

Forget the checklists - think about the people

Designing a care home has never been easier. A quick Google search will unveil a vast array of helpful information, PowerPoint presentations, study guides produced by worthy charitable foundations and any number of checklists to ensure that nothing gets missed. Got your cinema room? Hairdressers? Café? Shop? Library? Memory boxes at the door? Good. How about the corridors? Are they brightly lit and do they end in a suitable destination? Great! Then you're all set . . . but wait! What if your care home is expected to cater for residents with dementia? Have you picked up the latest Stirling University checklist? Let's do a quick check:

- Low window sill heights
- No dead end corridors
- Contrasting colours to aid visibility
- Consistent floor coverings
- Matt finishes rather than shiny
- Wayfinding, signposting and legibility
- Even light distribution - to avoid pooling and shadows

Right then! We are ready to start building. Okay, I'm being deliberately simplistic and more than a little unfair, but there is a danger that we are starting to miss out some crucial steps in the design process. These things I have mentioned are all important and have been borne-out by extensive research and trial and error testing over many years. My point is that we are often so busy making sure that we have ticked all the boxes and been clever with our room arrangements and avoiding dead-end corridors that we sometimes forget that we are designing a building for people to live in, people who are very vulnerable and who may be physically and/or mentally frail and who will be anxious about the upheaval of leaving their home and coming to live somewhere completely alien to them. Surely, that's where the design process should start.

Before any checklists are rolled out and before any consideration is given to the internal arrangement of the home, there needs to be a more subtle design process which begins with a study of the 'place'. For a person to feel 'at home' it is important that we understand what that means in their particular context. In simple terms, if a new care home is intended to cater for residents from a dense urban neighbourhood of tightly packed Victorian terraced houses and inter-War semis, a care home built with sleek glazed facades and curved, rendered walls would appear alien and could easily add to the



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already heightened anxiety of the vulnerable resident, having to make what is already a traumatic move.

On the other hand if that care home were to be built out of brick, with a pitched and tiled roof with a central front door flanked by bay windows to the bedrooms and living rooms, then at least the building would be 'legible' to use urban design parlance. This could be the sort of building that would evoke memories of 'home' and is far more likely to become a place of refuge for someone who is starting to suffer from the stress of memory loss and diminished cognitive ability.

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We are involved with two schemes in different parts of the country at present: one in West Sussex and one in South Oxfordshire. As with all non-specialist elderly care homes they will cater for the populations within about a 10-15 minute drive from the new home. In the case of the South Oxfordshire facility we began with a study of the Thames valley. The main local centre has an historic core with buildings dating back to the 16th and 17th Centuries. Many

have been re-clad or re-fronted in Georgian and early Victorian times to disguise their disrepair and to effectively shore up the older structures behind. Moving away from the centre, there are Victorian houses and cottages with occasional pockets of more modern housing scattered throughout the village. As would be expected, there are many traditional building materials used throughout the village. There are a few timber-clad buildings and many brick, or brick and flint/limestone rubble. This is typical of the wider Thames Corridor villages generally.

Our care home proposal uses a mixed palette of brick panels and timber panels which help to add interest to the façade whilst the pitched and tiled roof picks up the same colour and style of roof tile which is prevalent in the surrounding area. The roof overhangs the eaves to give shading to residents on the sunnier faces of the building whilst echoing many of the rustic barn conversion properties typical of this area with large sloping roofs and overhanging eaves. In short, we have attempted to create a building which blends in with the local villages around about, and which will be familiar and hopefully 'homely' to the local resident population.

In contrast, we are just starting construction on a scheme in West Sussex which is far removed from the styling of the South Oxfordshire home. In this case, we have opted for a flat-roofed, white-rendered building with large glazed panels in bedrooms and corner glazing to living rooms. Whilst this simple, stark design would be alien to the folk of the rural Thames valley villages, it is a familiar typology amongst residents of the south coast who have lived all of their lives with art deco and modernist structures.

Understanding what 'home' means to the people we are designing for must come first. Once we have settled on this, then we can roll out the checklists . . . **CT**