Focal Points on the Utilisation of Retirement Centre Gardens

Renata Schneiter-Ulmann
University of Applied Sciences Waedenswil, University of Applied Sciences Zurich, Grüental, 8820 Wädenswil, Switzerland

Keywords: therapeutic gardens, retirement centres, elderly citizens, occupational therapy, garden management

Abstract
Within the framework of the pilot project, “Focal Points on the Utilisation of Retirement Centre Gardens”, the specific issues relating to the utilisation and design of three retirement centre gardens from the point of view of both residents and staff were determined from semi-structured interviews. The results showed that most respondents had a close affinity with nature, particularly flowers and plants. On taking up residence in the retirement centre, all except one gave up their own garden. The garden at the retirement centre was mainly used in a passive way, most of the areas not being used at all. The residents did not identify with the garden. Occupational therapists and nursing staff would like to integrate the garden into their work to a greater degree. They expect that as a result, the elderly people would increase the passive use of the garden and also start to use it actively. Semi-public areas and private retreats, such as shady recesses for individuals or small groups, were defined as desirable elements. Generally speaking, the variety of plants should be widened. The utilisation requirements that were roughly pinpointed in the pilot project will be analysed in detail in the research project, “Therapeutic Gardens for Retirement Centres”. Based on the results, the appropriate construction measures will subsequently be carried out. Also, a concept for occupational therapy in the retirement centre garden will be elaborated. A garden management concept for the maintenance and care of the garden, as well as a performance control, will serve as a quality assurance for the project.

INTRODUCTION
In Switzerland, gardens of retirement centres - that is, institutions where an old people’s retirement home, nursing home and senior citizens’ housing are located in one place – until recently have scarcely differed from public parks. However, due to their physical and mental abilities, the requirements of the aged differ radically from those of younger and particularly more mobile elderly people. The action radius of the elderly becomes increasingly limited with advancing old-age infirmities (Newcomer 1976). Often, the garden at the retirement centre is the only place in the open air that the residents can still visit regularly and independently.

Information about the wishes of elderly people as regards a retirement centre garden scarcely exists. Moreover, equally little is known about the behaviour of the elderly in the open-air areas of retirement centres. In Switzerland, there are practically no gardens that are optimally tailored to the particular needs, possibilities and abilities of the elderly in the sense of an overall concept. At the beginning of 2001, the Department of Horticulture at the University of Applied Sciences Waedenswil decided to carry out a pilot project on the topic of “Focal Points on the Utilisation of Retirement Centre Gardens”. This project was successfully brought to a close in February 2002. The object was to investigate both the current and desired living environments as well as the main issues relating to the utilisation and design of a retirement centre garden, and thus to create a basis for the “Therapeutic Gardens for Retirement Centres” research project.

The basic notion of the research project is to retain and, where possible, to improve the quality of life of the retirement centre residents by increasing the amount of time they spend in the garden, by means of both familiar and new activities. The term “quality of life” is deemed to mean opportunities for the residents to make use of their
still remaining physical, mental and social competences in their everyday lives at the retirement centre, and to satisfy their social and psychological needs as well as the physical ones. Until now, the subject of quality of life in retirement centres has been limited to a nursing and therapeutic level inside the centre itself.

MATERIALS AND METHODS
In the run-up to the pilot project, a literature and Internet search on the topic of retirement centre gardens was made. This was followed a pilot project where three retirement centres in the Zurich region worked together. The current and desired focal points from the point of view of both residents and staff were determined by means of semi-structured interviews. The interview framework was drawn up in collaboration with a cultural and environmental psychologist from the University of Berne (Oswald F. 2001). The subject areas of the interviews were determined from conversations with the directors of the retirement centres, as well as from the pilot project team’s first impressions of the gardens.

The interviews with the residents encompassed the following topics (Table 1):
• Biographical background of the respondent as regards nature in general and gardens in particular before moving into the retirement centre
• Current relationship of the respondent to nature in general and the retirement centre garden in particular, as well as a detailed account of his/her individual use of the garden
• Wishes of the respondent as regards the utilisation possibilities of the garden in question.

The interviews with the staff (occupational therapists, nursing staff, housekeeping staff, director) encompassed the following topics:
• Current utilisation of the garden by the residents
• Desired utilisation from the professional perspective of the respondent
• Prerequisites that need to be fulfilled in order for a retirement centre garden to be optimally used.

The interviews were recorded on tape, transcribed and evaluated, and then summarised and in report for each of the retirement centres (Oswald F., 2001, Oswald, K. 2001, 2002).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Results of the Literature and Internet Research
The initial literature and Internet search revealed that environmental psychology and horticultural therapy experts, primarily in America and England, have been examining the effects of gardens on elderly people for a number of years (Wells et al. 1997; www.ahta.org, www.thrive.org.uk). “Horticultural Therapy” successfully organises therapeutic activities for the elderly in gardens that have been specifically created for this purpose (Pastor Simpson and Strauss 1994). Such “therapeutic gardens” or “horticultural therapy” concepts can only be transposed to Swiss conditions to a certain degree, as the residents of US old-age institutions generally move into retirement centres at a younger age and come from a different cultural background (Oswald, F. 2001). Scientific literature on gardens in retirement centres does not exist in Switzerland (Oswald, F. 2001).

Results of the Interviews with Residents
1. Biographical Background, Relationship to Gardens before moving into the Retirement Centre
All the residents interviewed have, with one exception, a close affinity with nature, particularly flowers and plants. 20 of 21 respondents grew up in the countryside, either on a farm or in a house with a sizeable garden. In all cases these were kitchen gardens, which were cultivated by the entire family and which also provided them with food during the Second World War. As adults, all except one had a garden, which was either attached to their house or took the form of an allotment. Many of the respondents derived great pleasure, as well as an important psychological balance, from
working in the garden. They attached particular importance to the fact that the garden looked well cared-for, that there was always something in flower, and that all the produce was put to good use. Also of importance were the aspects of order, productivity and aesthetic appearance. In the course of their lives, these elderly people acquired extensive specialised knowledge of gardens and gardening. It is conspicuous that they can refer to many of the plants by name. In their gardens, they particularly liked the rich variety of colourful flowers, such as *Gladiolus communis*, *Aster sp.*, *Helianthus annuus*, *Dahlia sp.*, *Pelargonium sp.*, *Primula acaulis*, *Trophaeolum majus* and *Rosa sp.* Also mentioned were *Buddleja davidii* due to the butterflies that this shrub attracts, *Sambucus niger* because of its scented flowers, and fruit trees. Berries, kitchen herbs and various vegetables were also named. Elderly people particularly miss these plant varieties if they are not present in the retirement centre garden.

2. **Current Utilisation of the Relationship to the Retirement Centre Garden**

On taking up residence in the retirement centre, all the elderly people except one gave up their own garden, despite the fact that gardening was frequently their favourite part-time or even main activity. The retirement centre garden is mainly used in a passive way, most of the areas not being used at all. The respondents seek contact with nature by going for walks in the garden, sitting and observing, spending some time in the open-air part of the cafeteria, looking out of the window or from the balcony at the greenery, and growing flowers on their balcony. Only 4 of the 21 respondents are involved in tending and designing the garden and only in a very limited way. The residents do not identify with the garden in its current form. In the three gardens participating in the pilot project, there is nowhere where the elderly people can go to adjust their mood or be alone.

3. **Requests for the Retirement Centre Garden**

The majority of respondents would like to have areas which they can actively use, either individually or together, providing that the necessary assistance, such as flexible support from the staff and appropriate construction measures (e.g. raised flower beds), is guaranteed. Semi-public areas (social meeting places) and private retreats, which can be clearly segregated from the public areas, are also desired.

**Results of the Interviews with the Staff (Occupational Therapists, Nursing Staff, Housekeeping Staff, Director)**

1. **Current Utilisation of the Garden together with the Residents**

The garden is very little used as part of the occupational therapy programme. In the experience of the therapists, the garden is too open and the participants too exposed to use it for creative or intimate activities, such as painting, keep-fit or singing. None of the three gardens owns direct access from the therapeutic rooms to the garden. In Switzerland, the concept of using a garden for occupational therapy does not exist. Nursing staff occasionally take walks in the garden with elderly people who are no longer able to move around independently. Often, there is no time for the garden, as activities in the nursing care department inside the building take higher priority. Neither the housekeeping staff nor the retirement centre director currently utilise the garden with the residents in a targeted way.

2. **Desired Focal Points for Garden Utilisation**

Occupational therapists would like to integrate the garden into their work to a greater degree. They regard a garden as being useful if it can be employed for therapeutic purposes in a wide variety of ways, such as in memory training or to stimulate the senses. However, the residents should also be given the opportunity to cultivate, harvest and make use of the varieties of plants that they know from earlier times in a vegetable garden with raised beds. The work should be specific, meaningful, future-oriented and linked with a productivity certificate. Such activities could contribute towards those concerned identifying with the garden, which is currently not the case. In particular, plant varieties should be chosen with which the residents have a personal relationship. The choice of plants should also reflect the four seasons.

A protected, non-overlooked therapy room outside in the open air is also desired. This would enable many activities which currently only take place indoors to be held in the garden when the weather is fine. The nursing staff would like an increased activation
for residents in need of care taking place in a passive way through the presence of a variety of visual, olfactory and tactile stimuli in the garden. In the opinion of the housekeeping staff, the garden should arouse happy memories, make a good impression and provide a meeting place for various age groups. All the retirement centre directors advocate therapeutic occupation possibilities with reality reference in the garden. The garden should be a place of peace, quiet and relaxation. Retreats where the residents can enjoy some privacy should be created. These recesses for 1-3 (or more) persons should have their own special character. As a result, the new retirement centre garden will be more structured and have a more extensive network of paths, preferably with circular routes of different lengths.

3. Prerequisites for the optimal Use of a Retirement Centre Garden

According to the retirement centre staff, various living environments need to be created in the garden, supported by adequate construction measures. In addition, the staff resources for tending the garden and implementing occupational therapy need to be increased or newly created.

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, it can be said that elderly people would like to make increased passive use of the garden and also start to use it actively, provided that the appropriate assistance is guaranteed. Occupational therapists and nursing staff would like to integrate the garden into their work to a greater degree. Semi-public areas and retreats, which can be clearly segregated from the public area, are desired. The network of paths should be adapted and extended. Generally speaking, the variety of plants should be increased and, in particular, familiar Swiss varieties should be considered.

In order for these wishes relating to the utilisation and design of the retirement centre garden to be implemented, the garden needs to be adapted to the new requirements. What is needed is:

• a concept for occupational therapy held in the garden
• a specific design plan
• a specific planting plan
• a garden concept that contains all the procedures and activities necessary for the garden to be optimally utilised and looked after (The garden concept should form an integral part of the overall concept of the retirement centre.)
• on-going performance control

Based on the results of the pilot project, the interdisciplinary research project, “Therapeutic Gardens in Retirement Centres”, was drawn up, in which the Alterszentrum Gibeleich retirement centre in Glattbrugg, canton Zurich and the University of Applied Sciences of Eastern Switzerland with the University of Applied Sciences Rapperswil (design plan) and the University of Applied Sciences Zurich with both the Zurich School of Social Work HSSAZ (current/target analysis, performance control) and the University of Applied Sciences Waedenswil (concept for occupational therapy in the retirement centre garden, planting plan, garden concept, project management) are participating. The project runs from 1 March 2003 until 28 February 2005.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Research Project was financed by the Commission for Technology and Innovation (CTI) of the Federal Office for Professional Education and Technology in Berne, Switzerland and the Alterszentrum Gibeleich retirement centre in Glattbrugg, Switzerland.

Literature Cited


www.ahta.org
www.thrive.org.uk

Table

Table 1. Interviews by retirement centre and respondent group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Retirement centre</th>
<th>Female residents</th>
<th>Male residents</th>
<th>Activation therapists</th>
<th>Nursing staff</th>
<th>Housekeeping staff</th>
<th>Directors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Breitlen</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Built in 1975,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>92 residents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gibeleich</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Built in 1998</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>110 residents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandbühl</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Built in 1976,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80 residents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>