

PUTTING RELATIONSHIPS FIRST

Many gardens around care homes are not being used. Mark Rendell and Debbie Carroll of Step Change Design started a research project to find out why



Mark Rendell is a garden designer and pre-registered member of the SGD, who runs The Growing Company, a design consultancy in North Wales.

OUR TWO-YEAR

research journey into the care sector presented us with some serious home truths about our attitudes as designers from our very first site visit. The garden we were in was quite scruffy, with lots of weeds, sharp corners and bare patches in the borders. We didn't feel that it was an impressive or well-looked-after space for the residents of this care home, many of whom were living with dementia.

But that June afternoon was a watershed moment for us. We saw a magical interaction between the activities manager and a resident. They were engaging happily with this modest garden; the buttercups, daisies and dandelion clocks.

It was an authentic and warm interaction that transformed the mood of the resident. It wasn't the garden design or the quality of the physical space that made this moment meaningful – it was the skills deployed by the person who accompanied the resident in the garden.

Inside and out

The garden was typically domestic in feel and scale: it had a washing line, a scruffy lawn, bird feeders and familiar plants such as lavender, rosemary and wallflowers. This was actually good enough. It didn't need to be redesigned. So where did that leave us?

We decided to widen our research to include what took place inside the

care home as well as outside, to observe its processes, policies and attitudes. By observing the whole home, we gathered a wider picture of what was influencing the residents' engagement with the outdoors.

It became clear that the most active engagement wasn't dependent on having the most money or the prettiest gardens; many homes were using what they already had, including some apparent design flaws, to great effect. We also noticed that the more active gardens were initiated by the people there. They had moved away from reliance on the 'things' in the garden to create activity and stimulation.

We gathered nearly 1,500 pieces of data and identified a key correlation: those homes that were practising what we termed 'relationship-centred care' were more naturally active in using their gardens, regardless of the condition or whether or not they had been designed. Relationship-centred care, a culture that we witnessed and identified, treats residents as individuals and allows them a significant degree of freedom.

We went on to create 'The Map' tool, based on our analysis, and by doing so finally worked out where we fitted in: design support needs to match the cultural practices of the home.

Starting with culture

The truth is that if an organisation is not already using its outside space, a new design will not guarantee greater engagement levels once the novelty has worn off.

This finding requires a more holistic approach to design support; we call it

'relationship-centred design'. It requires a shift away from traditional one-off design interventions towards smaller interventions provided over time, which take place alongside the home's journey forward to greater, more sustainable interaction with the outside. It also respects the need for a constantly flexible and evolving space, keeping the care home firmly in the driving seat.

Relationship-centred design has to start from where the culture currently is, not from where we (or the home) think it should be. Many clients and organisations believe that a new garden will in itself kick-start excitement and engagement with the outside space, but they have to fully understand the attitudes and practices in place before the design process starts.

We advise designers to understand the cultural practices at work and to build in time at the care home as a part of the site survey and analysis phase, observing behaviour and practices, inside and out, to establish the reality of the care culture at work – The Map tool can help with this.

Although we are seen as designers, that may not be what is required of us initially. We also have an important role as advocates for the value of the outdoors in the overall care provided to residents. Our enthusiasm for, familiarity with and championing of the outside space can be enough to help a cautious care culture to shift significantly in attitude towards this valuable resource. This can pave the way for more investment and design support in the future, aligned carefully with our knowledge of where they are on the care-culture spectrum. ☉

To read more on relationship-centred care, see the Journal for Dementia Care, March 2015 (Hawker Publishing). Find out about The Map tool at www.stepchange-design.co.uk, where you can also get the book *Why don't we go into the garden?* and check dates for workshops.

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