

COVID's Influence on Senior Care Design Trends

Facility spaces need to incorporate technology and a sense of community.

By Mackenna Moralez
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Long before President Joe Biden made the call to improve the [quality of senior care facilities](#) earlier this year, people had been paying attention to how these facilities operate.

Every so often a senior care facility makes headlines for not providing quality care for its residents or that they are [abruptly closing down](#), but while these few instances garner the most attention, most facilities are already striving to improve their operations. According to a report by [National Care for Assisted Living](#), more patients were coming to nursing homes for shorter stays and returning to their permanent residence. Since 2012, successful discharges back to the community have increased 7.8 percent. Meanwhile, the number of people returning to a hospital during nursing home stays have decreased 8.7 percent since 2011.

According to the Joint center for Housing Studies at Harvard, the U.S. population aged 65 and over is expected grow from roughly 30 million today to 77 million in 2034. As the demand for senior care facilities have skyrocketed in recent years, people are now expecting a more personalized experience from the buildings. High-end homes are becoming more popular, and this is reflected in the upcoming plans for the size of units being built, the number of residents and the ancillary services they offer. Luxury senior care facilities will play an expanded and increasingly important role in serving market needs in diverse ways.

“The market is changing in response to the lifestyles of its clientele,” Anthony Vivirito, LEED AP, Associate, [The Architectural Team \(TAT\)](#) says. “There is a need to differentiate senior living communities and the care they offer, in order to remain competitive in the marketplace. A certain segment of our clients have embraced the boutique model of care, where the focus is on offering an individualized care program for each resident. From a design perspective, this type of change manifests itself through space programming that allows for greater flexibility and autonomy based on the acuity of the resident.”

“Additionally, the pandemic has forced a reexamination and reorganization of large central activity and ancillary areas into more discrete rooms or spaces,” Vivirito continues. “The goal is to be able to safely control the spread of a virus by isolating certain resident populations in wings or floors of the building. In terms of specific systems and materials, touchless controls, antimicrobial surfaces, and more advanced HVAC systems are being specified to address Covid and other virus-related concerns. We are now designing and specifying for split HVAC systems, which offer significant air quality and energy efficiency benefits relative to the central ducted systems that were the norm just a few years ago. Split systems also allow for the higher indoor air quality and more precise environmental control that senior communities require.”

The [boom in luxury senior care has not come on as suddenly as it may seem](#). Those in the industry have seen the evolution of senior housing providers preparing for baby boomers and their higher end desires. A small portion of these seniors have the

financial savings to support high monthly fees and developers are willing to deliver housing stock to match their desires. The high-end luxury model and amenity-rich programming of these facilities is largely only applicable in affluent communities, as it relies on a certain clientele to be economically viable.

Still, new and innovative planning and [design approaches will also be critical](#) in this period to help the senior housing and assisted living industry keep up with demand. When seniors move into care facilities, they want to maintain the independence they once had. The facilities should feel welcoming and warm, rather than clinical to ease the transition from their homes. Using materials and finishes that evoke serenity, comfort, and hospitality, residents will feel at home in their new space.

Technology has played an integral role in this lifestyle change because people want to stay more [connected with the outside world](#). To better accommodate this, designers are layering technology into existing senior living communities. Despite what people believe, the pandemic has driven seniors to become more technology savvy as telehealth, click and collect grocery services, and video calls have become more mainstream. Part of what seniors are looking for in these facilities are programs that can help structure their day. Providing upgraded Wi-Fi and internet support capabilities have been vital to these facilities as it is now improving the quality of care for seniors.

“The pandemic is driving the advancement of new technologies to promote healthy environments,” Tammy Ng, project manager, senior associate, [MBH Architects](#).

“There is an increase in demand for smart building technology, which includes increased use of touchless door operations and more motion sensors to run fixtures and equipment within the building. With the introduction of technology to automatically adjust building temperature and lighting, there is less need for occupants or staff to come into contact with buttons or switches, decreasing the spread of disease.”

Sense of community

The market for senior care facilities will continue to [adapt to consumer needs](#).

However, what still needs to be focused on is creating a sense of community within the building. Providing spaces for organic and informal engagement and interactions for both residents and staff can improve physical, emotional and cognitive wellbeing for all parties involved, Vivirito explains.

It is important that a sense of community is incorporated into design plans. While this may look like a “main street” design approach, centering on a main corridor with various programmatic spaces allows for intergenerational community interaction and offers a sequence of possible experiences.

“The pandemic also accelerated the need for access to the outdoors,” Ng says.

“Outdoor common areas around the facility allow for more social distancing. Protected, outdoor spaces areas are becoming more significant to community building. Moving beyond the traditional offering of game rooms and indoor pools, we see an influx of exciting new options such as community gardens, sculpture plazas, and elevated food and beverage options. Make these spaces open and inviting, while respecting the need for privacy, safety and ongoing needs to social distance.”

Communities aren't built within the cells of a spreadsheet, though. Senior care facilities need to think about engaging everyone that steps foot into the building. While it may just be a place of work for some, it is a home to most.

[Mackenna Moralez](#) is the associate editor of the facility market.