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## Age Boom Invigorates Senior Living

By Violet Law

Unlike younger and more transient working-age population, seniors cherish the stability of calling one – and only one – place home in their golden years. However, many may not have their wish. Earlier senior housing complexes were developed with little forethought that many senior residents would experience significant physical and mental decline as they age. Their declining condition may render the less adaptable housing obsolete. The hassle and expenses related to repeated packings and movings is avoidable when housing is designed with more thoughtfulness for the seniors' changing needs.

Recently, several California-based housing providers shared their insights into achieving better, more adaptable designs for their latest senior house developments. A new public senior housing complex developed by McCormack Baron Salazar, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the second-oldest county in the nation, also is featured.

The days when seniors were content with cramped quarters are long gone. The *efficiency* apartment is a relic these days.

"People are interested in larger accommodations," says Dee Ann Campbell, vice president of communication and planning at Episcopal Homes Foundation in San Francisco. "Studios may have been the acceptable standard in the past. Now people want more



living space." And this demand for more spacious units is not limited to the market-rate sector; says Campbell. "We're seeing it in affordable housing."

While it is not uncommon for housing providers to have to accommodate seniors asking for more space to store their belongings of a lifetime, increasingly extra room has to be made for new technology. Among senior residents, the personal computer is becoming a ubiquitous, and essential, tool to maintain contact with far-flung family members and an active social life. Seniors who own a computer, Campbell observes, would like a nook or den in their living quarters to house a home office.

In the not-so-distant past housing

providers "underestimated the ability of seniors to use technology," says Ryan Chao, executive director of Satellite Housing in Berkeley, but they are now catching up. "We're now providing (seniors) opportunities for using computers and technology." Satellite has retrofitted some older complexes with computer labs.

And seniors are growing more active not just on cyberspace but also in their physical environment, and this calls for more activity space. No doubt this need dovetails nicely with providers' desire to shed the institutional feel of conventional senior housing and foster a greater community feeling. Luckily, the right design prescription seems to be emerging.

The trick lies in configuring the public space. The question is how

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– and the devil is in the detail. The Legacy, the senior housing project designed by Pittsburgh architect Dan Rothschild for McCormick Baron Salazar, features a large community space that stretches from the front entrance to the elevator bank. The space is equipped to accommodate a wide range of activities, from sedentary to competitive. It has a fireplace lounge with club seating, a café, a billiard parlor, a fitness room, a meeting room and offices for management and social workers on-site.

“The community room is like the Main Street of the community,” explains Rothschild. “It feels more like a hospitality setting.” Most traditional buildings place

elevators close to the entrance and thus undercut the opportunity for residents’ interactions.

Some housing complexes might have sites that limit the size of the common area. Connecting it to an outdoor space, such as a patio and the courtyard is one way to get around the constraints of small spaces. Avoid long hallways at all costs. The communal space also affords providers the flexibility to offer more social services and programming.

No detail is too small in designing a common area that maximizes residents’ contact, some providers have observed. Chao of Satellite Housing recently had “a revelation” about the placement of mailboxes. For some seniors, Chao says, the

mail carrier’s arrival can be the highlight of their day; they love to chat with the carrier and other residents. Putting mailboxes in plain view of the lobby can help facilitate the exchange between those seniors and postal carriers. The same goes for staff offices. “A good, thoughtful location of staff spaces can make the staff accessible” to residents, Chao adds.

Of course, interaction need not be confined to the lobby and ground-floor communal area. The layout of residential floors can affect the same level of interaction. In designing The Legacy, Rothschild placed a TV lounge next to the laundry room on each floor. The goal is to

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create “a series of neighborhoods” and “break down the scale of the building,” he says.

Admittedly, more design efforts in planning for new senior housing now goes into accommodating residents as they become physically impaired. More providers have gone beyond requiring only a percentage of the units to comply with Americans with Disability Act (ADA) guidelines. They see the need to have all units adaptable so that no residents would be asked to move out of their units in order to be better accommodated. All of The Legacy’s 108 units are adaptable.

At the Retirement Housing Foundation of Southern California, director of development and construction Bob Nathan says that his organization provides design guidelines for architects to follow in order to meet the mobility needs of their senior residents. Under those guidelines, which the foundation has devised based on its experience in serving older, frailer residents, all doors must be fitted with handles, instead of knobs, so that even an arthritic hand can easily open them. Handrails are

installed on both sides of a corridor. Shower stalls, but not bathtubs, are the standard issue feature in bathrooms because the tub can become a barrier, especially for seniors on mobility devices.

At Satellite Housing, Chao says a move toward universal design is afoot at all of the new developments.

Ultimately, no one knows their needs better than the users themselves. Most of the housing providers interviewed say they regularly survey their current residents when planning for new housing. The survey results tell the story of what works and what doesn’t and hence point to areas for improvement. Some providers even go as far as to involve residents in conceptualizing a new project.

The bottom line of all these efforts is to give seniors a sense of control over their living environment. It is just as important to create for them a sense of place to ease their transition from their own homes to the congregate housing setting. Otherwise, they might feel alienated from their milieu, even though they’ve settled into housing

of much better condition. This is where contextual design comes in.

In contemplating the design of The Legacy’s exterior, Rothschild says he was inspired by the vacant site – an urban infill sandwiched between historical landmarks in the storied Hill District that produced playwright August Wilson. The result: a façade design that incorporates the African-American neighborhood’s colorful history in the jazz world. The width of each adjoining building that makes up the housing complex varies to approximate the length of musical notes – a quarter note, a half note or a whole note – adding rhythm to the streetscape. Names of jazz greats were etched onto limestone panels that form a frieze.

Just as what University of South California professor Victor Regnier, who is writing a book on design trends in senior housing, has observed: “There has been a stronger focus on developing contextually-based designs that gear toward the community and reflect what the city is about.”