Making communities accessible for older residents

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A s baby boomers grow older, city planners, developers and boomers themselves are starting to assess ways to make neighborhoods more accessible and welcoming for those who are growing older. Pauline Abbott, director of Cal State Fullerton’s Institute for Gerontology, recently co-edited a forthcoming book, “Re-creating Neighborhoods for Successful Aging,” that draws from the fields of gerontology, health sciences, community planning, landscape architecture and environmental design to explore ways to make communities safer and more friendly to populations that are growing older.

“There are many things that communities can do when they’re designing neighborhoods that allow people to ‘age in place,’” she said. “That may mean things like making doorways wider in homes so that wheelchairs — and strollers — can easily pass through them.

“We also encourage builders, when designing homes, to make sure that at least one bedroom and bathroom are on the first floor,” she continued. “We usually see two-story homes with all the bedrooms upstairs. Navigating stairs can be difficult for seniors and small children. That’s why we recommend that at least one bedroom is located on the ground floor. And no sunken living rooms or rooms on different levels.”

Recently, Abbott, two architects and a group of senior citizens met with a group of gerontology students and faculty to review plans for a city park. The students discovered that citizens met with a group of gerontology students and faculty to review plans for a city park. The students discovered that the farther you drive to work, the more likely you are to gain weight,” said Abbott. “Creating neighborhoods where you can walk to work helps the environment and your health, and builds a sense of community.”

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Many architects are convinced that these “old world” principles are key to creating supportive neighborhoods.

Another option is a senior community, like Morningside in Fullerton, that offers aging boomers an option to maintain an active lifestyle with access to healthcare and home health services as they become necessary, social activities and programs that many senior citizens enjoy.

“Some enjoy living in age-segregated communities,” Abbott said. “But we also find many who would prefer to live independently in their own homes. For that reason, we need to consider how we are building and developing neighborhoods.”