

Not-So-Big' Home Meets Needs of Today's Active Adult Buyers

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To understand the active adult market, it is important to look at what this particular market doesn't want.

Active adults have had it with big yards, but are used to privacy. They are tired of high utility bills, but like natural light. They don't use the entire house they now have, but want to keep most of their things. They don't want stairs of any type, but still want space.

What they do want is the "not-so-big" (NSB) active adult home - a compact, yet well-designed floorplan that meets buyers' needs without exceeding the necessary space requirements. As designers and builders, we have our work cut out for us.

Actual square footage is not as crucial as the efficient use of space and meeting seniors' demands. When designed properly, 1,500-2,000 square feet (with optional expanded space) should handle the needs of most of this market.

Forty-Foot Building Widths Are Ideal

A 40-foot building width is an ideal starting point. It allows for the efficient integration of a front-loaded, two-car garage, a front entry and living space - generally a living room or bedroom suite.

Anything wider than 40 feet will not add much more efficiency or flexibility until you reach the 50-foot mark. That width enables you to design a vastly different home.

Keep in mind that designing a house under 40 feet wide with a front-loaded, two-car garage can cause problems. Design-wise, the narrower width forces front entries to open directly into living space. An alternative solution is to have a side-entry.

If your lot size dictates a width narrower than 40 feet, consider designing a home with a one-car garage. Most active adults do have two cars when they move into their new home or community, but soon end up with just one car. For the NSB house, this would work just fine.

Side Entries Can Work - With the Right Design Touches

Many buyers prefer front entries, which provide identity and security and eliminate the need to walk down a narrow side yard past the neighbors' blank wall.

Because an NSB house may be narrower than the traditional home, a side entry is an effective architectural solution. A side entry design brings residents and guests into the middle of the home. It also lessens the long, narrow look of the house.

If a side entry is your only alternative, consider putting an entry porch on the side, a trellis between houses or, better yet, an angled side entry - an appealing compromise.

The Right Bedroom Placement Will Broaden Your Market Appeal

Active adult buyers generally want bedrooms on the first level. Keeping the master bedroom on the first level and putting additional bedrooms upstairs will attract not only a senior buyer, but also a younger senior buyer (the so-called "junior senior").

However, putting two bedrooms on the first level assures you of an even broader market. An optional second level can be used as a den/loft/guest bedroom, office, television room, retreat or just storage space - all options the active adult considers for his or her individual lifestyle.

De-emphasize the Garage

The front-loading garage still seems to be the market preference, but don't let the garage dominate the streetscape. The NSB home buyer isn't looking for a garage with a house attached to it.

Try these tips to de-emphasize the front-loading garage:

- Pull the garage back six to 12 feet from the face of the home or front porch.
- Recess the garage door.
- Add a trellis over the garage door.
- Use "designer" garage doors.
- Use architectural elements (i.e., dormers, second-story room, etc.) to pull the eye away from the garage door.

A more radical solution is to use an alley scheme with the garage in the back. In this scenario, the garage disappears completely, providing unlimited porch opportunities in the front of the house. This design, however, pushes many rooms to the front and diminishes the use of a rear patio or sunroom.

This can become a problem when the home's width dictates that the master suite is at the front (not the most desirable location). However, the neo-traditional movement is making inroads into seniors housing, and the benefits of living toward the street and the creation of a true "neighborhood" have many advantages.

Great Room vs. Formal Living Room? Offer Variety

The NSB house can't be everything - at least not in one model. The solution is to offer variety - a great room plan and a formal living room plan, the details will make either of these house plans work - and allow buyers to make the decision.

The NSB house incorporates windows to visually expand the limited square footage and admit the natural light many active adult buyers desire. However, the designer should be cautious about furniture placement: if buyers are moving within the same geographic area, they probably will bring plenty of "heirlooms" with them. The designer should offer ample space for these items.

Other useful design features are high windows that furniture can go beneath, or split windows that furniture can go between. Consider windows under kitchen cabinets, windows over bathroom mirrors, transoms over windows and even transoms over inside doors to admit more natural light.

Offer Plenty of Lifestyle Choices

Adult buyers, especially the boomers, are accustomed to choices. While the builder can offer sunrooms, second-floor space, different kitchen and bath packages, and color choices, it's essential to go a step further and offer your buyer a variety of lifestyles.

One model should offer conservative, more defined rooms for more mainstream buyers, while the others can be more creative. Bear in mind that the next generation of active adults increasingly will demand more exciting space, including a range of ceiling heights, lots of windows, open plans, home offices, workshops, greenhouses, decks, terraces, hot tubs, landscape packages and gourmet kitchens. In other words, they are looking for quality.

Build in Lots of Storage

Most active adult buyers prefer to store belongings rather than throw them away. Designers must look for every opportunity to create storage. Forget the pull-down stairs to attic storage. Basements aren't ideal either - they add stairs and a possibly undesirable storage climate.

It's important to be innovative with storage solutions. This means allotting storage under the stairs when there is no basement and providing kitchen cabinets in the laundry room and garage. Also consider including oversized linen closets, garages and actual storage rooms to overcome the storage issue.

Garage space, preferably a defined additional storage area, works well. If you are offering second-floor rooms with a "real" stair, then a door into the attic is fine.

Porches Are Becoming More Popular

While sunrooms remain a popular option, porches are becoming an important design element. They add an inviting image, and if useable - preferably eight feet wide - and not merely decorative, they add certain vitality to the street and the community. The screened porch on the back of the house adds real living space to the home. It's also an easy option for a sunroom enclosure.

While the rear sunroom is highly desirable, another approach is to add a front sunroom - the old "enclosed porch." Properly detailed to blend with the home's architecture, the front sunroom can add architectural interest, bring living space to the street and serve a double function as a den, TV room or office.

Keep in mind that an extra room in the NSB house is a definite marketing plus.

Make the Home Adaptable

Keep in mind that active adults think they are 10 years younger than they really are. The NSB home should be designed to allow for aging-in-place without shouting it. Larger house numbers, lighted doorbells and accessible front entries all enhance livability without taking up valuable space or significantly increasing costs.

The builder should pay attention to heights of switches and controls. Designing wider hallways (three feet, four inches) and doorways (two feet, 10 inches) and offering at least one accessible bath (even though not required in a single-family home) extends the livability of the home for all residents regardless of their age or ability.

Get familiar with the Fair Housing Act and basic universal design guidelines. Use them in conjunction with creative design to "hide" the adaptability of the NSB active adult home.

Active Adult Market Is Open to Builders of All Sizes

Boomers are rapidly approaching active adult status, but they are approaching active adult home buying with different requirements. While the large active adult community continues to be popular with many buyers, there will be an increasing demand for smaller infill-type senior communities. This opens up the market to builders of all sizes, especially in urban and many suburban markets.

The new "senior" buyers will be looking for a different home. They want:

- Carefree exterior maintenance, but not at the cost of elegant design
- A downsized home, but with larger rooms
- Community character and a sense of place (not the traditional "subdivision" feel)
- Energy-efficient, but with lots of glass
- Offices at home, not crafts at the clubhouse
- Individualized homes
- No yard, but plenty of privacy

The NSB house has to meet all the criteria that a 3,000-square-foot home does. A deeper understanding of the active adult buyers' needs, not to mention good design, can help you meet this challenge.