



The senior citizens of today want facilities to help them maintain their physical and mental health

Designing the future of senior living

AS THE country races to achieve developed-nation status with a high-income economy by 2020, ironically that year will also see it breach the threshold to become an ageing nation based on current demographic trends.



by Khoo Chuan Keat

Recognising the profound economic, social and political impact, Pemandu under the stewardship of Datuk Seri Idris Jala had identified senior living as a long-term business opportunity that

could deliver significant economic benefits under its Healthcare National Key Economic Area whilst addressing some of the community-based care needs of the elderly.

Pemandu conducted a Lab on Senior Living in September-October 2012 following which a pioneering development undertaken by Eden-On-The-Park Sdn Bhd was recently endorsed as an Entry Point Project (EPP 17). The project is Malaysia's first integrated retirement village. Comprising active independent living, assisted living, and care residence, the company is licensed under the Ministry of Health to provide a full continuum of care and will set the benchmark for the industry in the country.

While integrated senior living as an industry is non-existent in Malaysia due to our relatively younger demography, it is established and institutionalised in countries like Japan, Australia and the United States, which had encountered the issue of ageing population several decades before us. Hence, we have the

chance to shorten the learning curve and growing pains by tapping their experience to leap-frog the industry evolution.

As a result of consumer demand in many of these countries over the last three decades, new and improved senior living and care models have emerged to supplement increasingly obsolete nursing and old-age homes. Even with the availability of new options, the supply of well-planned and designed facilities has not kept pace with the rapid increase in the number of active independent seniors and cognitively impaired elderly needing housing and care. The growing number of seniors will not only drive demand for products, services and housing but also new payment and ownership models that are more responsive to their cultural, lifestyle and financial expectations.

Because people are remaining healthy longer, they can either decide to age in place, relying on community-based services or live with a like-minded community in active independent facilities. This has reduced the demand for assisted living apartments in some markets as well as the average length of stay in long-term care facilities which means marketing efforts need to be more aggressive to ensure a steady admission of new residents.

Ethnic and cultural diversity is also becoming a more delicate challenge in building like-minded communities. Some faith-based organisations are

discovering increasing diversity in their resident population due to inter-marriages, multi-cultural families and less adherence to traditional religious doctrines.

While we should not be stereo-typical in generalising what seniors want, there are some clear preferences. For instance, the desire for privacy is changing the design of senior living and care facilities. Studies have found that an overwhelming majority prefer a smaller private room to a larger double room. Shared rooms, group bathing and lack of privacy in public areas are all being rejected by the new generation of seniors. This expectation of privacy is making many senior housing and care settings obsolete. A desire for more autonomy is also changing unit mix, service and dining options, and the range of activities offered.

Ageing in place requires a complex interface between the individual and the environment with progressive facilities and features that residents can use as and when needed. Seniors and their families also prefer a residential environment in contrast to large institutional facilities.

More value-conscious

The next generation of seniors being far more value-conscious will want to clearly understand the model of senior living and service options they select. Additionally, to address the issue of vulnerability, a facility must not only be safe and secure but also create the perception of safety and security.

One of the myths about older adults is that they want to be segregated with people their own age, enjoying views of the countryside. Whilst living in a like-minded community, sharing and enjoying common interests and activities is a compelling proposition for active independent senior living, there is an equally strong preference for older adults to stay within striking distance of their own community, close to their families and friends. Proximity to a city's cultural and social amenities also allows the residents to remain active in the wider community.

This "silent generation" born between 1925 and 1945 began reaching retirement age in the 1980s. They know they will live longer than their parents and want facilities to help them maintain their physical

and mental health. This generation is also heavily influenced by their adult Boomer children whose interests range from sports, fashion, technology, and home décor to green furnishings and building materials. They want to live among all age groups in an economically and racially diverse environment, close to public or community transportation systems. They are concerned about both financial and green sustainability, and desire opportunities for life-long learning.

A major phobia of the silent generation is becoming mentally impaired and physically frail before having the opportunity to enjoy retired life. A senior's wellness means more than just an aerobics or gym class, or swimming laps in a heated pool. Today's seniors are looking for a range of wellness-related activities and features including choice of dining venues; access to nature; designs and colours that enliven the environment; mind and body exercises that promote healthy ageing; and the freedom to socialise with whom they choose.

There has been and will continue to be a shift away from a focus on supporting and caring for ageing adults towards empowering seniors through increased emphasis on wellness devoted to improving the quality of residents' lives beyond fitness centres with treadmills and exercise bicycles. This requires a more holistic attitude that should pervade an entire community's environment and programmes.

Life-long learning

Accompanying the trend towards healthier lifestyles is a growing interest in life-long learning as seniors continue to seek intellectual and even vocational opportunities that they were previously unable to attain. This interest has changed the activities and programming offered at senior living facilities and created a market for retirement communities adjacent to colleges and universities. Such communities provide cultural and intellectual stimulation through participation in adult classes, study sessions, inter-generational student think-tanks, etc. Attending plays, musicals, recitals, poetry readings, sporting events and in some cases, performing in their own ensembles, add vibrancy to the seniors' lives.

An emerging trend sees the planning and design teams working together with residents to re-invent the lifestyle apartments of their dreams. In the past, communities adopted a one-size-fits-all approach, providing few options for interior décor, flooring and wall colours, kitchen and counter top designs. The past decade has seen an increase in available options for finishes, lighting, appliances, bathroom fixtures; allowing for pre-priced customisation upgrades. These options enable residents to mirror their interests in cooking, leisure, entertainment and work in the way their space is optimally arranged and utilised.

The senior living industry basically needs to learn from the fashion industry. The key is to anticipate changing preferences and trends, and to understand what people want and how that meets their real and perceived needs.

Having discussed the impact of changing lifestyles and expectations on the design and operations of senior living facilities, the next part of this contemplative article will reflect on operational efficiency and affordability. [FocusM](#)

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