

The Top Five Defining principles of successful memory care

Design

By Douglas Pancake, AIA

CALA members are among the most educated and experienced developers and operators of memory care programs across the country.

As an active participant in the evolution of the ARCFE building type for the past twenty years, I have had a front row seat in observing and driving the industry as it evolved from its very first fledgling memory care programs and buildings. Since then, the knowledge level and expertise of my clients and other providers across the industry has grown to the highest level.

Most of the professionals I encounter in my work as an architect can readily understand the virtues of supportive and therapeutic environments, and how these elements translate to higher functional competence and wellbeing of the residents we serve. I hear many success stories from CALA members of positive outcomes in communities where environmental design is combined with equally innovative programming and operations.

These success stories often take into consideration five important Defining Principles (DPs) of memory care unit design. The DPs contribute to resident wellbeing in significant ways. They complement care delivery and operational programming, compensate for each individual's declining cognitive abilities, strengthen remaining skills and support the wide variety of often conflicting emotional and psychological needs.

Defining Principle #1:

Resident Centered Programming and Design

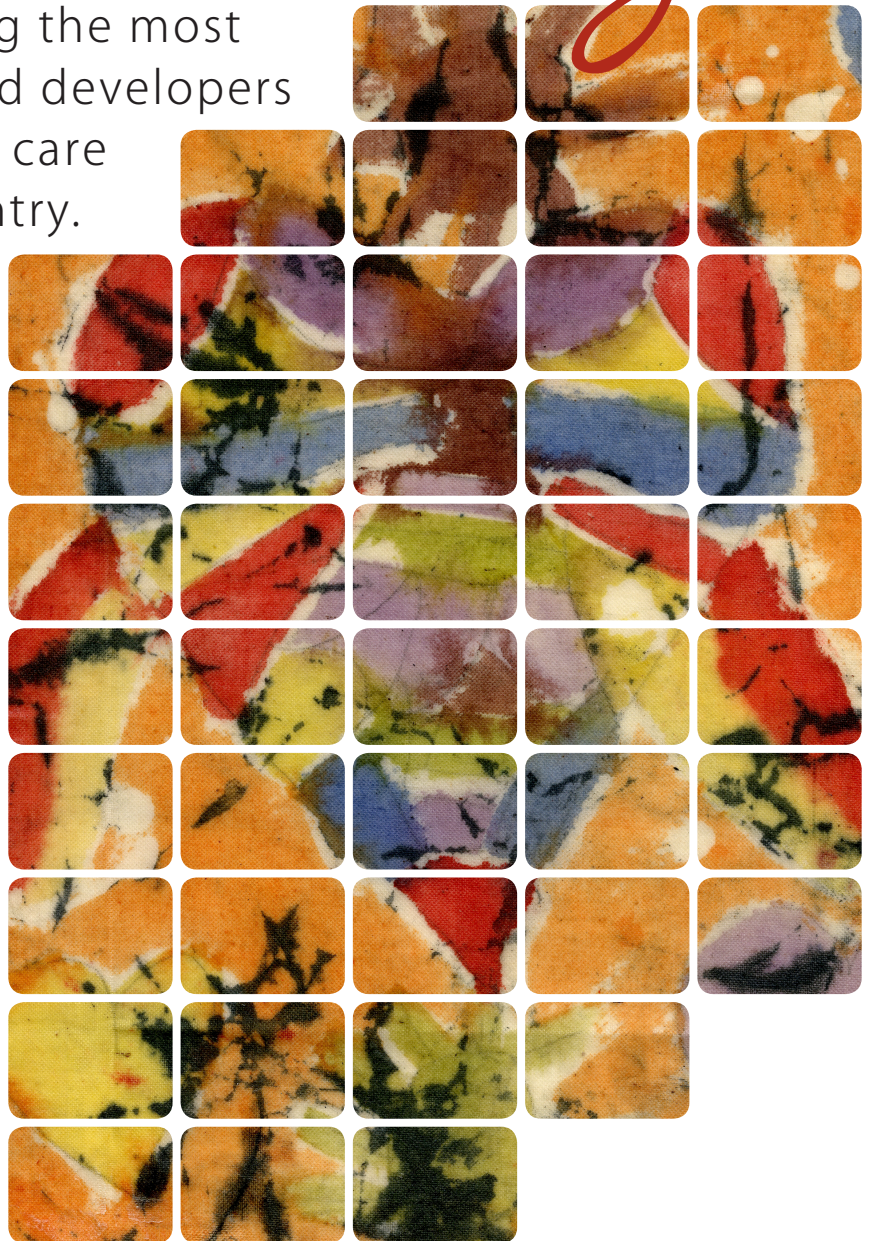
Each resident's positive experience must be the highest priority in every aspect of the design process. The architectural program, activities program, care program and business plan must be complementary, symbiotic and focused on maximizing the life experience of each individual. Environmental design should facilitate opportunities for daily success in each living space. The emotional, functional and interpersonal aspects should enhance each resident's life experience and perceived

autonomy, while at the same time supporting the people serving and caring for the residents.

Defining Principle#2:

Prosthetic Environmental Design

Thoughtful architecture and design can compensate for missing or declining cognitive skills. The basic floor plan design and space planning should first consider orientation and way



finding for individuals who cannot retain a cognitive map, or are unable to retain knowledge of the spatial conditions leading through the build environment. One way this can be accomplished is by implementing a looping circulation system that leads an individual through or alongside each space offered in the program.

Eliminate dead end corridors with secured exit doors. This severe environmental condition is a harsh reminder that an individual lives in a controlled environment. Dead end corridors lead to elevated levels of aggravation and frustration. To the greatest extent possible, corridor terminations should offer choices. An inviting view to the outdoors gives choice and control to the resident, who may either venture outside or turn around. The inclusion of an activity room, parlor or life skills station at the end of a corridor can offer even more choice and intellectual or social stimulation. Providing this level of choice fortifies the individual's autonomy and self-determined experience.

The inclusion of memory boxes positioned at the entrance of each bedroom are perhaps the most effective environmental prosthetic device. Memory boxes have evolved across the past two decades, but the fundamental and defining principal remains the same. In many cases, an individual cannot utilize normal way finding and cognitive mapping skills such as room numbers or spatial adjacencies. Memory boxes provide a significant and understandable cue connecting the bedroom space to its owner.

Items placed in the memory box should always be memorabilia and artifacts representing the individual's earlier life. These items are overlearned and deeply ingrained into the long-term memory, which we know endures until later stages of a dementing illness. Additionally, the contents of each resident's memory boxes typically represent the greatest accomplishments and successes in life. They provide memory cues, which exercise memory recall. They facilitate conversations among the residents and others. And they present a significant portrait of the individual's identity

to residents and staff. Arguably, the memory box is the most important defining principle in the successful design of a memory care environment.

Defining Principle # 3: Home-like Design

The environment should look, feel and smell like home. The earliest environment and behavior research observed that Alzheimer's residents would more readily adapt behaviors that could be appropriately linked to the space they were experiencing: conversation and socialization in the living room, dining in the dining room, sleeping in the bedroom, etc. Furthermore, the behavioral response to the environmental imagery and programmatic expectations can provide positive behavioral outcomes.

The rule of first impressions is just as important here as it is anywhere else in senior housing and care. Upon first arrival, a new memory care resident should observe other residents that are engaged, self-determined, and interacting in a familiar environment. This experience will reaffirm the new resident's expectations and reinforce the role of the engaged, self-determined individual. The architectural vocabulary of home should be reinforced throughout the memory care environment. Kitchens are typically the gathering space for many positive experiences. Provide a residential kitchen with an adjacent and connected dining room. These spaces could also facilitate spontaneous activities and socialization among the residents, just like at home.

The hearth is also most important in creating an authentic expression and imagery of home. The living room should be nicely appointed and reflect those expectations rather than appear like a hotel lobby.

Defining Principle #4: Consider and Eliminate Sources of Environmental Stress

Noxious environments are all around us. Ambient noise, glare, hot spots or shading can create a negative emotional response. Consider the details. All environments should be designed with sensitivity to acoustics. Finishes in

common areas should include materials such as carpet and acoustic panels to absorb and reduce ambient noise.

Additional consideration should be afforded to artificial lighting levels. Lighting in senior housing and care design can be a dissertation on its own. However, the general rules of thumb governing lighting design should be considered, including providing indirect and reflected lighting schemes with elevated and consistent distribution of ambient lighting levels. Direct lighting sources are only appropriate for task lighting. All opportunities for solar glare should be eliminated.

Defining Principle #5: Create Multiplex Environments

Provide opportunities in the environment that will gratify the conflicting emotional and psychological needs of perceived safety and autonomy. Individuals living in memory care environments often experience these simultaneous, but conflicting emotional needs. We all feel vulnerable at times, and having our sense of security and safety reaffirmed provides comfort. At the same time, we all like to be in control, and enhancing our safety may impact our perception of autonomy. The environmental response to one can exacerbate the other.

One example of an environmental response to these multiplex needs and the understanding of the hierarchy between our own control of the environment and security measures imposed upon us can be demonstrated though the transition from indoor to outdoor space. Providing unencumbered access to the outdoors can reaffirm one's sense of independence and autonomy, or it can increase fears caused by the knowledge that there is risk in the outdoor environment. Creating a hierarchy in the transition from indoors to outdoors can address this condition.

The transition leading to any outdoor space begins with the most sheltered and secured space. Next, a space or area may open up to an outdoor view. The next transitional space may provide a sitting area or viewing area where the individual may observe the goings on outdoors, thus providing security and

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"When they can see genuine care being given, then they are free to release the guilt they often feel and can put that energy into quality time spent with their loved one..."



Denese Taylor
Memory Program Coordinator, Belmont Village, Encino

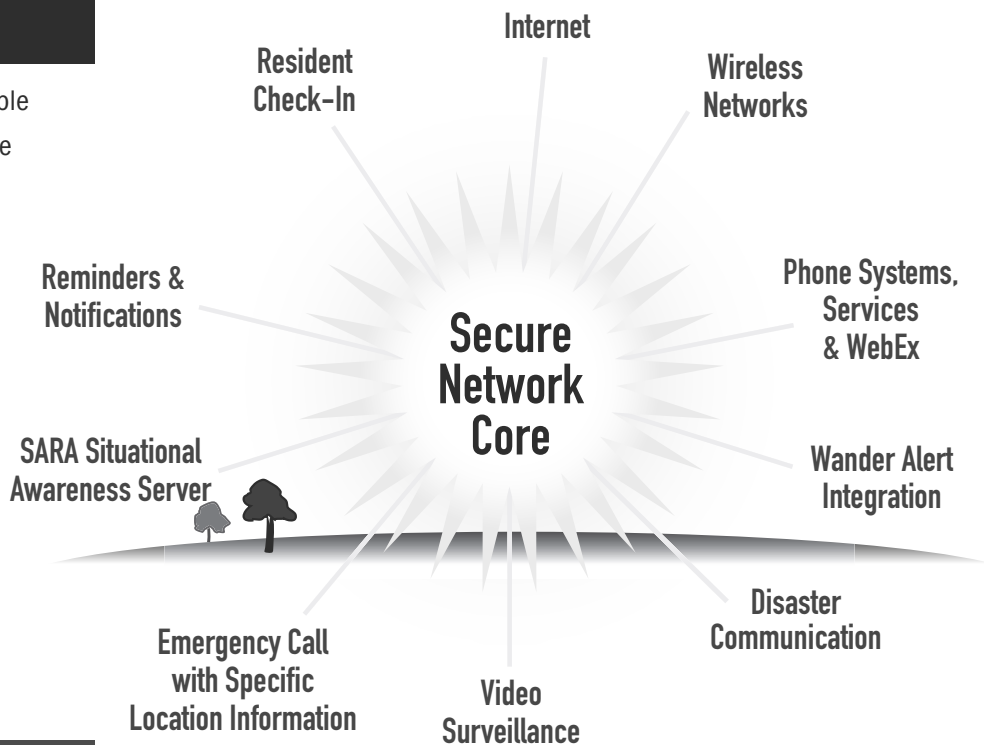
reinforcing autonomy and control. The next transitional space may be a covered patio where an individual can proceed outside but still sit in a covered location protected with a roof above. The conclusion of this transitional hierarchy is complete exposure. With the transitional hierarchy described here, the individual can find the location within the memory care environment that will gratify whatever conflicting psychological needs the individual may be experiencing.

Across the country, the senior care industry is experiencing a surge of remodel and repositioning work. Many older buildings, including congregate living facilities, psychiatric hospitals and acute care hospitals are being revived as memory care programs. In almost all cases, these aging buildings offer little opportunity to provide supportive and meaningful environments. Here lies the challenge and the ultimate reward. Thoughtful application of these distinctive principles to both new construction and building reuse projects can maximize the opportunity for a successful program and the highest outcomes for the residents living within. ■

Doug Pancake, founder of Douglas Pancake Architects, is a leader in the evolution of senior housing design, code development and advocacy for elders.

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Douglas Pancake Architects (DPA) is an architectural firm specializing in design for the aging and serving the healthcare industry across the United States. For 25 years, DPA's founder, Douglas Pancake, has been a leader in the evolution of senior housing design, code development, and advocacy for our elders. The architects at DPA are a group of compassionate and talented individuals, focused on creating supportive and meaningful healing environments for the frailest and most vulnerable members of our community.



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