EXCLUSIVE

The Case for Age-Friendly Suburbs

Friday, April 5, 2013 - 4:00pm PDT by ERIC C.Y. FANG
Housing, Land Use, Social / Demographics, Transportation, Urban Development, North America

Several trends are conspiring to challenge America's ability to house and care for its senior citizens. Utilizing successful examples, architect and planner Eric C.Y. Fang examines how the suburbs can be adapted to support an aging population.

America's established framework for housing and caring for its senior citizens addresses a range of needs, from those with independent and active lifestyles to those requiring more intensive levels of care. What each of these models has traditionally had in common is they are typically housed in discrete, standalone facilities with an extensive—and expensive—array of on-site services. The focus is on services and amenities, rather than place.

Despite the demonstrated success of this framework, several trends may challenge its ability to continue as the dominant paradigm for housing America's senior citizens. The first is the sheer number of people poised to cross the threshold into retirement age. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the anticipated tide of Baby Boomer retirees will double America's senior population by 2030, increasing its ranks by 35 million [PDF]. The changing lifestyle preferences of seniors will also play a role, as increasing numbers continue working into their 70s and living in their own homes. Finally, the drop in property values resulting from the Great Recession has significantly impacted the retirement choices available. Together, these developments have begun to reverberate in how seniors choose to live, with a dramatic drop in the migration to Sunbelt states, and an increase in the average age of those moving into assisted-living facilities. The need for a greater range of attractive living options for this rapidly growing age cohort has never been more apparent.
Many observers have touted cities such as New York and Philadelphia, with their pedestrian-friendly sidewalks, transit infrastructure, cultural and recreational amenities, and medical services, as a primary alternative for the senior population. But the scale and complexity, not to mention living costs associated with the big city, are daunting for many and thus not for everyone.

It is the suburbs, in fact, where the large majority of the rising senior population presently resides. What’s more, this is also where their children and grandchildren reside. For seniors who look to their children for support and caregiving, locating to the suburbs is not a choice; it is a necessity. Retrofitting suburban communities so they may serve as a realistic and competitive option for seniors may become one of American society’s major challenges – and opportunities.

With their heavy bias toward the automobile and dispersed land-use patterns, most American suburbs are far from ideally suited to accommodate senior populations. But there are several ways in which suburban communities can become more supportive settings for seniors who want to stay in their communities, but cannot manage, physically or financially, to stay in their single family homes or maintain their mobility.

In communities where driving is the only way to tend to everyday activities, transit will be increasingly important to allow seniors to maintain an independent and connected lifestyle. According to a 2002 study published in *The American Journal of Public Health*, more than 600,000 drivers aged 70 and older decide to give up driving each year. For those between 75 and 84 who do not, fatality rates are equal to those of teenage drivers. The U.S. Department of Transportation estimates that over half of all seniors stay at home due to a lack of transportation options.

Increasing access to transit will only go part way toward making suburbs more livable for seniors. Public transportation places its own demands on riders and is not always an option for older citizens, and community shuttle services can be costly to operate. Making retail amenities and services such as pharmacies, medical offices, grocery stores, and restaurants accessible by foot would dramatically increase the ability of seniors to take care of their everyday needs, effectively creating a walkable community. Improving the quality of the public environment by creating sidewalks that are wider and navigable for wheelchairs and walkers, and providing amenities like small areas for passive recreation, public restrooms and places for shelter or covered walkways will be critical to that goal.

A more basic barrier to making suburbs more age friendly is the segregated land use patterns that are common to many post-War suburban communities. An obvious solution is to create mixed-use districts to allow support services to be located in the ground level of tightly clustered mixed-use facilities with senior housing above. Locating these services within a walkable downtown setting could help expand the market and defray otherwise unsupportable costs for service. Using the ground floor of mixed-use developments for such services can also help fill otherwise hard-to-lease ground level spaces with uses that are more public in nature. Unfortunately, zoning in many suburban communities prohibits these types of combinations.
Revising such policies will be a key step in allowing suburbs to evolve in a way that is more fundamentally supportive of an aging population.

There are many small towns that exemplify the qualities that would allow an age friendly local community to thrive. Communities like Westfield, NJ, Oxford, MS, and downtown San Mateo, CA can all claim a compact core with multi-family housing options, walkable streets and rail transit. Other communities like Princeton, NJ and San Luis Obispo, CA share these characteristics and add education and culture to the mix. Many of these towns are showing up on the “top ten places to retire” lists in publications like Kiplingers and Money magazine.

Developers in affluent East Coast communities like Westchester County and Cape Cod have also begun to recognize the value and market appeal of a walkable small-town setting. At Christie Place, Ginsburg Development Companies has just finished selling out a two-building, age-restricted luxury condominium development on an infill site in the village center of Scarsdale, one of the more desirable and affluent communities in the New York metropolitan area. The 42-unit development is replete with a ground-floor restaurant, café and dry cleaners. A neighborhood grocer and other retail services are within an easy 600-foot walk, as is a MetroNorth commuter rail station which provides access to Midtown Manhattan in 30 minutes. The charm
and amenities of Scarsdale's village center are featured in GDC's marketing for Christie Place, showing that place has become a factor in senior living.

In Cape Cod, Wise Living has developed a series of independent senior living communities near the centers of historic towns like Chatham, Harwich Port, Orleans and Woods Hole. At 10-41 units, the Wise Living developments are far smaller than the 80 units that are the norm for standalone assisted living facilities, and 120-150 units that are typically needed for Independent Senior Living to leverage the required common spaces, building infrastructure and staff. This allows the scale and design of the buildings to be compatible with the scale of these historic communities. The brand value of the towns, and the rich menu of amenities they offer, such as beauty salons, houses of worship, restaurants, coffee shops, museums and galleries are a central part of Wise Living's marketing strategy, which stresses the importance of being "connected with a vibrant, year-round community."

Integrating senior housing into the fabric of suburban communities could help spread the costs of services commonly associated with senior living, such as medical care, physical therapy, and meals to a broader population. A more open model with shared services and amenities could, as Wise Living has shown, make smaller-scale senior housing developments viable and enlarge the range of developers able to meet the growing need for senior housing. Situating seniors in settings where they can access these services by foot or transit will also reduce the need for paratransit or community shuttle services, which state and local governments are finding increasingly difficult to fund.

The prospect of a place for seniors in the heart of the community offers the possibility of a broader, more holistic vision for the future of American suburbs that have struggled to move beyond the child-centered orientation of the post-War era. Redirecting the locus of senior living to more compact and age-friendly small town settings may offer a way to allow retirees to remain in the communities where they have raised their children and lived their lives. Instead of the empty nesters selling their house in the burbs and fleeing to a Sunbelt retirement community, an Upper East Side pied-a-terre or a Pacific Heights condo, perhaps it is time to consider the senior couple downsizing within their community into a flat in their own village center, where they keep active by walking to take care of their day-to-day needs,
stay close to family and friends, and live within easy access to the medical and community support network they have spent their lives establishing.

Eric C.Y. Fang AIA, AICP, LEED AP, has led large-scale urban redevelopment, transit-oriented development and campus planning projects for public agencies, private developers and large institutions nationally and internationally. A lifelong student of the city, and currently an Associate Principal at EE&K, a Perkins Eastman Company, Eric co-founded the design journal LINE and has written for publications including UrbanLand and Architectural Record.

Age-friendly
#Submitted by ELDERBURBIA on 8 April 2013 - 12:11pm

Article foretells what will be a major development in my opinion, though the solutions are actually urban, if small scale, and not suburban if, by suburbs, we are referring to those homogeneous, single use, greenfield sub-divisions where so many elders live. I like your thinking! (Phil Stafford, Elderburbia: Aging with a Sense of Place in America)

Senior Villages
#Submitted by JENLEF on 11 April 2013 - 02:54am

Interesting point about seniors having similar fatality rates as teenagers. The decision to give up driving can be very difficult, sometime resulting in isolation and depression. I'm currently studying organizations--known as Senior Villages--that assist seniors age in place. These membership-driven non-profits provide much needed instrumental and social support to those who are increasingly losing the ability to drive. They don't change the physical layout of the suburbs, but mediate several of the problems you describe in your article.

age-friendly communities
#Submitted by ELDERBURBIA on 11 April 2013 - 11:55am
Grantmakers In Aging, with funding from Pfizer Foundation, is undertaking major age-friendly community projects in five U.S. locations. Check it out at:
http://www.giaging.org/
Phil Stafford
Multigenerational homes a family solution

By Marilyn Bowden • Bankrate.com

Once upon a time, Grandma could expect to move into the spare bedroom and help out with the kids. After World War II, that model changed as young people moved closer to the city and embraced the new American dream -- a house in the suburbs that had no room for aging parents.

Now multigenerational living is making a comeback. According to a Pew Research Center report, U.S. Census data recorded 51.4 million Americans, or 16.7 percent of the population, living in multigenerational households in 2009, up 10.5 percent from just two years earlier. This period, of course, encompassed the depths of the Great Recession. And for many, the original impetus was undoubtedly economic.

But homebuilders are finding that demand for housing that accommodates several generations under one roof is still on the rise, not only among immigrant groups for whom multigenerational living is culturally expected, but across all demographics and regions.

One reason for this is that, post-recession, the cultural landscape is changing, says Gina Canzonetta, marketing manager at Maracay Homes, which offers homes that include self-contained generation suites, or "casitas," in new communities in southern Arizona.

"In general, people want to be more connected," she says. "We are becoming a culture of responsibility and more meaningful relationships."
AN ALTERNATIVE TO BUILDING AN ADDITION

A couple years ago, Tom Moser, a financial planner in Arizona, became concerned about his octogenarian father, who lived alone about 20 miles away.

"I was seeing some things that indicated Dad was lonely," Moser says. "I grew up in a Mennonite community in Indiana, where adding on to an existing home has been the norm for a couple of hundred years, so the concept of different generations living together was not new to me.

"I wanted to do something for my father that was right for him. He wasn't open to going into assisted living, and that was not our first choice either. I discovered that three miles away, Lennar was building just the type of home I was looking for. So we jumped at it."

Lennar rolled out its line of "Next Gen" homes at the beginning of 2012, says Jeff Roos, Western regional president. By the end of 2013, Lennar had sold more than 1,200 of them in more than 100 communities.

A "Next Gen" home doesn't add significantly to the total square footage, Roos says. "It's designed with a separate apartment within the confines of a family home. It provides a separate living space that allows more than one generation to live independently, but together.

"I think it's the greatest advance since indoor plumbing. It's a real game changer."

DESIGN RESPONSIVE TO DIFFERENT NEEDS

"It's all about the numbers," says architect Howard Perlman, president of Las Vegas-based Environmental Design Group, whose 2Gen designs are credited with starting the trend. "People are living differently today," he says. "When a third of the world is living doubled, it makes sense to build multigenerational houses that can still function very well as traditional houses."

Perlman's 2Gen house, which includes a lock-off space with separate entrance within the floor plan of a family home, ensures that each family unit has privacy, including its own front door, kitchen and living space. It can be used by aging parents or boomerang kids, as a home office, a nanny apartment or a space for extended visits from out-of-town relatives.

"Every architect dreams about being able to push society in a direction that's positive," Perlman says. "It's good to have grandparents living with grandchildren when there is a proper house to do that in, so that everybody has their own space and can be separate when they want to be. It's healthier for the kids and for the seniors."
WHO'S BUYING MULTIGENERATIONAL HOMES?

"It's really good for children and young people to have a connection to their roots -- a sense of history and who they are. Older relatives provide that," says Donna Butts, executive director of Generations United, or GU, which is dedicated to improving the lives of children, youth and older people through intergenerational collaboration.

Intergenerational living is more prevalent among cultural ethnic groups where several generations living together is common, Butts says. But GU's surveys show the trend is growing.

CEO Frank Spadaea says Gen-Flex homes from Franciscus Homes, based in Virginia Beach, Va., which also incorporate lock-off privacy suites within a larger home, are proving popular, even though most area residents are not culturally inclined toward intergenerational living.

"We did it because we were interested in providing privacy and comfort for everyone, two hot buttons we felt anyone in a multigenerational situation would want," he says. "It's about the flexibility of the design and integration into the house itself."

The privacy suite ranges from 500 to 600 square feet and is always located on the first floor, Spadaea says. The rest of the house takes up about 1,800 square feet, for a total square footage comparable to the regional average for a single-family home.

MORE ECONOMICAL THAN ALTERNATIVES

The all-in-one floor plan also keeps costs lower, Maracay's Canzonetta says. "Since it's all under the same roof, the financing options are the same as for a traditional home."

"With respect to mortgages," says Perlman, "these are single-family homes with one person on the mortgage. In most cases, a senior parent moves into the 2Gen suite. His adult children who need more space occupy the main residence. The senior parent is usually the source of the down payment, and the adult children are responsible for the loan. It's far more economical than seniors living in nursing homes."

As a financial planner, Moser says, the economics of buying a multigenerational home where his father could also live "made huge sense to me, as opposed to buying my dad another home. It made economic as well as emotional sense. He helped out with the down payment on the new house, which is important because he felt he was contributing, and he saved $1,000-$1,500 a month in expenses."

While the homes are too new to have entered the resale market, "We think they will have great resale value in the future because of growing demand," says Lennar's Roos.
SETTING UP BOUNDARIES IS IMPORTANT

Multigenerational living takes some compromise on all sides. "There are issues of communication," Moser says, "and boundaries and limits that need to be set up.

"Our social calendar is much less filled, and I haven't played golf in ages, but I was more than willing to give that up for what we are doing," says Moser. "I have no regrets. Dad is happy, and we go bowling together, travel to doctor visits together, go to University of Arizona basketball games together."

Moser's family was so pleased with the arrangement that his sister bought the same model next door so her husband's parents could move in. Soon after, Moser's mother-in-law bought a traditional home on the other side.

"It's working out very well," he says. "It's added very much to our lives."
Senior Cohousing May be the Next Real-Estate Trend

Once a relative novelty, communal living facilities continue to increase in popularity -- and they could become a key part of the way developers and cities accommodate an aging population.

BY: Ryan Holeywell | November 2012

Explore the topic of aging in America through in-depth stories, data and interactive content at governing.com/generations.

Several years ago, Steve Pretl of Potomac, Md., saw that his next-door neighbor was outside, so he walked over to say hi. They chatted for a few minutes before the neighbor stopped Pretl and said, "You know I moved out three months ago, right?" He had only stopped by to pay a visit. Pretl had had no idea. He took it as a wake-up call. Perhaps it was time to get to know his neighbors.

Today, Pretl is in his 12th year of living in a type of tight-knit residential development known as cohousing, and it's a good bet that his neighbors won't move -- or experience some other life-altering events -- without his knowing about it. "It's a blend of community and privacy," says Pretl, 73. "You can have all the privacy you want. But if you do it too long, people will ask, 'Why don't we see you around?'"

Pretl and the other 80 or so residents of Takoma Village Cohousing in Washington, D.C., treat one another like extended relatives. They range in age from 12 months to 85 years. Every week they cook and eat dinner together. Communal facilities -- living spaces, a children's play area, a tool workshop -- encourage interactivity. There's no professional management company in charge: The residents themselves handle basic repairs, cleaning and landscaping. When somebody's ill, there's an understanding that the neighbors will help out.

Once a relative novelty, cohousing developments continue to increase in popularity -- and they could become a key part of the way developers and cities accommodate an aging population. Unlike their parents' or their grandparents' generation, baby boomers say they don't want to decamp to Florida or Arizona upon retirement. They want to stay in the communities where they've spent their adult lives. For many experts on housing and senior issues, cohousing looks like an increasingly attractive solution.

The idea of cohousing originated in Denmark in the 1970s; American developers imported the model in the early 1990s. Today, there are about 110 cohousing developments throughout the country, says Joani Blank, a former board member of the Cohousing Association of the United States, which acts as a clearinghouse of information about the developments.

Blank first moved into a cohousing residence in 1992, and she has the enthusiasm of an early adopter. The idea behind cohousing, she says, is very simple. It's about creating "intentional neighborhoods" in which residents interact with their neighbors, as an alternative to the relative anonymity of high-rise apartment complexes or sprawling exurban McMansions. "Our intention is to be close to our neighbors, and be known by our neighbors, and know them," Blank says. "And that's it."

The cohousing development where Blank lives, in Oakland, Calif., has wide sidewalks to encourage residents to stop and congregate. Cars don't park in between homes, because doing so would create a barrier. A staple of cohousing is lots of meetings and lots of committees, since residents play such an active role in decisions large and small. In Blank's community, residents have windows over the kitchen sink, and most tend to keep the curtains open. "In cohousing," she says, "we want to maximize the openness."

Inevitably, Blank says, people learning about cohousing for the first time are tempted to view it as co-op-meets-commune, a dream of hippie counterculture. (The fact that many cohousing residents are baby boomers who came of age in the 1960s only fuels those parallels.) But Blank says that's just a caricature. "We all have completely functional, self-contained units. I could be in any condo in the country."

Historically, cohousing developments have included residents of all ages, but now there's a growing interest in developments exclusively for aging residents, says Kathryn McCamant, president of the developer CoHousing Partners and one of the earliest pioneers of the cohousing movement in the U.S.
"Boomers are looking for an alternative that hasn’t been there before," McCamant says. "They don’t want to live in communities of thousands of old people. They want to stay in charge."

Those leading the shift will likely be seniors who’ve already lived in multigenerational cohousing developments, which tend to focus on families, and who may be searching for something else. "It’s not that the kids are annoying. Everybody loves them," says Jim Leach, CoHousing Partners’ chairman and a resident of Silver Sage Village, a senior cohousing development in Boulder, Colo. "But when you have an intergenerational community with a lot of young families, the kids come first. Dinners are like going to McDonald’s Playland. Ours are like going to a nice restaurant."

Advocates of senior cohousing say it’s an attractive option for many reasons. Developments in urban areas would allow aging people to be less reliant on cars. The units are much easier to maintain than large single-family homes. And cohousing allows them to remain socially active and engaged with the community. Meanwhile, there’s the very practical benefit of knowing that there are people close by in case of a medical emergency. While cohousing isn’t a solution for those suffering from serious medical conditions, it can be a useful solution for people who merely need the occasional helping hand.

"When people are connected, they start to work as an extended family," Leach says. "They tend to take care of each other, even though there’s no obligation."

When a resident of Blank’s development in Oakland was diagnosed with cancer, neighbors provided round-the-clock help so that her husband could continue going to work. Advocates say that with a minimal amount of care -- in some cases, just the care that’s provided by thoughtful neighbors -- seniors can remain at home and relatively independent much later in life than they may otherwise have been able to. "[Seniors] want to feel like they control their own destiny," Leach says. "A high percentage of them don’t want to be stuck somewhere where people are taking care of them, and they don’t have much of a relationship with them."

Groups like AARP and the American Planning Association have paid close attention to cohousing, since both styles -- seniors-only and multigenerational -- may be an attractive option to aging baby boomers. The model will no doubt remain a niche option. But the boomer demographic is so large that it’s worth paying attention to, says Rodney Harrell, senior strategic policy adviser with AARP’s Public Policy Institute. "You’ve got enough numbers that there are still people out there to fill every niche and category," he says.

Cohousing isn’t for everybody. Some critics say more work must be done to encourage affordable housing units within the developments. Otherwise, they say, cohousing will remain a boutique option for the already well-to-do. As one resident of Takoma Village Cohousing notes, while her neighbors often tout the racial and religious diversity within their community, the economic makeup of the development is homogeneous: solidly and entirely middle class. "We don’t just want condos for rich people," Harrell says. "We want affordable units mixed in. But it’s a challenge, especially [because] when it’s such a niche option, prices tend to go up."

Advocates have also called on city governments to help encourage cohousing by creating zoning policies that foster the type of dense development that includes cohousing. "It’s a matter of recognizing the new constituency and the new population and tailoring government programs to meet those unique needs," says former U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Secretary Henry Cisneros, who has written about housing options for aging Americans.

In some places, local officials have worked to help support cohousing developments. Dene Peterson, one of the founders of ElderSpirit Community at Trailview, located in southwest Virginia, says the development leveraged government money in order to secure private loans before opening in 2008. The development became a reality thanks largely to a combination of loans from the Virginia Housing Development Authority and a grant distributed by the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development. Of the senior development’s 29 units, 16 are designated as low-income rentals. In fact, ElderSpirit calls itself "the first mixed-income, mixed-ownership elder cohousing community in the United States."

Peterson, who says she wasn’t interested in a nursing home, couldn’t imagine spending her final years anywhere else: "I expect to die at home," she says. "And one reason I built this was for a good death for myself."

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