
Learning from a Village: The Materiality of Disability

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Abstract

De Hogeweyk, a 23-townhouse village development near Amsterdam in Weesp open since 2007, where people with mild to severe dementia can safely walk and bike streets, grocery shop, attend theatres and other social hubs, prepare their own meals, have the opportunity to iron and do their laundry. Their independence is possible because the 1.6-hectare site is actually a large-scale nursing home designed to look like a village, but with only one, secured, exit. At De Hogeweyk, groups of six to seven residents live together in one of seven different townhouse styles. Each is designed and furnished to reflect different cultural lifestyles, including upper class, traditional, Indonesian and cultural. For five days last February, Megan Strickfaden and Nicole Gaudet were the first researchers along with filmmaker Steven Hope ever to gain liberal access to this world-renowned facility dubbed "Dementia Village." The result is a 33-minute ethnographic documentary film called 'Dementia Care by Design' that highlights the relationships that de Hogeweyk's residents have with their caregivers and the built/designed environment of the village. Since this was an ethnographic documentary film project, there was no predetermined storyline. Instead, the research team and filmmaker recorded as many details as possible for a critical understanding of what works and what doesn't work in the village. Wandering the site unsupervised, the team engaged in ethnographic research and shot footage from the moment residents awoke until bedtime resulting in greater than 12 hours of video footage, conducted nine interviews with staff and family, shot nearly 1,000 still photographs, and recorded 60 pages of field note observations. Analyzing the textual and visual data and subsequently editing the film, several themes emerged that appear to be contributing to residents' well-being. These included continuity, choice, memories, multi-sensory stimulation, indoor-outdoor experiences and everyday activities occurring during the natural flow of time. Format: screening of the 33-minute ethnographic film 'Dementia Care by Design' bookended by a lecture and discussion [note that this presentation can also be done through the screening of an abbreviated 8-minute film on de Hogeweyk but it would not have the same impact]

Keywords: material culture, film, quality of life, choice, independence

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