

## Retirement Living: Defining the Brief

an Insight by Wayne Schomberg  
Principal, ThomsonAdsett

**W**hen an organisation decides to construct a Seniors Living Development it is important to prepare a thorough brief to ensure the best development possible is constructed.

### Meeting market needs

In the Retirement Living Industry, due in part to the limited products that were historically available, it has not been uncommon for the briefs to the design team to be simple, and sometimes oversimplified. Indeed, on a number of occasions we have had a brief delivered along the lines of, "Well mate, we need a retirement village with about 200 units and a community centre, we did the figures and it seems to work. Just get on with it. You've done a few of these for us now and you know what to do."

As an architect specialising in projects in the Aged Care and Seniors Living Sector, this is a brief that can best be defined as bittersweet. It is gratifying that organisations seek out Thomson Adsett Architects because of our experience in the Aged Care and Seniors Living Sectors, and acknowledge our past performance in delivering Aged Care and Lifestyle projects. However, the industry is

undergoing dramatic change, driven by fundamental changes in the market demographics and growth. It is concerning to see a widely-held assumption that there is a norm generally suitable for Retirement Living, which encourages a "one size fits all" approach.

The concern is that a project may proceed without the objectives for the development being fully understood or the brief being properly formulated. Ultimately this may lead to a development that under-performs in either the short or long term when assessed against the real objectives and drivers for the development. The development may not achieve its full potential or provide the maximum benefit possible to the Client.

It is not uncommon for very sophisticated organisations to assume that something as simple as a mission statement will convey a brief to their Architect in sufficient detail. It is also not uncommon for small organisations to have established what their aims and goals within the sector are, without fully understanding how they are going to achieve them. To achieve the best result out of a decision to develop a site for Seniors Living, each organisation should ask themselves the following questions and provide their Architects with honest answers.



**Retirement Living: Defining the |****Question 1:**

*Where do we as an organisation fit into the Aged Care and Seniors Living Sector? What are we doing in this sector?*

In the Aged Care and Seniors Lifestyle Sector there are a number of "for profit", "not for profit" and government organisations developing sites for Seniors and Retirement Living. These organisations are working in this sector for reasons that vary dramatically and therefore have vastly differing organisational aims and goals. It is important that an organisation communicates what its organisational aims and goals are in both the short, medium and long terms. This will affect the way an organisation looks at development and the way a designer puts together a design.

**Question 2:**

*Why are we developing the site for Seniors Living?*

When deciding to proceed with a Seniors Living Development it is important to identify what drives the process. An organisation needs to consider that there are a number of drivers for any development and they may be social, economic or a combination of both. These drivers need to be well defined as this has an effect on the way a designer approaches the design of the development.

There are times when the answer to this question highlights that the drivers of a development may not be the same as the aims and goals of the organisation developing the site. For example, an organisation decides to develop a site to generate capital or income when its primary goals may be community or social in nature. The designer needs to be aware of these issues so that decisions related to the development are based upon the drivers of the development.

**Question 3:**

*What do we as an organisation want out of this development?*

An organisation needs to be clear as to the outcomes they want the development to achieve. From a social viewpoint, a method of evaluating the social outcomes needs to be identified to show how the social criteria will be assessed and ultimately the success of a development judged.

From an economic viewpoint, the way a development is designed when an organisation wishes to use the development as a way to generate capital in the short term differs from the approach a designer takes when an organisation wishes to use the development to generate a regular income in the long term. Similarly, whether an organisation intends to hold on to the development in the short, medium or long terms, also affects the way a development is designed. An organisation needs to be clear what economic outcomes they want the development to achieve. Most organisations lack the expertise to establish this briefing within their own organisational structure and outside expertise is required.

**Question 4:**

*What market are we addressing? What are we trying to sell?*

An organisation must establish what they are selling and ensure it is appropriate for the market they are selling it in. Once an organisation has decided they need to develop a site and have identified what they expect to achieve, it is important that the organisation accepts they are competing in a market and the success or otherwise of the development will depend on whether the product offered "For Sale" is appropriate for the market.

There are a number of market drivers for a Seniors Living Development and to maximize any development's potential, an organisation needs to understand that when a person is buying into

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a Senior's Living Development they may not be buying only a "House and Land Package" but rather a "Package of Lifestyle Options" that include a housing component. In addition to the housing type offered, the socio-economic demographic of the potential residents needs to be established so that lifestyle options, service options, care options, community options and financial options can be incorporated and sold as a total package. These issues need to be identified and the packages established so a development can be purpose-designed to maximize its market potential as well as its return to the organisation. As noted in Question 3, most organisations lack the expertise to establish this briefing within their own organisational structure and outside expertise is at times required.

### Question 5:

*How do we ensure that this development is sustainable into the Future? What is the life expectancy of the development?*

An organisation must establish what they intend to do with the development into the future, what their expectations for the development are in the future and what the life expectancy of the project really is.

Historically, sustainability has not been generally high on the list of priorities for an organisation with a short-term view of their developments. These organisations generally wish to maximize the profit from a development and move on to the next project. An organisation with this approach needs to consider that the buildings constructed have, at minimum, a 25 year life expectancy and statistically a proportion of the residents who purchase the housing will occupy it for a high proportion of its lifetime. A short-term view of sustainability will ultimately affect the viability of a development and once buyers become aware of this issue, they will address it in the market.

Economic sustainability has always been important to organisations that take a long-term view of their developments and consider their land and building stock as assets. Social and ecological sustainability has generally not been given the same level of importance. However, due to changes in social attitudes and government policy, we can expect that as time goes by economic, social and ecological sustainability will become of greater importance, and more in-depth consideration should be given to these issues during the inception stages of a project.

Without doubt if an Architect receives a "Good Brief" from an organisation, they have a greater chance of designing a development that addresses the real requirements of the client and the real drivers for the development. We would suggest considering a more in-depth review of the aims and goals of the organisation in light of the development, and that the specific drivers of the development be established and critically evaluated. Ultimately a more thorough and consistent brief will provide a development purpose-designed to maximize its market potential as well as its social and economic return to the organisation that generated the project.

### Wayne Schomberg

Wayne Schomberg is a specialist in Seniors Living design, and a Director of ThomsonAdsett.

