

Articles for Landscape Show 2017

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Ahead of our second year presenting at the Landscape Show, we wrote this series of short articles for the *Preview* magazine, describing our new approach to working with care settings, 'Relationship-Centred Design' and also previewing our presentation theme this year which is the 'Hidden Dangers' that designers need to be aware of when working with care settings.



Article 1: Two garden designers in search of an answer

We've been on an eye-opening research journey into the care sector to answer a deceptively simple question, "Why aren't care home gardens more actively used?" It was during our very first site visit to one of the 17 care homes in our study that we were presented with some serious home truths about our attitudes as designers and this will form the centrepiece of our presentation at this year's Show.

The garden we were in was quite scruffy: there were lots of weeds, sharp corners and bare patches in the borders. It was not a very impressive or well-looked after space, from our point of view, for residents living with dementia. What took place on that June afternoon, however, was a watershed moment for us. We saw a magical interaction take place between a resident and the activities manager who used what this modest garden already had (weeds and all) to create an authentic, engaging and skilful interaction that visibly lifted the mood of the resident.

We realised that it wasn't the garden design or the quality of the physical space that made this interaction meaningful. It was about the skills deployed by the person who accompanied the resident in the garden. The garden was typically domestic in feel and scale; there was a washing line in one area, bird feeders and some generationally-familiar plants like lavender, rosemary and wallflowers in another, but it didn't seem to matter. Or rather, this was actually good enough.

Article 2: Designing a care setting garden means stepping indoors

A key message we want to share with garden designers and landscape architects is to understand the *care culture* in operation before you design a new garden for your care setting clients. This is to avoid the danger of 'overdesigning' the space (i.e. providing an outdoor resource that is beyond the current capacity of the home to use it effectively).

We widened our research to include observations of what took place *inside*, as much as what took place outside the care settings we visited, and this led us to the answer to our original question: “*Why aren’t care home gardens used more actively?*” It took time to identify this as the factors that influence activity levels in the outdoors lay in the subtle and complex set of practices, attitudes, habits and norms in the care setting itself, rather than in any particular features in the garden.

In other words, *care culture* will ultimately determine how well used a new garden will be in the longer term, not the quality of your design. If the care setting is not using the garden *they already have* then our research indicates that a brand new one will not be used any more than the previous one, after the novelty value has worn off.

This is because the ingrained and subconscious habits, attitudes, beliefs and norms that are in operation at the care setting have not been addressed to ensure that the new outdoor space will be easily incorporated into the overall care culture in operation.

Article 3: Care culture influences engagement levels with the outside space

Before our research project, we believed that a well-used garden for residents living with dementia in care settings depended on our skills as designers. In fact, our findings showed that it doesn’t.

We identified a correlation between those care settings that had a more advanced organisational culture (i.e. person-centred practices) and a correspondingly higher engagement level with their gardens, *regardless* of their condition, how pretty they were and whether or not they had been designed. In fact, the higher performing homes had more modest spaces and fewer resources than others in our study.

As our presentation on September 19th will explain, designers risk their reputations by creating expensive gardens that are not used as much as their care sector clients expect them to be.

A key factor is to understand much more about the care sector clients we work for. Understanding the *actual* care culture in operation by our care sector clients is a vital piece of information that should guide the designer’s overall brief and remit from the outset of a design.

Long before reaching for the tape measure and survey equipment, designers need to observe and challenge what they see taking place across the whole setting, both indoors and outdoors. Investigate room layouts and navigational cues to the outdoors, ‘Open Door’ policies and attitudes

towards Health and Safety, and how many people are using the garden as it currently is in order to gauge how well embedded in the culture is going outside for both residents and staff.

Article 4: Working successfully with a care setting means understanding their care culture

We discovered in our research project that there is a diverse range of care cultures operating across the UK care sector and that they lie on a spectrum. This was important for us to grasp as this also appeared to influence how much the care setting was using the garden they already had.

For designers and other outside specialists who are called in to work with a care setting, this is a really important piece of information that should guide the level and type of design or horticultural support to give. But how do you work out the care culture of your client?

We produced a graphic diagnostic tool called the 'Care Culture Map' to aid both the care setting and outside specialist in identifying where they are located along the care culture spectrum. The Map contains several columns and one of them addresses the type of support that designers and outside specialists can provide at different points along this spectrum.

The Map aims to ensure that work provided by outside specialists *matches* the current culture position of the care setting in order to avoid the risk of overdesigning the space.

We call this new approach, '*Relationship-Centred Design*' and it is based on working with where the care setting currently is (in their attitudes and practices relating to the outside space) and not where we think they should be, or wish to be. In essence, we believe that both parties, designers and care staff, need to be prepared to address and modify the way they may have traditionally worked together.

Article 5: We need to change our approach in working with care settings

We advocate a new approach to working with care settings called 'Relationship-Centred Design'. But what does this mean in practice? For designers, this approach calls for more modest and smaller scale interventions (as opposed to a one-off, whole garden approach) that support the care setting on its journey along the care culture spectrum towards greater and more meaningful engagement with the outside space.

Designers and outside specialists may need to overcome some deeply ingrained beliefs around their practice, including: focusing on aesthetic qualities of a garden, e.g. making a pretty space,

health and safety approaches that recognise and support advanced forms of risk assessment and an assumption that, as an expert, they are 'in charge'.

The emphasis in the approach we advocate is not on simply making the garden neat or pretty, nor believing that we have to redesign or alter the *whole* space in one go or to fill it with features and objects that may well turn out to be irrelevant or gimmicky but instead focusing on the expressed needs of the residents and working closely to the current care culture in operation.

Above all, we will need to deploy a wider range of skills and competencies than simply design in order to deliver our aim to ensure that our involvement results in more active and meaningful engagement with the outside space for the residents, staff and families now and for the longer term.



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