



Residents at the Sumner on Ridgewood retirement community socialize while enjoying at a wine and cheese party in Copley Township. The facility offers a variety of amenities.

SENIOR LIVING REBORN

Aging baby boomers push retirement communities to take on new look with lots of amenities, activities

**By Mary Beth Breckenridge
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When Phyllis Berry was widowed, she knew she didn't want to live alone. So now she lives with more than 170 other seniors, all of whom she makes an effort to know by name. She keeps a schedule so full that she has to think hard to list all of her commitments — volunteering, committee work, bridge, socializing, even games of pool “every day but Sunday,” she said with a laugh.

Berry is part of a wave of seniors that is putting a new face on retirement facilities. They're using their power as consumers to demand homelike settings, a focus on community and amenities that support a full, active life. Cornelia C. Hodgson, an architect who specializes in senior living, has seen senior communities evolve since 1977, when she joined the Beachwood architecture firm Dorsky Hodgson Parrish Yue. Then they were just independent-living facilities or nursing homes, she said; now many of the communities focus on supporting the whole person — body, mind and spirit.



Phyllis Berry, a resident at the Sumner on Ridgewood,, reads the newspaper in her apartment at the retirement community.



Sumner on Ridgewood, designed by Dorsky Hodgson Parrish Yue, offers residents housekeeping services and prepared meals. Amenities include a deli, salon, pub, concierge desk, library and computer center, walking trails and an aquatic and fitness center.

“Before it was, ‘We will provide care for you.’ . . . Now people are looking for lifestyle,” said Hodgson, who’s now a partner in the firm.

And that lifestyle can be gracious. Berry’s home — Sumner on Ridgewood in Copley Township, which Hodgson’s firm designed — has amenities including a deli, salon, pub, concierge desk, library and computer center, as well as walking trails and an aquatic and fitness center with a fitness coordinator who can work with a resident’s doctor to design an exercise program. Residents enjoy housekeeping services and meals prepared by chefs. The bulging activities schedule runs the gamut from bingo and exercise classes to theater excursions and wine-and-cheese parties.

It’s a community where residents can live as they wish, not where staff members tell them what to do and when, said its executive director, Shane Gabis.

Like many newer retirement communities, Sumner is a continuing-care facility, offering independent living in apartments and detached homes, assisted living and short- and long-term nursing care. But even the health-care facilities are homelike, featuring private suites with their own bathrooms and kitchenettes.

The community is designed to promote social interaction rather than focusing on medical care, Gabis said. Hodgson described the focus of such communities as being “about wellness rather than illness.”

These types of senior communities are typically resident- rather than staff-driven. At facilities developed by Pennsylvania-based Kendal Corp., future residents often are highly involved in the planning process, often determining how spaces will be used, said Bill Silbert, its director for marketing and public relations. Once the community has been built, they play a leadership role in activities.

“We create conditions, but it’s the resident population that creates its own lifestyle,” said John Diffey, Kendal’s president and chief executive officer. Its communities are “not so much staff-programmed. They’re not cruise ships,” he said.

The evolution of retirement facilities represents a cultural shift, Hodgson said. Agism has abated as people have begun living longer, healthier and more vital lives, she said. And many seniors are viewing that phase of their lives not as a time to slow down, but as an opportunity to start new careers, explore new areas of learning and enjoy activities they might not have had time for before.

That’s a large part of the reason retirement communities have flourished near college campuses, Silbert and Diffey said. The Kendal Corp. has built six communities connected to campuses, including Ohio’s Oberlin College and Denison University.

The educational environment of such communities provides “an extraordinarily stimulating lifestyle,” Diffey said. That

stimulation comes partly from the educational and cultural opportunities a college offers, but Diffey said it also comes from the people who are drawn to live in such settings. Often they’re alumni or people who’ve worked on a campus, and they tend to be committed to lifelong learning and to contributing to society, he said. College-affiliated communities have the added benefit of built-in access to students, so residents aren’t segregated from younger people. Other communities commonly make efforts to promote intergenerational mingling: Sumner on Ridgewood, for example, often invites youth to perform, and residents are encouraged to have young family members use the pool and other facilities.

Although research shows most seniors want to remain in their own homes, retirement facilities that foster a sense of community can be a good choice for those who want to remain engaged with other people, said Kathy Keller, a spokesperson for AARP in Ohio.

That’s particularly true for seniors who can afford facilities with more options, Keller said. “Nobody wants to feel they’re in institutional care.”

Hodgson credits baby boomers with fueling the latest changes. That generation, the oldest of which has entered retirement age, tends to be well-educated and affluent, she said. Boomers want the best, and they’re willing to pay for it.

Their demands can present challenges to those who administer senior communities,

Sumner’s Gabis said. Older seniors tend to be frugal and formal, whereas boomers are more relaxed and more willing to spend on the best facilities, even if that means raising fees to pay for them.

One example where the dichotomy is apparent, he said, is dining options. Older residents tend to like to dress for dinner and eat in a formal setting, but their younger counterparts are more likely to prefer a casual atmosphere.

That’s why Sumner is planning to add a sports bar as an informal dining option, he said. Those kinds of amenities come at a cost, and it can be steep. Residents of continuing-care facilities typically pay an entry fee that can be in the tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars, along with a monthly fee for services. But Hodgson said the nonprofit organizations she’s worked with typically have foundations that continue to support residents if their resources become exhausted, so no one has to leave.

Some facilities, such as Kendal’s, have made an effort to provide housing options for many income levels. Still, there’s “a crying need” for more affordable communities, Hodgson said.

Still, for residents like Berry, upscale senior communities like Sumner offer a chance to stay active and involved.

But what she likes best is the strong sense of community. “That’s mainly what we’re all about,” she said.