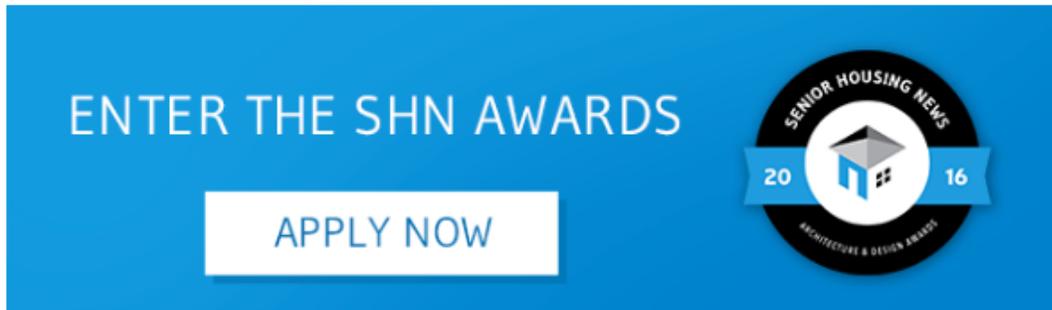


Design Experts Talk Top Trends in Senior Housing 2016

October 11, 2016 by [Stephanie Aaner](#)      

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The [2016 Senior Housing News Architecture & Design Awards](#) are approaching this November. This year's awards competition, exclusively sponsored by Kwalu, is setting out to find which owners, operators, designers and architects are defining the future of senior living.

[Nominations are now open](#) and entries are coming in daily. Judges are gearing up to select the winners of the 2016 Architecture & Design Awards. Senior Housing News recently asked our returning judges about their thoughts on trending topics in senior housing and what this year's entries must possess in order to come out ahead of the competition.

SHN: What is the most impressive architectural or design element you've seen in a community so far this year?

Elisabeth Borden, President & Principal at the Highland Group: Villagio Memory Care in Broomfield, Colorado, opened in early 2016, has a storefront-type window looking into the kitchen from the main entrance/community living area. Through the window, you can watch the chef working away in the well-equipped kitchen, preparing the next meal. It really stirs up the appetite and makes you feel like you are in a great restaurant. This also makes a connection between residents and staff. The kitchen staff seemed delighted to be recognized, and what fun to watch! Justin Brown, CEO of Choice Capital, told me he designed that window himself.

Jeffrey Anderzhon, Senior Planning & Design Architect at Eppstein Uhen Architects: An increased attention to creative exterior spaces as an extension of those spaces enclosed by the building envelope. These spaces can easily become the social intersection of the community of residents, community of staff and broader of community.

Dan Cinelli, Principal & Executive Director at Perkins Eastman: Innovative dining practices: Farm-to-table dining with resident involvement in growing herbs, raising chickens/eggs on-site, and canning vegetables. Menus that are guided seasonally by what is in the garden, stocked, or locally sourced. The evolution of Small House/Green House design to truly create a transformation in how skilled care is provided to seniors.

David Dillard, Principal at D2 Architecture: Some of the new dining venues are amazing.

John Cronin, Principal at AG Architecture: The way providers and design teams have been addressing the cocktail lounge/bar environment says a great deal about the lifestyle expectations of the residents in today's communities. Whether a Greenfield project or a repositioning, design teams are elevating the experience in this space. There are so many opportunities to make this a distinct and desirable destination. People are seeing it as a great gathering spot, a hub of socialization.

SHN: What design or architectural elements are today's communities lacking?

EB: Everyone thinks it is tacky when I say this, but I think what is typically most lacking and poorly designed are the spaces needed by staff. Staff are our most important stakeholders – we can't do anything without them. Well-designed and located offices and work spaces, storage rooms, and housekeeping closets make a huge difference in the day-to-day quality of life of staff, and certainly impact operating efficiency. I believe that many architects and owners don't want to "waste" valuable square footage on less sexy functional space. Yet, if you talk with staff, the activity director will tell you there isn't good storage adjacent to activity spaces, caregiving staff will tell you that the medication rooms are too small, and the maintenance director will tell you there is no shop space to do repairs that could be done in-house.

JA: Too often today, designers are overlaying their personal or sponsor corporate idea of "home" in their designs. While we probably shouldn't be critical of this as it is generally a result of intensive market research that results in financial success, it is also important that each resident's idea of "home" is unique. Designs, as much as possible, should be versatile enough to morph over time and to individual tastes. Once a building is complete, the designer often does not return to the site. Engaging the designer beyond occupancy can lead not only to more efficacious future designs, but also to fully customize their environment for a more meaningful experience for residents.

DC: The industry still needs to increase the number of developments in more urban/suburban transit-oriented community locations, which will create opportunities for integration into the larger fabric of community. Real and innovative programming to accompany life-long learning, comprehensive wellness, cultural connectivity, and culinary demands of today, and more importantly, programming which is attractive to tomorrow's consumer. Not seeing enough integrated AV/technology in the apartments. Communities are well behind the times.

DD: Some of the new dining venues are mind-numbingly dull and predictable. Come on! This is the most important social event of the entire day for our resident friends. Let's do better.

JC: I've have said it before, and I will say it again...a rock climbing wall...and by that I mean even more comprehensive wellness amenities. An expanded recreational facility that supports a variety of activities, such as badminton, bocce ball, etc. would expand the community appeal. Just think about having a rock climbing wall and driving range or putting green. Not only does this type of facility enhance the lifestyle for residents, staff and family within the senior living community, it provides a greater opportunity to connect with the surrounding neighborhood.

SHN: As a veteran judge, you have seen hundreds of entries come across your desk. What are the contributing factors a winning entry must possess?

EB: There are two things that I think winning entries must possess. First, the best applications articulate the ways in which their design features create vibrancy, connection, purpose, and focus on the overall health and wellness of their residents. This award competition isn't just a beauty contest, and the winners aren't simply the properties that have the most expensive design details and finishes. Second, I think the judges are always looking for unique and appealing design elements that demonstrate a deep understanding of the purpose of the structure: who will live there, who will work there, and what will be happening inside, every moment, every day.

JA: A succinctly described and imaged project that highlights the design process that resulted in that particular environment. The demonstrative attention paid to the resident of the environment but overlaid with the constrictions that may be a part of the process, such as budget, site constraints, or operational efficiencies.

DC: Innovative environments = innovative programming. Describe the program initiative, e.g. combining IL and AL. Flexibility and adaptability of the design; Designers who go beyond bricks and mortar to demonstrate an understanding of innovative integration of the consumer's unique lifestyle. Truly unique and untested ideas that set projects in a new direction with new solutions/ideas. Such as cutting edge environments with strong interior aesthetics for MC, SNF, Dining and Services. Visual beauty, whether traditional or modern design.

DD: In a word: innovation. In another word: taste. Another: regionalism. I also am a big fan of "Befores" and "Afters". Perhaps this goes back to the 150-pound weakling to muscle-man photos and testimonials that populated the back pages of *Popular Mechanics* and *Boys Life* back in the day....

JC: Good, no, *great* photography and well written project descriptions. Does the photography enhance what the story is saying? Do the words and visuals work together to bring your story to life? It is important to be objective and really look at the overall package to make sure that the essence of the project is truly conveyed.

SHN: What is the most overused or unnecessary design element you've seen so far in the past 12 months?

EB: We are hearing from independent living residents that we need to pay more attention to the apartments that they actually live in and less to the common areas. We've all seen new buildings that

have glorious and plentiful community rooms, living rooms, fitness rooms, theaters, and bistros, but then skimp on the individual units. The common spaces might “sell” the building, but once residents move in, their apartment must be truly livable, with spaces that really work for them – a good spot for a small dining table, a place to put a desk, lots of drawers and cabinets and shelves and closets. Independent living residents live in the units and only visit the common spaces, so a strong offering of great apartments should come first and the common spaces second.

JA: Fireplaces and/or fire pits. Nice to look at in professional photography, but over used as “residential” iconography, and frankly, not often fired up!

DC: “One size/aesthetic fits all”; Inactive spaces, example: BIG double-height lobbies with nothing going on; and creation of a “Main Street” to simulate a “downtown” within a community.

DD: Good question. Symbolically: crown mold! I think the traditional Early American (aka Early Ugly) style of red brick architecture is moribund. Clients—and more importantly residents—are looking for “nice” but not measured so superficially as traditional style architectural and interior googah. Architects and interior designers should trade this outdated investment for better lighting or better appliances or... anything.

JC: Any space that is not purposefully designed and programmed to best suit the community’s culture, lifestyle goals and resident needs is an unnecessary element. Designing beautiful spaces that go unused is a disservice to the community. For example, if an art room is created but people just play cards in it, then it was not the right solution for the community. If residents want an art space where they can paint and work with clay and other materials, then the space should be properly designed to address those needs so it will be used, enjoyed and cherished. Purposeful design and proper programming to make the best use of the space work together to create a vibrant community.

SHN: What is one feature or design element commonly looked over that you feel is critical to a project’s success?

EB: I think outdoor spaces are often not given enough attention. Particularly lacking in many communities are outdoor spaces that are adequately sheltered from sun and wind. I see many outdoor spaces where only a tiny fraction of the total space is even partially sheltered. Within the past month, I have toured three separate new communities that have internal courtyards, none of which had any significant protected space. Many architects seem to prefer open pergola-type coverings, rather than an overhead covering that actually blocks the sun, and a shelter along the side to block wind. Umbrellas covering patio tables generally are ineffective. Some internal courtyards have no option for privacy as well, and feel like a fishbowl, with people peering into the courtyard from hallway windows.

JA: Stealth services. As designers, we need to be better at hiding the food carts, med carts, the laundry carts, the housekeeping carts in order to provide a true “home” for residents. Very few of us push a bunch of carts down the hallways of our house.

DC:

- A focus on holistic wellness
- A connection of the design aesthetic that shows connection to their geography in the USA
- Adjacent Neighborhood connectivity
- Not creating a sense of excitement and views of active spaces the minute a potential resident enters the community's front door. A sense of place and a sense of normalcy...make it comfortable to families of all generations—design spaces/places that are familiar to them from their normal lives

DD: Porte cocheres! They more or less stink across the board. At worse they say “nursing home” a block away. Not a good brand for an IL community trying to make an impact. Is it critical to a project's success? It may surprise you that I'd say **YES**. First impressions mean a great deal in marketing and thereafter. Done well – with landscaping, gardens, porches, lighting, and yes, porte cocheres – these “fronts” and portals (literally) to the outside world impart a great deal, visceral and otherwise to residents, visitors, and staff, not to mention thousands of passers-by who log in their impressions of our industry at large from their windshields.

JC: A lot of time is spent on the design of specific amenity or destination spaces, such as restaurants, theaters, craft rooms, etc. But what about spontaneous interactions and resting spaces? More thought needs to be given to opportunities for casual connections. Integrating extra space near elevator locations with access to natural light and lounge furniture serves as a key wayfinding cue as well as a place for unplanned interactions. These areas provide a sense of time and place. They allow residents to see elements in the landscape that orient them to their final destination. They provide a space for people to meet before traveling together to an activity or simply a spot to rest and observe the activity of the community. These types of spaces infuse a level of energy that further activates a community.

SHN: What's the most frustrating item that is typically missing from past projects submitted to the architecture & design awards that you wish participants would focus on more?

EB: The majority of nominees fail to demonstrate how the design helps to connect the property and its residents to the surrounding community. Senior Housing News' selection criteria for the awards very clearly articulates “Community Integration” as a key criterion, yet many of the nominations in prior years have not even touched on this aspect. It is so important that residents and families feel that they are part of the neighborhood and that there is a daily flow of people both into the property and out of the property. The best properties are not “islands”, separate from their context, but rather look and feel as if they and the people who live and work there belong.

JA: How staff actually provides care and services within the environment. A beautiful building can be an award winner, but if it fails functionally, its simple beauty cannot compensate.

DC:

1. Explanation of the senior living philosophy that informs the designs and the challenges the designers met to achieve the unique aspects of their projects. A recitation of square footage, unit count, and amenities is less informative and more attuned to a development agenda.
2. Participants should elaborate on why the design makes it more marketable, operationally efficient, financially viable, and/or encourages aging-in-place...etc. For instance, an explanation of how the design contributes to the well-being of the occupants and the communities in which they are located would strengthen a submission.

DD: I would appreciate more context—expressed in terms of the physical (site conditions, neighborhood, etc.) and the market the project is intended to serve. It would explain the “why” in the design solutions in many cases. How did THIS scratch take care of THAT itch?

JC: Most design awards programs ask a series of specific questions. While some may be similar from competition to competition, others are different. It is frustrating to read general marketing copy that doesn't truly answer the question asked. If a question is not relative to the project, it is better to pass on the question than to just fill in the space with information that does not respond to the specific question.

Visit the [SHN Awards Website](#) for [FAQs](#), past [awards coverage](#) and important dates and deadlines.