



Bridging Urban Living and Senior Care: Designing Benchmark at Alexandria for Connection and Independence

Project Challenges

Transforming an existing office building into a senior living community presented a unique set of design considerations:

- Adapt an existing commercial building and its unconventional footprint to support assisted living and memory care.
- Create a senior living environment that feels connected to the distinctly urban character of West Alexandria.
- Support resident independence, comfort, and engagement while maintaining efficient spaces for staff.
- Select furnishings and materials capable of performing in high-use and higher-acuity environments.
- Balance durability, cleanability, and accessibility with a warm, hospitality-driven aesthetic.
- Create meaningful connections between the interiors, surrounding architecture, and broader community.

Kwalu Solutions

Kwalu furniture was selected throughout Benchmark at Alexandria to support the project's performance and resident-experience goals. Solutions included furnishings that:

- Deliver long-term durability in high-use senior living environments.
- Support cleanability and ongoing maintenance needs.
- Provide comfortable, supportive seating appropriate for older adults.
- Bring a warm, residential aesthetic to dining, gathering, and memory care spaces.
- Perform in higher-acuity environments where furniture is subject to particularly intensive daily use.
- Support a consistent design language across main dining, casual dining, private gathering, library, salon, and memory care spaces.



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Erin Rinehardt
Project Manager, StudioSIX5

Reimagining an Urban Building for Senior Living

In West Alexandria, Virginia, an existing office building presented an unusual opportunity: transform a commercial structure into a senior living community designed around connection, independence, and quality of life.

Rather than starting with a traditional senior living footprint, the project team worked within the existing building and added seven floors to create a community serving assisted living and memory care residents.

For StudioSIX5, the unconventional starting point became part of the project's identity.

“We really tried to lean into that urban setting,” said Erin Rinehardt, Project Manager at StudioSIX5. “It’s so different from a typical Benchmark project from previous properties we have worked on with the Benchmark team.”

Located within a mixed-use area near shopping, dining, and other everyday amenities, the community offered something particularly valuable for residents: an opportunity to remain connected to life beyond the building.

That connection aligned closely with Benchmark Senior Living's emphasis on supporting senior health, quality of life, and independence.

Connecting Past and Present

The design needed to feel distinctly rooted in Alexandria.

StudioSIX5 interpreted that history through a contemporary lens, pairing warm, bold colors with layered neutrals and textures. The result is a modern, casual environment that acknowledges Alexandria's character while embracing the more urban identity of West Alex.

"We really wanted to pay homage to the history of Alexandria," Rinehardt explained, "but knew that we needed to lean into the more urban side of this area to appeal to future residents and their families."

Wellness-driven and biophilic design strategies further strengthened the connection between the interior, exterior architecture, and surrounding community.

The goal was to create a sense of place, one that belonged specifically to its setting rather than feeling like a senior living community that could exist anywhere.



Hospitality Designed Around Daily Life

That sense of place continues inside through spaces designed to support the rhythms of residents' everyday lives.

The first floor is dedicated entirely to shared gathering areas, including the lobby, main dining room, private dining, casual bistro, living spaces, an arts and multipurpose room, private family gathering space, and library.

Additional amenities throughout the community include a salon, fitness space, physical and occupational therapy areas, and a rooftop patio.

For StudioSIX5, this variety is an essential part of senior living design.

“We really try to embrace the hospitality aspect,” Rinehardt said. “We’re designing spaces where the residents don’t have to leave to do things like go to a salon or socialize with friends.”

Rather than creating one prescribed experience, the community gives residents different ways to spend their time, from gathering around a fireplace or sharing a meal to creating in the arts room or finding a quiet corner in the library.

Even areas created from challenging portions of the existing footprint became opportunities. At the ends of corridors, spaces receiving abundant natural light were transformed into small “sunrooms,” each with their own color story.



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Designing for Independence

Behind the hospitality-inspired aesthetic is careful consideration of how residents and staff use the community every day.

StudioSIX5 worked closely with the Benchmark team to create layouts that support staff efficiency while preserving a sense of autonomy for residents.

Furniture selection was intentional.

“Especially for senior living, we’re really focusing on how chairs function,” Rinehardt explained. “Are they easy to get in and out of? Are they easy to clean?”

Material and furniture specifications considered durability, stain resistance, moisture barriers, cleanability, and antimicrobial finishes. Contrasting materials were also incorporated to help residents with visual impairments more easily distinguish surfaces and furnishings.

These decisions reflect StudioSIX5's broader senior living design principles, which emphasize comfort, hospitality, longevity, and timelessness alongside the practical demands of everyday use.



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Project Manager, StudioSIX5

Performance Where it Matters Most

Kwalu furniture was used extensively throughout the community, including the main dining room, casual bistro, private gathering spaces, library, salon, and memory care environments.

The memory care floors were an especially important application.

Each memory care floor includes its own dining and multipurpose spaces, allowing residents to access daily activities without needing to move between floors. Tunable lighting helps staff adjust the environment as the day progresses, while dedicated quiet rooms provide spaces for one-on-one support when residents need a calmer setting.

Kwalu furnishings were specified throughout these areas with long-term performance in mind.

“Kwalu’s quality of construction and focus on durable materials is the reason we consistently specify their product in our higher-acuity senior living communities,” Rinehardt said.

For the design team, durability is about more than surviving daily wear. Furniture has to continue functioning and show minimal wear for the environment years after installation.

“Furniture takes a beating in these environments,” Rinehardt said. “Kwalu’s quality ensures that the products will still function and look great five, even ten, years down the line.”

That longevity supports the project’s larger goal: creating a community that remains comfortable, attractive, and functional for the people who depend on it every day.

Creating Spaces for Connection

Some of the project’s most successful spaces are those that encourage residents to connect on their own terms.

One of the design team’s favorites is a private gathering room that families can reserve when visiting residents. Two book-matched live-edge tables create a central focal point, surrounded by Kwalu seating.

These different settings give residents opportunities to engage with others while maintaining a sense of choice in how and where they spend their time.

That philosophy extends beyond the walls of the community. Its urban location places residents near grocery, dining, and retail amenities, allowing Benchmark at Alexandria to remain an integral part of the surrounding neighborhood rather than separate from it.



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From Repurposed Building to “Showstopper”

When Rinehardt returned for the community’s opening celebration, she had the opportunity to experience the completed environment alongside residents, families, and Benchmark leadership.

For the StudioSIX5 team, seeing an unconventional office building transformed into a warm senior living community was particularly meaningful.



Benchmark Chairman and CEO Tom Grape offered perhaps the most memorable assessment of the finished project, calling the community a “showstopper.”

For Rinehardt, the compliment affirmed what the team had worked to achieve: a space in harmony with its architecture and surroundings that still responds to the needs of the people who call it home.

The completed community feels less like an adaptation of an office building and more like a natural part of West Alexandria: urban, sophisticated, connected, and distinctly its own.

As Rinehardt described it, the project “beautifully bridges the gap between the young urban environment and the senior demographic,” creating opportunities for connection between the two.

Through adaptive reuse, hospitality-driven design, durable furnishings, and a strong focus on resident independence, Benchmark at Alexandria demonstrates that senior living does not have to exist apart from the community around it. It can be an active contributor to it.

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