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Physical design issues affect accessibility, safety, and usability.

Educational environments for the elderly

By Thomas O. Byerts

In recent years, interest in continuing education and public service activities for adults has expanded at a modest rate. Serious concentration on the special education needs of the elderly is, however, growing rapidly on some university and community college campuses across the country. This interest is prompted by a number of factors which include recent realization of the broad education and services needs of older people, recognition of new (and needed) sources of revenue, and development of good will for institutions of higher learning. From the consumer point of view, rising levels of education achieved by "newer" cohorts of older people, coupled with higher expectations for learning, leisure activities, earlier retirement, second careers, and economic necessity for new job skills caused by rising costs of living, are leading to new levels of interest. This does not mean that large numbers of older people are expected to arrive on campuses, though the numbers should increase in general. As relevant programs are developed on campuses and at extension sites, the increases could be dramatic.

Beyond some traditional and non-traditional institutions actively marketing educational services to alumni and broadening their definition of "older" adult students

to include the middle aged and the elderly, few examples of sustained programs for older people on campuses (that have clear housing or environmental implications) could be cited. Examples include:

- 1) Tommey Abbott Public Housing, Syracuse, NY: a three tower complex (one for the elderly and the other two for men and women students, joined by public areas used by both younger and older people) sited at the foot of Syracuse University's campus, adjacent to and administered by the All-University Gerontology Center in cooperation with the Public Housing Department;
- 2) Fairhaven College, Bellingham, WA: Features an age integrated approach to married student housing and classes; and
- 3) The Elderhostel Program: A growing national network of educational institutions that develop short-term stay, residential campus (summer) programs for older people.

In addition, campuses such as the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, are major state campus models for accessibility to the handicapped. The University of Illinois program began over 25 years ago and has attracted a number of disabled students. It has a pioneering rehabilitation institute that spearheaded the design standards for the campus and provides a focal point for enabling a large population of physically handicapped students to obtain a high quality education.

In another direction, some educational institutions—particularly community colleges—have assumed responsibility for sponsoring and housing senior center programs, adult day care centers and other recreation, social and health hospital clinics and special diagnostic programs for older people. Other educational institutions offer alumni college programs where alumni of all ages are invited to participate in special educational opportunities on campus. Some programs require overnight accommodations.

Physical Design Issues

Serious physical design issues affecting security, safety, and usability must be addressed, lest inappropriate and unfortunate situations develop on campus—be they campus residential, commuter, or extension located in the community. In fact, if dealt with properly, a re-design of most campuses would improve the environment for students, staff and visitors of all ages and conditions. Action along this line is being spurred forward by the Federal pressure of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 as summarized from an excerpt of an HEW Fact Sheet, March 1978, detailed below:

In colleges and other post-secondary institutions, recruitment, admissions, and the treatment of students must be free of discrimination.

Quotas for admission of handicapped persons are ruled out, as are pre-admission inquiries as to whether an applicant is handicapped. However, voluntary post-admission inquiries may be made in advance of enrollment concerning handicapping conditions to enable an institution to provide necessary services.

Higher education institutions must assure accessibility of programs and activities to handi-

capped students and employees. Architectural barriers must be removed where the program is not made accessible by other means. A university, however, is not expected to make all its classroom buildings accessible buildings, or take other steps to open the program to handicapped students. Handicapped persons should have the same options available to others in selecting courses.

The balance of this paper focuses on physical design issues and their implications for the relatively new and potentially broad-based "aging of the campus."

Motivation

A serious look at motivation is in order. In the mid-70s, as many higher education programs began to face cutbacks in funding, reduced operating income from declining enrollments and endowments, inflationary pressures and empty dormitories (students preferring to live in the community), some institutions began a (desperate) search for student "bodies."

Are the empty classrooms and dormitories a result of the declining quality of education or the institution's lack of relevance to society? Were the dormitories vacant due to poor design, management, or maintenance? Is the motivation for encouraging older students a result of a sincere desire to expand the age mix and challenge the faculty and "traditional" student body with the wisdom and experience that maturity brings? Is there a commitment to develop a support unit to facilitate older students returning to the campus? As these questions are answered, an evaluation of the existing physical plant/equipment followed by a plan with a goal of developing a more age-integrated program of learning, is clearly in order.

It must be recognized that campuses (as is the case with most cities or buildings) were not built to accommodate permanently or temporarily disabled or frail elderly persons or even children or disoriented visitors for that matter. Campuses have recently come under steady federal pressure and regulatory controls in this area. These standards for assessing usability of public buildings insist that programs that take place in buildings must be accessible and usable by the handicapped and elderly. They include: 1) incorporation of reserved parking with dignified entrance/egress (not through loading dock at rear); and, 2) free movement through and use of facilities (e.g., bathrooms, drinking fountains, and cafeterias as well as laboratories/libraries, recreational facilities and classroom spaces). For residential campuses, the regulations often apply to campus housing such as married student apartments, single student dormitories, hotels, apartments, and boarding homes in the neighborhood.

Circulation

Whether they are large, sprawling rural campuses, dense inner city campuses or modest extension sites in churches, libraries or shopping areas, most campuses rely on "student power" to get up to the next classroom or over to the next building. Few campuses take real control of conditions like weather, distance, and security. Campuses tend to be under-equipped relative to elevators or escalators since they were designed for active 18-24 year olds who were expected to walk up and down stairs. Parking lots are usually expensive, require passes, and are often located on the periphery of campuses. At a

minimum, handicapped student parking spaces close in proximity to major buildings must be provided. Some older people may not have the physical stamina to make it from one class to the next across campus in the few minutes allotted between classes. Reorganization of schedules, circulation patterns and location may be appropriate. Is there a campus shuttle bus? Is it accessible? Is it reliable?

Security is difficult on university campuses since there are usually many entrances and exits, and many campuses are spread out in "park-like" settings. Students and non-students blend easily together. There are landscaped grounds for beauty and contemplation by day. They also, however, provide places to hide or escape at night. Evening classes can be dangerous if lighting is inadequate and student traffic is sporadic, since classes are let out at designated times.

Building signage or clear images suggesting function are typically poor or non-existent. Most campuses were built over a period of years. Some maintain a particular architectural style while others collect various architectural styles, contemporary to the time of construction. Rarely is there a uniform (or even clear) graphic system. Campus maps are traditionally hard to find and hard to read. Many buildings are named after benefactors—not activities or units contained therein and often multiple functions are contained in one building. Street addresses are rarely used. People who are out walking may have memorized their route, are familiar with a portion of the campus, or they too are lost!

Entry

The next issue to consider is the building entrance. Many college buildings were built with classical styles in mind. Thus, there are often several formal entrances on axis with the building. The entrances are usually approached by stairs to set them off on a formal platform. Which entrance is the most direct route to the classroom, the office, or lab in question? Buildings must now have at least one entrance on grade or ramped for handicapped wheelchair students, staff, and visitors. The typical heavy single or double doors (or in more modern buildings, revolving doors), must be negotiated to enter buildings. Safe, power-assisted doors should be considered.

Interior

The next area of concern is the need for clear, wide hallways in heavy traffic areas. Hopefully, excess glare is reduced by dark glass or a canopy over the exterior windows. Interior task lighting, matte finishes on floors and lever handle hardware should be used in both new or remodeled construction. Quality of signage is often a critical and overlooked interior design issue.

Are the elevators and laboratory facilities clearly marked? Are the classrooms easily identified? Can a wheelchair-bound person use the public telephone and drinking fountains? Are the elevators limited only for faculty use? Can the controls be reached from a seated position? Is it easy to tell what floor a person is on? Do the elevator doors close slowly and retract easily if blocked? Is there braille and raised lettering on the controls?

Can a hard-of-hearing student communicate over the background noise of the corridor or in the classrooms/offices? Are there places to sit and rest that are out of the flow of traffic? Classrooms are often among the most ineffective and inefficient environments for communication.

Too many classrooms have acoustical, lighting and ventilating problems. The chairs are often uncomfortable and fixed in rows with table arms that get in the way. The larger theater settings are often cold and impersonal and the seminar rooms are often congested. Are the faculty offices suitable for scholarly discussion, writing and conducting research?

Due to the tight budgets, many campus administrations have had to cut back on maintenance and cleaning. Graffiti, posters, and debris crowd out directional signs and passageways. Are the exits clearly marked and hardware workable? Do faculty and staff take full advantage of whatever inherent flexibility there is in the use of space and equipment?

Living Arrangements

For campuses interested in attracting temporary or full time older students into campus housing or housing in the community, the "quality" and appropriateness of student housing can become a critical issue. Typical student dormitories featuring two-person "efficiency" rooms, a small lounge on each floor with gang bathrooms down the hall are not appropriate for extended, or in some cases, even for short-term stays. As duration of stay shifts from short-term to long-term, housing should meet and potentially exceed the HUD Minimum Property Standards for Multi-Family Facilities.

Demand for more amenities or special features increases with duration of stay and degree of disability presented by older students, alumni or retired faculty members. New construction of conventional or subsidized apartments designed for the elderly and handicapped would provide year-round dwellings for older students, spouses or others. Rehabilitating existing structures can provide space to meet new standards of usage.

Accessible and functional apartment houses or boarding homes on or near the campus which are located in safe neighborhoods should be considered. Married student housing with several bedrooms may be more appropriate than dormitories, but large numbers of unsuper-

vised children could be a detriment. A set of policies would have to be worked out before various groups of older people occupy the facilities.

A key element is the design of the dwelling unit. Single rooms or suites with private bathrooms and an emphasis on showers with a seat and sprayer as well as the inclusion of grab bars throughout are a growing priority for most people. Space and privacy should be adequate for conducting the activities of daily living. Fittings and hardware should be simple and easily operated. Telephones and emergency communication systems in each unit are strongly recommended. If cooking is permitted in the unit or in the common space on each floor, electric stoves are indicated and task lighting in these areas should be increased. Background noise should be minimized throughout these facilities.

On balance, construction of new apartments or renovation of existing buildings truly designed for the elderly and handicapped are the first priority. Serious conversion of dormitories or community housing for long-term stay is a second and perhaps more feasible alternative. A motel or transient hotel/apartment type of arrangement or well-designed dormitory for short term stays may be adequate.

Conclusion

The physical environment plays a much stronger role in people's lives than is commonly realized. This role increases in importance as people grow older and experience age-related loss of perceptual acuity, reaction time, strength, dexterity, social and familial ties, and confidence of youth. Appropriate responses to the growing needs and demands of older people for education services will take a major commitment from campus administration, whether educational offerings are traditional or non-traditional in design. This applies to both new and old campuses and buildings. For programs to be successful, an environment developed with a knowledgeable, sensitive approach is required. Without this, only minor gains will be made in education programs for older adults.