

# Design as a Superpower in the Senior Living Industry



**Tama Duffy Day\***

*FACHE, FIIDA, FASID, LEED AP, Principal, Gensler, Washington, DC USA*

**Submission:** May 09, 2024; **Published:** May 23, 2024

**\*Corresponding author:** Tama Duffy Day, Principal, Gensler, 2020 K St., NW, Washington, DC USA

## Abstract

Almost by definition, excellent design of senior living facilities prioritizes well-being in ways that should be automatic for all types of design - but aren't. The practice of design forces us to think deeply about the experience of the end user without taking their abilities for granted. While I am striving to raise senior living design standards in particular, I truly believe that using design as a superpower, grounded in research, should inform every project being delivered today. Design is a superpower. But to what end will we use it?

**Keywords:** Senior Living; Senior Living Design; Active Older Adults; Architecture; Interior Design; Geriatrics

## Introduction

Senior living distills the relationship between well-being and design in such a compelling way. When a project provides older adults with access to nature, that is more than just a nice feature; it creates measurable health benefits at a stage in life when they are most consequential. When a bathroom supports individuals of all abilities without sacrificing beauty, that does more than check off a code requirement; it advances human dignity.

## Discussion

Here are three simple tools that can be utilized to unlock the superpower of design. You too can bring the power of design into your organization and positively impact resident and staff experiences.

### Design superpower #1 - Design from the inside out

For me this seems so logical. Design from the inside out, after all, we're designing for people. Here are two successful examples. Eight years ago, we embarked on one of the first of its kind, an affordable housing project for LGBTQ elders in Chicago, called the Town Hall Apartments. At that time there were no precedents, so we began to unpack the program requirements by talking to the elders themselves. Designing from the inside out - defining the user experience. We asked the elders many questions about the possibilities of this project, a place that would become their home. We heard about the importance of this project, its needed be inclusive, to represent activism, their families, and the concept

of new lifestyles. Through a series of workshops, we asked them to think about space and scale, we gave them plans with to-scale furnishings they could move around and in another workshop we drew on the floor a full size layout of an apartment so they could test being in the space, seeing the door locations and kitchen location. They assisted the team in determining the size of the apartments and requested that the kitchen be moved toward the exterior window - near daylight - to support the idea of healthier eating. These exercises literally shaped the project in unexpected ways.

After multiple discussions on how to use the amount of space the project could afford - they jointly determined they wanted smaller apartments and larger community spaces. Places they could gather with other residents, their new family, their community. This request and the reshaping of the program impacted the size of the windows, the pattern language on the exterior of the building and ultimately, the way in which the residents would live and be in community.

To no one's surprise, the apartments were fully rented long before the building opened and still has a long waiting list. It was designed from the inside out, embracing the human element. The second example of designing from the inside out is CitizenM hotels, a Netherlands-based, global hotel developer, and their recently completed project in Seattle. Citizen M delivers on a specific guest experience - their guests want to be "in community" with other

guests. At times you might enter their lobby and feel you are arriving to a party, a lively community of travelers enjoying each other's company.

The check-in experience is quick, or you can bypass check-in entirely and use your smart phone to reserve, select, check-in and unlock your hotel room door. Citizen M also has an extremely specific hotel room that is identical at each location, around the globe. One size hotel room, with one king-size bed. Every room exactly the same. Every hotel room is about 7' in width and designed like a Swiss army knife, every part test and prototyped. They like to say the room has "nothing you don't need..." And each room is built, and entirely finished and furnished off site, packaged, shipped and installed like a big Lego building block. When the building is being constructed you can see each room being stacked.

As you might imagine, on projects like this every team member must be working hand in hand - engaged from the beginning - to deliver on their promise and the guest experience. The unique aspects of their hotels are their community spaces with 24/7 access to food, beverages, lounge spaces and community rooms. They attract travelers that seek to be in community with other travelers and their brand promise is proudly colorful, confident, and artsy.

And before CitizenM opens a property they celebrate local culture through a significant and meaningful art installation. For Seattle, they celebrated the diversity of their staff, their guests, their community by highlighting a large colorful portrait visible in every hotel room window.

Designing from the inside out to reflect the specific and unique user needs and requirements.

### **Design superpower #2 - Design memorable experiences**

The second design superpower is to design memorable experiences. In our Gensler research, we developed an experience design framework, which at its center has the user's intention. That user intention is surrounded by three components needed to support that user's intention; the design of their expectation (brand), to design the interaction (operations), and to design the physical space (architecture and interior design). When these three components are thoughtfully designed together, they positively impact behaviors and create memorable and impactful experiences.

Using the previous example of the CitizenM hotel, they market to and attract a specific type of traveler. They have designed a service model to support that traveler and the physical space has been designed to provide the traveler, their guest, and their staff, the spaces needed to deliver on that traveler experience. Their brand, their operational model and their physical spaces are intentionally designed together.

Gensler's newly designed Central Park house, a residential

high rise in Vancouver, Canada, was designed to give residents an urban experience with connection to nature and remarkable views.

The site is just steps away from their central park and rises 41 stories high. This residential building's intention is to be both grounded and elevated. Located about two-thirds up the tower is the Horizon Pavilion. Cantilevered off the building, it contains the multi-floor amenities, serving as a unique oasis for the residents and their guests. Designed to be lifted up and into the sky, at the horizon, it is the most visible and identifiable exterior design element. The ventilation of the building is designed in a way to create a constant flow of fresh air - a true luxury in urban environments.

And the building is grounded at the street level. A double height lobby welcomes residents home, providing a private sense of arrival, sheltered from the noise and bustle of the city. Inside, the resident apartments range in size from 400 square feet to 2,700 square feet, allowing for diversity in resident affordability and family size. Each apartment has floor to ceiling energy efficient glass and balconies that extend the living space into the surrounding landscape.

In a comparable manner, is the recently designed 55+ urban independent living project in Lancaster, Pennsylvania called Mosaic via Willow Valley. At 22 stories high, it will be the tallest building in Lancaster, with a two-story podium and 20 stories of residential units above. Inspired by hotel branding, operations and design, there is a porte cochere, a two-story arrival, a lobby restaurant, ballroom, spa, fitness center and residents tower bar.

All the public spaces have been designed to celebrate community and gathering, seeking to invite in people of all ages, understanding the importance of intergenerational engagements. The amenities do not seek to duplicate already successful local business in this urban neighborhood, but rather embrace the local businesses and provide different offerings that both residents and the public can enjoy.

The naming and branding of the spaces are intentionally developed from the historic and context of Lancaster County. Such as recalling the history of Lancaster being called the Red Rose City and roses being a symbol of connection, this is the foundation for the design and branding of the ballroom. The site for this building was previously a printing press - so the tower bar will be called Inkwell, providing legacy to the Lancaster County newspapers once delivered from this site.

This project was designed with a Gensler team with expertise in residential design, hospitality design, brand design, healthcare design and senior living design - to truly invent, with Willow Valley, a new product, a new living experience, which is authentic while building memorable experiences. Celebrating the significant role older adults play in the success of urban communities. Designed using all three components (brand, operations, and the physical

space) to create memorable living experiences.

### Design superpower #3 - Design for health

The last design superpower is to design for health. Given our knowledge in evidence-based design we know nature can impact health and wellness, as can designing for all our senses.

In designing the OhioHealth Neuroscience Wellness Center, our design sought to impact health in many ways. The first was for the building to literally sit “in” nature with all the fitness and training spaces being provided nature view. Views of nature can reduce blood pressure, encourage positivity, and support well-being. The building also serves as a beacon, a lantern of sorts, so you can easily find your way in those early morning or late afternoon visits. Inside the Neuroscience Wellness Center, natural light permeates all spaces. It snows in Ohio, so the corridors connecting the geriatric clinic, and the large rehab spaces also serve as a walking track - so movement can be supported in all four seasons. And by looking inward, into the central courtyard, the building also provides a place for staff to step outside and recharge between patient visits. Designing for staff health and wellness is a critical component in all facility types, especially healthcare.

Access to nature can also be designed into urban settings. In shaping and forming the Shirley Ryan Ability Lab, in Chicago, Illinois, the team placed the arrival of this large translational medicine facility on the seventh floor and connected the arrival to a sky level garden that wraps the building. This sky garden provides view of the Chicago skyline, and of lake Michigan.

The Shirley Ryan Ability Lab seeks to revolutionize rehabilitation medicine. There are six labs designed for the various rehabilitation focus, such as arms and hand. The interior is anything but sterile, using bright color and patterns to inspire and encourage movement. Their mission is to be the global source of science-driven breakthroughs in Human Ability and the

building was designed specifically to support the patients, their families, researchers, medical staff and visitors’ unique needs and aspirations. And when access or views to nature are not possible, by means of biophilic design one can use pattern, forms, and materials, that reconnect us to nature and to health. But designing for health extends beyond buildings and spaces support healing.

We integrate health into all our work - including aviation. We have been design partners with the San Francisco International Airport for over 40 years. The renovation of Terminal 2 included the expansion of locally sourced organic food, the integration of more daylight, and easy access to water stations throughout. Terminal 2 brought the first ever dedicated airport yoga room in North America. Throughout all areas of the airport the lights subtly change color to align with your circadian rhythms, to support the natural physical, mental, and behavioral changes we exhibit in a 24-hour cycle, and to reduce the impacts of jet lag. To summarize, designing for health can be applied to all project types, specifically those that can have a positive impact on older adults [1-2].

### Conclusion

When I say that design is a superpower, I mean it. Design from the inside out, design memorable experiences and design for health illustrate just three ways design can be used as a superpower. You too can use design as a superpower to make an impact in the Senior Living industry.

### Acknowledgements

Research was funded through the Gensler Research Institute

### References

1. Cindy Coleman, Tama Duffy Day, Michelle DeCurtis, Jeremy South-erland, Laura Latham, et al. (2023) Beyond Senior Living: Designing Communities for Inclusion, Gensler Research Institute, USA.
2. Tama Duffy Day, Kasia Maynard (2024) Why It’s Time to Reframe the Design Conversation Around Senior Living, Open Access Journal of Gerontology & Geriatric Medicine.



This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License  
DOI: [10.19080/OAJGGM.2024.08.555733](https://doi.org/10.19080/OAJGGM.2024.08.555733)

#### Your next submission with Juniper Publishers will reach you the below assets

- Quality Editorial service
- Swift Peer Review
- Reprints availability
- E-prints Service
- Manuscript Podcast for convenient understanding
- Global attainment for your research
- Manuscript accessibility in different formats  
( Pdf, E-pub, Full Text, Audio)
- Unceasing customer service

Track the below URL for one-step submission  
<https://juniperpublishers.com/online-submission.php>