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The Magazine for Seniors Housing Real Estate and Operations

October-November 2020

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Architects' Inventiveness on Display

Building designers consider urban integration, sustainable features and even build in vacant parking lots to reflect the future trends of seniors housing.

By Jeff Shaw

As the seniors housing industry matures in all facets, architects are on the front lines of that evolution. After all, they are the ones who design the future properties before a single shovel hits the ground.

We've heard for years about the possible incoming changes. Demand for urban locations will increase as baby boomers will want to live near the hustle and bustle of downtown living. Environmentally friendly design will become paramount, both to reduce utility costs and satisfy governments and residents alike. Infill developments will arise from redevelopment opportunities of vacant properties, as other commercial real estate sectors — most notably retail — undergo their own shifts.

But what do these trends look like in practice?

Below are a series of case studies from seniors housing architects that reflect these trends, highlighting a single, unique project from each firm.

Case Study #1: Mall Madness

Suburban shopping malls present a unique challenge to the commercial real estate industry. As consumers shift their habits toward e-commerce, many shopping centers — particularly Class B, suburban sites — have high vacancy or have even closed completely. Meanwhile, they take up vast swaths of prime real estate.

The flip side of that coin? Vacant malls or underutilized parking lots may offer strong infill opportunities in areas with little open space for ground-up development.

Perkins Eastman has designed a five-story, 500,000-square-foot independent living community to be built in the parking lot of Southwest Plaza, a mall in the Denver suburb of Littleton. The shopping center totals over 1 million square feet, with Dillard's and Target



ACTIV Littleton is being developed on 500,000 square feet of open parking lot space at the Southwest Plaza mall in Littleton, Colorado. The mall can be seen in the background of the rendering.

as anchors.

ACTIV Littleton will feature 252 units as well as “an abundant suite of services and programming thoughtfully designed around health and wellness,” according to Jennica Deely, communications specialist of the central region for the New York City-based architecture firm.

“This project explores the adaptive reuse potential of underutilized space (traditionally reserved for vast seas of asphalt and parking) that surrounds an existing suburban shopping center,” says Deely. “This project will include seamless connections to and convergence with retail and mixed use.”

The design will allow the operator to utilize the services of the shopping center as a nexus for the community, provide mountain views and create an “intimate, neighborhood scale” through landscape planning, according to Deely. The mall even hosts a weekly farmers’ market.

In addition to the mall, the development is surrounded by a variety of other retail and restaurant options, multiple public parks and a golf course.

Case Study #2: Intergenerational Integration

In the Bronx, Body Lawson Associates Architects & Planners designed Home Street Residences, an eight-story, 75,000-square-foot affordable housing project for seniors. Of the 63 units, 19 are reserved for homeless seniors, two for those with hearing and/or vision impairment and four units for those with mobility impairments.

The project opened its doors in May.

“The 63 apartments inside Home Street are larger and better equipped than typical low-income housing for seniors,” says Victor Body-Lawson, founder and principal with the firm.



Home Street Residences rises eight stories on the former site of a vacant church in the Bronx, featuring 63 units of affordable housing for seniors.

“They feature large windows with shading devices to let in abundant daylight and views, while modulating the amount of light each apartment receives.”

“We reduced building costs and construction time by using factory-built, panelized façades and prefabricated concrete plank floors. This approach also provides for steel panels, offering several inches of space that can be filled with a thick blanket of insulation, which improves the building’s passive heating and cooling performance. That helps reduce energy costs during the winter and summer extremes,” continues Body-Lawson.

The development is situated on the site of a former vacant church, and the architects paid homage to the previous use. A schist from the church’s façade is used in the courtyard, along with a dated cornerstone from the building. Inside, furniture was reclaimed from the church, with benches and other naturally finished wood elements in the common areas made from salvaged wood wainscoting from the chapel walls.

In perhaps the development’s most unusual design element, the first floor houses DreamYard, a competitive video game training program for local teenagers.

“The goal of this project was to create a mixed-use, affordable seniors housing community for people over 55 years of age with an integral community facility that fosters interaction between resident seniors and community youth,” says Body-Lawson.

As with many affordable seniors housing communities, the waiting list is long — over 50,000 people

applied through a lottery system to be the first residents.

“Home Street Residences presents a new approach to urbanism and architecture for low-income community development, with community amenities and a setting that enlivens a transitional area of the Bronx,” says Body-Lawson. “We’re doing these things through the use of better materials and finishes, using better mechanical systems and integrating a youth program that creates a sense of community and vitality for seniors.”

Case Study #3: Green to the Extreme

The third phase of redevelopment of the Anne M. Lynch Homes at Old Colony in South Boston was announced at the start of October, with a \$78.8 million loan from MassHousing kicking off the project. The Architectural Team designed the project, which will add a four-story, 51,000-square-foot, 55-unit building for low-income seniors. The ground floor features program space for residents, including a community room, fitness center, wellness center, salon and resident services offices.

Originally constructed in 1940, the 845-unit Old Colony is one of the oldest federal public housing developments in the country. Prior to the current redevelopment effort, the Boston Housing Authority said it was one of the most distressed properties in its portfolio. The first two phases of the redevelopment project were also related to affordable housing, but for families instead of seniors.

The seniors housing phase of development is pursuing Passive House certification, a standard for environmentally friendly construction.

“It is the first building in the 10-plus-year Anne M. Lynch Homes at Old Colony redevelopment to be designed to this level of sustainability, and it’s one of the first affordable Passive House-certified projects in Boston as well,” says Nate Thomas, project manager with The Architectural Team.

The architects hope the development will set a template for other affordable housing projects to ensure sustainable construction becomes common.

“As more Passive House projects are designed and built, the process and the details will be demystified and it will hopefully become more common,” says Jay Szymanski, associate with The Architectural Team. “This project’s envelope — including walls, windows and roof — are designed to maximize the thermal enclosure and minimize air leakage. This allows for the right-sizing of mechanical systems and an overall reduction of energy use.”

Passive House certification also calls for high levels of indoor air quality, which could provide a silver lining. With infection control on everyone’s mind during the COVID-19 pandemic, Passive House standards could provide a blueprint for air filtration.

“The project includes an outdoor courtyard for the residents’ use, as well as private patios for ground-floor units to maximize available exterior space,” says Szymanski. “As far as design changes due to COVID, we are also pushing for Wi-Fi throughout

the whole building for increased telemedicine use.”

Case Study #4: Urban Development Rocks

Panorama Senior Housing has unveiled plans for Eagle Rock Assisted Living and Memory Care Center in the Eagle Rock neighborhood of Los Angeles.

KTGY Architecture + Planning is the architect of the new community. The groundbreaking is scheduled for early 2021, with completion slated for late 2022.

The property will feature 87 assisted living units and 22 memory care units in a five-story building and a four-story building with a rooftop deck. A ground-level courtyard and subterranean parking structure connect the two buildings.

“This site was quite challenging because we had to fit a commercial kitchen, large dining room, and a ton of other amenities in two separate buildings,” says Daniel Kianmahd, founder of Panorama. “In fact, about 45 percent of the gross area of the building is dedicated to common areas compared with 15 percent for typical apartment buildings.”

The planned community fits in with Eagle Rock’s “Rock the Boulevard” campaign, a \$16.2 million makeover of the neighborhood’s main thoroughfare. The recently approved improvements will include wider sidewalks, crosswalk improvements, ADA-compliant ramps, landscaping, public art and parking-protected bike lanes.

“The new community is an innovative response to multiple needs,” says Ben Seager, KTGY associate principal. “First



The third phase of redevelopment of the Anne M. Lynch Homes at Old Colony will include a 55-unit building for low-income seniors in South Boston.