



# Will This Completely Insult Your Architect?

*By Steve Moran*

I love touring senior living communities and I am often surprised at how similar they are and yet . . . at the same time how much uniqueness and creativity I see. We are really delighted to have the highly regarded Senior Living architecture firm [LWDA](#), Levi + Wong Design Associates, Inc., as our newest partner.

I was recently chatting with Ruth Neeman, AIA, one of the LWDA Principals and Director of Senior Living Studio about the importance of having plans peer reviewed. Improving quality of life for seniors can be found in many Senior Living architects mission statements -- which makes sharing of knowledge the basis of our practice.

The AIA Design for Aging Knowledge Community is one of the more formal ways to do just this on a national level. Ruth described how they were recently asked by an owner to do a peer review of plans, created by another architectural firm, for a new construction memory care facility and found a number of areas where they were able to make recommendations they believe would improve the design, in terms of saving costs and better meeting the operating-programming goals.

A peer review should not be a one-time event -- but an ongoing program of feedback. At each stage of the design process there are different topics to discuss -- from programmatic approach and sequence of spaces early on, to millwork finishes and colors later on in the process.

She also told the story of a Long Term Care building owned by a municipality that had to follow a public construction process, that was not part of their core competencies. In that particular case, they contracted with a peer review architect who helped them uncover some of the public bidding oddities that would not have been fatal, but ultimately saved the developer considerable time and money.

## **Insulting Your Architect**

It prompted me to ask the question . . . “So it is easy for you to go in and critique someone else's design, but how would you react if one of your clients wanted to take your plans and have another firm review them?” Her immediate response was “No problem, a good peer review increases the level of confidence that we are serving our clients efficiently and appropriately.

An experienced peer reviewer will not use taste or aesthetic preferences as a guide to the review process, but solid principles of design, research and evidence-based outcomes -- no one has the perfect vision or all the right ideas.”

## **When You Need a Peer Review**

I asked Ruth if every set of plans needed to be peer reviewed. Her response was that while it might be an interesting idea, there are some times where it makes more sense than others:

- If a project is located in another state with unique/quirky requirements.
- If a project is funded with public dollars, it will often have nitpicky requirements that an expert can catch.
- If you are working with a trusted, talented architect that may not be 100% focused on senior living -- some of the most current research or industry trends may not be at their fingertips.
- If you are working with an architect that primarily works with just one or two senior living clients, their plans will naturally be skewed to the operating philosophy of that client. A review can uncover program differences and new ways of doing things.

At the end of the day, it is about making the project as perfect as possible before construction starts. Whether doing the review or being reviewed, more input is better . . . though that does not necessarily mean the recommendations need to be accepted but rather they need to be considered.

## **Picking the Right Peer Reviewer**

Picking the right peer review firm is a delicate process. Here are some considerations:

1. You need to pick a firm that has deep experience in the type of building that is being reviewed (memory care, independent living, affordable senior living, skilled nursing, etc)
2. You need to pick a firm that works for multiple clients which will give them a broader perspective.
3. You need to pick a firm that will be helpful and not just nitpick a design with the goal of either stealing business or tearing down a competitor.
4. You need to select a firm with broad educational track record -- active in trade organizations and constantly teaching and learning.

Have you ever used a peer review firm and what did they find?



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