



Designing wellness facilities

and living environments

Trends in design point to social spaces, universal features and integration of wellness into everyday lives

by Donna Jackel

Choice is the buzzword in today's housing market for older adults. The challenge, say experts, is how to meet the needs of current clients while building in flexibility for future residents.

The average age that people move into independent living communities is

trending upward, rising from 80 to 84 over the past decade,¹ according to Edie Smith, senior vice president and research director at Oxford, Mississippi-based ProMatura Group, a full-service market research and advisory firm specializing in age 50-plus consumers. Meanwhile, the needs and desires of the 78 million or so Baby Boomers in the United States² are influencing everything from building design to dining services.

How do these influences play out in new and remodeled construction?



Carroll Village continuing care retirement community in Dillsburg, Pennsylvania, is a new master-planned senior living community designed by RDL Architects with a focus on outdoor spaces. Apartments, community amenities, offices, and commercial retail are designed with porches that offer opportunities for viewing and engagement. Developed by Presbyterian Senior Living, Carroll Village is planned to be pedestrian friendly with a mix of residential and retail spaces. Credit: Jan Shergalis. Image courtesy of RDL Architects

Recently, I interviewed two architects, a researcher specializing in retirement communities, two interior designers and a developer. They shared what they consider hot—and what’s not—in housing for the 50-plus crowd.

Community trends

The trends indicate that, among desired amenities, both older adults and Boomers want greater connections to the outdoors and to the larger community. Gated communities are passé in some markets, according to W. Don Whyte, president of Kennecott Land Company, a development company based in South Jordan, Utah, and chairman of the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) 50+ Housing Council. Increasingly, residents want easy access to shopping, the arts, libraries and restaurants.

Wellness is increasingly perceived as a way of life, rather than as a particular building or area. Walking, lifelong

learning, gardening, access to an attractively designed courtyard—all can promote spiritual, physical and emotional health, and are desirable features in a community.

ProMatura’s Smith is trying to get a handle on the amenities that older adults really want. She has conducted hundreds of consumer studies over the years.

“Retirement communities are placing more focus on their wellness programs, particularly now that the average age of the residents moving to independent living is steadily increasing,” Smith states. “They are older and frailer than five years ago, partly because people delayed selling their homes when housing prices fell.

“There is also a greater desire for people to stay in their homes as long as they can,” Smith says, adding that increased availability of in-home and community-based services has made this possible.

“A community that offers a strong wellness program will likely be able to attract younger residents as well as extend the life of those already living in the community.”

To offset the costs of a full-feature wellness program, some larger communities—Twin Towers in Cincinnati, Ohio, for example—are selling wellness program memberships to nonresidents 50 years or older. “It’s been a great marketing tool for them,” Smith says. “A lot of [wellness] members move in.”

Architectural designs also reflect a more holistic approach to wellness, says Suzanne Meltzer, senior designer for the Senior Living Studio at RDL Architects in Shaker Heights, Ohio. “What we are seeing now is the desire to combine physical fitness with the other dimensions of wellness, not just with programming, but through the design and layout of public spaces,” Meltzer says.

For a community to remain competitive with other providers, a wellness center must have a physical and visual relationship with other active areas of wellness, such as a food venue, a lifelong learning center, a library and, in some upscale communities, a full-service spa. “The ability to move seamlessly between events without needing to preplan, encourages an active lifestyle,” Meltzer says.

Merging learning and living, indoors and out

One of the newest trends is the lifelong learning center, a space large enough to hold public events. It’s important, however, that the privacy of residents be maintained. “Spaces should be prioritized from the most public to the most private and arranged in a way that allows for that transition,” Meltzer says. For example, an auditorium could have a public entrance and also connect to transition spaces, such as a café, library or retail area.

Previously, according to Meltzer, architecture was “the focal point and image-maker” of age 50-plus communities. “[Now] we are beginning to focus much more on the arrangement of buildings and how outdoor rooms can be formed by these arrangements,” she says. “The location of public spaces within the building may become dictated by how those spaces can interact with these outdoor rooms. And programming of these outdoor spaces becomes as important as any indoor programming, further encouraging active use.”

When executed successfully, merging indoors and outdoors creates intimacy, says Meltzer. One way to achieve this is by designing gathering areas that have a sense of enclosure, such as a hearth room, a café or a library anchored by a fireplace and at least two walls. “One of those walls should have

Continued on page 46

Designing wellness facilities and living environments

Continued from page 45



At North Central Village Senior Apartment Homes in Columbus, Ohio, interior public spaces were designed by RDL Architects to provide opportunities for engagement. Purposefully designed spaces, such as computer stations within the Great Room, provide opportunity for social interaction through incidental use. Credit: Jan Shergalis. Image courtesy of RDL Architects

views and access to the outdoors,” she says. “Windows that look out on the courtyard encourage residents to connect with nature. Plantings and outdoor structures can also make outdoor seating/gathering areas feel more intimate.” Transitional elements, such as porches or other covered outdoor structures, allow for ease of movement even during inclement weather, Meltzer adds.

Continuing development

People living in age 50-plus communities are seeking less traditional ways to stay fit. “The biggest difference in how we develop communities now is that we try to create amenities that will incorporate wellness into a daily lifestyle,” Don Whyte says. “It ends up being part

of the way you live, rather than being pitched as wellness [activity].”

That is the philosophy at Daybreak, a multigenerational planned community located in South Jordan, Utah, which is under development by Kennecott Land. Daybreak features a network of trails and sidewalks that connect to other destinations, such as stores, to encourage walking. “They also create an opportunity for accidental contact,” Whyte says. “If you come upon a friend, you get a chance to chat. You can walk, feel safe, socialize and exercise all at the same time.”

Outdoor activities could include a simple community vegetable garden. Such a

space affords residents the opportunity to socialize, trade vegetables and swap gardening tips.

For indoor activities, a multipurpose room offers the most versatility. “It’s about designing for flexibility, so residents can use [the room] to meet their needs over the long term,” Whyte states. “What you want to avoid is creating spaces designed for only one activity. Racquetball used to be very popular. Now [facilities] are trying to figure out what to do with [the courts].”

Interior/universal design

To age in place, many older adults will eventually require accommodations in

Continued on page 48

Designing wellness facilities and living environments

Continued from page 46



As designed by SmithGroupJJR, each of nine distinct garden spaces support resident wellness at the Fran and Ray Stark Assisted Living Villa in Woodland Hills, California (Motion Picture & Television Fund). Image courtesy of SmithGroupJJR

their homes, such as wider doorways, curbless showers, grab bars in the bathroom, and a floor plan that can be easily navigated. RDL Architects typically designs their senior living communities to meet accessibility guidelines, whether they are required by code or not, says Meltzer.

Independent apartments include at least one fully accessible bathroom or one that is easily convertible. “All areas of a building are wheelchair accessible and grade changes minimized to eliminate the need for ramps,” Meltzer states. “Providing this level of accessibility increases square footage; however, we have found [it] can often be offset with efficiently designed spaces.”

At SmithGroupJJR, an architecture, engineering and planning firm with offices in 10 US cities, accommodations are made throughout their clients’ buildings, according to Joyce Polhamus, a vice president and director of the company’s Senior Living Practice. Some of

these modifications are subtle, such as adding space in dining rooms to store walkers, and installing pullout shelves and lower window heights in residences, Polhamus adds. Because the demand for these items is high, creating economies of scale, the cost is reasonable, she says.

If executed correctly, universal design shouldn’t have an institutional look to it, says interior designer Jeanette Knudsen, owner and president of Design for a Life Span in Phoenix, Arizona. When designing bathroom spaces, she recommends building in a curbless shower and 36-inch-wide bathroom and shower doors. A 60-inch turning radius, or a clear floor space in front of the shower door, allows for easy access. Other accommodations include a comfort height toilet and easy-to-grasp, lever-handled faucets.

In the kitchen, counters of varying heights provide for a time when a person may not have the strength to stand for long periods of time, or might be

in a wheelchair, says Knudsen. Glide cupboards are easy on arthritic hands. Knudsen also says that with kitchen appliances, lowering the position of the microwave and raising the dishwasher can make kitchen duties easier.

Interior design, too, must be flexible to satisfy the needs of multigenerational families. Boomers, their children and a parent, for instance, could all live beneath one roof. Aging in place continues to gain popularity as many older adults with decreased mobility or other health issues choose to live independently and hire in-home services, rather than move to a higher level of care. The right design makes this more feasible.

When it comes to interior design, furniture continues to trend toward cleaner lines—Mission arts and crafts, rather than the heavy, traditional Queen Anne style, says Ingrid Fraley, president of Design Services, Inc., of Washington, DC, which works exclusively in housing for older adults.

Another trend that Edie Smith at ProMatura has observed is the increasing willingness of older adults to accept less square footage in exchange for finishes or style—such as granite countertops or an open floor plan.

When it comes to mealtime, Boomers want greater flexibility and choice, according to Smith. In response, more communities are offering café or bistro services, in addition to the traditional dining hall. “It all comes down to not wanting to pay for what you’re not using, and not wanting to eat in the same location every night,” she adds.

Going ‘green’

Prospective buyers are attracted to sustainable housing because they know it will lower operating costs over the long term, while also protecting the environment. At Daybreak, all homes are Energy Star certified, meaning that



The Fran and Ray Stark Assisted Living Villa in Woodland Hills, California (Motion Picture & Television Fund), was designed by SmithGroupJJR with transparent walls to enhance the connection between private spaces and nine gardens. Distinct garden spaces provide wellness and activity destinations. Activities range from working in the kitchen garden to dining at the alfresco courtyard and exercising in the outdoor pavilion. Each garden space, or outdoor room, is unique and provides interest, diversity and a sense of discovery. A strolling garden path links the aromatic garden, a butterfly garden, a rose garden, and two meditation retreats. Image courtesy of SmithGroupJJR

a home meets strict US federal guidelines that they are more energy-efficient than required by code and feature energy-saving features, such as effective insulation and high-performance windows.³ Other green features available at Daybreak include solar and thermal panels, renewable building materials and high-performance appliances, Kennecott's Don Whyte says.

According to Whyte, the costs associated with going green can range from US\$2,000 per unit to thousands of dollars. "It depends on the type of unit and house design," he adds.

Meltzer explains, though, that the cost premium for alternate energy systems, such as solar panels and geothermal ground source heat pumps, is dropping as they become more common.

Green developers want potential residents to know they have employed sustainable measures, yet not all are willing to pay for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification. According to the nonprofit US Green Building Council, LEED certification "provides independent, third-party verification that a building, home or community was designed and built using strategies aimed at achieving high performance in ... sustainable site development, water savings, energy efficiency, materials selection and indoor environmental quality."

At Daybreak, a completed portion of the community was conditionally certified as a three-star National Green Building Standard (NGBS) green com-

Continued on page 50

Trendwatch

- Wellness is becoming a way of life in all indoor and outdoor environments, not just an indoor physical space.
- Wellness is reflected in the open, airy design and layout of public spaces, both indoors and outdoors.
- The age 65-and-under crowd wants greater choice in terms of when and where they eat. Communities are opening casual bistros or snack bars (in addition to formal dining rooms) that allow residents to pop in for a nosh whenever they're hungry.
- Gated communities are becoming a thing of the past; older adults prefer to embrace the larger community.
- The lifelong learning center is one of the hottest trends. It's a public space for lectures, movies and entertainment that is large enough to accommodate the outside community.
- As tech-savvy Boomers begin to retire, wireless setups in residences are becoming more common.

Designing wellness facilities and living environments

Continued from page 49



At Carroll Village, three multistory buildings are clustered around a new town square. They are unique in design to one another, and include amenities for community activities, commercial retail, and offices, all with views of the outdoor gardens. Image courtesy of RDL Architects

munity. Whyte believes that NGBS certification provides greater flexibility than LEED certification in long-term development planning. “The LEED certification process requires that the community be completed before you can be certified,” he adds. “Instead, you can have the National Association of Home Builders tentatively review your plans, and later review the finished product.”

However, LEED certification may not always be optional, notes Joyce Polhamus of SmithGroupJJR. “I am sure someday soon the building codes will be requiring construction to meet LEED requirements, and then the certification will not be as precious [costly]. Most architects design to LEED standards in all their projects anyway.”

Getting wired

It may be more a necessity than an amenity, but technically savvy Boomers are like-

ly to expect a wireless setup in their homes and more builders are already making it a standard feature. Being wireless, however, isn’t just about using the Internet.

“Home automation is becoming very sophisticated and more and more popular,” says Whyte. Going wireless can also mean using a tablet computer to reset the thermostat, check whether the stove is turned off or be assured that the garage door is closed. Catering to this level of technical sophistication is just one of many ways in which the housing market for older adults today is different—and more complex—than in the past.

The good news for consumers is that there are now many options out there, and a much greater appreciation for what they really want. As Kennecott’s Don Whyte says, “The biggest mistake you can make is failing to identify who your customer is. Then they will select another community that better meets their needs.”

Donna Jackel is a freelance journalist based in Rochester, New York. She has 25 years of writing experience and was a recipient of the New York Newspaper Publishers Association award of excellence in 1996, as well as the Genesee Valley Nurses Association media award in 2005.

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3. United States Environmental Protection Agency. How New Homes Earn the ENERGY STAR. Retrieved June 7, 2012, from http://www.energy.gov/index.cfm?c=new_homes.nh_verification_process.

Resources

American Society of Interior Designers

Design for Aging Council
www.asid.org/designknowledge/aa/inplace/design+for+aging+council.htm

Daybreak

www.daybreakutah.com

Design for a Life Span

<http://designforalifespan.com>

Design Services, Inc.

www.deserve.com/index.html

National Association of Home Builders (NAHB)

NAHBGreen: National Green Building Program
www.nahbgreen.org

ProMatura Group, LLC

www.promatura.com

RDL Architects

www.rdlarchitects.com

SmithGroupJJR

www.smithgroupjrr.com

United States Green Building Council

LEED certification
www.usgbc.org/displaypage.aspx?categoryid=19