

Boomer Buildings

New wave in senior living: Just don't call it a 'home'

Puget Sound Business Journal (Seattle) - by Jane Meyer Brahm Contributing Writer

Friday, June 20, 2008

Valet parking, concierge services, luxurious interiors, original art, spa-quality fitness center, sophisticated cuisine. Sound like a high-end boutique hotel?

It's the new trend in retirement living -- and it's definitely not your grandfather's retirement home.

In fact, don't even say "home" or "senior citizen." Baby boomers don't like those terms, and as they enter their 60s and retire, they're redefining the entire retirement industry.

Several upscale projects just open or soon to open in the Seattle area exemplify the trend in housing for active adults ages 62 and above: the Mirabella at South Lake Union in Seattle, Aljoya on Mercer Island, and The Bellettini in downtown Bellevue.

Unlike the sprawling retirement communities built out in the suburbs a generation ago, they are located in urban settings.

"The leading edge of the baby boomers do not want the old-style retirement experience," said Paul Riepma, senior vice president for marketing for Mirabella. "They want an urban, walkable neighborhood; they want to be in the center of things, integrated into society."

And they want larger homes, he said, with amenities that feel like high-end condominium developments such as Seattle's soon-to-open Escala and Olive 8.

Apartments in the three retirement developments range in size from one-bedroom, 700-square-foot units to spacious, 2,400-square-foot two- or three-bedroom, two-bath units. All have full kitchens and laundry facilities; some have fireplaces or balconies.

With the emphasis on hospitality and service, and with posh, luxury interiors, they have the look and feel of a top-of-the-line hotel -- a far cry from the stereotypical image of an "old folks' home."

"The vision is to marry hospitality with senior living," said John Goodwin, general manager of the Bellettini. Goodwin spent most of his career in the hotel industry with Sheraton, Red Lion and Marriott before joining Bellettini operator Leisure Care. "So this is a perfect fit for me," he said. "And here you can really get to know your clients -- the long-term residents."

While the real estate market may have slowed, there's plenty of interest in these urban retirement communities. The first residents of the Mirabella will not move in until late January, but the building is already 97 percent reserved. The apartments in the Bellettini and Aljoya are more than 70 percent taken. More than 800 people showed up at the open house held at the Bellettini on a recent Saturday.

The three developments have refundable entrance fees and monthly rent that varies according to apartment size and service level.

"The new way is refundable entrance fees," said Riepma. "Baby boomers want to know they'll get their money back if they move, and that it'll go to their kids when they die."

The entrance fee at Mirabella is 95 percent refundable when the person moves or dies; at Aljoya and the Bellettini, the entrance fee is 100 percent refundable. Entrance fees range from about \$300,000 to \$1 million; rents range from \$2,000 to \$5,000 per month.

Forget the notion of a dining hall with meals wheeled in on carts at set times. Residents of the new retirement communities can dine when they want, choosing from the menus of restaurants that are also open to the public.

“People don’t want to be told when to eat dinner. There’s no regimentation -- baby boomers hate that,” said Riepma.

The Mirabella will have four restaurants and various packages to choose from. Aljoya will have two restaurants, a casual bistro and a full-service restaurant, Lily’s. The Bellettini has two restaurants on the ground floor, Panini’s and Toscano, both open to the public.

Adrienne Perr, the first resident to move into The Bellettini, loves living there, and describes the food as “incredibly good.”

“You can tell the waiter what you want even if it’s not on the menu,” she said. “For me, the most outstanding thing is the people who work here. Without exception, they’re not just pleasant, they have great personalities and they’re warm and affectionate.”

Mirabella, developed by Pacific Retirement Services, is a 12-story project that is a Continuing Care Retirement Center (CCRC), meaning that residents can remain in their apartments no matter how much care they need. It’s the first, all-new CCRC in Seattle in 35 years, Riepma said.

The leading-edge baby boomers want to be independent and never be a burden on their children, he said. Many of them took care of their own parents and they’re adamant about not wanting that for their kids.

“That’s why CCRC programs are picking up speed,” he said. “They’re designed for healthy, active people, with the promise of lifetime care, all in one building, delivered in your private suite -- and not having to go to some God-forsaken nursing home.”

Aljoya, developed by Era Living, is also a continuing care retirement center, but it will not have a separate skilled nursing unit; rather, flexible licensing will allow the services to be brought to the residents in their own apartments, if needed.

Situated adjacent to an outdoor sculpture park, the five-story Aljoya offers proximity to Seattle in village-like downtown Mercer Island. It is slated to open at the end of August.

Amenities offered in the three facilities are those of first-class resorts: pools, theaters, fitness centers, libraries, beauty salons, spas, art rooms.

The range of activities available is reminiscent of cruise ship offerings -- cocktail-hour gatherings, art openings, lectures, book clubs, fitness classes, nature walks, films, special-occasion parties, etc. The Bellettini even has a

“Brain Gym” for its special classes designed to improve mental activity.

Those who market these homes to baby boomers are challenged by the stereotypical images conjured up by terms like “retirement home.”

“We almost have to come up with a new vocabulary,” said Jill Ashton of Lytle Enterprises, owner of The Belletini.

“Baby boomers don’t want the word “senior” associated with anything they do. We struggled with how to describe the property. . . We even had a lot of people in their 30s who drove by, saw the building going up and wanted more information. . . So eventually we went with calling it a ‘retirement community.’ But you really have to get people to come in and take a look around.”

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