

Why Trendier Senior Living Amenities Might Not Be the Answer

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Senior living providers that are updating their amenities may seem cutting-edge today, but it'll take much more than spas and Internet cafes for operators to succeed in the future.

At least, that's the take of one architecture and design expert who spoke with Senior Housing News for this Q&A series leading up to the [2015 SHN Design & Architecture Awards](#), exclusively sponsored by [Kwalu](#). SHN recently asked returning judge Elisabeth Borden, principal for The Highland Group, her thoughts on trending topics in senior housing design this past year.

SHN: What are the top trends you've seen in senior housing in 2015?

EB: One is an increased focus on wellness, including the creatively-designed "active stairwell" that encourages people to walk up to their third- or fourth-floor unit. A second trend is greater attention to natural light, with more and larger windows. The trend that is most critical is that developers are beginning to pick vibrant and walkable locations that allow residents to remain engaged in the community.

SHN: Where is senior housing design and architecture falling short in comparison to other industries?

EB: I think senior housing design falls short in comparison to other industries in two important ways. Senior housing design tends to either focus too much around needs and care, or takes an opposite approach and assumes people want everything done for them and just want to have fun.

Instead, design should support the kinds of lives people have always had, balanced with play, work, rest and connection with others. Design should support truly meaningful engagement and should not assume people are different because they are older.

SHN: What's your favorite new technology that's specific to the senior housing industry and why?

EB: My favorite new technology is anything that helps people regain or retain wellness and function. It's hard for people to enjoy life when they are in constant pain or can't do things they love to do.

High-tech fitness and physical therapy spaces that have the latest equipment to help people with strength and balance show that the community understands the importance of wellness. It is so important to design fitness and therapy spaces around the equipment, as well as to create a beautiful and motivating setting with windows, light, and color.

SHN: How can operators design communities that are not only relevant now, but will continue to be relevant in the future?

EB: To be relevant in 10 or 20 years, developers and operators need to rethink everything about how we offer housing and services. Boomers are not the same as their parents. It isn't simply a matter of substituting a different set of trendier common space amenities, such as an Internet café instead of an ice cream parlor or a spa instead of a beauty parlor.

I'm convinced that boomers will not be attracted to the same housing and care types we have now, that they won't want the same combination of common amenities, unit types and services we now offer in independent living, for example. Developers and operators need to invent new models that respond to boomer preferences—some new models that may be smaller communities or may look more like co-housing, tailored to affinity groups and placed in unique, vibrant locations.

SHN: If money were no object, what is the one thing you would include in every senior housing design this year?

EB: I'd love to see every community encourage people to spend time outside by creating a fabulous set of diverse outdoor spaces, not just one big patio or courtyard for everyone to share. Create several types and sizes of spaces—private, semi-private and public—placed around the perimeter of the building.

If I lived there, I'd want to reserve a private patio for a dinner party for six friends one day, then sit outside in a little tucked-away space with a friend another day. Even with urban models there are ways to design small spaces into decks, balconies, rooftops and alongside the building edges.



Elisabeth is the founding principal for The Highland Group, a Colorado-based firm providing market research and planning services for developers and operators of senior housing and care. A baby boomer herself, she is informed and passionate about the development of new approaches to housing and care for her generation. Elisabeth earned her M.A. in Long-Term Care Administration from the Center for Studies in Aging at the University of North Texas.