



*Dana Strand Senior Apartments, Los Angeles, California
Designed by KTGy
Photo by Applied Photography*

Creating a Better Product

Senior Housing from an Architect's Perspective

California architect Manny Gonzalez has witnessed a lot of changes over the last two decades in the design of affordable apartment communities for seniors, including those funded in part with low-income housing tax credits. As a result he can describe the changes as well as offer key suggestions to developers about important features for new senior communities today.

"I've been designing senior apartments for over 20 years," says Gonzalez, a partner at the architecture and planning firm of KTGy in its Santa Monica office, "and the resident we are designing for today is much different than the resident we were designing for 20 years ago."

"When I first started, the residents were nowhere as active, the amenities that were really important were the mail room, and it was always important to have a community space that was large enough so that the entire group could sit together at an event for spaghetti night or square dancing or whatever it happened to be. And bingo was the big game; we always had to have space for bingo."

Flash forward 20 years, and the typical senior resident and the spaces important to them are much different.

"The residents now are a lot more active and vibrant," says Gonzalez, who primarily designs housing projects located in California. "There's a lot more concentration on fitness and total wellness and living longer. Things like demonstration kitchens [for cooking classes]

are critical today...And the fitness center, which used to have maybe some free weights and an exercise machine or an exercise bike, now has things like Pilates and yoga classes. There are even things like fitness on demand, where you can watch a video or exercise class; you don't need an instructor. You can do it on your own and do it on your own time."



Manny Gonzalez

Photo: Christopher Mayer Photography

Many of today's seniors are tech-savvy, particularly the leading edge of the Baby Boomer. "So like Gen Y, you've got to have five bars on your phone and a good wireless system for residents to enjoy," says Gonzalez. "Because residents will have a cell phone and they will exchange greetings electronically with their family."

Flexible Gathering Spaces

Community spaces are still important, but that no longer means the predominant amenity is a large community room capable of holding all 120 residents of a property at the same time.

"You need to have the ability to flex into something that large, if desired," says Gonzalez. "But not everyone wants to be in a group with 120 people. Some residents

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only want to be with their best friend or a group of three or four people. And for that group to meet for cards in a room that holds 120 people doesn't feel very comfortable. So you need to provide gathering spaces – even if it's in a hallway or on a floor other than the main community space – that allows for interaction and socializing for groups of different sizes, and not just the 120-person capacity."

Creativity can be part of the formula as well. For instance, two of the senior communities designed by KTGy have a large garage as a community space, where residents can hang out or attend Lowe's or Home Depot do-it-yourself demonstrations, and where the maintenance department has workspace and an adjoining supply room. "The door rolls up and opens out onto the patio," says Gonzalez, who notes the garages are "very popular, and not just for the guys; women go there, too."

Gonzalez advises flexibility in the design of amenities at a senior property. "It's difficult to know what your resident population is going to end up being and liking, so flexibility in your amenity space is key," he says. For example, some communities have included a billiard room, which is popular with men. "But if there aren't that many men, the billiard room doesn't get used," Gonzalez says. "Therefore it's important to be able to turn that room into some other kind of space, whether it's an art space, fitness space, or yoga class. Being able to be flexible to have spaces that can convert to just about any need is critical, to enable your community to adapt to the changing market."

Similarly, Gonzalez says "some communities end up taking on an ethnicity that you might or might not expect. One of our communities ended up having a preponderance of Italian residents, so Italian cooking classes became the very popular demonstration for that group of residents."

Learning from the Past

Gonzalez also suggests that a visit to a property developed years ago to see how the current residents actually live and use the space can produce "aha" moments that lead to wiser design decisions for new projects. He recalls a visit to an award-winning, four-story project in Orange County he designed years ago. While taking photographs of the exterior, he noticed about one-fourth of the units had a plastic storage bin on their balcony.

"I said to myself, 'If that's not a message to me that I didn't provide enough storage at this facility, I don't know what is.'" **TCA**

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