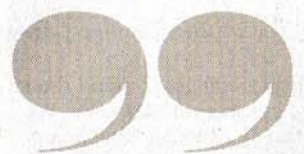


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Christopher Manthorp, P4



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Building up hope

The credit crunch could herald the return of council housing after decades in the political wilderness. But will the government lend its support? By **Peter Hetherington**



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When I'm 84 Christopher Manthorp

I met Garuth Chalfont at the UK Dementia Congress last year. He was coming off the lecturing podium, frothing with joy and eagerness. He specialises in gardens, and particularly gardens for people with dementia. He is fanatical about them, in fact, and is brought close to tears by the contemplation of institutional gardens, with their "Tesco parking lot shrubs", and the ignorance of a care establishment that does not take gardens seriously.

Chalfont is quite right, of course. When managing a specialist home for people with dementia and behavioural problems, I looked after a very difficult individual for a while, a beefy ex-farmer, big enough to hurt people badly when he was angry. And he was angry practically all the time. It took us longer than it ought to have done to work out how much he missed the outdoor life. We built in a circuit of the garden, showed him how to find it – and it worked wonders. Rain or shine, he was out there, and easier in his mind.

I was impressed by the Dutch attitude to gardens when I spent time over there looking at services for older people. They think of nature as integral to residential care and sheltered housing, and ensure that older people have access to them. I saw a terrific butterfly garden, for example, which drew people with dementia into it, fascinated and happy.

I also very much liked the fact that residents kept chickens, and even sheep, enjoying caring for them, with occasional help. People who couldn't walk any more were also catered for with picture windows offering garden views, and water features, it seems, were *de rigueur*.

Chalfont works on a very similar basic set of assumptions about the healing effect of nature and its necessity to our spirit, but has taken the philosophy to a logical conclusion. The new slant he brings is to insist not just that gardens should be sensorily stimulating but also that they must be integral to the life of a home.

What this means in practice is that he makes sure that living spaces open on to gardens, and that the gardens contain elements that engage people – he's keen on garden sheds for residents, for example, giving people a focus and a retreat. He builds in gates to open, and places where people sit, eat and drink. He puts together yards designed to draw people into activities, a simple-but-important familiar space where people can, for example, help hang up washing.

Chalfont also redesigns resident days with residents, staff and relatives, so that people often go out into the garden

with a specific purpose, something that gives a focus to their day.

Successful design, he says, stimulates people's interests and engages them with their surroundings. A garden is a failure if it isn't integral to people's lives. And he hates that grim institutional vacancy – nothing to do all day, nowhere to go. He wants people to have a meaningful daily life, enabled by space, weather, pleasure and work.

The theory works for carers at home, too. Hell, if we haven't got gardens, if we're living on the fourth floor, for example, we should be colonising allotments. Squat them if necessary.

Chalfont is hand-in-glove with those fierce conspirators for change, the Bradford Dementia Group, and is passionately involved in research and lobbying. He helps design new schemes and does consultancy work with homes and sheltered housing schemes, redesigning gardens and routines, bringing the garden into people's lives. He has even written a book, *Design for Nature in Dementia Care*, which sets out his principles very readably.

It's astonishing that a country that values its gardens as highly as the UK shouldn't have got stuck in to the issue of integrating garden activities into care.

Christopher Manthorp is director of older people's services for Epic, part of the Circle Anglia Group. He is writing in a personal capacity.