

CITYSCAPE | JUNE 25, 2020

The American Nursing Home Is a Design Failure

By Justin Davidson



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CF Møller's reimagining of a nursing-home complex in
Copenhagen. Photo: C.F. Møller

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Intelligence

The American Nursing Home Is a Design Failure

and yet with each year we succeed in surviving, we all face a crescendo of mockery, disdain, and neglect. Ageism is the most paradoxical form of bigotry. Rather than expressing contempt for others, it lashes out at our own futures. It expresses itself in innumerable ways — in the eagerness to sacrifice the elderly on the altar of the economy, in the willingness to keep them confined while everyone else emerges from their shells, and, in a popular culture that sees old age (when it sees it at all) as a purgatory of bingo nights. Stephen Colbert turned the notion of a 75-year-old antifa into a comic riff on geriatric terrorists, replete with images of octogenarians innocently locomoting with walkers, stair lifts, and golf carts.

In Sweden, elderly COVID patients were denied hospitalization, and in some cases palliative care edged over into “active euthanasia,” which seems barely distinguishable from execution. The *Wall Street Journal* quotes a nurse, Latifa Löfvenberg: “People suffocated, it was horrible to watch. One patient asked me what I was giving him when I gave him the morphine injection, and I lied to him. Many died before their time. It was very, very difficult.”

In this country, we have erected a vast apparatus of last-stop living arrangements that, during the pandemic, have proven remarkably successful at killing the very people they were supposed to care for. The disease that has roared through nursing homes is forcing us to look hard at a system we use to store large populations and recognize that, like prisons and segregated schools, it brings us shame.

The job of housing the old sits at the juncture of social services, the medical establishment, the welfare system, and the real-estate business. Those industries have come together to spawn another, geared mostly to affluent planners-ahead. With enough money and foresight, you can outfit your homes for your changing needs, hire staff, or perhaps sell some property to pay for a move into a deluxe assisted-living facility, a cross between a condo and a hotel with room-service doctors. “I don’t think the industry has pushed itself to advocate for the highly frail or the people needing higher levels of care and support,” USC architecture professor Victor Regnier told an interviewer in 2018. “Many providers are happy to settle for mildly impaired individuals that can

afford their services.” In other words, if you’re a sick, old person who’s not too old, not too sick, and not too poor, you’re golden. For everyone else, there are nursing homes.

The nursing-home system is an obsolete mess that emerged out of a bureaucratic misconception. In 1946, Congress passed the Hill-Burton Act, which paid to modernize hospitals that agreed to provide free or low-cost care. In 1954, the law was expanded to cover nursing homes, which consolidated the medicalization of senior care. Federal money summoned a wave of new nursing homes, which were built like hospitals, regulated by public-health authorities, and designed to deliver medical care with maximal efficiency and minimal cost. They reflect, reinforce, and perhaps resulted in, a society that pathologizes old age.

The government sees its mission as preventing the worst outcomes: controlling waste, preventing elder abuse, and minimizing unnecessary death. Traditional nursing homes, with their medical stations and long corridors, are designed for a constantly changing staff to circulate among residents who, ideally, remain inert, confined to beds that take up most of their assigned square footage. As in hospitals, two people share a room and a mini-bathroom with a toilet and a sink. Social life, dining, activities, and exercise are mostly regimented and take place in common areas, where dozens, even hundreds, of residents can get together and swap deadly germs. The whole apparatus is ideally suited to propagating infectious disease. David Grabowski, a professor of health-care policy at Harvard Medical School, and a team of researchers analyzed the spread of COVID-19 in nursing homes, and concluded that it didn’t matter whether they were well or shoddily managed, or if the population was rich or poor; if the virus was circulating outside the doors, staff almost invariably brought it inside. This wasn’t a bad-apples problem; it was systemic dysfunction.

Even when there is no pandemic to worry about, most of these places have pared existence for the long-lived back to its grim essentials. These are places nobody would choose to die. More important, they are places nobody would choose to live. “People ask me, ‘After COVID, is anyone going to want to go into a nursing home ever again?’ The answer is: Nobody ever wanted to go to one,” Grabowski says. And yet 1.5 million people do, mostly because they have no other choice. “If we’d seen a different way, maybe we’d have a different attitude about them,” Grabowski adds.

The fact that we haven’t represents a colossal failure of imagination — worse, it’s the triumph of indifference. “We baby boomers thought we would die without ever getting old,” says Dan

Reingold, the CEO of RiverSpring Health, which runs the Hebrew Home in Riverdale. “We upended every other system — suburbia, education, child-rearing, college campuses — but not long-term care. Now the pandemic is forcing us to take care of the design and delivery of long-term care just as the baby boomers are about to overwhelm the system.”

Most of us fantasize about aging in place: dying in the homes we have lived in for decades, with the occasional assist from friends, family, and good-hearted neighbors. The problem is not just that home care can be viciously expensive, or that stairs, bathtubs, and stoves pose new dangers as their owners age. It’s also that, in most places, living alone is deadly. When a longtime suburbanite loses the ability to drive, a car-dependent neighborhood can turn into a verdant prison, stranding the elderly indoors without access to public transit, shops, or even sidewalks. “Social isolation kills people,” Reingold says. “It’s the equivalent of smoking two packs a day. A colleague said something profound: ‘A lot of people are going to die of COVID who never got the coronavirus.’”

It’s not as if the only alternative to staying at home is a soul-sapping institution. Back when people traveled for pleasure, tourists regularly visited the Royal Hospital Chelsea in London, where, since the end of the 17th century, veterans have been able to trade in a military pension for a lifelong berth in a soldiers’ collective on an architecturally exquisite campus, located amid some of the city’s most expensive real estate. Those who can work tending the grounds, staffing the small museum, and leading tours. When health crises hit, they can move into the care home, which is on the grounds, overlooking immaculate gardens.

The example of an institution so humane that it seems almost wastefully archaic suggests that we don’t need to reinvent the nursing home, only build on humane principles that already succeed.

Get small.

Grabowski’s analysis revealed one variable in operation and design that afforded some protection from coronavirus: Intimate facilities fared far better than large ones. Fortunately, the country has a growing network of miniature nursing homes, certified by the Maryland organization the Green House Project. Typically, this is a cross between a graduate student house-share and a suburban development. Ten or 12 residents, each with a private room, share a sprawling ranch house. They take their meals together, at a long communal table, sharing their lives with a handful of staffers. “The kitchen is open, so you can see the food being prepared and smell it as

it's cooking," says Green House's senior director Susan Ryan. Daylight flows into the common areas and a few steps lead outdoors to a garden or patio.

Ryan says that the Green House network has fared relatively well during the pandemic. Its 229 nursing homes nationwide have experienced a total of 32 coronavirus infections. Only one resident has died of COVID-19. But resistance to a specific disease isn't the only way to judge an approach. Several years ago, Grabowski co-authored two papers evaluating the Green House protocol, and came away with the sense that a gut reaction might be more reliable than sober analysis. "I'm all about data, but it's hard not to walk in, take a look, and say, 'Yes, this is where I'd want to put my family member,'" he says.

The goal is to make people feel like they are able to continue the life they have lived for decades, rather than be suddenly transformed into superannuated livestock. "You want a place to feel normal, which is the opposite of institutional," says Martin Siefering, an architect at the firm Perkins Eastman. "Shiny vinyl floors are not normal. Loud mechanical systems, having meals served to you on a tray — these things aren't normal."

The suburban-style protocol is an awkward fit for dense urban settings like New York, where the high cost of real estate conflicts with low Medicaid reimbursements, and airiness is luxury. The New Jewish Home, an Upper West Side fixture, hired Perkins Eastman to adapt the Green House model for a new 20-story building on West 97th Street, with separate 13-person pods stacked by floor instead of spread out on an estate. The project ran into a NIMBY firestorm. Backed by city, but opposed by Assemblyman Daniel O'Donnell, Borough President Gale Brewer, and City Councilmember Mark Levine, as well as an association of neighbors, the project was ultimately defeated in court on a zoning question that had little to do with how best to provide long-term care to seniors. The result is that, in New York, the state of the art is grim.

Focus on how people live, rather than on how long.

The guru of the old-age good life is Hans Becker, an elfin 78-year-old Dutchman who spent two decades as CEO of the social-services agency Humanitas and now runs a nursing home of his own, Residence Roosenburch, outside Rotterdam. The design matters less than the philosophy. "The first value is that people are the bosses of their own lives. We have a 'yes' culture — we are not allowed to say no," he says. Becker involves residents in the life of the place, encouraging them to cook, party, and gather for a drink at the in-house bar. "A barkeeper with velvet eyes and white teeth is just as important as a doctor," he says.

Becker can sound glib about his charges' physical ailments, but he is emphatic in his opinion that the old see too many doctors. "You should make an organization where people don't complain too quick. In nursing homes, the residents are right away complaining, 'Doctor, my knee's hurting.' So the doctor comes, and the nurse, and the physical therapist. But that knee is going and it's not coming back. It's better to focus on other things. Happiness lowers cost."

In effect, Becker believes that the struggle against infirmity and pain is a losing battle and waging it too vigorously carries with it a heavy psychological toll. The pandemic has been ruinous for his ethic of maximizing joy.

"Now the government says you cannot have visitors, you cannot peel potatoes, you have to stay in your room, you can't be busy," he grumbles. "To be active is very important for your happiness and self-esteem. Use it or lose it: If you don't walk, you lose the capacity to walk. Now you can't go out, everything is done for you. So the home just becomes a waiting room for death. But it's better to die happy and a little earlier than to die in loneliness and misery."

De-isolate the old.

Long-term-care facilities, almost by definition, are old-age ghettos, where the frail know only each other, and they get accustomed to losing friends faster than they can make new ones. Cities can alleviate this problem by integrating senior residences into mixed neighborhoods — which is one reason to regret the failure of the New Jewish Home's Upper West Side project — but often it's not enough to trust to chance and demographics.

The Danish architecture firm CF Møller and the landscape firm Tredje Natur (Third Nature) won a 2016 competition to reimagine a complex of nursing homes in the Norrebro neighborhood of Copenhagen. "Norrebro was a hard-core working-class area," says Mads Mandrup Hansen, a partner at CF Møller. "Today, different ethnicities and generations are intermixed. So if you build this facility, you fight gentrification, build a bridge between generations, and prolong quality of life. We basically open up the doors to the neighborhood." (The project stalled for a while, but is now beginning construction.)

A series of three linked courtyards is crisscrossed by paths and lined with stores, clinics, and social services. The goal is to fuse the complex with the city, to mix populations, and stimulate casual contact — all wonderful goals in normal times and completely at odds with life in

lockdown. Hansen admits that the project was conceived pre-pandemic and doesn't adapt easily to a potential future in which people gravitate to barriers and separation. "That will have to be down to the conduct of the staff," he says.

Demand better.

In a segmented industry where the interests of nursing-home and assisted-living operators compete for meager government funds, reforming the system will involve rewriting rules and spending more. "If the government put \$300 billion into elder care, they could transform it," Reingold says. "That's an investment, not an expense. Spending more on quality long-term care would save a fortune in hospital stays." A night in a nursing home costs Medicaid \$200 to \$300, depending on the state, while a night in a hospital can cost ten times that much.

The elderly don't take to the streets, at least not on their own behalf. Some join the young in protesting outrages they have endured for decades, energized by the hope that their children and grandchildren won't have to. But when it comes to their own daily needs and indignities, they prefer to lobby, vote, and, where necessary, pay. The rest of us are mostly content to hope that the problem will solve itself — or we were, until the pandemic made the system's failures unavoidably stark.

"There's a lot of interest in this topic right now," says Siefering, the architect. "It's too bad that interest came as a result of a lot of people dying, but it would be a shame to waste that kind of death."

**A version of this article appears in the July 6, 2020, issue of New York Magazine. [Subscribe Now!](#)*

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10 COMMENTS

THE **Intelligencer** FEED

6:17 P.M. PENNSYLVANIA

Trump's Pennsylvania Recount Effort in Disarray Under Giuliani: Report

By MATT STIEB

Giuliani, meanwhile, just made a flailing appearance defending one of Trump's remaining lawsuits in the state.



4:39 P.M. MONOPOLY

Amazon Will Sell PrimeInsulin for Your PrimeDiabetes

By SARAH JONES

Monopolies helped cause a health-care crisis. Another now steps in to profit.

3:41 P.M. 2020 ELECTIONS

Is Black Voter Turnout a Problem for Democrats in Georgia?

By ED KILGORE

Yes, Black voter turnout should be higher. But that's not an excuse for southern Dems to return to their old habit of focusing on white conservatives.

MOST POPULAR

1. Trump's New Vote Fraud Theory Is So Much Crazier Than You Realize

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4. Un-Normalizing America's Third Wave of the Pandemic

By DAVID WALLACE-WELLS

5. Trump COVID Adviser Scott Atlas Is on a Hot Streak of Dumb Ideas

By MATT STIEB

2:25 P.M. EARLY AND OFTEN

Lindsey Graham Pressured Georgia Secretary of State to Toss Legal Ballots

By CHAS DANNER

Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger says he's alarmed by the efforts of Graham and other Trump allies to challenge Biden's victory in Georgia.

1:48 P.M. JUST ASKING QUESTIONS

CNN's John King: 'I'm Addicted' to the Magic Wall

By DAN HYMAN

His other habit during a very long Election Week? "My doctor's probably gonna kill me, but I have a *pot* of coffee."

12:46 P.M. STRIKE

Nearly 800 Philly Nurses Strike Over Staffing Shortages

By HANNAH GOLD

After months on the front lines of the pandemic, nurses are now battling their employers, too.

12:15 P.M. HOT POD

The Rise of Right-Wing Podcasts Is Upon Us

By NICHOLAS QUAH

The other side of the *Pod Save America* coin is turning up.

11:04 A.M.

Senator Chuck Grassley, 87, is isolating after COVID-19 exposure

Republican Sen. Chuck Grassley of Iowa was exposed to Covid-19 and will immediately quarantine, according to a statement from his office Tuesday morning.

Grassley, who as president pro tempore is the most senior Republican in the chamber, is 87-years-old, putting him at a vulnerable age for contracting the virus.

... "I learned today that I've been exposed to the coronavirus," he said in a statement from his office. "I will follow my doctors' orders and immediately quarantine as I await my test results. I'm feeling well and not

currently experiencing any symptoms, but it's important we all follow public health guidelines to keep each other healthy."

GOP Sen. Chuck Grassley of Iowa isolating after Covid exposure

—CNN

10:06 A.M. THE NATIONAL INTEREST

A Disturbing Number of Republicans Support Trump's Coup Attempt

By JONATHAN CHAIT

Opposing a coup that's certain to fail ought to be easy.

10:00 A.M. PRESIDENTS

Trump Wouldn't Be the First President to Try a Comeback

By ED KILGORE

And it's a lot harder than it looks.

9:45 A.M. CRIME

What Happened to Quawan Charles?

By BRIDGET READ

A Black teen was found dead in a field. His family says he looked "like he'd been tortured." Law enforcement still hasn't ruled his death a homicide.

9:36 A.M.

Biden isn't interested in devoting the next four years to holding Trump accountable

President-elect Joe Biden has privately told advisers that he doesn't want his presidency to be consumed by investigations of his predecessor, according to five people familiar with the discussions, despite pressure from some Democrats who want inquiries into President Donald Trump, his policies and members of his administration.

Biden has raised concerns that investigations would further divide a country he is trying to unite and risk making every day of his presidency about Trump, said the sources, who spoke on background to offer details of private conversations.

They said he has specifically told advisers that he is wary of federal tax investigations of Trump or of challenging any orders Trump may issue granting immunity to members of his staff before he leaves office. One adviser said Biden has made it clear that he "just wants to move on."

Another Biden adviser said, "He's going to be more oriented toward fixing the problems and moving forward than prosecuting them."

Biden hopes to avoid divisive Trump investigations, preferring unity

—NBC News

8:28 A.M. CORONAVIRUS

Trump COVID Adviser Scott Atlas Is on a Hot Streak of Dumb Ideas

By MATT STIEB

On Monday, Atlas said state lockdowns caused the new case surge and encouraged some elderly Americans to enjoy their “final Thanksgiving” with family.

7:00 A.M. POLITICS

Why ‘Socialism’ Killed Democrats in Florida

By BEN JACOBS

Why an old line of attack found new success in 2020.

7:00 A.M. GAMES

COVID Is an Existential Crisis for College Basketball

By WILL LEITCH

Thanks to unlucky timing, no sport has been as badly hit by the pandemic.

11/16/2020 PRESIDENT TRUMP

Trump Asked About Options to Strike Iran Last Week: Report

By MATT STIEB

The president was talked down from his reported consideration of an attack on Iran’s growing stockpile of nuclear material.

11/16/2020 HATE CRIMES

FBI Data Shows Hate Crimes Reached Highest Level in a Decade Last Year

By MATT STIEB

Hate-motivated killings were at their highest since the bureau began collecting the information in the early 1990s.

11/16/2020 HIGHER EDUCATION**Student-Loan Debt Is Immoral***By* SARAH JONES

If you're angry at the idea of relief, you should be furious at the system.

11/16/2020 2020 ELECTIONS**Which House Races Still Aren't Called?***By* ED KILGORE

A narrowed Democratic margin in the House could swell or shrink as the last seven races are eventually called.

11/16/2020 THE ENVIRONMENT**Trump Admin Now Rushing to Imperil Arctic Refuge***By* MADELEINE AGGELER

Before he leaves office, Trump is trying to let oil companies drill in America's largest wildlife refuge.

11/16/2020**On Instagram, former First Lady Michelle Obama criticized Trump's "groundless conspiracy theories" about Biden's win and called for a "smooth transition of power"**

This week, I've been reflecting a lot on where I was four years ago ...

Donald Trump had spread racist lies about my husband that had put my family in danger. That wasn't something I was ready to forgive. But I knew that, for the sake of our country, I had to find the strength and maturity to put my anger aside. So I welcomed Melania Trump into the White House and talked with her about my experience, answering every question she had—from the heightened scrutiny that comes with being First Lady to what it's like to raise kids in the White House.

I knew in my heart it was the right thing to do—because our democracy is so much bigger than anybody's ego. Our love of country requires us to respect the results of an election even when we don't like them or wish it had gone differently—the presidency doesn't belong to any one individual or any one party. To pretend that it does, to play along with these groundless conspiracy theories—whether for personal or political gain—is to put our country's health and security in danger. This isn't a game. So I want to urge all Americans, especially our nation's leaders, regardless of party, to honor the electoral process and do your part to encourage a smooth transition of power, just as sitting presidents have done throughout our history.

—@michelleobama on Instagram

11/16/2020 INTELLIGENCER CHATS

How Worried Is Team Biden About Trump's Transition Obstruction?

By GABRIEL DEBENEDETTI AND BENJAMIN HART

The president-elect will be sworn in on January 20, but stonewalling has consequences — especially during a pandemic.

11/16/2020 LAME-DUCK SESSION

Lame-Duck Session Begins With Low Expectations

By ED KILGORE

Leadership elections should confirm the status quo, and there will likely be another stopgap spending bill with limited COVID-19 stimulus.

11/16/2020 THE NUMBERS

It's Not Your Imagination: Manhattan Rents Really Have Fallen a Lot

By JEFF ANDREWS

And it's likely to continue for a while.

11/16/2020 THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Trump's New Vote Fraud Theory Is So Much Crazier Than You Realize

By JONATHAN CHAIT

Soros, China, and (deceased) Hugo Chavez designed software to steal elections?

11/16/2020

After four years of leaking to journalists, Trump staffers will soon make their back-stabbing gossip available in book form

Donald Trump's former campaign manager Brad Parscale expects to sign a lucrative book deal, a development that's rattled some members of the president's team, according to three people familiar with the matter.

Parscale, one of Trump's closest and most trusted allies for nearly a decade, has told multiple people he is writing a book. Some of the president's advisers are concerned Parscale could reveal damaging information about Trump and his family, the people said.

Parscale has told people he's signed with a literary agent and is in negotiations with a publisher. The potential deal is expected to be worth seven figures, according to two of the people. The former campaign chief is said to have written some of the manuscript already. His potential publisher and publication date are unclear.

Former Trump Campaign Manager Brad Parscale Plans to Write Book

Bloomberg

11/16/2020 COVID-19**Moderna Says Its Vaccine Is 94.5 Percent Effective in Early Data***By* BENJAMIN HART

As the U.S. struggles with record COVID-19 case numbers, the light at the end of the tunnel looks to be getting closer.

11/16/2020 CORONAVIRUS**Trump COVID Adviser Tells Michigan to 'Rise Up' Against New Restrictions***By* MATT STIEB

Scott Atlas's advice comes a little over a month after the FBI stopped a militia plot to rise up and kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer.

11/16/2020**Iota is the second hurricane to hit Central America in less than two weeks**

Iota was upgraded to a Category 4 hurricane early Monday morning, the National Hurricane Center said, warning that the storm was likely to bring catastrophic winds, life-threatening storm surge and extreme rainfall to Central America, an area still recovering from Hurricane Eta less than two weeks ago.

The storm was 170 miles southeast of Cabo Gracias Dios on the border of Nicaragua and Honduras with maximum sustained winds of 145 miles per hour, the National Hurricane Center in Miami said. Iota was forecast to make landfall in the area on Monday night.

Iota, Barreling Toward Central America, Becomes a Category 4 Hurricane**—New York Times****11/16/2020****Johnson was hospitalized with COVID-19 in April but made a full recovery**

Boris Johnson is self-isolating but continuing to work from Downing Street following contact with an MP who later tested positive for coronavirus, a No. 10 spokesperson said Sunday evening.

The British prime minister met with a small group of MPs in Downing Street on Thursday morning, one of whom, Lee Anderson, subsequently developed symptoms and tested positive for coronavirus. Johnson will continue to address the country during his isolation period and will discuss options for taking part in parliamentary business remotely.

"The prime minister will follow the rules and is self-isolating," the spokesperson said in a statement. "The prime minister is well and does not have any symptoms of COVID-19."

Boris Johnson self-isolates after contact tests positive for coronavirus

—Politico



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