

AGE FRIENDLY CITIES AND RETIREMENT COMMUNITIES

Different approaches, similar objectives.

Mutually exclusive? Or is the whole greater than the sum of its parts?

by James Warner, FAIA

Aging Trends

According to the American Seniors Housing Association (ASHA), roughly 3 million seniors housing units will be needed by the year 2040. With only 1 million units in place today, it projects the need for another 2 million units over the next 24 years, roughly doubling the rate of the last 24. With the over-65 population continuing to grow, so should senior living and seniors housing, leading investors to believe, 'If we build it, they will come.' Or will they?



Aging at Home

Surveys from resources such as AARP show the vast majority of Americans over the age of 65 have no interest in moving to a retirement community. In fact they overwhelmingly oppose anything other than staying in their own homes. Reasons vary and include: family, familiarity, connections to community, diversity, intergenerational living, memories, comfort and independence, whether perceived, real or imagined. Additionally, wealth among this aging cohort declined precipitously during the past recession, delaying retirement for many, and canceling potential moves altogether for others.



Staying in your own home is a naïve desire since many, if not most, homes are simply not suited for aging in place. Homes with second floor bedrooms and bathrooms, narrow hallways, stairs, the potential for falls and minimal maneuvering space present challenges to aging adults with vision and hearing impairments, respiratory issues, frailty, mobility problems and limited abilities of all sorts. Depression and social isolation resulting from a lack of independence, the loss of a car, or an inability to travel at will are also among the pitfalls of aging at home.



Bridges® by EPOCH Memory Care Assisted Living at Mashpee, Mashpee, MA

Retirement Communities

Senior living and seniors housing offer many seniors the opportunity to avoid these pitfalls, opening doors to new experiences, growth and development that might otherwise never be experienced, enriching and extending lives. For-profit and not-for-profit, life plan communities (CCRC), independent living, assisted living, memory care and skilled nursing facilities all serve aging populations in different and meaningful ways. Due to high urban land costs, most communities exist on rural or suburban sites, self contained and remote from familiar streets or neighborhoods, far from resident's home towns or cities. Is there a better way to serve an aging society?



Brightview Senior Living, Randolph, NJ

WHO

The World Health Organization (WHO) believes there is. In 2007 it launched the Age Friendly Cities and Communities initiative. The purpose of this initiative is to raise awareness of worldwide aging populations, urbanization and how cities and communities can enhance the lives of all residents in an age friendly environment. AARP is now a WHO partner sponsoring livable communities in the United States by adopting such features as safe, walkable streets, better housing and transportation options, access to key services, and opportunities for residents to participate in community services. Participating communities will facilitate public policy, zoning and building codes that allow for universal design in all buildings, especially housing, transportation and public spaces affording intergenerational aging-in-place and accommodations for all abilities.

The Boston Society of Architects, Design for Aging (DFA) Committee is currently working with the City of Boston on their WHO/AARP Age Friendly City initiative. Volunteering to participate in neighborhood meetings and weighing in on urban planning and universal design, as well as policy issues with regard to planning and zoning, the BSA DFA Committee will continue to work with the city for the next three years. The DFA Committee produced a 25 minute documentary "Celebrate the Voices" <https://vimeo.com/144566535> in 2015 documenting some of the many challenges of aging in Boston.



Technology

Since the Industrial Revolution, approximately every 10 years a new product or technology has had a transformative impact on society, whether the steam engine, electric lighting, automobile, airplane, radio, computers or the internet. Technology drives innovation. Innovation has a way of changing our lives in ways never previously dreamed of: the internet, wifi and connectivity are all still in their infancy. Aging and healthcare are among the next frontiers. David Roman, Senior Research analyst at Goldman Sachs, notes "US Healthcare is about to go through a mobile medicine revolution, or connected care, creating a new \$30B industry where we may see dramatic improvements in efficiency and outcomes." Parallel advances in technology, wearables, telemedicine, Uber, driverless cars, village models, PeaPod, home health, life care at home will surely enhance and improve the aging at home experience. More importantly, they will create a viable alternative to senior living as we currently know it.





True North at North Hill, Needam, MA

Opportunities

For those committed to remaining in their own homes, this could not be better news. How will age-friendly communities impact senior living and seniors housing businesses, developers and service providers? The answer is yet to be determined, but some of the more progressive senior living providers are beginning to recognize the potential for the aging-at-home population to embrace age-friendly community ideals.

Both the WHO/AARP age-friendly and livable communities program and for-profit and not-for-profit, senior living providers all want to improve the lives of aging seniors but in different ways. An age-friendly community tends to suggest a heterogeneous mix of social and economic backgrounds as well as intergenerational living and unstructured programming while retirement communities are more structured, homogeneous and most often stand alone. As discussed, aging seniors tend to prefer one or the other. Can they coexist?

They certainly can. Goodwin House at Home in Alexandria, VA is an extension of Goodwin's Life Plan (CCRC) programs, and offers access and coordination to most of the services that are typically offered at a CCRC to a person living in his or her own home. According to Executive Director, Karen Skeens "by bringing the CCRC services into the home, seniors can live the way they want in retirement without worrying about health changes forcing a major disruption in lifestyle." And they are not alone, 'CCRC at Home' programs are rapidly developing across the country.

In a recent Senior Housing News post, five competing senior housing providers have teamed up to form Tandem365, a Michigan-based organization that aims to help older adults—55 and older—"navigate" the health system to avoid pitfalls in their health and remain in their homes longer. The concept essentially targets care and services that currently are not reimbursed by insurance. Seniors living at home may not have access to essential care services or may need help coordinating care, transportation or even activities of daily living. Qualified adults can join the program on a plan and receive many of these services and more within their home.



According to Alexis Denton, AIA, Smith Group JJR in San Francisco, there's a new concept in development that includes a mall-style community center for older people who live at home. The center provides transportation to and from this "mall" of services and activities so they can spend their day there, receive services and social interaction. "As an architect, that's an interesting blend of aging in place and senior living. And that's why this is such a super-cool industry: there is a lot of opportunity for small changes that really matter, possibly changing the existing model entirely."

Mather Café Plus, an outreach program created by Mather Lifeways, a network of LifePlan communities based outside of Chicago, has transformed the image of senior services in ways that no other senior living provider has. Quoting their website, "From the street, a Café Plus could be any attractive, busy restaurant within a community. But look closer—it's More Than a Café. The award-winning Café Plus concept is designed to attract active, younger-older adults (age 50 and better) by providing fun and educational, wellness-related programs and activities. The Café Plus experience might start with a cup of coffee, but the possibilities are endless once a customer walks in the door. In addition to full-service restaurant menus, lifelong learning programs are offered in areas such as computers, yoga, writing, wellness, and more." The concept has been so successful; other communities across the country and around the world have replicated the model with similar success.





Tamarisk Assisted Living Residence, Warwick, RI

The Future

With seniors embracing the trend to move to urban centers where services and amenities abound, cities such as Boston, New York and San Francisco are embracing an age-friendly philosophy and its tenets. Technology continues to advance the needs of an aging population, and life plan communities continue to reach out for new business strategies. This is very good news for both those who choose to age in retirement communities and also for those who prefer to stay in their own homes.



Benchmark Senior Living at The Commons in Lincoln

Robert Lagoyda, Education Manager at LeadingAge, the organization representing not-for-profit, life plan communities and senior living providers around the country, sees the benefits but also the responsibilities of their members to support the age-friendly communities initiative. "Our members have a commitment to older folks in general. Having our cities make more sense serves the greater population. I think there is a social accountability role in this for our members."



Urban mixed-use intergenerational co-housing
JSA Inc. / Environments for Aging

The Affordable Care Act, accountable care organizations, managed care, post-acute care, PACE programs and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services will also play ever increasing roles with profound implications to our aging population. If the purposes of these programs are to contain costs and optimize quality then the framework and infrastructure supporting them must first be in place to allow that to happen. Only in an age-friendly environment can that truly be achieved.

As the WHO/AARP age-friendly and livable communities initiatives play out across the country and as developers and investors continue to seize upon the opportunities presented by an aging society, these entities can hopefully come together in ways yet to be imagined. And when and if they do, the result will surely be greater than the sum of its parts.



About the author: James Warner, FAIA

A founding principal of JSA and head of their nationally recognized senior living studio, Jim is a firm believer that design can have a profound impact on human behavior and at its very best can actually extend and improve the quality of one's life. His insights into the lifestyle of an aging society, the forces that shape them and the innovation resulting from that insight, have resulted in many awards and publications. Jim has played leadership roles in LeadingAge, Environments for Aging, ALFA and Design for Aging. He is a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects and received degrees in Architecture and Engineering from Syracuse University and the United States Military Academy.

About JSA: JSA creates enriching environments that allow seniors to enjoy life to the fullest, integrating physical and social activity. JSA has established significant expertise designing senior living communities for non-profits, as well as national corporations - expertise that helps communities reflect their unique culture while incorporating the realities of market appeal, operational efficiency, and budget. JSA's design success is reflected by numerous design awards from both architectural and industry sources.