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SHARED LAND, SHARED LIVES

Lessons learned from an
intergenerational case study

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How can “community” be created within a built environment shared by older residents and preschool children?

This resource provides insights on how the places and spaces within a purpose-built intergenerational environment can create meaningful opportunities for older residents and preschool children to interact. We look at how these interactions can provide choices for older adults to interact across a continuum between personal privacy and regular structured intergenerational activities.

The stories we have gathered from a range of stakeholders provides insights into how each sector involved, including aged care, early childhood and architects, can work together to develop the vision and plan to develop this sort of “community”. The report also highlights some best practices recommendation for those wishing to replicate this setting. This report will be of interest to aged care providers, early learning providers, local councils, and architects.

THE COMMUNITY

We conducted an in-depth case study at a purpose-built independent retirement living environment (ECH Aged Care) and a Montessori early learning centre (Echoes Montessori) co-located on a plot of land in Modbury, South Australia.

The site opened in 2021 and includes 77 independent-living apartments across two connected buildings. The total enrolment of students in the ‘Pre-school’ group within the early learning centre is about 48 children with ages ranging from approximately 3 to 6 years old. The average daily number of students in attendance in this class is around 25 as not all the students are enrolled full-time. The location supports structured interactions between older adult residents and preschoolers, for example adults (“grand-friends”) participating with Montessori lessons. Importantly, spontaneous interactions also take place in other shared spaces such as the community garden, and even unexpected places like the lift, foyer and the carpark.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Designing for community (**Finding 1**) involves carefully considering factors like distance between buildings, accessibility and flow; positioning common areas at the core of the space; emphasizing permeability and building around natural elements. Specific types of spaces (**Finding 2**) have been found to help interactions thrive.
- Creating community (**Finding 3**) involves carving out space for different interactions: spontaneous versus planned, co-located versus distant. Physical features can also deepen community (**Finding 4**).
- For teams that seek to deliver similar projects, a mindset of collaborating for community (**Finding 5**) must shape the housing supply chain. Collaboration is strengthened by strong leadership, the tempering of commercial motives, selecting team players who have deep expertise as well as openness to learning, and systematic translation of a broad vision through careful, iterative, participative detailed design processes.

FINDING 1: DESIGNING FOR COMMUNITY

Location/ accessibility

Buildings were kept close, 15-20 meters apart. Continuities in features across different buildings maintained flow and supported transition. Dual entrances in some rooms improved access.

Centrality

The preschool was intentionally positioned “front and centre” to signal to the public that the site was truly a community. The community garden was positioned at the core of the site.

Permeability

Visual and auditory connectivity were achieved through open space, open-air balconies with sightlines to the outdoor play area, extensive use of glass, and garden hedges at half height.

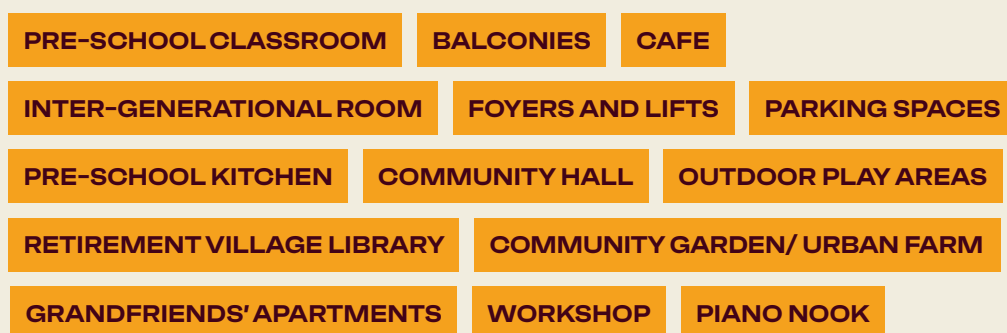
Importance of nature and natural light

The community garden was a locus for interaction. Deeper integration with the park at the rear and with the larger community would have been ideal.

FINDING 2: SPACES FOR COMMUNITY

There are plenty of spaces for structured intergenerational interactions such as the preschool classrooms. Other spaces such as the piano nook, library, workshop (where grand-friends repaired some classroom materials while children watched or assisted) and the intergenerational room support more emergent interactions, allowing different generations to learn from each other in a more casual way.

Both older adults and preschool children appreciated and connected with the green space within the built environment. Green space and light were found to promote social connection not just through shared activities but also through shared views.



“...there’s a small little gallery space right at the edge of the tenancy. I think they call it, the very creatively named, intergenerational room, where there’s two sides to the access. You can come in from one side as a resident or you can come in from the other side as part of the centre. And that’s the room for reading, doing art together, for really some more focused interaction.”

– Interviewee 1

FINDING 3: CHOICE AND COMMUNITY

Individuals within the shared site have a range of interaction types that they can choose. These range from no engagement to structured, ongoing and supervised engagement.

1 No engagement

People on one side of one apartment building do not hear or see children. It is crucial to protect this option for those who want privacy.

2 Passive at a distance

People on their balconies might enjoy listening to, or seeing, children in the outdoor play area, even if they do not directly engage.

3 Active at a distance

People on balconies may wave at children playing in the outdoor areas, or even throw down paper airplanes. These simple interactions have been known to lead to more frequent, deeper interactions.

4 Incidental

People might bump into each other in the lift, parking lot or foyer. Again, these simple exchanges have been known to open up more meaningful interactions later.

5 Exploratory

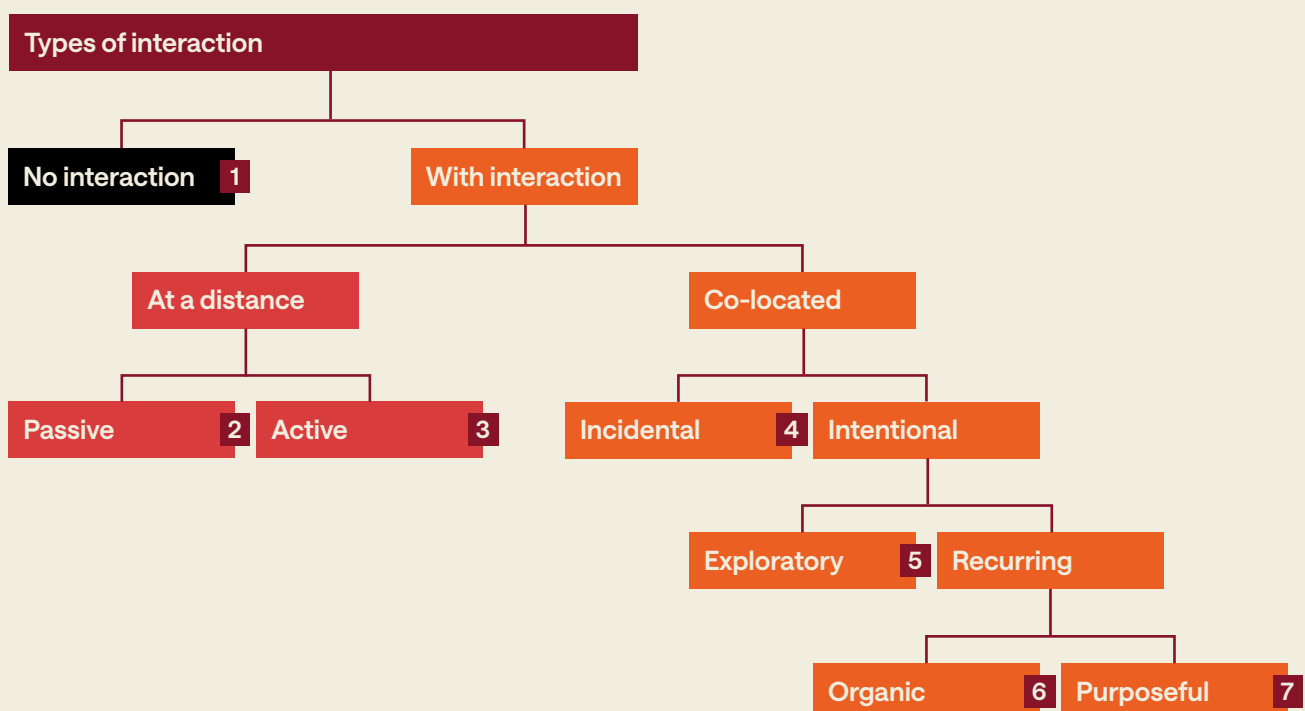
People might want to see what intergenerational interaction looks like, without actually participating, so they observe dynamics through a window or door.

6 Recurring, organic

People meet regularly to garden together.

7 Recurring, purposeful

People meet to participate in a planned activity, for example a lesson in a classroom.



FINDING 4: DEEPENING COMMUNITY

Providing people with choices is important, but ultimately the site's features support deeper, meaningful interactions:

Incidental interactions can become intentional.

“Those little interactions [at the lift] are often then the icebreaker that are needed for that resident to then feel really comfortable approaching us or for us to know somebody's name, to be able to say, oh, hi so and so, and approach them again a bit more proactively next time. So that's been a really nice thing... just that sense of neighbourhood.”

– Interviewee 5

Interactions at a distance can become co-located.

“...they'll look up and they'll see a grandfriend up on their balcony. And the grandfriend might indicate, can you go down to the garden? And then they'll ask the teacher, and all the children will gather and they'll all go down and meet him in the garden and do some gardening. And they know where their grandfriends live. So it's just lovely to see, to know where people live in your community. It's their neighbours.”

– Interviewee 2

Exploratory interactions can become recurring.

“...we also wanted a space where we thought residents might be curious, but might not actually feel yet ready to come in. And so we had a room created that runs off the walkway I guess between the residents' homes and our place that is open at any time. So it's a room that the residents can just come into, and they can actually then see the children working in the classroom.”

– Interviewee 5



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FINDING 5: COLLABORATING FOR COMMUNITY

Project teams seeking to deliver similar intergenerational sites will benefit from the following best practice recommendations:

Visionary leadership supported at multiple strategic levels

The leading organization has a CEO with a compelling track record for innovative solutions and is supported by board members who believe in the vision.

Balanced project environments

Commercial pressures are tempered. When necessary, cycles for expected returns on investment are adjusted.

Early stakeholder involvement

Project stakeholders were meaningfully engaged during early project stages. Input on conceptual design was systematically obtained from preschool stakeholders as “tenants.” Potential concerns of the local council were anticipated and proactively managed.

Synergistic team composition

Team members are experts with deep knowledge on their respective operations, are open minded and willing to learn about domains outside of their specialisations, and deeply share the fundamental values of the project.

Shared project vision and collaborative implementation

Team members own the vision in its entirety, and work in practical ways to implement it. For example, non-technical team members are encouraged to participate in detailed design, even if it means drawing on butcher paper, for architects to translate into drawings.

Communication and cohesion

Team members meet, preferably face-to-face, to develop intimate understandings of their own and others' perspectives of the project. Team members become conversant in the needs and expectations of other parties.

METHODOLOGY

Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with six project team members. We used multi-level analysis to distil key themes and categories from 164 pages of text. Findings were presented at one academic conference, to Montessori partners and to partners at ECH.

RESEARCH COLLABORATION

This study was conducted in partnership with Echoes Montessori and ECH.



For more information on this resource, please contact

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