

Deloraine Aged Care Greensborough is undergoing a \$3.5m update and extension. Photos supplied by the builder, Cobild



A face lift for older facilities

With the right planning and design, older facilities can offer a viable and attractive alternative to luxury developments, writes **ROBERT CAULFIELD**.

Older aged care facility operators have a major challenge in keeping pace with the likes of luxury complexes. These large developments offer swimming pools, gymnasiums, cinemas, restaurants, and beautiful grounds.

What older developments often don't realise is that they actually have several advantages. With the right planning and design, they can offer a viable, more attractive alternative.

At a basic level, older facilities run into trouble when organisations don't perform regular upgrades. They become antiquated and run down.

As an architect specialising in the design of aged care facilities, I have been asked by some bigger operators wanting to expand, to investigate older accommodations that have gone broke to determine their suitability for purchase.

In many cases the amount that needs to be spent means they are not viable. If the owners had kept up an ongoing program of upgrading and maintaining their facility, then it would have been a different story.

These days small operators have few choices when it comes to survival – upgrade, sell, or end



Four Deloraine residents were given honorary project manager roles for the upgrade of their facility.



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in a serious financial predicament, and possibly face bankruptcy.

We advise all our aged care clients to follow a logical system that provides a mechanism to add great value and profitability to their business, regardless of whether they want to sell or expand.

Firstly, a floor plan is essential so you know what you have to work with and how to best maximise the space. If you don't have a floor plan, get the building and site measured. Sometimes even minor amendments can achieve interesting results.

In the case of a current job, the upgrade of Donwood Community Aged Care responded to market preference for single rooms.

The rooms that were previously double occupancy were made into apartment suites with a bedroom, sitting area, kitchenette and their own small outdoor area. Some of the rooms went from being tight two bedders to generous sub apartments where they could substantially increase the refundable accommodation deposits.

Another major asset small operators have is the family nature of the business. Treating residents like a member of an extended family is a unique selling point, so the second important step is resident engagement.

Determine the residents and their family's lifestyle values, what they like about living there, and where things might be improved. This may reveal the need for more lounge rooms, newer furniture and more open spaces.

During recent upgrades to Deloraine Aged Care in Greensborough, the operators engaged residents at the planning stage, asking them what they would like to see in their homes in relation to décor and facilities.

Several residents were keenly interested in the process. They also enjoyed being able to view construction from the dining room and often when I was there at lunch time, I would sit down with them and explain what was going on.

Deloraine nominated four residents as honorary project managers and presented them with safety vests and helmets. It was their task to bring progress reports back to the other residents, everyone had a feeling of involvement in the development rather than having something thrust upon them.

It was important for me as an architect to engage them in this way because this is not just a building, it's about how people live in their environment.

Similarly, during Donwood Community Aged Care's construction period, the CEO set up a viewing area at a window at the end of a hallway. We handed out safety vests and helmets.

It's a bit of theatre but it was also a special experience, which created a sense of inclusiveness, and the residents had a sense of being valued family members.

Recent trends show bedrooms are getting larger and there's a better standard of accommodation throughout, so you have to compete on quality, not just price.

Generations are getting wealthier and because the children are so involved, you have to meet their expectations in the design process. They have seen places with luxury facilities like hydrotherapy and swimming pools, gyms and barbecue areas and they think it's fantastic. The fact that they don't get used much is irrelevant.

Employing an architect is the third vital step because they know how to join all the dots and make the best of the residents' desires and the ongoing viability of the business.

An architect experienced in aged care developments will come up with the best, most cost-effective solutions to improve on what is there.

It might mean building over a carpark, as in the case of Greenway Gardens Aged Care in Heathmont, Victoria, adding on extra storeys, which could be less expensive than buying more land or the million-dollar-plus house next door.

If you have a good business plan and are able to get finance, there's no doubt that a well-run aged care business is in demand.

When the residents of Donwood moved into the first stage of the upgrade, they were extremely happy with the result, which for me as an architect is thrilling. I know that community engagement and careful planning were vital factors in its success. ■

Robert Caulfield is managing director of Caulfield Krivanek Architecture.

A work in progress

Nestled in the leafy suburb of Greensborough, Melbourne, a suburb established in the 1850s, is Deloraine Aged Care, a classic family-owned business.

It is currently having a \$3.5 million update and extension. Being in such an established suburb, aged care facilities are in high demand.

Through their astute management, staged upgrades and clever design, Deloraine has managed to stay viable in the face of competition from several new local luxury facilities.

The renovation maximises space on a tight block in several ways.

We lined the 6-metre-high sloping ceilings with timber to create a sense of a grand home with large lofty living and dining rooms and designed generous modern bedrooms with small internal courtyards.

The new building was constructed around an open space so that residents can sit outdoors in comfort protected from wind and weather. Compact external spaces allowed for maximum building on the block.

As architects, we would happily choose the décor, however we encouraged the Deloraine family to select furnishings to personalise it. We advised them that it is their character and their family; imagine what the residents would enjoy.

We have worked with the 60-year-old facility for 12 years. Due to its age, there have been a number of unexpected faults and problems, which have been rectified along the way to bring it up to 2017 standards.

To do this the client followed our process to maximise the number of rooms economically, while allowing for unexpected adjustments due to age.

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