



PLANETIZEN

FEATURE

The Case for Age-Friendly Suburbs

Several trends are conspiring to challenge America's ability to house and care for its senior citizens. Utilizing successful examples, architect and planner Eric C.Y. Fang examines how the suburbs can be adapted to support an aging population.

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America's established framework for housing and caring for its senior citizens addresses a range of needs, from those with independent and active lifestyles to those requiring more intensive levels of care. What each of these models has traditionally had in common is they are typically housed in discrete, standalone facilities with an extensive – and expensive – array of on-site services. The focus is on services and amenities, rather than place.



Despite the demonstrated success of this framework, several trends may challenge its ability to continue as the dominant paradigm for housing America's senior citizens. The first is the sheer number of people poised to cross the threshold into retirement age. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the anticipated tide of Baby Boomer retirees will double America's senior population by 2030, increasing its ranks by 35 million [PDF]. The changing lifestyle preferences of seniors will also play a role, as increasing numbers continue working into their 70s and living in their own homes. Finally, the drop in property values resulting from the Great Recession has significantly impacted the retirement choices available. Together, these developments have begun to reverberate in how seniors choose to live, with a dramatic drop in the migration to Sunbelt states, and an increase in the average age of those moving into assisted-living facilities. The need for a greater range of attractive living options for this rapidly growing age cohort has never been more apparent.

Many observers have touted cities such as New York and Philadelphia, with their pedestrian-friendly sidewalks, transit infrastructure, cultural and recreational amenities, and medical services, as a primary alternative for the senior population. But the scale and complexity, not to mention living costs associated with the big city, are daunting for many and thus not for everyone.

It is the suburbs, in fact, where the large majority of the rising senior population presently resides. What's more, this is also where their children and grandchildren reside. For seniors who look to their children for support and caregiving, locating to the suburbs is not a choice; it is a necessity. Retrofitting suburban communities so they may serve as a realistic and competitive option for seniors may become one of American society's major challenges – and opportunities.

With their heavy bias toward the automobile and dispersed land-use patterns, most American suburbs are far from ideally suited to accommodate senior populations. But there are several ways in which suburban communities can become more supportive settings for seniors who want to stay in their communities, but cannot manage, physically or financially, to stay in their single family homes or maintain their mobility.

In communities where driving is the only way to tend to everyday activities, transit will be increasingly important to allow seniors to maintain an independent and connected lifestyle. According to a 2002 study published in *The American Journal of Public Health*, more than 600,000 drivers aged 70 and older decide to give up driving each year. For those between 75 and 84 who do not, fatality rates are equal to those of teenage drivers. The U.S. Department of Transportation estimates that over half of all seniors stay at home due to a lack of transportation options.



Christie Place, located in Scarsdale, New York, encourages walkability. Courtesy Eric Fang.

Increasing access to transit will only go part way toward making suburbs more livable for seniors. Public transportation places its own demands on riders and is not always an option for older citizens, and community shuttle services can be costly to operate. Making retail amenities and services such as pharmacies, medical offices, grocery stores, and restaurants accessible by foot would dramatically increase the ability of seniors to take care of their everyday needs, effectively creating a walkable community. Improving the quality of the public environment by creating sidewalks that are wider and navigable for wheelchairs and walkers, and providing amenities like small areas for passive recreation, public restrooms and places for shelter or covered walkways will be critical to that goal.

A more basic barrier to making suburbs more age friendly is the segregated land use patterns that are common to many post-War suburban communities. An obvious solution is to create mixed-use districts to allow support services to be located in the ground level of tightly clustered mixed-use facilities with senior housing above. Locating these services within a walkable downtown setting could help expand the market and defray otherwise unsupportable costs for service. Using the ground floor of mixed-use developments for such services can also help fill otherwise hard-to-lease ground level spaces with uses that are more public in nature. Unfortunately, zoning in many suburban communities prohibits these types of combinations. Revising such policies will be a key step in allowing suburbs to evolve in a way that is more fundamentally supportive of an aging population.

There are many small towns that exemplify the qualities that would allow an age friendly local community to thrive. Communities like Westfield, NJ, Oxford, MS, and downtown San Mateo, CA can all claim a compact core with multi-family housing options, walkable streets and rail transit. Other communities like Princeton, NJ and San Luis Obispo, CA share these characteristics and add education and culture to the mix. Many of these towns are showing up on the "top ten places to retire" lists in publications like *Kiplingers* and *Money* magazine.



Christie Place, located in Scarsdale, New York. Copyright Sarah Mechling/Perkins Eastman.

Developers in affluent East Coast communities like Westchester County and Cape Cod have also begun to recognize the value and market appeal of a walkable small-town setting. At Christie Place, [Ginsburg Development Companies](#) has just finished selling out a two-building, age-restricted luxury condominium development on an infill site in the village center of Scarsdale, one of the more desirable and affluent communities in the New York metropolitan area. The 42-unit development is replete with a ground-floor restaurant, café and dry cleaners. A neighborhood grocer and other retail services are within an easy 600-foot walk, as is a MetroNorth commuter rail station which provides access to Midtown Manhattan in 30 minutes. The charm and amenities of Scarsdale's village center are featured in GDC's marketing for Christie Place, showing that place has become a factor in senior living.

In Cape Cod, [Wise Living](#) has developed a series of independent senior living communities near the centers of historic towns like Chatham, Harwich Port, Orleans and Woods Hole. At 10-41 units, the Wise Living developments are far smaller than the 80 units that are the norm for standalone assisted living facilities, and 120-150 units that are typically needed for Independent Senior Living to leverage the required common spaces, building infrastructure and staff. This allows the scale and design of the buildings to be compatible with the scale of these historic communities. The brand value of the towns, and the rich menu of amenities they offer, such as beauty salons, houses of worship, restaurants, coffee shops, museums and galleries are a central part of Wise Living's marketing strategy, which stresses the importance of being "connected with a vibrant, year-round community."

Integrating senior housing into the fabric of suburban communities could help spread the costs of services commonly associated with senior living, such as medical care, physical therapy, and meals to a broader population. A more open model with shared services and amenities could, as Wise Living has shown, make smaller-scale senior housing developments viable and enlarge the range of developers able to meet the growing need for senior housing. Situating seniors in settings where they can access these services by foot or transit will also reduce the need for paratransit or community shuttle services, which state and local governments are finding increasingly difficult to fund.

The prospect of a place for seniors in the heart of the community offers the possibility of a broader, more holistic vision for the future of American suburbs that have struggled to move beyond the child-centered orientation of the post-War era. Redirecting the locus of senior living to more compact and age-friendly small town settings may offer a way to allow retirees to remain in the communities where they have raised their children and lived their lives. Instead of the empty nesters selling their house in the burbs and fleeing to a Sunbelt retirement community, an Upper East Side pied-a-terre or a Pacific Heights condo, perhaps it is time to consider the senior couple downsizing within their community into a flat in their own village center, where they keep active by walking to take care of their day-to-day needs, stay close to family and friends, and live within easy access to the medical and community support network they have spent their lives establishing.

Eric C.Y. Fang AIA, AICP, LEED AP, has led large-scale urban redevelopment, transit-oriented development and campus planning projects for public agencies, private developers and large institutions nationally and internationally. A lifelong student of the city, and currently an Associate Principal at EE&K, a Perkins Eastman Company, Eric co-founded the design journal LINE and has written for publications including UrbanLand and Architectural Record.

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