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IIDA.org | Fall/Winter 2014

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A growing senior population is disrupting design, as once staid facilities are transformed into vibrant communities.

By Kate Rockwood

WHAT'S OLD IS NEW

make it easier for residents to move through the community. And in individual rooms, “an accent wall can help immensely,” he says. “That registers in the brain that there are four walls, while an all-white room can seem circular.” Same in the bathroom, where a contrasting seat makes it easier for aging eyes to correctly gauge the toilet.

Incorporating biophilic design elements can also have a profound benefit on seniors’ health, including regulating circadian rhythms, which are often disrupted by aging.

“If someone doesn’t have enough natural daylight, it’s harder for them to sleep,” says Freitas. “Even with atriums, sunlight might flow over the community but not enter into it.”

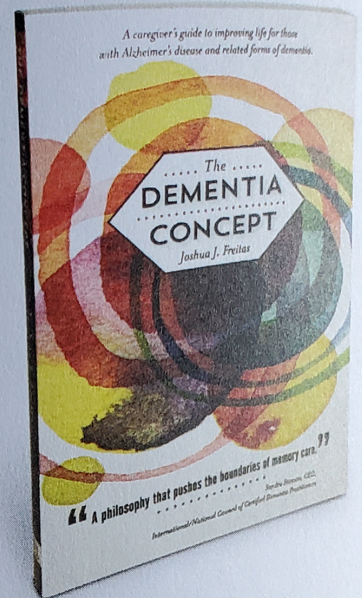
Automated technology can help. “Lighting programs that behave like the sun would ... encourage seniors’ circadian rhythms to be normal and natural,” says Powell Sheppard. “Technology is key for making that more fluid, though. You wouldn’t want to rely on someone remembering to turn the lights down 25 percent at 6 p.m. It would feel too jarring for residents.”



The library at McDowell Village in Scottsdale, Arizona, USA was redesigned with senior-friendly features that make it easier for residents to use and maneuver.



Josh Freitas, author, *The Demential Concept*



“After the age of 65, our brains all start to shrink as a part of normal aging.”

Such design elements take on even more meaning in memory care facilities. For residents who tend to self-isolate, painting the interior of their bedroom door red can pique their interest and get them to open the door and enter the social spaces. In contrast, long hallways can often be confusing. And while most residential projects focus on keeping intruders out, memory care facilities must focus on preventing residents with dementia from wandering. Some interior designers disguise doors behind very shallow bookshelves, some block windows to make the outdoor scenery less enticing, and others use shadow as a deterrent. “Black below the mid-thigh can be very scary, because they sense it as a possible hole,” says Freitas. By casting the right color over a door, designers can help keep vulnerable residents safe.

Here, too, the numbers can’t be ignored. Dementia currently affects 47 million people worldwide, and this number will nearly triple by 2050, according to a 2015 report by Alzheimer’s Disease International.

The design industry is taking note. University of Nevada, Las Vegas recently unveiled a master’s degree program in healthcare interior design aimed at creating comfortable spaces tailored to the lifestyle needs of residents, including those with neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s. A collaboration between the university and the Cleveland Clinic Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health, the two-year program combines design traditions with the research and experience of neuroscience experts.