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How Wayfinding Can Increase the Feeling of Security In Your Community

by Lisa B. Bixler, Colin Healy and John Hrivnak

How identifiable is the entrance to your senior living community? It's an important question because visitors and residents feel welcomed and safe if they can navigate a space.

One of the ways to blend form and function to achieve the most welcoming and secure of senior living communities is to design for wayfinding.

Wayfinding refers to the ability to make sense of and navigate a space. We aren't talking about signs, although signs can help with wayfinding. What helps more is an identifiable entrance, understandable and natural foot traffic patterns, and easy-to-manage doors.

If you don't yet have a design for your community, you will need to plan for wayfinding from the pre-design stage onward. If you already have a community, you may want to consider an audit to examine wayfinding, because it influences all phases of evaluation and use of your community by older adults and their families. Such an audit will include first impressions and "comfort level" on an initial visit, how your community stacks up against others in the area and contentment once a senior moves in.

Wayfinding experiences begin when someone approaches a building. How easily can they identify which driveway or door is the main entrance? Much more than signage, architectural elements and



lighting show visitors where to enter the building, especially those visitors who may be feeling a little overwhelmed.

Once they identify the front door, even getting out of the car is part of the experience. Consider a rainy day. Is there a canopy, and is it designed to comfortably accommodate delivery vans, cars and emergency vehicles?

Navigating the front door is more challenging for some than for others. A power-actuated door to a vestibule that is secure enables visitors to quickly get out of the rain and adjust to the interior. Yet there is the immediate impression of a secure facility. Perhaps an annunciator button in the vestibule would

allow visitors to reach a receptionist or security officer.

Likewise, when residents await rides, they can do so in comfort. Visibility can be maintained as well, until the ride arrives.

Within the community, the use of color, texture and lighting to differentiate walls, floors and bathroom fixtures communicate and comprehend “path” are all used. Corridors are one example.

Lighting in corridors is critical to help with wayfinding and also to limit falls. Light levels must be adequate and even. More footcandles are necessary as we age, yet it still is necessary to meet energy requirements of watts per square foot. Indirect bounce light from cove lighting and sconces is better than direct lighting of intermittent ceiling lights.

Wall grab bars (on both sides of the hall) help with balance — they also need to be of a material that is cleaned easily and does not harbor germs. Backlighting the grab bars further can help with overall lighting as well as help those with less-than-perfect eyesight find the bars.

For those with cataracts, color rendition is important, because colors appear differently with this condition (imagine looking through yellow-tinted wax paper). Change in floor colors and/or textures along the sides of a corridor can help residents locate the edge of the floor to wall, and if the texture is different, residents also can feel it via their walking canes, walkers or rollators.

When walls and base or walls and floor are the same tone, orientation becomes more challenging. Figure / ground relationships developed by floor patterns also can be problematic. Imagine a black-and-white checkerboard pattern — it becomes difficult to read whether or not the borders are color changes or steps.

Falls further can be prevented by providing drop shelves at resident dwelling unit doors. Residents

then are able to safely set down objects to free up their hands to deal with locks. A bonus is that the resident does not have to bend over to pick up objects, which could subject them to some disorientation.

Different corridors for different wings or floors can have unique trim, color and finish to better help residents with orientation and identifying “my neighborhood” in larger communities.

Using the principles of designing paths that are readily discernible for residents will lead to successful senior living design.



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