

# CONNECT

## Changing Perspective

TRANSFORMING WORK  
SPACES IN SENIOR LIVING

**PERKINS —  
EASTMAN**  
DESIGN RESEARCH



# CONNECT



# About the Series

**O**ur CONNECT series explores a number of ways the senior living sector can reinvest in the bonds that brought us together before the pandemic and also create new strategies for connection as we look to the future. Throughout 2022 we have explored the emotional and social elements that nurture our communities, the physical spaces that encourage interaction, the technology that unites rather than isolates, and the organizational missions that drive our collective passion as planners, operators, and change-makers. Thank you for joining us in the journey to CONNECT.

## Key Takeaways

The dedicated staff areas—the physical “workplaces” within senior living communities—abound with untapped design possibilities to better support worker needs, health, safety, and holistic wellness. Exploring other market sectors including workplace, higher education, and healthcare can provide design ideas that may positively influence the future of workplace design for senior living.

Purposefully-designed spaces for senior living caregivers and staff can lead to many long-term benefits, including the potential for decreased burnout, increased recruitment and retention, less emphasis on wage wars, a decrease in ageism bias, and holistic wellness across the community.



# Chang

The staff lounge at The David H. Koch Center for Cancer Care at Memorial Sloan Kettering features ample spaces for employees to take a break so they can return to work refreshed.



# ing Perspective

## TRANSFORMING WORK SPACES IN SENIOR LIVING



Over the last three years, the global workforce has experienced an unprecedented series of shifts in the ways that people engage with their colleagues, clients, and above all, their physical place of work. Many sectors have already proactively started to evaluate what these shifts mean and the solutions that can better support their employees and their bottom line. Work spaces for senior living should be no different.



*In addition to having a dedicated space that is beautiful, it has to be functional.*

**Tim Johnson, CEO of Frasier community**

For the new generation of worker, “work” represents more than just a 9am - 5pm job. Outside of day-to-day tasks, work is increasingly tied to a sense of personal fulfillment, the opportunity for professional growth, and a company culture and workplace that is holistically supportive of these values. However, as companies take a deeper look at their dedicated physical work and break spaces within their senior living communities, a large gap often exists between workers’ aspirations and the spaces that best support this.

Design for senior living has traditionally prioritized the resident and visitor experience. And rightfully so, as residents, families, and visitors are the customers and primary end-users. However, is the hierarchy of focusing architecture and design on the experience of the resident (and then administration, with care team members coming last) outdated? Data suggests that employee satisfaction can be directly linked to productivity in office environments; it’s not a stretch to theorize that the same would apply for employees in senior living. If the experience of the resident is primary, the people caring for residents must be equally important.

With the Millennial and Generation Z workforce attracted to meaningful, relational work, the senior living sector is prime for evolution. Providers have the opportunity to improve upon workforce challenges by integrating supportive spaces and systems to create an inspiring work environment for all. Paying better attention to the ways that spaces can support all staff—from caregivers to culinary workers—addresses a variety of common issues within the senior living sector, including:

- **Burnout:** When team members have an outlet to truly take a break and decompress between shifts, their ability to return to the job refreshed and continue to exercise patience, compassion, and resident-centered care increases.
- **Recruitment and retention:** When communities demonstrate thoughtfulness and invest in how they support their team and their continued growth, it links directly to employees wanting to work with them and stay.
- **Value beyond salary:** Going hand-in-hand with the goals of attraction and retention, if employees are supported more holistically, a decision to leave will not be solely based on salary. The benefits of employee wellbeing play a huge role in overall employee satisfaction.
- **Acceptance of the aging process:** As communities begin to break down the barriers between resident space, employee space, and even public community space, we may also see a greater mainstream acceptance of the aging process. The more team members and the outside community understand the natural process of aging and how to support older adults, we may see less ageism in our society.

We believe that a deeper exploration into the nature of senior living work will help uncover many untapped design opportunities. We also believe that successful design trends in markets outside of senior living—workplace, higher education, and healthcare, for example—can influence the future of workplace design in senior living, offering a refreshing new perspective to how we design spaces to support caregivers and staff.





This employee pantry at pharmaceutical company Boehringer Ingelheim provides dedicated spaces for employees to break for healthy meals and snacks in an informal setting.





Perkins Eastman Pittsburgh studio is a hybrid workspace which includes small phone rooms for privacy, an employee wellness room, and booth spaces for collaboration, in addition to traditional desk workspaces.



## Variety in the Workplace

A residential and care community does not conjure up images of “workplace.” It’s not the traditional setting that we associate with desks and offices, as you might see in a corporate office. Most often we see a dedicated staff break room or locker room that rarely seems adequate in terms of space allocation, functional variety, or even location. However, says principal Alejandro Giraldo, “The days of relegating staff breaks rooms to the basement are long gone.”

To combat the battle for dedicated space, trends in workplace design and the variety of spaces offered for employees (above and beyond the traditional desk or workstation) can inform how we design spaces for caregivers. In a recent example, Perkins Eastman transformed its Pittsburgh studio from a traditional office setup to better support hybrid work. The design team for this project created many different work points throughout the space, which range from small focus rooms and impromptu ledge seats with views of downtown Pittsburgh, to intimate booths similar to what you might find at your local coffee shop. While there are standard desking zones, employees are encouraged to use all areas around the office throughout the day. This freedom of choice provides more flexibility to support many different types of individual work preferences.

### TRANSLATION TO SENIOR LIVING

We can start to apply this communal concept into senior living. By encouraging staff to utilize areas throughout the community, we are providing variety and choice and a broader connection to the entire community. Why couldn’t a staff member have their lunch in the bistro? Or, use the meditation room for a quiet moment? While these are all good examples to support overlap, what about the more

private moments, for example, important phone calls or a place for nursing parents?

At the Frasier community in Boulder, CO, we found that team members were using their cars during break time for personal calls, because Frasier had no dedicated staff space for private calls. As a result, a phone room and wellness room were incorporated into the design of the dedicated staff



lounge. A workplace nook was also developed where team members could complete coursework or study. Tim Johnson, CEO of Frasier community, is convinced of the need to incorporate these spaces into the design. “In addition to having a dedicated space that is beautiful, it has to be functional. Having a sink, refrigerator, and space to spread out is critical. Also, having rooms for privacy and for introverts who need to recharge their batteries is important,” he says. In recognizing the variety of physical and emotional needs for their care staff’s break time, Frasier is anticipating that the result will be a more rejuvenated team of caregivers.

**As is planned for the Frasier community in Boulder, CO, semi-private nooks and phone rooms at OAK Health, an AARP-funded athletic club project outside of Washington, DC, give staff and visitors the opportunity to step aside for phone calls and privacy.**

## Connection to Nature: Healthcare

As we explore these spacial options for the senior living workplace, maintaining indoor-outdoor connections should be an underlying concept. Evidence suggests that simply incorporating natural daylight into interior spaces can drastically improve one's health, both mentally and physically. As we've explored in previous research in our white paper, [Biophilic Design: An Alternative Perspective for Sustainable Design in Senior Living](#), we can begin to understand the how and why natural light integration is so critical in the built environment.

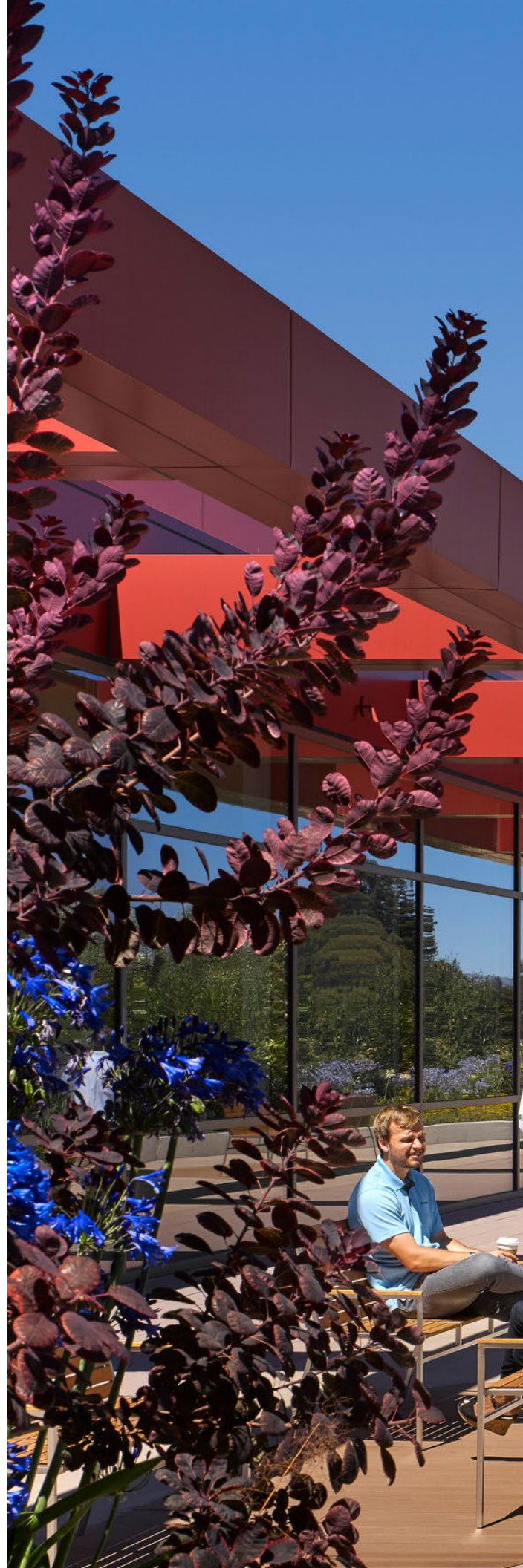
At the recently completed Stanford Hospital in Palo Alto, CA, the design emphasis was based wholly on overall wellness and integrated natural connections. Staff, patients, and guests enter through an inviting sunlit atrium, seamlessly connecting them to areas throughout the hospital. At the heart of the hospital is the third floor's 40,000 square foot garden, which integrates native plantings, lushly landscaped nooks of built-in seating, and rejuvenating sunlit congregate areas promoting rest and self-care. Caregivers flock to these spaces whether it is to spend time during a break or to connect with patients. It has become a natural extension of the other programmed interior spaces of the hospital.

### TRANSLATION TO SENIOR LIVING

Similar to the philosophy of the Stanford Hospital, Enso Village in Sonoma County, CA, employs nature as a foundation for the entire community. This senior housing residence is Zen-inspired, which means that it purposefully creates a connection between the outdoors and indoors for all spaces, including those for the caregivers. The interior spaces incorporate natural materials that create a seamless transition from indoors to outdoors. Recognizing the importance of providing natural settings to enhance ease, comfort, and peace, Enso Village is envisioning a community where the traditional senior living values are present, but executed in a way that considers all users equally.



Enso Village brings the outdoors in with expansive windows and natural finishes.





Stanford Hospital features a large garden of native plantings for the enjoyment of staff, patients, and visitors.





This communicating stair in the Commons of McKelvey Hall brings together faculty, graduate students, and PhD candidates for planned and serendipitous meetings.



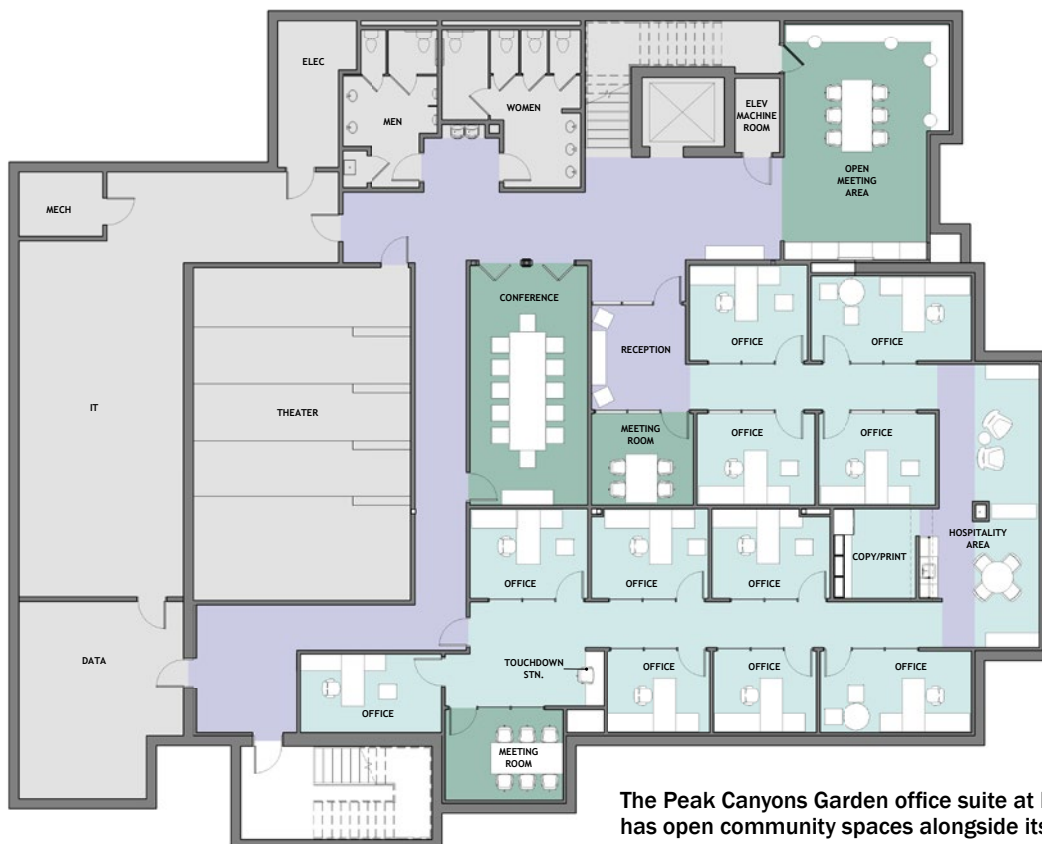


## One Community: Higher Education

Blurring the lines between resident- and staff-designated spaces is also important for caregiver experience. Our colleagues who specialize in higher education have been working on this concept for quite some time. At McKelvey Hall at Washington University in St. Louis, MO, a cutting-edge facility for computer science, various research disciplines are connected to one another with a series of communicating stairs that come together in the Commons. This central collaboration space reflects the transformative vision of McKelvey Hall: contemporary, flexible spaces that amplify opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration. Faculty, graduate students, and PhD candidates have a number of shared spaces at their disposal, including work areas, specialty laboratories, offices, flexible classrooms, as well as social and collaboration spaces. This bridging helps eliminate user hierarchy, creating a dynamic that celebrates autonomy and ownership—key components of worker satisfaction.

## TRANSLATION TO SENIOR LIVING

Similarly, at the Frasier community, careful consideration was given to where the C-suite administrative area would be located. Frasier administration recognized that they had unused space in the basement of The Canyons—the arts and education center, and ultimately decided to relocate the offices there. The Frasier team also wanted to ensure residents felt welcome in these spaces, resulting in positioning two larger meeting areas adjacent to the office suite lobby. While staff will use the spaces for traditional meetings and conferences, residents may also use these rooms for programs, speaking engagements, and external community programs. The space is further adaptable: during events the lobby becomes a pre-function space and the meeting rooms open directly to it through the use of large bi-fold doors. As Frasier has grown, meeting space for resident events has increased which decreased their ability to offer space to the outside community. “By having more meeting space, we can continue to have the outside Boulder community use our space,” says Frasier’s CEO Tim Johnson. These welcoming community spaces set the tone for true community, one that feels safe and comfortable for all.



The Peak Canyons Garden office suite at Frasier has open community spaces alongside its administrative areas.





Fostering community is a central element of Oak Health Club's vision. A prototype project guided by AARP, this facility is designed to encourage adults of all ages, whether patrons or staff, to interact and share in the pursuit of fitness together.





## Conclusion: Investing in the Future

Today's workers seek work and work environments that honor their passions and values. When care teams are supported emotionally and physically, they are better able to focus on finding the meaning and purpose in their roles. We think when these spatial and programmatic support systems are incorporated into the design for the senior living workforce, we will see decreased burnout, increased attraction and retention, diminished wage wars, and a greater acceptance of the aging process.

When the caregiver workforce is valued, engaged, and sees growth potential and opportunity for ownership in their duties, the compassion shows in the way they care for the residents. When someone loves what they do and is supported by their employer, they take pride in their work and the energy radiates throughout the entire community.

## Discussion Starters

**What is your community doing now to support staff health and holistic wellness?**

**How can you build upon that foundation to develop a more robust plan for support spaces?**

**With your current programs, how can the built environment foster connections between residents, staff, and the outside community?**

**Name a few recent experiences you've had in your work environment that have provided opportunities for rest, privacy, socialization, and connection to nature.**

**How can you integrate these experiences into your community in a meaningful way for all team members?**



The senior living sector can draw inspiration from dedicated staff spaces, such as this staff pantry at Lincoln International, to encourage casual interaction, relaxation, and overall wellbeing.

## Resources

Abdul Raziq, Raheela Maulabakhsh, *Impact of Working Environment on Job Satisfaction*, Procedia Economics and Finance, Volume 23, 2015, Pages 717-725, ISSN 2212-5671, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2212-5671\(15\)00524-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2212-5671(15)00524-9). (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2212567115005249>)

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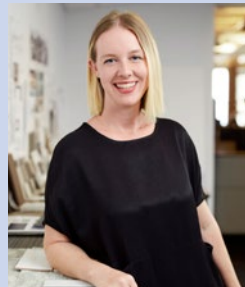


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