



Colleges & Builders:

New Opportunities for 50+ Housing

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I have been involved with 50+ housing for more than 30 years and have been part of the development of any number of wonderful communities during that time. Yet I now realize I never viewed any of them in personal terms. I assumed I would always be in my New York City apartment, living my busy urban life.

But now I am an extravagantly happy resident of a unique independent living community, and eager to tell builders and developers of 50+ housing about a housing concept that works. The community is Lasell Village, and builders from Japan, China, and the U.K. have been visiting and studying it for years.

“Learning” at Lasell Village is not just a programming option—it is a commitment to 450 hours of learning every year.

What makes it ideal for its 50+ residents is a meshing of the truly responsibility-free living that older buyers want with the environment, culture, and benefits of a college campus setting. It is located on the campus of Lasell College in Newton, Mass.—one of the oldest and most well-established colleges in the state’s academic corridor.



The Village was developed by and is sponsored and managed by the college, but it has its own identity as a non-profit educational retirement community, focused on accommodating the requirements and interests of “older” students. It identifies itself as a “living and learning community,” but it is clearly the “learning” aspect of this premise that sets it apart from a number of other impressive independent living options. “Learning” at Lasell Village is not just a programming option—it is a commitment.

When residents sign up to live at the Village, they agree to participate in at least 450 hours of “learning” each year. After spending several months here, it is clear how this affects the way the residents feel about the community. Not only does the agreement promise residents a full and rewarding experience as they make this crucial move, but it also ensures

that their fellow residents will be on a similar wavelength—that they, too, will be vital and involved people, eager to grow, expand, and live a challenging life. The agreement, and the academic setting, go a long way toward answering a question prospective residents

inevitably ask themselves when they consider any new community: “Will I fit in?”

At Lasell Village, residents have multiple opportunities to earn their “learning” credits (without the burden of homework). The college offers three annual trimesters of courses on a huge range of subjects, taught by professional-level presenters (many from the faculty of Lasell and other nearby colleges) and offered where residents live. Each residential building includes at least one classroom or exercise space, meeting areas, and its own library.

There are also other options. Residents can walk a few blocks to attend classes with the younger students at the college, or they can share in intergenerational programs with the other college students, aimed at creating interchange of ideas and insights between the age groups. They also can attend classes or programs at other area colleges, visit museums and art exhibits, or attend musical

and discussion programs in the many nearby communities. Travel, on their own or with groups, counts toward those lifelong learning experiences, as does volunteer service in community programs. Fulfilling the “learning” requirement at Lasell means doing what makes you happier, more well-informed, and more involved.

In my first month at Lasell, I heard three different chamber music groups, attended a series of fascinating lectures on great museums of the Western world, saw both the legendary opera stars Beverly Sills and Placido Domingo perform in some of their earliest roles, saw several beloved classic films, discovered fresh aspects of my favorite paintings, and enjoyed an outstanding jazz group. I even watched movies and presentations for courses on a closed circuit TV channel reserved for Lasell.

Residents are invested and involved in the learning opportunities, and eagerly choose classes and programs for upcoming semesters. I was

impressed to see no grumbling even when a lottery was required for the most sought-after courses or lecturers. The excellence of the “learning” programs and the breadth of experiences they bring to residents set Lasell Village apart, and the college has received numerous awards for its unique program for older adults.

Of course, I was interested in the community’s development process, and I found that good planning addressed many of the areas of resistance to senior housing ventures that we in the industry have wrestled with over the years. I asked Paula Panchuck, executive director and dean of Lasell Village, where the management had sought and received guidance during the planning phase.

She told me that she and the other college managers talked extensively with people in the community—especially with groups they thought of as potential residents. This series of conversations, along with the managers’ own insights, successfully informed and guided their planning process. Residents and prospective residents still are a primary source of guidance at the Village. Almost every aspect of the operation—operating committees, planning groups, evaluations, etc.—includes resident input, and the degree of respect that exists among residents and management is exceptional.

Here are some of those areas of resistance—long a problem for seniors’ communities—that Lasell seems to have avoided.

Isolation and Segregation

How many times have builders heard potential residents complain that they don’t want to live in an isolated area that is just for “old people?” They want to live in a “real” situation where they can interact with people of all ages and all phases of life. They expect a retirement community to be isolated because so many such communities—especially the early ones—are located in relatively remote areas, with residents spending most of their lives exclusively with each other.

But Lasell Village is totally integrated into a bustling college campus. Its buildings look like the other campus homes and buildings, comfortably in

Central courtyard of Lasell showing variety of exteriors
PHOTO COURTESY OF LASELL VILLAGE



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sync with the traditional architectural vernacular of the New England towns around it. From my living room window, I see as many young college students and neighborhood families with baby carriages as I do my fellow residents. And for a change of scene, there are three suburban towns, with shopping malls, movies, restaurants, and bars within a few miles.

Since its inception seven years ago, the Village has engaged college students as wait staff and assistant managers in their dining room and service departments, so we have our own “family” of young people with us every day. Our young people are up-beat, respectful, and dedicated, and they enjoy as much being here as we do.

“Cookie Cutter” Homes

Retirement communities often are criticized (and rejected) because they convey a sense of sameness. Prospective buyers complain about “cookie cutter homes” which translates to a fear that their homes will offer no opportunity for individuality, creativity, or self-expression. They’d say, “The

homes all look the same, the streets all look the same; even the people all look the same!”

There’s no hint of the cookie-cutter approach for the 188 independent living apartments with 62 different floor plans at Lasell Village. Each building is different, each entry is different, each home is different. Most buildings have three stories, some have four. Others feel like single-story houses. Some have porches, others have terraces and gardens. One of my neighbors waited three years for an apartment with a terrace large enough to replicate the fabulous gardens she had left at her long-time home.

The Lasell Village buildings are not laid out in rows, but are laced into an oval pattern around a town center, courtyards, and gardens. Buildings are connected with glass-enclosed walkways, making it possible to reach any part of the Village without going outside, should circumstances require it. The property includes a small pond with a walking (and relaxing) path, as well as several small natural woodland areas.



Residence-based classrooms give residents easy access to seminars and courses.
PHOTO COURTESY OF
LASELL VILLAGE

An “Institutional” Feeling

Many of today’s retirement housing options are high-rise buildings. That can be a stumbling block for people looking for a place for the next chapter of their life, but tied emotionally to their perceptions of “home.” It can be a very long leap from years in a single-family home into what they may see as the “impersonal” and “institutional” environment of high-rise living. Developers hear resistance to buildings with “long halls,” and what those halls suggest about anonymous people the new resident may never get to know.

Industry professionals have repeatedly found that the 50+ resident is looking for an ambiance that feels like “home.” The kind of low-rise, home-like setting Lasell offers can be a much easier transition. The low-rise design, the compatibility with the surrounding architecture, and the fact that there are no high-rise structures was important in obtaining zoning approval.

Of course, the proposal for Lasell Village originally had to struggle with the inevitable “not in my backyard” protests. But some of those protestors are now committed Lasell enthusiasts, delighted to have relatives and friends living contentedly nearby.

Village residents and college students in class.
PHOTO COURTESY OF
LASELL VILLAGE



It’s about Dining, not just Eating

Lasell’s dining areas reflect the Village’s priority of fostering resident control over their quality of life. In most communities, residents are assigned a table and table mates. Not at Lasell, where residents are encouraged to put together a table for each meal, just as they would if they were inviting friends to their home or to a restaurant. Lasell Village residents love this plan—it helps them meet and get to know more of their fellow residents, and makes each day’s experience different.

The restaurant and dining service at Lasell Village often is cited for excellence. The dining staff keeps both the menu and the presentation varied and interesting. Even residents who have been at Lasell Village for years look forward to meals and anticipate the ambiance, which evokes a high-end restaurant, or the extravagant look of a cruise ship dining room. Tables of different sizes are scattered in various parts of the large, bright rooms lit by ceiling-to-floor windows. It’s truly fine dining.

We Want “Responsibility-Free” Living

Years ago, we builders discovered how effective a hook “maintenance-free” living was for 50+ buyers, and that’s still a key to the appeal. But as prospects became more sophisticated and affluent, we saw that exterior-only maintenance-free living wasn’t enough. In focus groups, I would hear respondents talk about the many services they would like, and I would think, “Are they kidding?” But now we hear builders offering “responsibility-free living.”

Lasell Village’s remarkably responsive concierge team handles that. Residents can count on the concierge desk for almost anything. All my mail and packages (even furniture), drugs and toiletries, Internet purchases, and dry cleaning are delivered to the concierge desk daily and brought directly to my apartment. When I have health issues, the concierge team will drive me home and even pick me up for meals and activities.

There’s transportation to doctors’ appointments, to shopping centers, to movies, local restaurants,

and more. My building has a beauty parlor, a small bank office, and a wellness clinic, with RNs available much of the time. There's even a podiatrist on the premises. And everything meets the highest standards of quality and good taste.

When I was wondering how to most effectively convey the sense of quality that characterizes Lasell, I thought of the young service person assigned to help me with my apartment when I moved in. Like many young people today, he had a prominent tattoo. But his tattoo was in old English script!

A Skilled Nursing Facility

A continuing challenge for builders is the need to provide services for those who may require a

full spectrum of nursing and medical care, while maintaining an overall community image that projects a vibrant, upbeat lifestyle. The Village pulls it off, providing a full rehabilitation and skilled nursing facility which has its own name, Lasell House, its own staff of highly trained professional and support personnel, and a location distinctly its own. Lasell House occupies an elevator-accessible full floor in the main building, and includes 38 patient rooms, a large, bright "day room," and a comprehensive, state-of-the-art physical therapy center.

It's invaluable when Village residents have unexpected health problems. Residents value the fact that friends and loved ones can get the care they need and still be close at hand, in a building



A look down from the street onto a campus building shows the integration of Lasell Village and Lasell College. PHOTO COURTESY OF LASELL VILLAGE

Developers should look to college campuses and consider the possibility that both they and the colleges can make profitable use of their unused land.



that looks like home, but is a top-notch nursing operation. The Lasell Village dining staff provides Lasell House residents with their good food, and the décor is bright and attractive. And Lasell House performs so well as a skilled nursing facility that it cleared the annual state Board of Health review with the highest possible grade.

An Adaptable Model for a New Type of Housing

I hope that sharing my experience at Lasell Village will inspire builders and developers all over the country to look to the college campuses in their own areas and consider the possibility that both they and the colleges can make profitable use of the large areas of unused land on their properties.

For the 50+ buyer, a residential setting that recognizes the importance of ongoing learning can be quite attractive. Even the enigmatic boomers, who have been so difficult to capture, might work along with their alma maters to develop housing linked to their colleges. That can only happen, however, if builders and developers are scrupulous in the way such communities are presented. Right now, such “living and learning” communities have no clear identity, and can be lost among the many senior communities or CCRCs.

Lasell Village is clearly an upscale venture. However, the concept is adaptable to being developed in less costly ways. Sensitive developers can study the Lasell experience, learn from it, and adapt it into something that works in their area. And resource people such as Paula Panchuck, an enthusiastic advocate for the concept, can be exceptionally helpful to builders and developers who want to work it out in their own way. **50+**

Map shows the land plan of Lasell Village.
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