Our dwellings enclose and protect us from the natural elements. However, they can all too often separate us from nature. Our designs should strengthen our connection to the natural environment and help maintain our lifelong enjoyment of the natural world. In recent years, we have seen that there is a strong desire to blur the lines between the inside and exterior areas of our living environments.

Images on Pinterest and Houzz are filled with beautiful examples of various settings. Magazine and newspaper articles extol the benefits of outdoor rooms. When we look at the images that are being posted, we see how the porch flows into the patio which incorporates a fire pit and water features and even an outdoor kitchen. The question is - how is this any different when it comes to senior living environments. The simple fact is that people of all ages like being outside, now, more than ever.

Where does all of this come from? Well, we are 'hard-wired' to nature as Edward Wilson has described ("The Biophylic Hypothesis", Island Press, 1993). And we know that there are important physical, and cognitive benefits derived from maintaining our connection to nature. Being outside in nature releases the feel good chemicals, endorphins that are in our bodies. Our senses react to the sights and sounds of nature and trigger the release of the natural (runner's high) high that the body creates. So, sitting on the patio and watching the sun set actually makes you feel better. This in turn helps to reduce depression and lower anxiety - all naturally within the body. And there are countless other examples that do the same thing, such as listening to the birds sing, feeling a cool breeze on your skin or the smell of fresh picked herbs.

It is our task to make it as easy as possible for older adults to visually as well as physically connect to nature and the outdoor environment. Living rooms, dining rooms, and all common areas should have full views to the outside. The interior and exterior 'rooms' should use materials that make the two rooms appear as one. Doors should be easy to open and there should be no change in grade, so people with physical and visual impairments can move about freely.
We have all enjoyed sitting on the front or back a porch of our home. This secure area offers us protection from the elements (rain, wind, etc.) and helps keep us safe from all of the 'wild' nature around us (Maybe not lions and tigers and bears any longer). But it is a place that we can feel protected, especially if we provide screens to keep out the bugs. It is further embellished by adding light, ceiling fans and comfortable couches and rocking chairs! The porch becomes the transitional space that allows us to easily move outside and maybe even stay a little longer when the weather is not the best.

The senior living residence should be designed to allow recreation and group activities to move freely inside and out. Overhead canopies and other shade structures provide cover during the day. Resilient surface materials, such as recycled rubber pavements, make the indoor as well as outdoor rooms safer and more versatile for different activities.

One of the great joys in being outside is to enjoy meals throughout the day and night. The use of the outdoor rooms can be extended, just as restaurants keep you dining outside later at night or into the cooler months. Misters can help cool people off when it gets too hot and dry during summer months. Low voltage lighting creates special moods. Holiday decorative lights signal special events and holidays. Portable heaters help extend the outdoor dining experience later into the fall season.

Incorporating plants into all living areas is another way to meld the inside and outside. Having raised
Incorporating plants into all living areas is another way to meld the inside and outside. Having raised planters and other containers on the patio and porch is one way to keep nature close to you. These planters should also be mobile, to make the plants more accessible. Why not bring the plants inside? There are mobile planters that can be moved inside when the weather turns colder. The 'Chef’s Wall' is a hydroponic planter that can be filled with herbs and vegetables. (http://greenecowalls.com/products/chefs-ecowall-garden/). People want to know where their food is raised and growing some of the plants that can be used in their meals in one other way to strengthen a connection with nature.

Chef’s Wall-Mobile Raised Planter Garden; photo taken by EcoWalls

The garden is as important as any other room within a residence. The physical, cognitive and social benefits that are derived by people spending time, outside, in a nature filled room are vitally important to the health and well-being of all individuals. We need to see these spaces as an essential component of all living environments, and not just 'curb appeal'. The garden is a place that allows us to be more of who we really are and to become more of who we want to be.

About the Author

Jack Carman, FASLA, LLA is president of Design for Generations LLC, a landscape architecture design firm specializing in the development of therapeutic gardens and landscapes in healthcare and senior communities nationwide. He is co-editor and contributor to the recently published book “Re-creating Neighborhoods for Successful Aging.” Jack actively works to promote the creation of healing outdoor environments through national associations and conferences. He is the founder of the ASLA professional practice network on Healthcare & Therapeutic Gardens.