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Architecture_MPS; Liverpool University; Liverpool John Moores University
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SENIOR HOUSING: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES OF RESIDENTS, DEVELOPER, AND ARCHITECT

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INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to understand how senior housing meets the needs of African American elders. We examine how one non-profit provides affordable senior housing by interviewing six low-income African American elders, the developer/manager, and the architect to describe how housing influences the health and well-being of residents.

Saint Paul, Minnesota

Minnesota, with a population of 5.4 million, is the largest state in the North Central U.S. With almost 300,000 residents, Saint Paul is the state capital and is situated adjacent to another large city, Minneapolis. Saint Paul is characterized as more diverse than Minneapolis; 86% of residents have a high school degree, 23% fall below the poverty line, 60% are homeowners, 60% are White, and 16% are African American. The proportion of residents aged 65 years and over is 16% for the state and 9% in Saint Paul.¹

Affordable Senior Housing

The three developments in this study benefit from multiple funding sources, including 202 funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The Section 202 program was created by the Housing Act of 1959 to build appropriate rental housing for moderate and low-income independent older persons. Such housing oftentimes includes support services and safety features. According to Pynoos, Bressett, and McCleskey, “housing providers and advocates have judged ... Section 202 to be relatively successful in terms of high levels of tenant satisfaction, the formation of new friendships, an absence of serious management problems, and the provision of supportive environments.”²

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: PERSON-ENVIRONMENT FIT

A well-established theoretical framework in gerontology, Person-Environment fit (P-E fit)³ has been developed and applied by many researchers to describe and evaluate the fit between persons’ biological and social characteristics, and the built environment. This framework conceptualizes the importance of congruence between users and defines the concepts of balancing resources, deficits, changes in health, and adjustments to living situations.⁴ In this research study, P-E fit served as a framework to develop interview questions and structure the initial coding schemes for data analysis. This study addressed a gap in the literature applying P-E fit among low-income African American elders.

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METHODOLOGY

To recruit participants the researcher worked with trusted advisors in the African American community and snowball sampling. From the total sample, six elders from subsidized rental housing lived in three different HUD 202 properties owned and managed by the non-profit, Episcopal Homes. Initial analysis of data from the elders suggested they felt Episcopal Homes was a place to thrive. This prompted the researchers to delve deeper into understanding how Episcopal Homes developments influence well-being. To that end, the researchers interviewed the developer/manager (CEO) of Episcopal Homes and the architect to determine how design, location, and mission contributed to residents' perception of thriving. This case study describes how well-designed, mission-driven senior housing combined with individual and neighborhood resources supports resilient residents.

This research is guided by a generic qualitative approach defined by flexibility and iteration rather than explicit philosophical assumptions from a single qualitative orientation and underpinned by characteristics represented in all qualitative approaches, such as the objective of providing a deep understanding of a phenomenon from the perspective of the research participants.⁵ The flexibility and iteration in a generic approach may help to overcome frameworks that have portrayed marginalized groups as deficient and fits the transformative-emancipatory paradigm of the research.⁶

Member Checking and Transcription Verification

To increase validity of data, participant member checking better ensures that their experiences are adequately represented. Creswell⁷ encourages member checking of interpreted data, such as themes and patterns. However, Carlson⁸ found that when participants reviewed their actual transcripts, some felt uncertain, embarrassed, and unwilling to continue. Thus, Carlson suggests that researchers summarize narratives and share those summaries with participants. Based on these suggestions, elders were mailed a written summary of their interview to confirm and provide additional comments. Interviews were audio recorded with permission of the participants. Transcriptions of interviews were verified for accuracy in meaning and intent.⁹ Field notes helped in verification and interpretation of contextual aspects of the interviews.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Marshall states, “the process of bringing order, structure, and interpretation to a mass of collected data is messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative, and fascinating . . . it is not neat”.¹⁰ In an effort to triangulate the findings, one researcher focused on analysing data from elders; the other on analysing data from the CEO and the architect. Each reviewed their set of data transcripts by interview question and coded for themes. Next, each reviewed for additional themes across questions and then re-examined the transcripts for deviant cases and comments. After summarizing the themes, the researchers met to compare similarities and differences in themes and exceptions between participants.

FINDINGS

Themes identified in interviews with elder participants are described first, followed by themes from the CEO and the architect. We present themes in descending order of importance, as identified by the elder participants. To emphasize the voices of participants, direct quotes are in italics and centred. Themes included thriving in old age, reciprocal relationships with property staff, and important design and neighbourhood characteristics.

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Elders

The participants demonstrated individual and collective resiliency. They had “made it” and expressed a strong sense of well-being achieved in old age. Later life resilience appeared to be linked to the built and social environment; participants described feelings of empowerment in relation to how housing and staff fit their physical and psychosocial needs. They also described a long-standing sense of community attachment strengthened by their life-long experiences as members of a marginalized group that overcame multiple stressors by building resiliency.

Thriving In Old Age

Participants described a sense of peace, satisfaction and self-actualization realized in old age. When asked what they liked best about their current home, they most often mentioned a sense of peace. They commented,

I'm at peace living here...it's one of the best moves I've ever made for myself.

It's peaceful to me....I'm 84. And I never dreamed [of] the peace...I had to get used to it.

...All I want right now is peace of mind and respect, and I'm fine. So I don't have a lot of overall expectations because, if I die tomorrow, my life has been fulfilled. I have a beautiful family, ... I've worked a long time, I've been around the world. What else can you ask? Now I'm in peace.

. . . Oh, I don't like Los Angeles. I stayed there for too many years, mainly because of them [children], and then mainly because I didn't have enough gumption to just pick up and come back here with family and friends. But I did now. . . . And I came home. I'm happy here. For the first time in my life, I am happy. It's taken 80 years.

Property Managers and Staff

A strong theme that emerged for participants was a feeling of being valued, empowered, and accepted by their property managers and staff; for some this was a new feeling in their lives. Residents from all three Episcopal Homes strongly valued their reciprocal relationship with their property manager and staff. For instance,

I love living here [in Episcopal Homes]. . . . [name omitted] is the best resident manager ever. She's always willing to help anybody; no prejudice; she's just a beautiful person every day, every year.

The most important thing to me is the staff and how you're treated by staff. . . . people here's really interested in your welfare and your care and help, and all of that. [The Property Manager] is the greatest; she really is. . . You don't find many apartment managers like that.

The fact that they're [the staff] interested in us, that makes a big difference.

Some participants combined descriptions of the built environment with descriptions of the property manager and staff:

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I'm comfortable here, it's a beautiful place...the best resident manager anybody would have. She's an understanding person, and you can feel the love from her. Honestly, she gives you a hug and it means so much; that's the kind of person she is; anybody approach her. . . . she's just precious to me because ...[there are] some places where people don't have patience with a lot of people when...they have to deal with different situations. But whatever situation, [it] never changes her.

"Yes, I really like living here. I love my apartment ... the staff here are just beautiful people. And they make it nice; wanting to live here. They're just always there for you."

Good Design

The elders described their homes as well-designed to meet their physical and social needs. Complaints were minimal; common complaints were about a lack of storage and the desire for a walk-in bathtub.

[The homes are] very comfortable and convenient. And the ones that need handicap equipment, they can get it....And you can see how beautiful they are.

I get around really good in my apartment....The way they're made everything is directed towards the needs that you might have.

Very comfortable, well-situated, very good location. Attractive...I've had people say this looks like a four star hotel.

Neighborhood Attachment

The Episcopal Homes building and its design may have played a role in attracting residents. However, it was the attachment to their neighborhood that participants valued more than their beautiful, well-designed homes. Participants described feeling connected to the neighborhood, that their friends are there, and that they valued the diversity. They described importance of neighborhood connections:

... Why take us out of our environment and put us off way out someplace else because that's where you're building the houses....When you build them in our neighborhood, we can stay in our neighborhood.

I like the idea...of it [Episcopal Homes] being here And you're not taken way out somewhere....I think they need to get 'em [these residences] in the neighborhoods, and put people in here that are from the neighborhood, so they can all still be friends.

Racial Diversity in the Community

All of the participants discussed their general experiences with racism. However, they all described that they feel accepted and that there is little to no discrimination at Episcopal Homes. When asked about discrimination in their current home, participants shared the following:

If it [racism] were here, I would address it. And hope that it would be addressed but I have not felt it. I don't expect to feel it, not at this point in time. We have Asian people here, we have Black people here, we have White people here, we seem to all get along, say hello.

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[What] I like best about my neighborhood is the diversity. I grew up in a [diverse] neighborhood...So I like a [diverse] neighborhood."

It's a nice little community...it's versatile...it's pretty well a mixture of people....We learn a lot about other cultures in here because we got some people that don't speak English and we don't speak their language either. But we figure out how to get along and talk.

CEO

The CEO is the developer and he manages the on-site property managers. He joined Episcopal Homes in 1999 with a Master in Business Administration degree and experience working in health care. He described himself as a natural leader. Although he did not articulate it, he appeared confident in his ability to choose collaborators. He expressed admiration for the one architect he worked with,

"Super guy, very helpful, first rate...Obviously he has limitations because 202 is prescribed, but he still finds ways...He does magic.

The CEO described his personal value and family background growing up on a small family farm; "he knows poor." He spoke about his parents to explain how he feels about senior housing and his commitment.

My parents worked seven days a week. When they sold the farm, they got \$60,000. That will not buy a year in a nursing home. . . They deserved quality and dignity, not opulence. So I think about my parents and people like them when I think about what kind of housing to provide.

[Episcopal Homes is] serving the urban core, serving the most in need; that really is just in my DNA. One of the principles we live by here at Episcopal Homes is that diminished income does not mean diminished quality of life.

When asked about changes over time, he mentioned the shrinking of public funds and leveraging twenty-five funders on a project. He highlighted factors that enhance his ability to raise funds: 1. Transit-oriented redevelopment of the urban core with increased density fits and HUD goals; and, 2. Inclusive design and programming that build community across income levels; appealing to foundations. As city staff and elected officials change, he spends time rebuilding networks,

The people I need support from I have to get to know. I am constantly relationship building.

Architect

The architect for all of the Episcopal Homes HUD 202 properties graduated as one of the top five in the class at a top five school. As such, *he stated, "I have a pretty high level of design."*

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He began working at several small firms, but then transitioned to large firms. Twenty-five years ago he started a new job on the same day the firm merged with a firm specializing in senior housing. After one of his first low-income senior projects opened, he received a letter from a resident,

The letter said that it was the nicest place he had ever lived, nice to hear. I have done fifteen 202 projects . . . 202s are fun and simple, making a facility that make a difference for people. When an opportunity is given to you and you take it and run with it.

The architect created a sense of safety for residents in a relatively high crime area. He described design features such as gates and locking doors to keep residents safe and feeling secure.

I am always cognizant of security, but I don't want to overdo it. I think with seniors it becomes secure because there are 50 pairs of eyes watching. In that way, senior housing can help the entire neighbourhood.

When asked to describe his design process, he resisted taking credit for innovation. He talked about the abundance of affordable regulations and guidelines simplifying the design process. However, later when talking about features included in the Episcopal Homes buildings he mentioned adding fun to the design and the challenges of designing accessible kitchens.

Design process on low-income senior 550 sq. ft. units, there is only so much you can do. . . Have to work around guidelines and codes but that's a part of design. Parameters help set design. I have been doing it long enough I can ignore the budget, I know enough it just comes out within the budget. . . Every project we try to do a little nice . . . better . . . we do not want people to walk it and say "This is HUD housing." We are not making a cheap housing project.

It is an impressive ceiling in the community room and I thought what can we do for fun . . . [The] goal is to build something impressive and not 10 ft. ceilings with acoustic tiles. [The ceiling is] also a testament to Saint Paul's willingness to pay for extras. [The] community is more open to a nice building.

DISCUSSION

There were an abundance of positive comments from elder participants about individual property managers and staff, which the CEO reiterated in his goal of hiring great staff. The CEO's leadership value of autonomy and hiring goals were also meeting residents' needs of feeling valued and accepted. According to the CEO,

I work hard to hire competent people with a diverse set of skills and then work hard to create an environment where they can be successful.

Each building seemed to have an individual ambiance and programming that met the residents' needs and linked to their pride in place. The CEO and the architect spent time learning about the neighborhoods, conducting focus groups with potential residents and talking with community leaders. This demonstrated their commitment to recognizing the importance of place for a diverse community, in addition to design and function. For example, one building has an Art Deco façade because a

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community leader wanted it in her neighborhood. The architect explained that he added color not typical in Art Deco because he did not want it to “look like a poor building.” He listened to the community, added his design expertise, and the result is a building called exemplary by local and national housing experts. We feel the exemplary housing comments are the result of the connections of both attractive and functional design, linked with a thorough commitment to understanding and valuing the needs of the community and residents. These linkages were made apparent in the residents’ comments about feeling accepted, connected to place, and thriving.

Finally, participants preferred living in economically and racially diverse neighborhoods that are often overlooked by profit-driven developers. Residents, the CEO and the architect all feel Episcopal Homes is unique and something truly special, in part because of the dedication to building great homes in the community. According to the CEO,

In many ways we have no competitors. I hope it stays that way for a long time. University Avenue . . . crime . . . all the ground along University Avenue is contaminated . . . None of those things are scary . . . you mitigate crime as best you can and build to mitigate noise .

And, as a resident stated,

[Apartments don't need to be] raggedy...because you're in the city. Make them nice, too; just like this one.

The PE-Fit model posits the importance of well-designed and supportive built environments with a variety of challenges will fit many elders and encourage competency. A home with an appropriate level of environmental stress interacts with psycho-social resources. We found multiple indicators of quality of life, familiarity, belonging, and attachment that encouraged individual and collective community resiliency resulting in successful aging in place.¹¹ In this study, the six African American elders, the CEO and the architect achieved their goals to provide the residential ambience, amenities, and inclusive community that helps create peace and a sense of self.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ "St. Paul (city), Minnesota," *United States Census Bureau*, accessed March 13, 2015, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/27/2758000.html>.
- ² Jon Pynoos, Bressette, Matthew, & McCleskey, Sara, "Elderly," In *Encyclopedia of Housing, Second Edition*, ed. A.T. Carswell, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2012), 151.
- ³ Kurt Lewin, *Field Theory in Social Science*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1952).
- ⁴ Frances M. Carp, and Abraham Carp, "A Complementary/congruence Model of Well-being or Mental Health for the Community Elderly," In *Elderly People and the Environment*, (Springer US, 1984); Eva Kahana, Loren Lovegreen, Boaz Kahana, and Michael Kahana. "Person, Environment, and Person-environment Fit as Influences on Residential Satisfaction of Elders." *Environment and Behavior* 35, no. 3 (2003), 434-453; M. Powell Lawton, and Lucille Nahemow., "Ecology and the Aging Process," in, *The Psychology of Adult Development and Aging*, ed. Carl Eisdorfer and M. Powell Lawton, (Washington: American Psychological Association, 1973), 619-674; Heather M Young, Suzanne K. Sikma, Linda S. Johnson Trippett, Judy Shannon, and Bonnie Blachly. "Linking Theory and Gerontological Nursing Practice in Senior Housing." *Geriatric Nursing* 27, no. 6 (2006), 347.
- ⁵ Kate Caelli, Lynne Ray, and Judy Mill. "Clear as Mud": Toward Greater Clarity in Generic Qualitative Research." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 2, no. 2 (2008), 2.
- ⁶ Donna M. Mertens, "Mixed Methods and the Politics of Human Research: The Transformative-emancipatory Perspective." in *Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social and Behavioral Research*, ed. Abbas Tashakkori and Charles Teddlie. (Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE Publications, 2003), 141.
- ⁷ John W. Creswell. "Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches." (2009), 191.
- ⁸ Julie A Carlson. "Avoiding Traps in Member Checking," *The Qualitative Report* 15, no. 5 (2010), 1110.
- ⁹ Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research, Sixth Edition*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2016), 209.
- ¹⁰ Marshall, "Designing Qualitative Research, 214.
- ¹¹ Carolyn Aldwin, and Heidi Igarashi. "An Ecological Model of Resilience in Late Life." *Annual Review of Gerontology and Geriatrics* 32, no. 1 (2012): 120-123.

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