Design Matters
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By William Brummett

Creating Home

At first glance the notion of creating home in environments serving our residents appears simple. Certainly the word home immediately recalls imagery that is often somewhat universal and clear. But upon further reflection, and particularly when one is attempting to create home in settings that have a long tradition of being realized in institutional manners, what appeared clear at first is seen veiled and difficult to firmly grasp. Defining an idea as deeply rooted and emotion-laden as home is similar to attempting to define beauty or love: "I don't know how to define it, but I know it when I see it or feel it."

Despite the challenge of authentically creating home, its value is perhaps highest of all the design-directing goals we have in creating housing and care environments for our clients. We know anecdotally that our residents who have to leave their home for another setting morn this loss in a very deep and real way. I know from my resident interviews over the years that one thing almost every resident has told me is they want a place "that feels like home."

When I embarked on this journey of attempting to more clearly define home as a way to help me create better environments for seniors and others with special needs 14 years ago, I quickly discovered how difficult it is. One realization I came to is it is sometimes easier to define what something is *not* first. What I heard from residents lead me to believe that not only is home not an institution or facility, but it is also not a prototype, and not a hospitality setting. Many residents had negative comments such as "this place is just like the place down the street," or "I feel like I'm in a hotel." My conclusions were that home is unique to its context, a natural outgrowth of the community of which it is a part, and this could not be successfully achieved from adapting a prototype. I also concluded that the "hospitality model" is not what fulfills the fundamental human need for home. Hospitality emerges from hotel and resort typology, representing a wonderful service model that is a treat for the short term. But in the long run the hospitality approach is transient, lacks real meaning and authenticity, and perhaps is best as an added service amenity, not the conceptual foundation for design.

I realize that when I interview residents, I instinctively want to interview them in their own room. I learn a lot about who they are by looking around the room at what they have chosen to keep, display, and put in special places.

What I have begun to believe about home is that it cannot be defined by a simple statement. That perhaps it is defined by the activities that take place within it, and the way home supports the ability for these simple, daily activities to resonate with feelings of intimacy, love, security, freedom, and choice. Home is the place where memories are made and kept. Home is the place

that we make the most personal physical expression of who we are, what we value, and who we want to be.

It's obviously not an easy or direct leap from such a collection of concepts to a physical design. We do have some design guidelines and aspects that we use in our office that can get a design started in the right direction. The next article will discuss these.

It is possible to draw a couple of broad conclusions from this conceptual basis that inspire and direct design intended to embrace this essence of home: 1) The intimate, private and personal nature of this description of home makes clear the reality that these experiences cannot happen in any arrangement other than private rooms; and 2) A pivotal question to ask yourself honestly is "How would this daily experience or activity happen at home?," and then design buildings, spaces and services to support this first.