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Co-Living – Planning for Organic Growth and Evolving Expectations:

Part 2 - Developing and Implementing Co-Living Design Strategies

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In our previous white paper (Part 1 - Generations on the Move and their Evolving Vision of Future Living), we presented an abridged history of how co-living evolved from the co-housing model. In that white paper, we defined co-living as a housing style in which individual renters— who are often strangers—each rent a unit that contains a bedroom and a private bathroom. In this style of housing, the traditional living and kitchen spaces are shared by the larger community. Also reviewed in our previous paper was how the needs of and drivers for millennials and baby boomers have primed them to see co-living as a successful rental model. Their desire to downsize, their expectations of what a home should supply, and their more nomadic ways of living all contribute to millennials' and baby boomers' positive views of co-living.

Although the effects of Covid-19 on the prevalence of co-living have not yet been studied, anecdotal evidence suggests that shared living models increased in popularity during the pandemic. Demand for this style of housing may continue to increase in the near future. Part two of this white paper will explore how our proposed design interventions can help to create successful co-living communities. These design interventions center around up-front experience planning, which sets the stage for the experience of both staff and residents and allows for organic growth through flexible/socially-designed spaces and natural society formation.

Up-Front Experience Planning Developer-Driven

As noted before, co-living facilities are not just about providing a place to live. Instead, they provide a holistic experience centered on the creation of a community. Developing this experience starts with an investment in the up-front planning phase. To cultivate this community, it is critical to understand the people who are part of the community on a deeper, more personal level. Developers must take into consideration the demographics of the community—as well as community members' values, desires, and needs—in order to develop programs that support the community and enrich the lives of its members. The development of these resident programs is just as crucial as the building's architectural components to creating a successful co-living facility. Gaining an understanding of the staff's needs and behaviors is also critical to a co-living facility's success. Two basic planning models—staffing-up and resident inclusion—require the involvement of the developer, and solve for how to integrate the community and educate the staff.

Not only must a co-living facility be planned and executed with foresight for the needs of the various demographics within the community, but the staff must be able to explain the story and culture of the residence. A recent study of two different co-living facilities revealed that staff members often felt they lacked the knowledge to address questions from the residents (Green, 2017). This problem could be solved by engaging the staff in the co-design process during the up-front planning.

Staff members' involvement in this process will enable them to engage with the residents, learning first-hand their behaviors and needs. Their newly gained knowledge will help them to perform better on the job and to better anticipate the residents' needs, while also facilitating stronger relationships between the staff and residents. This process will also set the groundwork for continued education that will aid staff members' ability to grow and adapt as the residents' needs arise or evolve. The developer and designers can create an experience that addresses the needs and wants of residents and staff by using participatory design and primary research methods—such as surveys, journey mapping, and co-design workshops—in the up-front planning phase. These planning tools aid in capturing the facility's authentic story, educating the staff, and crafting a strategic narrative for the experience.

(Pictured is a client visioning session hosted by M+A Architects.)

Storytelling is also central to another "co" model of the shared economy, that of co-working. The most successful and well-known co-working facilities have a core element that defines the reasoning for engagement. Hera Hub and CoWomen, for example, are two co-working companies that center around empowering women. CoWomen's experience and story begins with its tagline, "Take it to the next level by collaborating with driven women." The Collective is another co-working company with a central story that is expressed in its motto, "Be more together." The Collective works to enable its tenants to create their own experience. Both of these value-driven conceptual statements establish a starting point to ensure that the developer, designer, and tenants are collectively on the same page and are participating in the same "co" story. Co-living facilities can learn from co-working companies' approach. They must have a clear, value-driven conceptual statement/story that is adopted by the staff and expressed authentically to the tenants.

(Pictured is Hera Hub's Irvine co-working office space. Photographs from Hera Hub's Facebook.)

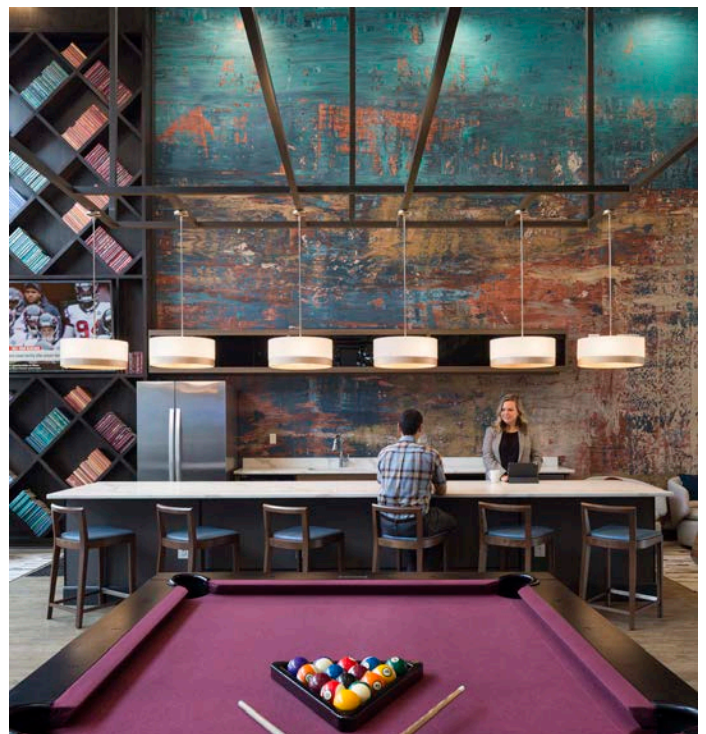m+a architects

Resident Experience and Expectations

An effective starting point for co-living facilities is a story that builds connections between the staff and the residents and between the residents and the built environment. However, co-living communities must also meet the basic functional and emotional needs of the residents. Whether these basic needs are met determines whether a tenant will engage in the community and thrive. Understanding which needs are vital to a specific co-living community can help set up the community for success.

When researchers conducted interviews with house-sharers, aged 20—35, in New Zealand, the residents expressed three main categories of needs. If we extrapolate these needs and apply them to co-living, these can be addressed through intentional planning, design activations, and/or staff education, residents' experiences would improve. Those needs identified were:

- **Separate but Connected:** This concept is about balancing these two emotional needs. It is important to understand that while tenants will live with or in close proximity to each other, they will still want to retain their own independence. Conversely, they cannot be so independent as to become isolated. They still will need to engage with others and participate within the community.

- **Similar but Different:** While tenants have shared desires—hence living communally—they must understand that all tenants come from different backgrounds and have differing identities. Differences can be used to either facilitate relationships or to create divisiveness. Understanding different identities, as well as shared traits, can help tenants foster better connections, faster.

- **Trust and Comfort:** Feeling safe is a basic need in any living situation. As we have established, co-living is about relationships, and the foundation for any relationship is trust. In a successful co-living community, trust facilitates safety, which enables comfort. Certain areas, such as bedrooms, must

be considered off-limits to others. Tenants must trust that other residents will see these spaces as private. When that understanding is shared, tenants feel more comfortable (Clark, et al., 2018).

Successful co-living communities must determine when and where these functional and emotional needs can or should be met. They must also navigate residents' expectations as to how these needs are addressed in their daily lives in the facility. Take the hypothetical example of a resident who expects the communal space to be shared from 5:00 pm—7:00 pm and the area's television limited to their preferred viewing preferences. These expectations could lead to conflict, as they may not reflect the shared values of the other tenants using the communal facilities.

(Pictured is the AG47 Silverton project designed to balance two generational needs and preferences. Designed by M+A Architects, 2020. Photography by Josh Beeman, 2021)

The New Zealand interviews, conducted by Clark, Tuffin, Frewin, and Boker in 2018, also studied conflict scenarios within co-living dynamics. Sometimes, tenants' traits do not mesh well, leading to stress for all involved. The researchers noted several traits that could be used to place residents into groups that have a better chance of being harmonious.

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(Pictured is The Pixon mixed-use project where the design focused on social contact principles for planned interactions. Designed by M+A Architects, 2020. Photography by Chad Baumer, 2020)

The following categories of personality traits, life experiences, and background could become a measurement used to weigh which residents would live well with each other:

1. Cultural heritage
2. Morals and values
3. Age
4. Goals
5. Level of independence
6. Desired amount of socializing
7. Desired amount of private space (Clark, et al., 2018)

While positioning staff for success is important, developers must also plan to manage residents' expectations. In past co-housing communities, there were periods of time when there were no set rules or expectations for the residents, which led to a "low sense of community" (Bouma & Voorbij, 2009). If one of the goals of co-living is to create social relationships, then upfront education, discussions of expectations, and co-design planning can help prepare residents for what they can and cannot do. Writing bylaws is another way to establish a sense of social boundaries in a co-living facility. Bylaws could help establish a foundation for success for the residents, creating a commonly shared understanding and commitment to follow a certain set of guiding principles for the community. The existence of bylaws can also help resolve disputes when conflict does arise (Melzer, 2005).

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Organic Growth

Socially designed spaces are not a new invention. Their roots arise from the social contact design principles that were used in the co-housing communities that gave birth to co-living. These principles help build communities by creating spaces where social interaction can occur (Williams, 2005). Several tenets of social contact design could be or are already being applied to co-living, including:

- higher density of residents
- highly visible public spaces
- co-location of the entries to dwelling units
- location of areas for common household chores, such as laundry and gardening, in communal spaces (Williams, 2005)

The goal of each of these principles is to help form better social connections and to increase the frequency of planned and unplanned meetings. The more chances there are for people to interact with other residents, the greater the opportunities for building community (Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2015). Public and communal amenity spaces are integral in designing for successful communities.

When designing for socializing, designers can begin to tell the branded story of a co-living facility's culture through its amenity spaces (Jones Lang LaSalle, 2017). However, amenity spaces do not have to be prescriptively or restrictively designed; rather, they should allow for organic change and growth, depending on the functional needs of the residents. When amenity spaces are too fully developed, residents "struggle to take control and build confidence in their immediate environment, which is being reflected in short tenancies" (Green, 2017).

In fact, Herck and Meulder found that "design for diverse use" was critical in producing desirable and functional amenity spaces (Herck & Muelder, 2009). Residents' need for control and flexibility of use of the communal spaces was also highlighted in Green's Living Lab study, which allowed residents to co-create components not included in the original facility design and incorporate them into the communal spaces. The study allowed residents to explore certain spaces for their own needs. This freedom made the facility feel less like a prescribed space and more like a space in which residents could affect change (Green, 2017).

Allowing residents more control in the design and function of the space was an effective means of community creation and problem solving. The residents who participated were more actively engaged and were more likely to become brand champions of the facility. Co-living facilities could incorporate this level of resident participation by, for example, holding an annual summit where residents were invited to be co-creators in reshaping an underutilized area. This type of event would allow the facilities team the ability to change and evolve as newer resident preferences emerged.

As noted by Williams, another important consideration for communal spaces is visibility (Williams, 2005). The amenity spaces in co-living communities should be centrally located so that they can be seen from multiple viewing points. This way, residents can see when an amenity space is in use, and they can decide if they would like to participate or not (Bouma et al., 2010). With today's technology, visibility of amenity spaces can also be achieved through other means, such as social media or other communication platforms. Monitors or community chat centers can be used to allow residents to notify one another when activities begin or are ongoing. Staff members could also facilitate notification through their own communication or social media platforms.
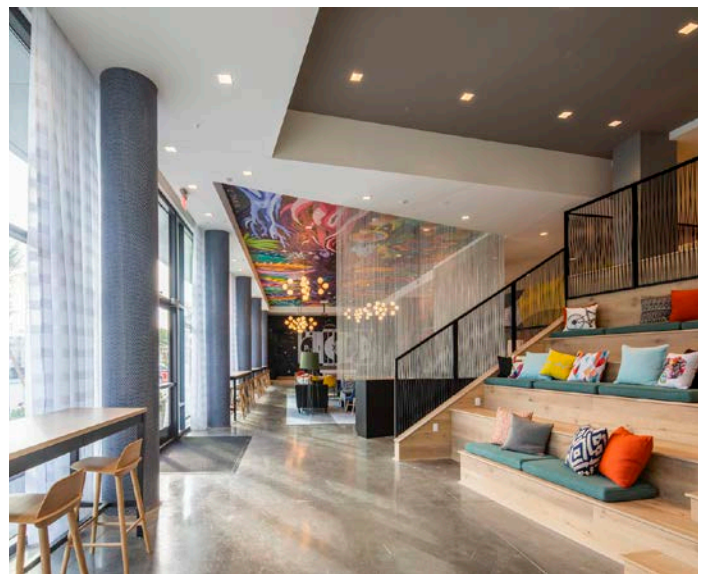
(Pictured is The Pixon mixed-use project was intentionally designed with open amenity spaces for views. Designed by M+A Architects, 2020. Photography by Chad Baumer, 2020)

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In fact, technology can now be considered a further addition to social contact design principles, as it increases the number of social touchpoints (Frissen, 2004). Technology allows for more potential social connection to amenity spaces. For example, leveraging technology extends into universal design, providing social connections for residents who might have disabilities that limit their mobility or other capabilities (Bouma et al., 2010).

Community Formation

With the availability of main amenity spaces for planned meet-and-greet activities, it might seem that forming a successful community in a co-living facility would be relatively easy. However, other types of interactions are also needed. Community formation happens when you build ways for people to informally come together. Planned activities should allow for individuals to mingle and form personal connections, similar to those one might experience at a friend's party or at the local gym.

Tailored events that focus on residents' needs are useful in forming deeper connections between tenants (Jones Lang LaSalle, 2017). These types of experiences could include life-skill classes, networking events, or working sessions that are designed to promote the residents' business, life, or learning endeavors (Jones Lang LaSalle, 2017; Outsite, 2016). The key is to design with flexibility in mind, creating spaces that can be transformed from a dining area to a yoga studio to a book club meeting room to a classroom.

Surrounding the main amenity spaces are "buffer zones," which are corridors, stairs, and other such "connecting" areas. These areas are also useful in building community and society. Much research has been done on buffer zones and their influence on creating social interactions. Buffer zones are less about planned activities and more about unintentional meetings. While the main amenity spaces help to form multiple social connections, these buffer zones—where there are higher rates of passive interactions—allow for true friendships to form (Abu-Gazzeh, 1999). According to Felbinger and Jonuschat, passive interactions "are a form of passive community building and may lead to feelings like 'convenient' social control, common feelings of security and/or wellbeing" (Felbinger and Jonuschat, 2006).

Corridors are the best place to have these passive interactions and to act as a buffer zone to the main amenity space. In fact, effective corridor design can aid organic community growth and relationship development just as much as effective main amenity space design. The positive effects of passive interactions in buffer zones were demonstrated in a study conducted by Bouma, Poelman, and Voorbij. During this study, students kept a diary and were interviewed about their activities in two different communities. The results from this study showed that the community that had more passive contact interactions also had a greater sense of community and performed more shared activities (Bouma et al., 2010). In this era of disengagement, driven by technology and expanded by the COVID-19 pandemic, many within the millennial and Gen Z generations are looking for ways to find human connection. These groups of potential co-living residents will appreciate investments in buffer zones, where passive engagement can occur.

(Pictured is The Xander multi-unit residential project in downtown Columbus. Designed by M+A Architects, 2021. Photography by Alex Abejuela, 2021)

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The outdoors is also an effective space for community building. Courtyards, stoops, and porches are informal common areas where people can have conversation as others pass by, similar to corridor interactions (Zhang, 2018). In addition, using the outdoors as a meeting space taps into the long-studied principles of biophilia, utilizing our human need to connect to nature and other living organisms to enrich the human connections needed for community formation. Outdoor common areas also provide a place for residents to fulfill responsibilities and to take community action. For example, raking leaves or completing gardening projects could be rotating tasks that help bring random groups of residents together.

Summary

As you have read, our research findings on co-living indicate that it is an attractive model due to the synergy between generational desires and economic drivers. Many are choosing to delay or trade the "American Dream" of a white picket fence for diverse experiences, which are becoming a premiere focus within co-living facilities. As stated in our previous white paper, the recent interest in co-living stems from an increasing desire for agile living, past precedence setting up expectations for the future, and more mobile generations. These factors indicate that co-living communities are primed to thrive if set up, programmed, and designed successfully. Whether it be developer-driven, community-driven, or simply organic, we believe co-living will only continue to grow in the future as the pandemic has accelerated and made more acceptable an agile, hybrid lifestyle.

Just as people now expect more from single-function devices, they also expect more from their homes. New ideas about design will help meet these expectations, and external innovations will continue to transform the ways in which we live, work, and play. What our research indicates is that to design successful co-living communities, we must allow intergenerational and interidentity communities to merge in an organic fashion. Understandings must be agreed upon and expectations managed upfront to help ameliorate future conflicts. Participation should become a continued required act that can help give ownership to shared spaces, rather than a voluntary option.

How can we create the environment that allows for the above to occur, and in the process, create a true community? For this to happen, a vision of that community and the future it can bring must become a story that is shared and believed by all who touch the project, from start to continued habitation. This story will set the foundation upfront, and create a system of shared values that allows for the organic growth necessary for successful community formation.

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M+A Architects commissioned this white paper, performed the secondary research literature reviews, and generated the content for this report with coordination and review from the Department of Design at The Ohio State University. At M+A Architects, we are using this and other evidence-based research to support our decision-making process to elevate our clients and our practice. To continue the conversation on successful co-living communities and our other services, contact Mark Bryan at research@ma-architects.com.

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