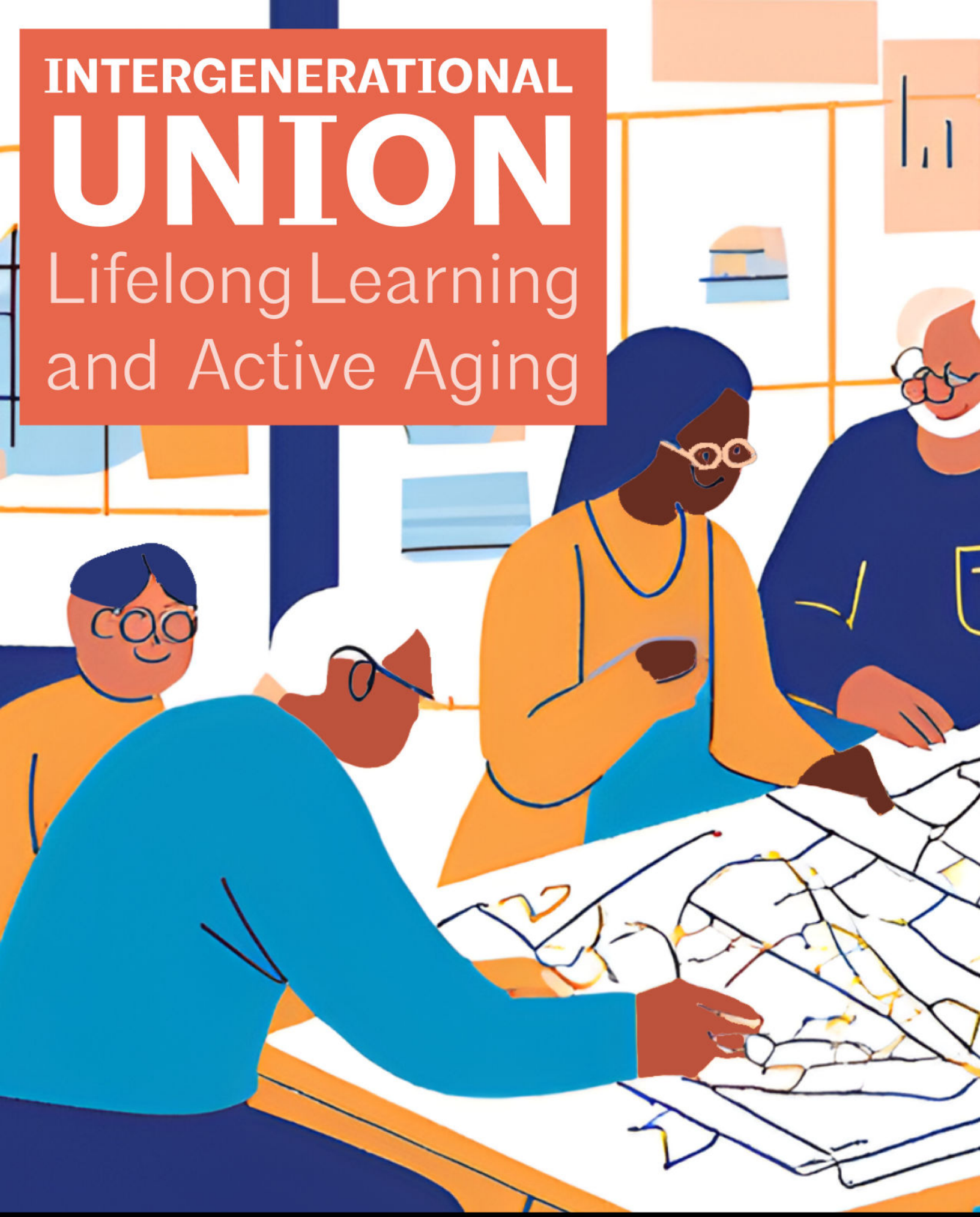
INTERGENERATIONAL UNION

Lifelong Learning and Active Aging



AIA Design for Aging 2026 Student Design Competition **PROGRAM**

2026 DESIGN FOR AGING, STUDENT DESIGN COMPETITION

AN INTERGENERATIONAL UNION:
A Campus-Integrated Hub for Lifelong Learning and Active Aging

The aim of this competition is to inspire innovative design solutions that foster meaningful intergenerational connections and prioritize the well-being of older adults. Students are encouraged to propose a design solution that supports interactions among older adults, students, and others within campus-based and community settings.

INTRODUCTION

The Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA) is pleased to announce the **Design for Aging Student Competition** for the 2025-2026 academic year. The competition is a partnership with the AIA Design for Aging (DFA) Knowledge Community. The competition will challenge students, working individually or in teams, to explore a variety of design issues related to intergenerational senior living spaces.

BACKGROUND[1]

In 2023, U.S. Surgeon General declared loneliness and social isolation to be a national health epidemic, underscoring its severe physical and cognitive consequences. Older adults are especially vulnerable—**1 in 4 adults over 65 is socially isolated**, which dramatically increases their risk of chronic illnesses such as heart disease, depression, dementia, and premature death. Alarmingly, the **cognitive decline associated with chronic loneliness raises the risk of developing dementia by approximately 50%**.

Young adults are also experiencing escalating levels of loneliness and mental health challenges, often exacerbated by social media, academic pressures, and lack of meaningful intergenerational interaction. **This overlap presents an opportunity to design solutions that foster mutual support between generations**, using physical spaces and shared programs to cultivate connection, purpose, and well-being for all ages.

The Surgeon General's advisory provides a public health lens, while the design competition offers an architectural response. **Both aim to repair the social fabric by encouraging real-world interaction, intergenerational bonding, and inclusive environments**. The competition's goals and judging criteria mirror the advisory's principles, turning systemic advice into spatial, programmatic, and experiential design solutions.

[1] Office of the Surgeon General (OSG). (2023). *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community.* US Department of Health and Human Services.

THE CHALLENGE

As the global aging population continues to grow, sustainability and inclusivity are key considerations. **An Intergenerational Union** challenges students to develop innovative and integrated university-affiliated living solutions that are environmentally-sustainable, aging-supportive, and promote meaningful connections between generations. Submissions should promote the emotional and physical health of each user's generation by integrating wellness, biophilic elements, environmentally responsible strategies and materials, and design features that support the diverse needs of individuals of all ages and abilities.

OBJECTIVES

- Generate new living solutions for seniors that foster meaningful intergenerational community connections.
- Foster intergenerational bridges to combat the growing prevalence of loneliness and associated mental health conditions in seniors and young adults in communities,
- Familiarize designers with challenges present in designing senior housing communities
- Demonstrate how the aging population can remain a contributory and viable part of a community through location and interaction with an institution of higher education.
- Gain experience developing a program and set of objectives to guide the project from conception through the design phase.

AWARDS

Jurors will select First, Second, and Third prize winners, in addition to a selected number of honorable mentions, all at the discretion of the jury. A total of **$13,500** USD is distributed by ACSA, in the following manner to the winners:

	First Prize	Second Prize	Third Prize
Student/Team:	$4000	$3000	$2000
Faculty Sponsor:	$2000	$1,500	$1,000

A limited number of honorable mentions may also be awarded at the jury's discretion. Prize-winning submissions will be exhibited at the 2027 ACSA Annual Meeting and the 2027 AIA National Convention as well as published in a competition summary publication.

ELIGIBILITY

The competition is open to students from all ACSA member schools around the world. You can find a listing of all ACSA member schools online. Students are required to work under the direction of a faculty sponsor. Submissions will be accepted for individual as well as team projects. Teams must be limited to a maximum of five students.

SCHEDULE

April 8, 2026	Registration Deadline (free registration)
June 3, 2026	Submission Deadline
Summer 2026	Winners Announced

CRITERIA FOR JUDGING

Submissions will be evaluated on how effectively they respond to the design challenge, align with the competition objectives, and translate the values embedded in the program to design an intergenerational living environment that promotes aging in place, lifelong learning, and social connection. The jury will consider the following key criteria:

1. Clear and comprehensible design, documentation, and stated objectives developed for the project.
2. A compelling and original conceptual strategy translated into a coherent integrated design proposal.
3. Compliance with all competition objectives.
4. Clear focus on providing innovative housing concepts supportive of seniors.
5. Incorporation of inclusive design principles that support cognitive, sensory, and physical access, and equity for all users regardless of age, ability, gender, culture, and background.
6. Demonstration of thoughtful campus and community connections that foster engagement and shared experience.
7. Development of a thoughtful program, and building and site strategies that address social isolation, physical health and emotional well-being.

Successful entries will show how design can support connection, care, and creativity across generations, through thoughtful design and a strong understanding of community needs.

SITE

Students will select a site either on or adjacent to a university or college campus of their choice. Students will be required to graphically explain the site selection strategy, campus context and connection points, in their submission.

PROGRAM

This architectural program invites students to design an inclusive, intergenerational living community located on or adjacent to a college or university campus. Proposals should support aging in place, lifelong learning, and most importantly, enriching connections between older adults, students, faculty, and families—connections that lead to richer social, educational, and cultural outcomes for all generations.

Design solutions may draw from the principles of cohousing and pocket neighborhood development, both of which emphasize human-scale design, shared spaces, and intentional community building. These philosophies foster a built environment where daily interaction, mutual support, and resident engagement are structurally encouraged. Students are encouraged to think beyond isolated housing typologies and instead propose a neighborhood-scale framework where shared living and learning are central to daily life.

In alignment with current public health priorities, the program is also grounded in the U.S. Surgeon General's Six Pillars to Advance Social Connection[2]—a national framework responding to the epidemic of loneliness and social isolation. These pillars are to be embedded spatially and programmatically:

1. Strengthen Social Infrastructure with inclusive gathering places and communal hubs
2. Enact Pro-Connection Policy through equitable, universally accessible design
3. Mobilize the Health Sector via integrated wellness and cognitive support environments
4. Reform Digital Environments by emphasizing physical presence and analog experiences
5. Deepen Knowledge through shared learning, mentorship, and creative expression
6. Cultivate a Culture of Connection through collective rituals, shared identity, and storytelling

This program asks students to translate these values into form and function, producing designs that are inclusive, flexible, and fully integrated with the surrounding campus and community. The result should be a living environment that promotes well-being, dignity, engagement, and intergenerational enrichment.

The sections and criteria that follow outline general guidance on resident mix, program spaces, campus connections, and required deliverables. Students and faculty may adjust or expand on the program or spaces to align with their vision and objectives:

[2] Office of the Surgeon General (OSG). (2023). *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community.* US Department of Health and Human Services.

RESIDENT MIX

Determine appropriate mix of residents based on campus context, site capacity, and your program goals. Resident types must include a minimum of 60 living units for seniors, and any mix of your choice of other resident types to complete the community:

Independent Living / Active Adult — 750–1,000 sq. ft. *(per unit)*

A nonmedical level of care that aids rather than cares for residents who are relatively healthy and fit. Facilities typically handle housekeeping and transportation services.

Assisted Living — 350–550 sq. ft. *(per unit)*

Non-medical assistance with activities of daily living (e.g., bathing, dressing). Care plans are individualized and the facility typically cooks meals and provides housekeeping.

Memory Care — 300–450 sq. ft. *(per unit)*

Similar to assisted living with emphasis on safety and security. Entries and exits are typically monitored and outdoor spaces are dedicated. Therapies and additional care (e.g., incontinence management and medication monitoring) are frequently provided.

Skilled Care / Nursing Home — 250–380 sq. ft. *(per unit)*

Residents receive care around-the-clock from nurses and nursing assistants. Care plans are customized to address short- or long-term health care needs (e.g., various therapies, wound care, injections, intravenous care and vital signs monitoring).

Additional Resident Types

Select optional residential types that best fit your selected site and/or community needs. These additional residential types should have a minimum of 40 living units.

Apartments / Dorms — 750–1,000 sq. ft. *(per unit)*

- College Students
- Faculty / Alumni
- Families (e.g., low-income, single-parents, foster, etc.)
- Others (Specify)

INTERGENERATIONAL AMENITY SPACES

Students will select and scale spaces based on their design vision and population mix. The list provided is not exhaustive, but rather inspirational and illustrates alignment with the 6 Pillars:

Community & Social Spaces

- Lounge areas, cafés, coffee shops, diners, restaurants, bars, etc.
- Chef's kitchen, cooking demos, classes, etc.
- Festivals, cultural events, art galleries, theaters, performance spaces, etc.

Wellness & Activity Spaces

- Fitness, wellness, pool, spa, salon, barber, supportive healthcare, pharmacy, etc.
- Child and/or senior daycare center, etc.

Learning & Creativity Spaces

- Study, learning, research rooms, lecture, classroom spaces, tutoring center, etc.
- Woodshop/maker space, podcasting, incubator, etc.

Retail & Economic Inclusion

- Shops, farmer's market, etc.

CAMPUS / COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

The proposed site and spatial relationships should promote natural integration with the nearby academic and civic communities that supports mobility, shared experience, and neighborhood belonging. Students are asked to demonstrate five (5) or more desirable site-based campus or community connections that enhance the concept of an Intergenerational Union.

Adjacency / Amenity Examples

- Mixed-Use Developments
- Retail Spaces
- Walking Trails
- Swimming Pool(s)
- Alumni Centers, gardens, farms, parks, dog parks
- Recreation Center, gym, pickleball, golf, tennis
- Academic Buildings
- Library / Resource Center
- Other

SUPPORT SPACES

Include ~20% of the total square footage for support spaces (e.g., staff areas, restrooms, kitchens, mechanical, storage, circulation, etc.)

RULES

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) and computational design are providing students and architects with new labor-saving tools and transforming many of the tasks associated with project delivery. The proliferation of AI use in practice and academia is raising legitimate questions about how the responsibility and accountability of the architect and students might be altered by this technological wave.

- AI usage in student submissions must ensure the students remain responsibly in control and continue to be accountable for all images and likenesses in their submissions.
- AI is a tool — it is not a replacement for professional judgment. Regardless of the AI tools used, it remains the architecture student's responsibility to provide designs in conformance with academic integrity.

Students choosing to use AI as a tool must attribute this use in their design essay (abstract). Students are accountable for the originality, validity, and integrity of the content and designs of their submissions. In choosing to use AI tools, students are expected to do so responsibly and with a high standard of ethical conduct. This includes reviewing the outputs of any AI tools and confirming content accuracy.

Building Code

Refer to the International Building Code and the local zoning ordinance for information on parking requirements, height restrictions, setbacks, easements, flood, egress and fire containment. All proposals must be designed to meet requirements for accessibility; for guidelines, refer to the Americans with Disabilities Act and the principles of Universal Design.

REGISTRATION

Faculty to Complete One Online Registration for Each Entry

An ACSA member school, faculty sponsor is required to enroll students online (available at www.acsa-arch.org) by **April 8, 2026**. Registration can be done for your entire studio or for each individual student or team of students participating. Students or teams wishing to enter the competition on their own must have a faculty sponsor, who should complete the registration. There is no entry or submission fee to participate in the competition. Each registered student and faculty sponsor will receive a confirmation email that will include information on how the student(s) will upload final submissions online. Please add the email address competitions@acsa-arch.org to your address book to ensure that you receive all emails regarding your submission.

During registration the faculty will have the ability to add students, add teams, assign students to teams, and add additional faculty sponsors. Registration is required by April 8, 2026, but can be changed, edited, and added to until a student starts a final submission; then the registration is no longer editable.

Registration Steps:

1. Faculty log into the ACSA website,
2. Click the "Register your Students" button,
3. Select the 2026 Design for Aging Competition from the submission type dropdown menu & Click “Enter”,
4. Select “Individual Registration” to add individual student. Click “Save and Continue”. You will need to know each student’s first & last names, email, & institution, which are all required fields for each student,
5. Select “Team Registration” if this is a team registration, you may add additional students by clicking “Add Student” to the same submission to this team, teams must be limited to a maximum of five students,
6. Once the individual student or team is complete, Click “Submit”
7. Repeat steps 3 – 6 for each individual or team.

Faculty Responsibility

The administration of the competition at each institution is left to the discretion of the faculty within the guidelines set forth in this document. Work on the competition should be structured over the course of one semester during the 2025-2026 academic year.

Each faculty sponsor is expected to develop a system to evaluate the students’ work using the criteria set forth in this program. The evaluation process should be an integral part of the design process, encouraging students to scrutinize their work in a manner similar to that of the jury.

The intent of this competition is to provide an academically rigorous design challenge suitable for integration into the curriculum of an architectural design studio or course. Curriculum integration is not a requirement of competition guidelines but is strongly encouraged. The administration of the competition at each institution is left to the discretion of the faculty within the guidelines set forth in this document.

SUBMISSION REQUIREMENTS

Digital Submission Format
Submissions must be presented on four 20” x 30” digital boards. All boards are required to be uploaded through the ACSA website as BMP, GIF, JPEG, JPG, or PNG files. The names of student participants, their schools, or faculty sponsors, must NOT appear on the boards, or in the project title or project title file name(s).

Design Essay or Abstract
A brief essay, 300 words maximum, is required as part of the submission describing the most important concepts of the design project. Keep in mind that the presentation should graphically convey the design solution and context, and not rely on the design essay to convey a basic understanding of the project. The names of student participants, their schools, or faculty sponsors, must NOT appear in the design essay. This abstract is included in the final online submission, completed by the student(s) in a simple copy/paste text box.

Program Summary or Narrative
The Program Summary or Narrative, 300-word maximum, is submitted by the student(s) in a simple copy/paste text box. It should include the total gross area along with clarity of included spaces. Please explain the rationale behind the selection, organization, and sizing of program spaces. Students should describe how their spatial strategy supports:

- Intergenerational interaction and shared use of space
- A diversity of needs and care levels (e.g., active adults, assisted living, memory care)
- Daily life activities including wellness, learning, dining, and recreation
- The values embedded in the Surgeon General’s Six Pillars of Social Connection
- Principles emphasizing human-scale, shared spaces, and intentional community building that foster daily interaction, mutual support, and resident engagement.

Narratives should also address how interior and exterior spaces are scaled to promote accessibility, flexibility, and inclusion. Consider how dimensions were informed by resident needs, local context, or program adjacencies, and how these decisions enhance user well-being, autonomy, and community belonging.

Required Submission Documents
Submissions must include (but are not limited to) the following required drawings:

- Site plan (with north arrow) showing proposal in its context of surrounding buildings and topography, together with details of access/circulation;
- Floor plans, for each unit, to show program elements, spatial adjacencies and navigation strategies;
- Elevations & sections sufficient to show site context and major spatial and program elements;
- Three-dimensional representations – in the form of perspectives, axonometrics showing the proposal in its context, montages and/or physical model photographs – to illustrate the character of the project;

- Large scale drawing(s), either orthographic or three dimensional, illustrating integrated design

Incomplete or undocumented entries will be disqualified. All drawings should be presented at a scale appropriate to the design solution and include a graphic scale.

ONLINE PROJECT SUBMISSION

The student is required to submit the final entries that must be uploaded through the ACSA Competition website at www.acsa-arch.org by 11:59 pm, Pacific Time, on June 3, 2026. If the submission is from a team of students, all student team members will have the ability to upload the digital files. It is recommended that one team member completes the final submission upload. Faculty have the option to submit the student's final boards when needed. The submission is not complete until the "submit" button has been clicked. Once the final submission is uploaded and submitted, each student will receive a confirmation email notification.

The final submission upload must contain the following:

- Completed online registration including all team members and faculty sponsors,
- Each of the four 20"x30" boards uploaded individually as high resolution BMP, GIF, JPEG, JPG, or PNG files, no more than 20MB each,
- A design essay or abstract (300 words maximum)
- A program summary diagram/text of spaces and areas (300 words maximum).

The names of student participants, their schools and faculty sponsors must NOT appear on the boards, abstract, program summary, or in the file name.

Winning projects will be required to submit high-resolution original files/images for use in competition publications and exhibit materials. By uploading your files, you agree that the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA) has the rights to use your winning submission, images and materials in a summary publication, online and in promotional and exhibition resources. ACSA will attribute authorship of the winning design to you, your team, faculty and affiliation. Additionally, you hereby warrant that the submission is original and that you are the author(s) of the submission.

RESOURCES

A core aim of ACSA competitions is to help students recognize that strong design is grounded in research. Accessing, interpreting, and applying credible information is a fundamental part of developing responsive, resilient, and innovative solutions.

A growing body of evidence shows that the built environment has a measurable impact on occupant stress, safety, health outcomes, and quality of life. The process of making design decisions based on research to achieve specific outcomes is known as Evidence-Based Design (EBD). A wide range of trusted resources—including websites, credentialing programs, publications, and organizations—can support student research and help strengthen the programming, planning, spatial, and experiential logic. Participants are encouraged to explore EBD strategies, precedent projects, and reliable resources that demonstrate innovation in aging-friendly, inclusive, and intergenerational environments.

Recommended Resources:
Evidence-Based Design (EBD) & Research Application:

- The Center for Health Design (CHD)
    - *Website: www.healthdesign.org*
    - *EBD resources and peer-reviewed publication knowledge repository*
    - *EDAC certification (Evidence-Based Design Accreditation and Certification)*
    - *Free and member-based research publications*
- The Facility Guidelines Institute (FGI)
    - *Website: www.fgiguidelines.org*
    - *Author of Guidelines for Design and Construction of Residential Health, Care, and Support Facilities*
    - *Includes standards for memory care, assisted living, and long-term care*

Aging & Aging in Place:

- World Health Organization – Global Age-friendly Cities
    - *Website: www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241547307*
    - *A guide to engage cities to become age-friendly and tap the potential that older people represent for humanity*
- AARP Livable Communities
    - *Website: www.aarp.org/livable*
    - *Reports, design guides, and universal design checklists*
    - *Research on senior housing, intergenerational design, and social infrastructure*
- National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) – CAPS Certification
    - *Website: www.nahb.org*
    - *Certified Aging-in-Place Specialist (CAPS) credential and training program*
    - *Focus on home modification, accessibility, and safety*
- Executive Certificate in Home Modification (ECHM) – USC Leonard Davis School
    - *Website: www.homemods.org*
    - *Highly respected program for modifying homes to support aging in place*
- Executive Certificate in Home Modification

    - *Website: https://homemods.org/echm/*
    - *An intensive program that provides access to the latest on home modification research, products, funding strategies, policies, and community planning*
- SAGE (Services & Advocacy for GLBT Elders)
    - *Website: www.sageusa.org*
    - *Research and design considerations for LGBTQ+ inclusive elder housing*

Intergenerational & Inclusive Design:

- Intergenerational Task Force
    - *Website: https://sagefederation.org/roadmap/*
    - *A "roadmap" checklist of intergenerational elements and survey data*
- Generations United – Intergenerational Program Certification
    - *Website: www.gu.org*
    - *Toolkits and policy guides to support intergenerational programs and shared site models*
    - *Intergenerational Housing Task Force reports*
- Pocket Neighborhoods by Ross Chapin
    - *Book & Website: www.pocket-neighborhoods.net*
    - *Focus on small-scale, community-centered housing typologies*
- Cohousing Association of the United States
    - *Website: www.cohousing.org*
    - *Examples, case studies, and planning resources for intergenerational and senior cohousing*

Campus-Connected Communities & Retirement Models:

- University and College Retirement Communities
    - *Website: www.universityretirementcommunities.com*
    - *Database of campus-based retirement living models*
    - *Insight into partnerships between higher education institutions and senior housing developers*
- College-Linked Retirement Communities
    - *Website: www.retirementliving.com/college-linked-retirement-communities*
    - *Communities located on or near a campus with education institution connections*
- A Guide to University Retirement Communities
    - *www.caring.com/resources/guide-to-university-based-retirement-communities/*
    - *Difference Between Senior Living Communities and University Retirement Communities*

Key Reports & Foundational Readings:

- U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory: "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation" (2023)
    - *Full Report: www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf*
    - *Defines the Six Pillars of Connection*
    - *Offers a public health framework applicable to intergenerational design*
- Inclusive Design Research Centre (IDRC), OCAD University
    - *Website: https://idrc.ocadu.ca*

- *Research and tools focused on design for diversity, accessibility, and equity*

Books & Articles:

- Inclusive Design for Getting Outdoors (I'DGO)
  - *Research project on aging and access to outdoor environments*
  - *Website: www.idgo.ac.uk*
- Design for Aging: International Case Studies of Building and Program – by Jeffrey Rosenfeld & Wid Chapman
  - *An excellent precedent resource on senior living environments globally*
  - *Amazon: https://a.co/d/icoF6Dd*
- Creating Cohousing: Building Sustainable Communities – by Kathryn McCamant & Charles Durrett
  - *The definitive guide to the cohousing movement with site plans, models, and case studies*
  - *Amazon: https://a.co/d/jcNL3kZ*
- The Architect's Guide to Inclusive Design: Embrace Diversity, Enhance Flexibility, Create Community – by Chris C. Penman
  - *A resource designed to infuse projects with innovation and inclusivity from the ground up*
  - *Amazon: https://a.co/d/jjYSwL7*
- The Senior Cohousing Handbook: A Community Approach to Independent Living – by Charles Durrett
  - *A comprehensive guide to the psychological and logistical aspects of joining or creating a cohousing project*
  - *Amazon: https://a.co/d/j4ikiOY*
- Pocket Neighborhoods: Creating Small-Scale Community in a Large-Scale World – by Ross Chapin
  - *Inspiration and practical ideas to create meaningful, livable communities that prioritize connection and quality of life*
  - *Amazon: https://a.co/d/0xhQG06*

COMPETITION ORGANIZERS

Sponsor

AIA Design for Aging (DFA) Knowledge Community

The mission of the AIA Design for Aging (DFA) Knowledge Community is to foster design innovation and disseminate knowledge necessary to enhance the built environment and quality of life for an aging society. This includes relevant research on characteristics, planning and costs associated with innovative design for aging. In addition, DFA provides outcome data on the value of these design solutions and environments.

AIA, Design for Aging (DFA) Knowledge Community

Administrative Organization

Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture

Leading Architectural Education and Research

The Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture is a nonprofit, membership association founded in 1912 to advance the quality of architectural education. The school membership in ACSA has grown from 10 charter members to over 250 schools in several membership categories. These include full membership for all accredited programs in the United States and government-sanctioned schools in Canada, candidate membership for schools seeking accreditation, and affiliate membership for schools for two-year and international programs. Through these schools, over 6,000 architecture faculty members are represented. In addition, over 500 supporting members composed of architecture firms, product associations and individuals add to the breadth of interest and support of ACSA goals. ACSA provides a major forum for ideas on the leading edge of architectural thought. Issues that will affect the architectural profession in the future are being examined today in ACSA member schools.

ACSA

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Program updates, including information on jury members as they are confirmed, may be found on the ACSA web site at www.acsa-arch.org/competitions. Additional questions on the competition program and submissions should be addressed to:

Edwin Hernández-Ventura
Programs Coordinator
ehernandez@acsa-arch.org
202.785.2324

Eric Wayne Ellis
Senior Director of Operations and Programs
eellis@acsa-arch.org
202.785.2324

Competition Program written and developed by: Design for Aging (DFA) Knowledge Community along with ACSA.