

# Approach for Designing Elderly Care Homes

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## Abstract

Most research has been unable to combine organisation, management and design studies. This seems a major shortcoming when looking at elderly care homes, because well-being in these institutions depends on all three approaches. Hence the aim of our research is to produce new knowledge on the interdependence of the three aspects. Special emphasis is put on planning processes. Numerous new buildings for the elderly will be planned in coming years and, at the same time, renovations of old buildings will be carried out. We will especially look at the design objectives for these undertakings.

This paper is about a work in progress by a team consisting of researchers and doctoral students in organisational and management studies at the University of Eastern Finland and design research at the Aalto University School of Art and Design. The four-year project started in 2009 and is funded by the Academy of Finland. Already in the early phase, the multidisciplinary team has produced inspiring new ideas.

One of the research methods has been to use photographic documentation of municipal and private elderly care homes. During visits to care homes in North Karelia, systematic documentation was created. Selected photographs were, then, discussed by six focus groups representing various stakeholders. This research material, experiences and documentation of visits and sessions, was used to describe and analyse conditions and concrete product environments, in order to lead to better understanding, planning and organisation in the future. In this paper, the concept of homeliness is examined from a design point of view and as a part of well-being, based on empirical data and literature.

## Keywords

Elderly care home, design, organization, homeliness, well-being

Our study conceives well-being as a process that starts from early conceptions of care in a design context and continues to evolve in the activities of care organisations in actual centres. Consequently, the embodiment of goals and values in design, organisation, and the actual environment is conceived as a process. A specific feature of our research is looking into the actual functions in care centres and collecting empirical data from various existing institutions. One of the case studies concerns small care homes, both private and municipal, in North Karelia; another case is situated in the Helsinki area. Interviews have been and will be carried out with elderly people, personnel, managers, designers, entrepreneurs, financial planning personnel, owners, municipal officials, the construction industry and other stakeholders. Data gathering methods include visits, documentation, focus group sessions and interviews. Environmental conditions, power structures, schedules and conflicting viewpoints in the care home practice will be brought to light in order to enable stakeholders to understand the processes and discuss their outcome.

The central concepts of the study are *well-being* and *homeliness*, which frequently appear in literature and various discourses (e.g. Cold; Lundgren; Wahl). These concepts have been and are still used as basic goals for organisation, leadership and design; in many countries,

guidelines have been made for achieving these broad aims.<sup>1</sup> When looking more closely at the written research literature, documents, and the actual centres, it appears that these concepts are always used in some way. New technological applications may reduce homeliness while curtains may increase it. However, they seem too vague, unspecified or narrow for design purposes. According to the early results of our study, the actual care centres look very different even if research based recommendations and guidelines have been applied.

## Photographic analyses

Our research has set out to look for all kinds of favourable qualities in existing care homes, as well as to identify and observe negative features by using various methods. One method is to analyse photographs. To do so, we set out to meet and converse with people who had different backgrounds and viewpoints in relation to care homes. To analyse and find out how the different stakeholders conceive of care homes, six focus groups were formed. In the summer of 2009, all in all 30 persons discussed photographs in groups of five: two groups of elderly persons inhabiting care homes, one group of personnel and entrepreneurs, and one group with experts in design. Design researchers, some of whom had experience of design research related to elderly care, formed a fifth focus group, and the sixth group comprised interior design students who were familiar with the design of care homes for the elderly.

The groups discussed photographs of four different private and municipal sites. The pictorial material for the sessions was selected from a vast amount of photographs taken systematically during 2008-2009 in North Karelia for the most part by two interior design students, led by Hannele Komu and Mirja Kälviäinen.<sup>2</sup> The same four spaces were chosen from each home: living room, dining room, toilet/bathroom and corridor. All spaces were semi-public. These were depicted in a total of 16 photos for the focus groups, each of which was led by one of the researchers in our group.<sup>3</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> See Kälviäinen and Miller.

<sup>2</sup> They visited 17 care homes in 2008 and early 2009. Then, two researchers, Hannele Komu doctoral student who is well familiarized with the problematic of elderly care homes and Dr. Mirja Kälviäinen Senior Design Researcher from our research group visited the four selected care homes before the focus group sessions. The photographic material is supplemented during the whole research process.

<sup>3</sup> Before carrying out the group discussions, our group Rissanen et al. had planned the sessions and how to handle their outcomes.



Figure 1. Three examples of photographic documentation of the care homes: a living room, a dining room, and a corridor.

Before the actual focus group sessions, the researchers discussed the difference between looking at pictures of spaces and actual visits. Clearly, a lot is left out of pictures, remaining outside of the frame, and the experiences differ in many important respects.<sup>4</sup> Yet many conclusions can be drawn on the basis of carefully taken and well-grounded photographs while being aware of the difference in experience and of the fact that a photograph is always an individual's personal view seen through a lens. The focus group sessions consisting of designers and personnel were well aware of this discrepancy.

For the group discussions, five introductory questions were formulated and agreed upon to help focus the topic of conversation and, for later research purposes, to help compare the different group sessions. The groups were asked to verbalise their impressions and thoughts of the

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<sup>4</sup> Some of the features of experiencing real places, such as sound, smell, changing atmosphere, people's activities, etc., were documented during the many visits to the same centres. These aspects can be combined with the pictorial material thanks to the notes and dates, to provide a more comprehensive view.

spaces pictured in the photographs, and to indicate what they liked. They were also asked to think of what they would want to change. Lastly they were asked if they would like to live in the places pictured. The sessions ended with discussions on views and ideas about the topic and about elderly care homes in general. The discussions were recorded and transcribed. The material is being processed according to different points of view during the research.

## **Content analyses and design semiotics**

To begin with, for the purpose of design research, I collected all the adjectives from the recordings of the group discussions. I also listed all the interior details mentioned and all descriptive nouns referring to spaces. All these words can signify positive or negative aspects in the discussions and can be checked later when necessary from the recording, where they are uttered in context. At this stage of my study the point was firstly to acquire an overview of all the possible aspects expressed with the adjectives mentioned (and later also to see what was left out). Secondly, the aim was to look closer at some of the salient qualities revealed by the material and then to compare the findings with results given in research literature, with our experiences of visits, with photographs of other care centres, etc. By clarifying the actual discourse in this way research results can support the design of the milieus.

### **Adjectives**

The most frequently used adjectives (n=101) were without doubt *homelike* or *homely* (referring to *homeliness*), *messy*, *well-lit* and *institutional*. At this phase of the study it is not important to concern ourselves with the specific users of the words, because the aim is only to show the full variety of the adjectives and, then, to analyse why some of them appear more frequently than others.

The first one, *homely*, was probably popular because it relates to the public discourse of several recent years in Finland about institutional living in general. In actual fact, *homeliness* has been the prevalent goal lately. This goal has most likely spread to people's everyday discourses through its use in political discourse and the mass media – notably also to people other than the elderly. The aim highlighted by the national discourse has been to organise living and accommodation that is less institutional or clinical. But, without detailed or critical descriptions of this desired quality, the aim may fail. Naturally the concept also refers to the place where the elderly come from, their previous homes. These homes are places they have lost or gave up when they moved to the care centre. Their homes were created by them to a greater or lesser degree, and the elderly (perhaps also many other stakeholders) may have a tendency to compare the care centres with them. This is why it may be worthwhile to look into the respondents' personal histories and residences.

Despite the ensuing loss of concreteness, it seems important to focus on the central concept of *homeliness* and to analyse its potential meanings, even if they are often not well articulated in our verbalized data. With the help of content analysis (e.g. analyses of words in our data) and relate it to the photographs and research literature, we can specify and exemplify *homeliness*; we may concretize its meaning, and visualize and demonstrate it; we may compare different conceptions of it. In this way we can approach *homeliness* and achieve something that also concretely contributes to it, if it is the aim of the design and organization.

Possible references of the concept of *homeliness* (the many words and descriptions used to describe it) and its concrete embodiments (in the care centre setting) will be interpreted. Care home milieus will be conceived as semiotic signs (cf. Peirce) as referring to qualities and things.

Some of the frequently mentioned adjectives that can be construed to relate to homeliness and its positive connotations were *uncluttered* (as opposed to messy), *soft*, *cosy*, *spacious* and *colourful*.<sup>5</sup> These connections and relations will be further scrutinised, thematized and exemplified by design options.

However, at this stage of our research, the big underlying question remains: should homeliness be the general aim of design and organization? Or should the goal be formulated in another way by using more specified concepts or descriptive examples? If the actual references to homeliness seem too far-fetched, then heavy arguments can be made against using the concept at all. The concept often seems an empty slogan or too large an entity, which is tough to deal with. We can see this manifested in the actual institutions. Due to the vagueness of the concept, it may be that designers, entrepreneurs, personnel, etc. understand the term in their own ways and are not in fact discussing the same thing. They may also be unable to articulate it and identify its full potential.

Moreover, it may be useful to look at the most negative adjectives, which were often direct opposites of the positive ones. *Dark*, *colourless*, *narrow* and *cold* were among these. *Long* most often referred to a corridor and was given as a negative attribute. Long corridors (which actually are not very long at all) seem to emphasise uncertainty, anguish and impersonal features.

The range of adjectives was surprisingly large, at 101 words used during the sessions. It repeatedly included different shades of the same quality, e.g. dark, blackish, gloomy, murky, shady and sombre, or calm and restful.

### ***Other descriptive wordings***

All in all, 38 items from the interior spaces were mentioned in the six focus group discussions. The groups were not asked to list the depicted items in the rooms, but discussed characteristics by pointing out specific items as examples of what they meant. The items (words denoting objects depicted in the photographs) were therefore a part of either positive or negative comments and belonged to the more general discourse. Among the items were pieces of furniture, fixed interior details, vases and curtains, as well as collections of items. Our research will look into the policies of choosing and arranging these items. Who bought them and when, and who decorated each room?

In addition to the adjectives and list of items occurring in the discussions, I found 30 descriptive nouns that were used to illustrate the character of a space. Among these were common nouns related to the function of the room, such as *kitchen*, *corridor*, *hallway* or *toilet*. There were also many descriptive formulations such as *contemplation room*, *class room*, *cafeteria*, *flea market*, *nest*, *hotel*, etc. This approach to the data exemplifies people's awareness of the items and the overall quality of the product environments, as depicted in the photographs or as remembered. The photographs presented to the viewers visible existent items and their conditions, interior design, colours, materials, etc. At the same time the items and their placements connoted attitudes, habits and possibilities for various activities. We can clearly identify what is impossible or not allowed, and argue about the justifications and reasons of this. These aspects will be included in the next step, the semiotic analysis, where the reference relations of items will be interpreted in use in actual care homes, supported by photographic and other documentation.

A design semiotic analysis will demonstrate *how* various meanings are embodied in care home environments, especially in the semi-public areas. Items in a room embody specific styles; they

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<sup>5</sup> With the help of the transcripts we can check the context or topic in which each adjective is used, and also link them to the photographs, and to the actual centres.

refer to similar forms in other contexts; they point at production methods and their origins. They function as metaphors that may also unconsciously connote emotions and moods, traditions and habits, ideologies and beliefs. Items function as symbols whose content should be carefully interpreted by all parties. These connotations are crucial in a multicultural setting.

For the designer, metonymic relations are also important. This means that items affect our interpretations based on their proximity in the space. Qualities can be transferred from one item to another nearby one. The metonymic aspect is not often made explicit in the planning process or in actual design solutions. Metonymic relations analysis is one way of demonstrating how concrete manifestations of the organisation and management function. By studying items' relations in office spaces, entrances, corridors, layouts, information systems, schedules, meetings, etc. the character of the arrangements can be illustrated. Our research will point out metonymies, which can or should be changed to better serve the aims of the care home.

### ***A new home or something else?***

Moving into a care centre signifies a change into another form of living: from a private home to a collective dwelling. The move includes crucial changes in the lives of the elderly, to fixed schedules, unfamiliar faces and contacts, unexpected meetings with strangers, smaller private areas, limited age variation in human contacts, diminished areas for own activities and initiatives, etc. Such major changes can easily also narrow the conception of the *homely*. Should, then, the institutions be called homes or something else? We have not yet answered this question. In any case, the goals for this new form of living should be formulated in a motivating and supportive manner for the benefit of the elderly, the personnel (including managers), friends and relatives. *Homeliness* may include many of the necessary qualities. But, what are they? For an answer, the concept must first be analysed together with the other important requirements. A hierarchy of the necessary qualities can perhaps be construed to permit the use of the concept homeliness.

Our research will produce new information with regard to the organisation and design of care homes based on empirical data and on literature. The content and formulations of guidelines and recommendations produced in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, the UK, and the US will also be analysed. This is a work in progress, and it is still too early to present well-reasoned findings. However, it seems apparent to me that care homes share the typical characteristics of all kinds of institutional living and accommodation. Standards and recommendations are important to follow, but what matters are their formulation, style and signification to the stakeholders. Do they inspire designers to develop new forms and create novel solutions to some of the routines that again and again seem to bother the stakeholders and, in fact, reinforce the negative aspects of these institutions?

The results of our study may be helpful for other institutional accommodation programmes and renovations, too. Moreover, in our prior studies we have found similar features and difficulties outside of Finland, in other European countries.

Furthermore, new kinds of communication tools are needed for designers, staff, relatives, visitors, the elderly and other to continuously follow the processes in practice and to understand the point of view of the different stakeholders. The care centres are living areas, social semi-public spaces, workplaces, communal institutions and private enterprises. All these aspects reflect the attitudes of people and the society towards the culture of ageing, and are manifested in the concrete care homes and their organisations.

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