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Intelligent design: New Jewish home crafted to be senior-friendly

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In the 1998 Coen brothers flick “The Big Lebowski,” the eponymous main character traipses back and forth across Los Angeles and its environs, White Russian in hand, to demand compensation for a rug soiled by thugs.

His rationale: “That rug really tied the room together, man.”

But while a small throw rug on a hardwood floor might be a vital piece of décor for a movie character, it doesn’t work well at a senior facility. Slipping on a rug is one of the most common household hazards for the elderly, right up there with tripping over electrical cords and slipping in the shower.

The decision to go with safe, stable flooring material was an obvious design choice for Daniel Ruth, CEO of the Jewish Home in San Francisco and the upcoming Palo Alto senior facility at 899 Charleston St. Other design choices were more innovative and subtle.

For example, wall coverings might well tie the room together, man, but they also serve as to suppress sound and reduce glare.

To ensure good safety and good design, Ruth brought in Lorraine Hiatt, a New York-based consultant who has helped lay out nearly 500 senior living facilities around the country. So while many people evaluating senior living might fixate on family photos or a big-screen TV, Hiatt notices how long a corridor is, what kind of light source is best for seniors and how close everything is to the bathroom.

“This is not sexy,” Ruth acknowledges. It is, however, what goes into making housing for the elderly state-of-the-art.

Each unit also is equipped with multiple emergency response buttons so that any of the 90 staff members who will serve 899 Charleston's roughly 250 residents can respond quickly to residents' needs.

Units at 899 Charleston will come in four floor plans, all named for prominent Jews: the Bernstein, the Chagall, the Douglas and the Friedan. (For those who don't make the immediate connection, that is Leonard, Marc, Kirk and Betty.) The units range from 780-square feet for the Bernstein to a full 1,600 square feet for the Friedan.

Although 899 Charleston will be the sister campus of the Jewish Home in San Francisco, the two will serve different clientele. Ruth points out that the average age at the Jewish Home is in the upper 80s, which is expected to be about 10 years older than the average resident of 899 Charleston.

This, too, is by design. The Palo Alto facility is not set up for intensive, late-life care, although residents in need of such care can be transferred to the Jewish Home in San Francisco. As a result, Ruth expects the Charleston residents to give the 34,000-square-foot gym a good workout.

Palo Alto's 899 Charleston is also spread into several buildings on the Campus for Jewish Life, which also will house the JCC, federation office and other Jewish organizations as well as gardens, courtyards and Jerusalem-inspired architecture. San Francisco's Jewish home, by contrast, is a standalone facility in an urban setting.

The Palo Alto facility — due to open its doors toward the end of the decade along with the rest of the Campus for Jewish Life — has set up a "preview center" at 366 Cambridge Ave. in Palo Alto. Future residents can reserve a spot with a 10 percent deposit. Units are expected to run between \$400,000 to more than \$1 million. So far, 87 people have signed up.

For more information visit www.899charleston.com or call (650) 321-3188.

http://www.jewishsf.com/content/2-0-/module/displaystory/story_id/32902/format/html/displaystory.html