

Property developers' initiatives to help seniors age in place

BY JOTHAM LIM

Below: Examples of universal design concepts, such as larger spaces and lower furniture for wheelchair accessibility

With Malaysia set to become an ageing nation in the coming decade, demand for senior-friendly properties is expected to increase. This will have implications on the way homebuyers choose their properties, and how property developers design and plan their projects to cater for the growing silver-haired population.

As demand is expected to rise rapidly in the near future, more developers are introducing senior-friendly features and designs in their properties. Lum Tuck Ming, deputy managing director of the property development division of Sunway Bhd, says this is driven by a growing ageing population, strong urbanisation efforts and more consumer awareness.

"In addition, Malaysia is increasingly perceived as one of the world's best places to retire. Awareness surrounding senior-friendly features [in properties] will increase, and a larger proportion of the international community is expected to retire in Malaysia because of the relatively affordable properties, good weather and multicultural, multilingual society," says Lum.

"Property developers will be seen adding more senior-friendly features [in their properties] as a way to add value. These features will be either an add-on option or a mainstream offering."

Dato Azmir Merican, group managing director of Sime Darby Property Bhd, says the developer's multi-generational homes have received overwhelming support and seen outstanding take-up rates. He believes Malaysians are already leaning towards investing in properties that allow them to age in place.

"The term 'multi-generational' is being used more often among property developers and as a marketing tool. Clearly, developers are taking their cue from the market, understanding that there is strong demand for residential properties that allow seniors to age in place," he says.

Azmir noticed that, during the property selection process, Malaysian homebuyers are increasingly more sensitive to how senior-friendly a property is, preferring, for example, to have a bedroom on the ground floor for their ageing parents.

He points out that a main challenge that comes with ageing is the loss of mobility, which makes daily activities such as climbing stairs difficult. One way to address that is to provide seniors with a room on the ground floor with close access to community spaces such as the kitchen, living and dining room.

"In our 47 years in the property industry, we have studied and learnt from homebuyers in our older townships of Subang Jaya, Ara Damansara and Taman Melawati about the key aspects and features they require in their forever homes," Azmir says.

"Therefore, we have incorporated these needs into our newer townships of the City of Elmina, Bandar Bukit Raja and Sennia City."

He adds that local property developers play an essential role in pushing the "age in place" agenda to the relevant authorities: the housing ministry, local state councils, financial institutions, developers and consumers. The term is generally used to describe individuals who live in their chosen home for as long as they are able to.



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He says there are many ways to incentivise consumers to be interested in property developments aimed at allowing residents to age in place, such as awareness campaigns, housing price subsidies, low interest rates, income tax rebates and exemptions from stamp duty and instrument of transfer.

DEVELOPER INITIATIVES

While some property developers have begun to focus on purpose-built housing for seniors in the form of retirement villages, others have taken steps to accommodate this growing customer segment through smart township planning and universal design concepts suitable for all members of the family.

Universal design generally refers to the design and composition of an environment, so that it can be accessed, understood and used by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability.

Sunway's Lum says the developer addresses ageing in place on two different levels: within the home itself and in the community.

"At the home level, we incorporate





Community gardens and social activities are ways to keep the seniors active



An artist's impression of herb gardens at Iham Residence in Sime Darby Property's Elmina Grove

step-free access in places such as bathrooms, and have wide doorways that allow wheelchair access," he says.

"We are also careful with the choice of [floor] materials to reduce the chances of slips and falls. Our fittings and wares also take into consideration the ergonomics for people of all ages, such as the height of switches and sockets, and using levers instead of knobs for doors."

On the community level, Sunway has incorporated universal design concepts in its townships, such as covered walkways and link bridges that allow for safe and comfortable travel between buildings.

The developer has also installed lifts in strategic locations and accessibility ramps. Lum also notes that the sidewalks and pavements within the company's townships are built wider, and there are plenty of pedestrian crossings for the elderly and disabled.

According to Lum, studies have shown that most people want to live their retirement years in neighbourhoods that are safe and supportive of their overall health and well-being, with good access to amenities.

"Therefore, one of our priorities is to ensure that all our townships and integrated developments have easy access to healthcare in case of emergencies. We already have two hospitals in Sunway City and Sunway Velocity, and we intend to build five hospitals in our developments across the country," says Lum.

"Second, we keep the environment safe by having many closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras in the common areas. In Sunway City, we even provide surveillance in many public areas, which is supplemented by an auxiliary police force of 800 personnel who patrol our development and deter petty crime such as snatch thefts."

Similarly, Sime Darby Property adopts smart township planning and universal design concepts in its projects, says Azmir.

In 2019, the company introduced its "multi-generational community living" concept with its pilot project, Iham Residence, in the City of Elmina.

The 513 units in the project have four design layouts, each individually curated for each gen-

eration to live in the same neighbourhood. It ranges from properties with entry-level prices and flexible design layouts for starter families, to properties with dual-key layouts, ramped access points and an unobstructed ground floor aimed at assisting seniors.

The developer's Bandar Bukit Raja township also has hospitals, providing seniors with easy access to medical facilities. There are ramps and marked pedestrian pathways in its town parks and commercial centres.

Azmir explains that taking senior needs and wants into consideration is crucial when planning a township. The developer has studied a senior's typical day and considered what it can do to make basic living easier for them.

"Design parameters such as low hazards, minimum physical effort requirement, usage convenience, flexibility in use and a good line of sight are critical when it comes to designing a home to meet seniors' daily needs," he says.

Gamuda Land Sdn Bhd aims to develop townships that cater for all demographics rather than specialise in the senior segment, says chief operating officer Aw Sei Cheh. Still, seniors can benefit from the developer's strategic town planning and property layout design, he adds.

"As a town-maker, we carefully plan and design our land to include places that enhance our community's quality of life. This includes a spectrum of home types for the needs of different people, such as starter homes or apartments for singles or independent seniors looking to downsize," says Aw.

"We also have multi-generational homes for families or link houses for young married couples. There is not a single type of property that specially caters for senior living, as we believe it depends largely on the person's lifestyle."

Aw cites, for example, Gamuda's latest township, twentyfive.7, which is being developed. It has landed properties with a dual-key layout. The lower floor is outfitted with a studio unit complete with a kitchenette, bedroom, bathroom and living area suitable for seniors, while the upper floors consist of a two-storey unit that accommodates a family of five. Aw says such an arrangement is ideal for families living with their elderly parents.

Another Gamuda Land township — Gamuda Cove — is located beside the 1,111-acre Papa Indah Discovery Wetlands, where residents have easy access to outdoor activities such as hiking, trekking, horseback riding, animal viewing and bird watching. Aw says the township's strategic location and better air quality can help seniors maintain a healthy and active lifestyle.

Gamuda Land refurbished and upgraded its clubhouse in Jade Hills earlier this year and hosted community activities such as photography, cooking and swimming classes.

"The phrase 'senior living' normally conjures up images of assisted living, which may not be very relevant to the current population.

Retirement villages in Malaysia

Apart from properties designed to allow residents to age in place, there are also options such as retirement villages that enable seniors to lead productive lives.

Unlike senior care centres or retirement homes, a retirement village is a residential community or housing complex designed for seniors who are generally able to live independently and care for themselves. Assistance from home care agencies and basic medical facilities is allowed in some communities, however, and social activities and opportunities are often provided.

Residents of retirement villages generally have the freedom to enjoy their own lifestyle without needing to adhere to a strict diet or schedule.

According to a 2018 study by Universiti Putra Malaysia, the retirement village market in Malaysia is still considered a blue ocean, owing to the low supply compared with other types of property.

The study also states that demand for retirement villages in Malaysia is steadily increasing because of the changing lifestyle of seniors, who are becoming more independent.

Examples of retirement villages in Malaysia are the 100m-based Green Acres and Eden-on-the-Park in Seremban.

Green Acres completed its first phase of development in 2016 and is the first of its kind in Peninsular Malaysia. It offers 177 units for residents aged above 55, and occupies a 13-acre site surrounded by the rolling limestone hills of the Kota Valley.

The homes are located in a gated and guarded community, and incorporate universal design concepts such as wider doors, well-positioned light switches and an emergency call system.

According to its website, Eden-on-the-Park is the first active senior living resort that has an integrated aged care facility in Malaysia. The eight-acre development features 104 luxury apartment suites and 14 bungalow villas. It is adjacent to the aged care facility, which has 71 rooms.

Eden-on-the-Park has access to a golf course, jungle track, hobbyist garden and gymnasium. The resort provides housekeeping service and conducts regular activities and health programmes for residents.

The aged care facility is for less independent seniors in need of nursing services. There are flexible care options, ranging from long-term residential care to short-term day-care services.

Research has shown that our seniors now live a more active lifestyle and have a more positive outlook on the quality of their life," says Aw.

"So, our masterplan design mindfully takes into consideration not only the home but also the community spaces, where the seniors can partake in activities that enhance their quality of life...[by] enjoying a carefree lifestyle in their golden years, living a more active lifestyle and pursuing their personal interests compared with their mid-life."



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