

Designing Alzheimer's Facilities:

What should be Considered?

BY GREG HUNTEMAN, AIA

One in 10 individuals over age 65 have Alzheimer's disease and half of those over 85 have the disease, according to the Alzheimer's Association. Projections indicate the number of Americans with Alzheimer's will increase from four to 14 million by 2050. This growth will demand the development of specialized facilities to handle this unique population. More than half of all nursing home residents have Alzheimer's Disease or a related disorder.

The design of Alzheimer's facilities is a unique and rewarding process that requires a broad range of knowledge about the ways the disease affects the sufferers. The key to the design process is to perceive the spaces through the eyes and minds of

the residents while enhancing the efforts of the staff. Even the best de-



signed facilities are useless without a well-defined operations program.

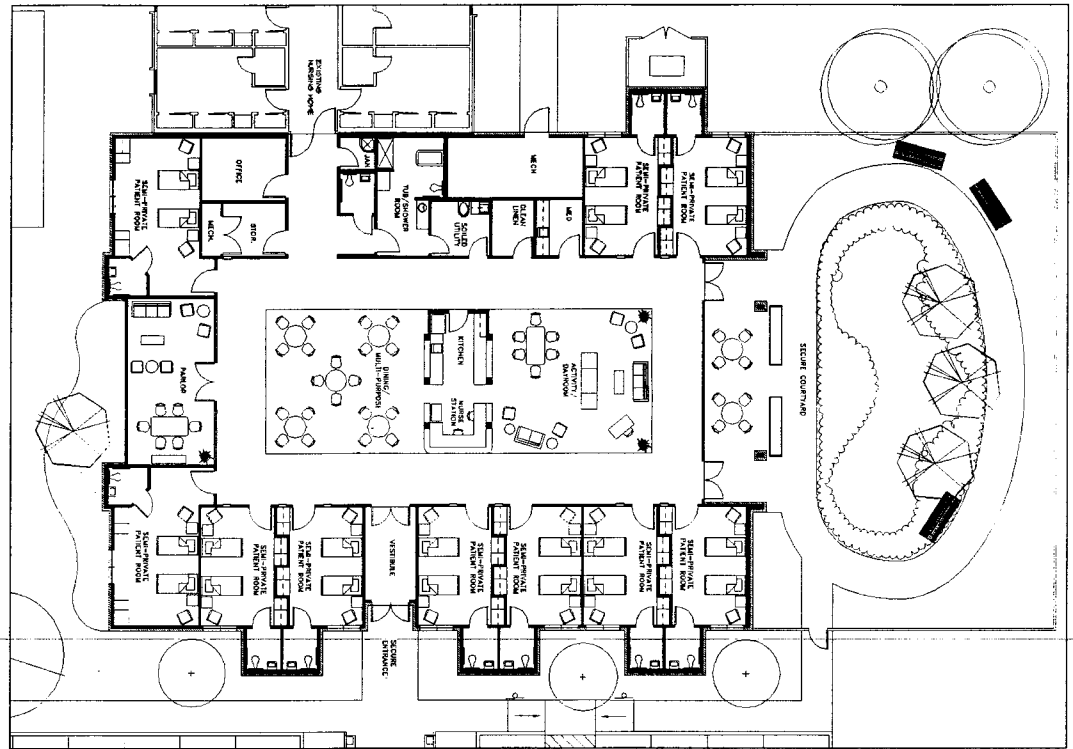
The design development process is critical to a successful Alzheimer's facility. It's important to initially estab-

lish design goals that incorporate the administrative and architectural characteristics necessary to meet the unique needs of residents. The next step is to translate the design goals into an architectural program that describes and illustrates the different building areas and their relationship to other spaces. Owners are usually surprised that Alzheimer's facilities require a greater proportion of public spaces and corridors in comparison to typical assisted living and nursing home facilities. Also crucial to the success of such a facility is the selection

of a design team consisting of experienced and knowledgeable architects, interior designers, landscape architects and engineers. In some instances, a development consultant may also be

added to the team to provide additional information on operational issues.

The recent design for a project for the Colorado Fayette Medical Center in Weimar, Texas implemented many of the unique design qualities a specialized Alzheimer's facility requires. During the initial design phase of Park Place Care Center, a 20-bed Alzheimer's unit expansion to an existing nursing home, primary design issues were discussed with the facility's Chief Executive Officer, Randy Bacus. The project's goal was to create "a special environment where Alzheimer's residents felt comfortable and safe." To achieve this goal, facilities were designed to emulate the character of a residential home while at the same time disguising the facility's underlying medical systems.



Indoor Spaces

Indoor space should encourage social interaction and disengaged observation by residents. These spaces, when woven together, provide a continuous "wandering path" eliminating dead ends wherever possible. Large spaces can be subdivided to afford multiple activity areas. Private areas can be incorporated in the design, providing areas for conversation with family and friends. At Park Place Care Center, the nurse's station and kitchen were designed to be situated at the center of the wandering path, allowing staff to interact and observe residents throughout the public areas.

Outdoor Spaces

Exterior courtyards can become an extension of the wandering path and provide an excellent place for additional activities. Courtyards provide residents with areas they can observe from inside or can enjoy safely outdoors. Covered porches provide a comfortable transition and represent areas that many residents once enjoyed at their own homes. Raised planters can

be utilized for easier resident access to non-toxic plants.

Safety

Safety and security should be as inconspicuous as possible. The more visible the barriers, the more confined the residents feel, increasing the potential for problems. Proper integration of a continuous wandering path minimizes the focus on exit ways. The use of magnetic locks and delayed exit devices are the most common solutions for exit doors and courtyard gates. Local building officials need to be consulted to determine what security systems are preferable. Designers must also pay attention to the selection of finish materials that support resident safety. Carpet should be used in resident areas whenever possible to pad falls and minimize the risk of slipping on spills. Separate storage areas safeguard residents' clothing and belongings. Unlocked areas for clothing encourage resident self-sufficiency while locked areas ensure security.

Way Finding

Way finding offers another challenge to dementia sufferers. The use of multiple "designators" improves the

orientation of residents with different sensory impairments. Areas can be designated by artwork, interior finishes and landmarks. Personal pictures and symbolic objects can also be used to identify areas for residents. High shelving can provide an excellent location for memorabilia and accessories. At Park Place Care Center, glass cabinets outside resident's doors were designed to allow items of personal interest to serve as visual memory cues. Resident rooms were also designed to be finished differently and accessed off different activity spaces.

Lighting

Optical changes that occur in the elderly must be considered when designing facility lighting systems. To address these changes, light levels should be increased to improve visibility and color rendition. Light levels also need to be even and consistent to maximize depth perception and minimize shadows that often create perceived obstacles for Alzheimer's residents. At Park Place Care Center, indirect cove lighting and natural light through the use of "clerestory" (high) windows were de-

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Vendor Product News

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signed provide the optimum light quality in the primary public areas.

Finishing Touches

Finishes and furnishings should be selected to emulate the characteristics of a typical residential home as well as withstand the daily use of multiple occupants. Selections also need to take into account the sensory perceptions of residents. For example, it's important to select colors that minimize the effects of yellowing eye lenses that are so prevalent among the elderly. It's equally important to select colors and patterns that comfort the residents. Furniture should have rounded edges, moisture-resistant fabrics and easy accessibility. Choose accessories that further enhance the residential character of the space. Residents especially treasure memorabilia that facilitate memories of the past. In the community surrounding Park Place Care Center, there is a long history of quilting. To honor that tradition, quilts serve as focal points and noise buffers throughout the facility.

By emphasizing good design, Alzheimer's facilities can alleviate potential problems and market a better quality of life for its residents. The ultimate goal should be to create an environment that soothes wandering minds and encourages them to live life to the fullest.

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