

lifespan perspective

A different way of looking at design

Senior Center Design & Renovations Projects 3 Tips for Achieving Better Results

It's totally understandable that most clients of architectural services enter into the project wanting to believe that they can entrust the outcome to the design professionals. This isn't entirely true. If the desired outcome is an environment that can effectively facilitate your programs and services, accommodate members and staff, and support your efforts to attract future participants, the design team can't be expected to hit a home run without your full participation...in fact, *you* are its most important member.

A good architect or interior designer will spend a good deal of time at the beginning of a project getting to know your organization and goals. The more they know about what you will do and those you will serve in your new or

improved facility, the more on-target the design will be. Depending on their level of familiarity with this type of organization and facility, they may or may not know all the right questions to ask.

Tip #1

Think about the questions that don't get asked, and bring that information to the attention of the design team before they start designing. Some of the most commonly overlooked and therefore under-represented considerations in senior center design include:

- the diverse physical, mental, and sensory capacities of the center's target population
- the design-related implications of specific activities that need to be accommodated
- storage needs.

Many designers don't understand that Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance only scratches the surface of design considerations required to create a truly aging-friendly environment. Be sure that your designer is made aware of the actual level of need for handicapped accessible parking, conveniently located senior-friendly restrooms, and other accommodations that may not be adequately addressed through ADA and code compliance alone. We've worked with some senior centers where it was determined that the handicapped parking space count should be tripled to meet the anticipat-

Who is the most important member of your senior center design team?

- A. Architect
- B. Structural engineer
- C. Interior designer
- D. All of the above
- E. None of the above

Answer: E - None of the above

ed demand. To comfortably accommodate various forms of mobility support, ranging from taking someone's arm to wheelchair and scooter use, the width of corridors, doors, and sidewalks may need to be adjusted well beyond the legal minimum.

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If the designer doesn't seem to have a functional understanding of the things you need to be able to do in every room and space within the new or improved facility, *tell them*. The size, configuration, and layout of the rooms and spaces should be guided by the ways in which they will be used. Issues often overlooked in design include sound transference between spaces, privacy protection, and appropriate adjacencies and separations of various activity spaces, public spaces, restrooms, and offices.

Finally, it's important to discuss storage solutions for program supplies and equipment, office and janitorial supplies, short- and long-term files, seasonal and seldom-used items,



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tables and chairs, etc. Make sure the designer understands the desired location, level of access, and volume of space needed to meet current and future needs. For best results, review this on a room-by-room basis.

Tip # 2

Take the preliminary design for a test drive

Before approving a proposed layout, spend time reviewing it with the staff members, volunteers, or others who will actually conduct specific activities in each program space, or make use of the offices and other administrative areas throughout the building.

Ask your architect to assist as needed in assessing whether the designated space is appropriately sized to accommodate the preferred quantity and arrangement of furniture and/or equipment, with adequate room to spare for safe, comfortable navigation throughout the space. Review storage accommodations to confirm that they are adequate and appropriately located and configured for the intended uses and users. Later in design, you'll need to take another look with these same people to confirm that the proposed finishes, fixtures, lighting, controls, outlets, etc. have been appropriately applied for the intended uses.

Tip #3

Basic architectural training falls shamefully short of preparing designers to adequately anticipate and design for the environmental needs of people of diverse ages and abilities. In your role as the most important member of your senior center design team, your ability to empathize with and advocate for your participants can make all the difference. Put yourself in the shoes (actually in the bodies and minds) of those who will utilize the facility, and walk through the proposed

environment from their perspective. Think about the ways that your members with temporary or permanent impairments make use of your current facility, and ask yourself why. In what ways are their choices and behaviors shaped by the environment, rather than preference? Bringing these issues to the attention of the design team will enhance their sensitivity to the ways that the facility impacts the people you serve.

A center director we worked with recently told us that a member had admitted that she rarely came to the center anymore because she couldn't be sure that she could make it to the remotely located restrooms in time to avoid an embarrassing accident. As a diabetic who struggles with obesity, she also had to hope that the building's only spacious stall was available when she needed it. Neither of these are issues that necessarily receive due consideration unless the client brings them to the designer's attention.

As you think about your members' experiences, consider:

- **normal and injury/disease related changes in walking gait and endurance.** People who are ambulatory, but shuffle when they walk or are unable to lift their legs more than slightly may be endangered or disabled by some walking surfaces, curbs, steps, or inclines. Also consider the need for handrails and resting spots in places that may not be obvious to the architect.
- **people who use assistive mobility devices.** Along with ADA requirements for door and hallway widths and basic turning space, it is also important to consider the use of mobility devices within the activity space. Will someone who relies on the use of a wheelchair, scooter, or walker be able to enter the fully furnished and equipped room, move around, and partici-

pate in the activity without undue awkwardness or inconvenience? Even if you find this to be a minimal issue today, consider the likely increase in mobility device use as participation grows.

- **the ways that the constructed environment supports independence and mental comfort.** The ease with which people are able to get their bearings and find their way around a site and building profoundly impacts their comfort level and the likelihood that they will return. As you conduct a virtual walk-through of the proposed environment, put yourself in the shoes of a newcomer, or of someone who may easily become disoriented. Is the layout intuitive? What supports (such as signs, maps, and visual cues in the application of finishes) may be needed to sustain independent use?

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- **sensory changes.** Ask the designer to help you anticipate possible problems in the lighting, sound, and temperature environments throughout the building and site, bearing in mind the broad spectrum of sensory challenges that are common among older adults. Commonly overlooked problems include glare from windows and clerestories at different times of day; background noise from heating, air conditioning and ventilation equipment; and inadequate control of the temperature environment in spaces prone to fluctuation, such as kitchens, computer labs, and exercise rooms.