

Older and Wiser: Creating Communities for Life

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SUMMARY

As Baby Boomers move into retirement, many adjustments must occur both in the workplace and in community design. Boomers are estimated to live healthier longer and will require better living conditions in their golden years. As a result, critical issues must be addressed surrounding urban design and community living for retirees, and there is no better time to start planning and changing than now.

QUALITY TIME IN THE GOLDEN YEARS

Americans are aging in the largest numbers in history. By the decade ending 2012, the Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts, six million people aged 16 to 54 will join the working-age population. Over the same period, the 55-and-over age bracket will swell by 18 million Boomers, raising the question, "Where are we all going to work, live, recreate, and retire?"

Unlike our parents, we don't plan to retire, not just yet. Not surprisingly, we're also healthier than our parents, expecting to live longer, more active lives. As we Boomers turn 65, we will stay active, either working at our chosen careers or turning to other passions—creative pursuits, mentoring, or traveling.

Not ready for nursing facilities or even assisted-living complexes, we're looking to stay connected to our neighborhoods, our cities, and our hometowns. Many of us are empty nesters, rattling around our now-too-big houses, looking for alternatives but determined to stay close to our communities.

As a result, many Boomers are settling in America's urban areas to grow old there. The question is whether our future housing choices will be limited to traditional senior-living projects that consume the greenfields at the edge of the metropolis, or will we recast Mr. Blanding's dream house to suit our vision of vibrant, compact communities featuring walkable, mixed-use, mixed-income, intergenerational housing in traditional neighborhoods?

The core principles of the growing smart-growth movement—building in areas served by current infrastructure and within existing community fabric—make perfect sense for all ages. Growing more

compactly supports development of a range of affordable housing options in existing neighborhoods that can accommodate our burgeoning number of seniors, embracing the notion of aging in place.

Why is the concept of community so important to our aging population? We know the aging process is fraught with losses. For an elderly population of unprecedented levels, maintaining family connections, keeping established social networks, and developing new friendships will be critical to managing setbacks due to the inevitable disconnects that occur as greater numbers of seniors begin living alone or in group settings.

CHANGES IN THE HOUSING MARKET

Creation of new housing opportunities and more choices for older singles and couples within our existing communities will provide the foundation for a future that allows seniors to stay connected, healthy, stimulated, and active in a larger community. Aging boomers will be seeking and creating those places that feel familiar, safe, and secure while allowing them to remain connected to family and friends, all within a short walk to the drugstore and the library.

How will current trends in housing construction designed for aging address the overwhelming need for senior housing within our dramatic new vision of community? According to Moore Diversified Services and the American Seniors Housing Association, which tracked average annual total units between 1997 and 1999, the 54,000 units produced during each of these two years dropped to just under 30,000 units per year between 2000 and 2005, resulting in 120,000 fewer senior units over that time period. Clearly, the market is not keeping pace.

Developers are focusing on a narrow segment of the elderly housing market: the so-called traditional "senior living products." If current development trends in housing production for aging populations continue, new housing will fall far short of likely demand. Projects will be limited to those that carry the lowest risk, are quickest to the market, and have the highest rate of return. Risking our future living

environments on a commodities market dealing in isolated enclaves for income-eligible seniors is not an option. Major changes must occur in our housing supply for seniors—by location, numbers, and type.

If we are truly going to create communities of quality, we must deliver more affordable housing; more convenient shopping; and better access to public transportation, health care, and recreational and cultural facilities—all hallmarks of traditional cities and towns. Our emerging communities, shaped by the growing older-and-wiser crowd, will feature compactness and mixing of uses; convenience and walkability; and, perhaps most important, economic and social diversity across all ages. The following primer suggests the necessary steps to create communities based on our common interest in a high future quality of life.

Get your legal house in order. The first thing that needs our attention are outdated regulatory frameworks, i.e., antiquated zoning and building codes. Short of wholesale revisions to state enabling legislation, zoning overlays within special districts such as downtowns or neighborhood centers are an effective means for creating mixed-use housing and commercial precincts (ala the traditional style of housing over the Mom-and-Pop convenience store). Similarly, we must modify our building codes for older neighborhoods to allow for development of accessory units or infill granny cottages at the back of existing lots on the alley, where small ancillary apartments can be developed.

Create tax incentives for seniors. Many communities have adopted development incentives to create affordable housing within mixed-use or multifamily housing projects. These techniques could also fund a community's elderly housing trust, create affordable units for seniors through set-asides from density bonuses for new or rehabbed housing, or (with a twist on new market tax credits) provide elderly housing within existing neighborhoods.

Invest in retirement accounts. Infrastructure investments, particularly in public transit, are the smart-growth equivalent of your IRA. More compact growth in existing urban areas, coupled with transit-friendly residential and commercial uses near transit stations, will help create new transit-oriented villages that build community. Achieving our new vision for the future will require significant new investments to better serve our regions and emerging neighborhoods.

Plan for health care. Staying healthy through exercise and diet is the best health insurance aging Boomers can buy. The shape of our metropolitan

regions and provision of accessible open space with walking, biking, and hiking paths are critical to the well-being of our citizens. Imagine being able to leave our compact neighborhoods and join the morning walkers on the river greenway loop trail.

Get the house ready for new buyers. By now, we have our plan well under way. New zoning is in place. Our incentives are attracting many senior development proposals, and transit-oriented villages are springing up in our communities. We have acquired key open-space parcels that will double as wetland protection areas and provide handicapped access into the nature preserve. It's time to prepare our house for new buyers because the range of new infill housing available for boomers has blossomed: senior apartments; affordable units in mixed-income, mixed-use complexes; granny cottages; accessory units; and new market-rate townhouses.

Our healthy, active Boomers who make up the lion's share of the elderly-housing market, will be scanning our new communities' real estate ads and finding ample listings for "affordable, mixed-income, intergenerational housing, conveniently located near shopping, transit, and the library." As predicted, the older-and-wiser generation will have succeeded in transforming sprawling suburbs into compact, vibrant, 21st-century neighborhoods, each with a newly awakened sense of community.

About the Contributor

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RESOURCES

More Best Practices

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 11.09.01 The Urban Design Process: Creating and Achieving a Vision
- 11.09.02 The AIA's 10 Principles of Livable Communities
- 11.09.03 Ten Principles of Community Partnering

For More Information on This Topic

See also “Urban Design Services” by David Dixon, FAIA, *The Architect’s Handbook of Professional Practice: Update 2005*, 13th edition, page 153.



See also the 14th edition of the *Handbook*, which can be ordered from the AIA Bookstore by calling 800-242-3837 (option 4) or by email at bookstore@aia.org.



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Key Terms

- Leadership
- Disciplines
- Design disciplines
- Planning
- Urban design