Safety and Security
Importance for Elderly Living in Sheltered Housing

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Sheltered housing for elderly persons is in a dynamic transition, because reforms emphasise the right of continued integrity and respect, also when one needs extensive service and support in the daily life (SOU, 1997:170; SoS, 1997:2). Therefore it made it an interesting and important area to study. Today one rebuilt more traditional nursing homes and homes for aged to get away from the atmosphere of institution. Common characteristics of new buildings are individual living units in combination with semi-public areas. Efforts are made to make the milieu more like a home.

It is the elderly who have most difficulties to master changes in their living environment. Studies show that even small changes of rebuilding seriously could threaten the feeling of security for the elderly. For example, the abilities for social contacts such as to be able to greet a neighbour, or ask for help constitute a great strain for many older people. Moving to sheltered housing is of course a much greater adjustment from that perspective. At the same time as care, supervision and support that the personnel can give are of great help in the adjustment process. In addition, when the furniture are arranged similarly as in the previous housing it contributes to a positive perception of the moving. For some individuals the moving rather seemed to be an incentive to changing the environment (Ulrich, 1992; Fridell, 1991; 1995; 1998).

The more purely aesthetic aspects of the physical environment are not often enough accentuated. Florence Nightingale belongs to those who saw the creating of an aesthetic therapeutic environment as an important part in the nurses’ care of the patient. She concretized aesthetical questions about a beautiful view from the window, flowers on the table, a work of art to contemplate from the hospital bed, as well as the light and color scheme of a sick room. Later research that has followed in Nightingale’s tracks are Watson (1985; 1995), Koithan (1996) and Wikström (1993; 1997).

Aim

The present project is a collaboration and exchange between the scientific areas nursing science, architecture, environmental psychology and art sciences. The aim was to describe older peoples’ opinions of their living conditions in sheltered housing and from this point of view...
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document perceived advantage of and difficulties with todays sheltered housing with focus on planning and decoration of indoors design and outdoors environment, and to lift forward the need of research within this area in order to get information of what is most urgent to study.

Method

For the planned project a purposive sample of eleven sheltered housings was visited. They varied in design of the interior space and outdoors environment. Participants were chosen from three criteria: those who had been assessed as mentally well-oriented as to their names, time, setting, etc., by the ward staff, and were able to see and hear with or without spectacles respectively hearing aid. The average age of the elderly persons were 84 years (range 78-89). During one year older persons living in sheltered housings were interviewed. A registered nurse with geriatric experience visited each of the elderly persons twice. During the first meeting she was presented for the elderly person by the director of the sheltered housing. The nurse told the elderly person about the procedure of the interview, and that she was interested in the elderly’s opinions of living in sheltered housing, especially their flat, semi-public areas such as dining-room, assembly-room and outdoor-environment. The elderly was again visited a few days later for the interview that lasted for approximately one hour. The interview consisted of open-ended questions that were recorded and later transcribed. But the interview was also a questioning conversation in which the interviewer followed up the answers with new questions. When the taped interview was completed the interviewer and the interviewee walked around in the flat and in the semi-public area. The aim was to get spontaneous opinions from the elderly person, and to ensure that also unforeseen areas might be revealed. Quick notes were made and transcribed the same evening. During the interview process great emphasis was on allowing the elderly’s views to appear. The extent and length of the interview varied depending on the elderly’s state of health. Usually the elderly person indicated very clearly when he/she considered the interview to have finished. The length of the transcribed interviews ranged from ten to sixteen pages.

The usual approval by the sheltered housing management and by the participants were given.

Analysis of the findings

A qualitative analysis of the data was made in two steps. The first step was a content analysis with open, substantive coding of each interview. Open coding fractured the data and allowed identification of categories. Then a naming and a categorising of phenomena through a close examination of data was examined, compared for similarities and differences, and questions were asked about the phenomena as reflected in the data.

When contemplating the categories and considering the tone of the interviews, a model emerged presenting two domains describing the elderly’s stated experiences as aesthetical and caring. The aesthetic domain is exemplified by themes on indoors and outdoors environment, and the caring domain by the theme security. Brief examples were used to describe each theme that originated from the elderly’ descriptions of their living conditions.

Findings

The unconditionally best with this form of living expressed by the elderly persons was that they experienced security. In addition, the environment indoors and outdoors was regarded as important. It should have a park or some green spots and chairs to rest on. The flat should have a balcony and an open and light planning.

The final themes emerging from the categorising of the codes:

Security
Environment outdoors
Environment indoors

The Caring Domain

Theme: security
"if you get sick you can sound the alarm,
and the 'girls' will come, it's the best"
"here I am in safe hands"
"living here gives me a sense of security"
"here you can get care when you need it"
"you can always get help"

The Aesthetical Domain

Theme: environment outdoors
"instead of all the cars...a small park, a
lawn,
some chairs and tables, it would be nice"
"it had been nice to be able to see a green
spot"
"I spend some time outdoors, I like the
wooded hillside"
"I very much would like to come out...
because the view over the sea is wonderful"
"they should place some chairs just outside
the house so that those who are immobile
could enjoy the lovely view"

Theme: environment indoors
"here I stand with the door open and have
a
look and expose myself to the sun"
"The best with this flat is the balcony"
"it's open and light"
"I like it here because of the window
view"
"I have sun in the morning and to some
extent in the evening...I like that"
"it's too dark and gloomy"

Discussions
As part of a larger project on the meaning of
the physical environment for elderly people living
in sheltered housing, a qualitative exploration
was undertaken. It permitted insights into
elderly's opinions of sheltered housing. With
the elderly's experiences as starting point, the
design and function indoors and outdoors was
further examined in the present project. It result-
ed in a vivid description of the potential role of
the physical environment. A determining factor
for a positive experience of living in sheltered
housing was the nearness to nature. Most of
the elderly in the present study reported on
this aspect as most important. The participants
thought that their flat should be open and light
and it should have a tree window view. Those
who had a flat with a balcony talked about it as a
place to relax. These aspects of the environment
outdoors seemed to be a specially valued quality
by the elderly. This is in line with research con-
ducted by Berglund & Jegerby (1989), Cham-
bbers (1997) and Rubin (1998b). The meaning of outdoor environment for health and well-
being have been the subject of many studies
(Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Grahn, 1992; Grahn
&Mårtensson, 1997). The connection between
the elderly people's ability to spend time out of
doors and health have appeared in studies from
Sweden (Küller, 1990; Grahn, 1991). Küller's
study shows that elderly who spend more time
out of doors felt healthier, slept better and showed
less symptom of depression. Allison et al.
(1998) found that simply viewing nature usually
produces restoration from stress in less than
five minutes.

In several theories of nursing care the mean-
ing of the environment indoors for the well-
being is stressed, and the role of the nursing
staff as an intermediary between the patient and
the environment is clearly expressed. Roy and
Robert's (1981) theory of adaptation describes
the ability to adapt oneself to the environment
indoors and to have impact on it. The striving
for creating an environment that corresponds
with the elderly's earlier life has to be stres-
sed. Because the individual's ability to adapt
her/himself is limited during a period in life
in which the functions of the senses decreases.
Reflections of the philosophy of care regarding
design indoors do not seem to have any coun-
terpart when it comes to the elderly's outdoors
environment. It comprises an often overlooked resource in care even if there are interesting exceptions (Nordström, 1994).

Living in sheltered housing meant security, and it was of great importance and highly valued by the elderly in the present study. The reaction of the individual to different external conditions such as the stress and strain of the environment have been described by Neuman (1990). She gives examples of how the nurse could help the elderly person to manage the strain of feeling insecure. Often the importance of creating a secure environment indoors, with for the elderly well-known details contributes to a feeling of security. Growing old increases the dependence of the physical environment just as it makes it more difficult to control and have impact on (Nordström & Gora, 1995). For instance, to be able to move safely around the home using the shower or preparing food. The loss of control means that no longer be able to manage the conditions of the environment which could cause environmental stress and a feeling of insecurity (Küller, 1995). The quality of the physical environment in order to offer elderly persons security is increasingly crucial if a person will be able to maintain a living relationship to the environment (Dossey, 1982; Cannava, 1994; Dijk, 1995; Rubin, 1998a). The home is an important place for most elderly persons. It is a place that offers security. Through repeating every day tasks and the fact that the most personal events in our lives often take place in the home contribute to that the emotional bounds to it increases and give rise to a feeling of security. To feel at home and to feel secure in ones home are not an either or state. It can be compared to a rope in which it is the amount of threads that give the rope its strength. Some theories have been developed around the home as a place of security and confidence (Altman & Werner 1985; Andersson, 1988; Churchman, 1991). To feel at home and the positive force of a home appear clearly when this environment is threatened, like for instance when a person has to move involuntarily. The changes in the environment might then be perceived as a threat towards the own person (Hurtig, 1990;Wikström, 1994).

There is a consciousness about the need of a continuity to a life outside and to the time before the elderly person moved to sheltered housing. The ability to establish an active relationship between the elderly’s sheltered housing and their previous living conditions make heavy demands on the nursing staff and their personal engagement and professionalism. Neither is it possible to make a copy of one of the elderly persons’ environment to another, and it is not possible to readjust one environment that are shared by many individuals to the needs and preferences by the individual (Leininger, 1978). It becomes especially visible in environments with persons from different cultures, but it is also visible when there is less differences in such aspects as lifestyle, earlier standard of living and housing. The conditions for making a home include the relationship between the environment indoors and outdoors. The dynamics between these is a fundamental dimension in order to feel secure at home, and crucial for the elderly’s perception of the environment. When the elderly person’s agility is limited, the shape of windows, balconies, terraces, entrees and patios are decisive for creating favourable conditions for a functional living. To be able to have an overview of the environment in order to follow what happens or what is going on in this is important, just as it is the elderly persons themselves who have to decide whether they shall take an active part.

Conclusions

Determining factors for a positive experience of living in sheltered housing are security and nearness to nature. With the elderly’s experiences as starting point, the design and function indoors and outdoors should be examined further.

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