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PRIME TIME

Green spaces key in new designs

Spending golden years amid greenery



The Admiral at the Lake, a continuing care complex on Chicago's North Side, will feature a stair-step design that affords views of Lake Michigan and spaces for terrace gardens.

Outdoor spaces are taking center stage at retirement communities. At the new Mather complex in downtown Evanston two outdoor areas will cover two-thirds of the site where two high-rises are being built. Residents will be able to view the green space from their apartments and the common areas, and will be encouraged to use the areas too.

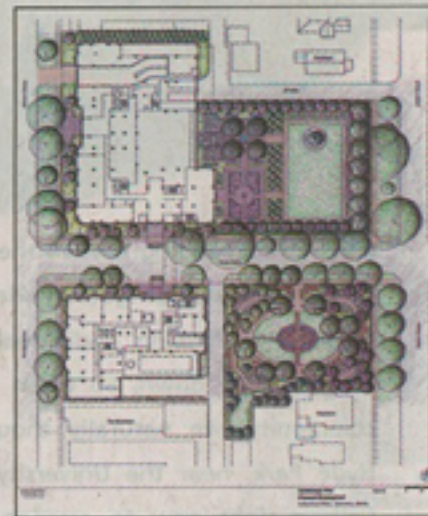
"We felt this green space was a tremendous opportunity," said Mary Leary, president and chief executive for the project developer Mather Life-Ways, a non-profit group that operates several retirement projects. "It will be good for our residents."

Outdoor dining will be available as well as formal and informal gardens where residents can stroll. A big lawn

area will be open for community events. Garden plots will be provided to residents who want to grow their own vegetables and flowers.

Indoor/outdoor comfort

The new gardens will be scaled to feel comfortable so residents will go out and use the areas. Formal gardens will be mixed with less formal ones, according to Daniel Weinbach, principal at Daniel Weinbach & Partners, the Chicago-based landscape designer of the Mather. One green space, adjacent to the first new high-rise slated to open in 2009, will include a great lawn and the individual garden beds for residents.



The new Mather complex in downtown Evanston will have both formal and informal gardens and outdoor dining areas.

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GREEN BUILD

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The second garden, adjacent to the new high-rise slated to open in 2011, will be informal. It will feature a circular path through an arbor of birches, crab apples and evergreens. Residents can stroll through the tree garden and also stop at seating areas with benches and tables and chairs. "The idea is to create a series of spaces for residents. In an urban setting, you want a garden that people will use," said Weinbach.

Other communities are placing the same emphasis on the great outdoors. New developments have terraces, walking paths and gardens of all sorts. Builders recognize that older people want to maintain a connection to nature.

Health benefits

In fact, evidence is growing that being close to nature can improve one's health and outlook. "People care about nature," said Susan Rodiek, a professor at Texas A&M University who studies the effect of the outdoor environment on residents of retirement buildings. In focus groups, Rodiek has found that elders do not want to feel cut off from the wider world. They want to see the outside and go outside. Older people don't want to "stare at the same four walls," Rodiek said.

Rodiek's research shows that being outdoors can improve one's health too.

Exposure to bright light lifts moods and a trip outside most likely involves some exercise, which is an added benefit.

Rodiek's research also has found that the desire for contact with the outdoors increases with age. She's currently conducting a study of older people in Chicago, Houston and Seattle to see how exposure to the outdoors impacts quality of life.

Fitting in

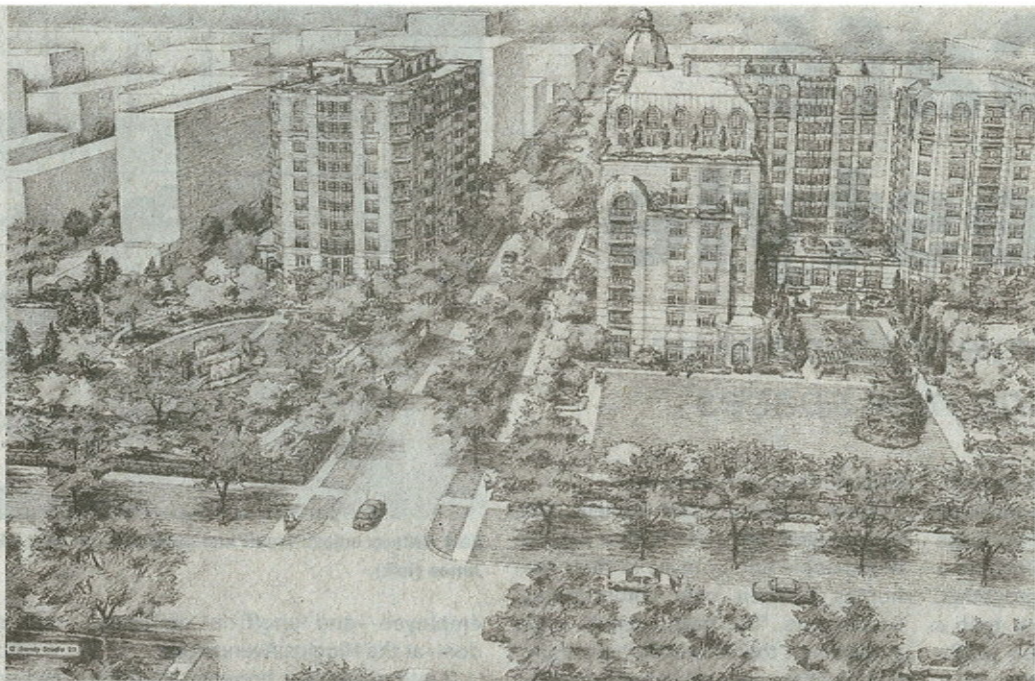
Green space is a key element of the redesign at the Holmstad, a 38-acre retirement community in west suburban Batavia. A new town center is under way and will include new common areas, such as the dining room, fitness center, and pool. The three-story center will feature 48 new apartments on the upper two floors. Terraces on the third floor of the new building will face a grassy area that overlooks the nearby Fox River.

The center is designed to match other Batavia buildings, which feature turrets and special detailing, and it will have underground parking. "Part of our plan was to green up the campus as much as we could, so we put the parking underneath the new building," said Karen Larson, executive director at the Holmstad. "People chose our property

because of the location near the river and the walking paths."

The new building connects to existing buildings on the campus. An expansive courtyard between the structures includes 80 trees and hundreds of shrubs.

Though many retirement communities are located in the suburbs where outdoor space is readily available, buildings in urban locations are finding ways to incorporate green space in their designs too.



At the new Mather complex in downtown Evanston, green space covers two-thirds of the site.

Donaldson, principal at the Dallas office of Perkins + Will, architects for the building. Though quite a bit larger than the previous structure, the new building has a stair-step design that allows lots of sunlight and good views of Lake Michigan, Donaldson added.

The ground level park will have an outdoor patio. The first floor of the new building will feature common areas, such as fitness and wellness centers, a media room and swimming pool. Other building amenities include a library, living room, and meditation room.

Large terraces will be located on the sixth floor, just off the dining area and adjacent to the health care wing. Terraces will also be

located on the 10th, 14th, and 18th floors. "The whole idea is to design the terraces so people will use them," said Donaldson.

The terraces will have planters, trees, shrubs and perennial flowers. Seating areas will feature semi-covered and outdoor spots. The terrace on the sixth floor will have real turf and a walking path. "It will feel like a real park where people can stretch their legs and actually be on the grass," said Donaldson. ■

The Admiral at the Lake is a new continuing care complex on Chicago's North Side. The complex features a 31-story building with 200 apartments, along with assisted living and nursing care suites. Construction is scheduled to begin later this year.

The new building replaces an old structure which has already been demolished. The two-acre property included a large park which is being saved. "Our mandate was to preserve as much green space as possible," said Paul

Café Lifestyle

Adults reinvent themselves in enticing new spaces

The appeal of the corner café, coffee shop or diner is universal. It cuts across racial, gender, age and socioeconomic lines. It's a place where everyone comes together, whether to do lunch, hang out, grab a quick bite, chat with staff, visit neighbors, attend events, meet, greet, grow, learn, ask for advice or give it.

Seven years ago, the folks at Mather Lifeways decided to create gathering places to enhance the lives of those over 50, and do it with ageless appeal. Today, three cafes, two on the North Side and one on the South Side, are national models of success. They have won awards, and have been featured in *The New York Times*. They host 10,000 adults a year, offer 4,000 classes and serve 50,000 meals.

'More Than a Cafe'

Their moniker: "Mather's-More Than a Café" says it all. Inside the bright, colorful, trendy spaces you'll find customers catching up on e-mail, learning new ways to use technology, discussing music, travel, theater, and painting, playing games, exercising, getting help solving problems, and celebrating the holidays. They might come to see a business or sports idol, author or performer. A recent newsletter (available on-line at matherlifeways.com) featured everything from Zumba (an exercise class) to digital photography, a full page of trips and tours, plus lectures, games, music and more.

The secret to the cafes' success is defying stereotypes, coupled with an understanding of the way people actually want to age, says Betsie Sassen, executive director of café development.

"It's about empowering people," she says. "Older adults still want to learn and grow and continue. They want to volunteer or learn a new language. We believe this is a time for things they may have pushed aside, things that refuel them. These years can be a time to learn new things, meet new people,

kind of reinvent themselves."

There is also a health benefit. "The idea behind the cafes is that we can help people age in place in their own homes in their own communities," Sassen says. "We have seen in some studies that the cafes may have a protective effect on one's health, keeping them socially engaged and help them stay in place."

Opening the cafes to the public and appealing to customers of all ages, not just the "younger older adult" they're designed for, is a big part of this. Anyone in the neighborhood can and does drop in and mingle.

"Food brings people together, and if we can get them in to eat the food, we can get them interested in some of the other programs," Sassen says.

Knowing their customers' taste is important. The menus feature traditional favorites made freshly on-site: pancakes and eggs, omelets, Caesar salad wraps, Sloppy Joes, hamburgers, pizza, lasagna, cookies and pies. About \$6 buys a full meal, and items can be ordered ala carte for around \$1 or less.

Setting the tone

The space itself is open and appealing, yet intimate, averaging 3,900-5,000 square feet. "We use modern furniture and bright colors so it feels like a hip coffee shop that you would see anywhere in the city," Sassen says. "Customers can view something that is going on in the other spaces, and hopefully get interested."

An exceptional staff sets the tone. "There is an expectation that you don't just come to work to clean or cook or receive people at the front desk. You come to make them feel welcome," Sassen says. "We have five generations of workers, so that makes it pretty rich. We also have seen a phenomenon where customers become volunteers, then part-time staff."

Herta Fischer is one of those. The 74-year-old former banker and resident of Jefferson Park went from volunteer to



Ealy Gatson enjoys lunch and conversation with Mather Cafe manager Beedie Jones (left).

employee—and unofficial ambassador—at the Higgins Avenue café.

"I retired and was home for 10 years and got kind of bored," says Fischer, who is unmarried and has a daughter in the area but no grandchildren. She started serving coffee and cake at evening movie screenings, then took exercise classes in muscle strength training, line dancing and tai chi. She also learned how to use e-mail to connect to relatives in her native Germany.

"One day, one of the supervisors asked me if I wanted to start working here as a cashier. I said no at first. But then they said, 'Do it for a day,' and I did. Then it was two days, then three days, now I've been here three years."

Fischer says it's the easiest job she's ever had because of the friendly atmosphere. Her day starts when people arrive in the morning for the 35-cent coffee. "It's bottomless, and they don't have to tip," Fischer says. "People are not pressured to leave. They stay and talk to each other."

It's also an ideal "recovery" spot for people who are going through knee or hip replacement and don't want to sit home. "They get dropped off here for three or four hours and can play cards, Scrabble, pinocle, etc.," says Fischer.

If they're alone, she brings them together. "A lot of elderly people have had a spouse pass away," she says. If she sees them sitting alone, "I suggest that someone else shares their table. This way, if you introduce them, they don't feel bad about it."

She also likes the international flavor at the cafe. "I'm German, my boss is Greek, the branch manager is Austrian, and cooks are Mexican and African-American. We're always teaching each other," she says.

Help with the big stuff

The cafes also help folks keep up

with changes in their lives and in the world. When free RTA bus passes for seniors became available, volunteers set up shop to help them apply.

A social worker also comes to the cafes once a week. "We make customers aware when she is available and people can make appointments. They can meet about a variety of issues. It's private and free for them," Sassen says. "We also have a nurse who comes in once a week, so people can check their blood pressure and ask questions. It's non-threatening. It's a counseling over coffee approach."

When certain things occur such as Medicare changes, Mather has certified Medicare consultants who come on site. Seasonal things like tax help and flu shots complete the picture.

Mather's cafe model is being copied globally. "Everybody in the aging industry is taking a look at themselves and seeing if they are well positioned to serve the adults of tomorrow," Sassen says.

Mather has made it easier with an on-line toolkit and two-day workshops that explain how to replicate the concept. So far more than 100 people from 18 states and two foreign countries have come to Chicago to check it out.

"I had a group of Koreans recently, few of whom spoke English," Sassen says. "Somehow Herta found out that one of them spoke German, so she was able to communicate with them. By the end, they were taking pictures of themselves with the cooks, etc. They will never forget their visit."

"When you set a tone like that, you walk in the door and you feel like, 'Hey, there is a party going on here!'" she says. "The possibilities are endless."

Mather's Cafes are located at 7134 W. Higgins Ave., 3235 N. Central Ave., and 33 E. 83rd St. in Chicago. ■

More Than a Hot Line

In the days of automated everything, it's nice to get a person on the other end of the phone when you have a question. A knowledgeable, friendly and helpful person is a plus.

That is exactly what callers find when they call Mather Lifeway's Info Plus service toll-free at 888-600-2560. It's open Monday through Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. It gets about 10,000 calls a year regarding everything from finding someone honest to fix your mom's toilet to applying for state and federal programs.

Glenda Taylor, manager of Info Plus, takes many of those calls. With a degree in social work and 20 years experience, "I'm kind of an information guru," she says. She draws from a database of 14,000 listings in Illinois. If she doesn't have the answer, she'll find it for you, for free.

"If a daughter calls and says she is concerned about her mother being alone all the time and she needs some socialization or activities, I might refer her to one of the Mather cafes, or to adult day services if she has dementia," Taylor says.

Taylor has been trained by the Illinois Department on Aging as a Medicare specialist, so she can advise on prescription drug coverage, and how to navigate the Medicare bureaucracy.

"These days, a lot of information is on the Internet, but many older people don't have the skills to access it," Taylor says. The Info Plus line fills the gap. About 70 percent of calls are from older adults, and 30 percent from their adult children.

Taylor says the most popular topics are Medicare, handyman referral, transportation, and senior housing.

She also makes appearances at Mather's cafes, lecturing on things like public benefits, free RTA fare cards, reverse mortgages, long term care insurance, and how to find senior housing. "We are also an AARP tax site, so I help coordinate that in the spring and flu shots in the fall," she says. ■