

NEW WAVE OF SENIOR LIVING ENVIRONMENTS



Shaun Purcell and Georgina Russell from Wilson Architects share their insights into the latest thinking on creating successful senior living facilities.

Sterile, institutional, unfriendly; these are just some of the common associations with senior living, which historically has shared more characteristics with the clinical

setting of a hospital than a comfortable home environment. Demand for a higher standard of care environments, along with improved understanding of user needs, has highlighted the importance of an integrated approach to design and management for senior living for facilities managers.

Facility Perspectives spoke to Shaun Purcell and Georgina Russell from Wilson Architects about the modern design of aged care facilities.

Facility Perspectives: How are the needs of residents in senior living facilities better understood today compared to a few decades ago?

Wilson Architects: Over the last decade in particular, research has brought resident wellbeing to the forefront of the discussion of senior living. Past models of senior living placed greater emphasis on care delivery in a medical sense (creating a more clinical as opposed to residential environment).

which is now understood to have significant adverse effects on wellbeing.

Coupled with tailored care, the built environment is key to maintaining a sense of independence and identity for residents within larger senior living communities. Central to this is the facilitation of daily routines and activities of the typical home, creating a less institutionalised setting. For the new generation of senior living residents in particular, maintaining a sense of independence is of key importance.

FP: From a facilities management perspective, what is the biggest challenge for senior living? How can this be addressed?

WA: Research suggests that the most significant challenge is achieving the right balance between an individual's lifestyle and care needs, and overall operational requirements. Facilities managers need to understand the importance of providing residents with privacy, dignity, autonomy and comfort, as well as a secure and safe environment while continuing to operate efficiently. Considered design of environments and care delivery can overcome these inherent social and economic challenges to address the needs of both residents and facilities managers with mutually beneficial outcomes.

FP: What strategies can be implemented in senior living design to address these issues?

WA: Designing for flexibility is a big issue. As occupancy rates increase, a suitable room may not be available at any given time, so easily reconfigurable units (for example, conversions combining two one-bedroom units into one two-bedroom unit) provide more options for more people. The flexibility to transition from low care to high care seamlessly in the same living environment, rather than needing to move as care needs escalate, is also the new benchmark.

Avoiding typical 'institutional' design strategies is also important – for example, not locating private rooms immediately adjacent to public spaces or on long, monotonous corridors. Allowing for residents to move around freely in a

safe and secure, yet not overtly controlled, environment with access to external spaces is also important. As density requirements inevitably increase, attention to maintaining a genuine landscape connection, even in high-rise environments, needs to be prioritised.

FP: There is evidence that creating spaces of a domestic scale and feel can improve the wellbeing of senior living residents. What design aspects contribute most to this?

WA: No-one wants to live in a hospital. A warm and appealing residential environment has measurable health benefits for residents, and relieves one of the larger stress points of moving from the family home into a care environment. Senior living facilities need to provide environments that are welcoming and warm, where residents can participate in making a home for themselves.

There are many things that facilities managers can do make the environment more homelike and welcoming, including:

- ▶ providing accommodation for couples, room for pets, areas for visiting family to stay for longer periods, and places where children of all ages can be occupied and want to visit
- ▶ making landscape an integral part of care and participatory environments
- ▶ providing dining areas with visible and interactive kitchens or plate-up areas of a domestic scale, as well as demonstration kitchens where care staff and family can cook for residents
- ▶ providing built-in furniture like memory boxes that invite personalisation, promote wayfinding and serve as conversation starters for care staff while maintaining a level of control over common environments
- ▶ maximising care provision efficiency while de-emphasising the provision of care in design and layout terms
- ▶ allowing residents to exercise a level of control over their space and their daily activities so that they are able to retain a semblance of a normal life routine.

FP: What is the latest thinking on senior living that is both fit for purpose as an aged care/health facility, and comfortable for

residents as a long-term home?

WA: Operators are now considering a base build that allows for increasing and added care provisions (for example, hoists) that are, by their nature, clinical but necessary infrastructure. Integrating technology and providing flexibility for future technology adaptation at the design stage is also a key issue.

Architects also now have a better understanding of the specific environmental conditions that significantly impact on residents. Particularly for those who suffer conditions such as dementia, factors such as sensory overstimulation due to exposure to loud/clinical noises, bright lights and glare can have serious adverse effects. We are now designing to control these variables and minimise discomfort for residents.

FP: What did you learn about senior living models from your recent international study tour that could be applied in the Australasian region?

WA: There is a definite trend towards more mixed-use development, rather than isolated 'ghettos' of senior living. Australian operators can look to European models that integrate a range of housing for a variety of demographics with social, retail and health infrastructure.

High-rise models for advanced aged care (including dementia) are also becoming increasingly common with urban densification. These developments are also suitable for mixed-use purposes, with the potential to activate the surrounding environment while providing additional revenue streams for operators.

FP: What is the future of senior living design and operation?

WA: An ideal model for future senior living environments should support more individualised care delivery, providing residents with more autonomy and control within an integrated community setting. This kind of setting should support routine life activities in a home-like space. This lessens the impact of the institutional setting, resulting in improved wellbeing for residents, their families and carers. 🌱