

Building freedom of choice

Surprising trends reshape senior housing market

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Designer kitchens. Kiddie pools. Inner-cities. They're not exactly hallmarks of senior housing. But a new generation of seniors is changing that.

Healthier and often more adventurous than the generations of seniors before them, today's seniors are making some surprising and refreshing choices as they pick places to grow old.

"Today's strong trend is many more choices for senior housing," said John Migliaccio, director of research at the MetLife Mature Market Institute in New York.

When builders ask for his advice about what to build to keep pace with market desires, Migliaccio tells them, "There will be demand for almost any kind of housing you can imagine."

New priorities

Just one change tells you the times are very different: "We are seeing more communities with kiddie pools and play areas for young children," said Migliaccio, explaining that sometimes grandparents are providing child care for their children's children, or just want to make sure their

grandkids have something to look forward to when they visit.

Either way, the increasing presence of children in these communities is a sign of the pervasive changes that have rewritten all the rules.

Another trend: Amenities are important, said Judith Sisler Johnston, a Florida-based interior designer who has worked on many of the new senior communities being developed across the nation. According to Johnston, senior housing follows many of the same trends that shape conventional housing, and that means granite counters are in, as are gourmet kitchens and upgraded spa-like bathrooms.

"No one wants to feel he or she is stepping down when moving into senior housing," Johnston said.

But this can go overboard, said Todd Harff, president of Creating Results, a Woodbridge, Va.-headquartered firm that specializes in marketing real estate to seniors. He said that in the period between 2004 and 2007, "much [of the] senior housing got too big and too expensive."

Less square footage

The current downturn in housing has affected the senior

sector, too, and smaller homes — perhaps 1,500 to 2,000 square feet — are selling better, Harff said.

Here are some of the trends that are reshaping the senior housing marketplace:

■ **Infilling.** Many baby boomers are turning their noses up at suburbia and retiring into inner-cities, said **Steve Kleber**, an Atlanta-based senior housing marketing specialist who has coined the word "Ruppie," which stands for retired urban professional. "Many more seniors are moving into walkable urban neighborhoods. They want to be where everything is and they definitely do not want to be isolated," he said.

Hollywood, for instance, is attracting seniors, said Los Angeles-based social worker Forrest Hong, chair of the National Assn. of Social Workers Aging Specialty Practice Section Committees. With good public transportation, substantial retail and easily available healthcare, downtowns now rank high among the choices mulled by seniors.

■ **College towns.** "We are seeing more seniors who want to live in college towns," said Kleber. A local example is University Village, a recent development across the street from California Lutheran



University in Thousand Oaks.

This trend should gain momentum, said experts, explaining that college towns are usually resource-rich and filled with such cultural activities as concerts and lectures.

■ **Going green.** “More of our buyers are asking for ‘green’ options,” said Rick Andreen, president of Trilogy/Shea Homes Active Lifestyle Communities, a senior housing developer with such communities in California as Trilogy at La Quinta. Particularly popular right now are comparatively low-cost green options such as energy-efficient windows and Energy Star-certified appliances.

Some developers of condo and apartment complexes also are putting in common gardens where everybody has a private plot for raising anything from roses to tomatoes.

■ **Beyond calories.** Food and wine, too, are emerging as key for seniors, said Andreen, who indicated that at Trilogy Central Coast in Nipomo, Calif., his company has retained a locally well-known chef to create meals in the community’s restaurant. And just as with foodies of all ages, seniors want to eat locally

produced food, so there’s a push to use foods bought at Central Coast farmers markets, he said.

■ **Home offices.** “We are seeing many more [office spaces] in senior housing,” said Harff, adding that either by necessity or by choice, many people past retirement age are working from home.

■ **Exercise.** “Fitness is in,” said Migliaccio, who noted a real sign of the times is that new plus-50 communities are shifting from shuffleboard to fitness tracks — and that’s because the new seniors plan to keep exercising.

■ **NORCs, or naturally occurring retirement communities.** These are increasingly popular, said Anita Altman, a senior housing expert with the UJA Federation of New York, a social services provider.

A NORC can be a handful of neighborhood blocks where many older residents live. That’s increasingly common because the desire of many seniors is to age in place and they can do that in NORCs, where they can contract for support services ranging from meal delivery to health counseling to domestic help.

Good examples of NORCs

are on the East Coast — such as the Penn South complex in Manhattan’s Chelsea neighborhood — but there’s a thriving NORC in Los Angeles’ Fairfax District, too, according to Los Angeles social worker Hong. Anywhere there happens to be many seniors who are aging together on a block or in a neighborhood, the potential exists for a NORC, said Altman.

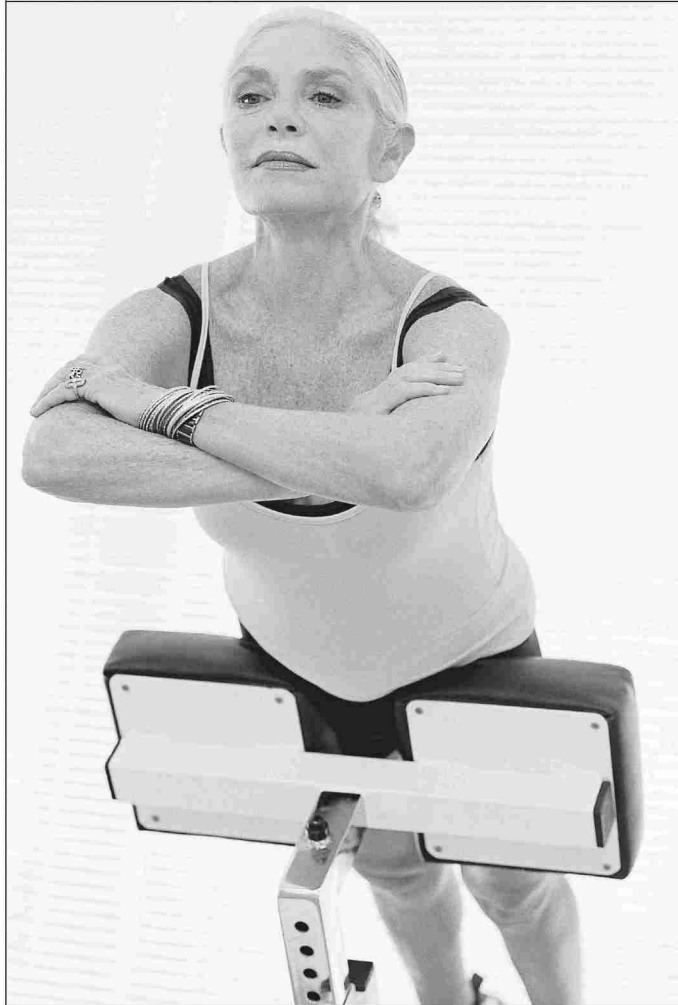
Reason for optimism

The long-term prognosis for senior housing is strong, according to MetLife’s Migliaccio.

Sheer demographics power this optimism.

“Baby boomers will bring new interest in senior housing,” said North Hollywood attorney Stuart Zimring, a past president of the National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys and an expert on senior housing in the Los Angeles area. And they represent a strong force — there were 78 million boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) in July 2005, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Freelance writer Robert McGarvey covers real estate.



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On-site gyms are among the amenities now being offered at new plus-50 housing developments.