Aging: Small Is Beautiful

The newest thing in end-of-life care: residences that look—and feel—like the house you've lived in all your life.

By Claudia Kalb and Vanessa Juarez

Newsweek

Aug. 1 issue - Dorothy Green had always been an independent woman. A Cadillac-driving, mink-coat-wearing, Tiparillo-smoking woman. So it was especially hard on her family members when they realized that their spitfire matriarch, now 85 and suffering from dementia, could no longer care for herself. Last year Green's family moved her into a 60-bed assisted-living facility in San Luis Obispo, Calif. Green was well cared for, but she didn't like the rigid schedule. And living with dozens of other people made her agitated. "She would cry a lot," says her granddaughter and staff nurse, Teri Weitkum.

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All that changed last fall, when Green moved 30 miles away into a luxury suburban home called Vista View. The stand-alone house is a long-term-care facility for people with Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia, but it feels like home. There are spacious bedrooms, wall-to-wall carpeting and a garden, where residents grow tomatoes and squash. In the mornings, Green pads around in her slippers. One recent summer day, she and her three housemates gathered for beef stew served on china plates with designer cutlery. "They treat me like I'm a somebody," says Green.

It seems so obvious: let people age the way they have lived. Today, finally, it's beginning to happen. From upscale residences in California to family-size nursing homes in Mississippi, living facilities for the elderly are undergoing an architectural and cultural makeover: big, sterile institutions are out, small, homey environments in. The need has never been greater. Today 35 million Americans are over the age of 65—by 2030, that number is expected to double. As baby boomers age into sixtysomethings, the demand for civilized living will only intensify. "We have to completely transform the system," says Rose Marie Fagan of the Pioneer Network, an umbrella group for innovative aging programs.

Nursing homes are at the top of the list. Many of the nation's 17,000 institutions are decades old and operate on an impersonal hospital model—lackluster corridors, shared bedrooms, strict sleeping hours. Enter Dr. Bill Thomas, a 45-year-old geriatrician at SUNY Upstate Medical Center, who's on a mission to revolutionize long-term

Project, Author of "What Are Old People For: How Elders Will Save the World." (Vanderwyk & Burnham, 2004), and Rose Marie Fagan, Executive Director, The Pioneer Network

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care. In the 1990s, Thomas launched the "Eden Alternative," which called for humanizing big facilities by removing nurses' stations, adding plants and pets, and focusing on the staff-elder relationship. Eden was just the beginning. Today his baby is the National Green House Project, a radical shift away from large institutions to homes with no more than 10 residents each. The advantages: cozy living, privacy (individual bedrooms and baths) and time for caregivers to get to know residents—not just their medical needs, but their life stories, too.

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