



The Owner's Guide to Senior Living Construction

Independent Living | Assisted Living | Memory Care | Skilled Nursing | CCRC

Planning Communities for Residents, Operators, & Long-Term Value

Senior living construction requires more than building attractive residential spaces. These communities must support comfort, safety, wellness, care delivery, operational efficiency and long-term financial performance, often within a single campus.

From independent living and assisted living to memory care, skilled nursing and continuing care retirement communities, every senior living project brings a unique mix of residential, healthcare, hospitality and operational requirements. Owners, operators and developers need facilities that feel welcoming to residents and families while also functioning efficiently for caregivers, staff and service teams.

At ARCO National Construction, our collaborative approach aligns planning, budgeting and construction from the beginning of the project lifecycle, helping senior living projects move forward with greater certainty while meeting the specialized requirements of this growing sector.





Building Senior Living Communities for Today's **Operators and Residents**

Senior living communities are evolving. Today's residents expect more than a place to live; they expect comfort, dignity, independence, wellness, connection and access to amenities that support an active lifestyle. At the same time, operators need buildings that support efficient staffing, smooth daily workflows, durable materials, reliable systems and long-term adaptability.

That balance makes senior living construction uniquely complex.

A successful community must account for resident experience, care requirements, operating costs, regulatory standards, future expansion and market demand. Decisions made during early planning can influence everything from staff circulation and unit mix to amenity placement, technology infrastructure, project budget and long-term performance.

For owners and developers, that means construction success starts long before groundbreaking. Early collaboration with a contractor can help identify cost drivers, evaluate constructability, coordinate with design teams and align the project with both business goals and operational needs.

Whether the project is a new independent living community, an assisted living facility, a memory care residence, a skilled nursing facility or a larger continuum-of-care campus, thoughtful planning is critical.



What Makes Senior Living Construction Different

Senior living construction sits at the intersection of residential, healthcare, hospitality and commercial construction. While these communities may include apartments, dining rooms, fitness centers and outdoor gathering spaces, they also require specialized planning for safety, accessibility, care delivery and operational performance.

Unlike traditional multifamily housing, senior living communities support aging residents with varying levels of independence and care. Design and construction decisions must account for mobility, fall prevention, wayfinding, medical support, emergency response, caregiver access and life safety systems. At the same time, the building should feel warm, residential and hospitality-driven rather than institutional.

Several factors make senior living construction unique.

Resident Safety and Accessibility

Accessibility is foundational to senior living construction. Hallways, entrances, resident units, bathrooms, common areas and outdoor spaces must be designed with mobility in mind. Communities may need to accommodate walkers, wheelchairs, scooters, medical equipment and residents with limited vision or cognitive impairment.

Safety also extends beyond code compliance. Thoughtful layouts, intuitive circulation, appropriate lighting, slip-resistant surfaces, secure outdoor areas and clear sightlines can all support resident independence while reducing risk.

Healthcare-Ready Infrastructure

Depending on the project type, senior living communities may require nurse call systems, emergency response technology, medication rooms, therapy spaces, medical gas coordination, infection control considerations, specialized MEP systems, backup power strategies and other healthcare-supporting infrastructure.

These systems must be coordinated early to integrate cleanly with the building design and support daily operations once the community opens.

Hospitality-Inspired Environments

Senior living communities also carry hospitality expectations. Residents and families look for spaces that feel comfortable, engaging and elevated. Dining areas, bistros, salons, theaters, wellness centers, pools, fitness rooms, outdoor kitchens and walking trails can all influence the appeal of a community.

For construction teams, these spaces introduce added complexity. Amenity-rich environments require careful coordination of finishes, building systems, acoustics,

Staff Workflow and Operational Efficiency

A senior living building must work well for the people operating it every day. Staff circulation, service routes, care stations, laundry, kitchens, storage areas, waste handling, maintenance access and back-of-house spaces all affect operating efficiency.

When workflow is considered early, owners can create communities that support staff productivity while preserving a comfortable, residential experience for residents and visitors.

Operational Continuity and Long-Term Value

Senior living communities are long-term assets. Owners must consider how the building will perform over time, how it may need to expand, and how future resident needs or market demands could change. Flexible planning, durable materials, efficient systems and thoughtful infrastructure decisions can help protect long-term value.



Senior Living Project Types

Independent Living

Independent living communities are designed for older adults who want a maintenance-free lifestyle with access to services, amenities and social opportunities. These projects often resemble high-end multifamily or hospitality environments, with private residences supported by dining, wellness, entertainment and gathering spaces.

Construction considerations often include unit mix, amenity placement, parking, outdoor access, acoustics, finish durability, efficient circulation and community spaces that encourage connection. Because residents are typically active and independent, the building should balance accessibility with lifestyle appeal.



Senior Living Project Types

Assisted Living

Assisted living communities support residents who need help with daily activities while still maintaining as much independence as possible. These projects require a more careful balance between residential comfort and care delivery.

Construction considerations may include accessible resident units, caregiver access, emergency response systems, dining and activity spaces, medication support, staff work areas, service circulation and life safety requirements. The building must feel welcoming while allowing staff to provide assistance efficiently and discreetly.



Senior Living Project Types

Memory Care

Memory care communities are designed for residents living with Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia. These environments require specialized planning to support safety, comfort, orientation and routine.

Construction considerations may include secure entries and exits, intuitive layouts, controlled outdoor access, calming finishes, simple wayfinding, enclosed courtyards, staff visibility and spaces that reduce confusion or overstimulation. The goal is to create a safe, supportive environment that protects residents while preserving dignity and quality of life.



Senior Living Project Types

Skilled Nursing

Skilled nursing facilities provide higher-acuity care, rehabilitation and medical support in a residential setting. These projects require more robust infrastructure and closer alignment with healthcare operations.

Construction considerations often include therapy spaces, nurse stations, medical support areas, commercial kitchens, life safety systems, infection control, durable finishes, accessibility, specialized MEP systems and regulatory coordination. Because these facilities support more intensive care, early coordination between the owner, operator, design team and construction partner is especially important.



Senior Living Project Types

Continuing Care Retirement Communities

Continuing care retirement communities, or CCRCs, provide multiple levels of care within a single campus. Residents may move from independent living to assisted living, memory care or skilled nursing as their needs change.

Construction considerations include campus planning, shared amenities, phased development, infrastructure capacity, resident circulation, service access and long-term flexibility. These projects require a big-picture approach because each part of the campus must function independently while supporting the overall continuum of care.





Planning for the **Continuum of Care**

One of the most important considerations in senior living construction is the continuum of care. A community that supports multiple care levels can help residents remain connected to the same campus while receiving the appropriate level of support over time.

Planning for the continuum of care requires owners to think beyond the first phase of construction. Even if a project begins as independent living or assisted living, future expansion may include memory care, skilled nursing, additional residential units or new amenity spaces.

Flexible Campus Planning

A flexible campus plan allows owners to adapt over time. That may include preserving expansion areas, planning future building connections, coordinating traffic flow, and placing shared amenities where they can serve multiple care levels.

Early site planning should consider how future phases will affect parking, utilities, resident access, service routes and outdoor spaces.

Future Expansion

Future expansion is easier and more cost-effective when it is considered during initial planning. Utility routing, structural systems, stormwater management, site access and building orientation can all affect the feasibility of later phases.

Owners should work with their construction partner to identify potential expansion zones and understand which upfront investments may reduce future disruption or cost.

Phased Development

Many senior living projects are delivered in phases. Phasing can help owners manage capital investment, respond to market demand and keep existing operations active during expansion or renovation.

However, phased development requires careful construction planning. The team must consider resident safety, site logistics, access control, temporary conditions, utility tie-ins, noise, dust, deliveries and staff coordination. When phasing is planned early, owners can reduce disruption and maintain a better experience for residents, families and operators.

Infrastructure Planning

Infrastructure is one of the most important parts of continuum-of-care planning. Electrical systems, plumbing, HVAC, fire protection, low-voltage systems, stormwater management and site utilities must be evaluated for both current and future needs.

A community may not need every system at full capacity on day one, but early planning can help avoid expensive rework later. The right infrastructure strategy supports long-term flexibility while protecting the project's initial



The construction of the project was a success by all measures. It finished ahead of our schedule, and it finished within our budget. The team identified and addressed issues during construction and kept the ownership and operations team always informed.

*Jed Momot
NorthPoint Development*



Design Considerations That Support Resident Experience

Resident experience is one of the defining priorities of modern senior living construction. A well-designed community should support comfort, independence, wellness, safety and connection.

Construction decisions have a direct impact on how these spaces are delivered. Materials, systems, sequencing, detailing and constructability all influence the final resident experience.

Privacy | **Natural Light** | **Outdoor Access** | **Dining** | **Amenities** | **Visitation** | **Safety**



Privacy and Dignity

Resident units should feel personal, comfortable and easy to navigate. Depending on the care level, private bathrooms, accessible layouts, sufficient storage, and space for family visits can all contribute to dignity and independence.

In higher-care environments, privacy must be balanced with caregiver access and safety. Early coordination can help ensure that resident rooms support both comfort and operational needs.

Natural Light

Natural light can make senior living environments feel warmer, more open and more residential. Windows, common areas, dining spaces, corridors and amenity rooms should be planned to create a welcoming atmosphere and support daily routines.

From a construction standpoint, natural light strategies must be coordinated with energy performance, structural systems, envelope design, glare control and interior finishes.

Outdoor Access

Outdoor spaces are an important part of resident wellness. Patios, balconies, courtyards, gardens, walking paths and outdoor dining areas can encourage movement, socialization and connection to nature.

For memory care and assisted living environments, outdoor spaces may also need secure access, level walking surfaces, seating areas, shade, visibility and safe circulation loops.





Dining and Amenity Spaces

Dining is often one of the most important daily experiences in a senior living community. Today's communities may include formal dining rooms, casual bistros, demonstration kitchens, private dining areas or outdoor dining spaces.

Amenity spaces such as theaters, salons, fitness centers, wellness rooms, pools, libraries, activity rooms and lounges can help differentiate a community in the market. These spaces require early coordination of finishes, mechanical systems, plumbing, equipment, accessibility, acoustics and operational flow.

Family Visitation

Senior living communities must support not only residents, but also families and visitors. Comfortable gathering spaces, private dining rooms, outdoor seating, child-friendly areas and easy wayfinding can all improve the family experience.

Safety and Independence

The best senior living environments support independence without making safety feel intrusive. Details such as accessible bathrooms, appropriate lighting, handrails, clear circulation, durable flooring, secure entries and intuitive layouts can help residents move through the community with confidence.

Construction Considerations That Support Operations

A senior living community must also work behind the scenes. Operational efficiency affects staffing, service delivery, maintenance, resident satisfaction and long-term cost.

Construction teams play an important role in helping owners and operators translate operational goals into a functional building.

Staff Workflow

Staff movement should be considered early in the planning process. Care teams, dining staff, maintenance personnel, housekeeping, administrators and service providers all use the building differently.

Efficient layouts can reduce unnecessary travel distances, improve response times and make daily work easier for staff. Poorly planned circulation can create inefficiencies that last for the life of the building.

Nurse Call and Technology Infrastructure

Technology is increasingly central to senior living operations. Communities may need nurse call systems, emergency response systems, resident monitoring, access control, security, Wi-Fi, audiovisual systems, building automation and other low-voltage infrastructure.

These systems must be coordinated early with walls, ceilings, electrical systems, equipment rooms and operational workflows. Delaying technology coordination can lead to costly changes, conflicts or performance issues.

Infection Control and Cleanability

Durability and cleanability are critical, especially in assisted living, memory care and skilled nursing environments. Flooring, wall protection, fixtures, surfaces, HVAC strategies and maintenance access should all be selected with long-term performance in mind.

The right materials can help owners maintain a clean and welcoming environment while reducing maintenance challenges over time.

Back-of-House Planning

Back-of-house spaces are easy to overlook, but they are essential to operations. Kitchens, laundry areas, storage rooms, staff areas, maintenance shops, loading areas, trash rooms and service corridors all affect how efficiently the community functions.

These spaces should be planned to support operations without disrupting the resident experience. Service routes should be clear, efficient and separated from resident-facing spaces where possible.

Maintenance Access

A senior living community is a long-term operating asset. Mechanical rooms, equipment access, roof access, shutoff locations, panels and service areas must be planned so maintenance teams can work efficiently and safely.

Good maintenance planning can reduce disruption, improve system performance and support long-term operational value.

Life Safety Systems

Life safety is a core requirement in senior living construction. Fire protection, emergency power, alarms, smoke control, rated assemblies, egress paths, accessibility and code compliance must be coordinated across the design and construction process.

Because senior living residents may have mobility limitations or care needs, life safety planning must be especially thoughtful. Early coordination with design teams, authorities having jurisdiction and trade partners helps reduce risk and avoid late-stage redesign.



An Integrated Approach to Senior Living Projects

Senior living projects benefit from integrated delivery because design decisions directly affect budget, schedule, operations, resident experience and long-term facility performance.

In a traditional delivery model, owners may not receive meaningful construction input until later in the design process. By that point, cost drivers may already be embedded in the documents, and redesign can be expensive or time-consuming.

An integrated approach, sometimes referred to as design-assist, brings construction expertise into the process earlier. That early collaboration can help owners align design intent

Benefits of Integrated Delivery

Senior living projects require coordination across many priorities: residential comfort, care delivery, amenities, accessibility, life safety, building systems, site logistics and long-term operations. When design and construction teams work together early, owners can make decisions with a clearer understanding of cost and schedule impact.

ARCO's Approach

ARCO's collaborative process brings the design and construction teams together early in the project lifecycle. By aligning design decisions with constructability and budget considerations, ARCO helps prevent conflicts, minimize change orders and maintain schedule certainty throughout construction.

Integrated delivery can help:

IMPROVE BUDGET ALIGNMENT

REDUCE REDESIGN RISK

IDENTIFY CHALLENGES EARLIER

COORDINATE BUILDING SYSTEMS

EVALUATE COST-SAVING ALTERNATIVES

SUPPORT OPERATOR WORKFLOW

IMPROVE SCHEDULE CERTAINTY

REDUCE OWNER RISK

Case Study: Atria Senior Living

138-Unit Independent Senior Living Facility | Cary, North Carolina



Stabilizing a Senior Living Project Through Design-Assist Collaboration

Atria Senior Living's independent living community in Cary, North Carolina, demonstrates the impact early contractor involvement can have on senior living construction.

ARCO National Construction delivered the 198,000-square-foot independent living community after leading a design-assist redesign that reduced the project budget by more than \$8.5 million and restored financial feasibility. The completed community includes 138 one- and two-bedroom units supported by an amenity program focused on wellness, engagement and resident experience.

The Challenge: Before ARCO became involved, the project faced significant financial challenges. As the design progressed from design development to construction documents under the original general contractor, the project experienced a 37 percent cost increase. That escalation made the proforma unworkable and placed the project at risk of cancellation.

Atria needed a path forward that would preserve the owner's vision while addressing budget realities. The solution required more than cost cutting. It required a collaborative reassessment of design, constructability, operations and delivery strategy.

The Solution: ARCO implemented a comprehensive design-assist approach, engaging a new architect and structural engineer to redesign the building in collaboration with Atria's ownership and operations teams. The redesign aligned the building layout with day-to-day operations, improved constructability and eliminated unnecessary cost drivers.

Through early contractor involvement and disciplined cost management, ARCO reduced the overall project budget by more than \$8.5 million, restoring financial feasibility without compromising quality or resident comfort.

The Result: The Atria Senior Living project highlights the value of collaborative delivery, early cost control and technical expertise. By realigning design, budget and operational goals, ARCO helped transform a nearly cancelled project into a high-quality independent living community tailored to the needs of both residents and operators.

The Completed Community

The finished community includes 138 one- and two-bedroom independent living units, many with private balconies that enhance resident comfort and access to outdoor space. Common areas were designed to encourage social interaction and create a welcoming environment for residents and visitors.

Key amenities include a 1,700-square-foot lobby and bistro, beauty salon and barber shop, built-in theatre, multiple gathering spaces, an indoor swimming pool, fitness and wellness centers, and a commercial kitchen that supports daily dining operations.

Outdoor amenities include an outdoor kitchen and pergola, putting green, bocce ball court, outdoor stage and offsite pedestrian walking trail. These features support active living and reinforce the community's focus on wellness and lifestyle enrichment.

ARCO also coordinated the installation of an underground stormwater detention system, supporting site performance while preserving usable outdoor space.



Key Takeaways for Senior Living Owners:

The Atria project offers several important lessons for owners, operators and developers:

- ✓ Engage construction expertise early.
- ✓ Evaluate cost and constructability before design decisions become fixed.
- ✓ Align building layout with operational needs.
- ✓ Use design-assist collaboration to solve feasibility challenges.
- ✓ Protect resident experience while addressing budget realities.
- ✓ Consider infrastructure and site solutions as part of the overall value strategy.



How to Choose a Senior Living Construction Partner

Choosing the right construction partner can have a lasting impact on the success of a senior living project. The builder should understand more than construction logistics. They should understand how design, cost, schedule, operations and resident experience work together.

The right partner will help owners make informed decisions early, identify risks before they become problems and deliver a facility that supports both short-term project goals and long-term operating performance.

Questions to Ask Before Selecting a Construction Partner

When evaluating senior living construction partners, owners and developers should ask:

Do they have experience across multiple senior living project types?

A partner with experience in independent living, assisted living, memory care, skilled nursing and CCRCs will better understand the differences between each care level.

Can they provide early budgeting and constructability feedback?

Senior living projects benefit from cost and schedule insight before design is complete. A contractor who can support early planning can help avoid costly redesign later.

Do they understand both resident experience and operator workflow?

The building must be comfortable for residents and efficient for staff. A strong construction partner will consider both.

Can they evaluate cost-saving alternatives without compromising quality?

Value engineering should protect the owner's goals, not simply reduce scope. The right partner can identify smarter solutions that maintain function, durability and resident experience.

How do they manage long-lead materials and procurement?

Procurement planning can affect schedule, opening dates and revenue. Owners should understand how the contractor identifies and manages long-lead items.

How do they coordinate building systems?

Senior living communities require close coordination of MEP, life safety, accessibility, healthcare-supporting systems and low-voltage technology.

Can they support phased development or future expansion?

If the project may grow over time, the contractor should understand how to plan infrastructure, utilities, site logistics and future connections.

How to Choose a Senior Living Construction Partner

What risk does the contractor assume?

Owners should understand how pricing, scope, contingencies and risk transfer are handled. ARCO's process provides cost and schedule confidence from early stages, and once a firm proposal is accepted, ARCO assumes financial risk, locks in pricing and secures key materials immediately.

Can they provide relevant case studies?

A strong partner should be able to demonstrate experience with similar projects, challenges and outcomes.

Red Flags to Watch for

Senior living owners should be cautious of construction partners who:

- Have limited senior living experience.
- Provide pricing without clear scope assumptions.
- Enter the project too late to influence cost or constructability.
- Treat value engineering as simple scope reduction.
- Lack experience with care-related infrastructure.
- Do not understand operator workflow.
- Have weak MEP or low-voltage coordination.
- Do not identify long-lead procurement risks early.
- Cannot support phased development or future expansion.
- Do not provide transparent communication around budget and schedule.

What ARCO Brings to the Table

ARCO brings national senior living construction experience and a collaborative approach that helps owners align design, budget, schedule and operational goals early. ARCO has delivered senior living communities across the United States and understands that these facilities must balance residential comfort with healthcare-ready infrastructure, regulatory compliance and thoughtful design that supports both residents and caregivers.

By engaging early in the project lifecycle, ARCO provides reliable budgeting, constructability insight and coordination across the design and development process. This approach helps owners make informed decisions, reduce risk and move forward with greater confidence.

Start Planning Earlier. Build with Greater Certainty.

Senior living construction is about more than completing a building. It is about creating communities that support residents, families, caregivers, operators and owners over the long term.

The most successful projects begin with thoughtful planning. From project type and unit mix to infrastructure, amenities, operations, cost control and future expansion, early decisions shape the performance of the finished community.

By involving ARCO early, owners, operators and developers can align design, budget, schedule and operational goals from the start. With the right team in place, senior living projects can move forward with greater clarity, stronger cost confidence and a construction strategy built around long-term value.

READY TO START PLANNING YOUR NEXT SENIOR LIVING PROJECT?

Connect with ARCO National Construction to discuss your project goals, evaluate early feasibility and explore a construction approach built for residents, operators and long-term success.

ARCO