

The door or threshold is as old as the first shelter. Throughout time men and women disguised or decorated the passages into their homes to ward off danger or evil spirits and to identify themselves to friends. Iconographic sculpture, surrounding entrances to public buildings, told the story of the community to a population that could not read the written word. The door or portal was, in effect, a history book for the community.

Today's literate society relies on words and signs as well to signal identity and ownership. This is particularly true in congregate living situations where the opportunities for individual expression and environmental cues to wayfinding are limited to very precise areas. In a typical facility each door is fundamentally the same as the next.

The practice of placing images and personal articles at the entrance to a resident's room in order to trigger a resident's memory and identify ownership, now becoming quite common in assisted living, alzheimer's care and congregate housing, is restoring an historic convention and use of the doorway as a place to tell a story.

By considering memory, perceptions and experiences, rituals and the reintroduction of narrative or iconographic decoration relating to doors, designers of care settings can create meaningful places, which gently jog the fragile memories of the resident.

Memory & Experience

A doorway is a place, distinct from the room or hall on either side. It may also be a place of refuge e.g.; in a tornado or earthquake people are safest in a doorway. A door presents itself to us as a vertical being. One experiences not only the point of contact, the door-knob, but the entire door. One 'reads' a door with the entire body- who has not come upon a door with a push sign when to the contrary the door and handle

clearly say pull. Many of us have experienced feelings of hesitation at doorways, particularly at the threshold of a patient's room.

A closed door is certainly off-putting, but don't forget that a door may also be imposing or unwelcoming to someone experiencing difficulty manipulating the lockset, often the case for



One of a series of papers addressing issues relating to the design of settings for care. RM SOVICH ARCHITECTURE is a full service architecture firm specializing in the design of care settings and environments for aging and people with special needs.

RM SOVICH ARCHITECTURE, Suite 240, 3600 O'Donnell Street, Baltimore, MD 21224
410.327.7971 <http://rmsarchitecture.com>

an elderly person with diminished wrist strength. A wide door with a glass light is welcoming, while a tall, solid door can be imposing. A low door height, particularly in cases where one must duck to enter, creates a very special, intimate feeling. A large handle on a door in a child's drawing means the door is inviting. A key hole may mean the door is locked, but a locked door may also hold a mystery. (Bachelard, 1964) No wonder that when researchers in an alzheimer's care wing covered door handles with paper blending with the door color patients were less likely to try to leave

through that door.
Ritual

"Numerous rites accompany passing the domestic threshold-- a bow, a prostration, a pious touch of the hand and so on. The threshold has its guardians- gods and spirits who forbid entrance both to humans and to demons and the powers of pestilence." (Eliade, 1957, p. 25)

LOCUS OF MEANING & MEMORY :

Notes on the
nature of doors
and passages in
care settings.

RM SOVICH, AIA

Everyone practices rituals at doorways, often without even realizing it. For example, most people knock and wait for permission to enter another's room at home. Doors are the places for greeting and goodbyes and many of the important events in life occur at the doorway. People decorate the doors to their homes in order to celebrate holidays or communicate life events, such as a childbirth, to the community.

Those of the Jewish faith place an object, the Mezuzah , on each door jamb in the home in order to recognize

the Law and Observation of God every time one passes through a door. It is a commandment that they be placed on every 'post and gate'.

Doors Tell Stories

Portals and doorways are places that historically were surrounded with iconographic sculpture which tell stories. In churches and cathedrals bas relief panels on the metal doors might tell the story of the history of man on earth, the creation myth or the history of religion. At the church of Saint Lazarus of Autun, the relief sculpture over the entrance tells the story of the Final Judgement.

Biography

In the Augsburg Lutheran Home in Baltimore, a panel next to the door of a resident room holds a picture and short biography of the resident. These combined biographies and photographs function on several levels; first, they support the resident's memory, second and maybe more importantly they tell the story of that person's life to the staff and visitors, reminding them of the dweller's humanity. A casual visitor easily finds a topic to strike up a conversation with the resident based on the information on this panel. During a stay in a hospital, or any congregate living setting, people have a need to be seen as human, often care providers see only a disease or ailment.

Please Knock

The Bereavement Counselor at the Joseph Richey Hospice in Baltimore, insists all volunteers knock and ask permission before entering patient rooms. "Wouldn't we knock before entering their house?" she asks. This simple ritual of respect empowers the dweller. Think of a typical hospital experience-how many of the 30 people, nurses, aides, dieticians, therapists and doctors, that enter the average patient room in a 48 hour period knock and ask permission to enter? The modern hospital is a battle ground,

where everyone is too busy for such antiquated rituals.

Ceremonial Front Door

In planning congregate or assisted living housing, along with the ceremonial front door for greeting guests in the lobby, create a side door or porte cochere for the residents to

"How concrete everything becomes in the world of the spirit when an object, a mere door, can give hesitation, temptation, desire, security, welcome and respect. If one were to give an account of all the doors one has closed and opened, of all the doors one would like to reopen, one would have tell the story of one's entire life"
(Bachelard, 1964).

use on a daily basis-just as they might have routinely used their garage to come and go when they lived at home.

Hospice Door

In a hospice, a door to a dwelling room is not merely a product selected from a catalog nor an object of particular style or finish; a door is a place of transition. In planning one should ask-how does the door feel to the touch, how does it create a place and how may that place affect the feelings or emotions of a person experiencing it? In some cases it may provide comfort for the person entering, simply by allowing a space to pause to collect one's emotions before entering. A patient may look toward that door to ease fears of abandonment or in hopes of comfort.

Doors as Living Narrative

Narrative decoration may address the past and future of a place or room, as well as the present. Imagine a resident room doorway with attributes that speak of the life of each person that dwelled in that room. This door would be a living narrative connecting the lives of each successive dweller. The attributes might simply be small colorful handmade ceramic tiles or carved wood panels. Each panel could represent something significant to each individual. The effect of this informal memorial would be a comforting reminder, giving strength in the knowledge each is not alone, others have passed this way before.

Notes:

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