

Boomer Buildings

The homes boomers need are not the ones they buy

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Steve Wattenbarger designs retirement facilities. In the last 20 years, his Bellevue firm has designed senior housing projects in 19 states, from independent living complexes to skilled nursing homes.

When he set out to design his own home, he decided to build a home from which he'd never have to move. Designed for aging in place, it includes a guest unit with a separate entrance that could serve as a caregiver apartment. The home includes universal design features such as wide hallways, barrier-free showers and levers instead of door knobs.

His kind of foresight is rare, according to experts on aging. While there are an increasing number of options for retirement communities, the designs of single-family homes have not changed to anticipate the coming avalanche of aging baby boomers entering their 60s.

By 2030, the boomers will be 66 to 84 years old and will make up more than 20 percent of the total population. In the state of Washington, baby boomers represent nearly 31 percent of the population. They will need smaller, more efficient homes on one level, with universal design features.

But the market for single-family homes has not reflected it.

"The market's not changing because baby boomers refuse to think about their future," said Liz Taylor, a columnist, consultant and speaker on aging issues. "Boomers are still buying megahouses, but they'll wake up 20 or 30 years from now and say, 'Gosh! What happened?'"

She predicts that mega-mansion developments will be the slums of tomorrow.

Bill Morton, a Bellevue writer and founder of Second Half Strategies, believes that ever so slowly we're beginning to see a few examples of creative home design that recognize the needs of older adults. He cites the "small house movement" and the nascent trends of co-housing and cottage communities.

"People desire community," he said. "Small homes in close proximity bring people together." While not specifically designed for any specific age group, cottage communities such as Salish Pond Cottages in Fairview, Ore., or Danielson Grove in Kirkland foster a sense of community that's appealing to older adults.

Home builder Jim Greenup never set out to develop a new concept in home design. But what calls "multigenerational housing" in his high-end Vista Ridge development in Spokane may be just that.

He just wanted to solve a problem: to build a home for baby boomers who are downsizing and who may also need to care for an aging parent.

So he built two homes in one, sharing the same roof, sitting back to back, each facing a street with a front yard, each with a full kitchen and laundry room.

The larger, primary home has 2,500 square feet with a stone fireplace, large master suite and two-car garage; the smaller home has a one-car garage and is designed to Americans with Disabilities Act standards.

Each front entrance has a different look. There are no back yards; instead, the units share a common courtyard, and there is a hallway in between the units that connects them.

“This allows for independence, but also connectivity,” said Greenup. “It’s a lot different from a duplex, and it’s not like a casita in Arizona, where you basically have a big bedroom with a sink and a microwave.”

Greenup designed Vista Ridge to accommodate up to five multigenerational homes among the 52 homes planned for the gated community. Since each end of the home faces a street and the lot has two “front” yards, multigenerational homes fit only in certain areas of the development. They are zoned as accessory dwelling units (ADUs).

One completed two-in-one home is listed for \$425,850; the other, with a two-story primary unit and larger floor plan, is \$529,900.

It was Greenup’s personal experience that prompted him to consider options for a new kind of home.

“I watched my mother care for her mother in a duplex,” he said. “A lot of things didn’t work right. I watched this and that’s what gave me the idea of designing something that would work better.”

Of course, the smaller unit could be used for any number of living arrangements -- as a guest suite, for adult children who return home, for a caregiver, or as a rental unit.

So far, there’s been a lot of interest in the homes, he said, but no buyers yet.

“People come in and really like what we’ve done,” he said. “They like the forward-thinking features, and I don’t get any critical comments. But I’ve not sold them.”

Greenup figures part of this is because buying a multigenerational home involves more decisions, taking more time.

“People who do this are making three big decisions: to downsize, to sell their home, and then to live with a parent and probably sell that home as well,” he said. “All of that takes time.”

Homes like Greenup’s represent “a private sector approach to a communitarian idea, the idea of families taking care of each other and sharing housing as an explicit decision,” said Branden Born, assistant professor of urban design and planning at the University of Washington.

Taylor, the columnist, thinks Greenup is ahead of his time -- too far ahead.

“You want to be ahead of the curve,” she said, “but not so far ahead that you go broke before the idea catches on.”

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