Eden Alternative: the Experience of Residents in an “Edenized” Nursing Home

Emi Kiyota
School Of Architecture and Urban Planning
University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee
PO Box 413
Milwaukee, WI 53201, USA

John Oliver Selfridge
Department of Architecture
College of Architecture, Planning, & Design
Kansas State University
Seaton Hall 211
Manhattan, KS 66502-2901, USA

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Abstract
The Eden Alternative was developed by William Thomas and Judy Meyers-Thomas in 1991 in order to improve the quality of life in nursing homes. The Eden philosophy identified feelings of loneliness, helplessness, and boredom as three serious problems in long term care. The philosophy advocates creating a “human habitat” filled with companionship, opportunities to give and receive care along with de-emphasis of medical treatment. The philosophy of The Eden Alternative has three main themes: 1. Changing the culture of the organization, 2. Creating a human habitat with living things, 3. Cultivating spontaneity in daily life and work.

The present study explores the influence of an “Edenized” environment on the feeling of “being at home” for residents. In this paper, residents’ experiences with plants were described and analyzed. In addition, suggestions are made for creating supportive environment for The Eden Alternative. A positive influence on the people's everyday life in the nursing home was observed. Both residents and staff members seemed to enjoy living with animals, plants, and children in the nursing home environment. These living things seemed to help making the nursing home a lively environment. They also attracted visitors and made their visit a pleasurable experience, especially for children. The “Edenizing” process created a sense of belonging and ownership to this place from both residents and staff members. The environment with living things also cultivated the residents’ sense of relatedness with the outside world.

INTRODUCTION
The Eden Alternative was developed by William Thomas and Judy Meyers-Thomas in 1991 in order to improve the quality of life in nursing homes. The Eden philosophy identified feelings of loneliness, helplessness, and boredom as three serious problems in long term care. As a practicing geriatrician, Thomas found that nursing home residents frequently suffered from those maladies. While medical technologies have led to many improvements in nursing home clinical status, medicine offers little to lonely and bored people living in long-term care institutions. Thomas (1996) advocated creating a “human habitat” filled with companionship, opportunities to give and receive care along with de-emphasis of medical treatment.

Most nursing homes operate in the medical model which comes from hospitals. This model emphasizes professional staff members providing treatment to dependent elderly residents. Life in such places revolves around the facility’s routine, activities are programmed and structured, staff works impersonally from resident to resident. There is a general sense that the facility belongs to the staff. Residents come to be known by their
diagnoses and weaknesses, not their strengths.

Unlike hospitals which treat acutely ill patients, nursing homes ought to be places where people can feel “at home”. In many cases, residents stay for long periods of time and may spend the rest of their lives in there. The Eden Alternative changes conventional nursing home environments into the places where people can live and grow. The philosophy of The Eden Alternative has three main themes.

1. Changing the culture of the organization (Resident-centered care; Staff empowerment: reduce hierarchy)
2. Creating a human habitat with living things (Introducing animals, plants, and children into the environment)
3. Cultivating spontaneity in daily life and work (Creating an environment where residents spontaneously interact with a variety of living things as part of their everyday life as well as the more usual programmed activities).

The first Eden Alternative facility was developed in New York in 1991. A study was conducted to evaluate the influence of the Eden Alternative over a four-year period. The results showed a reduction of 25% in the number of psychoactive prescriptions in a three years period and a 20% decrease in the mortality rate after two years of implementing the Eden Alternative (Thomas 1996).

The designed environment has a powerful influence on residents’ physical, psychological, and spiritual everyday experiences. Numerous studies have been done in a variety of disciplines that recognized the problems of the conventional nursing home environment (Cohen and Weisman 1991; Namazi and Haynes 1994; Regnier 2002). Due to these contributions, nursing home environments have been improved in ways that enhance the residents’ quality of life. However, still the metaphor (notion) of institutional care remains the dominant paradigm. Thomas has proposed the Eden Alternative as a means of transforming otherwise sterile environments into rich human habitats.

The present study explores the influence of an “Edenized” environment on the feeling of being at home for residents. In this paper, residents’ experiences with plants are described and analyzed. The outcome of this study may be helpful for designers seeking to create places where the Eden Alternative might be introduced.

METHODOLOGY

Research Site

The study was conducted at the Elim Care Center, which is a non-profit making organization located in Fargo, North Dakota. There are 98 beds in a skilled nursing home and 48 beds in assisted living. This facility started implementing the philosophy of the Eden Alternative in 1995 and became a member of the Eden Alternative registry in 1997. Along with the people who live there, there are 4 dogs, 5 cats, more than 50 birds, 3 rabbits, and numerous fishes in two fish tanks in residence. There are also many plants in many places both indoor and outdoor for residents to enjoy taking care of them. The facility is also home to a child daycare. Residents are able to see and be with children in their everyday life. This research site was recommended by Thomas who is the founder of the Eden Alternative.

The nursing home environment is multifaceted with many interacting elements. In order to understand this environment, triangulated data collections were planned; including participant observation, behavior mapping, and multiple in-depth interviews with residents.

Procedure

Participant observations and in-depth interviews were conducted to collect information. As part of the observations, behavior mapping was used to understand how people use public spaces in this facility. In addition, one of us (EK) lived in the nursing home as a resident for three weeks in order to obtain first-hand experience.

It was recommended by the administrator and director of nurses that the author simulate a common disability that residents have in this facility so that they would
experience everyday life as many residents do. The simulation was that of a person who had experienced multiple strokes and became paralyzed on the left side of the body. In that scenario, the author used a wheelchair and restricted their left arm with a sling.

RESULTS

Through this study, it was evident that The Eden Alternative had a positive influence on people’s everyday life in the nursing home. Both residents and staff members seemed to enjoy living with animals, plants, and children in the nursing home environment. Those living things seemed to help making the nursing home a lively environment. They also attracted visitors and made their visit a pleasurable experience, especially for children.

As a result of the “Edenizing” process, a sense of belonging and ownership to this place from both residents and staff members was observed. The environment with living things also cultivated the residents’ sense of “relatedness” with the outside world (Searles 1960).

Some residents had difficulty in living with animals or children because of the noise and hygiene issues. However, no resident expressed major difficulties with having plants in their living environment. There were two benefits that were created by plants in the “Edenizing” process. One was to decrease the institutional appearance and feel of the facility. The other benefit was to provide opportunities for residents to enjoy taking care of plants. Residents who kept plants in their rooms were proud of maintaining their plants in good condition and liked talking about them. Taking care of plants seemed to enhance the sense of connectedness with their past and family. The plants provided new avenues of conversation within the largely predictable life of the nursing home.

Animals promoted spontaneous interactions with residents more frequently than plants or children. There seemed to be three reasons for this phenomenon. One is that animals required more frequent attention and care from residents than plants and the children enrolled in the daycare. Secondly, plants and children were not appropriately integrated into the residents’ everyday lives. For example, plants were introduced as decorations in the environment. Thirdly, this facility was built with the “medical model” design philosophy of thirty years ago and so there were structural limitations that limited the ability of residents to interact with plants and children.

The Eden Alternative declares, “Creating an Elder-centered community is a never-ending process” (Thomas 1996). The further growth and improvement of a physical environment that can better support The Eden Alternative is an ongoing holistic process.

DISCUSSION

There is a great need to create natural environments that enable spontaneous interactions with plants. Long-term care organizations should provide attractions which are more than aesthetic. Residents need to be involved in nurturing plants. When designing exterior spaces for nursing home residents, it is beneficial to take empirical studies into consideration. Brawley (1997) suggested four basic design principles for the creation of outdoor spaces for residents with Alzheimer: 1. safety and security, 2. way-finding and orientation, 3. selecting non-toxic plants, 4. providing appropriate sensory stimulation. In order to meet the objectives of The Eden Alternative, careful consideration of the role which plants can play in the indoor and outdoor environments will be required.

Understanding Residents’ Everyday Routine in Nursing Homes

We observed that residents’ lives were highly routinized with a sharply limited life scope. In order to create a place where residents are encouraged to interact with plants, it is necessary to understand the everyday routine of nursing homes. The interaction that residents have with plants should be naturally integrated into the flow of the residents’ everyday life.

Because of their limitations in physical strength and endurance, residents are often unable to explore unfamiliar places. Frequent interactions with plants may be anticipated in a place where the residents can see and use plants in their everyday activities. The careful
understanding of residents’ lives must be antecedent to providing the maximum physical and visual access to nature. For example, the places which were frequently used by staff members usually had greater access to plants than the places used mainly by residents. As a result, residents had less opportunity to see and interact with plants than would have been predicted on the basis of the total number of plants in the facility. The practice of supplying the building’s lobby with plants while the residents’ rooms remain barren is an example of this bias at work.

Understanding and Compensating for Residents’ Physical Abilities

Nursing home residents are physically challenged in many ways. Some simple tasks can be extremely difficult or impossible for them to accomplish without adaptive tools and techniques. Combinations of adaptive devices and therapeutic strategies must often be employed. The creation of these techniques remains in its infancy. A variety of opportunities to interact with plants should be provided to compensate for different types of residents’ physical difficulties.

Eliminating Physical Barriers

1. Location and Number of Exit to the Outdoor Space. There were only two exits from resident areas to the courtyard. In order to go outside, most residents needed to travel a long distance to reach the exits from their rooms. This discouraged them from going out into the courtyard.

2. Gap at the Doorways. At each exit doorway, there was a gap in the flooring. It was very difficult for residents using wheelchairs or walkers to negotiate this barrier.

3. Pathway Design. The pathways in the courtyard consisted of a combination of straight lines and sharp corners. Sharp corners were difficult to negotiate when self-propelling a wheelchair.

4. The Height of Flower Beds. Physical limitations make it difficult for many residents to garden at the level of the ground. Raised flowerbeds allow residents to have easy access to interact with plants.

5. Insects. There were many bees in non-raised beds which were then flying at the eye level of residents seated in wheelchairs. Insect control should be taken into account in a nursing home environment.

Creating a Place Where Residents Are Able to Find Meaning

1. Ownership. Residents often felt responsible for plants that they owned. Although there were many plants in public spaces, the residents did not seem to be interested in interacting with them. On the other hand, they enjoyed taking care of the plants in their rooms. There was a general sense that the plants in resident rooms belonged to the rooms’ occupants, but plants in public spaces were seen as belonging to the facility. Spontaneous interaction with plants may be promoted by the sense of ownership.

2. Display their Effort. Residents were proud of the plants that they were taking care of in their rooms. I observed the pleasure of showing and sharing the story about their plants to other people. A place where residents can display their plants should be provided to as a means to enhance motivation and self-esteem.

3. Plants with Personal Attachment or Family Involvement. Plants kept in residents’ rooms were mostly ones given by their family members. Residents seemed to validate and strengthen the feeling of attachment to their family members through the act of taking care of their plants. Plants with personal attachment were more highly valued and that value seemed to be associated with a high degree of spontaneous interaction with these plants.

Creating Mix Use in Garden Space

A variety of living things should be combined in garden spaces to maximize the benefit of the Eden Alternative. Garden space can be a place where residents, children, and animals meet each other informally. Integrating the space for animals to exercise, children to play, family members to visit residents, staff members to take a break, and residents to
get away can promote positive and lively garden space. In a garden, it is also important to create short cuts for people who live and work in the nursing homes to enhance their non-instructed interactions with each other.

**Providing Choice and Flexibility**

The Eden Alternative supports the practice of introducing large numbers of indoor plants. Some residents expressed fears of allergic reaction to plants. The choice of being in the place with plants or without them should be available for residents.

**Residents’ Involvement in the Designing Process**

In the Fargo facility, indoor plants were mainly low-maintenance houseplants in hanging baskets. The plants in the courtyard were mostly annual flowers. Those plants were selected by staff members. Residents’ preferences were not reflected for the selection. One resident said about the courtyard “It is nice but this is not a garden”, because the plants were not familiar to her. Residents should be able to select the plants in their living environment.

**Literature Cited**


