

A new master plan for senior living



Explore three communities 'whose models aim to transform how we view and respond to aging'

by Sally Abrahms

Senior living is changing. While traditional stand-alone, age-segregated senior living communities will soon have fewer and fewer takers, forward-thinking communities are bringing the inside out and the outside in. What does that mean? Residents are increasingly becoming part of the larger community, whether it is interacting with neighbors of any age or people from around their town or city. And enterprising developers are repositioning their senior living communities as fun destinations to visit with great amenities that appeal to everyone.

There are already master planned communities with care *and* retail, restaurants, stores, office and medical buildings, schools, wellness spas, hotels and homes. They may have a variety of hous-

ing (perhaps single family and multi-family homes, townhouses, one-floor apartment or rental units, a 55+ active-adult community and long-term care) and people at different life stages in the same neighborhood. Often, they share amenities, activities and resources.

These developers are onto something. A new American Enterprise Institute report shows that people who live in amenity-rich communities are more content with their neighborhood, more trusting of others and feel less socially isolated. These public policy researchers found that 45% of those who live in neighborhoods with abundant amenities rate their community as "excellent," compared to 26% for those that have few.¹

Senior living communities for new generations

"For the Greatest Generation [born before 1928²], the primary values of senior living were safety, security and comfort,"

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Diners enjoy the award-winning Canvas Restaurant & Market at Lake Nona in Orlando, Florida. Image courtesy of Tavistock Development Company





Residents of all ages can 'grow veggies, herbs and flowers' in 'The Agrihood' (small neighborhood farms) in Rancho Mission Viejo's Escencia and Sendero villages in Orange County, California. Other people enjoy the harvest through on-site culinary workshops and a farm stand. Image courtesy of Rancho Mission Viejo

says Robert Kramer, founder of the National Investment Center for Seniors Housing & Care (NIC). Developers continued to create age-segregated, stand-alone communities in response. Yet that's not what Boomers want—or will put up with.

Rather than viewing later life as a time to “retire, disengage [and] decline,” Boomers in senior living communities will seek “engagement, experience, enjoyment and enrichment,” Kramer comments. “To do all those things, they need to be integrated and connected with, not isolated and separated from, the rest of society.”

Mixed-use projects with nonprofit organizations on site and restaurants open to the public, for instance, make for a more interesting, vibrant place. University-based retirement communities (UBRCs) on or near college campuses, senior liv-

ing communities in cities or suburban town centers, and master planned communities similarly appeal to members of the Silent Generation (ages 74–91²). The verdict is out on Boomers, the oldest who turn 80 in 2026.²

“Boomers—and there are 76 million [in the United States],³ as duly noted by developers and healthcare providers—have always forced the market to respond to them and been change agents,” maintains Kramer. “This is going to happen again. They will redefine our sense of what retirement and aging is.” The scramble is on to come up with communities where they will want to be.

At a time when negative stereotypes about older people are going strong, and studies show the detrimental impact⁴ of social isolation and loneliness on older adults (from depression to early death), these new kinds of communities could

not come fast enough. In addition, an abundance of research⁵ shows the positive effect for both children and older adults on intergenerational engagement.

Here are three communities whose models aim to transform the way we view and respond to aging:

Lake Nona

With 11,000 acres, the 17-square-mile community of Lake Nona in Orlando, Florida, is a city within a city. Besides assisted living, a 55+ active-adult community and 13 age-diverse neighborhoods, the developer Tavistock Development has an impressive list of resources.

There's a country club with golf, big box stores, boutiques, commercial office space, farmers markets, entertainment venues, hotels, lakes, Medical City with a children's hospital, cancer center and Veterans Affairs center, and



Wellpoint Community at Hampton Cove in Huntsville, Alabama, will connect to the broader community through engaging programming for all ages, says developer Joseph McCarron. It is hoped the Via Center (pictured) will draw residents from an existing neighborhood. Image courtesy of LifeCenters Communities, LLC

a plethora of institutes and centers for collaboration. Add to the list:

- Childcare and preschool, two elementary schools, a middle school and a high school, the University of Florida Research and Academic Center and the University of Central Florida Health Sciences campus
- Lake Nona Education Health Sciences Initiative, which provides learning opportunities for all ages, putting community residents in contact with doctors, researchers, professors and business professionals
- Johnson & Johnson Human Performance Institute trains and coaches professional athletes, with 100 tennis courts that are home to the United States Tennis Association

How does long-term care fit in? Somerby at Lake Nona, built in 2015, offers assisted living and memory care. Formerly

owned by Watercrest Senior Living, the community is located in a commercial area that has a preschool, restaurants and a yogurt shop. The big draw, though, is a spa used both by residents and those in the larger Lake Nona community (about 30–40% of the spa’s income comes from outside the building). Bob Harwood, executive director of Somerby, notes that some residents were spa customers first.

Even so, Somerby’s location has been challenging because “the town is growing away from us,” says Harwood. Development, such as a new town center, is expanding in the other direction into the heart of Lake Nona where there will be a comedy club, hotels, a movie theater, a bowling alley, shops and restaurants—in addition to what is currently there.

Already, an existing 55+ active-adult community is in the “hot” area. Because

Somerby is away from much of the action, Harwood encourages long-term care residents to take advantage of nearby amenities. He is also planning intergenerational activities with the newly opened preschool. In addition, he opens up Somerby to the larger community for outside meetings. “My goal is to bring in anyone who would normally not find us, including young people who may be grandkids,” Harwood states. “If this is where we are, we have to figure out what can we do with it.”

A new independent-living, assisted-living and memory-care project being built near the town center and walkable neighborhoods will have no geography issue. Watercrest at Lake Nona opens in 2021 with a cigar and wine bar (you read that right), theater, spa and multiple dining venues. The Watercrest commu-

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At Lake Nona in Orlando, Florida, the town center features hotels, restaurants, retail and entertainment, plus the towering 'Beacon' public art installation. Image courtesy of Tavistock Development Company

nity also features a wellness center that offers the latest treatments, including light, sound and salt therapy.

“The challenge has been to overcome dated mindsets regarding the resident, family and caregiver experience,” says Skipper Peek, senior vice president at Tavistock Development. “To accomplish this, we built clear distinctions by celebrating people and a culture of service while delivering an environment that fosters well-being and connectivity across generations and personal interests.”

Peek observes that in the past, assisted living has lacked an environment conducive to family. At Watercrest, a mother and daughter will be able to have a glass of wine by the pool, for example, or attend an evening event together.

Wellpoint Community at Hampton Cove When Phase 1 opens next May [2020] in Huntsville, Alabama, Wellpoint will be

the start of a master planned development with an emphasis, and distinguishing edge, they believe, on health and wellness.

Charter Senior Living will be in charge of the 114 independent-living units, 50 assisted-living apartments and 26 memory-care suites on site. This community will be called Charter at Wellpoint.

In 2021, the property will add a 90-room boutique hotel, a 40-home active-adult community and the Via Center, a 50,000-sq.-ft. “progressive integrative wellness center.” Near Wellpoint is a long-established neighborhood of 2,200 homes from which it hopes to draw members of all ages to Via.

LifeCenters Communities, the developer/sponsor of the 20-acre master planned community, together with Hutchinson Consulting, is distinguishing it as a place for proactive wellness that combines hospitality and healthcare.

“We conceived a prototype of a planned community cloaked in lifestyle rather than aging services,” says LifeCenter’s CEO Joseph McCarron. “We are promoting active engagement, wellness, social engagement and supportive care as needed.”

Wellpoint is located at the 18th hole of a 54-hole Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail. Its Via Center will offer wellness planning and programming, health coaching, preventive care, fitness and lifestyle classes, medical offices, nutritionists, and a spa—float rooms, salt caves and cryosaunas anyone? Other features will include the latest workout equipment and facilities and a restaurant with a cooking school to make healthy meals.

Via will also house The Enterprise Center, a coworking space open to the public as well as a collaborative “community

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Residents of Gavilán 55+ neighborhoods enjoy exclusive Gavilán amenities—such as The Outlook retreat and The Hacienda clubhouse—as well as all-age amenities and scenic views at Rancho Mission Viejo in Orange County, California. Image courtesy of Rancho Mission Viejo

incubator where various generations can work together, advance technology and create opportunities in aging services,” says McCarron. That may mean partnering with local medical schools and universities, healthcare providers, community members, corporations, scientists and entrepreneurs in the field.

“The exhibiting trend is accelerating convergence,” McCarron explains. “Collaboration is displacing competition. It’s important to think about what organizations, nonprofits, educational and other respected institutions you could partner with to provide residents with opportunities and a sense of purpose.”

LifeCenters has hired experts in their fields of hospitality and senior living. “The growth of senior living has largely been fueled by capital markets and real estate development,” McCarron states. “This deal mentality has focused on real estate and financial returns without recognizing the significance of operations management.”

In predevelopment are three more Wellpoint projects, in Murfreesboro,

Tennessee; Venice, Florida; and Salem, New Hampshire.

Rancho Mission Viejo

To understand the scale of Rancho Mission Viejo (“The Ranch”) in southern California, consider these numbers:

- 17,000 acres and growing of open space with trails, parks and public programming
- 6,000 acres of future intergenerational housing and mixed-use development over the next 20 years
- 7,500 people in a community that has a working ranch
- Two villages, built in 2013 and 2015, with housing and mixed-use amenities (Starbucks included) and a K-8 school [one school]

All neighborhoods have a variety of activities, resources and housing, both affordable and market rate: apartments, townhouses, single-family houses, multifamily and villas. That means young families, singles, Millennials, Gen Xers, Boomers and older adults have a chance

to interact. It also means you might find three generations living there.

The Ranch—which received a 2018 “Best Master Planned Community of the Year” Gold Nugget Award for its Escencia village development⁶—has seven 55+ active-adult communities, each called Gavilán 55+, built in residential neighborhoods and a newly opened 300-unit life-plan community.

Independent living is either apartments or single family homes; assisted living, memory care and skilled nursing are next door at the Health Center. More long-term care communities will be built as The Ranch expands. For now, there are four people over age 100 living at Gavilán. “We believe that the definition between 55+ restricted, independent and assisted living is getting very blurred,” comments Paul Johnson, executive vice president of community development at Rancho Mission Viejo.

Johnson anticipates that many in the 55+ communities will stay where they are as they grow older. “I see a lot of op-

portunities in servicing people who age in place,” he says. Others may decide to move to a nearby life-plan community.


One thing is clear: The company’s research showed that older adults, particularly those in 55+ housing, do not want to live separated behind gates. “We looked at what had been traditionally done by other senior living providers and thought, ‘We don’t want to do that,’” Johnson states. “We began to understand it was an integrated approach of mixed housing and that 55+ [adults] love being around younger people.”

Gavilán communities have some amenities just for their residents—research told them this was important, too—but they can also use facilities and take part in activities anywhere on The Ranch.

Regardless of where people live on the property, opportunities abound to stay socially engaged and active. For instance, there are three neighborhood farms where residents of all ages can grow vegetables, herbs and flowers and, should they choose, get guidance from staff. They can also volunteer to help around the farm.

Communities for living well together

Lake Nona, Wellpoint and The Ranch are examples of thoughtful development that fosters healthy and meaningful intergenerational living and a sense of community. With whatever residents need right there—medical, retail, hospitality, recreational, work—these lifestyle projects make growing older easier and more interesting.

And then there are those visits. Rather than the “dreaded” place they have to go to see Grandma, children who come to the Health Center at The Ranch can also stop by the 5.5-acre children’s park and check out the zipline. 

Sally Abrahms is an award-winning writer on Boomers and older adults with a focus on senior living, caregiving and technology. She has published in The Wall Street Journal, TIME, Newsweek, the New York Times, AARP, PBS’s Next Avenue, the Boston Globe, Forbes and the Washington Post. Abrahms also writes and consults for companies focusing on the 50+ demographic. For more information, visit www.sallyabrahms.com.

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Resources

Charter Senior Living

www.charterseniorliving.com

Hutchinson Consulting

<https://hutchinsonconsulting.com/consulting-services>

Lake Nona

www.lakenona.com

LifeCenters Communities

www.lifecenters.community

National Investment Center for Seniors Housing & Care (NIC)

www.nic.org

Rancho Mission Viejo

www.ranchomissionviejo.com

Rancho Mission Viejo’s Gavilán® 55+

www.ranchomissionviejo.com/amenities/55-plus

Somerby at Lake Nona

www.somerbyseiorliving.com/community/orlando-fl

Tavistock Development Company

<https://tavistockdevelopment.com>

Watercrest Senior Living

<https://watercrestseniorliving.com>

Wellpoint Community at Hampton Cove

www.lifecenters.community/locations/hampton-cove