THE INSPIRATION OF REMINISCENCE AND THE NURSING HOME

RANDY CALL

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF ARCHITECTURE AND PLANNING
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Thesis Committee Chair- Alfredo Missair
Consultant- Stan Mendelsohn

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ABSTRACT

The nursing home is an institution that fulfills a need in our culture. There may be alternatives to the nursing home in some situations, but not all. Steps can be taken, however, to deinstitutionalize and improve the environment of the nursing home. The problem with institutionalization is that it cuts one off from his roots, places one in a foreign setting, and in essence ends one's life. Therefore, the goal is to allow and encourage one to continue one's life and grow even if one is by necessity placed in a nursing home.

One of the issues I am focusing on is memory or the inspiration of reminiscence. Reminiscence is valuable to the elderly, because it reduces stress and helps them cope with the decline of physical attributes and mental abilities. It can also make the transition to a new environment much smoother. Reminiscence can be inspired through sensory perceptions of the environment. It may also be achieved by promoting interaction of the residents with a greater community.

For my test of my hypotheses and my continued explorations I have chosen a site in Yorktown, In. The site offers advantages of proximity to an established community, to an elementary, middle, and high school, and Buck Creek, the White River, and many trees.
CHAPTER ONE:
THE BENEFITS OF REMINISCENCE

When I began my thesis I decided to study institutional architecture, because I was intrigued as to why the word institution had so many negative connotations. I decided to narrow my topic down to a particular type. I chose the nursing home, because there the negative aspects of the institutional environment are the most detrimental.

As I researched the needs of the elderly in the institution, my thesis took the position that not only could the environment of the nursing home be made more acceptable, but that it could aid in the rehabilitation of residents. My research uncovered the benefits of reminiscence to the elderly and established a connection between socialization and rehabilitation.

When one walks into a nursing home, his first impression may be quite favorable. It is clean, comfortable, and it seems to work well. That is all that is needed if one is providing for livestock, but nursing home residents are people.

"Without the spirit of place that links sensory immediacy of experience to underlying cultural and ritual resonance, an environmental framework is sterile and barren."\(^1\) This quote from *The Environmental Memory: Man and Architecture in the Landscape of Ideas* by Malcom Quantrill makes the point that past experiences should be considered when designing an environment for anyone. This chapter insists that this is important on a personal level when designing environments for elderly people, and it suggests ways that the architecture can respond to this.

There is an unbreakable bond between architecture and memory. One's perception of an environment is largely due to one's previous experiences. One compares sensory stimuli to those encountered before. One understands, for example, where to enter a building based on entries one has seen before. A monk who has spent a lifetime in a monasteriey may perceive a farm as noisy, whereas a stockbroker would find it monotonously quiet. Therefore, memory and environment are linked regardless if this is conscious in the designer's mind or not.

At one time, reminiscence by the elderly was viewed as a negative preoccupation with the past. It is true that some have problems with reality. In 1963, however, Robert N. Butler wrote an article that inspired several studies that indicate the benefits that reminiscence provides the elderly. Butler also hypothesized that reminiscence enables one to resolve conflicts from one's past that produce stress as one realizes he is approaching death.

Impending death also makes dreaming difficult. Dreaming about the future is important for human beings. Since this becomes difficult with old age, a gap is formed. It can be filled by turning thoughts to the past. Instead of being depressed about the inevitable, one is made happy by thinking about all that one has lived through.

Furthermore, when one is institutionalized, there are more stresses involved that those created by facing death. Stress is produced by the breaking or straining of the social network and by being cut off from an environment filled with memories. These stresses may be relieved by reminiscence.

It is a widely held belief that reminiscence relieves stresses
involved in the grieving process. Funerals are largely an opportunity for friends and relatives of the deceased to share memories. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that reminiscence would relieve other stresses as well.

Even before Butler's findings, Erik Erickson had produced his theory of the eight stages of human development. The eighth and final stage is ego integrity vs. despair. Essentially, when a person reaches this stage he goes through a process determining if his life has been worthwhile. Erikson looked upon life-review as a crucial activity that leads to ego integrity.

Life-review is also connected to pride and self-esteem. As one grows older certain qualities and abilities are either lost or diminished. As a result, self-esteem is difficult to maintain. Thinking of past accomplishments and other memories, however, can restore pride and strengthen self-esteem.

Arthur McMahon and Paul Rhudick did a scientific study that indicated, if it did not prove, that elderly who reminisce are less depressed that those who do not. They studied a group of men between the ages of seventy-eight and ninety. The subjects were interviewed, and based on their responses they each were labeled as either reminiscers or non-reminiscers. This data was then compared with records that assessed their levels of depression. The conclusion was that those who reminisced were less depressed.

Reminiscence has many other benefits as well. It can generate opportunities to make amends with people from the past. Many times misunderstandings are cleared up and long time feuds are ended when the circumstances that created them are reevaluated.

Reminiscence helps in the adaptation
to being institutionalized and to growing old. When the stresses are relieved as has already been discussed, acceptance comes easier and the ability to function in the new environment with diminished capacities becomes much greater.

Reminiscence establishes a continuity from the past to the present. This accomplishes a couple of things. First, it gives significance to one's place in history. Second, it gives meaning to the present.

Reminiscence is also one way of establishing time parity between the young and old. It makes it possible for these two groups to communicate freely. It reaffirms the elderly person's status, and thus makes him feel comfortable. This use of reminiscence is easily recognized by the works: "when I was your age."

In addition, some researchers have suggested that their findings indicate that reminiscence stimulates conversation and increases the attention span, but these conclusions have been questioned by others.

There are several documented cases where individuals have been dramatically helped by having their thoughts directed to the past. An article by Judith Liton and Sara Olstein relates four such cases. In the first case a woman was able to resolve feelings of guilt connected with her second marriage. This guilt had contributed to her paranoid personality. In one case a woman who had not spoken for years began speaking again. In another case "...reminiscing dispelled the hallucination and disorientation of an aged client, who recovered her identity and was then able to speak with ironic pleasure of the present."² These cases clearly give validity to the studies and theories that establish the

benefits of reminiscence.

According to Frode Stromnes and research done by Janellen Huttenlocher memories are stored through images rather than words. If reminiscence is to be stimulated by talking, than it must be necessary for the subject to create images in his mind from the spoken works in order to remember. Therefore, if the environment can provide this imagery the reminiscence process is more direct and more easily accomplished.

Once it has been established that reminiscence is a healthy, beneficial activity for nursing home residents, and that the environment is an appropriate vehicle for reminiscence, one can begin looking for ways that the environment can stimulate reminiscence.

Memories are simply one form of thought. All forms of thought have some inspiration. The question then is how can the architectural environment inspire thought and specifically memories. Thought is inspired by information. The architectural environment provides information on all sensory levels. Thought is then affected by what one perceives about that information.

Information can be visual. At least two types of visual information can be described. One type is imagery. This can include abstractions or replications of forms from the past. The second type includes more concrete information: color, material, scale, proportion, size, and views.

Imagery is a very large part of architectural design. Imagery is, of course, affected by concrete information such as materials, but is also tied to form, light, and rhyhtm. Forms are the most obvious imagery, but I think light is the most dynamic.

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Both Gothic cathedrals and nightclubs have very strong imagery that is largely due to their lighting.

The more concrete information is always considered by designers, but not as a stimulator of reminiscence. Color schemes can be selected that have associations with styles of the past or with a particular environment. Finishes such as wallpaper, a wainscot, or a parquet floor can remind one of their homelife as a child or a young adult. Scale and proportion can make one remember an intimate experience, or a significant event. Human scale is generally a goal of good designers but a monumental scale may inspire memories of early experiences, because spaces are usually scaled to adults and are thus superhuman to the child.

Auditory information is given. When sound is considered by architects it is usually limited to acoustical considerations. They consider if sounds are desirable and at what level in terms of decibels is desirable. The interest here is what kinds of sounds can the environment generate or expose in order to stimulate memories.

The most obvious solutions involve programming. The environment can provide space for special activities, such as concerts or parties. These types of activities generate sounds that are distinctive and are sure to inspire memories of similar events from the past. Music is of course very powerful, but other sounds could be just as valuable, for example, a rooster crowing, rain beating against a metal roof, children yelling, horns honking, a door creaking, or a screen door squeaking. Almost no environment should be designed to be quiet all of the time, except those designed for specific short term activities such as a library.

Olfactory information is given. This can be thought of in much the same
way as auditory information. Opportunities for the smell of bread baking in an oven or of flowers after a spring shower to be enjoyed by residents should be looked for. Many nursing homes are concerned with covering up odors. This is often necessary to cover up offensive odors, but the result is one constant odor that permeates the entire facility or no odor at all. Neither scenario is acceptable.

Thermal information is given. The heat one perceives from a spot source such as a pot belly stove is quite different than that from the constant temperature given off by a forced air heating system. Heating, like sound, is often given over to engineers, and likewise the goal is usually an optimal static solution, a desired temperature that is to be maintained at all times. Human beings are more complicated than this, however, we need some variability. It also seems that heating different spaces with different methods may also be desirable if possible.

So far I have treated the environment as a stimulator of reminiscence, but it can also facilitate reminiscence in other ways. It can provide a way of displaying prized possessions. Edmund Sherman and Evelyn Newman conducted a study. Eighty-one percent of their subjects could identify a most cherished possession. These items are a source of much pride to the elderly. Many are often worried that they will be lost or stolen; thus, providing for secure storage space is very important.

What underlies all of these issues is time: the connections between the past and the present, the changes in the environment (hour to hour, day to

day, and season to season), and the linking together of perceptions as one moves through a space to create one experience are all functions of time.

The changes in the environment increases the amount of information. They also make one aware of the hour and the season. This stimulates both memory and awareness of reality.

The movement itself can also stimulate memory, especially when related to ritualistic experiences. The way a space or series of spaces unfolds may be reminiscent of a past experience. Or a ritual may be repeated. Unfortunately, these experiences are very limited in current institutions.

It is clear that stimulating reminiscence is a worthy goal of the design of the nursing home environment, and there are many opportunities to do so.

My project was thus to design nursing home that would respond to these issues. It is one thing to say that reminiscence is a good thing. It is another to realize the inspiration of memory in the architecture. I began by choosing a site based on criteria that came from my goals. First, the site must not be isolated. A pastoral setting was improper. I wanted activity and this opportunity for the facility to become a part of the community.
CHAPTER TWO:
THE SITE

I chose a site in Yorktown, In. It had the advantages of nearby schools and a small town atmosphere. The school across the street would be a source of much activity, and the presence of children would stimulate memories. It also had amenities of Buck Creek, the White River, and many deciduous trees around the Perimeter of the site. It did present a problem, however, in its potential for flooding.

Proximity to a community is not enough, however. One can still be lonely in a crowd. It is important that the residents feel that they are a rightful part of the community of Yorktown. I looked for ways of achieving this. I began by attempting to extend the grid of Yorktown across the creek and onto the sight. This idea has merit, but it still leaves the residents on the edge. I also considered the possibility of directing the focus toward the school. This was worthy of looking at but because of poor access to the downtown via Riverside, I decided ultimately to pursue the former orientation.

The only clear access to the downtown was through an extension of Vine Street. The street at the edge of the creek is only one block up from the main strip of the downtown; thus, even though there may be some psychological obstacle posed by the crossing of the creek, I do not believe it is that great.

The pace of Yorktown is quiet and pleasant. The opportunities for shopping at a small market or eating at a diner are provided. The access from the street that runs by the school leads to a busy intersection and presents problems.

Because of the elevation of the site and its location next to the White River
there is a definite threat of flooding. This threat alone is enough to possibly make the site infeasible in a strict pragmatic sense, but I chose to accept this fact, because in every other respect the site responded to the issues with which I was dealing. Particularly becoming part of a community.

In order to pay some heed to this situation, however, I looked at some alternatives for dealing with issues regardless of the economics. One possibility was to try and build on the highest part of the site, but this was only less than ten feet higher than the lowest point and would not ensure safety.

The houses across the creek were twenty feet higher than my site. To make a connection via Vine Street either the transition or part of my building had to be at that same elevation. Thus, I worked on a scheme that responded to this vertical transition.

I finally decided to place my building on the site in a way that responded to the other issues and build the site up underneath it. With this solution I was able for my building to be at the same elevation as the houses across the creek.
CHAPTER THREE:
THE HOME

One of the problems of institutionalization, which by the way is the greatest fear of the elderly, is the cutting off of memories that are tied to the single family residence. I reasoned that by breaking the facility up, this shock could be reduced. This led to studies of how the units could be reminiscent of the home and still be ultimately integrated with the facility.
EVOLUTION OF FINAL DESIGN
CHAPTER FOUR:
THE FINAL PROJECT

This solution is based on the issues of the site, imagery, and function. Here it is:
SECTION THRU EAST LOBBY
TYPICAL ELEVATION OF UNITS ON NORTH SIDE
SECTION THRU TYPICAL UNIT
BIBLIOGRAPHY


