“The liberation of elders and elderhood is not an aging issue.....It is not about government programs or public policy. It is not about aching knees, weakening eyes, or even the wrinkles that line our faces. It is a world-changing struggle that can remake the experience of life from cradle to grave.

Aging in place is a mirage, a fantasy created by our terrible fear of institutions. Statistics show that people want to age in place. Which would you prefer? Living at home or being thrown down a flight of stairs? Aging in place, if it’s aging alone, is an artifact.

If you were to raise the level of social capital up to the level of need for assistance in later life, you would save a trillion dollars. Monastic life does this. Monks and nuns use services but not as much as society in general and they stay out of institutions longer. Social capital means being a darn good neighbor. It means being willing to help and being willing to be helped by another person. It is a reciprocal relationship that is informal in nature.”


Introduction

Leaders in every generation have the opportunity to improve the quality of life for their fellow citizens, and some answer the call. The contributions of those who came of age during the Great Depression and who lived through World War II are integral components of our society’s contemporary fabric—tangible, daily reminders to every American of the enduring legacy of the Greatest Generation. We are beneficiaries and witnesses to the power of their vision and commitment to improve and enhance the quality of life for all.

During the ‘50’s and ‘60’s, another generation looked around and saw frail elders who had been left to fend for themselves, without the support or medical care that had been the hallmark of families caring for one another for generations—or who were institutionalized when their only “illness” was frail old age. One response was the creation of nursing homes that served for many years as a safe alternative to institutionalization, unnecessary and costly hospitalization, or simply being left home alone.

The medical model of double-loaded corridors—long corridors with rooms on both sides— which was the only model known at the time, was tweaked to create a less medical but still institutional environment, a step away from a hospital or other institution...but not too far away. The problem with the nursing home model is that it ended up creating the very conditions it had been designed to eliminate—loneliness, alienation, and the absence of human connection.

Variations on the nursing home model became popular in the 1970’s and ‘80’s, each time because the original ideal of creating a homelike, medically-safe environment had become an institution in itself. This situation gave rise to other care and service models more appealing to residents and their families. They were designed to offer a sense of ‘community, with tailored programs and services. Independence was balanced with medical care and social interaction in an environment intended to be more homelike and less institutional than the traditional nursing home. In many ways, these were an improvement, and ultimately ushered in the current trend toward options such as “Continuing Care Retirement Communities” and “Active Adult Communities.”
The Baby Boomers

Along the way, the Baby Boomer generation grew up. That generation “to whom much has been given” is now called upon to make its contributions to inspire those who have the courage to envision a brighter future and build a meaningful legacy to hand to future generations.

For many in this generation, the peak experiences of youth—living in college dorms, ashrams, intentional communes, or with dear friends—left an indelible impression of a way of life that had at its core the sharing of daily rhythms of life with friends who really cared about one another. Bonds were created in ways unheard of for their parents—sharing personally, intimately, deeply with unrelated people outside of one’s family. Bonds were created that lasted, and eated—sometimes intentionally, sometimes spontaneously, but always authentically—communities of caring and love that would result in enduring influences long after the physical disbanding of the groups themselves.

As Boomers Age—Where Will They Live?

According to the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB), the 50-plus population is the fastest growing segment of the housing market. Nine of the top ten homebuilders now have an active-adult division dedicated to capturing this burgeoning market. Americans aged 55 and older bought nearly one-fifth of the 1.1 million new homes sold in 2003, and accounted for half of all remodels that same year. And, as 78 million boomers inch towards retirement (the leading edge turns 60 this year), these trends appear to be on the upward swing.

Fueled by an increase in disposable income from the robust housing market, children leaving home, peak earning years and windfall inheritances, boomers are inheriting $1 trillion a year from parents and grandparents—many boomers have the means to plan where and how to spend the second half of their lives. Some are moving to active adult communities that feature amenities beyond bingo and golf, such as exotic travel clubs, yoga, and lifelong learning. These communities have grown dramatically since the 1990's when Congress granted developers exemptions from federal housing...
anti-discrimination statutes. In 1995, 15 age-restricted communities were built, compared to 99 new communities in 2004. Today there are about 1,250 communities in 44 states.

**Not all boomers are satisfied with the current menu of senior housing options**, however. Increasingly, they are rejecting their parents’ concepts of aging and retirement living and are seeking new pathways to growing old which reflect their values and consciousness. One facet of this cultural revolution in aging is the emergence of intentional communities addressing a constellation of desires — a sense of place, sustainable design, shared values and goals, diversity, and respect for elderhood. Developments like Highcove in western North Carolina and Civano, near Tucson, AZ, combine the physical aspects of traditional neighborhoods with earnest attempts to create new models of community. Others, like ElderSpirit in Abingdon, VA cultivate personal growth and spiritual deepening in later life. Some communities have been created as centers for aging gay and lesbian people, such as RainbowVision in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Others, such as Eldershire in Sherburne, NY and Silver Sage in Boulder, CO, strive to create an environment where people can age in the context of vibrant, supportive community — a “cultural lighthouse” radiating the virtues of elderhood.

While the underlying reasons for creating these new models of community vary, many of the roadblocks are shared: Building codes and zoning laws, the lack of standards for “universal design” standards, financing and funding, lack of research on what it means and takes to “age in place,” liability and legal issues – represent a handful of the challenges that non-traditional communities face.

Research completed in 2004 by AARP found that at least 22% of their studied group was looking for “private living units with communal living areas.” We believe that now is the time for enlightened leaders to take that leap of faith and explore options for how we will age together and alone.

**From Aging in Place....**

For years, the clarion call has been to advance the notion of “aging in place.” This was seen as a way to permit individuals to remain in their own homes and not be subjected to life in a nursing home. Aging in place is still the most commonly recognized model—the theory goes: If people are given the tools, they can stay in their homes longer, have their independence and the familiarity of their friends and home; however, in many ways this model has perpetuated—again—the loneliness and alienation that nursing homes were meant to eliminate generations ago. Obviously, a model that perpetuates a single-person solution is no great leap forward.

The focus of aging in place is to provide older adults with sufficient support services so that they can remain in their own homes. Support for aging in place has provided an alternative to moving to an institution (assisted living, nursing home) or moving in with a caretaker/caregiver. Services for aging in place have focused on meeting a unique mix of individual needs, one household at a time.
Aging in community presumes that those who are living this way have a high degree of interest in a way of life that offers daily opportunities for deep human connection in the context of a smaller, clustered, village-type setting, where possible. The model will be replicable across the spectrum from rural to urban.

Hallmarks of this new model?

1. From a site master plan perspective, **smaller is better**. People like to be well-known, and it’s easier to be well-known in smaller community/neighborhood groupings. Do we really need 4,000 sf homes and so much “stuff?”

2. Aging in community offers the opportunity to address the trillion dollar health care question in part by shifting from a “care” model to a “help your neighbor” model.

3. Aging in community places a high value on **human connection**, both internally and in the community-at-large.

4. Aging in community gives the generations a context for sharing their unique strengths, perspectives, and gifts with one another in order to build a richer and more **meaningful legacy**.


6. Aging in community focuses on **building vital communities** that foster the common good and engage people of all ages and abilities.

7. With a high value placed on **sustainability**, it is critical to explore ways to extend the opportunity to age in community to the broadest possible **economic** segments of the population. As responsible stewards of the **environment**, communities that emphasizing aging in community will address the criteria established for L.E.E.D.—Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certification. ([http://www.usgbc.org/](http://www.usgbc.org/))

**Conclusion**

United by the intention to create innovative alternatives to current housing choices, this new movement promises to help elevate and transform the national conversation about aging. By engaging the skills, spirit, and imagination of enlightened architects, planners, builders, and owners, new models are being created that address the growing interest in aging in community.