

Designing for the Elderly-Real Estate Tech, January 1997.

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It is a global trend for most developed economies and urban areas to see an increase in both the number and percentage of elderly people (those aged over 65) due to generally better medical and social care in addition to the prospective aging of the baby-boomers. Not only do they live longer, they are also healthier and lead a more active lifestyle than their counterparts in the 1960s or 1970s. Notwithstanding the foregoing, as people grow old, they tend not to see and hear as well as they had before, or may not be able to react/respond as quickly as before. Unfortunately, many of today's products such as televisions/radios and their remotes, books, road signs etc to name a few, including buildings and all accessories included within them, are not designed with the elderly in mind. However, the situation could easily be remedied if a bit more care and creativity/imagination could be thrown into the formula. The following are just some of the building items which may concern architects and real estate developers/owners:

(A) Easy To Spot Building Name or Address: perhaps many of us have had the experience of trying to locate a particular address/building and found ourselves over-shot thus having to turn back. Many building numbers or addresses are apparently non-existent and for those that do exist, they are very subtly displayed. Even youngsters would have trouble spotting them let alone the elderly.

(B) Easy To Recognize and Properly Sequenced Push-Buttons in the Lifts/Elevators : while many are designed with a touch of flair with designer graphics or lettering, they tend to be small in size or “fancily” sequenced. “Open” and “Close” may be user-friendlier than some “arrows”. A large button with a dark background and a bright-colour digit (or vice versa) could be better perceived than a stainless steel button with engraved digits. An automatic narrative voice-over informing the riders of the floor level reached is a useful tool as well.

(C) Properly Sized and Placed Building Directional Signs, Door Signs, etc : occasionally it seems that designers get carried away and while there is a systemic colouring system or lettering sequence, the signs are in many instances poorly located or the size of the sign and message is such that one would have to walk up to it before he/she realises he/she is in

the wrong section of the building. Perhaps some designers should pull themselves away from their drafting tables/computer screens and view their graphics from the intended viewing distance, not 2 feet from the table or screen. Also, one needs to pay attention to not putting building signs right behind a beam or bulkhead as the purpose of the sign would have been defeated.

Assisting the elderly in their daily endeavours is not only a virtue in itself, it is also a commercial necessity in that not only their numbers would increase in the next 10 to 20 years, their economic influence would rise proportionately as well. Those who cater to their needs and lifestyles with care and kind consideration would not only be serving them and thereby deserving their patronage, but would also be benefiting themselves as well.