

Aging at home and the New Urbanism

Former Secretary of HUD Henry Cisneros supports CNU's FHA, Fannie, and Freddie Reform Initiative

[cnu](#) [community](#) [walking](#)

CNU, New Urban News

Issue Date: Sat, 2011-10-01

Page Number: 19

In my work as Mayor of San Antonio, I first noticed the characteristics of neighborhoods in which most of the residents were facing the challenges of age and the housing stock was older. It struck me then that such neighborhoods required specific attention, but it was not until years later that I discovered how significant the challenge of an aging population is for the nation. This realization led to my current work on a project co-sponsored by [Center for Longevity at](#) Stanford University, which focuses on the housing and community issues faced by the nearly 90 percent of older Americans who will stay home as they age.

The central assertion of this project is that we as a nation need to examine the ways that we can modify or build homes and communities to support aging in place for an unprecedented number of older Americans. In the course of my research, I have found that there is a wonderful convergence between New Urbanism and the challenge of providing housing for aging Americans.

Much of our present built environment is a poor fit in a nation where so many people are aging. Today, 70 percent of Americans older than 65 live in single-family detached homes and many need modifications for aging residents. For years, city officials and remodeling contractors have organized and certified renovation packages in order to “weatherize” homes. The need to make existing homes more suitable for older persons should prompt a similar approach to create “life span homes.”

New homes that are appropriate for older persons are also in demand. A 2002 report by the [National Association of Home Builders](#) indicates that 31 percent of home buyers 55 and older would seriously consider buying town homes, duplexes and multi-family condo units. As a society we need to produce more housing that is of smaller scale, affordably priced, and located in walkable communities.

Adapting communities

Beyond the suitability of individual homes, it is necessary to adapt entire existing communities for older residents. City planners refer to the growing concentration of older people in existing communities as NORCs, for Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities. Such seemingly unchangeable barriers as the age of the housing stock and distance from necessary stores and services can be overcome with an intentionally designed overlay of community services.

Henry Cisneros



Courtesy of CNU

Admittedly, it is difficult to place new communities of major scale composed of homes for older persons in built-up urban environments, although the recycling of obsolete areas is happening in cities of all sizes. However, there is immense potential for newly-designed retirement communities in the less dense first-ring suburbs and in the green-grass ex-urbs.

One of the most important breakthroughs in the community building field over the last years has been the work of the architects and planners known as the New Urbanists. Their efforts have advanced Smart Growth principles which are highly applicable to the creation of communities for older Americans.

In [*The Smart Growth Manual*](#), New Urbanist authors Andres Duany, Jeff Speck, and Mike Lydon describe regional planning as essential because it addresses the “true scale of people’s lives.” It is clear that many essential support systems for aging Americans must be planned regionally. For example, a truly effective van transportation system for older people should be a part of a regional transit agency, tied to other forms of mass transit.

Neighborhood impact

At the neighborhood level, *The Smart Growth Manual* considers the size and organization of urban neighborhoods, which have direct implications for older people living at home. In order to make it possible for older residents to walk to essential services, a neighborhood must include a mix of homes, retail stores, eating and recreation sites, and public gathering places.

The New Urbanism’s [form-based code](#) provides guidance at the level of the individual building unit or home. It stresses designing and locating dwelling units so that the community has a mix of types and price points, which grants older persons the freedom to choose from a variety of housing options.

One housing innovation for aging residents who wish to continue working in a small self-employed setting is the live/work flex house, a dwelling that includes a workspace. These mixed uses create places where older persons can comfortably pursue careers well into their advanced years.

I think one of the dominant forms of urban development going forward is going to be mixed-use. It will be economically successful, it will enhance communities, and it will promote walkability and the New Urbanist principles. I believe that we should encourage mixed-use communities and scrub the Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, and FHA guidelines for any impediments that would keep us from building to New Urbanist principles.

As our country recognizes the growth of its senior population, it is important that we plan and build our homes and communities accordingly. Because of their influence in determining what mortgages are made, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac should establish priorities related to age-appropriate housing built on New Urbanist principles. In so doing, they would stimulate interest on the part of the lending sector and make it possible for builders to provide that housing.

This is not a matter of creating homes for our seniors as acts of obligation. By enhancing the quality of life for aging Americans, we will reap the benefits of their wisdom and experience at a time when our society needs every citizen to be as productive as possible.

Henry Cisneros is the Executive Chairman of [CityView](#), the former Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the former mayor of San Antonio.

Posted by Drew on 13 Oct 2011

Comments

[Break the chains](#)

Submitted by Denise Zurn (not verified) on Fri, 2011-10-14 11:09.

Great ideas are limited by federal regulations; this issue is inherent in processes that depend on the federal government. So get rid of the federal government role, and let the markets be the focus. Lenders, city planners, and developers are more than capable of understanding the senior market. Urban design professionals are great at educating those key players in new concepts. Won't miss the feds at all...