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Military retirement community focuses on accessibility Vinson Hall helps residents with new design

BY LINDSEY LAING, THE BOLLING AVIATOR



PHOTO BY LINDSEY LAING

Designer Moira Leite of M. Quinn Designs listens to concerns posed by resident Richard Zimmermann, a retired U.S. Navy captain, after her presentation at Vinson Hall Nov. 6.

It's called "Beautiful Accessibility." Designer Moira Leite of M. Quinn Designs has unveiled a model apartment proposal for Vinson Hall, an independent living community located in McLean, Va.

Her presentation to the residents Nov. 6, provided a glimpse of what is possible with the latest advances in accessibility aids. The model apartment is slated to open in February 2008. Vinson Hall is open solely to former military officers, their spouses and dependents.

Leite is proposing a re-design of the 532 square foot efficiency apartments in the retirement home. Leite concedes that the community presents unique challenges.

"The existing space has some liabilities," Leite said, "and Vinson Hall fits into two categories. It's a public space, as well as separate residences."

Through innovation in accessibility aids, the design is meant to prolong independence for the residents, as well as enhance their quality of life. Through her 35 years of work as an interior designer and lighting expert, Leite has a particular gift for planning living spaces for those with functional disabilities.

Her philosophy that, "Design must reflect lifestyle, heritage and the experience of the residents," rings true for those that call Vinson Hall home. "Every space can be beautiful," she said. Leite has done design work for Embassy Suites, McDonald's and Hardee's.

Marcia Twomey, Vinson Hall's director of development, became inspired when she visited a design house that showcased the new technology in accessibility. She contacted her friend and designer Moira Leite and an "Innovative Model of Living" was conceived. Or as resident Joe Gildea, a retired Navy officer said of Leite, "She's focused on making our units adapted for our use." Gildea makes the statement with confidence because it is through the input of residents like him, that the proposed changes have been decided.

"Vinson Hall is a partnership between the residents and the staff. The residents are very vocal and very active within the community. We think that's great," said Judy Bowes, Vinson Hall's administrator. The residents were given a survey that asked them what changes they would like to see in the efficiencies. "When Marcia (Twomey) came up with the idea, the first thing we did is reached out to our residents. We asked them for their concerns, wishes and daily challenges," said Bowes.

"All of you had wonderful suggestions," said Leite as she began her slideshow, "and I'm looking forward to the end of the presentation, so you can tell me if we made some of the wishes come true in the space."

According to the resident survey, the main issue with the current apartments is accessibility. The kitchen space in the existing efficiencies is poorly arranged and makes maneuvering in a wheelchair or walker difficult. Proposed built-in features, like bookcases and ironing boards that recess into the wall, would increase maneuverability and add useable square footage within the space.

Current plans to remodel also propose the use of queen-sized Murphy beds, the type that flip up and are stored flush into the wall when not in use. "These are not the old Murphy beds with the clunky doors. These are absolutely wonderful," said Leite. The new beds include a "Finger Lift" feature that makes raising and lowering the bed simple and effortless.

The other concern to residents is lighting. Leite is emphatic about how necessary good lighting is, especially in a smaller space. "If a facility isn't lit well, it's like a woman going to a ball with no jewelry," said Leite.

Leite explains how changes within an aging eye require special lighting. "With older eyes, the lens will yellow over time. It's (a condition) called presbyopia and it reduces the eye's ability to focus. So as the lens yellows, we need bluer light to see well," she said.

The addition of a motion-detecting lighting system would automatically illuminate a room when motion is sensed, greatly increasing visibility. "Wouldn't it be wonderful if when you walk in your door, the light goes on above you and you didn't have to reach around for a switch?" asked Leite. "Light level differences, color and glare all affect our ability to see in a space."

Even the smallest changes, such as an extra grab bar, raised surface heights and hardwood floors, will make a difference in the comfort of the residents and also reduce the number of injuries.

Extra grab bars near the shower entrance and shower doors that allow greater entry space into the shower, mean fewer slips and falls. Raised countertops provide a more comfortable work height and involve less back strain. Installing hardwood floors, as opposed to carpet, reduces the number of allergens in the air and also reduces tripping hazards.

Newer concepts like "Contrast Edges" and "Zero Transition" were also included in plans for the model apartment. Contrast edges provide a stronger visual difference in places like counter edges, flooring and thresholds. The concept involves using highly contrasting colors next to each other, for example a white counter top with a black edge. Zero transition eliminates the varied floor heights that can often snag a shoe or walker and cause a fall.

Many residents had questions during Leite's presentation, mostly concerning their individual needs. Leite addressed their concerns by saying, "Remember that much of the product that's in (this design) is here to show the possibilities. When (it comes to designing) your residence, we could come up with more specific needs for you as an individual. That will be important for us to consider as we're finalizing this."

CEO Kathleen Martin, a retired Navy rear admiral, is enthusiastic about the plans to update. "This is exciting for us, as well as the community at large. We have an opportunity to enhance living here for our seniors. I believe we have an opportunity to be a model for the community and to partner in outreach," she said. "We've been talking about better designs, better living. Right now we are beginning the journey of campus master planning. This just fits in very nicely. To look at design up front, so that when you bringing architects and engineers, it doesn't all get lost, is wonderful. If you had to move into an efficiency apartment, no matter what age you are, that (proposed model) would be a fabulous place to live."

Vinson Hall is located at 6251 Old Dominion Drive, McLean, Va. For information about Vinson Hall, visit www.vinsonhall.org or call 800-451-5121. To contact Moira Leite of M. Quinn Designs, e-mail her at leitemaq@mindspring.com or call 703-354-6359.

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