

Active living at Rose Lodge

Peter de Groot shares the story of one care home's careful work to offer residents a vibrant active living programme within a purposefully designed environment – as well as being outward-facing into the community

Peter de Groot is the owner of Rose Lodge care home, Exmouth, Devon.

Viktor Frankl articulated the central importance of the search for meaning in people's lives in his seminal book, *Man's search for meaning* (Frankl 1946). He observed that people can find meaning in different ways. For some it is to be found in interactions with other people, for others in an idea such as beauty or religion, or in the simple pleasure of purposeful activity ('work'). For many people, meaning is found in all of these places.

Rose Lodge is a care home for 24 people living with dementia, located in Exmouth, Devon. We also offer a social club daily, allowing one to two people each day to come and spend the day at Rose Lodge, joining in with the activities on offer. At Rose Lodge, we explicitly recognise people's search for meaning, and helping people find meaning is central to our care ethos, which can best be described as 'meaning-centred care'. As each person finds meaning in such different ways, we designed an active living programme which includes a wide range of activities including singing, a choir, drama, poetry, gardening, animal keeping, exercise, rambling, art, crafts, quizzes, live music, as well as the usual activities of daily living. We have found that the extent to which people can participate and enjoy elements of the programme is determined largely by how well we blend the physical and social environments into effective active living spaces.

Environment

Architects have a saying: "We create the environment and the environment creates us" – and indeed in our experience the physical environment is the best place to start. For people with dementia, a good physical environment is one where the purpose of the space is obvious ("We grow vegetables here"), the environment is easy to navigate ("I know where to go to do what I

want"), and it is honest, in the sense that the inherent promise it makes ("This is a darts room") can be kept ("I am playing darts here"). We feel the last criterion is very important, as a space that does not keep its inherent promise will lead to unnecessary confusion and frustration.

So far we have worked hard to develop three active living spaces that meet these criteria of being obvious, easy to navigate and honest. The first is the gardens: these include distinct areas for relaxation, vegetable growing, garden sports, and garden work. The second area, our salon, is used for hairdressing, chiropody, and beauty and pampering sessions. Our most recent addition is the darts room.

Each of these environments is complemented by a carefully structured social environment, and it is the combination of the two which enables people with dementia to use these spaces effectively and enjoyably. Each activity takes place in the most appropriate space, often led by an outside specialist and supported by assigned members from the care team. Without a planned approach to the social environment these spaces are likely to be used sparingly or ineffectively.

We try to include the wider community in our active living programme, in this way giving residents an opportunity to contribute to life outside Rose Lodge in a meaningful way. Our choir and drama groups perform at community events and in the local theatre, and the gardening group helps to plant gardens in Exmouth as part of the 'Exmouth in Bloom' volunteer team, and joins in the annual vegetable growing competition – this year they won the runners-up prize. A group of pupils from a local primary school come to grow vegetables with the residents during the growing season under an informal Landshare agreement.

We nurture and develop these relationships with local groups, and we have found they have

Space	Physical design	Social design
Garden – terrace	Large terraces directly off the lounge door, fishpond, sensory pergola, animals, raised flower beds.	Weekly live music sessions, picnics, dance parties. A meeting place, or a quiet space with nature.
Garden – allotment	Raised growing beds, all gardening resources (shed, water, compost heap) available and labelled. Fruit trees and shrubs.	Gardening club, Landshare project with local school, 'Exmouth in Bloom' vegetable growing competition and volunteering.
Garden – games lawn	Large level lawn area without obstructions, bowling club house, easy access to equipment.	A bowling club that practises and holds competitions, exercise classes, yoga classes, drama.
Garden – work area	Large composting boxes, fire pit, soil, wood-chips.	One-to-one or independent gardening activities.
Salon	Glamorous decor, height adjustable chairs and shampoo basin, mirrors, a magazine rack and a radio, pictures of famous actors.	Visiting professionals (hairdressing, chiropody, beauty) who can make you feel special. An informal meeting place.
Darts room	A lockable darts board and mat, pictures of classic British cars. Upright sofas.	A darts club with competitions, and future plans include playing against other teams at Rose Lodge and in pubs.

Details of the physical design of the garden



Distinct spaces

The new gardens have been designed to be logical and easy to navigate for the residents, with four distinct garden areas: the terrace, allotment (top left), games lawn, and work area. The areas closest to the lounge are the easiest to navigate while those areas further from the lounge are primarily for the most independent and skilled residents. This is a very natural way to match risk with skill without imposing unnatural constraints on people's liberty, and allows people with varying skill levels to find their own space. We have observed that most people will use the areas that they are competent to use and this makes the use of these spaces largely self-regulating.

Subtle navigation aids

From the lounge door, the first three areas are clearly visible at a glance so that residents can decide where to go without the need for explicit signposts which some residents are unable to read. Similarly, it is easy to find the way back to the lounge door, as this is signposted with a garden arch. The path down to the allotment and games lawn are



signposted by means of the same garden arch (top centre) which alerts people to the fact there is a transition to the lower level areas.

Minimal obstructions

For example the railings (above) are designed without breaks which help people to use them safely for support without difficult transitions. All the paths are also designed with minimal breaks, to give people the confidence to explore.



Use of colour

The garden structures are coloured to help with orientation. All fences are green. Major garden structures such as the pergola and the chicken enclosure are brown, and garden features such as the pond cover (top right), animal feeding stations, raised flower beds, and dovecote are blue (the doves are white). Contrasting colours are also used, for example to help residents locate access to the toolshed and feeding stations for the garden animals. The railings, raised bed edges, and path edges are picked out in a contrasting colour to make it easy for people to locate them.

Explicit signage

Black writing on yellow background is used to identify the various feeding stations, structures such as the toolshed, compost heap and so on, and to remind people of the names of the various animals we keep. This is the same signage that we use within the home, and has been shown to be easy to read for many people with dementia.

tremendous benefits not only for the residents but also for the community groups who gain a better understanding of how to interact with people with dementia. They also provide further opportunities for community engagement, such as residents being invited to join the passing-out parade of the pupils who grow vegetables with them at Rose Lodge.

In the box below left is a summary of how we have blended physical and social environments to create active living spaces.

These active living spaces encourage people with dementia to live in the present, using skills that may have been dormant for many years, and to develop new skills. The focus on living well in the present relates directly to people's search for meaning, which never ends. To put it simply: with a fuzzy past and an uncertain future, meaning is mostly found by living in the present. When we are engaged fully in an activity or interaction with others, confusion can drop away and life becomes joyful. This is well known in relation to singing, and underpins the success of singing circles. In fact there are many such practical activities that people can participate in when a supportive environment is created and nurtured.

Risk: Why not?

The design of our active living spaces reflects our approach to managing risk. We have moved away from a primary focus on minimising risk at all costs to one where we balance the limited risks of everyday life against the very significant benefits that come from living a meaningful life, and the certain negative consequences of excessive passivity. We have found that, in considering risks, the 'Why not?' question is generally a much more helpful question to ask than the 'What if?' question. This does not mean that we ignore risks, rather that we aim to design safety into the environments as much as possible, and we don't let considerations of risk prevent us from helping residents live active, meaningful lives.

To demonstrate some of these concepts, the physical design of the garden is described in more detail in the box above.

We have found that people with dementia can lead meaningful lives by living actively in the present. To achieve this, the physical and social environments must be blended carefully to support active living, and this in turn requires a new approach to managing risk.ⁿ

ⁿ Peter de Groot writes regularly on Rose Lodge's blogging website, www.dementiacaredevon.co.uk
Rose Lodge also has a website: www.roselodgecarehome.co.uk