

Applying Participatory Media as a Way to understand People-Environment Relationships in Australian Aged Care Settings

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"Understanding People-Environment relationships is a key aspect of future improvement in landscape architectural research. Designers need to explore user's experience in order to make sensible design decisions. This paper reports on an environmental gerontology research project which has sought to understand aged care residents' user experiences of their outdoor landscape designed environment. Using Digital Storytelling and Go-Along methods as techniques to engage users, this research was able to draw out the residents lived experiences of the gardens provided within their aged care facilities. This approach was adopted to empower users, especially senior users, to voice their opinions. Fieldwork was conducted over two years across two different aged care facilities in Queensland, Australia. The purpose of this research is twofold: to develop a more comprehensive understanding of individual user experiences by investigating the factors that contribute to user engagement in their outdoor environment; and to explore the role of participatory media in understanding user experience within a landscape design context.

The findings of this research show that these outdoor landscapes contribute not only to a therapeutic experience, but can also actively construct a 'healthful landscape'. User's landscape experiences are deeply connected with personal memories. Individual landscape memories influence user's experiences in positive ways. Plant gifting/exchange is a common and important practice of social interaction among residents. It positively contributes to a healthful landscape experience by connecting to personal memories, as well as to each other. The richness of garden colors and form also plays a more important role in making these spaces a vibrant experience for aging users. Finally, ease of maintenance was shown to be an important enabler for residents' active engagement in their landscapes. These findings could assist in implementing strategies to inform and enable future design solutions in an ageing society."