

CONVERSATIONS



How Building a Purposeful Environment Can

# IMPACT ASSISTED LIVING RESIDENTS

An Interview on the Impact of Aging with Kelley Hoffman

## INSIDE YOU WILL LEARN ABOUT:

The importance of using durable products and finishes in senior living environments.

The key to designing a functional and effective senior living environment.

How manufacturers, designers, and industry leaders collaborate to improve the lives of the aging population.

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**Kelley Hoffman**

Kelley Hoffman is an interior design professional and Partner at RDG Planning & Design. She has devoted more than 17 years of her career to enhancing the lives of the aging population and completed more than 900 senior living projects in all levels of care, including independent and assisted living, short-term rehabilitation, memory care, skilled nursing, and hospice care. In her current role, Kelley continues to carry out her mission to design residences for seniors who desire a sense of community and need a new place to call home.

## How Building a Purposeful Environment Can Impact Assisted Living Residents

### Did you always know you wanted to be a designer?

As long as I can remember, there were signs in my life telling me this is what I was meant to do. I was that weird kid who would get excited to come home and find my mom had moved all the furniture around. At a very young age, I recognized the impact design had on me and others. It could evoke feelings of comfort, safety, happiness—an entire array of feelings. I believe certain people are drawn to the senior living industry, and oftentimes they are drawn because of a personal experience.

### What personal experience influenced your decision to design for the aging population?

During my senior year of college, I was tasked with designing a ground-up senior living community for a senior thesis project. It was during this time that my grandmother developed Alzheimer's, forcing my mom to make the difficult decision to place my grandmother in a nursing home. With apprehension and guilt on my mom's part and a need to conduct product research on mine, we began to tour senior living options together. This experience, watching my mom find a home that was good enough for her loved one, made me realize the significant impact design could have on seniors, their families, and caregivers.

### In the early stages of a project, what are some of the steps you take to get started?

Designing for the end user and their specific needs is paramount to the success of the design. Designing for seniors is subtle, but deliberate. Every detail, finish, and furniture selection should be made to address the challenges seniors will face in the aging process. Well-lit spaces, smooth or nonexistent flooring transitions, finishes to address auditory issues, and properly scaled and constructed furnishings are just a few of the requirements for senior-friendly design. These elements have the ability to positively impact the lives of seniors and allow them to live safely in the environments. Understanding the goals and vision of the owner is also critical in the early stages of the design process.



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### What do you see as the next steps for the industry?

I suspect the progression we've been on—a strong focus on wellness, memory support, and the small house concept—will continue. We may see a larger demand for communities in a more urban setting, and I believe baby boomers will continue to be active participants in the community at large. Families and prospective residents also have concerns about being able to afford retirement living. I think growth in designing affordable housing for an aging population is something that will become more prevalent.

### Are there any trends or changes that influence people in these types of environments?

Definitely! When I first started 17 years ago, designing for aging populations was not sexy. You had to get creative to enhance the environment with a tight budget. But there has been a major shift in the industry as the aging conversation has become a hot topic. I think people are more educated about the choices the market has to offer, and they no longer automatically visualize the institutional or medical model associated with senior living. I also think there's a sense of job security in it for designers and manufacturers. Manufacturers are focusing on better designs with senior-appropriate products, allowing designers to meet the needs of the owners.

The senior living market is a collaborative industry of design professionals who are all driven to positively impact the lives of aging adults. Many manufacturers we work with have made it common practice to gather senior living design professionals from across the country—often from firms who are competing for the same work—to collaborate and share what products are needed in the marketplace to better serve our clients. It's a great time for barriers to come down, and to be part of an assemblage of professionals who are passionate about using their love of design to improve the lives of the aging population.

### How have you used research or other sources of information to find inspiration or new concepts that have impacted your design thinking?

Since the senior housing market is hot right now, there's an abundance of new and improved product development in the marketplace. Senior-friendly furnishings with commercial durability continue to enter the market at a rapid



 It's about designing a home for hundreds of people, not just a family of five.

pace. Manufacturers and experts, within their specific field, are a great resource. The residential, hotel, and hospitality markets are also strong influencers for the senior housing market. The fun part is taking the best ideas and modifying them so they are appropriate for our unique end user.

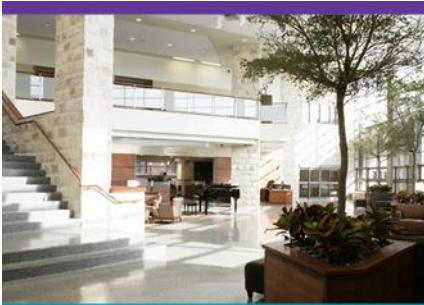
There's also a great deal of knowledge and insight to acquire from the residents in the senior communities. Surveys and focus groups can be helpful in designing spaces to meet the needs of the residents. I also love to meet with the nursing staff and the activity directors. They know their residents better than anyone else, and they have direct feedback on how the community is being used. That doesn't replace or diminish what a designer would bring to the table, but it's a combination of those interdisciplinary viewpoints that really makes for a more successful project.

### **When you are finished with a project, how do you determine if the space is well-designed?**

A space that is highly utilized is one way to tell a job was well done. An organized space with adequate storage and appropriate furnishings will remain tidy and will closely resemble the end product. Observing a space in use months after an installation was completed that still strongly resembles the original design is a strong indicator that the space was well-programmed and is sufficient in meeting the needs requested by the owner. A space that still looks good five, seven, or 10 years down the road is a sign that the proper finishes and furnishings were selected with the appropriate level of durability and ease of maintenance.

### **Has there ever been a time you worked on a project and thought that it could have been designed better?**

One of my first projects as a designer was a lesson learned. Because it was independent living, I didn't think the finish materials and furnishings needed to be as durable as, say, those in a skilled nursing environment. I went back into that community a few years later and some of those products and finishes we'd selected just didn't hold up. That was one of the biggest lessons that taught me, as a designer, that the durability of everything that goes into the space is crucial. Choice of products and finishes has more to do with the number of people that use a space. You have to remember, it's not a home for five; it's a home for 500.



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The same consideration you use for skilled nursing needs to be applied to independent or assisted living. It's absolutely critical to all levels of care.

### What do you think is the main reason a senior selects one community over another?

I had the privilege of co-leading a research project. The focus was to gain a better understanding about what makes communities feel like home, which is one of the main reasons the aging population selects one community over another. We had a group of 30 different people: three groups compiled of men, women, adult children, residents, and prospective occupants. We wanted to find out if there were regional influences, as well as age and gender influences, that would impact their decisions. At the end of the project, we were able to take away a few key elements that made a space feel like home. All three groups commented on an abundance of natural light, the use of natural materials, and the importance of feeling safe and secure. We determined that if you incorporate those elements, you're going to be successful in creating an environment that is utilized by residents.

### How can you design for the unique needs and preferences required for different spaces?

It's critical to understand how a space will be used, and learn about the specific needs. You can achieve this by having a detailed conversation with the owner and key stakeholders. It will provide insight that years of design experience may not. I believe it's a bit presumptuous to assume that the "recipe for success" for one community can be duplicated in another. Every community is different. You can draw from past experiences as a baseline, but it's clear that communication leads to the better design solutions for staff and residents.

### Why should aspiring designers get involved in the senior design industry?

The senior living industry is filled with amazing people. It's a stimulating industry and I'm really excited to be a part of it. It never feels like work. I want people to have a comfort level when faced with the tough decision of moving a loved one into an assisted living environment. I don't get to save a life; I'm not a doctor. But design still has meaning, and that's what I want to keep on doing.