Community in Portland, Oregon, opened in 1960 and was originally envisioned as an environment in which residents could have a high level of access to the outdoors, a concept that was unprecedented for that time period. Each resident had a front and a back door leading to a personal yard on both sides. There were no apartments on double loaded corridors. The community soon became known for its one-story garden apartments set in lush landscaping and an overall relaxed lifestyle.

Over the next six decades, the community faced several challenges as it aged, all contributing to a decline in occupancy. Repositioning the existing land was necessary to address the issues facing this landlocked community. As the site is very steep, one-story solutions offered neither market-rate sized units nor the precious outdoor space for which the community is known. The final solution involved utilizing the 40 foot slope of the site, along with an over/under cottage model that created pocket gardens between each tier of residences. The stepped pocket neighborhood arrangement maximized site utilization while maintaining open, outdoor living spaces with appealing immediate views of the pocket gardens, and extended views of the Willamette River and West Hills of Portland.

There was a paramount directive from the community's leadership that each cottage home be provided with multiple outdoor connections. In a housing model in which the lower level is primarily retaining wall on the uphill side and the upper level is a story higher than grade on the downhill side, the compromise was an entry porch and yard at the entrance to grade, and porches organized to allow a side porch or balcony with great views to their respective pocket gardens.

Each of the pocket neighborhoods is comprised of seven residential homes facing their respective garden. Residents are able to plant their own gardens at the at-grade entry porch, and even have the option of a pet fence as, not surprisingly; this garden community is also pet friendly. The site's comfortable pedestrian scale is a result of each two-story cottage having a one-story front at each garden. Each garden is bounded on one side by the large Open Green which provides wonderful views...
down to the river for all to enjoy. A series of one-story, semi-detached duplex homes provide an edge for the gardens. One benefit of the original community, close social connections, is maintained through an increased level of contact in the intimate garden setting.

neighborhoods are organized to allow a low-slope, accessible walking path from the bottom of the hill up to the “Town Center” community spaces at the highest elevation closest to the street.

Each garden is themed and provided with various amenities such as arbors, boulder seating walls, rose gardens, fire pits, and even pet drinking fountains. A multi-use pavilion structure bounding one of the gardens is available for social gatherings and events.

The investment in this project required the demolition of 100 of the community’s existing cottages as well as one of the main community spaces. The pocket neighborhoods were half of the solution. The other half of the solution was more traditional loft apartments in two- and three-story buildings, of which the first floor is primarily shared community space. Still, the community’s commitment to a connection to nature was the overriding design guideline. While the cottage homes are a more ‘rural’ solution, the apartments approach nature in a more urban way. The apartments are a good fit for residents for whom long travel distances to community spaces are undesirable, but who still seek a connection to nature.

All of the apartments have balconies that favor the views down to the river. Each and every balcony can be accessed from two rooms in the residences. The apartments are located in two buildings and are organized around a Main Street Town Center where many of the community spaces have a streetfront presence in addition to internal circulation options. One of the shops along the street, Seeds, will stock and sell gardening equipment, plants, and flowers. The community will have the ability to insert temporary bollards on Main Street, close off vehicular access, and host farmer’s markets, street fairs, and even food carts. To top it all off (literally), a community roof garden will be provided on an upper floor named, appropriately, The Vista Lounge.

The ultimate goal is to replace all of the campus’ 263 existing units in a similar fashion to provide appropriately sized and affordably priced housing to seniors interested in staying active and having a personal day-to-day interaction with nature.
The community will offer a choice of a true downtown experience or a more small-scale garden-style cottage lifestyle. The residents, however, may reap the benefits of both.

**Project Credits**

Client: Rose Villa Senior Living - Portland, Oregon

Architect of Record: RLPS Architects - Lancaster, Pennsylvania

Design Architect: MGA Architects - Portland, Oregon

Landscape Architect: Macdonald Environmental Planning – Portland, Oregon

Renderings courtesy of MGA Architects; site plan courtesy of RLPS Architects.

**About the Author:**

Jim Mehaffey, AIA is a senior project manager at RLPS Architects. He focuses primarily on seniors’ housing and healthcare projects with responsibility for coordinating multi-disciplinary teams and guiding projects throughout all phases of planning, design and construction. Jim also provides code research and compliance reviews. He authors a design blog, Lessons Learned from the Yeoman Architect, and has served as a volunteer at the Penn State University Architecture and Landscape summer camp.