NJAAW
HOUSING DESIGN COMPETITION

SHARING INNOVATIVE HOUSING SOLUTIONS
FOR NJ'S OLDER RESIDENTS

DEC 2025



njaaw
NEW JERSEY ADVOCATES FOR AGING WELL

AARP®

MADE POSSIBLE WITH A 2025 COMMUNITY CHALLENGE GRANT FROM AARP

New Jersey has a housing problem.

Not only are we among the 10 most expensive states for housing, but most homes are 50+ years old, 2-stories in height, and both inaccessible and unaffordable for older residents. NJAAW's 2024 Statewide Survey of Older Adults revealed that many older adults want to stay in their communities but face challenges with their current homes. Across the state, land is at a premium, pushing developers to build market rate and luxury housing over housing that is affordable to those at middle to lower incomes.

To highlight this challenge and provide solutions that are financially realistic for people on a fixed income, we applied for an AARP Community Challenge grant to hold a Housing Design Competition.

Using AARP's Housing Design Competition Tool Kit to guide the process and Community Challenge Grant 2023 recipient, Montclair Gateway to Aging in Place advising our process with lessons from their ADU design competition, our goal was to hold the contest, highlight the winning designs and potentially broker relationships amongst interested developers, designers and financiers.

The competition called for entries across 3 categories:

/ Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs)

/ Detached Single-Family

/ Multi-Family Housing

Our goals in this effort were to:

- Provide a range of housing options in New Jersey that provide solutions and options for older residents.
- Identify options that are affordable to a typical older resident - not designs that qualify federally or otherwise as structured, subsidized or tax credit projects - but financially realistic for retirees on a fixed income, both in terms of construction and maintaining.
- Educate local leaders, the housing industry and the public about universal design and age friendly design and share the results with developers, other architects, state agencies and municipal boards.
- To help shape priorities for housing in a Multisector Plan for Aging

With over 650 visits to the competition's website, we were very pleased to receive original, realistic and achievable solutions. With a panel of New Jersey based architects and housing advocates who have a deep understanding of the needs of older adults volunteering to develop the competition criteria and serve as judges, we prioritized submissions that were realistic, feasible, adaptable, and desirable. Our judges selected winning designs that are also affordable, both in terms of construction and maintenance and not reliant on federal or state subsidies.

Read on to see the competition winners…

DESIGN WINNERS

FIRST PLACE | SINGLE FAMILY UNIT

The Plum Tree Dwelling

ARCHITECT:

Randy M Sovich, FAIA

R M Sovich Architecture, Inc. | rmsarchitecture.com



PLUM TREE DWELLING

A Living Courtyard Prototype for Age-Friendly Housing in Trenton, New Jersey

The Plum Tree Dwelling is a perfect concept for New Jersey's urban areas. This single-family unit fits a variety of lots, is accessible, adaptable and can foster increased ownership. All while offering private outdoor space.

FROM OUR JUDGES:

The lot requirements for this design match any urban oriented town in New Jersey, and suburbs with limited space, such as Princeton or Essex County towns. This design can be used on almost any lot to create multiple, single-family units instead of "McMansions." It also gives an alternative for young families – whether someone's first/starter house or their last/downsizing house, the design meets the need of residents of all ages.

FROM THE ARCHITECT:

Thirty years ago I founded my practice because the places where older adults actually live and receive care were architectural afterthoughts, while museums and monuments got heroic attention. I set out to prove that thoughtful design could improve health, dignity, and connection in late life—no luxury budget required. It is a rigorously replicable system that is also deliberately versatile: the same core kit of parts can become a single-family accessory dwelling, a duplex for shared care, a four-unit cluster for a faith community, or a tiny pocket neighborhood—always using ordinary materials and local builders. Above all, it is a small home designed not only to age gracefully, but to be built hundreds of times, in many configurations, by people who have never hired an architect before.

The design responds to Trenton's urgent need for attainable, age-friendly housing within existing neighborhoods. It is rooted in Trenton's rowhouse tradition yet open to sky and garden.

DESIGN WINNERS

FIRST PLACE | ACCESSORY DWELLING UNIT (ADU)

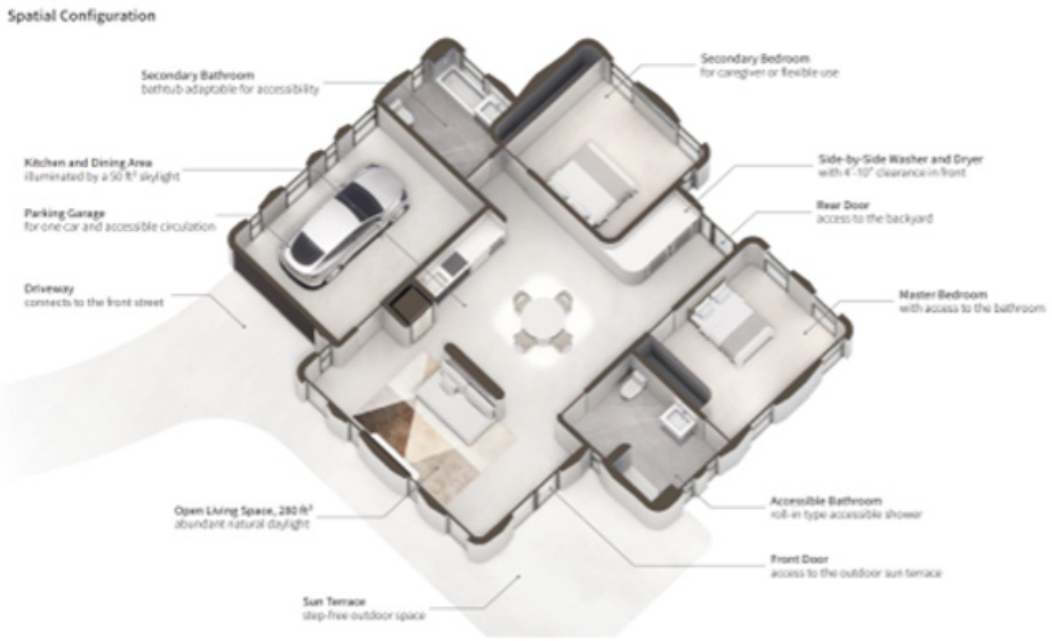
LUMA

ARCHITECT:

Melody Ho, AIA, LEED AP BD+C

HYMH Design | hymh.design





This submission was awarded the best accessory dwelling unit design showing a very practical and realistic lot in a typical New Jersey town. The layout and the dimensions of the lot show that ADUs can fit into most New Jersey communities without being intrusive, or overwhelming the design of the main building or neighborhood.

FROM OUR JUDGES:

By including the garage and therefor, parking, this design eliminates a frequent protest about parking. It can also be built as a single family on a separate lot.

FROM THE ARCHITECT:

My goal was to design a home that offers older adults an accessible, healthy, and calming living environment that can be built efficiently and kept within a reasonable cost.

The idea of creating an accessible home without compromising aesthetics grew out of a previous project I designed for the older members of my family. Through thoughtful material choices and careful attention to detail, I came to believe that accessibility can be both functional and elegant.

DESIGN WINNERS

STUDENT AWARD | SINGLE FAMILY UNIT

Eddie Zhang







Inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright's quote, "The longer I live the more beautiful life becomes," this comprehensive and traditional design from a student shows great potential for the future of housing in New Jersey.

FROM OUR JUDGES:

The open plan for the public spaces and accessible features of the bedroom and other private spaces ensures the potential for aging in place comfortably.

FROM THE ARCHITECT:

When I think of the next generation of elderly citizens to come, I think of my parents and how they will experience housing in the years to come. I designed this home as if I were to house my parents when they reach that age and are in need of a more minimalistic and accessible home.

NOTEWORTHY DESIGNS

In addition to the designs that received awards, the judges would like to highlight some of the thoughtful details of other submissions which show potential for meeting the housing needs of our aging population.

Perennial ADU

ARCHITECT:

Julian Liang

Jia Ba Bue Architects | CATEGORY: ADU



The Perennial ADU is a thoughtfully designed, single story detached ADU unit that reimagines living small without compromise. Its detached and compact footprint increases housing density without disrupting neighborhood character, while preserving privacy and autonomy for all occupants. With its low-profile form and contextual aesthetics, the Perennial ADU is designed to integrate quietly into any backyard setting, intentionally unobtrusive.

FROM OUR JUDGES:

This submission shows a very sensitive design that emphasizes a discreet location and potential for rear-yard oasis.

Multi-Family Building

ARCHITECT:

Matthew Valentine

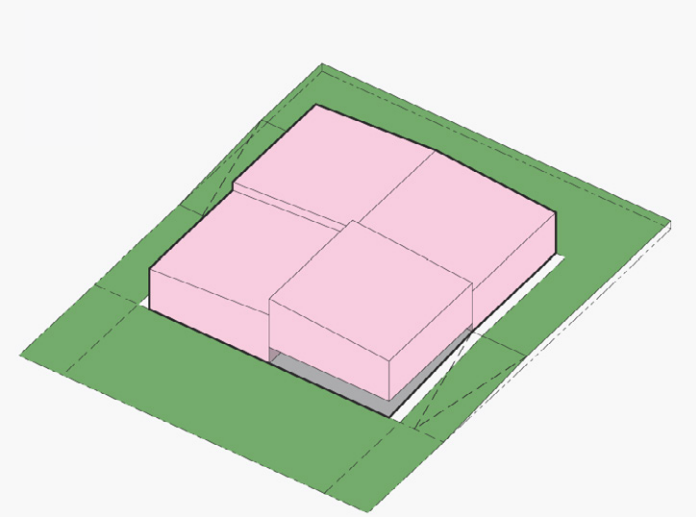
Lyon Szot Architecture DPC | matthew@studiolyonszot.com

With significant detail given to Universal Design elements, the drawings promote safety in the home: Soft flooring (corking) materials provide a gentler feel on the feet as well as soften any falls. Each entry has elevated surfaces and built in benches to put down bags, groceries, or sit on to easy entry and exit at the home. Handrails or hand holds are placed in critical areas throughout the home.

In addition, by separating the public living area from the private sleeping area of the house, it psychologically gives a sense of greater space and privacy.

FROM OUR JUDGES:

This design shows a solution for 'Missing Middle Housing.' With the change in elevation allowing for an increase in density and up to four units on one lot, it can add housing without impacting density.



One Object

ARCHITECT:

Baka Studio

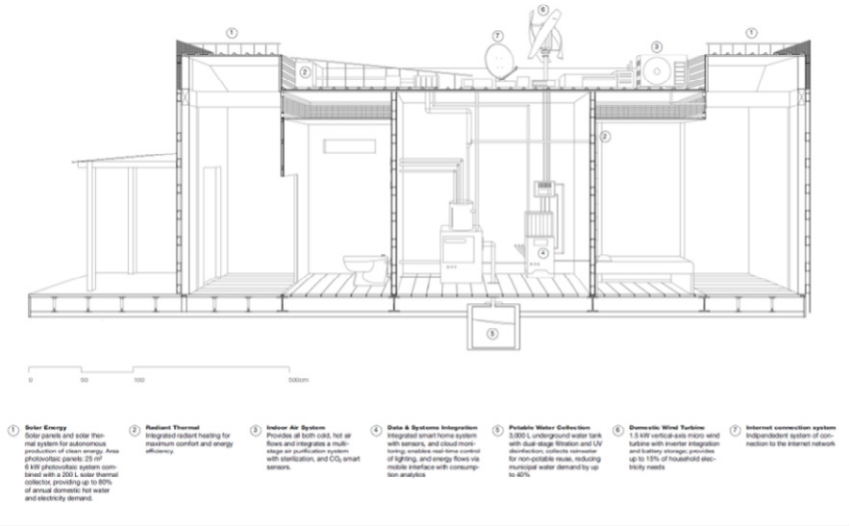
baka-studio.it | CATEGORY: ADU

One Object is designed as a durable and adaptable shell that allows transformation over time. Materials can be replaced, extended, or reassembled. As the architect states, “It embodies the idea of architecture as a living, open, and resilient system,” which works to address changing needs over the residents’ lifetime.

The judges felt this design scored well for construction costs, energy efficiency and included Universal Design.

FROM OUR JUDGES:

What I find most appealing is that conceptually, it takes the most expensive parts of the building and effectively puts them in a cartridge or unit and builds a house around it.



What's Next?

We see several of our competition submissions as both appropriate and affordable solutions to New Jersey's shortage of housing for older residents. As New Jersey continues to expand age-friendly efforts, providing options within communities grows more important every day. Bigger is not always better, and as these designs show, housing that meets the needs of our aging population is doable, affordable, and practical. Most important, these are houses that people would want to live in.

So, what's next? Over the next year, NJAAW will produce educational materials to highlight the winning designs and broker relationships among interested developers, designers and financiers. Our judges will share the winning designs with partners in the housing field who might potentially see a project through. NJAAW will continue to support and encourage housing that is both appropriate and affordable for our older residents.

As age-friendly communities grow throughout New Jersey, so does the call for age-appropriate housing. Most municipalities are small and with New Jersey's home rule approach, housing is addressed town by town instead of comprehensively. With a growing call for New Jersey to adopt a Multisector Plan for Aging (MPA) these designs show what is possible through the state.

We hope this contest inspires others to consider this as both design opportunities and good business strategies. While the competition is over, NJAAW is always interested in hearing about and seeing housing solutions for older residents. Please share examples with us by emailing **office@njaaw.org**.

Judges & Volunteers

We would like to thank our volunteers who shaped the rules and criteria and served as judges for this competition.

JUDGES

Steve Leone, AIA, LEED
Principal, Spiezle Architectural Group, Inc., NJAAW Trustee

Marina Rubina
Architect

Ed Truscelli
Executive Director, Princeton Community Housing

Kristin Spence
Deputy Director, Fairshare Development

Tom Toronto
President, Bergen County's United Way

Tim Evans
Director of Research, NJ Future

CRITERIA DEVELOPMENT

Chris Sturm
Retired, NJ Future

Ann Lippel
Montclair Gateway to Aging in Place

Dean Dafis
Maplewood Township Committee

Chris Black
Vice President, Building Projects at Fellowship LIFE



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About The AARP Community Challenge Grant Program

The AARP Community Challenge is a grant program to make tangible improvements in communities that jump-start long-term change. It is part of AARP's nationwide Livable Communities initiative, which supports the efforts of cities, towns, neighborhoods and rural areas to become great places to live for people of all ages.

TO LEARN MORE VISIT AARP.ORG/LIVABLE



NJAAW provides leadership in public policy and education to enable New Jersey older adults to live with independence and dignity in their communities. Our vision Is a state where all older adults can age with dignity, choice and supports in the community.

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