



AIANY Design for Aging Committee

Testimony before the New York City Council Committee on Aging
June 18, 2014

The Design for Aging Committee of the AIA New York Chapter aims to increase public awareness of the needs of seniors in an urban environment, and to create an age-friendly New York City by promoting design that accommodates those needs.

We feel that the creation of a Senior Housing Task Force working to improve the city in ways that enable independent seniors to live safely and comfortably in their neighborhoods and apartments — i.e. to age in place — is an important tool in creating an age-friendly city.

Developing ways for seniors to easily negotiate their surroundings also facilitates the goal of universal design, creating an environment that better serves the needs of all age groups, thus helping to maintain the diverse neighborhoods that are key to the city's vitality.

For the past four years our committee has been exploring multiple issues of “aging in place” within a dense urban environment. While we certainly don't have all the answers, we've submitted a memo to the Council with a number of specific goals and suggestions, and I'd like to mention just a few of them now. We feel that they are consistent with the Mayor's recently announced housing plan, and would help New York's burgeoning senior population to remain active and engaged in their communities, thus aging with dignity:

Given that most of the city is fully built out, and that both sites and funding for new construction are limited, I'll start with two suggestions related to existing buildings.

First, because over half of the city's rental apartments are in walk-up buildings, and it is not feasible to make them all fully accessible, study ways to improve them incrementally in order to allow aging residents to remain safe and comfortable as long as possible. This might include development of a modestly priced “toolkit” (upgraded lighting, safer handrails, new grab bars, improved intercoms, etc) that could help private owners to easily upgrade their buildings.

Second, explore ways to incentivize building owners to allow elderly residents to move within their existing buildings and/or immediate neighborhoods, either to apartments on lower floors or to smaller units, without unaffordable rent increases.

With regard to both new and existing buildings, we encourage review of existing code provisions on handicapped accessibility with regard to better serving frail residents who are not necessarily wheelchair-bound and whose needs may change unpredictably as they age. We also encourage modifying existing zoning in low-density neighborhoods to allow for ‘granny’ units to be added, either in separate backyard buildings or incorporated into an existing house. And for new multi-family construction, consider modification of existing zoning such as the Quality Housing regulations, to incentivize senior-friendly elements in all new multi-family buildings: seating near elevators on all floors, small gathering places, hand-rails along corridors, power-assisted entry doors, etc.



Lastly, in all buildings, explore the use, development, and implementation of affordable technology that will allow home-bound seniors to communicate with their families and friends, as well as with their medical service providers. Can the innovative “virtual senior centers” that have been pioneered by some non-profit organizations be made available to a wider population?

Our Committee’s goals are similar to those of the Senior Housing Task Force. We look forward to working with the Task Force to facilitate our on-going service as a resource in achieving the goal of a more age-friendly environment in New York City.

Thank you very much for your consideration.

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