Edited Transcript

Universal Design Conference

Sydney Town Hall (Lower)

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Day 1

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INCLUSIVE PRACTICE

Concurrent Session One: Chair Nicholas Loder

Guy Luscombe: Beyond Universal Design: what else can designers do?

Synopsis: *Guy outlines his research in Europe which included engagement with older residents in care settings and found some unexpected results. He was looking for innovative buildings for housing and care for older people. Large windows was an unexpected finding and he goes on to discuss why this might be one of the most desirable features, among others, for older people.*

As an architect, I've just been concerned that the common understanding we have in universal design is that it focuses on accessibility and usability and tends to forget, perhaps because it's so difficult, perhaps because it's intangible, some of the other factors of human need. Gerald mentioned earlier about safety and security and the physical and physiological needs, but some of the other needs, things like emotional needs, our social needs, even our self-development needs are kind of difficult to design for. So often I think that compliance is - we do things out of compliance and it's often as an afterthought, we know the problems of working with afterthoughts.

I recently won a Byera Hadley travelling scholarship awarded by the Architects Registration Board in New South Wales. The name of the project was new architecture for the new aged. I was looking for innovative European buildings and approaches for housing and caring for older people. The aims were to try to establish what approaches or what elements and features have been successful; to evaluate if these models and their features could be used in Australia; and to provide a resource for architects and others to respond to the needs of society.

In all, I looked in detail at 13 buildings and interviewed 15 people associated with them, residents as well as the people who ran it. I wanted also this to be a qualitative thing. I thought the best thing was to look at the buildings and have a backwards approach and ask the buildings a question and ask the people who use those buildings the question what is it about this that makes it successful? Usually the buildings were award-winning or had some sort of notoriety, so If they were they successful, what was it about them that was successful and what need did they address?

The overwhelming response from people was that they liked large windows. Wow, that's revelationary, isn't it? Why you could argue that there is a physical aspect to that, in that we're attracted to light, when you interrogated this a little bit more, it was more about daylight. People talked about having bright spaces, about having happy spaces, associating with feeling or a need with environments that aren't necessarily associated with places for older people.

There were obviously the views, and the views were not just the views, but the views were about connecting to community, seeing what was going on, not feeling isolated, not hiding away.

What I found most surprising about all of this was the size and extent of windows. We all need windows, , we always want to look outside, but they actually said they were large windows. Large windows indicates to me one of the characteristics of a more modern architecture. Currently in Australia I think people have this view that what older people want is a more traditional form of architecture which is characterised by

smaller windows, and while this may be right in our context, in Europe it's dark. Light is more important because there are longer days and it's a little colder, and what was interesting was that there was an assumption that this is what people want. Assuming what people want is patronising. Some other things that came out were these: open and adaptable space; having connection with outdoor space; community; and happiness and normality.

Happiness is intangible, and happiness was associated with kind of normality, and normality has its own attributes as well, and there's a crossover between a lot of these attributes, they speak to each other, normality and happiness obviously are two sides of the same coin in some respects.

But it's also about meeting and connecting people and working in smaller groups and being relaxed and engaged - all these comments came back about what was a happy space. It was also associated with the bright spaces, windows and happiness were associated with happy staff and happy visitors as well. So trying to create a happy place was actually at the core of a lot of people's approaches.

The Wallenstein 65, designed by a German architect who has been working in this area for 40 years, is space that has a lot more to it than I can show you. There were eight houses that have 12 people in them and every house is different and they have different door knobs, different colours, different layouts, and the idea behind that is to provide this kind of normality.

What they found was - the staff remarked upon the reduction in need for medication due primarily, they thought, to the design. In true evidence-based research terms you'd need to do a lot more to determine that, but they remarked on this in an unsolicited way.

I've been working in this area for 12 years, and I thought I knew most things, but I was surprised by this. It was freedom of choice. It took me by surprise because I thought, come on, that's not right, I've never heard of this before. But I think that's because it was so basic. When I thought about it more as we were travelling and talking to people, I could see it coming out in different ways because it is a basic human right. It is something we need, we all take for granted. We choose and fashion the way we live. We make choices every day and we fashion the world around us to suit how we want to live.

The Hogeweyk in the Netherlands, is quite a remarkable place in that it's a place for people with dementia and it is a completely open environment, once you're inside the building of course. It categorises people into certain groups, which is probably the most questionable part of its approach, but it actually provides a variety of different scenarios in terms of the types of houses that people can go into, they can choose the sort of the design of the house they can move into, but also in terms of the environment. However, one of the comments that came back from the Hogeweyk, is that it's very difficult to do normal. They went through an incredible , about three years, to try to determine how they were going to approach this building

I was trying to look at what the most successful projects were and they were characterised by these things:
- a strongly principled approach, where you could put down to codes and compliance or policy
- a rigorous and dynamic engagement process
- a well-defined brief
- creating trust in the architect and designers and their vision

That's why in some respects it's disappointing not to see more designers here today, we do need to provide that vision. While I completely agree with the whole policy-driven approach, there needs to be a vision and I think architects have the unique ability to provide that vision.

The guy behind this building for people with disabilities in Copenhagen is called Jasper Boesen, who was the former CEO and access consultant. His goal was to create the most accessible office building in the world. He thought of it in terms of not so much accessibility. It goes beyond accessibility - they wanted to talk about equal opportunity. They thought that equal opportunity was about inclusion and equity and it was a value-based system.

They wanted to get the thinking right: how can the needs be accommodated? They wanted simple self-help solutions and sustainability. They do a lot of things like daylight, natural light. Grey water collection is not common in Denmark because they have a lot of rain, but they wanted to do this. Cost effectiveness - they wanted to build it for no more than the standard office building cost in Denmark and they came in under that cost. He believed the idea that it's an extra cost is a myth.

One of the unique things about this building is its shape, and the concepts behind this. There were things like clarity, community, offices at windows, the idea of entering yourself as you went around, connecting to the outside. There is access from the station, access from the road, obviously a majority of accessible parking spaces right at the front door. Those are the things you'd expect. There's a way for people with low vision to navigate their way around the building with tactile and contrasting coloured indicators there

With so many disability types involved they wanted to get consensus and not just compromise. People with a hearing impairment don't want hard surfaces because it affects their ability to hearing. But people in wheelchairs find carpets difficult to negotiate. So they put their thinking caps on and came up with acoustic panelling which surrounds the whole entry. So all the floor surfaces are hard, but acoustic panelling surrounds the atrium with holes become a design feature and elevate the building and give it some sort of a joy; it makes it a desirable thing. You wouldn't even think twice about it, it's an invisible design feature but it performs a very important function. They put in round corners because they thought corner guards were stigmatising.

So what more can designers do? It's thinking about the whole person, not just their condition or situation; what are their needs in that very robust kind of way; adopting a more open and consultative approach and really get client and user engagement. Don't assume you know the right thing to do.

I went to a place in rural Portugal where a lot of people can't read. There was an aged care facility where a lot of people come from chicken farms. When they move into the facility they're given a pattern of a chicken, and they choose material and they make, with assistance, their own chickens. Their chicken is put outside their rooms to be a wayfinder, as they can't read, because they never learnt to read. They've turned this inability into something very, very joyful and wonderful, and it seems to highlight to me that if you have the will to do these things and the creativity to do them, there is a way of doing them.