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Prof. Dr. Burcin Cem Arabacioglu and Assoc. Prof. Dr. Pinar Arabacioglu

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Büyükdere Cad. Ecza sok. Pol Center 4/1 Levent-İstanbul

E-mail: icntadconference@gmail.com

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“LIVING MY HOME”: HOW INTERIOR DESIGN CAN ENHANCE A SENSE OF HOME FOR PEOPLE WITH DEMENTIA

Natsumi Wada¹, Silvia Maria Gramegna², Alessandro Biamonti³

¹ Via Giovanni Durando, 10, 20158 Milano MI, Italy, Italy : natsumi.wada@polimi.it

² Via Giovanni Durando, 10, 20158 Milano MI, Italy: silvi maria.gramegna@polimi.it

³ Via Giovanni Durando, 10, 20158 Milano MI, Italy: alessandro.biamonti@polimi.it

Abstract

This paper presents a scoping review exploring the intersection of interior design and homemaking for individuals with dementia, emphasizing the enhancement of belonging, dignity, autonomy, and identity. In dementia care settings, well-designed living environments can alleviate symptoms, promote wellbeing, and create conducive living spaces. While previous studies have addressed the sense of home for dementia patients, few have focused on the process of creating a home and its design possibilities. For individuals with dementia, whose world perception shifts constantly, the relationship between their environment and perception is crucial, especially after relocation to a care environment. The methodology involved a scoping review of five databases (PubMed, Mendeley, CINAHL, Research Rabbit, and Scopus) conducted in November 2024. Search terms included homemaking, dementia, sense of home, identity, dignity, and autonomy. From 984 articles, 18 relevant studies were scrutinized and analyzed. The results highlight the significance of interior design in reflecting personal tastes and life experiences, fostering connections with family memories, and reinforcing identity. Homemaking, linked to personal expression and autonomy, becomes vital when addressing cognitive changes; thoughtful interior modifications can support cognitive challenges, enhance comfort, and provide familiarity. Strategic placement of familiar objects can trigger memory recall, offering emotional solace and continuity. Thus, interior design transcends aesthetics, serving as a powerful tool in reinforcing identity, aiding self-discovery, and establishing a secure environment for individuals with dementia. Future research should explore innovative methodologies, such as design research methods and toolkits, to involve individuals with dementia actively in creating and adapting their living environments, fostering inclusive design practices.

Key Words: *Homemaking, Identity, Sense of home, Dementia, Interior Design*

1. Introduction

The term 'home' encompasses many dimensions, including material structures, spatial dimensions, temporal connections, social relations, and the processes that make up a home and establish identity in society[1]. The concept of home and domestic practices support individual and collective identities in a fluid and material sense, and recognize the creative value of these practices. The practice of domestic work as a social and personal space-making is closely related to identity[2]. Discovering and creating a language, a physical sensation, and an architectural style that harmonizes with the body is a process of affirming language and physical sensation and creating a safe place for one's "now." In the past few decades, the way care for people with disabilities has changed from a medical model to a social model. The social model treats people as individuals with unique identities, and places emphasis on how to create an environment. This approach emphasizes the importance of individual choice and autonomy. This study focuses on the creation of homes and design approaches in dementia care, and summarizes what approaches are possible in design practice based on previous research.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately 55 million people worldwide are suffering from dementia, and this number is expected to increase. Long-term institutionalization often causes elderly people with dementia to feel isolated and disconnected from society, leading to depression and a decrease in happiness. Currently, the design of living environments for people with dementia is increasingly being recognized as having the potential to create spaces that alleviate symptoms, promote happiness, and contribute to more fulfilling life experiences. The sense of "home", characterized by small-scale, homelike features and homelike activities that are central to daily life, has been confirmed as an essential element of dementia care[3]. People with dementia face a variety of cognitive changes every day, including confusion about time, space, and self-awareness due to memory loss (World Alzheimer Report 2020). This loss of memory can lead to a loss of self-identity as the familiar cognitive world begins to waver. Apathy, characterized by a lack of emotion, spontaneity, enthusiasm, and intellectual curiosity, can also drain the vitality of daily life. What meaning does self-creation or self-design of the environment have for people with dementia who face such a loss of self? In this study, we will examine how interior design can support the maintenance of self and identity for people with dementia, focusing on research into the concept of "home", and considering how the environment should respond to changes in the body, the design of facilities and housing, the way people with dementia themselves construct their world, and the possibility that the process of constructing "home" can be a creative response to changes in self and world perception. In particular, this paper will examine what kinds of design practices are being proposed, and how interior design can be used to create nurturing environments that help people with dementia maintain and promote their sense of self.

2. Methodology

In November 2024, a rapid review of five databases (PubMed, Mendeley, CINAHL, Research Rabbit, and Scopus) was conducted. Search terms included: home care, dementia, sense of home, identity, dignity, and autonomy. A total of 22 articles were screened for research based on subject and keyword, and a detailed manual classification was performed. Publications focusing on changes in cognitive function in dementia patients in nursing homes and residences, and studies examining how the built environment can be designed to respond to these changes, were selected. This review emphasized models appropriate for specific times and places, and sought to explore the diversity of appropriate responses[4]. The final review included 22 papers, which were summarized based on individual elements such as doors, gardens, reminiscence, memory recall, and the creation of multisensory environments.

3. Results

Regarding the research categories identified in this paper, according to the reviewed articles, current research follows an evidence-based design (EBD) approach, which is defined as a design based on the best available evidence from credible studies[5]. According to this definition, the reviewed studies were categorized into research-oriented and practice-oriented studies. Most research-oriented studies use qualitative research methods, such as observation, interviews, and case studies, to collect and qualitatively analyze data from people with dementia, relatives, and care staff. There were five literature reviews that organized comprehensive analyses of environmental factors and individual elements[6], [3], [1], [7], [8], and three that compiled comprehensive guidelines on interior design and dementia and home design[9], [3], [10], while there were individual practices on home design and identity, including home practice with families[11] and care home practices[8], such as practices in focus groups[12] in Some also referred to localized elements, such as one on gardens[13], one on entrances and exits[14], and one on objects and recall[15]. Also, in relation to house building, those with an action research approach that focused on making, identity, and creativity and connected narrative and chairs[16], those that connected individual house practices with architectural design[17], and those that made reference to cognitive science and interior design[18] were included. For each of the studies, a wide range of practices from a range of places were compiled from actual locations and interviews, including Italy, the Netherlands, China, Belgium, Australia, Ireland, Canada, and Turkey. It also includes a review of queer and home[19]. In each of the studies, the objects and interior design elements chosen often to reflect the country's cultural background, history, and sense of community belonging. Although this review does not discuss much cultural background, future organizing on home building and identity will need to delve deeper into history, cultural background, and its relationship to individual life histories, such as individual sexuality and community. Each of these elements is outlined in table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the 22 reviewed publications.

Author	Souse of evidence	Location	Methodology	Key elements
Van Steenwinkel et al., 2014	Residents, Relatives and staff	Belgium	Observation&Interview / Qualitative analysis	Layout, Color, Space, Lighting, Night table, Shelf
Gramegna et al., 2022	Residents, Relatives and staff	Italy	Focus group interview	Photographs of familiar faces, places, and objects, Images related to past hobbies and interests
Chen et al., 2023 a	Residents, Relatives and staff	China	Observation&Interview	Layout, Furnishings, Sensory Elements,Clear pathways and visual cues,Familiar objects
Van steenwInkel et al., 2012	Residents	Belgium	Conceptual framework & Case study	Public and private,Layout,Connection to the Outside,Personal Space,Atmosphere
Hoof et al., 2016	Residents	Netherlands	Photography and in-depth interviews	Personal belongings,personalization, Furniture,Television,internet
Ferdous, 2019	Previous publications		Systematic literature review	Public and private,Layout,easy navigation,visual cues,Connection to nature.Homelike Atmosphere,Dining
Chen et al., 2023 b	Residents, Relatives and staff	China	Case study Observation&Interview	Clear circulation paths, providing easily identifiable landmarks, and ensuring spaces. Public and private,objects, colors, textures, and scents.

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Van Hoof et al., 2016	Residents, Relatives and staff	Netherlands	Photography, interviews and focus groups	Personal belongings and familiar furniture, colors, soft lighting, comfortable furniture, homelike, fireplaces, comfortable seating
Falk et al., 2012	Residents	Sweden	Grounded theory	Personal belongings, flexible and adaptable interior design. Public and private
Chau & Newton, 2017	Residents, Relatives and staff	Australia	Case study Observation&Interview	memory boxes, sense of familiarity.
Newton et al., 2021	Previous publications		Narrative review	Freely and safely, independently. Enhancing Well-Being and Identity, Connecting to Nature
Linden et al., 2016	Residents, Designer	Belgium	Case study Creation&Interview	a scene with a chair, lamp and side table with personal objects, a bench in the path, living unit.
Chen et al., 2021	Previous publications		Literature review	Furniture, decorations, and memorabilia, public and private, colors, textures (rugs), and scents (candles)
Cooney, 2012	Residents	Ireland	Grounded theory	keep their activities. personal space, personalization
Weeks et al., 2017	Residents, relatives and friends of residents	Canada	Mixed-methods study	Personal belongings, furniture. Private and public. Homelikeness
Hoof et al., 2015		Netherlands	Focus group interview	Living spaces, personal belongings, furniture, decorations, surroundings, natural light, views of nature, Homelike, color, texture, lighting, and furniture.
Eijkelenboom et al., 2017	Previous publications Space Observation	Netherlands	Literature review Case study Observation	Personal belongings, furniture, and cherished items, adjust lighting, temperature. Homelike, colors, soft textures, and natural light, carpets, tablecloths, and family photographs. Public and private. wide corridors, doorways, and wheelchair-accessible furniture.
Fleming et al., 2015	Residents, Relatives and staff	Australia	Focus group interview	Tactile elements, varied lighting, and aromatherapy. Homelike, Personal belongings and familiar furniture styles. a muted color palette, soft textures, and controlling noise levels.
Siverskog, 2023	Residents	Sweden	Case study Interview	Identity: signaled clues about LGBTQ life histories (identities and art and rainbow flags, subtle clues, such as photos and books, the certificate on her name change). community, shared experience and memories.
Rijnaard et al., 2016	Previous publications		Literature review	Furniture and personalization, Homelik.; a warm and welcoming environment. Connection to nature, access to outdoor spaces, gardens, and natural views.
Author et al., 2023	Residents, Relatives and staff	Italy	Case study Creation&Interview	Framed Panels. familiar elements (like tables and tablecloths) personal belongings.

4. Findings

In this review, we have organized the information by focusing on how the unique sense of “home” is nurtured, how “home” serves as a link between the past, present and future, and how design can further strengthen this link. It has become clear that the following three elements are important for dealing with the ever-changing state of dementia: 1) a safe space, 2) a small world, and 3) connections.

4.1. A safe space

A safe space is the first element needed to create a social model environment that can respond to the changes of people with dementia. When dangerous events occur or family members become anxious, the activities of people with dementia are restricted, and these restrictions are connected to their own autonomy. Here, we will organize the key elements for creating a safe space and the design abilities, and who should intervene when and how.

4.1.1. Physical Safety

Design must prioritize safety and comfort, reducing physical strain and facilitating daily activities. For individuals experiencing cognitive and physical decline, modifications such as barrier-free environments, grab bars, and non-slip mats ensure secure movement and independence. Safety also alleviates family concerns while expanding possibilities for resident autonomy[20].

4.1.2. Mobility and Accessibility

Safe design fosters freedom of movement while minimizing restrictions. Features like concealed doors, secure windows, and designated paths allow residents to navigate environments confidently. These measures reduce wandering-related risks and enhance quality of life by supporting mobility and activity[20].

4.1.3. Color and Visual Cues

Bright colors, labeled objects, and clutter-free spaces improve visibility and reduce feelings of oppression. Directional cues and strategically placed objects encourage safe navigation, enhancing spatial understanding and comfort[11],[20]

4.1.4. Linear Arrangement

Furniture aligned in straight patterns helps residents organize activities and reduces cognitive confusion. Structured arrangements simplify understanding and interaction with the environment, promoting habitual behaviors and routines[11],[20].

4.2. A Small World

“A small world” where they can be themselves refers to their own identity, memories of the past, or a space in their own cognitive world that they feel comfortable in, the rhythm of their daily lives, and their own world. Here, we will discuss the important elements of their own world-building, the possibilities of its design, and how to create relationships.

4.2.1. Organized Spaces

‘Small, organized spaces’ foster cognitive accessibility by placing essential items within easy reach. Familiar layouts in kitchens and living areas trigger procedural memories, allowing residents to perform daily tasks independently and comfortably[20].

4.2.2. Routines and Triggers

Design elements like bedside lamps, tablecloths, and bedspreads establish daily rhythms without enforcing behaviors. Such spatial and temporal cues promote routine while respecting autonomy[11][20].

4.2.3. Personal Belongings

Integrating personal items—photographs, heirlooms, and furniture—preserves identity and fosters attachment. These objects evoke memories, sustain routines, and maintain individuality, enhancing the home’s emotional resonance [11][21][22].

4.2.4. Historical and Sensory Elements

Commonplace items and sensory details such as smells, textures, and music evoke nostalgic memories and foster comfort. Materials like wood, tactile objects, and familiar sensory stimuli bridge past experiences with present realities, reinforcing emotional well-being[16][21].

4.2.5. Connected Identity

Objects are also important in terms of maintaining one's identity. For example, in the homes of queer older people, photographs, rainbow flags and books showed a range of domestic materialities that signaled clues about LGBTQ life histories, a framed certificate of name change, to more subtle clues, such as photos and books, these object makes people with dementia more themselves[19].

4.3. Connections

Connections with others and new encounters can be triggered by even the smallest of details, such as the angle of a chair or the opening and closing of a door[20]. As elements that make up a sense of home, connections with others and encounters with new worlds are also important elements that shape who we are. Here, we will organize the elements that create connections and how to design them.

4.3.1. Social Interaction and Layout

Furniture placement fosters connection and interaction. Strategically angled chairs and open doors create social opportunities. Memory boxes placed outside rooms support wayfinding and spark conversations, promoting communal bonds[8][13].

4.3.2. Recreational Spaces

Items like playing cards, newspapers, and televisions provide social and leisure activities, encouraging engagement with others and the outside world. Accessible setups enhance comfort and create a homelike atmosphere[3].

4.3.3. Nature and Gardens

Access to outdoor spaces promotes relaxation, sensory stimulation, and a sense of agency. Gardens provide restorative effects, encourage physical activity, and reduce negative behaviors, benefiting both residents and caregivers [13].

5. Discussion

The findings of this review highlight the crucial role of interior design in shaping environments that support individuals with dementia by balancing safety, autonomy, and self-expression. Interior design plays a fundamental role in maintaining cognitive accessibility, fostering identity, and encouraging meaningful interactions. By examining the interplay between spatial organization, sensory stimulation, and personal objects, we can develop more inclusive and responsive design approaches that align with the evolving needs of individuals with dementia.

Furthermore, this study highlights three essential processes in addressing cognitive changes in people with dementia through design: creating a secure space, establishing a small, familiar world where they can express themselves, and fostering both order and meaningful connections with others.

5.1. The construction of a secure space.

A safe space is the first step towards building an environment as a social model for changes in people with dementia. When dangerous events occur or family members become anxious, the activities of people with dementia are restricted [23], [8], which can be transferred to institutions, where safe environments such as grab bars, non-slip mats, and barrier-free environments are ensured, or spaces are provided for easy wheelchair access[11], and the surroundings and the people with dementia themselves can move more freely [8].

A key insight from this review is that interior design serves as a mediator between safety and autonomy. Traditionally, dementia care environments have prioritized safety, often at the cost of personal freedom and self-determination. However, this review suggests that well-designed environments can offer both security and autonomy through thoughtful spatial organization, wayfinding elements, and accessible design features. For instance, spatial zoning can allow for structured yet flexible environments where individuals can navigate freely without excessive restrictions. Features such as contrasting color schemes, clear sightlines, and intuitive furniture arrangements provide subtle guidance while preserving the dignity of residents. In particular, the color and arrangement of furniture and rooms also led to the design of a secure space, and by repainting the space from dark to light colors, the space became simpler, more open, and less oppressive, making it easier to perceive the space and manage the house[11]. The organization of furniture and activity areas also helped people with dementia to better perceive and understand space and behavior[11] [8].

Moreover, sensory design emerges as an essential factor in maintaining cognitive stability. The inclusion of natural materials, soft lighting, and familiar textures can help create spaces that feel welcoming and reassuring. Additionally, multisensory cues such as ambient soundscapes, scents, and temperature variations can reinforce cognitive anchors that assist individuals in maintaining routines and spatial awareness.

5.2. A small world in which they can be themselves.

A central theme that emerged from this study is the importance of personalized spaces that reflect the identity, memories, and lived experiences of individuals with dementia. Traditional care environments often lack the personalization necessary for individuals to feel a sense of belonging. However, interior design can counteract this by incorporating familiar objects, flexible furniture arrangements, and personal artifacts that evoke memories and provide emotional grounding. This is where the small world takes place, deeply connected to personal identities. Photographs, children's drawings, and familiar furniture that people with dementia bring into care environments help maintain a connection to personal histories, evoking memories and providing comfort through past identities, routines, and hobbies. These personal objects also encourage reminiscing, reinforcing a sense of home [22] [7], [24], [6], [3], [3], [21]. Additionally, the strategic placement of familiar items—such as those around a sofa, in the kitchen, on the TV stand, or on a night table—helps organize cognitive understanding and physical movements. This arrangement supports daily ‘physical memories,’ enabling people with dementia to navigate their surroundings more freely by creating their own sense of order[8]. This overlaps with the identity and homemaking practices

explored in this study, where the person with dementia creates their own order by designing their own little world[11]. This order is more smoothly maintained in collaboration with family members, care staff, and others around them[8], [11], and 'physical memory' through tacit knowledge activates the daily life of the person with dementia[24]. Also, in the sensory realm, sensory elements such as warm lighting, radio, and music create a sense of security and create a state or mood[21]. Elements such as materials, shapes and dimensions are also connected to the sense of home and influence the creation of a comfortable space or place[21].

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This act of creation can also power lively activities for people with dementia, and being able to change the color of the walls or drill a hole in a room is proof that the place is for them. Gathering input on a case-by-case basis, not only on individual rooms but also on the arrangement of the space and artwork, respected the residents and enhanced their sense of well-being[3]. On the other hand, they strongly felt that this was not their place due to restricted access to the space and when they did not know if they could move freely[3]. Additionally, findings suggest that the inclusion of adaptive design elements—such as modular furniture, repositionable fixtures, and customizable lighting—can empower residents to modify their surroundings, reinforcing a sense of ownership and engagement with their environment. The ability to make even small adjustments, such as choosing bedding or rearranging personal items, can significantly enhance an individual's sense of control and stability.

5.3. *Connections and new encounters*

Beyond safety and identity, interior design plays a vital role in fostering social connections and enhancing emotional well-being. The spatial arrangement of common areas can either facilitate or inhibit interactions between residents, caregivers, and family members. Open-plan layouts, shared seating areas, and semi-private transitional spaces can encourage casual conversations and reduce feelings of isolation[8]. Games and newspapers can also bring out conversation starters[8] and help residents get to know each other. Television is valued as a way of enjoying leisure time, spending time comfortably, keeping abreast of current affairs, and providing a connection to the outside world[10]. 'Mundane objects from the past' can also support people with dementia to recall memories and draw out their history[15]. This may sometimes be a figure unknown to the family. Just as children were not able to choose the favorite things of people with dementia during their transition to the institution[3], we have surprisingly little opportunity to know what people with dementia value and what things they want to cherish on a daily basis, even though we seem to know about them. At the same time, we also know less about ourselves than we might imagine. Encouraging this kind of new self-discovery is one of the doors that interior design can open.

As Vansteenwinke et al. (2012) explain, humans and objects are interrelated, and through relationships, people understand themselves, others, and the things around them. meaning is personal but also embedded in historical, cultural, social, economic, and other contexts. A balance between autonomy and security is important for individuals to comfortably cultivate their days, both of which can be experienced in different contexts and times. Interaction between people and objects: Meaning is constructed through the interaction between people and objects. People experience the 'outside world' through their senses. A person's body and mind work together to interpret and give meaning to these experiences.

Furthermore, the review also identified the garden as a place combining these three elements. It is a safe place for oneself, elicits creative acts, connects to nature, and changes to the outside world[13], [13]. The role of natural environments is particularly noteworthy. Access to gardens, terraces, and green spaces has been linked to improved mental well-being, reduced anxiety, and enhanced cognitive function. Designing dementia-friendly landscapes with accessible pathways, seating nooks, and interactive gardening opportunities can provide both therapeutic and social benefits. Furthermore, the presence of visual

and auditory connections to nature, such as views of trees, water features, or bird sounds, can contribute to a sense of calm and belonging.

In conclusion, the three processes outlined in this review—the creation of a safe space, a small world where one can express their true self and maintain order, and the formation of new connections and encounters—illustrate a progression from safety to autonomy. "Creation" serves as the bridge between autonomy and self-discovery, allowing individuals to navigate between autonomy and safety.

Furthermore, this review highlights the limited number of design practices involving people with dementia in the actual process of homebuilding. At the same time, the transition from home to institutional care is often abrupt, leaving families and caregivers to make decisions about what possessions to bring, often without knowing what holds the most significance for the person with dementia [23], [21] Weeks et al., 2017). To address this, dedicating time for family discussions to identify and honor the "small world" created by the individual with dementia—recognizing its importance and designing their new living environment accordingly[17]—can contribute to preserving their dignity and ensuring a sense of belonging after relocation. Additionally, to address the lack of information about possible options during this transition, care facilities could establish clear guidelines and tools that outline both limitations and possibilities, improving communication and decision-making for families. While this review sought to explore each of these elements in depth, it relied heavily on a limited number of studies concerning homebuilding, underscoring the broader lack of research and practice in this area. This suggests a pressing need to not only design better environments for people with dementia but also to rethink the entire process of emergent homemaking itself. Expanding the diversity of research is also essential—design should consider how to support physical and cognitive changes while integrating historical, cultural, and personal identities, including sexuality. This shift requires rethinking the transition from home to community as a cultural change rather than merely a logistical one. Future research should further investigate innovative methodologies[18][25] within interior design, such as design research methods, toolkits for understanding dementia symptoms, and decision-making frameworks that prioritize the needs of people with dementia. Additionally, advancing homemaking initiatives could lead to the development of new methodologies that better address the complexities of dementia care and living environments.

6. Conclusion

This review underscores the importance of interior design as a tool for enhancing the quality of life for individuals with dementia. While safety remains a foundational consideration, interior design has the potential to extend beyond basic security measures to actively support cognitive function, emotional well-being, and personal identity.

The three core processes identified in this study—constructing a secure space, fostering a personal small world, and facilitating connections—highlight the different ways in which design influences daily life for individuals with dementia. Future research should focus on developing comprehensive design methodologies that integrate cognitive, emotional, and social considerations into interior environments.

There is also a growing need to explore innovative and interdisciplinary design strategies that merge insights from neuroscience, psychology, and cultural studies to create more responsive living environments. This includes the development of design toolkits, adaptable furniture systems, and digital interfaces that enhance communication, wayfinding, and personalization.

Finally, there is an urgent need for more participatory design research, where individuals with dementia and their families are actively involved in shaping their environments. By shifting from a purely prescriptive design approach to a more co-creative and human-centered process, interior design can serve as an empowering force that honors the dignity, history, and evolving needs of individuals living with dementia.

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