

Senior Housing News

Best Repositioning 2015: An Intimate ‘Boutique’ CCRC

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Nestled among high-end homes on a quiet, residential street in Los Altos, California, you'll find The Terraces at Los Altos.

Today, the buildings that house The Terraces at Los Altos' assisted living, skilled nursing and memory care units fit in with the nice homes that surround them. But renovating American Baptist Homes of the West (ABHOW)'s continuing care retirement community (CCRC) from its original design proved a herculean task.

ABHOW, a nonprofit that plans to [merge with be.group](#), currently has 49 total communities in California, Arizona, Washington and Nevada — 11 CCRCs, 34 affordable housing communities and four third-party assisted living communities managed by ABHOW. The Terraces at Los Altos was the provider's first community — Pilgrim Haven — built in 1949, before the city of Los Altos was even incorporated. Back then, the community was surrounded by orchards; now, it is located within a single-family home development.

Pilgrim Haven used to look more institutional, like a hotel, with white siding and “clearly outdated” buildings. Now, it has a California craftsman exterior and resembles “gorgeous high-end townhomes and cottages,” architect Elisabeth Borden, principal at The Highland Group and a 2015 SHN Design Awards judge, tells Senior Housing News. She and her fellow judges conferred the 2015 Best Repositioning honors on The Terraces of Los Altos.

“The most successful repositionings are those where the owners and architects dreamed big, refused to compromise, and believed in their ability to pull it off,” she says.

The Concept

ABHOW decided it needed to make some changes at Pilgrim Haven, which was renamed The Terraces at Los Altos in 2010, almost 15 years ago. At that time, although the campus was still “beautiful,” a lot of the buildings were from the 1950s and 1960s and needed to be brought up to current code requirements, says The Terraces at Los Altos Executive Director Rae Holt.

The buildings also didn’t meet the expectations of today’s seniors. ABHOW wanted to be committed to person-directed care, and to make the community have less of an “institutional feel,” according to Russell Mauk, ABHOW’s vice president of design, construction and redevelopment.

The vision involved bringing all of the skilled nursing residents together in one building on the same floor, as well as grouping all of the residents who needed memory care support into their own household. ABHOW hoped this would lead to more of the staff’s time and energy being directed towards the residents, as opposed to running around the campus.

The plan also involved building one of the first two “neighborhood model” skilled nursing facilities in California. In this model, bedrooms open up into the main common areas, improving sightlines for the staff while encouraging residents to engage with one another.

ABHOW’s intention to keep the buildings small and intimate reflects The Terraces at Los Altos’ location within the community at large.

“We’re actually very fortunate, I think, being in a residential neighborhood,” Holt says. “It makes our community feel residential.”

As Holt and ABHOW found out, however, it can be a challenge to receive support from local neighbors for such a major project.

The Construction

The project broke ground in July 2012. The roadblocks during construction started early — and rarely let up.

For a relatively small site — about six acres — there were a “shocking number” of zoning and city conditions of approval restrictions placed upon it, as well as neighborhood opposition, according to Conni Morey, the creative director at D2 Architecture, the Dallas-based architecture firm that worked on The Terraces at Los Altos.

These restrictions included a severe coverage limit, height limits, landscape screening requirements, a total construction duration limit, phasing restrictions, design review stipulations, storm water detention and treatment requirements, traffic management provisions, noise limitations, excavation limits, headlamp management restrictions for night shift employees, development incentive requirements, parking restrictions and “an extremely lengthy process of proving compliance with all these restrictions,” Morey says.

Still, ABHOW persevered and never lost sight of its goals.

“They could have chosen to compromise much of what made their new design special, in the face of the insanity of initial neighborhood opposition, setbacks, height limits, construction duration limits,

traffic management, provisions, parking restrictions, excavation limits and dozens of other roadblocks,” Borden says. “These people had the courage and commitment to persevere and effectively work with the myriad restrictions through town hall work sessions and neighborhood committees and groups.”

More specifically, ABHOW worked to address this myriad of challenges with six town hall-style neighborhood work sessions, nine public hearings, three neighborhood landscape committee meetings, and several neighborhood individual and small group meetings. ABHOW also made a conscious effort to develop a close relationship with county fire department officials, city staff and California Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development officials, Morey says.

The overall project also involved reorganizing residents. Following years of haphazard growth and addition of buildings, the property’s skilled nursing residents were housed across several buildings on campus and memory care residents were mixed in with the general population of both assisted living and skilled nursing.

Coordinating the transitions for current residents living at The Terraces at Los Altos during construction, therefore, proved a challenge, but one that ABHOW was able to tackle effectively.

“Their transition plan ensured that current residents would have to move only once, as new buildings were organized,” Borden notes.

Keeping resident satisfaction high was important in maintaining community-wide support for the project. Luckily, resident support for the project was not difficult to come by.

“Our own residents who lived here at the time were completely committed to the effort,” Holt says. “Seeing residents who will be affected was important in winning the community’s approval.”

What can other senior housing companies glean from ABHOW’s experience in Los Altos? Stick-to-itiveness can pay off.

“I think other properties considering repositioning could learn lessons in perseverance and commitment from ABHOW’s experience in redeveloping The Terraces at Los Altos,” Borden says.



The Completion

Phase 1 of the repositioning, which included two skilled nursing neighborhoods with 14 and 16 beds each, 16 memory support apartments, 2 assisted living apartments and the assisted living common area and kitchen, was completed in April 2014. Phase 2 of the repositioning — 28 assisted living apartments, plus some living areas — was completed in January 2015. The completion of Phase 1 and Phase 2 was a \$26 million, 59,000-square-foot project.

Once Phase 3 — independent living — is completed, The Terraces at Los Altos will have a total of 30 skilled nursing, 16 memory care, 30 assisted living and 105 independent living units.

The community's intimate scale makes it "almost a boutique CCRC," Mauk says.

"I think that's going to be the unique thing about it: the scale," he adds.

The project's scale makes it stand out, according to Dan Cinelli, the principal and executive director at Perkins Eastman and a 2015 SHN Design Awards judge.

"The scale of the project is really nice, it's sort of an intimate series of continuum spaces that are linked," he tells SHN. "If you were to go from assisted living to long-term care, the distance between those two spaces isn't far away."

This can be comforting from the perspective of a family member or visitor, as it can soften the blow that a resident has moved up the continuum of care.

"It's the same entry, so if someone was coming to visit you, it wouldn't feel like you're in a different level of care," Cinelli says.

The tallest building at The Terraces of Los Altos is just three stories tall, and most of the buildings are only one or two stories tall. This allows the community's residents "to simply feel like they are just another neighbor in a great neighborhood," Borden explains.

"The architecture firm succeeded in creating new structures that look far smaller and more residential than they actually are," she adds. "The new assisted living and skilled nursing building appears from the outside to be gorgeous high-end townhomes and cottages. Not only is this exterior architecture very attractive, but it is a perfect fit with the surrounding homes."

That's another thing that impressed the judges: ABHOW's dedication to regionalism. Understanding regionalism is key, Cinelli says. You can't just choose a picture in a book and say you want a community to look like it.

"So many of the submissions, if you didn't tell me where it was located, I wouldn't know where it was located," Cinelli says. "That white siding could be anywhere. Now, the transformation of the buildings really does make them look like California."