

Fast-forward to the not-so-distant future: The world will revolve around the elderly

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For most busy denizens of the early 21st century, contemplating the future means figuring out tomorrow's dinner.

But take a moment to journey forward to 2046, when 79 million baby boomers will be 82 to 100 years old. Thanks to lifestyle habits and medical advances, they probably will be the healthiest group of elderly in history. Thanks to extended employment spans, they will be the wealthiest. Thanks to their huge voting bloc, they will be the most powerful.

So just what kind of America will be forged by this crowd of geriatric goliaths? Talk to folks whose job it is to think decades down the road and two disparate visions emerge: one inspirational and the other downright creepy.

Using the revered boomer medium of film as a guide, the first story line offers a *Cocoon*-like world in which benevolent oldsters imbued with youth improve society by spreading their wisdom and wealth. The other scenario plays out more like *Planet of the Apes*, in which an impoverished underclass is unable to make its mark on a world ruled by domineering elders.

How will things play out? The script for *2046: A Boomer Odyssey* is still in our hands.

"Right now we're facing a future in which this group either serves its own interests at the expense of the young, or it helps lead a multigenerational society in which they're exemplars of enlightenment," says Ken Dychtwald, president of Age Wave, a San Francisco-based firm that helps companies prepare for the coming gray reign. "Boomers still have the chance to be a contributory group, to give more than they take."

That's a noble goal. But when it comes to taking — also defined as consuming — boomers are Zen masters. Setting aside for a moment the philosophical questions that will define Boomerworld, much of the cultural landscape in 2046 will be shaped by the enduring spending power of folks who added "shopaholic" to society's addiction lexicon.

Food, houses, watches, shoes, electronics, entertainment, you name it. As boomer tastes go, so goes the marketplace. Interviews with futurists, marketers and designers offer a provocative picture of Future Street, USA, where we just might find that:

- Most homes are single-story with interiors that feature so-called transgenerational design touches, such as levers and latches manipulated by the entire hand and not arthritic fingers, custom-height countertops and wider hallways and doors for wheelchairs.

- Movie theaters virtually have disappeared as Internet-bred boomers browse through a tidal wave of age-appropriate Hollywood fare from the comfort of their posture-preserving couches.

- Crosswalk lights stay green longer to allow this elderly army to safely reach sidewalks, and ads that showcase the hip octogenarian feature large typefaces and colors that acknowledge the aging eye's inability to distinguish between hues such as pink and yellow.

It's not so much that the young will be ignored by providers of goods and services; it's that the older crowd won't be.

"The demand from this large group of aging boomers will force products of all kinds to be designed without penalty to any age group," says James Pirkl, director of Transgenerational Design Matters, an Albuquerque-based non-profit that offers guidance on designing for the elderly. "In 2050, there will be 9 million people over 85, or triple what we have now. So society's focus will definitely change."

Some of these ageist shifts already have begun.

The Recreation Vehicle Industry Association says members are keeping tomorrow's on-the-go boomers front and center as they design RVs that increasingly resemble movable homes. "Boomers are fanatical about their lifestyle, which is defined by freedom and flexibility almost regardless of any energy crisis," says association President David Humphreys, who is confident that the need to stay mobile will trump rising gas costs.

Today, upscale RVs run from \$100,000 to \$700,000; the high-end vehicles feature upscale furnishings and full Internet connectivity, a must for a group that likes staying in touch while being on the move in luxury. "Boomers may well make these RVs their permanent homes," Humphreys says.

At Boeing, engineers working on the company's 787 Dreamliner, which is due in 2008, have been acting like old folks so that the plane's interior fits boomers.

"We had them try and function in a Third Age Suit, which when you put it on reduces the flex in your knees, back, elbow and neck," says payloads engineer Vicki Curtis, referring to a movement-restricting costume the airplane manufacturer borrowed from Ford Motor. "You can't even move your knuckles."

The result: Expect more legroom, ergonomic seating and air systems that improve breathing.

But while "There will be many older folks using this 787, we don't want it to look or feel like a nursing home," Curtis says. "The older folks of tomorrow just won't act like the ones who preceded them."

As the architects of today's youth-obsessed culture, boomers proudly flaunt their Dorian Gray complex. When they look in the mirror, the years melt away both figuratively (it's hard to feel old if you're doing senior triathlons) and literally (between Botox and plastic surgery, it has never been easier to defy Mother Nature).

"Right now, 50 is the new 35, and that sort of thinking will just continue with this crowd," says Marshal Cohen, chief analyst at NPD Group of Port Washington, N.Y., a firm that studies consumer behavior. "Boomers are getting older, but they're actually thinking younger."

Marketers increasingly will cater to this group, Cohen says. Already The Gap has launched Forth & Towne, aimed at women over 35. The move comes in response to the success of Chico's, women's stores that size clothes with a varied population in mind.

Such specialized retail shops will proliferate and creep north in target age. "Right now, very few stores in malls are aimed at people over 65, but they'll soon represent about 20% of all stores," Cohen says. "Instead of going after the youth market, many manufacturers will grow with their customers. That is a huge

change, away from the young and toward the old.”

Well, now. Could it be that age might soon trump beauty?

Might the future Paris Hiltons of the world be forced to staff hotel front desks for their allowance as a grandparent-dominated society finds her antics uninteresting? Would 2046’s sexiest man alive be an elegantly wrinkled George Clooney (85 on May 6), Hollywood’s diva be grandma Eva Longoria (71 on March 15) and that year’s president be Yoda-like tech guru Bill Gates (91 on Oct. 28)?

“Marketers, politicians, entertainment moguls — they are all very awake to the shift that’s coming,” says Peter Sealey, former marketing chief at Columbia Pictures and co-author of *Not on My Watch: Hollywood vs. the Future*.

“Think back to the 15th century, when eyeglasses first appeared. That invention literally added 20 years to a person’s life in terms of being able to function and be productive,” Sealey says. “Well, we’re going to see the same sort of enhancements going on this time around, a collection of devices that will make 95 look like 65.”

Sixty-five. That signpost for retirement will be another casualty of the boomer era. Otto von Bismarck picked the age at which folks could dip into a social insurance program in the late 1800s, when many folks were dead by 65. In a 2046 brimming with medical breakthroughs, you might get takers if the retirement age were 95.

“Expect to see more ads featuring old boomers at work, because compared to the generation that went before them, these people will just not retire,” says Peter Francese, demographic trends analyst for ad agency Ogilvy & Mather. “They’re college educated, and they can continue to make a good living well past retirement age.”

Age Wave’s Dychtwald, whose latest book is *The Power Years: A User’s Guide to the Rest of Your Life*, says boomers will see their golden years “as a playground of new beginnings. People will break away from the gravitational pull of aging. You might see 70-year-olds on campus with 18-year-olds. In my day, old people looked old. Not so now, and less so in the future.”

What’s more, looks are bankable.

“During the dot-com boom, we rewarded youth and suffered for it. (We now see) it’s criminal to discard the experience of the old and that retirement is a big loss to society,” says journalist Julie Winokur, who, along with her photographer husband, Ed Kashi, created the book and online documentary *Aging in America: The Years Ahead*.

“Back in the ’70s, there was a true generation gap between the old and young,” Winokur says. “But our work reveals that this time around, there is no gap, just a fluid transition between the ages.”

Indeed, another part of the one-big-happy-family vision is the promise of bonding between book-end generations. “It can be a world where grandparents care about their children and grandchildren, and back up the chain,” says Bill Novelli, CEO of AARP.

Novelli concedes it will take some societal reengineering to accomplish that, from restoring city centers (boomers will trade homes in the suburbs for the convenience and culture of urban life) to revamping the nation’s health care system. (“If the costs continue to rise, we could well spend half our country’s gross national product on health care, and that won’t work”.)

But overall, he is optimistic. “Just like the nation coped with all the babies born after World War II, America will grow older successfully,” he says. “I don’t see intergenerational warfare.”

But others do.

“It will cost money to stay healthy and good-looking,” says Konrad Kressley, professor emeritus at the University of South Alabama who specializes in future studies. “So you are likely to have wealthy, older Anglos on one end of the spectrum and working-class, largely minorities on the other. Many scholars think a war between these groups could break out, a political war pitting privileged elders against the immigrant young.”

There are ways to diffuse this “social dynamite,” says Paul Saffo, director of the think tank Institute for the Future. His suggestions include a “life tax” requiring boomers to pay for the privilege of sticking around, taking some of the tax burden off the young.

Some boomers might simply leave the country, making room for the next generation to blossom, Saffo says. It would be a generational “cleansing” that, in the old days, was handled by an early death.

“I’m waiting for the first retirement cities to pop up in places like Goa, India,” he says. “The weather’s great, people speak English, and it’s cheap. What more do you want?”

In fact, some boomers may want to take that advice one step farther — into outer space. By 2046, if boomer airline tycoon Richard Branson has his way, there could well be ways to live out that *Cocoon*-like fantasy and head for another corner of the cosmos.

That would be so boomer. Big, brash and bold. After all, this is the intrepid generation that fought for civil rights, demanded an end to the Vietnam War, booted a president and revolutionized communications. Earth might not be enough for this crowd.

In his 2001 science-fiction novel *Borrowed Tides*, Paul Levinson sends two 80-year-olds on a mission to Alpha Centauri, based on the book’s premise that people with active

intellectual lives are the ones who live longest.

"Hey, that well could happen in real life down the road a few decades," says Levinson, who teaches communications at Fordham University. "And when they go, you can be sure these old folks will be blasting The Beatles or the Stones on their trip. Let's face it, boomers have dominated the culture so far, and they're likely to keep on doing it."