

Older and Wiser: Creating Communities for Life

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SUMMARY

As Baby Boomers transition to retirement many adjustments need to occur in the workplace and community design. Baby Boomers are expected to live in good health for longer than previous generations and will require better living conditions in their “golden years.” Critical issues must be addressed concerning urban design and community living for retirees, and there is no better time to start planning and making change than now.

QUALITY TIME IN THE GOLDEN YEARS

Americans are growing older, in the largest numbers ever. By the decade ending 2012, the Bureau of Labor Statistics anticipates 6 million persons, ages 16 to 54, will have been added to the working age population. Over the same period, the 55-and-over age bracket will swell by 18 million baby boomers, raising the question, “Where are we all going to work, live, recreate, and...retire?”

Unlike our parents, however, we are not planning to retire, not just yet. Not surprisingly, we’re also healthier than our parents, expecting to live longer, more active lifestyles. As we boomers turn 65, we will remain active, continuing to work 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 Baby Boomers are opting to settle 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 continue to consume our nation’s greenfields at the edge of the metropolis, or will we recast Mr. Blanding’s dream house to better 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, established social networks, and developing new friendships will be critical to managing setbacks due to disconnects that occur as greater numbers of seniors begin living alone, or in group settings.

CHANGES IN THE HOUSING MARKET

Creating new housing opportunities and increasing choice 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, and allow them to remain connected to family and friends, all within a short walk of 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, found that 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 very narrow segment of the elderly housing market, the so-called traditional “senior living products.” If current

development trends in housing production for the 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 in a commodities market dealing in isolated enclaves for income-eligible seniors is not an option. Major changes in our housing supply, by location, numbers, and types for seniors, will be required.

If we are truly going to create communities of quality, we must deliver more affordable housing, 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 a 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 contains advice on what steps are needed to create communities based on our common interest in a quality future.

Get Your Legal House in Order. The first thing that needs our attention are outdated regulatory frameworks—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 in the traditional form of housing over the "mom & pop" convenience store. Similarly, we need to 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 various incentives for development that 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 our existing neighborhoods.

Invest in Retirement Accounts. Infrastructure investments, particularly in public transit, are the smart growth equivalent of your Individual Retirement Account (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 our 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 our citizens' well-being. Imagine being able to leave our compact neighborhood 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 lots of 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 comprise the lion's share of the elderly housing market, will be scanning our new community's local 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

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. *The Handbook* can be ordered from the AIA Bookstore by calling 800-242-3837 (option 4) or by sending an e-mail to bookstore@aia.org.



More Best Practices

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

- 17.06.01 The Urban Design Process: Creating and Achieving a Vision
- 17.06.02 The AIA's 10 Principles for Livable Communities
- 17.06.03 Ten Principles for Community Partnering

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Key Terms

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