The architecture of aging

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Research shows that by 2030, Americans aged 65 and older are projected to outnumber children 18 and younger for the first time in US history. The US Census Bureau explains that with this shift, population growth will slow and the median age will rise as baby boomers – who make up a significant portion of the US population – age into older adulthood.

This leads to a whole new set of considerations for quality of life. Currently, 5.8 million Americans are living with Alzheimer’s and this number is projected to rise to 14 million by 2050. Deaths from Alzheimer’s - which is the 6th leading cause of death in the United States - have risen by 145% between 2000 and 2017, according to the Alzheimer’s Association.

In response, experimental new neighborhoods are being developed to accommodate an aging population.

In August 2018, a first-of-its-kind ‘imitation town’ opened in the suburbs of San Diego, with a second location set to open outside Baltimore later in 2019. The spaces, which recreate life in the 1950s, leverage ‘reminiscence therapy’ to encourage Alzheimer patients to recall and discuss their life experiences. Studies have shown that reminiscence therapy, which uses visual, audio and environmental cues to evoke memories and stimulate conversation, has positive effects on mood, cognition and communication levels among dementia patients. “The town was built to trigger memories,” explained Scott Tarde, CEO of the George G. Glenner Alzheimer’s Family Center, which developed and operates the town.

Set to open at the end of 2019, The Alzheimer’s Village in France is also using architecture and intentionally-designed environments to treat dementia patients. Designed by Nord Architects, the neighborhood integrates nature and “healing architecture” to improve the quality of life for those living with Alzheimer’s. “We try to use architectural ways of solving things instead of institutional, machine-like, or normative ways of thinking about healthcare buildings,” Gregersen said. The layout of the neighborhoods will be designed to improve patients’ sense of direction and boost memory.
In Singapore, architecture firm WOHA designed a public housing development to meet the needs of Singapore’s aging population. The “vertical village,” which just won World Building of the Year 2018, integrates healthcare, community centers, commercial amenities, public facilities and green spaces to create “an environment for active aging and promoting community bonding,” explained Yap Chin Beng, senior advisor of estate and commerce of Singapore’s Housing Development Board.

Meanwhile, avant-garde design duo Shusaku Arakawa and Madeline Gins experimented with architecture and interior design as a way to slow down or reverse the aging process in their Bioscleave House in East Hampton, New York. The unique design, which features undulating floors, bright colors and few straight lines, encourages inhabitants to move in unexpected ways to challenge equilibrium and stimulate the immune system.

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