

lifespan perspective

A different way of looking at design

Senior Center Design and Renovations

Design on a Dime or Extreme Makeover?

I watch a lot of HGTV, and never miss ABC's "Extreme Home Makeover." Shows like these, which chronicle face lifts, functional enhancements, new home searches, and dramatic makeovers, effectively convey the powerful role that design plays in the quality of life.

Our society's growing fascination with the influence of the form and function of the constructed environment is becoming increasingly evident in the senior center industry. A wave of senior center study, renovation, and design projects we've completed over the last year has reflected the full spectrum of factors that motivate these organizations to make changes in their facilities. Many centers are suffocating from a lack of space, or crippled by inaccessible or ill-functioning design. Some are finding that their building's

outward appearance is compromising their efforts to promote what occurs within, while others are anxious to add amenities to appeal to aging baby boomers. With budgets that range from "design on a dime" to "extreme," they are all seeking ways to make the constructed environment work *with*, rather than against them, as they tackle the challenges that accompany rapidly changing demographics.

Architectural Studies

Accurately forecasting shifts in demands and interests has become a preoccupation in the senior center industry over the last decade. Strategies are in place to offer compelling new programs, popular amenities, and targeted services conceived with the young boomer-senior in mind. As the leading edge of the age wave begins to be felt, many centers are questioning whether their vision can be implemented effectively in their current facility, or will a change of venue be required? Some are resolving to make adjustments and stay where they are: others are scrambling to design (and fund) the building of their future.

The list of issues that may impact the feasibility and cost of renovations and additions can be daunting (see **Is it feasible?**). For many centers, the desired changes will prove to be do-able and affordable: unforeseen factors may make renovations impractical or cost-prohibitive for others. When included as part of an informed planning process, an architectural study helps to identify matches and mismatches



Old building, new purpose

Lifespan Design Studio conducted a study in 2007 to help a senior center in rural Pennsylvania identify limitations and opportunities associated with remaining in this former oil baron's mansion.



Adding space and curb appeal

LDS is currently teaming with a local design firm to add square footage, improve functionality, and boost the curb appeal of this dynamic east-coast senior center's generic-looking building.



Lifespan Design Studio offers architectural studies, assessments, planning, and design for new construction and renovations.

10678 Bettyray Drive
Loveland, Ohio 45140

513.239.8529
info@lifespandesignstudio.com
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Visit us on the web at:
www.lifespandesignstudio.com

Is it feasible?

Watch out for:

- zoning and other regulations
- structural limitations
- systems capacities
- hazardous materials
- parking requirements
- overall code compliance

between facilities and objectives, and may clarify options for modifying the facility for maximum benefits. By taking this approach, rather than attempting to decide what to do on their own, these organizations may avoid headaches, unnecessary expense, or disappointing results down the road.

Renovations

Senior Centers often regard renovations as the most readily achievable means of addressing their facility-related needs. Once it has been determined (through appropriate studies) that renovations offer a beneficial response, the design process is guided by functional and promotional objectives, and budgetary goals.

Functional objectives, which reflect the activities and tasks to be accommodated (and projected attendance), are usually pretty straight-forward. The designer and client work together to identify optimal ways of allocating space to support the proposed programs, services, amenities, and target groups. Matching design decisions to *promotional objectives* can be far more ambiguous, requiring the client and design team to project the aesthetic preferences of a target population that may span generations, cultures, and social classes; and to make choices that will stand the test of time.

Some difficult issues may need to be addressed as a renovation design project progresses. One of the most frequently overlooked issues associated with renovating or adding on to a facility is the impact of the revised design on parking requirements. The size of any proposed addition must take into consideration its impact on the aggregate number of parking spaces required for the facility. In renovations, when creating larger rooms out of formerly small ones (especially when converting from offices, storage, or circulation to activity space), the number of required parking spaces may increase significantly. The availability

of space to expand or add parking lots may ultimately determine the feasibility of the renovation or addition project.

For some centers, suspending or moving operations during construction is not an option. It may be possible to plan construction to allow the facility to continue to function at a partial or full level for most of the construction period. Because the design itself may impact the feasibility of this option, it is important to discuss this issue with the design team before design begins.

Extreme Makeover: Designing a New Facility

Even Ty Pennington and his crew can't change the fact that the form and scale of a brand new building may be defined or limited by the site. For this reason, the most successful senior center design projects may be those in which the designer is involved in the site selection process. In order to make an accurate assessment of the requisite size and configuration of a site for a proposed facility, the building itself must be predefined in terms of various key issues. Through a process called architectural programming, it is possible to project the necessary square footage, appropriate arrangement of spaces, and desired site features and amenities to be accommodated. Other key issues including the appropriateness of the site's location, topography, zoning, and other regulations also require informed evaluation.

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Senior Center Design Forum

The process of designing and constructing a new senior center may encompass two to three years or more. In some cases it may be necessary to establish a preliminary design for the facility early in the planning process. Parameters established for the size, appearance, and function of the building will be useful in projecting the cost of construction. Floor plans and graphic representations can be used to generate enthusiasm for the project, and to support funds-development efforts, including grant applications, capital campaigns, bond issues, and the formation of strategic partnerships.



Lifespan Design Studio worked with a community in the Pacific Northwest to develop this vision for a new adult multipurpose facility. Floor plans and graphic images were developed to support planning and funds development efforts.