

Reimagining Senior Living

People rarely think of downsizing to any retirement facility as something that's more. It's almost always seen as less, whether that's less space, less freedom, or less fulfillment.

Vassar Byrd is working to turn that thinking on its head with the redevelopment of Rose Villa, a 22-acre senior living community overlooking the Willamette River in Portland Ore.

The three-phase project started with a campus redevelopment that brought 75 new homes and a walkable environment, including a Main Street, greenspace, gardens, retail, and restaurants.

And with the recent addition of the Oaks at Rose Villa, Byrd, Rose Villa's CEO, is cementing the idea that different and better options exist both for residents and for the environment.

What's different, better?

The Oaks at Rose Villa is a 12-cottage pocket neighborhood that had its grand opening in February.

In developing the project, Byrd asked, "How do we rebuild our village with great infrastructure and modern amenities and reimagine it?"

She had a gut feeling about what "different" and "better" looked like. "For us, energy efficiency, health, and helping the environment were such important aspects," she comments.

Given Portland residents' deep concerns about and connections to the environment, she thought that incorporating green design principles would be a natural.

Focus groups with locals confirmed her suspicions. "They totally got it and talked about feeling better and having healthier air," says Byrd.

Lower utility bills

Byrd tapped Green Hammer Design, a Portland-based green design-build firm with a track record in energy efficient, healthy buildings to design the net-zero neighborhood.

"The idea that you could create as much energy as you use was a deeply resonant message," says Byrd.

Features like a south-facing roof solar array, triple-pane windows, air-to-air mini-split heat pumps, and a heat recovery ventilator to supply continuous fresh filtered air, and native landscaping all helped Green Hammer to achieve its goals.

Thanks to the energy efficiency features, residents of the Oaks at Rose Villa pay 22% less in monthly utility costs than those living in similar homes elsewhere on the campus.

Modern residents, modern design

The architect took design cues from the surrounding community, creating the 1,200-sq.-ft. craftsman-style, two-bath cottages grouped around a courtyard, according to Erica Dunn, Green Hammer's director of design.

"For us, it was really important that the architecture was in character with the neighborhood and community," says Dunn.

And the design is a departure from what people associate with senior housing – no pastels, flowered wallpaper, or ornate furnishings. Instead, the cottages' interiors are sleek, open, and modern, and they incorporate design principles that allow for aging in place.

Cultural, emotional considerations

Byrd also wanted to create a culture and environment that would mitigate some of the challenges of aging, including loneliness, that sense of disconnectedness, and some social woes – cliques, for example -- that can develop when 500 people are stacked in a high-rise building.

Green Hammer's design addresses some of those issues. Though there's personal, private space, residents walk out their doors and can find people in the courtyard, for example.

And the design of the garages forces people to go outside and not scurry directly into their homes.

An abundance of pedestrian paths encourages people to get outside on a regular basis and walk to take care of their daily business, which creates greater vibrancy on

the streets and provides more opportunities for resident to meet others, find friends, and feel a sense of community. That all helps to make people feel less isolated.

Residents already have gotten together to organize biking, hiking and cross-country skiing clubs, discovered Byrd.

Going viral

The Oaks at Rose Villa's approach is a concept that could have legs, believes Byrd. "Lots of people think a senior living community is a place where they may have to give up on the way they want to live. Here, they can continue to live their values," she says.

She's been getting the word out about the how-to of building a similar community, and she speaks at industry conferences about the Oaks concept, the process, and its marketing.

She thinks baby boomers and seniors also can change the landscape by demanding better aging-in-place options. After all, she points out that people in that generation were the ones to reshape everything from childbirth and the workplace, to the environment.

They can reshape retirement housing too.

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