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Activism & Bridge-Building in California

Tom Brutting, AIA

Last week, I attended a rock concert given by the Moody Blues. Looking around the room, I noticed that most of the audience was grey haired or bald. The enthusiasm for the music was evident, but it was also clear that the crowd swayed a little more slowly and with a bit less agility than one would expect at such an event. Baby boomers are aging, and they have become seniors! Yet they still perceive themselves as existing in the world when the Moody Blues first started forty years ago.

Throughout the United States, and in particular California, the average age is rising. It has been stated that in the next couple of decades the City of San Francisco will be inhabited primarily by seniors. Demographics are changing, as are needs and expectations.

A little over a year and a half ago, a Design for Aging Committee was started at AIA San Francisco. It exists under the umbrella of the national AIA Design for Aging Knowledge Community as a component group. Gauging interest, we found that a substantial number of people are indeed interested in aging in place and related design issues. We enjoy the participation not only of architects, but also of interior designers, landscape architects, providers of senior communities, contractors, students, and even the School of Gerontology at San Francisco State University. The discussions are lively, and the interaction among the different disciplines creates a beneficial dialogue and knowledge base, all in the interest of better design and living for seniors.

As the group has grown and become more active, AIA East Bay has become involved and is assisting in programs, announcements, and the sharing of knowledge. The group is now known as the Northern California Regional Design for Aging Committee.

The Committee has focused on topics such as different models for senior living, the recent “Greenhouse” movement, new technologies, and visiting existing senior communities.

The dialogue continues as broader-based groups look at issues, regulatory codes, and culture change. As an example, the Care Delivery and Design Improvement Committee (CDDIC) meets quarterly in Sacramento. Comprised of architects and providers, it also includes members

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from the State of California regulatory agency, OSHPD, and the California Department of Public Health (CDPH). It is also attended by more established groups such as the California Association of Health Facilities (CAHF) and Aging Services of California (ASOC). At each meeting, discussion takes place around topics of current concern regarding health care and senior living. The bridge building occurs when CDDIC reports on the activities of the Northern California Regional Design for Aging Committee, and vice versa. This dialogue is important, as we are all learning from experience, building our collective knowledge base, and looking at ways to make communities and infrastructure better for seniors.

Other organizations, such as the California Assisted Living Association (CALA), look specifically at the assisted living level of care. Like ASOC, it holds regional conferences with seminars and information sessions directly related to senior living and care providing issues.

One can easily see that momentum is building, and certainly the well-coordinated groups in existence create an avenue for activism and change. We are learning each and every day about improved, supportive, and better

living as we grow to be an older society. These groups are looking seriously at legislation and making inroads for change on a scale never before seen in the realm of senior living. It's no longer a matter of warehousing in a traditional "nursing home" setting.

So, why all the hoopla about culture change?

Demographics are changing. Baby Boomers will not ever think of themselves as seniors. As at the Moody Blues concert, they will live an active life, as long as health permits and as though they are still much younger. They are not as concerned about the things that worried previous generations, and they are a generation raised on financial assets and instant gratification. Sacrifice isn't generally in the vocabulary. Living longer and staying healthier, while probably working later in life, are becoming more mainstream. Traditional retirement is becoming a past concept.

The way we serve this generation's needs and expectations, and those to come, will result in culture change. Options and being able to customize the individual living experience will be far more important than simple security and care.

There are also aspects of change regarding codes and licensing that require some all-around activism. OSHPD, as the State regulatory agency for health care, acute care, and skilled nursing facilities, is welcoming the dialogue and willing to make changes. Currently, the codes are being examined, and it's the dialogue that is moving change forward. The bridge building of information, facts, and challenges is helping to mold more practical ways of approaching the real situations faced by senior communities around the state. It is hoped that the Office of the State Fire Marshal will come on board in the dialogue, as much is influenced by their directives. Yet, overall, the coming to the table is real, and people are serious about making a difference for the better.

Some unique things come about that only recently are being addressed by the building codes. As an example, dementia/Alzheimer care has some specific conditions that usually don't occur in typical building situations: one wouldn't want a fully operable window where a resident might escape and wander off or jump and be injured, yet the codes generally require a means of access and egress of that sort. It's a contradiction within "life safety." There are

ways around this, and usually it can be handled through a cooperative understanding of the means and methods of escape and protection.

Universal Design also plays an integral part in the aging process. Instead of specific modifications for a senior's situation, Universal Design allows one to function in a space at any age and with supposedly any handicap. It is fully accessible in the broadest sense, and creates an environment where, ideally, one can easily and comfortably age in place. Not always practical in every situation, it still is a way of thinking and directing design without limitations. It also fosters creativity. Activism will infuse more of that thinking into our building practices and codes.

California appears to be at the forefront of developing and being in dialogue about aging issues. Members of the Flower Power generation are now seniors. The culture is still alive; it's just that the bodies and abilities have changed.

Fortunately, the dialogue continues on a broader scale as national and international groups work closely together to foster the sharing of knowledge and information. The AIA National Design for Aging Knowledge

Community was noted earlier. ASOC also falls under a larger national group known as the American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging (AAHSA). They are active in advocacy and communication on a broader scale, as well as fostering technology improvements. Of course AARP, the American Association of Retired Persons, has been around for decades. The big secret, however, is that most Baby Boomers don't want to be associated with this association. That's for "old people," and they aren't old, or so they think! Its prime value has been the discounts offered to those of a certain age.

We've come from a period of time when it had been common to see "Old People's Home" on pathetically antiqued buildings, which eventually became homes for "the elderly." Now, it's politically correct to use the term "senior," although new trends are moving toward the term "active adult." It's forever changing, and always evolving, just like us, just like our bodies. The rocking chair is being replaced by exercise equipment.

I recently attended a party with a number of biotech researchers. There was some excitement in the discussion about the very near

possibility of people living to be 150 years old. One even ventured to speculate that a day may come when life expectancy could reach 1,000! My head was spinning at that point. I just couldn't imagine a group of "active adults"—or whatever they would be called—at a Moody Blues concert.

Nonetheless, let's keep it realistic, continue the dialogue, bridge build, and certainly interject some positive activism for change in the way we live as we grow older. It's getting better each and every day. ●

On-line Resources for Design for Aging

1. Aging Services of California, www.aging.org
2. AIA Design for Aging Knowledge Community, www.aia.org/practicing/groups/kc/AIAS075684
3. American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging, www.aahsa.org
4. American Association of Retired Persons, Housing & Mobility webpage, www.aarp.org/family/housing/
5. California Assisted Living Association, www.caassistedliving.org
6. Mather Life Ways, www.matherlifeways.com
7. University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, Institute on Aging and Environment, www.uwm.edu/Dept/IAE/