

The Care Home Designer

The value of informed design

My name is Peter Rose. I run a company called The Care Home Designer which improves the experience of people who visit, live and work in and our Dementia Care Homes by creating more appropriate environments in and around the home.

The Care Home Designer is the manifestation of strategies for improving the standards and application of design in dementia care and addressing the physical components of the care home environment as a whole.

I believe our Dementia Care Homes can and should be better places to live, work and visit.

The roots of a successful design

One thing I've found invaluable in my work is a set of **Essential Design Principles** that I've consistently used to help me design dozens of effective and widely used dementia-specific products over the last decade.

I want to make this knowledge freely available to anyone who can make use of their potential for improving any care home catering for residents with dementia.

Tried-and-tested, these principles are a valuable check-list for anything that is being considered for use in a dementia care environment. They help in the evaluation process of an existing product, and in the design of a new one. In either case, they will provide a reliable indication of whether the design is likely to be appropriate for the people for whom it is intended.

I couldn't have begun designing successful products without first learning what specific considerations needed to be factored in.

My Essential Design Principles came about through learning what makes a design fit-for-purpose in this environment. I needed to understand the specific needs of people who are living with dementia and how their altered abilities actually affect them. I had to know what had changed for them and how this creates problems. The result of the process was a tool that's helped me create genuinely helpful designs and the resultant products have proliferated in the care sector around the world and stimulated a sea-change in how the sector looks at physical products for dementia care.

Put yourself in someone else's shoes

If you've spent time in a care home as a visitor or carer, are any of the following familiar?

Products that simply aren't fit for purpose. They break, go missing, or simply don't work in the first place.

Certain items need replacing regularly.

Money is wasted on things that never get used.

Residents find it excessively difficult to find their way around or are fearful to leave their room or go anywhere because they fear falling or getting lost.

Nothing ever changes without the threat of a CQC inspection.

Now, imagine how it feels being at a point in your life where basic things such as being thirsty, needing a toilet or wanting to find the right key have become intolerably frustrating challenges when they used to be just second nature. Then imagine one day someone comes along and gives you a product that just fixes the problem. The relief and the release of stress must be like all your Christmases and birthdays coming at once. There are many opportunities to do exactly this, but they're not being taken.

This scenario may not work for everyone reading this but perhaps I can illustrate a hint of the feeling of frustration dementia can cause by asking you to recall when you've been working on a computer when the internet has gone down. You simply couldn't do anything, send an email or even make a phone call. You're suddenly, completely disabled and incapable of completing simple tasks. That 'thing' you normally 'just do' every day, perhaps many times over without a second thought, has become impossible, you can't communicate, you're isolated, and what's more it's beyond your control to fix it. Chances are you're totally reliant on someone you don't know, and over whom you have no control, coming to your rescue. Patiently or otherwise, you have no choice but to wait for help. You have, in this context, become completely dependent on someone else. Nightmare?

Then someone, somewhere fixes it and your internet is back on-line. You have your life back and can carry on. Stress free.

Without support, a person living with dementia will face challenges and frustrations like this, and worse, at every turn, every day, and have to rely on other people's abilities to help.

The Principles

These design principles have proved reliable time and time again when addressing designs that prevent dementia (and other conditions leading to cognitive issues) from interrupting a person's basic, daily functions, making it easier for them to get on with their lives with more independence dignity.

There are eight Essential Design Principles, and whilst it isn't always practical to apply them all, they should all be considered in the process and incorporated where they can be.

One - Colour

Colour is a dynamic thing. It can trigger emotions and make people happy, sad or fearful, motivate activity or suppress appetite. Colour is quite simply nature's communication tool. When creating earlier designs I used a bright, bold colour palette to achieve appropriate degrees of contrast as recommended by Stirling DSDC and others at the time.

This proved highly effective, but not necessarily 'pleasing' on the eye. To address this I began to refer to the Light Reflectance Value (LRV) of colours. Combining colours with a specific LRV difference of provides a more design-friendly palette whilst still delivering effective contrast....

Two - Contrast

Contrast is an essential part of decoding our environment. It can be used to highlight or hide a doorway for example. Contrast can be particularly valuable in the bathroom where design typically dictates everything is white but this lack of contrast can make objects indistinguishable to an ageing eye. Introducing higher contrast elements will make the important (and potentially hazardous) features of a bathroom stand-out.

As someone once said to me *"we love your red toilet seats because we don't have falls in the toilets any more"*.

As referred to above, contrast doesn't necessitate using bright, bold colours. Making colour choices to ensure an LRV (light reflectance value) differential of at least 30 points, will ensure suitable contrast between the colours chosen.

Three - Text

Presentation of text is a crucial consideration. Capitals should only be used for initial letters and type must be clear and without (sans) serifs. Century Gothic (the font I'm using here) is an excellent example. The larger the text can be, the better.

N.B. Reading is a more complex process than it first appears, so it's useful to appreciate that when we learn to read we focus on the sounds and shapes of the individual letters, but as our competence develops we use familiarity of the shape of words instead. Using block capitals makes every word the same shape and therefore harder to read.

Four - Imagery

Some people with Dementia will find reading increasingly difficult or lose this ability completely. For many, this difficulty can be addressed by the use of imagery. This can either replace the need for text or help someone to understand the text by association with the picture. Using symbols or a 2D graphic will be unfamiliar and abstract, providing little value, if any at all.

Clear, good quality photographic images, particularly on signage, make the most effective prompts. In many cases, a well chosen image will often clearly communicate the sign's message without the need to read words at all.

Five - Shape

When someone loses their ability to see colour, or even lose their sight altogether, a good design can still provide opportunities for effective communication. For example, it's helpful if a sign design is a unique shape. Using the picture element to create a unique outline, the 'viewer' may identify the sign by touch alone.

Six - Materials

The quality of any product is as much about the materials used as it is about the appearance. Products can be made cheaper by using inferior materials, or discarding components altogether, but in a dementia care setting every component should be there for a reason and needs to be of a suitable quality.

Generally, materials used in dementia care settings should have the following qualities;

- Non-reflective
- Class 0 or Class 1 fire-rated
- Meet the requisite infection control standard
- Be easy to clean and highly durable.....

Seven - Durability

Why do products need to be so durable?

Durability = reliability.

Imagine you completely rely on a toilet sign, then one day it isn't there.

For example, signage should never be installed more than 5 feet from floor level, otherwise many people just won't see it. Inevitably, anything at eye-level will get handled a lot and get dirty too. Stickers and flimsy products simply aren't suitable for the rigours of a typical care home, no matter how calm and well managed it may be.

Eight - Everything for a reason

This final principle should be considered as a partner to each of the others.

Every single feature of a design should exist for a reason. If it doesn't have a purpose, it shouldn't be there. If it doesn't fulfil its purpose, change it so it does.

In conclusion

Having spent more than a decade designing and manufacturing products based on these principles, the goal is always to achieve a satisfactory outcome. The value of any product isn't in the product itself, it's the benefit it brings to the user.

Our approach is to apply these principles on the grand scale of the environment as a whole and influence the experience of how it feels to reside, work in and visit the home.

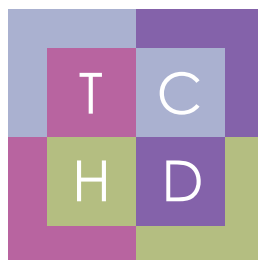
Incorporating these principles in the fabric of a care home will result in a better place to 'be' for reasons including the following;

- Increased resident activity and independence
- Improved health and occupancy levels
- More pleasant working conditions which reduce staff turnover and in turn, creates an environment to invest in improving skills and creating a better team ethos.

If you'd like us to help bring the benefits of exceptional design to your care home please contact The Care Home Designer, we'll be delighted to hear about your project.

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