

Article

This Is ‘Home’: Uncovering the Multifaceted Sense of Home via Sensory and Narrative Approaches in Dementia Care

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Abstract

This study examines how the sense of home for people with dementia is shaped not only by physical settings but by dynamic atmospheric compositions emerging through memory, sensation, and everyday practices. Building on a preliminary literature mapping that identified three dimensions of home in later-life care environments—safe space, small world, and connection—we developed a multisensory co-design toolkit combining key-element cards and curated olfactory prompts. The study was conducted in a dementia-friendly residential care facility in Italy. Nine residents with mild–moderate dementia (aged 75–84) participated in two group sessions and six individual sessions, facilitated by two design researchers with care staff present. Data consist of audio-recorded and transcribed interviews, guided olfactory sessions, and researcher fieldnotes. Across sessions, participants articulated “small worlds” as micro-environments composed of meaningful objects, bodily comfort, routines, and sensory cues that supported emotional regulation and identity continuity. Olfactory prompts, administered through a low-intensity and participant-controlled protocol, supported scene-based autobiographical recall for some participants, often eliciting memories of domestic rituals, places, and relationships. Rather than treating home-like design as a fixed architectural style, we interpret home as continuously re-made through situated sensory–temporal patterns and relational practices. We translate these findings into atmospheric design directions for dementia care: designing places of self and refuge, staging accessible material memory devices, embedding gentle olfactory micro-worlds within daily routines, and approaching atmosphere as an ongoing process of co-attunement among residents, staff, and environmental conditions. The study contributes a methodological and conceptual framework for multisensory, narrative-driven approaches to designing home-like environments in long-term care.

Keywords: homemaking; identity; sense of home; dementia; olfactory; multisensory



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1. Introduction

1.1. Time, Memory, and the Multisensory Body

Time and memory are intricately entangled through our sensory experience. The tactile feel of knitting evokes the rhythm of one’s own hands; the sweetness of candy recalls childhood play; a faint scent suddenly brings back the tension of a school exam. Such embodied cues remind us that remembering is not a purely cognitive operation, but a bodily unfolding of time.

The phenomenon of involuntary recollection—often referred to as the Proust effect—shows that sensory stimuli such as smell, taste, sound, and touch can trigger vivid auto-

biographical memories [1]. Although this effect is particularly well-known in relation to smell, it is not limited to olfaction; it can be elicited through all the senses, including visual images of landscapes or the taste of familiar foods. This underlines the fundamentally multisensory nature of memory.

For example, Petratos et al. [2] found that the scent of bubble gum evokes strong childhood nostalgia, which in turn enhances self-esteem and feelings of social connectedness. The emotional resonance of smell may help explain why olfactory elements have historically carried cultural significance in domestic rituals and everyday products. Smell functions as a powerful cue for autobiographical memory, often accompanied by a sense of temporal travel [3,4].

Traces of everyday life appear both within the body and across the lived environment. As Pallasmaa [5] notes, embodied actions such as eating, walking, and conversation leave the most enduring emotional imprints. The home, in this sense, becomes an extension and reflection of the self, an accumulation of embodied traces. It encompasses material, spatial, temporal, and social dimensions that support identity through habitual as well as creative acts [6,7]. Accordingly, the design and maintenance of home involve the discovery of a sensory language and bodily attunement through which belonging and continuity are affirmed. Within this framework, homemaking may be understood as a multisensory design practice in which the living body, memory, and material environment are tightly intertwined.

1.2. Dementia, Temporal Disorientation, and the Atmosphere of Home

People with dementia experience everyday cognitive changes, including confusion regarding time, space, and self-recognition [8]. In such circumstances, the home functions not only as a physical refuge, but also as a temporal anchor that sustains identity and continuity [6,9]. The arrangement of furniture, the presence of familiar objects, and recurring scents can act as powerful sensory cues that reconnect fragmented narratives of self [10]. Research on reminiscence therapy has shown that recalling personal episodes supports the reconstruction of identity and contributes to well-being. Homemaking can be understood as the ongoing expression of identity and preference through personal choices, memories, and sensory responses. For people whose perceptual world is continuously shifting—such as those living with dementia—discovering and creating a broadly defined sense of “home” in their current surroundings can be seen as an active process of transforming their world into a safer, more reassuring place. Gaston Bachelard redefined the house as an oneiric topology: a poetic space where memory builds its nests and resonates beyond intimate, domestic scales. Corners, alcoves, cupboards, and stair landings are not trivial residues; they are condensers of imagination that hold autobiographical time. From childhood onward, the house becomes the site where choices and memories accumulate—where even scratches on the wall are inscribed as traces of existence, layered over time through one’s own will and decisions [11].

From this perspective, the domestic atmosphere can be understood as a multisensory temporal fabric—a site where past, present, and anticipated futures intersect in a living way. Perception of space is inseparable from the flow of time and from the regulation of sensory balance [12]. For people with dementia, restoring a sense of temporal continuity through multisensory design—particularly through olfactory and tactile cues—may foster emotional stability and a renewed sense of self. In this process, nostalgia functions as a psychological resource that supports meaning-making, creativity, sociability, and inspiration [3]. Dementia research has shown that olfactory stimuli can elicit autobiographical memories and positive emotions [13], supporting the therapeutic value of sensory design. Because certain scents have the capacity to transport people back across time and space,

the introduction of smell into care homes and senior facilities can be highly beneficial in promoting social engagement [14]. Smell can thus be conceptualized as an “invisible architecture” that shapes the perception of space and time. It is closely related to the identity of place and to distinctions between authenticity and artificiality, and it carries emotional and mnemonic information [4]. The identities of places, people, animals, and materials are often inscribed through smell. Smell is therefore not merely a chemical signal, but a spatial and emotional structure through which identity is re-experienced.

Building on this perspective, the present study considers smell as one modality within the multisensory atmosphere through which the sense of home is formed for people living with dementia. As part of a broader architectural approach to enhancing the sense of home, we explore how smell can be used to elicit memories of home and the layered episodes associated with it, and how these memories might be translated into homemaking practices and spatial design. To explore the memory worlds of people with dementia, we investigate how scent, color, and images—beyond verbal language alone—can function as multisensory “translation formats” that inform design guidelines and directions for creating home-like environments.

2. Methodology

2.1. Exploring Home Through Multisensory Co-Design

This study examines how individuals with dementia—who experience confusion, apathy, and daily cognitive changes related to time, space, and perception—can actively participate in home-building. It involves creating a toolkit for design participation, developing a novel translation tool utilizing scent-based memory evocation, and exploring a methodology for design. To explore what is needed to elicit the difficult-to-articulate “sense of home” and how to proceed with scent design and planning related to memory evocation, the methodology will be examined through the following process:

1. Literature Review and Preliminary Mapping
2. Tool Design Based on the Literature
3. Semi-Structured Interviews
4. Data Analysis and Coding
5. Evaluation and Reflection

First, we conduct a literature review and preliminary mapping, performing exploratory research on “sense of home”, dementia involving cognitive world transformation, and homemaking. The purpose here is to organize, based on precedents, the approaches used to explore the sensation of “sense of home” within the context of dementia care, while also mapping how the feeling of home is fostered through environmental construction. Subsequently, based on the mapping of sense of home, we will design tools that are easy for people with dementia to understand and can be explored together with care staff and family members. We will then conduct semi-structured interviews using these tools. To explore this more internal, subjective sense of “home” rather than physical space, the focus is on personal experiences, memories, and stories related to home. Emphasis is placed on storytelling and narrative, employing a qualitative, participatory co-design approach involving individuals with dementia, care staff, and design researchers. Scent is also utilized as a sensory medium to explore memory, analyzing how the multi-layered memories triggered by fragrance evoke a sense of home. The purpose of this research is to develop spatial configurations that enable residents to continue their life stories during the transition from home to care facilities through a participatory co-design process, and to support the design of processes that sustain this continuity.

2.2. Preliminary Mapping: Sense of Home

As a starting point for exploring the sense of home in this house, a literature review was conducted as preliminary mapping on the sense of home and dementia care. Using three databases (PubMed, CINAHL, Scopus) and two search tools (Mendeley v2.122.0, Research Rabbit (web-based platform, accessed in August 2024)), primarily searching for keywords related to dementia, then further filtering by keywords: 44 papers using the keyword “Homemaking”, 685 papers using the keyword “sense of home”, 211 papers using the keyword “dignity”, and 44 papers using the keyword “autonomy.” Based on these 984 papers, we scrutinized articles related to interior design, architecture, and home-building, identifying 18 relevant studies. This time, we excluded studies concerning dementia symptoms or activities, limiting the scope to those related to home construction or systematically organizing its elements. While we included studies on safe space design—such as handrails and non-slip mats—already well-established in dementia research, our classification and mapping focused primarily on how environmental design progressed in response to cognitive and physical functional changes. This included research like how advertising posters evoked past memories for apathy [15], the use of rhythms and triggers for physical routines [16,17], and designing layouts that placed comfortable items according to individual preferences [2,7,18,19].

From these, three primary dimensions emerged as central elements for making care environments feel more homelike:

Safe Space: A physical and emotional environment that reduces risk and enhances autonomy. Clear pathways, non-slip flooring, safe furniture placement, and sensory cues contribute to creating an environment where people can move with confidence [2,10,18].

Small World: A personalized environment where one’s sense of self is expressed through daily routines, cherished objects, and sensory stimulation. This includes maintaining daily rituals, integrating familiar possessions, and spatial arrangements that support embodied memory [5,6,15,17,18,20–24].

Connection: An environment fostering social interaction and emotional bonds. Shared spaces, distinctive design elements, and symbolic representations of relationships play crucial roles. The presence of meaningful objects, opportunities for group activities, and access to nature and sunlight support relationships and well-being [10,18,19,25].

These three dimensions were organized as concepts for enhancing sensibility, guiding the development of the survey toolkit used in this study and informing its design. Based on this preliminary mapping (Table 1), we developed a set of keywords related to the “sense of home” and created a “Key Elements of Sense of Home Sheet.” This includes items such as beds, photographs, crafts, plants, televisions, going out, friends, and family. Designed as a simple visual tool combining icons and keywords, this sheet enables intuitive participant engagement and facilitates the verbalization of the individually unique and elusive sensation of a sense of home. This research focuses specifically on the home as a space layered with memory. We examine tool design that draws out personal memories and daily practices constituting individual’s lived world, centering on the concept of the small world within the mapping. Furthermore, we explore how these extracted narratives and sensory cues can be translated toward homemaking. This aims to function as a bridge between narrative inquiry and spatial practice.

Table 1. Mapping of Key Elements to Evidence-Based Design Principles in Dementia Care.

Sense of Home Dimension	Key Elements	Evidence-Based Design Principle	Supporting Evidence
Safe Space	Clear spatial layout and circulation	Reduce cognitive load; support orientation and safe mobility	Environmental gerontology shows that legible layouts reduce anxiety and disorientation in dementia [7]
	Bed, sofa, armchair	Support bodily comfort and affective regulation	Comfort-oriented furniture supports emotional safety and daily rhythm [16,17,26]
	Soft textiles, blankets	Sensory modulation and self-soothing	Tactile comfort contributes to emotional regulation and perceived safety [27]
	Warm, non-glare lighting	Enhance perceptual clarity and reduce stress	Appropriate lighting improves wellbeing and reduces agitation [7,25]
Small World	Personal belongings (books, crafts, instruments)	Support identity continuity through material memory	Personal objects act as mnemonic anchors sustaining selfhood [10,18]
	Kitchen layout, table	Enable continuation of everyday practices	Supporting habitual activities strengthens sense of autonomy and self [16,17,28]
	Colors and textures	Foster sensory familiarity and emotional resonance	Familiar sensory environments reduce stress and support recognition [21,29]
	Smell and music	Trigger autobiographical memory and emotional engagement	Sensory cues—especially olfaction—evoke memory and positive affect [16,17,19,25]
Connection	Family photographs	Support relational identity and social recognition	Visual reminders of relationships foster emotional connection [29–31]
	Shared dining table	Encourage social interaction and co-presence	Communal spaces promote social participation and belonging [32–35]
	Television, radio	Mediate connection to shared culture and wider world	Media provide shared references and continuity with everyday life [7]
	Plants, garden access	Support wellbeing through biophilic connection	Contact with nature improves mood and reduces agitation [29,30,33,34]
	Symbolic objects (profession, hobbies)	Symbolic objects (profession, hobbies)	Symbolic artefacts sustain role-based identity [17,18]

2.3. Designing a Toolkit to Explore the Sense of Home

2.3.1. Element Cards

Based on the literature and the derived categories and their specific elements, keywords related to the “sense of home” were extracted from the broad categories of safe space, small world, and connection. We created a “Key Elements of Home Sheet” containing beds and sofas that form private spaces as safe places, photos, crafts, and identity-related items representing one’s personal world, as well as plants, TV, going out, friends, family, etc., indicating connection and information from the outside world. See Table 1. The sheet uses simple icons and keywords to be easy to understand and encourage participation.

2.3.2. Designing Scents to Evoke Memories

Scent is well-known for promoting olfactory-evoked Proustian memories and multi-sensory recollection. Indeed, unlike other senses, the olfactory system and limbic system connect directly without passing through the thalamus, emphasizing the link between smell, emotion, and memory [3,35]. This direct connection gives olfaction a particularly powerful role in influencing mood, learning, and memory recall. Furthermore, the Proust

effect and the ability of scents to evoke specific memories have been demonstrated. In dementia research, reminiscence therapy is considered effective, and literature on scent-related studies has been compiled [14]. However, while the literature often selects scents like coffee or orange for their association with memory [14], or lavender and rosemary for relaxation, there is little discussion on the actual design or guidelines for creating scents themselves [14]. This study focuses on the points of “sense of home” and memory recall, introducing 10 carefully selected scents categorized into five themes related to “home”, based on a literature review. Eating: Strawberry, Pineapple; Cooking: Almond Milk, Cocoa; Garden: Jasmine, Sweet Olive (*Osmanthus*); Place: Grass, Church; Travel: Taiwan Night Market, Kenyan Soil. These scents (selected from approximately 40 samples) were chosen collaboratively by the design studio and care staff to reflect regionally meaningful cues. Examples include scents associated with churches and the familiar almond aroma of Italian home cooking. For travel scents, the design studio proposed rice and spices—aromas that transport one to another world, evoking the feeling of journeying. To support participants with olfactory impairments, visual images were paired with each scent presentation as an assistive measure. In practice, images and scents functioned synergistically. Each element was mapped to established design principles from dementia care literature (Table 2). This mapping demonstrates how the toolkit aligns with evidence-based strategies addressing safety, continuity of identity, and social connection.

Table 2. Olfactory Protocol.

Scent Category	Selected Scents	Evidence-Based Justification
Food/Eating	Strawberry, Pineapple	Sweet food-related scents are strongly associated with childhood memory, care, and affective warmth
Cooking/Domestic Rituals	Almond milk, Cocoa	Cooking-related olfactory cues evoke domestic routines and relational memories, supporting identity continuity
Garden/Nature	Jasmine, Sweet olive (<i>Osmanthus</i>)	Floral and plant-based scents support emotional regulation and biophilic connection
Place/Collective Memory	Grass, Church-related scent	Place-linked scents support spatial orientation and collective memory, especially in culturally familiar settings
Travel/Trans-local Memory	Taiwan night market, Kenyan soil	Distinctive composite scents trigger episodic and trans-local autobiographical memory

2.4. Participant Recruitment and Selection

Nine participants were recruited from a dementia-friendly community-based residential care facility in Milan, Italy: nine residents with dementia (aged 75–84), two care staff members, and two design researchers. Residents were diagnosed with mild to moderate dementia based on standard clinical criteria. The gender distribution among residents was eight women and one man. The care staff possessed extensive experience in dementia care, ensuring a rich source of practical insights.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

Prior to the study's commencement, all participants received a detailed explanation of the research objectives, their respective roles, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. All personal data was anonymized, and strict confidentiality was maintained. Interviews were conducted with respect for participants' cognitive limitations, avoiding excessive interference. This project was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Politecnico di Milano. Furthermore, this study adhered to Alzheimer Europe's guidelines [36] on consent. Specifically, staff were present during sessions to ensure participants' willingness to participate could be gauged from their reactions and expressions. Participants could easily interrupt the session at any time and return to their room or take a break if they felt discomfort or fatigue. Furthermore, participation in the study was designed not only to require a single written consent but also to allow participants to withdraw at any point during the three-month period they attended the facility if they expressed discomfort or refusal.

2.6. Semi-Structured Interviews Using the Toolkit

Group interviews were conducted in the shared kitchen or in the private rooms of the participating residents. To elicit images and feelings about home, the researcher asked questions such as: "What was your favorite place?", "What does 'home' or 'a safe space' mean to you?", "Why did you like that place?", and "What does 'home' or 'a safe space' mean to you?" To aid memory recall, the researcher used two tools: "Sense of Home Element Cards" and "scents" (Figure 1). Care staff participated in the interviews to monitor for excessive stress in residents and to provide background information. They also supported residents in recalling and expressing their stories. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for detailed analysis. This ensured stories were accurately recorded and could be revisited throughout the design process.



Figure 1. Semi-structured interviews using the toolkit.

Data collection comprised two group sessions (~20 min each) and six individual sessions (~30 min each). The first group session focused on eliciting participants' sense of home and the sensory/affective conditions that supported feelings of safety and comfort,

using semi-structured prompts supported by the key-elements sheet. The second group session focused on olfactory-led reflections, inviting participants to describe what they thought and felt when smelling selected scents. Individual sessions were conducted with care staff present; after a guided scent exposure, participants were interviewed about recalled episodes, emotions, and everyday rituals associated with the scent. All sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and complemented by researcher fieldnotes written immediately after each session (Table 3).

Table 3. Overview of Data Collection Sessions.

Session ID	Duration	Location	Main Focus	Prompts/Materials
G1	~20 min	Shared/common space (facility)	Eliciting “sense of home” and conditions for feeling safe/at ease	Semi-structured questions on home, safety, comfort; Key-elements sheet (icons + keywords)
G2	~20 min	Shared/common space (facility)	Olfactory-led reflections: what participants thought/felt when smelling scents	Curated scents (from the study set); short, guided prompts (feelings, memories, images)
individual	~30 min each	Resident’s private room (or quiet space)	Guided olfactory session followed by semi-structured interview on recalled episodes and meanings	Curated scents; follow-up interview questions (memories, scenes, emotions, routines, relationships); occasional image support when needed

2.7. Data Analysis

We conducted an interpretive qualitative analysis combining thematic analysis with narrative attention to autobiographical “scenes” of home. Data analysed for this paper consisted of verbatim transcripts of semi-structured interviews and guided olfactory sessions, as well as researchers’ fieldnotes written immediately after each session. Although collage work was part of the broader toolkit, it is not included in the analysis reported in this paper.

The unit of analysis was a meaningful narrative segment (episode or scene), defined as a portion of discourse in which participants described places, objects, routines, sensory impressions (e.g., light, texture, smell), affective states, or relationships associated with feeling “at home.” Particular attention was paid to how such segments articulated participants’ “small worlds” through everyday practices and sensory cues.

Analysis proceeded iteratively in three stages. First, two design researchers (the first author and a second researcher) independently conducted open coding on transcripts from six sessions, sampled across both group and individual formats. Initial codes were inductively generated to capture (a) spatial and material elements related to home, (b) sensory and atmospheric qualities, and (c) temporal and relational references. Second, the researchers compared and discussed their coding, refining code definitions through several rounds of dialogue to reach shared interpretive alignment. The agreed coding framework was then applied to the full dataset, with ongoing refinement through constant comparison. Third, codes were clustered into higher-order themes, informed by—but not limited to—the sensitising concepts derived from the literature mapping (safe space, small world, connection). An audit trail of coding decisions and theme development was maintained throughout the process.

To enhance trustworthiness, we employed analyst triangulation through independent coding and consensus-building discussions, as well as comparison across participants and sessions. Care staff were consulted regularly—approximately once per week over a three-month period—in meetings that combined reflection on emerging interpretations with the planning of subsequent activities. In this paper, staff input is used as contextual and plausibility-oriented clarification of daily practices and routines, rather than as validation of participants' subjective experiences. Reflexively, we acknowledge that interpretation is shaped by the researchers' backgrounds in design and by the translation of multilingual materials into English; therefore, we prioritised thick description and verbatim excerpts in reporting the findings.

Finally, translation from qualitative themes to design strategies followed a structured "theme-to-design" procedure. For each theme, we identified (1) the salient micro-environment or routine, (2) the sensory and atmospheric cues involved, (3) the underlying need related to identity continuity, safety, or connection, and (4) a corresponding spatial or atmospheric operation.

2.8. Participatory Design Development

Stories elicited through keywords and scents were analyzed iteratively. Recurring episodes related to desirable environments, emotional triggers, and family memories were transformed into preliminary design concepts and architectural ideas. Through small-scale prototyping and sensory exploration, we gathered feedback on how scent and material qualities contribute to creating a place of comfort for residents. In particular, scent exploration based on the Proust effect and memory evocation enabled access to memories and "small worlds" that are difficult (or impossible) to reach through interviews and questionnaires alone. This research analyzes these processes while aiming to systematize the conversion of insights into design. This paper focuses on the first phase of a broader research program: evoking narratives using multisensory materials and supporting the design of domestic atmospheres. It examines the collection and analysis of narratives and explores the mechanisms by which multisensory materials cultivate specific atmospheres. First, it presents narratives about participants' personal sense of "home" elicited using Key Element Cards, analyzing how these descriptions shape the atmosphere desired for perceiving or creating "home." Next, it examines memory narratives triggered by scent as a multisensory material, discussing how these narratives propose potential spatial configurations. Quotations are presented as anonymized excerpts with timestamps.

3. Findings

3.1. Multisensory Dimensions of the Sense of Home

Across group and individual sessions, participants described "home" as a lived constellation of bodily comfort, meaningful objects and routines, and relational anchoring. Consistent with the sensitising concepts derived from the preliminary mapping (safe space, small world, connection), the findings are organised into four interrelated themes: (1) emotional safety as affective regulation, (2) small worlds as identity-enacting micro-environments, (3) connection as relational and social anchoring, and (4) olfactory recall as a catalyst for scene-based autobiographical narratives.

3.1.1. Safe Space: Emotional Safety, Comfort, and Affective Regulation

Participants frequently defined "home" through bodily states of ease, calm, and rhythmic regulation. Soft furnishings, familiar seating, and places to rest were repeatedly associated with feeling safe and able to "settle" into time.

“My home is the sofa. It is unbelievably comfortable, and when I sit there, I can relax. As I sink into it, I feel as if time is running backwards, and that makes me feel safe.” (P1, 00:06:50–00:06:56)

Residents also described sensory conditions that stabilised everyday rhythms: quiet corners, clear spatial layouts, and access to semi-outdoor environments such as gardens or courtyards. These were not presented as abstract preferences, but as concrete affective affordances that helped them regulate tension and fatigue in daily life.

Notably, emotional safety was also described through self-directed bodily practices and intimate sensory containment. Several participants articulated comfort through gestures such as self-hugging, wrapping themselves in a blanket, or lying down—micro-moments in which they felt most “open”, most themselves, and least pressured by the external environment.

“Holding myself tightly is very comforting. Hugs from staff or family are wonderful, but the feeling of hugging myself is closest to what I think of as ‘home’.” (P4, 00:21:48–00:22:10)

These accounts suggest that for people living with dementia, a sense of home is often anchored in small-scale bodily reassurance: places and practices that enable a stable emotional baseline and a renewed sense of personal continuity in the present.

3.1.2. Small Worlds: Material Memory, Everyday Making, and Identity-Enacting Micro-Environments

Beyond comfort, participants described home as a personally crafted “small world” composed of meaningful objects, routines, and material traces that continued to support their sense of self. Everyday objects—bookshelves, musical instruments, tableware, knitting materials—functioned as memory anchors and as evidence of a life shaped through choosing, making, and caring.

“The bookshelf supported my entire life as a teacher. I built it up with all kinds of books so I could share knowledge with the children, and many memories with them have accumulated there.” (P2, 00:09:22–00:09:45)

Participants repeatedly emphasised spaces they had actively designed or adjusted over time. These environments were not merely backgrounds to daily life; they were described as extensions of agency and preference—places where identity was enacted through practice.

“I adjusted the kitchen for the children. I wanted it to be easy for me to cook, but also to be able to see their faces and chat with them while I was cooking.” (P6, 00:13:01–00:13:34)

Practices of making—knitting, cooking, reading, gardening—appeared as central mechanisms through which participants maintained a sense of selfhood and continuity. In several narratives, the act of choosing materials or colours was described as a form of self-recognition and freedom.

“When I sit on the sofa and knit, I feel like myself. Choosing colours freely and creating something—that is what makes this place my home.” (P3, 00:12:48–00:14:10)

Taken together, these accounts portray small worlds as recurring, micro-scale compositions of objects, textures, and routines through which participants could feel “this is me.” Such micro-worlds were described as personally meaningful not because they replicated a generic domestic aesthetic, but because they condensed autobiographical traces into accessible, everyday arrangements.

3.1.3. Connection: Relational Anchors, Temporal Orientation, and Situated Belonging

In addition to bodily comfort and material memory, participants described the sense of home as a relational and situational condition—one that is sustained through ongoing connection to other people, to the outside world, and to the passage of time. Connection was not limited to direct social interaction, but was often mediated through environmental elements that enabled participants to feel oriented, accompanied, and embedded within a larger world.

Several narratives emphasized connection to the outside environment as a crucial component of feeling at home. Gardens, balconies, plants, and views were described as interfaces through which participants could sense change beyond the interior space. Rather than serving merely as aesthetic features, these elements allowed participants to attune themselves to rhythms of weather, light, and seasonal transformation.

“For me, the garden is a very important element. By watching the plants change every day, the movement of clouds, and the way light comes in, I can feel the changes of the outside world. I would like to place a large tree on a spacious, comfortable balcony and be surrounded by plants I love.” (P3, 00:05:12–00:08:25)

In this account, connection emerges as an environmental relationship: feeling part of a living world that continues to change, even when one’s own daily routines may feel constrained. Access to natural elements enabled participants to locate themselves within broader temporal and ecological cycles, reinforcing a sense of continuity beyond the immediate interior.

Connection was also articulated through temporal orientation and the reassurance provided by perceivable rhythms of time. One participant described a clock as an indispensable element of home, not for its functional necessity, but for its role in making time visible and tangible.

“For me, a clock is an essential element. Watching the hands move and feeling the passage of time is a moment that makes me feel safe.” (P2, 00:03:48–00:04:10)

Here, connection is established not primarily through people or objects as memories, but through an ongoing relationship with time itself. The visible movement of the clock’s hands functioned as a temporal anchor, offering reassurance that time is flowing in an intelligible and familiar way. This suggests that connection in dementia care environments may involve supporting not only social bonds, but also perceptual links to time, change, and continuity. Across participants, connection was thus sustained through a combination of relational cues (family memories, shared routines), environmental interfaces (gardens, balconies, light), and temporal markers (clocks, daily rhythms). These elements enabled participants to feel situated—connected to others, to the outside world, and to an ongoing sense of “now”—even as cognitive capacities fluctuated. In this sense, connection functioned as a spatially and materially mediated condition of belonging, rather than solely as interpersonal interaction.

3.1.4. Olfactory Recall: Scene-Based Autobiographical Episodes and Everyday Rituals

Guided scent exposure elicited vivid, emotionally saturated autobiographical episodes, often organised as concrete scenes tied to everyday rituals. Participants commonly responded to scents by narrating small domestic moments—winter evenings making hot chocolate for children, shared family travel, or seasonal impressions such as grass, sun-warmed earth, and harvest smells.

“The first thing I remember with this smell. . . When the children came home cold, I would make hot chocolate. We often cooked together as a small family and shared dinner.” (P7, 00:24:08–00:24:35)

“This smell reminds me of the time when we often went to Asian restaurants during our travels. . . I went to Taiwan and Tokyo with my family.” (P4, 00:25:13–00:25:35)

“It brings back memories of staying near a ski resort with my family when I was little. . . the smell of grass, the sun, the scent of the harvest—these all recall distant memories.” (P6, 00:26:01–00:26:35)

Importantly, these recollections were not expressed as abstract summaries of the past. Rather, scent appeared to reassemble multi-sensory scenes—light, textures, gestures, social configurations—into a coherent remembered setting. In several cases, participants’ narratives became more detailed and affectively vivid when prompted by smell than in purely verbal prompts during the sessions. This suggests that olfactory cues can provide a distinctive pathway for accessing autobiographical layers that may remain difficult to articulate through language alone, particularly in the context of dementia-related communication changes.

Across the findings, the sense of home emerged through the interweaving of emotional safety, material memory, and connection. Comfort and affective regulation were grounded in bodily rhythms and intimate places of rest (Section 3.1.1); material objects and everyday practices sustained identity through accumulated memories and acts of making (Section 3.1.2); and connection was mediated through relationships with others, with the outside world, and with perceivable temporal flows (Section 3.1.3). Taken together, these findings suggest that home is not experienced as a fixed spatial container, but as a multi-sensory, temporal micro-world in which bodily comfort, autobiographical memory, and relational orientation are continuously re-aligned. For people living with dementia, such micro-worlds provide not only reassurance and familiarity, but also a means of sustaining identity and belonging amid cognitive change.

4. Discussion

4.1. From Multisensory Cues to Homemaking: A Process Perspective

This study explored how the sense of home for people living with dementia is not delivered by a fixed, “domestic” architectural style, but is continuously re-made through sensory, temporal, and relational patterns. Building on a preliminary scoping review that identified three core dimensions of the sense of home in later life—safe space, small world, and connection—the co-design toolkit translated these abstract dimensions into concrete narrative prompts and multisensory materials. The key element cards made residents’ “small worlds” visible. Favorite sofas, bookshelves, knitting corners, or kitchen layouts that allowed one to cook while watching the children all emerged as meaningful constellations of furniture, objects, textures, and activities. These stories confirm that “home” is experienced at the micro-world scale where identity is enacted: spaces that have been designed together with the person, over time, and that accumulate autobiographical traces. In this sense, a small world is not simply a room or a configuration of furniture. It is a recurring composition of light, textures, sound, smell, and activity in which a person can feel, “this is me”, or “here I can truly be myself.” For people whose cognitive environment is constantly changing, as in dementia, the design of such micro-worlds becomes a core strategy for supporting a sense of self-continuity.

4.2. Smell, Proustian Recall, and Narrative Design

The findings on smell show that scent functioned as a catalyst for storytelling and as a key component in how spatial impressions and memories are formed. Consistent with the literature on the Proust effect [1,10,11], the curated scents reliably evoked vivid, emotionally saturated episodes: winter evenings making hot chocolate for children, visits to night markets during family trips to Taiwan or Tokyo, or childhood stays near a ski

resort marked by the smell of grass and sun-warmed earth. Crucially, these were not abstract recollections but scene-bound memories: smell operated as a temporal trigger that reassembled light, textures, sound, gestures, and social relations into a remembered setting. Some of these episodes had never been, or could only very vaguely be, articulated in purely verbal interviews. This suggests that olfactory stimuli can access layers of autobiographical memory that might otherwise remain dormant or unspoken. Narratives, then, are not conveyed through language alone. For people with dementia, memories of home may be more effectively evoked through multisensory translations—smells, images, textures—than through words alone. Home itself can be understood as a container for such memories, shaping a multi-dimensional sense of self. In this study, we framed the key element cards and scents as “translation for-mats”—methods for externalising inner worlds in ways that architects and care staff can work with. Smell can be treated as an architectural material and integrated into at-mospheric design. When tied to specific places, activities, or times of day, scents can function as delicate, recurrent cues that support temporal continuity and emotional an-choring. Small situations imbued with scent thus become a method for spatial self-design: they enable residents to re-enter their own narrative timelines and to re-experience the sense that “this is my life, and it is continuing here.”

4.3. *Designing Atmospheres*

By combining narrative analysis, small world analysis, and olfactory prompts, this study proposes a set of atmospheric design strategies for architects and care practitioners. Rather than specifying universal typologies or stylistic solutions, these strategies focus on how to support individual temporalities, embodied routines, and relational orientations through small-scale, multisensory spatial operations.

4.3.1. Designing Places of Self (Emotional Safety)

Participants repeatedly located comfort, safety, and self-discovery in relation to specific places such as beds and sofas. These were sites where they felt most open, most themselves, and most at ease. Designing with the home-related feelings elicited by the element cards allows designers to identify and shape such personal niches: small-scale places where a person can exist as an individual at the “minimum unit” and feel securely themselves. These findings reinforce the idea that emotional safety is grounded not only in risk reduction, but in bodily comfort, rhythm, and affective regulation, which can be supported through careful attention to posture, softness, enclosure, and rest.

4.3.2. Supporting Material Memory Through Selected Objects (Small World)

Bookshelves, knitting baskets, musical instruments, handmade crafts, plants, and family photographs functioned as material memory devices. Designing a homelike atmosphere therefore involves not only allowing personal possessions, but actively staging them: creating niches, shelves, and surfaces where such objects are visible, reachable, and embedded in daily routes (for example, passing the bookshelf on the way to the dining table). These arrangements support what participants described as their “small worlds”—micro-environments in which identity is enacted through everyday practices and accumulated autobiographical traces.

4.3.3. Designing Connection Through Nature and Temporal Cues (Connection)

In addition to interpersonal relationships, the findings indicate that connection was frequently mediated through relationships with the outside world and with time itself. Elements such as gardens, balconies, plants, changing light, and clocks emerged as key atmospheric devices that enabled participants to remain oriented and connected. Access to nature—through gardens, balconies, or views—allowed participants to perceive daily and

seasonal changes, such as plant growth, cloud movement, and shifting light conditions. These elements functioned not merely as visual amenities, but as relational thresholds that connected residents to a wider world beyond the interior. Designing for connection thus involves ensuring opportunities for quiet observation, sensory engagement, and environmental continuity without requiring active social interaction. Temporal cues, particularly clocks, also played a critical role. The visible movement of clock hands provided reassurance by making time perceivable and predictable. For some participants, sensing the passage of time itself constituted a form of comfort and orientation. This suggests that temporal legibility should be understood as an architectural concern: designing environments that support connection to time through clocks, routines, and sensory markers of daily rhythms.

Together, these findings suggest that connection can be spatially designed by embedding environmental and temporal cues that support orientation, belonging, and reassurance. Gardens, balconies, light, and clocks operate as atmospheric interfaces through which individuals maintain relationships with nature, time, and the broader world—an especially important function in the context of cognitive change.

4.3.4. Home as a Fluid, Temporal Atmosphere

Echoing Pallasmaa's emphasis on embodied action and environmental gerontology's focus on material mnemonics, our data position "home" as a fluid, temporal atmosphere—a living sensory system that links past habits with present affordances and anticipated futures. Home cannot be reduced to an address or a cluster of walls; it is a distributed, repeatedly practised assemblage of objects, gestures, and impressions. This resonates with Van Steenwinkel's notion of the "small world" [16] and with Twigg's work on domestic materiality [9], suggesting that the sense of home is sustained less by physical permanence than by sensory continuity.

4.3.5. Atmosphere as an Ongoing, Participatory Process

Finally, the participatory nature of the process itself indicates that atmospheric design is never complete. Residents' preferences, memories, and sensory abilities change over time. The toolkit—element cards, collages, scents—can be understood as an iterative method for periodically revisiting and adjusting the environment. In this sense, atmosphere is not a static property of a building, but the emergent result of continuous resonance among residents, staff, and spatial conditions. Taken together, these strategies imply that designing "home" is less about reproducing a visual image of a private dwelling than about cultivating small, multisensory worlds in which autobiographical time can unfold safely.

4.4. Methodological Reflections

Methodologically, this study proposes a multisensory narrative toolkit that bridges research and design. It combines: Theoretically informed "sense of home" element cards (safe space/small world/connection), and Guided scent sessions designed to elicit autobiographical episodes. This combination enabled residents to express complex experiences in ways that were meaningful to themselves while also being legible to architects and care staff. Rather than extracting participants' "data" for external interpretation, the sessions functioned as participatory arenas of meaning-making. Residents, staff, and researchers jointly explored what "home" means in the context of the care facility and how this might inform future spatial interventions. This points beyond standard evidence-based design approaches toward a design-oriented format that activates users' perspectives throughout the process, not only at the stage of post-occupancy evaluation.

5. Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, it was conducted in a single dementia-friendly care facility in Italy with a small group of residents diagnosed with mild to moderate dementia. The cultural context shaped both the material environment and the chosen scents (for example, almond as part of Italian home cooking, or church-related smells). Second, olfactory function can be diminished by ageing and dementia. We addressed this by combining scent with visual imagery, and we observed synergistic effects. However, a more systematic assessment of sensory abilities was beyond the scope of this study. Future research should more carefully differentiate between participants with preserved and impaired olfaction and explore alternative modalities (for example, tactile or auditory) when smell is less accessible. Third, this paper reports the first phase of a broader research-through-design project. Our focus here has been on the extraction of narratives and the analysis of atmospheres. The subsequent phase—developing and evaluating full-scale spatial prototypes based on these insights—is ongoing. Rather than aiming for statistical generalization, this study seeks analytical and conceptual transferability, offering design principles and methodological insights that may be adapted to other care settings and cultural contexts. Architectural implications discussed in this paper should therefore be read as design directions and hypotheses, rather than as fully tested pre-scriptions. Finally, as in many qualitative studies, our interpretations are shaped by the re-searchers' professional backgrounds and by the process of translating multilingual material (Italian, Japanese, English) into a single analytical language. While we sought to remain faithful to participants' voices, subtle nuances may have been lost or transformed in this translation process. Future work will extend this toolkit by systematically comparing olfactory prompts with other sensory modalities—such as tactile materials, soundscapes, or temperature—to explore multimodal equivalence and complementarity in eliciting autobiographical memory.

6. Conclusions

This paper has argued that, for people living with dementia, the sense of home arises less from static architectural form than from atmospheric compositions of time, sensation, and relationship. Through a participatory co-design process combining key element cards and olfactory prompts, we showed how residents' small worlds—favorite sofas, book-shelves, kitchens, gardens, and delicate everyday rituals—can be understood as multi-sensory micro-worlds in which identity is continuously re-enacted. In particular, olfactory experiences illuminated the architectural potential of the Proust effect. Scents such as cocoa, grass, and church-related aromas did more than evoke images of the past: they re-assembled entire scenes of domestic life, including light, posture, sound, and social configuration. Smell thus emerges as a subtle design resource for sustaining temporal continuity, emotional reassurance, and a renewed sense of self. Grounded in prior work on safe space, small world, and connection, we proposed several atmospheric design operations: designing places of self and refuge; staging accessible material memory devices; embedding olfactory and temporal micro-worlds into particular corners and routines; and understanding atmosphere design not as a one-off intervention but as an ongoing process of co-attunement. Taken together, these insights suggest that homemaking in dementia care can be understood as a form of atmospheric tuning—a continuous adjustment among body, memory, and material environment. For architects and care practitioners, this implies a shift in focus: from reproducing the visual image of a “home-like” interior to cultivating environments that host individual temporalities and sensory rhythms. The contribution of this paper lies in articulating atmosphere as a designable interface between memory, body, and environment, and in proposing a multisensory, narrative-driven methodology

for architectural design in dementia care. Future work will extend this research through the implementation and evaluation of spatial prototypes based on these findings, comparative studies across multiple facilities and cultural contexts, and systematic investigation of how atmospheric interventions affect orientation, engagement, and quality of life. Even at this exploratory stage, however, our results indicate that designing with small worlds, narratives, and scent can open architectural pathways that support not only safety and comfort, but also dignity, agency, and relational presence in the everyday lives of people living with dementia. This study contributes to architectural discourse by demonstrating how atmosphere, often treated as an intangible quality, can be systematically explored, translated, and operationalized through participatory, multisensory design methods.

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