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Commentary: Innovative senior housing melds needs in attractive urban settings

By Mark Hinshaw

Special to The Seattle Times

Look around and do the math — a fifth of us in this country are older than 60, and within another decade or two, seniors are expected to make up more than 25 percent of the overall population.

The 2000 census confirms this demographic trend, which represents a fundamental change in our cultural makeup. Just as the baby-boom generation affected elementary schools in the 1950s, colleges in the '60s and '70s, and the workplace in the '80s and '90s, it will affect the decades to come, and the impact on society will be sharp and visible. We will see changes in services, health care and housing that we cannot imagine.

One of the likely effects will be changed retirement centers. Recent decades brought us massive complexes of repetitive boxes in the hinterlands — whether the Sun Cities of the South and Southwest or the deeply wooded enclaves in the Northwest. Attractive as many of these centers are, they are essentially places where the aged are tucked away, out of sight, in self-contained communities.

I don't believe that the upcoming generation of retirees and semi-retirees will settle for that. We will want to live in real communities, with real neighbors, shops, services and entertainment. Many of us will want these things in walking distance as we choose to drive less. Moreover, because of improved nutrition, advances in medicine and emphasis on exercise, we are living in our late-in-life housing that much longer.

So, what will seniors do? I doubt we will isolate ourselves. We are already seeing the leading edges of this change.

New forms of housing are cropping up. Accessory dwelling units, for example, can be an ideal form of compact living, surrounded by friends and services within a true neighborhood. An owner of a large, older home may elect to move into the smaller unit and make the principal house available to a couple

or family.

This might give rise to informal agreements that accommodate mutual interests: Child care in return for home maintenance, for instance. Urban neighborhoods will likely have both a mixture of ages as well as a mixture of uses within strolling distance.

A prime example

You can see variations on this happening in some of our local neighborhoods. In the Chinatown International District, the Village Square development on Eighth Avenue at Dearborn Street has been open for several years. Designed by Zimmer Gunsul Frasca Architects for the Seattle Chinatown International District Preservation and Development Authority, it has an amazing array of elements.

Nicely proportioned and detailed floors of "assisted-living" senior housing sit atop ground-floor stores and services. The development includes a community center, a health center and a counseling center on the street level. On a second-level terrace, there is a day-care facility. No institutional feel to this place.

The complex wraps around a small, beautiful public plaza — designed by landscape architects Murase Associates — with trees, seasonal flowers and a collection of art in whimsical forms. Metal poles hold aloft a stylized school of fish and a water buffalo. These markers, by Hai-Yung Wu, serve as symbolic gateposts.

Artfully tiled and zig-zagging benches by artist Stuart Nakamura offer places to sit in sun and shade. The buildings to the south are lower in height to ensure that sun reaches the plaza floor.

Clearly, this is a space that has been designed with considerable care.

The buildings themselves are residential in scale and organization. The street edge is defined, but terraces and bay windows suggest a domestic setting. Details to reflect its particular cultural emphasis are referential, rather than cartoonish. No upturned eaves or out-of-place stone lions to be seen. Yet, the place seems rooted, comfortable, and respectful of its place and its purpose.

Across the street, work is soon to begin on Phase II. That will include additional shops and a small branch library, a community center with a gym and 57 units of low-income family housing.

The building, designed by a joint venture of two architecture firms — Kubota Kato Chin and Kovalenko Hale — will extend the scale and mix of the initial phase across Eighth Avenue to the west. It was also one of the many developments funded by the housing levy Seattle voters approved in 1995.

This is the levy that is up for a renewal vote Tuesday. Seattle citizens, once again, have an opportunity to ensure that families and individuals with lower incomes will be able to find decent, affordable

housing. The past measures have resulted in thousands of new, well-designed and well-maintained dwelling units throughout the city. The new levy would expand the effort significantly. But apart from the levy here are other examples of blending senior housing into neighborhoods.

Other urban successes

The various Ida Culver Houses developed by ERA Care over the past decade have added sophisticated forms of senior housing into many parts of Seattle. Developments like Security House on Fourth Avenue near Bell Street place seniors squarely in the middle of the action, surrounded by commerce, culture, services and transit. Security House was also a levy-funded development.

In the north end of Seattle on Stone Avenue North and North 115th Street, architects Tonkin/Hoyne/Lokan designed a terrific project called Aki Kurose for the Low Income Housing Institute.

Yet another development that received 1995 levy funds, this 62-unit complex development seems like part of a small, traditional village occupied by families, individuals and seniors.

Each of the buildings is painted with a coordinated color scheme, lending a sense of individuality.

One well-known architect I know now laments some of his previous award-winning work in designing retirement communities out on the edge of the urban area.

He now believes that people can be better accommodated within in-city mixed use buildings — albeit with designs taking into account special needs for accessibility.

He says he's pleased that a number of seniors have settled into his more recent in-city projects and are quite enjoying their lives surrounded by the wide range of the urban amenities within walking distance.

In these developments and others we are seeing the start of whole new ways of thinking about housing and neighborhoods. And we will all benefit from it.

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