

- BEST OF HOME DESIGN AWARDS
- ASSISTED LIVING 'COMES HOME' TO RURAL AMERICA
- CARING FOR RESIDENT'S MIND, BODY, AND SPIRIT

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105-YEAR-OLD HAZEL BLECHA DIDN'T CONSIDER ASSISTED LIVING UNTIL WELL AFTER HER 100TH BIRTHDAY



BUILT-IN COMMUNITY

Developers can incorporate a variety of design elements that encourage resident interaction and foster a sense of community

By Cass Gottlieb AIA



COMMUNITY

Meeting the needs of the aging population with a range of choices—active-adult environments for independent seniors, congregate housing, assisted living residences, and continuing care retirement communities—remains a major challenge for architects and owners across the country. Good design plays a critical role in residents' quality of life and ultimately on the company's bottom line.

Americans today are living longer and are healthier than in previous generations. As baby boomers swell the ranks of the elderly population, will they approach the aging process differently from their parents and grandparents? If current trends are any indicator, seniors increasingly will want to stay in their communities, and remain mentally engaged and physically active, while enjoying the company of others.

Careful space planning and thoughtful design will create a residence that encourages social interaction, while offering residents choices and the ability to control their own level of participation. Given the desire of so many seniors to age in place, the challenge for owners and architects is to design assisted living residences that provide residents with a sense of community and address the varied needs of an aging population, while anticipating marketplace demands and constraints.

ESSENTIAL DESIGN ELEMENTS

Obviously, the first step to creating a residence that builds a sense of community is to replicate a home-like environment. Incorporate details such as wainscoting and chair rails, home-like wall coverings and carpeting, crown moldings and indirect lighting, paneled doors, and wall sconces. Consider these other ways assisted living providers and architects can use design to create a sense of community:

■ **Design a gracious lobby.** The front entrance of any building provides a dramatic first impression, both from the street and the interior. A well-designed entrance lobby can be a wonderful focal point for residents to gather and welcome

visitors, and to replicate a habit of keeping an eye on who comes and goes. This space may be inspired by the lifestyle of the residents themselves. For example, in communities such as Baltimore, lifelong homeowners keep an eye on the neighborhood from the front porches of their row houses; residents of an assisted living community can do the same.

■ **Avoid long corridors.** Arrange resident rooms in clusters or other patterns that don't generate long corridors. Where site conditions necessitate a long building or wing, stagger or offset the corridor to help avoid the long expanses so common in many institutional settings. Consider the views from, and the perception of, the corridors as residents walk through them. Strategic location of artwork, colors, lighting, and views enhance way-finding and help residents become oriented as they move from one part of the building to another.

■ **Develop an overall design concept and carry it through the public and private spaces.** Whether the building is a renovation or new construction, furnishings, finishes, textures, lighting, graphics, signage, and color schemes should relate to each other, offer a level of consistency throughout the complex, and be warm and inviting for residents, visitors, and staff.

For example, a newly renovated urban residence may include an interior design palette that is understated and traditional, with selected contemporary features. In contrast, a new residence for residents in a rural area might be influ-

enced by local vernacular styles, furniture, and artwork.

■ **Provide effective lighting.** Use natural daylight wherever possible to give residents a sense of well-being and orientation to the outdoors, while also serving as an energy conservation measure.

Incandescent lighting and many warm fluorescent compact fixtures are generally more flattering to skin tones, for young and old alike, than cool fluorescent bulbs. Use of indirect and task lighting is an effective means of avoiding glare, and enhancing the residential ambiance and scale. In living areas, avoid the overhead two-by-four fluorescent fixtures common in many institutional settings.

■ **Connect with the outdoors.**

Regardless of climate or location, connecting with the outdoors provides a sense of well being. Depending on climate and location, such a connection can be made via a conservatory, sunroom, or greenhouse; screened and covered porches; decks, patios, and walking paths; and, of course, a generous number of expansive windows.

■ **Bring the outdoors inside.** Live plants and flowers throughout a facility promote clean air, a positive mental attitude, and a bright visual element in lobbies and public spaces.

■ **Encourage personalized surroundings.** Local, ethnic, and cultural traditions may inspire unique design ideas that appeal to a broader base of community residents. Memory shelves or memory boxes are highly successful design features that encourage personalization as well as orientation. Located outside each resident's room, mounted at handrail height, the shelf or box offers a space for photos and other personal mementos that are displayed with pride. The shelves or boxes also serve as a social device to spark interaction and conversations among residents and staff.

■ **Create a secure environment.** To feel comfortable in their community, residents must feel safe in their homes, but not trapped. Security systems can serve two purposes: to keep residents in and intruders out. Either way, security devices should be effectively integrated

AT-A-GLANCE

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► Furnishings, finishes, lighting, and color schemes should relate to each other, offer a level of consistency, and be warm and inviting for residents, visitors, and staff.

► Connect with the outdoors via a sunroom or greenhouse, and bring the outdoors inside with live plants and flowers.

into the facility design, without being obtrusive or obvious. Many facilities use security systems to monitor less-traveled hallways or doorways for residents who tend to wander or become disoriented.

An emergency call system is critical to residents' well being. A simple pull-cord system is adequate for public and private bathrooms and toilets. In resident rooms and in public spaces, the telephone system can be used as part of the emergency call system.

Residences can incorporate handrails in hallways by making them part of chair-rail moldings, offering added security without detracting from the residential feel. Handrails provide a sense of security to residents who may feel unsteady on their feet, and who may otherwise be reluctant to leave their rooms.

■ **Choose appropriate floor coverings.** Carpet in most occupied areas will reduce the risk of injury in the event of a fall, absorb sound, and create a home-like ambiance. Level-loop carpets are better for resident mobility and safety than cut-pile, although the latter tends to be more attractive and residential in appearance.

COMMON SPACES THAT FOSTER COMMUNITY LIFE

Providing a variety of program spaces, and paying careful attention to their design, can serve to enhance the sense of

place and community for the residents. Good planning in the early design stages should anticipate future requirements and provide flexibility for a variety of activities, services, and building systems. Designing for flexibility will improve operations and save on construction costs. Consider the following areas:

■ **Dining spaces.** A large central dining room can double as an activity space for programs such as movies, where full participation is expected. A breakfast room, with a residential kitchen, can double as a lounge or a sunroom. A pantry, available for light snacks, can be strategically located near other activity or informal living spaces. Offering residents a variety of dining options throughout the day reduces the perception of institutional regimentation.

For example, in a 70-bed East Coast facility built around a historic single-family home, the original dining parlor, which is tastefully decorated with wood paneling, ceiling beams, and a fireplace, is used as a game room. Adjacent to the game room is the original kitchen, which has been converted to a coffee bar. Across the hall, the original master bedroom has been converted to an intimate and elegant dining room, complete with raised wall panels and a chandelier. The dining room is available to residents for intimate family gatherings and special dinners.

■ **Quiet rooms.** Residents sometimes need time out from daily routines, stress, or personal situations. A quiet room should be an oasis of serenity, carefully located away from noisy, high-traffic areas and activity spaces. Specify appropriate floor, ceiling, and wall finishes with sound absorption qualities, as well as upholstered furnishings, to reduce acoustical levels. Fish tanks and water sculptures, known for their soothing and calming effect, also are appropriate interior design elements for quiet rooms.

■ **Specialty areas.** Music is an important therapeutic activity for senior living. Frequent concerts, dancing, and games are effective ways to enhance community spirit and social interaction. Cooking demonstrations, card games, a beauty salon, laundry room, and television rooms are other program considerations that require suitable spaces.

POWER OF CHOICE

The Fair Housing Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act attest to society's recognition that physically or mentally challenged individuals are entitled to the same level of dignity in their daily lives as those without disabilities. These regulations require physical environments that allow an individual to maximize his or her level of independence, dignity, and quality of life. Whether designing housing for the well elderly or long-term care facilities for the frail, the goal should be to maximize each individual's potential for independent living in a safe and secure environment.

With proper maintenance and timely repairs, a well-designed and constructed building will last 25 to 50 years. The facilities built today will house future generations of seniors, who also will desire to age in place while maximizing their independence. A quality design that enhances the individual's sense of dignity and the group's sense of community will add real and perceived value to an assisted living residence now and in the future. ●

COMMUNITY OUTSIDE THE COMMUNITY

Assisted living residences can make good neighbors, especially when residents have lived in the neighborhood for most of their lives. However, with tight real estate markets in urban and suburban areas, building a new facility from scratch on a vacant plot of land is not always possible. In some cases, renovating an existing structure and building an addition may be a more viable, cost-effective option. The unique qualities of an older structure may result in a value-added facility with one-of-a-kind features and program amenities.

Developers should initiate a dialogue with constituent representatives—such as the board of supervisors or neighborhood leaders—early in the design process. This allows the project team to identify key issues before design commitments are made and to evaluate the neighborhood's needs relative to the developer's building program and budget.

During the preliminary design stage, it's critical to address neighborhood concerns and the developer's constraints. Making major changes well into the design process often will result in significant additional costs and scheduling delays. While an optimum solution may not be found for every issue on the community's agenda, participants are more likely to accept the final outcome if their concerns have been given serious consideration and they have had meaningful input into the early part of the process.



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