



“What Makes A House A Home?”
Part 2: Empathy As the Cornerstone of Design
By Barbara Speedling

If you are going to fill the void, you have to understand the loss.

What makes your house your home? Is it the structure, the things that you’ve collected to fill it, the location, or the view? Is it the privacy, control, comfort and security you feel when you are there? Is it all of these things, or some combination specific to who you are as an individual?

How much do the things that happen within those walls make it home? How important are the people who share it with you? Whether family, friend, visitor or service provider, the way we interact with others in our homes has all to do with the atmosphere and the comfort level we create.

Have you ever heard someone say, “this is MY house and I’ll do as I please?” If you have, then you understand the essence of “homelike.” If we could approach an atmosphere that, to the greatest degree possible, allows everyone to feel that kind of personal recognition, we would be as close as we could be to creating a homelike environment.

The challenge: Digesting what homelike really means and doing the difficult self assessment of how well you live up to your own standards of what makes a house your home.

Most nursing homes are clean, cheerfully decorated, and attractively landscaped. Some facilities appear more hotel-like, with carpeted rooms and hallways, table linens and centerpieces in the dining room, and comfortable visitor or gathering areas. Residents enjoy clean, orderly, cheerful rooms. So, why doesn’t all of that make it homelike? Go home and look at your house, then come back and look at the one you work in. Do you see the difference?

Consider the things you own. The “stuff” you’ve collected in your lifetime. How much of that could you put into your new home? Would your wardrobe fit in the space provided? If you think you wouldn’t care about clothing or how you look when you become a resident, think again. You will be the same at 30, 50, 80, as you are right now. If you’re a high-maintenance person now, you will be then.

How many different types of lotions, soaps, shampoos, and fragrances do you own? Do you have hand cream and foot cream and body lotion and night cream and daytime moisturizer with sunscreen and firming cream and exfoliating cream and anti-aging cream? Does your soap smell like mint or lavender or citrus or an Irish spring? Is your shampoo for oily or dry or limp or damaged or treated or colored hair?

How happy will you be with one squirt of our lovely head to toe cleanser/shampoo/ moisturizer product with the medicinal fragrance? I hear there’s a new product that requires no rinsing. Won’t that be wonderful?

It’s the attention to detail that transforms an environment from institution to community. A pretty room is never satisfying to the person who’s not allowed to sit there. How many times do we frown on residents sitting in the lobby? It’s sometimes the most inviting room in the whole place.

Wouldn't you prefer to sit in a nice room and observe "normal" people and goings on, as opposed to sitting in that dayroom I described to you?

We hear a lot about privacy, dignity, residents' rights and accommodation. We give inservice every year on these subjects. What does all of that really mean to us? We give lip service to how much we identify with the resident's perspective, yet we won't eat the food that we serve them, or sit on a chair they've occupied without putting a towel down first, or refrain from yelling outside their door, or making them wait while we argue about who does more and who doesn't help and how we're persecuted by those who make the rules. We have no problem getting them up and bathed and dressed and fed and medicated, then parking them against a wall or at a table for the duration.

We wonder why they yell and throw things at us. We wonder what we can do to keep them from crying, or screaming, or fighting, or running away. Maybe, we simply need to consider our own feelings. If you felt cornered, would you call for help or defend yourself?

If you can keep me alive and healthy, clean and dry, fed and hydrated until I'm 150 years old, then please help me to understand the point of being here. If I am seen as no more than another piece of furniture in this big, impersonal house, why bother? It will certainly never be my home or pass for a quality existence or cause me to thrive.

Perhaps, things would begin to change if we would invest less in the physical and more in the human aspects of what is homelike. If we could learn to lead by demonstration, to really live by and hold others to the standards we talk about in our mission and visions statements, and to educate and communicate equally, then we could begin to breed the kind of empathy necessary to caring well for individuals.

As we continue our discussion, we will explore the challenges many facilities face with regard to leadership and organization. Too often, our environments are adversely affected by inconsistency, poor communication, systems failure, office politics and personality conflicts.

There are those who care too much and those who don't care enough. There are those with a strong work ethic, and those who don't earn their keep. We are afraid to confront what we don't like for fear of being seen unfavorably by others. We are often concerned about how our actions will impact on our reputation and job security, or the political flow of the organization, when considering a course of action. Sometimes, those fears keep us from doing what we feel we should do, or would do, if we had more power. Many times, those same fears keep us from speaking up when things around us are going down a precarious path.

The first step to achieving the kind of environment in which everyone thrives is to look at how we lead. By taking a hard look at what works and what doesn't, and developing a new perspective on how to satisfy people by drawing on common sense and common experience, an organization can transform itself into a place where everyone derives satisfaction from the day-to-day experience of living or working in the environment.

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