

Plan On It

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Not Your Grandmother's Senior Housing *Why Design and Location Matter*

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There is a lot of talk these days about the size of the baby boom generation and their housing needs over the next few decades. The first baby boomers turned 68 last year, while the last of the boomers turned 50. With average life expectancy close to 79 years, we'll need to meet the needs of this huge generation for the next 30 years. We talk about them as a monolith but that is something they are not. Many boomers see themselves as very different from their parents, so our old housing models won't necessarily be attractive to them.

Senior housing types traditionally break into three categories: independent living, assisted living, and skilled nursing. We'll focus on independent living, which in our area is typically built as townhomes or multi-family buildings. The problem is that people often don't fit cleanly into a single housing type. Maybe someone has a hip replacement which makes it difficult to navigate independent living for a while. Or one spouse has limited mobility while another can still go on a 20-mile bike ride.

How do we know people are really interested in staying in this area as they age? One clue is the [Senior Housing in Dutchess County](#) brochure posted on the Dutchess County Office for the Aging website. This brochure received more than 30,000 hits in 2014. People are clearly searching for local senior housing options.

The buzzword these days is "active adult" developments. There's no official definition of "active adult" but it seems meant to imply that residents won't need much assistance. The problem is that active adults can become less active adults, and ultimately inactive adults.

It's important to acknowledge that developments, like people, go through stages. Senior developments often start out with an active, younger crowd (55ish) who drives. As people age they begin to have mobility problems, so developments can look very different after 10+ years. We need to plan for this loss of mobility and the associated need for assistance that happens in the senior development life cycle.

So how do we design developments that will be attractive to older people and provide the flexibility they'll need so they can continue to enjoy them as their needs change? The answer is to create senior developments that can adapt a bit to older people's needs so they can stay during an acute situation or during a transition period. At a minimum, the design should provide enough flexibility that older people and their families aren't sent scrambling at the first sign of a health crisis.

Beyond the Boomers: Thinking Long Term

Thirty years is a long time for many things but not for housing. In addition to planning for the boomers, we need to consider what will happen to senior-restricted housing when there is less demand. The generation behind the boomers isn't large enough to fill millions of senior-restricted units so we'll either have developments with high vacancy rates, which often leads to poor maintenance and disrepair, or communities will need to allow whole developments to convert to non-senior. We know this is coming so we need to plan for tomorrow as we think about today.

Universal Design

The best way to plan for flexibility and true independence is to design or redesign neighborhoods based on [universal design principles](#). There are numerous components to universal design, with the most important being:

- ADA-compliant sidewalks throughout the development.
- No-step entries to public spaces and each housing unit.
- One-story living in each unit with areas to eat and sleep, and at least one full bathroom, located on one floor (other bedrooms/bathrooms may be on another floor).
- Wide doorways and hallways help everyone move more easily, including those in wheelchairs, as well as help with the movement of furniture.
- Extra floor space, particularly in bathrooms to accommodate personal aides.

In addition to eventually helping us as we age, these design elements can make it possible for older or disabled family members to stay in our homes for an extended visit or during a period of recovery from an illness.

A Wider Variety of Housing Types

Housing types tend to be very traditional in Dutchess County. We have single-family homes, townhouses and some low-rise apartment buildings. These housing types are mostly driven by our zoning, which is most permissive of single-family lots and most restrictive of apartment buildings.

Apartment buildings are important for seniors as they provide a safe and affordable living arrangement. Older people can come and go easily via the elevator when stairs start to be problematic, and they can visit friends within the building when icy and snowy weather keeps them indoors. Utility costs are also significantly lower in apartment building units when compared to comparably sized townhomes or single-family units.



In the middle of an existing neighborhood in Pittsburgh, PA, a vacant high school was repurposed into the South Hills Retirement Residence, which includes 106 senior apartments, 84 of which are affordable. Amenities include game and craft rooms, wellness center, hair care center, and an exercise area. An accessible van is provided for regularly scheduled trips for grocery and medical needs, many of which are located within one-mile of the development.

Though not found locally, small single-story cottage developments are increasingly popular throughout the country. They provide a sense of privacy similar to a single-family home in a more manageable, energy-efficient, low-maintenance size.

Transit

Planning for transit is also extremely important. Since older people are often still able to drive when they move, they don't look as closely as they should at the transportation options they may need in the future. Here are a few basic questions to consider:

1. Is the development on a bus route?
2. Do the available bus routes get you to your most-needed destinations, such as the grocery store or doctor's office?
3. Can various-sized buses access the development? A bus route going by may not help much if the bus can't enter the development or seniors can't safely get to the bus stop on the main road.
4. Is there a convenient bus shelter?
5. Does a sidewalk connect the homes within the development to the main road/bus shelter?
6. How available are dial-a-ride and volunteer driver services, and where can they take you? Many have limited days of service, limited routes, or focus on medical and other essentials such as groceries. Make sure you know the details of each option. ([View the County's Dial-A-Ride schedule.](#))



These 1- and 2-bedroom cottages are part of the Arbor Acres retirement community in Winston-Salem, NC. The cottages are all single-story and range in size from 1,060 – 1,187 square feet.

Municipalities and developers must ensure that senior developments are designed to meet the current and future transportation needs of older residents.

Community and Activity

A sense of community is increasingly desired in senior developments and can be created in one of two ways – within the development itself, or by locating it in or near an existing municipal center.

Within the Development

Developments can provide a variety of activities which keep people engaged and create opportunities for socialization. Instead of just providing a small movie theater in the community room, a movie night can be scheduled or online college courses can be shown. Cooking classes about how to cook for one or two people can be held in the community room's kitchen. One of the problems with organized activities is that there needs to be a critical mass of people to support them, which many individual developments lack.

Activities don't necessarily need to be organized by the developer. Instead, they can provide the space and invite outside groups to use it for no or minimal cost. As opposed to gated communities, which look to exclude non-residents, some communities are inviting non-residents to use their facilities. This brings the community into the development which can provide the critical mass of people needed to support activities.

Seniors are increasingly active. Instead of slowing down, today's retiree is more likely to be at the gym, on a bike ride, or taking up a new hobby. Housing developments need to accommodate these desires. Walking paths within developments that connect to adjacent neighborhoods, parks, and rail trails are one of the most popular amenities. Fitness centers and hobby and craft rooms are other attractive amenities.



Heritage Oaks Senior Apartments, a 50-unit affordable apartment community in Oakdale, CA, designed a hobby and craft studio that resembled a 1950's garage with workbenches and dartboard to appeal to those who would miss tinkering in their garages.

Community gardens are popular since they provide the access to nature many seniors desire. Access to nature may be even more important in our area where many older people will be right-sizing from single-family homes where they had easy access to the outdoors. Townhome developments where the rules prohibit owners from landscaping their units are going against the desires of many residents. Seniors may want to simplify their lives but many would still like to spend at least some time outdoors, even if it's just on a porch or in a small garden outside their front door.

It's important to remember that the ability to provide these amenities is often a function of the size (or density) of the development. If your zoning severely limits density, it also limits amenities.

Location, Location, Location

Location is probably the most important aspect of building a successful and flexible senior development. Isolated developments that rely on the automobile don't allow for much flexibility. It's easier to provide many of the things seniors want and need in denser areas where at least a few activities are within walking distance. People probably aren't going to walk to the hospital for surgery, but it's nice if they can get to a few everyday things – visit a friend, have a meal at the diner, attend a program at the library – without relying on a car or public transit. A good location could allow a couple to downsize to a single car, freeing up money for hobbies, travel, and other interests. A good location also makes it easier to provide transit and services, such as meals-on-wheels and home healthcare.

The Status Quo

What happens if we don't design for today's senior in our county? People will move to communities that are building the type of housing older people want. It's easy to blame the weather and NYS taxes for our loss of retirees, but another issue seems to be the limited housing options in our area. Individuals will tell stories about how much more affordable their housing is in Florida – but when questioned further, it's clear they live in a much higher-density neighborhood than most of our municipalities would currently allow. If we keep building only our traditional housing types we'll either have increasingly empty senior developments as less active people are forced to leave, or we'll have lots of inactive people living in "active adult" housing.

The Future

It is important to provide housing alternatives that meet the needs of older people and are so attractive that there's competition to get into them - communities that are architectural gems with a real feeling of community.

The great news is that we actually know how to do this. We know what older people want because they tell us in surveys, and through where they choose to live. There are also great examples from throughout the country. Just take a look at the developments our friends and neighbors are moving to in Florida, Delaware and Boston. Do an internet search of award winning senior developments. Follow the basic design principles and look at the resources at the end of this newsletter.

The next step is for our municipalities -- they must review and modify their zoning ordinances so developers can build the kind of developments older adults want and need, and that are being created in other parts of the country. If we zone appropriately, innovative developers will build in our communities, and more retirees may choose to stay by downsizing in their hometown.

More Information

[Livable Communities](#), AARP Public Policy Institute

[Housing America's Older Adults: Meeting the Needs of an Aging Population](#),
Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University

[Insights and Innovations: The State of Senior Housing](#) [13MB], American
Institute of Architects

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This newsletter was developed by the Dutchess County Department of Planning and Development, in conjunction with the Dutchess County Planning Federation.

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