Reconnecting with nature

Garath Eliot Chalfont (right) considers the role of nature in people’s lives and its implications for the design of residential care facilities

There is evidence that maintaining a connection to nature is beneficial to quality of life and well-being for people with dementia, but how well do residential care environments facilitate this benefit?

Architectural research is under way which explores the person’s need and desire for nature in their life, as well as the ability of the built environment to provide it. My research at the University of Sheffield will produce design guidance as well as an assessment tool for comparing residential environments for their ability to provide for their residents this beneficial connection to the natural world.

A residential care environment is a complex setting in which many factors enable or challenge a person’s ability to connect to nature: care and management practice, various aspects of the building and the location, the availability of nature and habitat, human involvement, assistive technology and the abilities of the residents themselves. A purpose-built tool called PLANET (Person, Location, Architecture, Nature, Energy & Technology) is being developed and is useful for highlighting differences between settings.

Interviews with residents, focus groups with formal and informal carers, and observations of day to day life in residential care homes in the north of England continue to inform the research by investigating qualitatively the aspects that PLANET quantifies.

Findings so far underscore the interdisciplinary nature of the work and the complex factors to be overcome by a person with dementia if they are to establish contact with the natural world. For instance, the concept of ‘time frame identity’ describes the period in life that the person with dementia

ception of the building which they are living.

A study participant identifies themself as a second aged student will have a perception reinforced by institutional design and the building, the daily routine, communal meals and group activities. Importantly, they will act in response the environment which prevents autonomy activity such as standing up and gazing out of the window and venturing outside. This also begins to account for an extreme anguish some people feel at tea time when
dvented from returning home.

The research also contemplates that people with dementia view nature as a tool for expressing their thoughts and emotions metaphorically: I like to sit on the balcony and look at the birds, not a long time, but it’s good for me. They don’t let themselves get too poor. Participants in the study are particularly skilled at living in the moment and expressing love and laughter. Nature provides a role by enabling expression.

Ultimately, the research findings will be applied to design dementia care environments. The architecture and nature are designed in harmony to support heartfelt expression, reduce anxiety, stimulate joy and lift the spirits. Comments or inquiries are welcome.

Garath Eliot Chalfont, MA, research assistant in the School of Architecture, University of Sheffield, UK and is currently working on the INDEPENDENT Project (Innovative Enabling Environment Design for People with Dementia), which explores the potential for technology to improve qu