

Garden Design and Planning in Sheltered Housing Accommodation for Older People

Edward O'Meara — Occupational Therapist, Priory Group
Tania Wiseman — Senior Lecturer, University of Brighton

Introduction



Sheltered housing in the United Kingdom provides a safe and sociable environment for an aging population. It offers communal living, supported independence and choice to participate in activities. Existing studies show that gardens can offer older people physiological, psychological and social benefits (York and Wiseman 2012,). Yet there is limited research into how the design of gardens in sheltered housing developments is considered.

Research Aims

- To contribute towards guidelines and help to improve the quality of older people's lives through choice, accessibility and a feeling of independence.
- Research Question: How are gardens designed and planned for in sheltered housing accommodation?

Method

Ethical approval obtained and informed consent ensured from three purposefully selected participants.

- Qualitative approach utilising in-depth semi-structured interviews
- Analysis utilising an interpretative epistemology and a constructivist ontology.
- Member checking conducted as a validity strategy for assessing accuracy.

Results:

Five key themes were identified:

1. Considerations when planning a garden (including seven sub-themes)
2. How residents use the gardens
3. Well-being
4. Identity and social interaction
5. The managers' involvement

- Variety of plants
- The elements
- Accessibility
- Space
- Paid Gardeners
- Security
- Finances

Analysis

Colour, atmosphere, variety and wildlife were seen as important aspects to the gardens. Accessibility helped promote garden usage and protection from the elements was important to residents' use of the gardens. The managers brought their individual interests to the gardens, and it is important to note that finance influenced garden design.



Discussion

1. Designing a garden requires an open mind and the ability to balance needs –

- Plants can be relaxing or stimulating, providing a common bond.
- The weather influences the use of gardens.
- Appearance should be balanced with accessibility to improve usage.
- Limited space can mean storage problems, but can also prove more manageable for residents.
- Maintenance requirements should consider the benefits of having a variety of plants in gardens.
- Security is not just a physical barrier against crime and involves both psychological and physiological support (Cooper Marcus 2000).
- The financial implications of gardens can be viewed as investments if planned in advance (Ulrich 2002).

2. How residents use the gardens:

Residents used gardens for individual activities such as reading and reflection, as well as to be with other residents and pets. Therefore gardens should include spaces for a variety of activities.



3. Well-being: Benefits have been found from both passive and active use. (York and Wiseman 2012)

4. Identity and social interaction: Gardens can increase residents' self-esteem and identity with perceived control over participation being central to this.

5. The managers' involvement: The interest and enthusiasm of managers is essential in the promotion of garden activities within developments.

Conclusion

The findings discuss the individual needs and choices of residents. They also reveal the potential barriers to planning a garden and enable the managers to reflect on how they help enhance the opportunities for residents to utilise their gardens. The findings are therefore shown to be able to inform occupational therapists involved in planning safe, therapeutic outside environments.

Implications for practice

- The enabling environment does not have to be complicated.
- Occupational therapists can be experts on design and usability issues (Borell 2008).
- Well-designed gardens can help older people find the occupational balance that provides productivity, leisure and self-care (Turner 2002).

References

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