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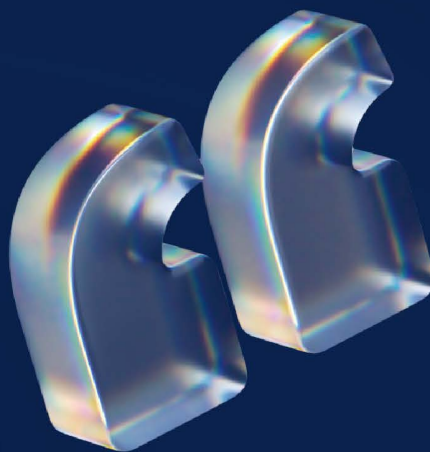
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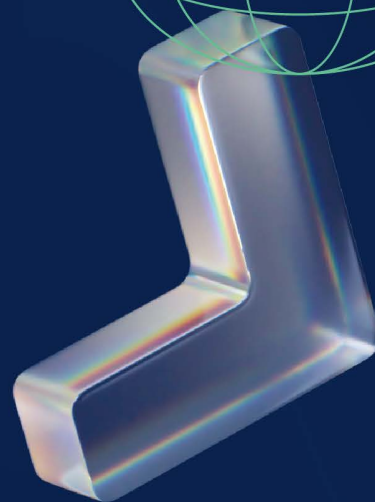
IASDR
2025



Proceedings of

IASDR 2025

11th since 2005, 20th Anniversary



DESIGN NEXT

11th Congress of the International Association of
Societies of Design Research

December 2nd—5th, 2025
Taipei, Taiwan

PROCEEDINGS OF IASDR 2025

EDITORS :

Chi-Yi Chang
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Yen Hsu

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IASDR 2025

11th Congress of the
International Association of Societies of Design Research

DESIGN NEXT

December 02–05, 2025
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"Weaving Home Over Time": Uncovering Layered Narratives of Belonging Through Participatory Homemaking in Dementia Care

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Taipei, Taiwan
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“Weaving Home Over Time”: Uncovering Layered Narratives of Belonging Through Participatory Homemaking in Dementia Care

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What elements make you feel that this is “home”? This study investigates the multifaceted concept of “home” for people with dementia, extending beyond physical shelter to encompass sensory, emotional, and relational dimensions. Drawing on a qualitative, participatory co-design approach at GRACE Lab—a living lab embedded in a Milan dementia village—we engaged five residents with mild-to-moderate dementia, care staff, and design researchers in semi-structured interviews, observations, storytelling, and one-on-one workshops. A bespoke toolkit of icon cards and collage materials was used to elicit personal memories and co-construct individualized “home” narratives. Data coded in MaxQDA24 were analysed through a multimodal narrative lens organized around three core dimensions—Safe Space, Small World, and Connection—each brought to life in participants’ choices of lighting, cherished objects, and shared rituals. From these practices emerged five theoretical insights. Affective Atmospheres revealed how colour, light, and texture regulate mood and foster well-being. Poetry of Activity showed how everyday rituals such as cooking or knitting reconstruct a lived sense of agency. Material Mnemonics illuminated objects as vessels of autobiographical memory. Relational Weaving demonstrated how interpersonal artifacts—family portraits, shared meals—thread together belonging. Finally, Trans-local Home captured home as a mobile, seasonally shifting experience. Our findings validate sensory-driven co-design as a powerful means to reconstitute home for people with dementia and offer a nuanced framework for designing care environments that sustain autonomy, identity, and emotional health. Future work should adapt these tools across diverse cultural and cognitive contexts and integrate interdisciplinary perspectives to refine home-like dementia care.

Keywords: *Homemaking, Identity, Sense of home, Dementia*



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1 Introduction

Dementia affects approximately 55 million people worldwide, with numbers projected to rise (Gauthier et al., 2021). Institutionalized care environments often lead to isolation, depression, and decreased happiness among individuals with dementia (Kitwood, 1997). Cognitive challenges such as confusion about time, space, and self-awareness due to memory loss pose significant difficulties for individuals living with dementia (Gauthier et al., 2021). Memory loss leads to a disrupted sense of self, often resulting in apathy—a state of diminished emotion, spontaneity, enthusiasm, and intellectual curiosity (Godderis, 1992). As dementia progresses, it becomes necessary to move from home to a care residence such as a hospital. However, the change in living environment can cause a loss of the sense of home, leading to confusion, agitation, and disorientation, and often results in a loss of connection with the surrounding environment and people. As a result, many individuals experience feelings of loneliness and anxiety during the transition to a care residence, which can lead to a loss of self-identity. In recent years, efforts to create more home-like environments in care facilities have increased. This reflects the growing recognition that environmental design, including a home-like environment in care facilities, can compensate for changes in cognitive, physical, and perceptual abilities in individuals with dementia and reduce stressful behaviors (Fleming & Purandare, 2010; Zeisel et al., 2003). The concept of "home," characterized by small-scale, familiar settings and everyday domestic activities, plays a fundamental role in dementia care (Van Hoof et al., 2016).

The concept of "home" is multifaceted. It transcends the physical structure of a house and encompasses emotional, spatial, and symbolic dimensions. A home is a material and emotional construct deeply intertwined with an individual's history, social relationships, and cultural norms (Coolen & Meesters, 2011). Home-making is a process where social relationships, materiality, and identity converge (Baxter & Brickell, 2014). Similarly, relaxing at home involves intentionality, physicality, and the ability to act freely and comfortably within a space. This complexity becomes even more important in dementia care. As Van Steenwinkel et al. (2012) argue, even when verbal expression declines, the meaning of home often remains intact in the lived experience of people with dementia. Here, the sensory, emotional, and habitual aspects of home take precedence over rational and linguistic aspects. Home-making is an ongoing act of expressing identity and preferences through personal choices, memories, and sensory responses. For people with dementia, whose perception of the world is constantly changing, discovering and creating a sense of "home" in the broadest sense—a place where they feel safe—is an act of transforming their world into a place of security.

This study aims to explore the complex concept of "home" for people with dementia, which goes beyond physical and material dwellings to include the pursuit of self, relationships with others, and places of security. To this end, we will create tools to elicit and concretize each individual's sense of home. Each person has their own elements and sensations that they value, and each has their own concept of home. Participatory approaches, including co-design, storytelling, and sensory elicitation (use of textures, visual icons, etc.), are useful methodologies for making implicit things explicit. Such approaches are particularly valuable when traditional oral interviews are insufficient. In this paper, we adopt participatory and sensory-driven design research methods to explore how to co-create a sense of home with people with dementia. Based on the theoretical and empirical foundations outlined above, we propose tools and frameworks to support designers, caregivers, and communities in supporting home-making as a dynamic and relational process.

“Before he is ‘cast into the world,’ ... man is laid in the cradle of the house” (Bachelard in Bollnow 2011: 258).

This exploration begins not with bricks and walls, but with memories, gestures, and sensations.

2 Methods

2.1 PIAZZA GRACE

This study adopted a qualitative, participatory co-design approach involving residents with dementia, care staff, and design researchers. The study was conducted at GRACE_Lab, an experimental living lab established by EQUA Cooperativa, a third-sector cooperative engaged in dementia care for the elderly, with the aim of creating environmental solutions for dementia care. GRACE_Lab is located within a dementia day care center in Milan and provides daily care support to elderly people with dementia. GRACE_Lab is an experimental lab consisting of designers/researchers, therapists, medical professionals, and caregivers. PIAZZA GRACE, a dementia village (DV) in Milan, serves as the pilot project for this study.

The study began in June 2024 and involved semi-structured interviews, observations, storytelling, and one-on-one participatory workshops with residents and staff at DV. Designed to explore the internal, sensory, and emotional aspects of "the sense of home" and to co-create tools that support self-expression for individuals with potential limitations in verbal communication, this process focused on eliciting memory and narrative through a multisensory and collaborative design approach. The ultimate goal was to support the continuity of personal identity during the transition to a care environment.

2.2 Semi-structured interviews and toolkit

Data collection took place in familiar and quiet settings, such as communal kitchens and residents' private rooms. Each session lasted approximately 20-30 minutes and was structured around a flexible interview protocol supported by a bespoke toolkit. The interviews explored personal meanings associated with 'home' through questions such as: 'Where is your favourite place in the house?' 'Why did you like that place?' 'What is a safe or restful space for you?' To explore and organise the complex and personal concept of 'sense of home', we developed a toolkit of visual and tangible elements designed to evoke memories and stimulate discussion from the scoping review conducted in November 2024, we identified three main thematic pillars thematic pillars were identified - safe spaces, small worlds and connections (Rijnaard et al., 2016; Falk et al., 2013; Wada, 2024).

We designed the toolkit based on the extracted keywords and elements. First, we created a set of cards based on key environmental and relational elements. The elements were divided as follows: To support memory recall and sensory engagement, two main tools were designed: Sense of Home Element Cards - These cards feature icons representing familiar objects, activities, people, and relationships.

2.2.1 Element Selection Cards

The first tool consists of more than 20 icons classified into four categories:

- Interior: photos, drawings, sleep, entertainment (TV), books
- Activities: gardening, crafts, music, sports, table activities

- Connections: communication, connect (phone/email), news/journals, hugs, games
- Relationships: Family, Friends, Care Staff, Outdoors

These icons are color-coded and designed to be visually clear and tactile for people with mild to moderate cognitive impairment. Participants were asked to select icons that represent comfort, safety, and belonging. Selections were made based on participant preferences, either through physical marking or verbal instruction. The initial card format was designed for physical interaction, but user testing revealed that the structure of the cards was confusing for some participants. As a result, the toolkit was revised to feature an icon-based list that can be marked directly on paper. These icons were designed with perceptual and cognitive accessibility in mind, using high-contrast visuals and simple shapes for easy recognition.

2.2.2 Home Collage Workshop

The second tool is a collage-making session. Participants were provided with the following:

Wallpaper backgrounds (more than 10 types to choose from), furniture cutouts (chairs, sofas, beds, lamps), household items (violins, houseplants, kitchen tools), decorative elements (flowers, lighting fixtures, textures), and activities (cars, books, cooking utensils, art supplies, etc.).

Participants freely arranged these elements to visually construct their ideal home or a home that left a lasting impression on them. In the example shown, one participant chose a calm green background and added a violin, warm lighting, a vintage TV, a soft sofa, and fresh flowers to create a space that resonated with their personal memories of music, comfort, and aesthetic warmth. These were used in one-on-one sessions to allow participants to express what "home" means to them not by directly explaining it, but by constructing a personalized visual space. Objects were provided in a variety of options to allow participants to select them based on characteristics such as softness, hardness, size, and color, while keeping the process simple by limiting each category to 3–5 types, ensuring that participants remained the primary creators of their Homemaking designs.

This design approach functions as a communication tool to evoke memories and preferences, while also serving as analytical material to demonstrate how individuals emotionally and autobiographically connect specific spaces and objects. During the sessions, staff members were present to provide emotional support, interpret expressions, and ensure participants did not experience excessive stress. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for thematic and narrative analysis.



Figure 1. A GRACE_Lab participant arranging icon cut-outs on a personalized collage board to visually construct their sense of home. Source: Author's photograph (2024).

2.3 Recruitment and selection of participants

Nine participants were recruited from a community-based residential facility providing dementia-friendly care. The cohort comprised five residents diagnosed with mild-to-moderate dementia (aged 75–84; four women and one man), two professional care staff with extensive dementia-care experience, and two design researchers. Recruitment was conducted in close collaboration with care staff, who identified eligible residents based on clinical and cognitive considerations and each individual's willingness to participate. Given the sensitivity of discussing family and the "sense of home," the research team consulted staff in advance to review interview topics, safeguard emotional well-being, and prepare appropriate facilitation strategies. Sessions were co-facilitated with staff members to support communication, monitor fatigue, and ensure that participants felt comfortable and safe throughout the process. Participation was limited to individuals who received a clear explanation of the study and provided informed consent. Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

Before participation, all residents and staff received a detailed explanation of the study's aims, procedures, and rights, including the option to withdraw at any time without consequence. Written informed consent was obtained either directly or via a supported-consent process when needed.

Because the topic of "home" can evoke personal and emotionally charged memories, particular ethical attention was paid to emotional safety. The research team worked closely with care staff before and during the sessions to anticipate possible distress, establish verbal and non-verbal cues for pausing or stopping the interview, and ensure a respectful environment for participants' reflections on their homes and families. Staff members were present during all sessions to provide emotional support and interpret non-verbal reactions, ensuring that reminiscence remained a positive and empowering experience.

To protect confidentiality, all personally identifying information was removed during transcription and reporting. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Politecnico di Milano and adheres to the university's guidelines for research involving socially vulnerable populations.

3 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a qualitative and multimodal narrative approach, combining verbal (interviews and field notes) and visual (collages) materials. The analytical framework of this study was grounded in the authors' prior scoping review (Living my HOME: How interior design can enhance a sense of home for people with dementia; Wada, Gramegna & Biamonti, 2025), which synthesized 22 international studies on environmental and emotional factors influencing the sense of home in dementia care. That review identified three recurring dimensions—Safe Space, Small World, and Connections—as central to understanding how spatial, sensory, and social conditions shape belonging and identity. These categories were further refined into subcomponents such as physical safety, linear arrangement, routines and triggers, personal belongings, and social interaction and layout. The present analysis operationalized this framework as the coding schema for the empirical phase, using it to structure participant narratives and visual data collected during workshops.

In the first phase, the literature review findings were operationalized into subcategories:

Safe Space: physical safety, linear arrangement, and perceptual clarity;

Small World: organized spaces, routines and triggers, connected identity, personal belongings;

Connections: mobility, social interaction and layout, recreational spaces, and nature/gardens.

Intermediate categories were positioned between these main domains—Color and Visual Cue (between Safe Space and Small World) and Historical and Sensory Elements (between Small World and Connections)—reflecting the transitional nature of sensory and mnemonic experiences.

These categories formed the initial coding framework in MaxQDA24. Each transcript and collage was coded according to the presence and interaction of these elements. Color-coded visual mapping (see Figure 2) was used to link participant narratives with their selected elements, enabling cross-case comparison. The map also included keywords and emergent concepts that captured abstract layers of experience—such as Affective Atmospheres, Poetry of Activity, Material Mnemonics, Relational Weaving, and Trans-local Home—interpreted as higher-order theoretical constructs distilled from participants' embodied and temporal expressions of "home."

Through iterative analysis, the process moved from descriptive coding (individual elements) to axial coding (relations among spatial, sensory, and social dimensions). Gestures, tones, and spatial arrangements described during interviews were treated as non-verbal data, expanding the multimodal lens to include embodied and affective cues. Finally, a reflection session was held with participants and staff to validate interpretations and ensure ethical and experiential accuracy. This participatory verification enriched the interpretive depth and reinforced the collaborative ethos of the study.

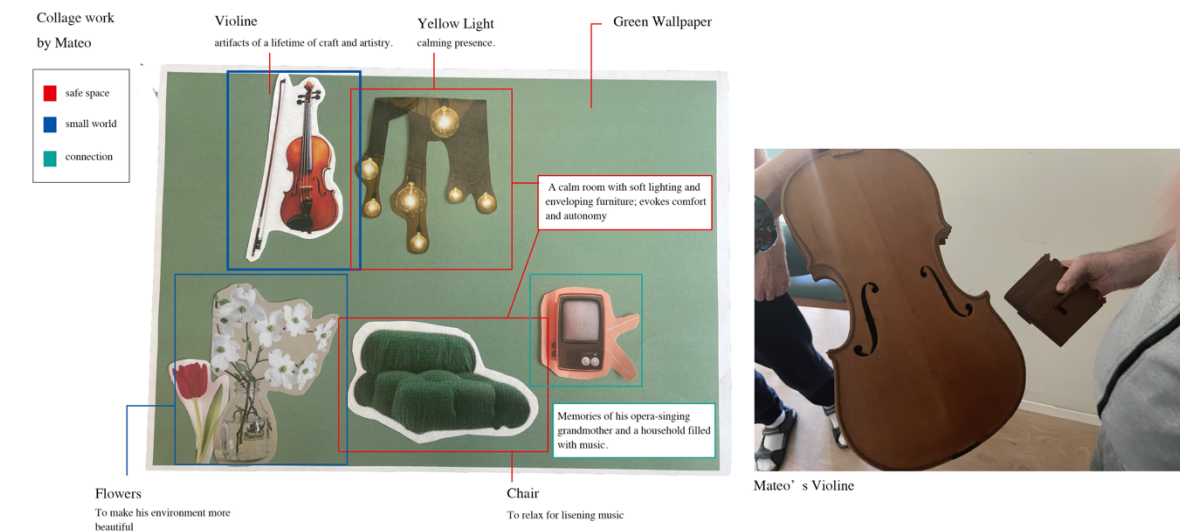


Figure 3. Collage by Anna, with red, blue, and green boxes illustrating Safe Space, Small World, and Connection elements respectively.

For Anna, whose family worked in tailoring, 'fabric' was a symbolic element of her home. 'There was always a seamstress in my house and she was always very busy. I was always very busy, I don't remember it well, but I liked tailored clothes and things, and I surrounded myself with things I liked. The tablecloths in the house, the clothes, the kneelers, every single one of them was tailored by ourselves.' Various people always came to work in the house and spent their free time sewing as well. For Anna, 'cloth' was not just a material, but a sensory memory that was ingrained in her life and a symbol of home. Being constantly surrounded by 'sewn clothes', along with the presence of busy craftsmen and family members, formed a sense of security and familiarity with the space. She also sewed in her own free time, which suggests that touching and tailoring fabric was also a practice of her 'homemaking', which helped her maintain a sense of physical and mental calm and self-expression. In the collage work, she chose the colours and interior design, talked about her family, and at the end, she placed an illustration of the fabric, saying that this was important to her, and her home was completed for her.

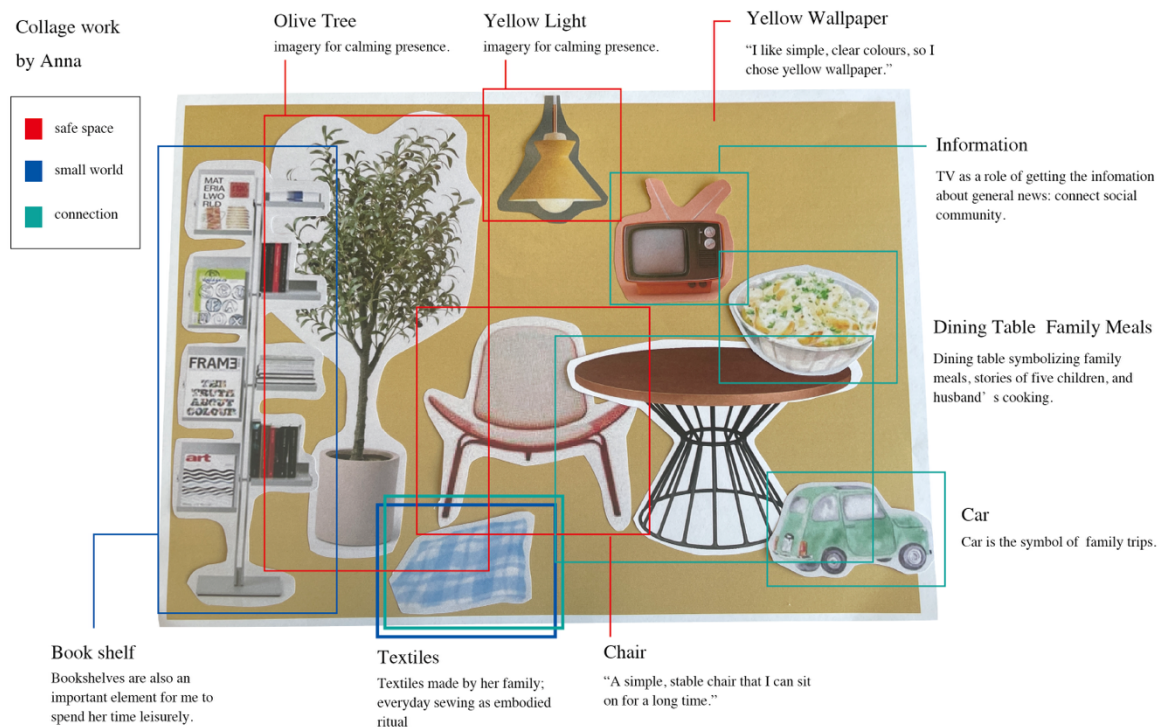


Figure 4. Collage by Anna, with red, blue, and green boxes illustrating Safe Space, Small World, and Connection elements respectively.

4.2 Affective Atmospheres.

During the collage process, Anna chose yellow wallpaper, saying she liked simple, clear colours, and an olive tree, as she wanted something calming. A simple table and chairs were chosen, and a bookcase was also an important element, so a bookcase was placed. Lucia chose the colour yellow, which is bright and symbolises vitality and security, and was used as a visual means to make the house a positive space. The large trees, flowers and coloured artwork placed there were also symbols that supported her sense of spiritual contentment and cosiness. This choice of colour and decoration was part of a 'sensory design for coziness = homemaking', creating a sense of security rather than simply decorative. The colour of this lamp is beautiful and comfortable. The table is simple and big because everyone in the family uses it. And a soft sofa and recliner where I can lie down and relax. I feel at ease when I sit on the sofa with a cup of coffee and a good book. I also want to have plants in the room, so I'll have a big tree and flowers, simple, colourful and cosy, I feel safe in a space like this."

Ilda created a kitchen/living room and a bedroom respectively. The bedrooms are cold, quiet and delicate colours, with armchairs, lights and a TV for relaxing. 'I like music very much, opera is my favourite. I will decorate the room with some beautiful flowers so that I can relax. I would also like some bread.' She then designed the other room with a red background and designed the space with colourful lighting and shelves with books, art and plants, making it a place where people can feel cheerful and socialise. Ilda clearly zoned the space as 'bedroom = static' and 'living room = dynamic'. This regulates emotional and physical needs within the living environment. Colourful lighting and plants evoke positive social interaction, while cold colours and soft light in the bedrooms create a sense of peacefulness. Switching on and off in daily life is made possible through spatial design. The spatial arrangement, light, colour, choice of objects and activities act as a bridge between the memory

of time and the present physical sensation. Through the practice of collage, both aspects of her 'dynamic self' and 'static self' are reflected in the space, which leads to the formation of 'cosiness = sense of home'. Ilda's home was created to be both a place for deepening relationships and a place where the self can be at ease.

4.3 Poetry of Activity

For Lucia, the kitchen, where she cooked, was the place where she felt most like herself and most at home. Cooking and baking were not just chores for her, but an act of creativity, self-expression, and a way to show her love for others. The kitchen was the center of her homemaking and served as a hub that brought rhythm and stability to her life. "In this space, I like photos and art, so I also displayed paintings, and I liked to relax in bed. I like TV, but I didn't want to choose it as something that made me feel at home. News, newspapers, books, knitting, and music. Family and friends." The color she chose, "yellow," symbolizes brightness, vitality, and a sense of security, and was used as a visual means to create a positive space within the home. The large trees, flowers, and colorful artworks placed there also served as symbols supporting her mental fulfillment and sense of comfort. Such choices of color and decoration are part of "sensory design for comfortable living = homemaking," creating a sense of security that goes beyond mere decoration. "The color of this lamp is beautiful and soothing. The table is simple and large because the whole family uses it. I also have a soft sofa and a reclining chair where I can relax. Sitting on the sofa, drinking coffee, and reading a book are moments when I feel at ease. I also want to have plants in the room, so I've decorated with a large tree and flowers, creating a simple, colorful, and comfortable space where I feel at ease." Lucia's choice of a large table and a soft sofa was made with the intention of spending time with others, indicating that relationships with family, friends, and pets are highly important to her sense of home. In particular, while she states that "the TV doesn't make me feel at home," she feels a deep sense of security when "reading books or drinking coffee." Her homemaking exists in the accumulation of daily activities such as cooking, decorating, choosing furniture, gardening, and interacting with her pets, and these, together with her life experiences, give warmth and meaning to her home. Lucia's "home" is not merely a functional living space but a place composed of "creativity," "sensory fulfillment," and "sharing with loved ones," serving as a space that balances "social connections and sensory self-recovery." The collage process itself can be seen as part of her homemaking, visualizing what is important to her, linking memories with current sensations, and creating an imagined future self.

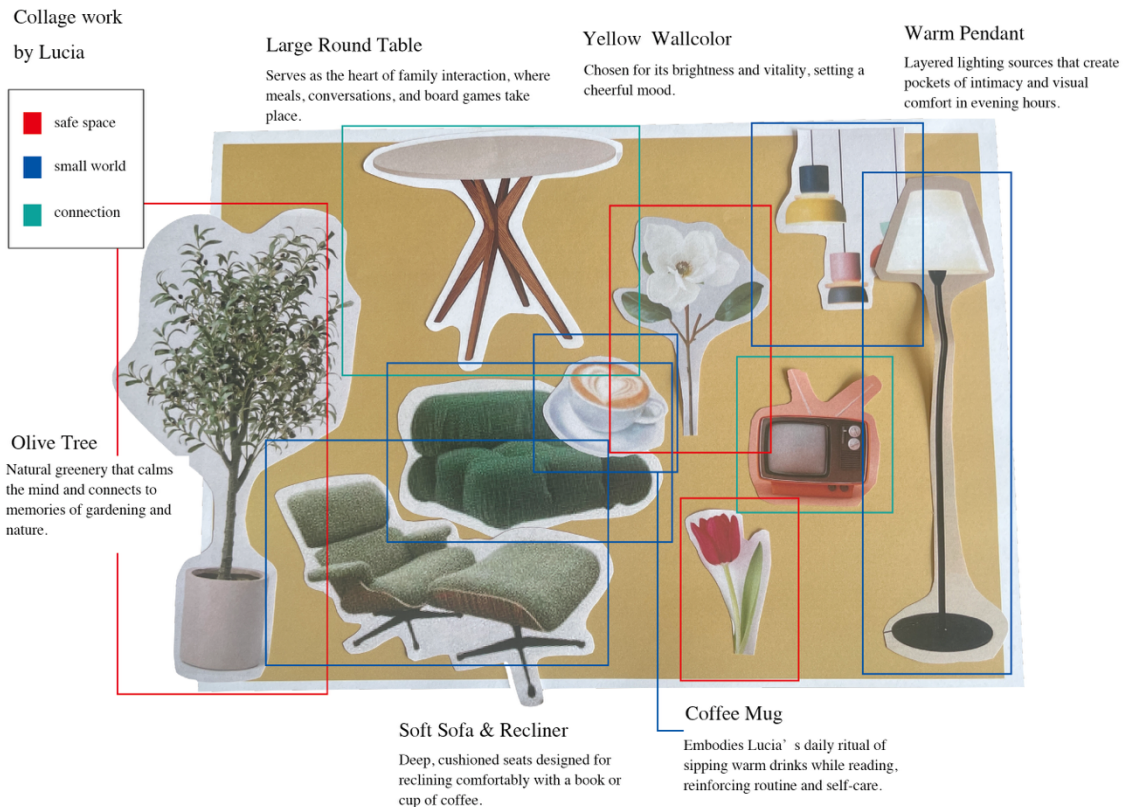


Figure 5. Collage by Lucia, with red, blue, and green boxes illustrating Safe Space, Small World, and Connection elements respectively.

4.4 Relational Weaving

The first thing Ilda would like to choose from the key elements is a table activity. For Ilda, the centre of the house was the table, a symbol of activity, a place that embodied movement, socialisation and connection. Cooking, dancing, conversation and activity all revolved around this place. This is a spatial design that prioritises 'relationship' over 'functionality', and it can be said that the emphasis is on reconstructing and maintaining relationships. Sleeping and music, but I also like to move, so dancing, I guess dancing is a sport. For Ilda, the most important thing is her family. Then there is the family and their relationships, the kitchen where she cooks for the family, social activities and friendships with friends who are connected to the outside world. 'A friend of mine was an artist and she painted a picture of our family. Let me, my husband and my son pose. I find family and friends and the things that come out of relationships beautiful. The 'family picture' she described was deeply meaningful in that it was painted by a friend. The painting is a symbol of memory and connection born of relationships and is an example of the materialisation of the memory of home through visual art. Such symbols have a narrative and cultural weight in homemaking, creating a spiritual depth in the space.

Anna placed an illustration of the dining table on her desk as she talked about her husband's cooking, desserts and a pastry called "cartei". This was an act of visually reconstructing 'important family times' in her memory, suggesting that 'taste' and 'co-eating' also played an important role in sense of home. Anna, who often travelled with her family, talked about her five daughters and sons, leaving the car as another component of the home.

Lucia's choice of large tables and soft sofas were chosen on the basis of 'spending time with someone', suggesting that relationships with family, friends and pets were very important in Lucia's 'sense of home'. In particular, while she states that 'television is not a sense of home', she feels a deep sense of security in 'time spent reading a book or drinking coffee'. Her homemaking existed in the everyday accumulation of cooking, decorating, choosing furniture, gardening and her relationship with her pets, which, together with her life experiences, gave warmth and meaning to the place of home. Lucia's 'home' was not just a functional living space, but a place that was composed of 'creation', 'sensory fulfilment' and 'sharing with someone you care about', and where 'social connection and sensory self-healing are compatible'. The collage process itself could be considered to have functioned as part of homemaking, visualising 'what is important to me', connecting memories and current sensations, and imagining and creating what I would like to be.

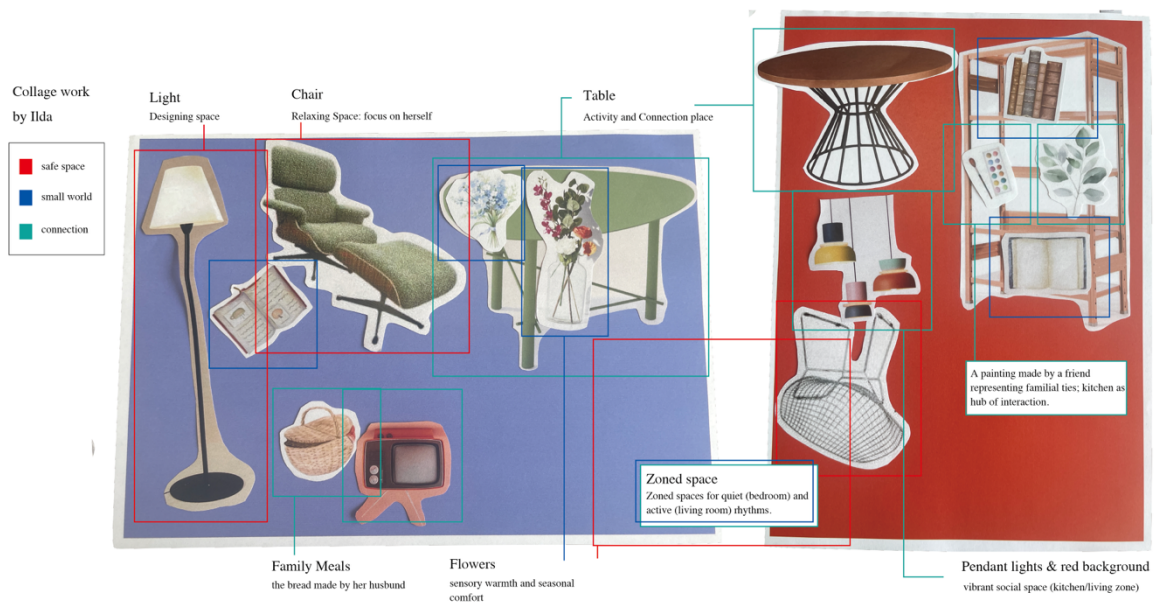


Figure 6. Collage by Ilda, with red, blue, and green boxes illustrating Safe Space, Small World, and Connection elements respectively.

4.5 Trans-local Home

Liina's 'homemaking' was not so much a physical space as a process of creating a 'place to return to' for herself through sensation, memory and affection. For her, home is a place that encompasses a duality of 'moving on and returning' as she moves around her living spaces (her seaside flat and her home in Milan), which change with the seasons. Seasonal sensations and memories are recreated through gardening. The construction of meaning through domestic roles such as daily cooking, organising and dealing with grandchildren. The 'inner world' is expressed through personal expression such as reading, radio and painting. 'I had a dog and a cat and I loved watching them play with each other. I used to spend a lot of time with him and the dogs at the beach. There was a design of home, time and space as shared time with a partner and the reconstruction of attachments that come from past experiences of loss (death of a son, separation from a spouse). 'I always made all sorts of preparations. That is, eating, thinking, cooking, lovingly. There was no garden, just a balcony, but when I was enjoying gardening, I felt that I was back in Milan. I liked novels and reading books. I don't call that often, but my family comes to see me.' The collage work was done on a wall as blue as the sky

and decorated with beautiful flowers. Books that I can always keep close by, a bird instead of a dog, a sofa to relax on and something sweet. I like travelling by car, and the sea.

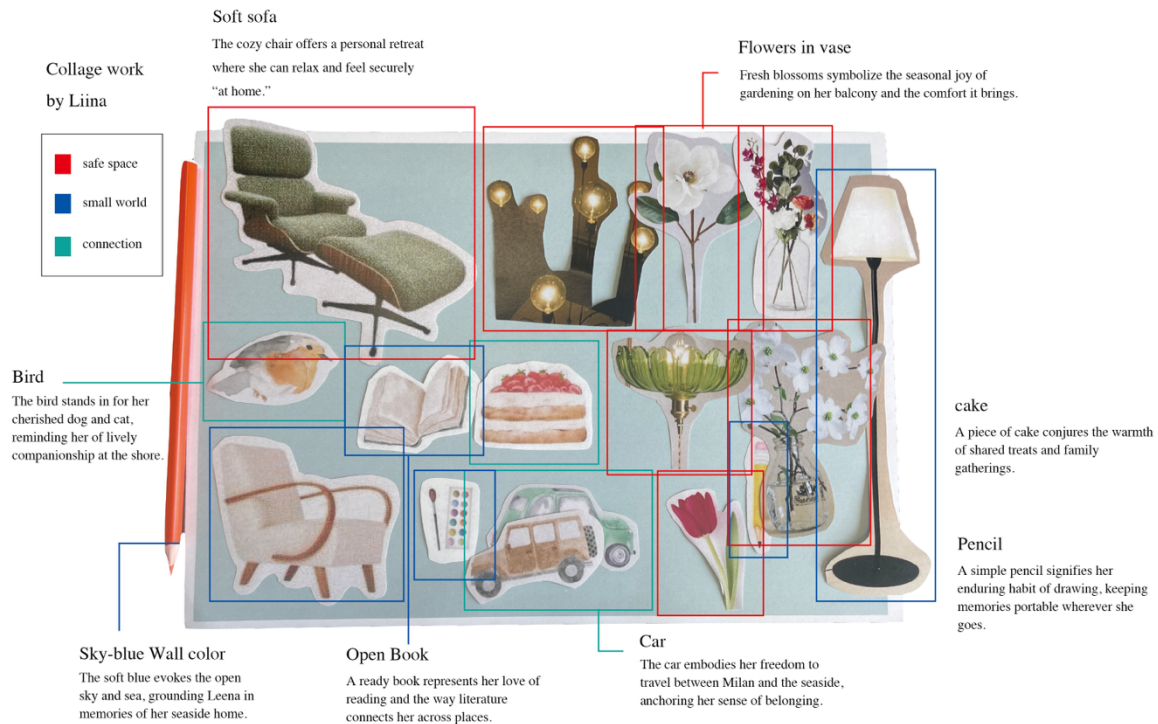


Figure 7. Collage by Liina, with red, blue, and green boxes illustrating Safe Space, Small World, and Connection elements respectively.

5 Discussion

This study explored the multifaceted and deeply embodied dimensions of the 'sense of home' for people with dementia, using the tripartite framework of Safe Space, Small World, and Connection (Rijnaard et al., 2016; Falk et al., 2013; Wada, 2024). Through participatory and sensory-driven co-design sessions, these categories revealed themselves as dynamic, interrelated domains that contributed to a more layered and relational understanding of homemaking in dementia care settings. The research findings highlight how these domains are not fixed typologies, but living processes that unfold through memories, embodied experiences, and affective interactions with the environment.

5.1 Safe Space/Small World/Connection

In prior literature, the notion of Safe Space refers to environments that enhance autonomy by ensuring physical safety and perceptual clarity, thereby enabling individuals to act of their own volition (Rijnaard et al., 2016). In this study, Safe Space was interpreted not only as physical protection, but as the "sense of a body that can move freely and safely." Participants expressed this through design choices that emphasized clear circulation, comfortable furnishings, and soft sensory cues—enabling them to inhabit spaces without fear or restriction. This aligns with Merleau-Ponty's (1958) phenomenology of the body, where movement and perception are inseparable from spatial meaning. Homemaking here is thus not only about inhabiting a room but about re-establishing one's agency

through everyday actions—whether reclining on a soft chair or reaching for a book. Safe Space becomes both a space where one can be and a space that one can make.

Small World encapsulates the intimate and individualized environments that reflect personal history and identity. For participants, personal objects—such as violins, sewing fabric, books, and tablecloths—acted as what Bachelard (1958) called “topoanalysis triggers”, anchoring the self to a material and emotional past. These were not simply memory cues but what Csikszentmihalyi (1981) terms “extensions of the symbolic self.” Participants built personal narratives through these items, forming miniaturized worlds that were at once sensorial and narrative. These 'worlds' became tactile and visual reconstructions of home, enabling participants to articulate memories even in the absence of fluent verbal communication. In this way, Small World functions as a narrative structure embedded in materiality, where the home becomes a projection of selfhood, remembered rituals, and sensorial familiarity.

Moreover, the Connection category encompassed more than interpersonal interactions—it included the emotional fabric that holds together experiences, relationships, and place attachment. Dining tables, family photographs, shared cooking rituals, and even pets emerged as central symbols of connectedness. These relationships were woven into space through spatial design that supported interaction—large tables, soft seating arrangements, and objects with collective significance. The idea of homemaking extended beyond solitary comfort to include co-presence, communal memory, and affective labour. Here, design supported not only function but relational meaning, reconstructing what Blunt and Dowling (2006) define as emotional geographies of home. The home becomes a space of emotional reciprocity, where comfort is co-created through shared narratives and embodied gestures.

5.1.1 Affective Atmospheres: Designing Mood-Regulating Environments

Participants’ choices in colour, light, texture and decoration revealed the powerful role of affective atmospheres in regulating emotion and supporting well-being. Drawing on Küller’s (2009) work in colour psychology and Oborn & O’Mahony’s (2021) discussion of perceptual affordances, we found that environmental elements enabled participants to modulate their mood and re-establish a sense of inner equilibrium. Yellow walls symbolised vitality and joy, green tones evoked calm and rootedness, and soft lighting created emotional intimacy. These findings suggest that design should not only respond to functional deficits but also act as a medium for emotional expression and regulation—a critical component in the everyday life of people with dementia.

5.1.2 Poetry of Activity: reconstructing Safe Space

For many participants, homemaking was enacted through activity—cooking, knitting, reading, or simply sitting with a coffee. These activities served as bodily rituals through which participants reclaimed their autonomy and rhythm of life. According to Merleau-Ponty, action is perception, and in this sense, activities reconstructed space not as fixed architecture, but as lived, moving, affective geographies. Kitchens became spaces of emotional productivity, gardens of seasonal memory, and sofas places of restful self-awareness. Homemaking thus operated as a poetics of daily activity, where routine and autonomy intersected to produce a sense of coherence and stability.

5.1.3 Vessels of Memory: Material Mnemonics: Intersection of objects and memory

Objects such as violins, textiles, photographs and books functioned as vessels of memory—not only evoking personal pasts but also mediating the relationship between self and space. Participants

animated these objects with stories, memories, and emotions, transforming them into mnemonic anchors within their environment. These objects embodied a dual role: they were both reminders and extensions of the self, revealing the intimate link between material culture and personal identity. As Csikszentmihalyi noted, such objects help to maintain a sense of self-continuity, especially vital in conditions of cognitive decline.

5.1.4 Relational Weaving: Interpersonal Objects as Threads of Belonging

The portraits drawn by Ilda's friend, which symbolize her activities, family life, social interactions, and connections, and her memories of her relationships with family and friends, show that objects weave relationships together. Participants visually reconstructed the time they spent with important family members in their memories. This shows that "meals" and "sharing meals" play an important role in their sense of "home." The act of doing something for someone else is also an important factor in shaping one's sense of self and home, and it can be said that spending time with someone and the memories of those relationships are stored in objects and spaces, creating a sense of home. "To understand either humans or the objects with which they live, we must study them in relationship," Chapman (1999: 208–9) writes.

5.1.5 Trans-local Home: constructing a mobile home

Narratives from some participants suggested that home is not bound to a single location but is dynamically reconstituted across time and place. One participant spoke of seasonal transitions between a Milan flat and a seaside home, illustrating what Blunt & Dowling (2006) describe as home mobilities, and what Cutchin (2020) defines as place integration. Through gardening, cooking rituals, or recollections of past travel, home emerged as a recursive structure of belonging—anchored in sensory memory and emotional continuity rather than fixed geography. This notion of a trans-local home invites us to consider how design might support multiple and mobile affiliations, enabling home to be felt rather than simply located.

5.2 Implications for design

This study underscores the importance of participatory and sensory-rich approaches in designing dementia care environments. Based on Foglieni & Villari's (2021) "Participatory Meaning-Making Theory," it demonstrates that design is not a neutral backdrop but an active co-author of identity, emotion, and narrative. Particularly in dementia care, while the need for safe spaces is often considered in home adaptations and care home design, incorporating the concept of a sense of home as a guideline and designing the very process of homemaking—which supports identity and self-cultivation—can provide more people with opportunities to explore and expand their own cognition and world. The accessible toolkit and visual methods developed in this research, while simple, suggest a new direction for environmental guidelines and design frameworks that encompass cultural and personal orientations, as well as each individual's life and relationships. Designers should consider not only form and function, but also the emotional, narrative, and embodied aspects of living—designing environments not for residents, but with residents, enabling them to design for themselves. This allows for the co-creation of safe, personal, and meaningful places. Crucially, it involves cultivating, alongside stakeholders, the understanding that homemaking is a process for discovering and cherishing the self.

5.3 Limitations of the study and future challenges

This study was conducted in the specific cultural and spatial context of a care home in Northern Italy, targeting a small number of residents with mild to moderate dementia. While the findings are rich, generalizing them across cultural backgrounds, stages of cognitive impairment, and linguistic contexts is challenging. Particularly, challenges were observed regarding environmental design for sexual minorities such as LGBTQ individuals and immigrants, including a lack of prior research. Moreover, countless keywords remain to be explored, such as age and gender differences in Homemaking. Future research should investigate the expandability and adaptability of tools across diverse living environments and cultural backgrounds, including the design of collage kits by minority groups. Simultaneously, by integrating interdisciplinary insights from neuroscience, psychology, and cultural studies into the process of exploring culture and history to deepen the meaning of Home, the responsiveness and inclusivity of design strategies could potentially be further enhanced. Regarding implementation in care homes, we propose utilizing this toolkit during interviews conducted when residents move from their homes to care facilities, alongside the use of a simplified toolkit. However, it should be designed as a flexible set that can be adapted in conjunction with the guidelines. While this study primarily employed visual tools, multisensory stimuli like sound and scent could more vividly evoke specific episodes, cultural patterns, and ways of life. Expanding the toolkit to include multilingual support and multisensory prompts could provide more equitable participation opportunities, particularly for individuals with severe cognitive decline or requiring non-verbal communication.

6 Conclusion

This study explored how individuals with dementia express and co-create a sense of "home" through narrative, sensory, and participatory design practices. Based on the narratives and sensory practices of people with dementia, this research demonstrated that the concept of "home" is a space that reconfigures memory, relationships, the body, materiality, and emotion. and "connections" were expanded and deepened through lived experience, revealing more nuanced constructs: "material memory devices" that hold and project autobiographical memories; "embodied making" that reconstructs identity and agency through physical engagement; "atmospheric harmony" that facilitates emotional regulation through environmental cues; and "transboundary homes"—fluid, migratory experiences of belonging transcending time and space. These new concepts underscore the need to rethink "home-making" not as a fixed architectural or institutional task, but as a continuous, relational, embodied practice. This research demonstrates the potential of narrative inquiry and sensory co-design for enabling people with dementia to engage as agents shaping their own living environments. Simultaneously, it calls for rethinking home-making as a designable process embedded within social contexts. It is a process responsive to vulnerability, rooted in personal meaning, and capable of sustaining identity even in the face of cognitive change. Exploring the sense of home means unraveling each person's history and everyday life, and continuously designing one's future within relationships that evolve over time. In this unfolding process, the entirety of a human life quietly comes into view.

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