

Maximizing Human Potential



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ARCHITECTURE

Approaches to Adaptive Design in Affordable Housing for Older Adults

by Sandy Atkins

Adaptive design of environments for older adults is critical to their long-term well-being, both physical and emotional. Over the past 15 years, the firm of Matalon Architecture and Planning in La Jolla, Calif., has designed multifamily senior housing ranging from high-end continuing care retirement communities to low-income HUD projects, all with an eye to supporting elders' independence.

Drawing on his extensive experience in the field, principal architect Michael Matalon gives us an overview of efficient and practical approaches to adaptive design in affordable housing for older adults.

We know that adaptive design supports aging in place, but can it be used in a cost-effective way?

We have learned that 80 percent to 90 percent of good adaptive design can be accomplished despite tight construction budgets. Whether you're a millionaire or paying rent the constitutes 30 percent of your Social Security income, there is common ground. One thing that needs to be remembered when developing a new residential facility for older adults is this: Many features are most cost-effective when designed in; retrofitting is much more expensive. Two key areas that need close attention are the kitchen and the bathroom.

What sorts of safety features do you include in low-cost senior housing?

During the framing phase, we put backing into the stud walls in bathrooms. That way, if a resident needs grab bars or an in-shower seat, they can easily be installed by staff. It's also critical to use floor surfaces that aren't too slippery and to avoid much of a change in plane; this helps elders avoid tripping. Very-low-pile carpet is a good compromise: It results in somewhat more difficult walker use, but provides a soft, nonslippery surface. In addition, we wire in an emergency call system and install handrails in all corridors.

How do you support social interaction in your projects?

We think it's extremely important to create community areas for social interaction; places that encourage people to stop and chat. We install systems in common areas to enhance effectiveness of hearing aids. A favorite feature of our projects is a roofed-over front porch that successfully draws people outside. They sit, watch the world go by and interact with neighbors. The porch is close to the office, so it's secure.

BONUS RESOURCES

Senior Housing by Matalon Architecture and Planning

Matalon Architecture and Planning in La Jolla, Calif., has designed a number of for-profit and nonprofit senior housing facilities. Here is a sample:

Hadley Villas. Ten-acre site; 80-unit independent living apartments; HUD Section 202 Program. Located in La Quinta, Calif.

Kirkwood of Cambria. Seven-acre master plan; 70-unit assisted living facility; 40-bed skilled nursing facility. Located in Cambria, Calif.

Sunshine Care at Del Dios. Two-and-a-half acre master plan; adult day care center; 45-resident assisted living facility; 30-resident dementia facility. Located in Escondido, Calif.

For more information, contact Michael Matalon of Matalon Architecture and Planning in La Jolla, Calif., at mbm@matalonarch.com or (619) 379-6911.

FURTHER READING

ASA ArticleSearch. The online searchable database of articles from ASA's periodicals offers more than 60 citations on housing -- including many dealing with affordable housing, elder-friendly housing and related topics. The full text of most of the articles is available at no charge exclusively to ASA members. Visit ASA ArticleSearch at <http://www.asaging.org/asav2/ArticleSearch/searchdatabase.cfm?topicid=47>.

How do you encourage walking?

There are a number of features we include to keep people walking as much as possible. The safest place to walk is inside the building so we try to put little nooks every 40-50 feet where the residents can catch their breath and also talk with others. They can be confident that they won't be caught short of breath, so they're more likely to take longer walks throughout the building.

How do you compensate for sensory deficits?

Lighting is important everywhere, but especially in kitchens, bathrooms and hallways. Strategic placement of light fixtures and windows can help overcome glare, which obliterates contrast for the aging eye, and shadows, which can obscure trip hazards or be perceived as objects. It is extremely important for residents to be able to distinguish vertical and horizontal surfaces, such as walls and counters against floors. We create contrast with color and materials; for example with a lighter wall and darker floor. The ability to perceive the edge of a counter is an important safety consideration.

What compromises do you make in low-cost housing?

The biggest compromise in HUD projects is lighting. We're limited to ceiling fluorescents and low-end incandescents rather than low-glare indirect lighting and more dispersed natural lighting. In high-rise HUD buildings, we can't encourage using the stairs as we can in two-story buildings, where we widen staircases and put seating on the landing halfway up. Walking outside is less secure because there are seldom grounds belonging to the project.

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