

lifespan perspective

A different way of looking at design

Special Edition: National Senior Center Month

Multi-purpose with a twist: Emerging trends in senior center focus and design

For decades, “multi-purpose senior center” has been the standard label applied to (non-residential) facilities that house a variety of programs and services for older adults. The multi-purpose nature of the institution is evident in each organization’s unique mission statement, and in the design of the facility, which is typically a collection of flexible-use rooms, open spaces, and offices.

Today, while most senior centers continue to serve older adults in multi-dimensional ways, many are adopting specific areas of focus as the centerpiece of their marketing approach, image, and facility. Although their mission and motivations remain truly multi-purpose, specific issues and corresponding programs and amenities may be positioned as the portal to their service network.

At the same time, a steady influx of newcomer-providers from the private and nonprofit sectors are reaching out to the growing senior audience with programs and facilities that focus on specific needs or interests, with multi-dimensional benefits. As a result, there are all sorts of businesses, organizations, and facilities out there today that fit a generic definition for “multi-purpose senior center,” but don’t bear the name, and may look and seem like something entirely different.

Not surprisingly, the buildings that house today’s senior centers and senior center alternatives are increasingly diverse in location, size, and style—and more thoughtfully designed than ever before. While they all require the insightful application of universal design principles to accommodate clients of diverse ages and abilities effectively, those centers that incorporate specialized amenities also call for specialized design responses. We’ve cited some of the most frequently encountered issues below.

Café model

Goal: support nutrition, health, and wellness while promoting social interaction, strengthening the community, and providing a point of access to other programs and services housed on-site

Design considerations

- the café/dining area is prominently located near the main entrance and may be reflected in the exterior

image of the building, identified in signage, etc.

- kitchen and dining room requirements may be significantly more sophisticated than for a traditional noon meals program



- entry sequence and reception area should complement café ambience
- other rooms and spaces are strategically located for privacy, sound control, and ease of access without compromising the flow or ambience of the café

Fitness/wellness center model

Goal: support physical and mental health and wellness while promoting social interaction and providing a point of access to other programs and services.

Design considerations

- like other health clubs, these facilities may include a mix of aerobic and resistance training machines, stretching and free weight areas, dance/aerobics studios, and indoor or outdoor tracks



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- may include one or more pools for exercise and therapy (warm water)
- may include locker/shower rooms, saunas, steam rooms, and/or whirlpools
- may include health suite and/or physical therapy rooms
- unique audio/visual, sound, and temperature/ventilation control requirements
- frequently include classrooms, private counseling rooms, teaching kitchen, café and/or lounge
- often require a separate entrance for access when other portions of the facility are closed, or multiple entrances when housing multiple agencies
- client safety is of paramount concern



Technology center model

Goal: support computer literacy, lifelong learning, and social interaction while providing access to other programs and services housed on-site

Design considerations:

- appropriate layout of computer stations and instructor's staging area
- special utility/wiring and other technological requirements
- lighting and environmental controls are of particular importance
- drop-in access and control; security issues

- create an inviting, non-intimidating ambience; provide a separate lounge space to support socialization



- may require a separate entrance for access when other portions of the facility are closed

Lifelong learning model

Goal: support lifelong learning, health/wellness, fitness, computer literacy, second career training, and volunteerism/mentoring, while facilitating social interaction and providing access to other programs and services housed on-site.

Design considerations

- flexible-use classrooms of various sizes, with adaptable lighting
- convenient table and chair storage
- room-by-room environmental controls
- centrally located restrooms
- public address and sound control
- may incorporate specialized facilities for fitness, art programs, computer training, etc.

- lounge/break-out space with kitchenette or café

Facility requests reflect popular trends

As senior center design specialists, we enjoy a front row view of trends and innovations on the leading edge in senior center programming and administration. Some of the design requests we receive today reflect the creative use of popular trends and technology as a means of generating funds to support center programs. Recent requests have included an on-site thrift store (currently popular with teens and college students in many areas), and an in-house e-Bay based fundraising facility.

Many centers are responding to an influx of newly-retired baby boomers with high profile re-employment and civic engagement offices to support the transition into second careers or retirement-alternative lifestyles. Other increasingly familiar requests include ceramics studios with multiple pottery wheels, and environmental-focused volunteerism offices.



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