

A resident at ACH Group's Highercombe facility in Hope Valley enjoys a visit from his grandchildren.

# Co-designing better living

The layout and interior design of residential aged care homes is being turned upside down to improve residents' wellbeing and staff efficiency, reports CAROLINE RICHES.

Corridors, plain walls and impersonal spaces. Residential aged care homes have not always set the design world on fire. To visiting family members they can sometimes seem drab and depressing; for staff members, long hallways can mean a constant trudge. We can only imagine how some of these places feel to residents. Often they don't, or can't, articulate how they feel about their surroundings. They could just be using up their energy trying to make sense of them.

The growing number of architects and interior designers specialising in dementia-friendly creations has not come about by accident, but through need. There has never been a bigger drive to create aged care homes that are more sensitive to residents and their day-to-day experience. And current and future residents are also having a say in how they would like their environment to look and feel.

It all makes sense. If the design makes residents more comfortable, they are happier and better able to take care of themselves, and there's less strain on staff. If care workers have less distance to travel, they can be freed up to be more attentive to residents' needs. If services such as food and laundry can be delivered more smoothly, then everyone is happy.

Grant Corderoy, a senior partner with aged care benchmarking firm StewartBrown, detests



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the corridor design of old-style aged care homes, believing they negatively impact state of mind, levels of care and the resident experience, as well as operations.

"Staff represent 70 per cent of the costs of running an aged care home, so we need them to work efficiently," Corderoy tells *Australian Ageing Agenda*. "But having to go down long halls in a spread-out facility to deliver food and laundry and check on residents is inefficient. And from a quality of care point of view, staff just can't see residents or get to them very quickly."

So what is the ultimate layout of a modern aged care home? Corderoy points to dementia villages, such as Korongee in Hobart, which is set to open in 2020 with houses of eight people, or homes designed across multiple storeys instead of one single level, like Life Care's Gaynes Park Manor in Adelaide.

"With a multi-level design, the footprint is lower, the delivery of services is more efficient and staff are moving vertically between floors rather than horizontally," he says.

Life Care CEO Allen Candy is immensely proud of the home, but admits its creation was a journey that took him all over the world.

"We walked into a residential aged care home in Bristol in England, and we thought, wow. It was smaller, there were intimate spaces, staff were always rostered in the same area so only worked with the same residents, families got to be involved and it created a real home within a home. We asked lots of questions, they shared their designs and we brought those ideas back to Adelaide," Candy tells AAA.

Gaynes Park Manor sits across three storeys. On each storey, there are two houses of 16 people, which are like clusters, with rooms arranged around communal living areas. Like a hotel, all the back-of-house is down below in the

basement. To keep dirty linen discreet, there are laundry chutes throughout the house. All the meals come up from the basement and are served in a communal dining room in each house.

Life Care, which operates five aged care homes across the South Australian capital, consulted Australian architects "who were prepared to do things a little differently" as well as architects from the dementia research centre at Scotland's University of Stirling. The brief? The very best in dementia design. Candy says having many minds on the project caused tension at times, but it was necessary to "keep pushing the envelope".

When it came to interiors for improving the resident experience, orientation was the buzz word.

"We're big into signage and each floor has a theme. The moment you get out of the lift there are all these visual cues telling you where you are," says Candy.

And we're not just talking about signs. If you exit the lift on the City floor, you're greeted by a big mural of Adelaide in the 1900s, while earthy textures represent the red brick of the South Australian capital. The Beach floor is themed in blue and decorated with sandstone, ocean-themed artwork and shells. Up on the green Adelaide Hills floor, there is a mural of pastures.

Each house feels like a unique home; even the nursing station is placed discreetly outside the house next to the lifts. There are natural spaces, such as dining rooms and pleasant open-plan living areas, which residents can arrange as they please. It's bright and cosy, but not patronising.

"The feedback we get is that's everyone loves it," says Candy. "It's a great design, it's very different, it's innovative and we're very proud of it."

It's in the bedroom of course where aged care residents can express their tastes most freely, and this is a trend that has been taking flight across the sector for some time.

In their twilight years, people need a comforting space with soft lighting and space to welcome loved ones, says Corderoy. It can also be a confusing time of life and people spend a lot of time in their room, so the aim is to make it as personal and familiar as possible through photos, artwork, furniture and fabrics.

Not-for-profit provider ACH Group has dug deep to find out what the community really wants when it comes to living in residential aged care. Its Design Days, run alongside COTA SA's Plug-in groups, have consulted a broad range of younger and older people for their take on the kind of residential aged care homes people would like to live in. Groups have tested furniture for comfort, practicality and style, and offered thoughts on colour schemes.

General manager of service design Trudy Sutton believes it's imperative to listen to what residents want.

"In the past aged care residents haven't necessarily thought to ask for different interior design options. But this is what future consumers are telling us they want to be consulted on.

"I see no reason why residents in ACH Group homes can't make their room their own," Sutton tells AAA.

Sutton says ACH Group is happy for residents to bring their own furniture and discuss their preferences when it comes to colour and design. "When people are in a familiar environment that is individualised and resonates with them, it



The communal deck at Life Care Gaynes Park Manor, which sits across three stories with two houses of 16 people on each.

can contribute to a sense of place, especially for people living with memory loss or dementia."

At Gaynes Park Manor, perspex panels have been installed in wooden cupboards for that reason: residents want to wake up in the morning to familiarity; they want to know where they hung their coat.

When it comes to dementia-friendly bathroom design, the toilet should also be seen from the bed if the door is open, which helps promote night-time independence. And different coloured tiles can act as signage.

"There are myriad things that make a difference," says Candy, "such as contrasting tiles around the shower, bathroom basin or toilet to draw attention to that space, or a different coloured door so it stands out against the wall."

Corderoy is pleased to see more and more aged care homes redesigning and rebuilding to better suit residents, care workers, their families and the wider community. He expects the old "legacy homes", as he calls them, will eventually disappear.

But he's keen to emphasise that aged care homes are long-term investments and it's crucial providers see them as such.

"The cost of building an aged care home is upwards of \$250,000 per bed so there's a high capital cost, as well as a high labour cost. The number one requirement is providing the right levels of care to residents, but to be profitable and successful, you need efficiency of operations and high occupancy levels."

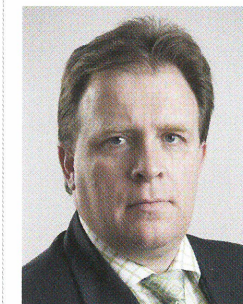
ACH Group's research sessions revealed a surprising clue in how to achieve the latter: many wanted their aged care home to appeal as much to those on the outside as to residents on the inside.

"They wanted the community to be welcome, they wanted space for inter-generational activities such as playgrounds for children, gardens that they could share," says Sutton. "They didn't want to be cut off; they wanted to be surrounded by everyday life."

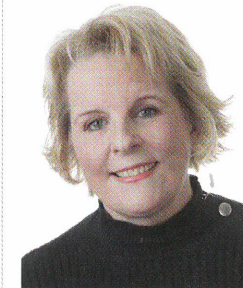
Candy says Life Care's architects also emphasised the importance of child-friendly spaces. To this end, Gaynes Park Manor has a cafe, open deck, running water features and a playground.

"People with dementia love looking at kids play, the kids feel more comfortable with their grandparents and they all have more meaningful interactions," says Candy.

"The best compliment for this place came from a gentleman who is wheelchair-bound. He said the best thing about being here compared to where he was before, is not that the kids and grandkids come more often, but that they stay longer." ■



Allen Candy



Trudy Sutton