

Assisted Living

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FEATURE STORY

While tight funds can prove challenging when revamping outdated or dilapidated spaces, beautiful assisted living communities can be had on even shoestring budgets

Champagne taste

BY JULIE E. WILLIAMSON

Sooner or later, every seniors housing community faces aging construction, uninspired design and tired décor. This often leaves budget-conscious operators wondering how best to divvy design dollars to make the biggest impact – without breaking the bank.

While tight funds can prove challenging when revamping outdated or dilapidated spaces, beautiful assisted living communities can be had on even shoestring budgets. The secret to making facilities the toast of the town? Advanced planning, effective prioritizing and a cache of creativity, experts say.

"Today's assisted living owners and designers are under continual pressure to do more with less. Every dollar spent needs to work even harder to show a favorable return on investment," says Jim McLain, general manager, C/S Eldercare Interiors. "Achieving the desired look and finding products that can stand the test of time is critical."

PINPOINTING PRIORITIES

Operators often question whether they should focus their attention on common areas or residences. Each facility is unique and certain areas will understandably command a larger portion of the budget. If a facility caters to rehab residents, for example, operators may want to make residents' private spaces a priority, for example. In memory care units where resident socialization is actively promoted, it may be more important to focus attention on common areas. Either way, though, designers stress that neither residences nor common areas should be neglected.

Before earmarking design dollars – and especially before making any



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purchases – attaining feedback from all stakeholders is essential. "Getting this input is valuable for prioritizing where and how the design budget will be allocated. Without that, you can easily lose focus and your budget can spin out of control," says interior designer Ebonye Bachman of Moonlight Interiors. Safety and code issues should always be addressed first, she reasons. "From there, you can assess which areas would benefit most from an updated look or new features to better meet residents' needs."

Paying more for contract-grade seating almost always saves operators big money in the end, design experts agree. Many operators are enticed by consumer-grade furnishings' lower price, but if seating is placed in well-used common areas, premature replacement will be a near certainty.

"High quality, healthcare-grade furniture will have reinforced frames that can stand up to heavy use," notes Sherry Gaumond, director of design for Larson & Darby Group. "I've seen facilities make the mistake of skimping on their seating budget, only to find the frames racking and a complete replacement needed after a year-and-a-half."

Sofas, love seats and chairs should feature dense foam, raised seat height, and durable, washable fabric that holds up against stains and moisture. As long as furniture frames are well constructed and durable, facilities can get many years out of them by simply swapping out fabric styles and patterns, Bachman says.

When budgeting for resident rooms, beds should take center stage. Gaumond sees value in stan-

dardizing beds. Aside from driving down purchase price, this can make furniture rearranging easier. "You don't have to get a bed with all the bells and whistles, but you do need to make sure it's a quality model that will last," adds Bachman. "It will likely be used by more residents than just the person using it today."

Most resident beds come with headboards and footboards integrated with frames, and many are offered in various faux wood finishes to match surrounding furnishings.

'LUX' LOOKS FOR LESS

Although quality furnishings should always be sought, that doesn't mean luxurious-looking accessories should fall by the wayside when budgets are slim. On the contrary, creative layering of accessories – many of which can be purchased at discount consumer stores – is one of the easiest and most cost-effective ways to punch up a space.

"Little details matter and, typically, there's nothing about accessories that makes them contract," says Catherine Richardson, design consultant for Direct Supply Aptura. This means facilities can take advantage of inexpensive or mid-range finds for artwork, lamps, lampshades, and other decorative pieces. Facilities looking to create a more updated, trendy and welcoming lobby can get good attention from installing a coffee bar. It's a relatively inexpensive way to make a big impact, adds Chris Morgan, healthcare renovations national account manager for HD Supply Facilities Maintenance.

Murals make attractive artwork and can now be inexpensively purchased at home goods stores, such as Pottery Barn, says Richardson, adding that they can also be easily

removed. Commissioning local art students for artwork – or design students for building shelves or other accessories – can be a low- or no-cost solution for low-budget facilities. “You can also ask children to provide artwork and then frame it,” notes Bachman. “This really incorporates community and makes a space more personal.”

Window dressings don't have to cost a bundle, either. Although Bachman urges facilities to pick premium functional coverings, such as blinds and shutters, she says residential-grade soft accents and decorative panels can work well for facilities with limited budgets. “These are there for looks, so they don't have to be made of custom-made fabrics.”

“We've seen many resident rooms transformed into beautiful, comfortable living spaces with just a few dollars spent.”

Jim McLain, C/S Eldercare Interiors

A big effect can be made with simple wall covering changes, too. Designers see paint as one of the least expensive, yet high-impact products available, allowing facilities to instantly update a look with the stroke of a brush. One easy way to save, according to Morgan, is to “remove wallpaper, skim coat walls with a light texture and then paint with a semi-gloss or eggshell finish.” If designer wallcoverings are preferred, Richardson suggests limiting it to a focal wall.

LOOK OUT BELOW

Don't forget the flooring, either. Gaumont says one of the most high-impact, budget-conscious changes she witnessed was when a facility swapped its high-maintenance, high-glare VCT flooring with homey, durable and low-maintenance

wood grain sheet vinyl. “This was a county facility, so we really had to be careful with money. That meant we also had to factor in maintenance expenses,” she says. High-impact, wood grain wall protection with integrated handrails further added to the warm design aesthetics, while maximizing safety.

Dining areas deserve design attention, too, but they can chew up a budget if operators aren't careful. Again, quality seating and fabrics are

critical, but operators can opt for value-priced table bases. “They're often hidden by tablecloths or chairs,” Richardson reminds.

ROOMS WITH A VIEW

Resident bedrooms can get a quick and inexpensive update with decorative headwalls. “We're finding many designers are incorporating matching full- or wainscot-height wall systems that improve design aesthetics and offer protection of

wall surfaces,” McLain explained.

Some facilities, he adds, are choosing headwall options that create a high-end hospitality look, while others are opting for warmer, more residential appearances. Either way, it's a look that doesn't cost much and can be installed even by do-it-yourselfers. “These systems surprise owners by how easy they are to install and how affordable they can be to design and specify,” McLain explains. “We've seen many resident

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rooms transformed into beautiful, comfortable living spaces with just a few dollars spent."

Bedding can offer a budget-friendly boost, but only if key factors aren't overlooked. Facilities don't need \$300 bedspreads. Non-quilted options can cost about one-third less, according to Richardson. Still, she warns that any bedding chosen must be able to withstand high washing temperatures. "Very inexpensive bed-

ding may not hold up, and having to replace it quickly winds up costing much more in the end."

Bathrooms can offer big bang for the buck. Sources agree that the key is sticking with more timeless and durable designs, like easy-to-maintain subway tile to accent walls, and porcelain floor tiles that are color-through, so white glazing won't be seen when chipped. Many experts are seeing a steady push for spa-like

bathing areas complete with inviting décor and soothing lighting, such as wall sconces on dimmer switches instead of fluorescent ceiling lights.

"Today, it's not just about taking a bath or shower. Residents want a true bathing experience," says Lee Penner, owner of Penner Manufacturing.

Bathing areas should be spacious—or, in the very least, carefully laid out to allow for safe access and

mobility by residents and staff. If done right, revamped bathing areas will be money well spent because they'll serve as an effective marketing tool for drawing in prospective residents, designers note.

With proper planning and careful execution, the same can be said of virtually every reworked space. "You can definitely create a 'wow' space with relatively little investment. It's just knowing where to invest and where you might be able to safely cut some corners without sacrificing quality," Bachman reasons. "Marrying those two is what brings success." ■

Maintenance Matters

Don't have money for a hefty design overhaul? Design pros offer their top tricks for keeping existing furnishings and design functional longer.

- Reuse or repurpose existing furniture, and consider moving it to a new location to keep things fresh. Touch up end tables with stain sticks. Replace lamp shades and clean silk plants. Clean and stain wood handrails in corridors. In resident rooms, reface cabinets or replace hardware.
 - **Chris Morgan**, healthcare renovations national account manager for HD Supply Facilities Maintenance
- Continuously conduct maintenance rounds, assessing paint, wall scuffs and other signs of normal wear and tear. Taking a photo of a room can help you spot things that might be missed with the naked eye (i.e., crooked artwork, damaged furniture, stained fabric).
 - **Sherry Gaumont**, director of design, Larson & Darby Group
- Cleanliness counts. Do your best to keep common areas spotless, odorless and inviting. This is one of the best ways to make a good first impression.
 - **Ebonee Bachman**, interior designer, Moonlight Interiors