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Dignity through design – how the architecture can make a difference

scheme developed by Hanover Housing Association in partnership with Brighton and Hove City Council, which aims to bring dignity through design to its residents.

Introduction

New Larchwood is the third extra care project to be completed under the

The RoAD project, as outlined in *Kate Jopling's* article, calls for better design of public spaces to empower older people. In this article, *Judy Sarre* explains the background and thinking behind Archadia's award-winning design for New Larchwood, an extra care housing

Department of Health's (DH) scheme providing funding for accommodation for older people. This new building provides 38 self-contained flats, together with communal spaces that facilitate socialising and allow care to be delivered to people in response to their needs.



The exterior of New Larchwood

The emerging design

In the summer of 2003, the then Health Minister, Stephen Ladyman, announced that money would be made available from the Department of Health for extra care housing schemes. The funding would be given to innovative schemes seeking to develop the range of choices available and the minister expressed the wish to see:

‘real partnership coming up with ideas that suit local communities’.

Archadia was commissioned by Hanover Housing Association and Brighton and Hove Council to design a scheme to bid for funding on a site in Coldean, on the outskirts of Brighton. Over 150 projects were submitted nationally to bid for the funding and 16 were fortunate enough to be selected. Archadia was thrilled to learn in February 2004 that one of these was their design for New Larchwood.

Next began the work involved to develop the design and obtain planning permission, which was granted in November 2004. This was quickly followed by detailed construction drawings, specifications and costing exercises in conjunction with Hanover Housing Association, Brighton and Hove Council and the building contractors, Feltham Construction. In March 2005 work on the site began.

It is the time spent developing the design that is so crucial to the outcome when considering the ultimate benefits to the residents of housing schemes. Unlike the construction period, when progress is there for all to see, this design part of the process is largely hidden from the eyes of the end users of the building, and many might be surprised if they were able to see the time and effort put into it. It is a time of meetings, consultations, negotiations, drawings, calculations and head scratching – involving not only the architects, but also their clients, the town planners, engineers, project managers, quantity surveyors and building contractors. This is the time when the architects try to ensure that the building will be as well thought out as possible and that maximum consideration has been given to the design features that will make it a comfortable, user-friendly and enabling environment for the older people who are to occupy it.



The library at New Larchwood



The cafe at New Larchwood



The cinema room at New Larchwood



Patrick Manwell at work at Archadia

The completed project

After approximately 22 months on site, New Larchwood was finally opened to residents in September 2006. The building immediately proved popular and was soon full to capacity. It nestles into its sloping site, giving a domestic scale and appearance. The materials were chosen to blend in with the neighbouring houses.

All flats are planned to allow easy wheelchair use and all fittings are easy to manipulate and operate. Level access showers are provided and are large enough to allow a carer to assist so that tenants requiring help can use their own private bathrooms. In short, one of the main aims of the design is to allow residents to remain in their own flats for as long as possible and avoid the need to move to a more institutional setting.

The internal spaces are light and airy. The flat windows both have low sills to allow residents to easily look out and are tall to allow light to be thrown deep into the flat. Natural light is introduced into the central corridors through light wells from above.

New Larchwood affords all the residents many opportunities to pursue a full life and to socialise with others, sometimes despite their level of disability. Among the on-site facilities specifically for tenants are a function room, library, faith room and cinema room. To maximise their use and popularity, communal sitting areas are designed to be close to the front entrance and overlooking local activity. The design, however, provides for progressive levels of privacy as one moves through the building, so that the tenants can rest assured that their own flats remain their personal living space, inaccessible to visitors unless invited in.

In addition, on the lower ground floor, is a range of integrated community facilities that can be accessed by the general public directly from the street. This is an unusual feature and provides a collection of amenities including a kitchen, a dining room, a health and beauty suite, a doctor's surgery, a coffee shop and a hairdresser. This will enhance the previously poor provision of such facilities for local older people and will help this extra care housing scheme, and its residents, to be truly a part of the local community.

The personal stories

At a recent coffee morning the residents were encouraged to share their personal experiences of life at New Larchwood and some touching tales emerged.

Rita, who was living with her daughter before she moved in, had become completely reliant on her. She is a wheelchair user and was never able to go out due to her immobility problems. Since living at New Larchwood, she has found she has been able to regain her independence and free up precious time for her daughter, who also has a young son to care for. Despite her own care needs, she has helped organise, set up and run the community shop; she joins in all the social activities and has made a lot of new friends. Her daughter says, *'New Larchwood has given her back her life to live again.'*



Award ceremony at New Larchwood
Back row: Ken Bartlett, Bruce Moore, Richard Best from Hanover Housing Association and Patrick Manwell, MD of Archadia. Front row: Dora Bryan and the Mayor of Brighton and Hove



Margaret, who was living in a residential home before she came to New Larchwood, was relying on her sister to help her with most things. She was unable to get about on her own and was completely reliant on care staff to push her around in a wheelchair. In three months, Margaret has taught herself to walk again and has become highly sociable, making friends with many residents. In the afternoon she visits others who are lonely and has tea with them. Earlier this year, she was able to present Dora Bryan with a bouquet of flowers at an awards ceremony in front of many people.

The European design award

When you hear such heartening accounts, it hardly seems surprising that New Larchwood has won an award from WELHOPS (Welfare Housing Policies for Older People). This is a European Union part-funded project to promote independent living and improved housing conditions for older people across Europe. Forty five schemes were visited by the WELHOPS steering group across different European countries including Spain, Italy, Sweden and Hungary and twelve of these, including three UK projects, were selected as examples of the best design. A snowy day in January saw this award being presented at New Larchwood by Dora Bryan.

'I am thrilled to see us performing so well when compared with our European colleagues and feel that there is much to be gained by the sharing of knowledge and experience between different architects and housing providers across the European Union. This has fuelled my enthusiasm for a personal involvement in such



comparative studies.' (Patrick Manwell, Archadia, who has long had an interest in older people's housing in other parts of Europe and undertook a brief architectural study tour to visit schemes in Holland while New Larchwood was being built.)

Dignity enhanced

In conclusion, Archadia hopes that as a result of careful thought and design, the residents at New Larchwood will enjoy as full and dignified a life as possible. In the privacy of their own homes, the flats will facilitate independent living; people will be able to care for themselves or be helped where necessary. In the public areas of the building, the tenants will be able to make full use of a range of facilities and mix with their neighbours from the local area. It is national policy to support people in their own homes for as long as possible and few people move voluntarily into residential or nursing care homes. New Larchwood is showing that buildings where care is provided to people in their own homes can be non institutional in character and atmosphere and can allow older people to remain part of a vibrant local community in safe, comfortable and friendly surroundings. In short, people can live with dignity until the very end of their lives.

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