

Designing Dining Rooms

for Senior Living



Designed by Thoma-Holec Design, LLC

White Paper



A Senior Living Facility Has Unique Dining Room Requirements.

“The residents, especially those with ambulatory and diminished faculty or mobility issues, must feel comfortable and safe when using the furniture,” observes Leah Bauer, Allied Member ASID, Associate IIDA, associate and senior interior designer in the Omaha office of Leo A Daly.

Amy Sickeler IIDA, AAHID, LEED AP BD+C LEED AP, design principal and principal in the Atlanta office of Perkins+Will agrees, **“As we age, it becomes more difficult to get up and down, our arms and skin become more fragile, so we need smooth or padded chair arms. We don’t want sharp or cold chair arms, and even fabric can be rough on skin, so I use natural wood with a durable finish.”**

Choosing the best tables and chairs for a senior living dining area is daunting so let’s start with some important considerations.

Dining Room Chairs

Durability is a top priority. Ask **“how often will this be used, is it a formal dining room or a multi-purpose space with frequent reconfiguration?”** Wear and tear is different, depending on usage. To ensure durability and avoid liability issues consider these points.

1 Chair Frames

Commercial chairs are manufactured around the world using different species and grades of wood. U.S.-made chair frames are generally made of oak or maple, chairs from Asia are often rubber wood, and European imports generally utilize beech. Maple and beech are preferred by most senior living facilities. They offer more strength in the joints, natural antimicrobial properties, and clear straight grain patterns that accept high performance finish colors.

Chairs should have mortise and tenon joints and a strong substructure, using corner blocks to prevent a chair racking or loosening.

Seniors prefer the easy access of an arm chair. Some chairs integrate arms with the front leg, others bolt arms onto the side of the seat. Arms attached to the front leg are usually the strongest solution although side attached arms, if securely fastened, can be acceptable. Avoid arm chairs which conceal how the arm is attached, you may not be able to re-tighten when it inevitably loosens over time.

Chairs Should Have

Soft, rounded edges and dimensions sized for smaller individuals.



Dimensions depend on the style, but Bauer indicates, “seat width should be at least 19.5 inches wide, with some bariatric sized (larger width) seating added. The seat depth should be 19 to 20 inches.”



Casters on dining chairs in senior living facilities are a Catch-22. They assist residents in pushing up to and back from a table, but can also allow a chair to roll back, resulting in falls. Susan DiMotta, AAHID, IIDA, LEED AP, a principal in the New York office of Perkins Eastman suggests. “Put casters on front legs only so chairs don’t roll away when residents are sitting and can be lifted slightly from the back to scoot residents closer to the table or allow them to push away. We avoid wheels on hard surface flooring and if clients insist, we ask them to sign a disclaimer.”



When it comes to **suspension systems**, some chairs offer spring seats, others use elastic webbing and the lowest-cost versions have foam atop a hard seat board. A spring seat provides the optimum long-term comfort and will facilitate good circulation.

Check that the chairs are manufactured with high-quality foam as measured by weight and reflex. Commercial grade foam needs a minimum rating of 1.8 lbs. per square foot or more. The reflex, or softness, is measured by Indentation Load Deflection (ILD), which impacts comfort. When comparing chair prices, it is imperative to know the foam specification, otherwise you will compare ‘apples with oranges’.

2 Finish

Residents often use skin lotions, which can break down certain wood finishes, and regular cleaning creates wear. Luckily many different commercial finishes are available, the most popular being conversion varnishes, UV cured, or polyurethane.

Sickeler prefers natural wood, without polyurethane which, especially if exposed to sunlight, can be damaged. Additionally, wood has natural antimicrobial properties, superior to those of plastic and metal.



3 Fabric

Fabric is a critical component in creating a good-looking dining room, and there are a number of considerations in making the right choice.



Minimum Abrasion Rating

The Wyzenbeek abrasion rating is a fabric's ability to withstand surface rubbing, the industry standard is 30,000 double rubs. "We prefer 40,000 to 50,000 double rubs," says Brenda Hall, president of HDB Design Group, LLC, Daytona Beach, "so the fabric will better retain its looks".



Stain Blocking

In senior living facilities, where fabric is subjected to spills and incontinence, soil and stain resistance fabric treatments are important. Michael Dobin, owner of Valley Forge Fabrics in Pompano Beach, Fla., explains that stain blockers are finishes applied to fabric after it is woven. Scott Bruce, in the Design and Construction Department of IHG, Atlanta, describes a specific stain blocker called Nano-Tex®, which creates a barrier against liquids, protecting both the fabric and the foam beneath it. Scott said "It's a neat thing to see, but it works."



Fiber Content

The right fiber content makes a positive contribution to fabric's wear and tear. "We prefer to choose a blend of polyester and nylon," says Hall, "which is a practical approach that ensures the fabric looks great even after several years. We try not to use too many natural fibers as they don't hold up as well."

Dobin adds that 100-percent polyester is often used, "because it's traditionally the most durable fiber for a dining chair" offering beauty, value and easy to clean.

Yet another option for high-use facilities is coated fabric. "This is a generic term for polyurethane vinyl," says Rosanne Veljkovic, director of Northeast sales for Irvine, Calif.-based Momentum Group. "It looks like vinyl and is the highest-performance fabric you can choose, it cleans easily with soap and water and almost any cleaner, per the manufacturer's instructions." Designers will often specify a chair with a vinyl seat and a fabric back.





Pattern and Color

Pattern and color is imperative to creating a great-looking dining room. First, consider the scope of the project, including the room's theme: Is it traditional? transitional? contemporary? Next is pattern, with some opting for small patterns that hide dirt and stains. "I like to mix patterns for stain forgiveness that a solid color doesn't provide," says Hall.

Finally, there is color, and Hall admits that it can be a fine line: "I like to use a combination of mostly neutral colors with little pops of color." Dobin agrees, indicating that, if you have a fabric that's nearly 100-percent stain proof, you can safely choose light or dark fabrics. However, a medium-colored, print fabric is best for hiding stains.

Dining Room Tables

Durability is a top priority when it comes to choosing dining room tables and there are four additional, important considerations.



1 Size

Most facilities opt for 42-inch square tables as they provide enough personal space but can be pushed into a group for a special occasion. Radius corners prevent injury when walking by a table and waterfall or bullnose edges ensure forearms aren't hurt. Sickeler also notes that sharp edges are not durable and damage easily. Consider adjustable-height tables, especially if you need to put chair arms or wheelchairs under the table. Since facility chairs usually require arms it is not possible to use certain tops, such as those with deep aprons, so take careful note of all dimensions advises DiMotta.

2 Base

The most popular tables are those with pedestals which allow easy access for chairs or wheelchairs and eliminate knee-bumping on sensitive skin. "A pedestal allows you to pull in more people if you want a collegial environment," affirms Sickeler, "and socializing is imperative for emotional well being." Cast iron or steel bases are both desirable, as they are heavy and do not tip if the base is sized properly to the top.

Most visitors make decisions about the quality of a senior living facility based on first impressions. Nothing speaks louder about quality than beautiful furniture which enhances residents' comfort and safety. As you work toward your decision, recognize that dining is the most important part of the day for a great majority of seniors. **"A dining facility is a place to nourish one's body and soul,"** Sickeler concludes.



3 Materials

Laminate or laminated wood veneer such as Veneer-Art® by Lamin-Art® provide surfaces which are beautiful, durable and easy to maintain. Natural wood tops require regular maintenance and should never be in direct sunlight. Be sure your facility is willing to maintain a wood table before making that investment.

4 Multi-Purpose Folding tables.

Tables that flip or fold and can be rolled for storage have become popular in recent years. This is an important feature for multipurpose spaces. "The tables can be moved to the side," DiMotta notes, "for such activities as dance, aerobics or performances. To ensure they don't look institutional and are safe, choose tables with larger pedestals and the ability to hide the wheels when the table is set in place."

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