

'Homes for Life': A critical ecological study of an Independent Living Project

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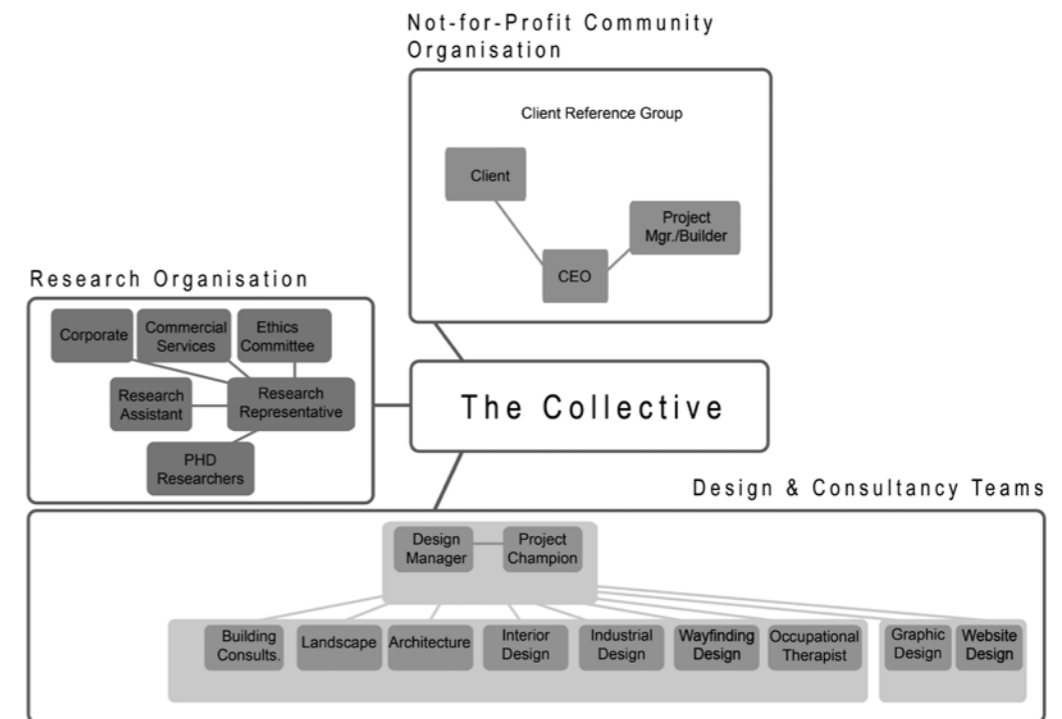
ABSTRACT

In this paper, an 'ecological' lens is applied to an independent living project aiming to provide 'homes for life' for adult children with disabilities. The qualities of the project as ecological praxis are highlighted along with the implications for an open-ended enquiry into ecologies for and of the interior. In terms of the ecological concern for intimate modes of being, interior design is shown to be well placed through its association with environments in which people spend most of their life and through powerful concepts such as 'interiority' and 'home' which link to fundamental existential notions of 'self' and 'identity'. However, despite the interior being a significant generative force, this has not happened to the exclusion of other disciplines. Ignoring territorial urges to claim areas and concepts as one's own, the paper describes how the project has actively encouraged design disciplines to trespass in each other's territories. Ecologies for and of the interior, while recognising the need for discipline emphasis, also demand an integrated and collective approach through what is in effect transdisciplinary practice.

This paper is the outcome of applying an ecological lens to an existing project, the Living in Independent Living Project; a process that highlights qualities of the project's ecological praxis while at the same time informing an open-ended enquiry into ecologies of the interior. As background, the paper provides a description of the project; how it has evolved, how it is organised, and what it is aiming to do. It then identifies key ecological concepts and what they mean when applied to the project, procedurally and substantively. The paper concludes by drawing out the implications for the project as it continues to evolve, as well as what it means for the design disciplines such as interior design that are involved in the project.

THE INDEPENDENT LIVING PROJECT: BACKGROUND

The project involves three organisations working collaboratively to provide housing that enables adult children with disabilities to live independently and, if they choose, remain in their home for as long as possible. These organisations include a not-for-profit community organisation (Kyabra) described here as the NGO (non-government organisation), which is also the builder for the project; a group of design practitioners offering pro-bono design services (Design Action arm of the Design Institute of Australia, DIA); and a university (Queensland University of Technology, QUT) undertaking procedural and substantive research for the project (Figure 1).



Through its community and social enterprise work, the NGO became increasingly aware of the deepening hopelessness and despondency of parents of adult children with disabilities, and what would happen to their children when the parents could no longer care for them as they had done in a conventional home setting. Contributing to this are the numerous barriers that these families face, including: an inadequate public housing system with families being on waiting lists for over sixteen years; little or no funding available for the personal care support needed for independent living; and a private rental market with no accessible or affordable accommodation. As highlighted by a local universal housing design action group: 'current housing designs do not work for many people. Families with children, older people, people with a temporary or permanent injury or illness, and people with disability deserve more'.

At the time of writing there were 52 families known by the NGO, and in the local area, to be in this situation and who had approached the organisation to help identify possible options. In response,

Above
Figure 1. Independent Living Project - organisational structure

the independent living collective was formed and commenced exploring the idea of designing and constructing co-located houses; one that would accommodate the parents and the other son or daughter. Supporting this is examination and development of appropriate care, legal and financial models that ensure continuing tenancy and support for the child when the parent or parents died or can no longer provide ongoing care for their child. The vision underpinning this is one of a 'home for life' regardless of the type or level of disability.

KEY ECOLOGICAL CONCEPTS

For many researchers and theorists, the biological notion of ecology as dealing with relationships between organisms and their environment has provided a way of describing and understanding the transactional nature of human-environment interaction, and for some theorists such as Carel Germain, offers a more organic and dynamic world view than systems theory². As cited in Kemp et al³ from an ecological perspective:

People are viewed as interdependent, complementary parts of a whole in which person and environment are constantly changing and shaping the other⁴.

In Germain's view the key quality is one of interconnectedness which in relation to people and environment involves a dynamic dialectic relationship. This reflects the position of Kurt Lewin who earlier sought to provide an alternative to the dominant individualistic and reductionist view in his holistic proposition that behaviour is a function of person and environment.

Accepting the above position has implications for how we work in and with aspects of our world. Problems need to be recognised as part of a complex web, and attempts to address problems have to be person related as well as environment related. Because of the dynamic nature of the person/environment interaction, intervention has to be intuitive and generative, inclusive and collaborative, with outcomes viewed in relational terms aimed at flexibility and transformation. From an ecological viewpoint, the environment is multi-layered and multi-faceted, it has temporal dimensions as well as being both physical and social. Issues that at first glance appear to be localised will in fact be connected to broader environments, crossing several boundaries, into other areas such as social-ecological justice involving social change and activism. Understanding of the person in this context also demands a preparedness to recognise different yet interwoven aspects: the individual and the collective; the sensing human being as well as the thinking human being; relationships with the environment and other people that are emotional, social and existential as well as physical.

There is however potential danger with applying earlier thinking of ecological theory, particularly in relation to the notion of evolutionary adaptation. As Kemp et al⁵ point out, such thinking '... connotes adjustment to rather than change in environmental conditions⁶. Of particular concern is the assumption that '...successful adaptation equates to health and well-being, and that the

individual who does not adapt is coping less well than the one who does...'. As they go on to point out: '...there are many instances in which people adapt to environmental circumstances they should never be asked to tolerate. Similarly, there is a possibility that failure to adapt may wrongly be attributed to individual pathology or failure rather than to toxic or hostile environmental conditions⁷.

While these limitations need to be considered, ecological theory is useful in reminding us that people are not viewed as passive beings impacted on by the environment but dynamic entities with the relationship being one of reciprocity and mutual accommodation. Added to this is an understanding of the complexity of the environment and of it having extended settings as well as immediate settings⁸. In the following section, the discussion shifts to an application of these understandings to the independent living project. This ecology of practice or ecological praxis will be discussed in two ways: procedurally in terms of the collective itself, how it is organised and how it operates; and substantively with respect to how it engages with the situation at hand, what it understands as the issues, and so on.

ECOLOGICAL PRACTICE : PROCEDURAL APPROACH

The vision of the collective is one of a model of collaboration and housing that is inclusive and sustainable. This aligns with the NGO's vision of fair, sustainable communities that instil hope, embrace diversity, promote safety, and in which all people feel a sense of belonging. Values explicitly proclaimed by the organisation include: social justice; respect; cultural recognition; belonging; participation and inclusion (as enshrined in Human Rights and Disability legislation); self-determination; hope; collaboration; innovation; and accountability. The values of participation, inclusion, and the like, are reflected in the decision to adopt a consensus design approach. In this approach, as first formulated by Christopher Day⁹, decisions are made not on a democratic vote based on individual views but rather through a consensus of something that is beyond but still acceptable to the individual. Based on the writing of Cooley¹⁰, these aspirations of the NGO and the collective, in their concern for intimate modes of being, the body, the environment, and large contextual ensembles relating to such things as the general rights of humanity, provide the basis for an ecological praxis¹¹ and, as will be illustrated, a praxis that is also inherently aesthetic. Citing Grosz¹², Cooley¹³ defines 'aesthetic' as a practice that is 'close, intimate, internal comprehension of and immersion in the durational qualities of life¹⁴'. Ecologies of Practice, then, refers to aesthetic practice that evolves in sympathetic relations, i.e. with an attunement to the process of that practice¹⁵. This is not a new understanding, as acknowledged by Cooley¹⁶ in her references to Henri Bergson^{17, 18} and his reading of ecologies as a condition of always being in-relation, a condition demanding commitment to aesthetic practice¹⁹.

The project described in this paper started as a conversation between the NGO project manager and the research coordinator. Informed by an intuitive appreciation of the multi-dimensional

nature of the task at hand, these people in turn connected with networks they were involved with, attracting other people to form the bones of the collective illustrated in Figure 1. As the project evolved additional people and organisations became involved, including sponsors, suppliers and lawyers. As the collective formed, its complexity became increasingly apparent. Complexity here was seen in relation to, among other things, the size of the group, the heterogeneous nature of the group (different organisations, disciplines, professions, client groups with varying disabilities and family requirements), as well as the nature of the issue itself, associated policy, regulations, and the like. What was developing overall was in fact a dynamic web of relationships involving mind, body, practice, work, community, and the need for flexible inter-relation enabling the potential for change and adaptability²⁰. As pointed out by Cooley²¹, this notion of adaptability links with Gregory Bateson²² and his concept of 'ecological health' involving the readiness for change necessary for survival, as well as to Guattari²³ and what he calls 'ecological' endeavour'.

While attempts were made in the early stages of the collective to control the complexity by formalising and structuring the development, this often proved frustrating and fruitless. It was almost as though the forming process, or more to the point, the becoming process, had its own logic; one that was essentially intuitive, generative, inventive, evolutive and transformative. As the project continues to proceed, project participants are becoming more attune to allowing future direction to emerge from immersion in and acquaintance with the project, which in turn informs a 'sympathetic communication' between the collective and the world beyond the project.

A recent example involves a client family and initial attempts to engage with them and understand their specific needs and aspirations. The family is currently comprised of a mother and father in their early sixties and a daughter (who we will call Kristine) who has lived with them and been cared for by them and a support network all her life. There are also two other adult children who no longer live at home. In order to understand the needs of the family, including the daughter, a meeting was arranged one evening in a meeting room at the NGO's office. The meeting was attended by interior design, industrial design, graphic design and architecture representatives as well as an occupational therapist, the research coordinator of the collective and the design action project manager. It was videotaped with the family's permission. The designers and consultants asked questions of the parents ranging from their understanding of 'home' through to more specific needs and desires (their new 'home' as separate from that of their daughter), as well as Kristine's desires regarding her current and future needs and opportunity for learning and personal growth. The meeting lasted approximately two hours.

Feedback from the family several days later suggested that they found this process a little too confronting and that they needed to know more about the project and be involved in decisions about how they would participate. In response, a smaller representative group of the collective met with the parents at their home bringing them more fully up to date as well as talking about how they would like to participate in the study. Together the group formulated a more inclusive approach,

in the process acknowledging intuitively that our knowing and being were mutually implicated, that it was a project of reciprocal connectedness needing time and the development of trust, and that the family had to be more involved in all aspects of the project. For Fisher & Owen²⁴, this in effect involved a process of 'repairing' identities that had been 'spoiled' through a lack of recognition and stigmatisation in both 'private' and 'public' spheres²⁵. According to Fisher and Owen, this is a process that should involve acknowledging the range of factors (environmental, socio-economic, physical and emotional) that contribute to the stigmatisation. They further postulate that this process can 'act to undermine people's sense of self-worth', which in turn contributes to a closing down of the possibilities for self-transformation and future development²⁶.

The challenge then is also an ethical one of '...pursuing a way of being with and through one's practice, practice which is deeply committed to thinking about the interconnectedness of life and life processes (be they biological or socio-cultural) – and the resulting sedimentations that is the artwork [in this case, the building and associated support systems] in its becoming'²⁷. Understanding the practice as an ethical one, is an idea that connects with Felix Guattari²⁸ and what he describes as 'ethico-political articulation'²⁹.

In terms of the above, the research component plays a significant social justice role³⁰. A deeper investigation of ecological theory confirms the need to make research a dedicated component of the project and for this research to be action-based. This reflects the view that knowledge developed of itself will not be sufficient to change practice or even inform practice, particularly if so-called 'expert' information is inaccessible. The complexity and dynamic nature of person-environment interaction mentioned previously demands that research and practice go hand-in-hand and that the research as well as design practice is participatory and emancipative. 'Actions taken collaboratively with client-consumers to effect change and empowerment provide the crucible within which new insights on fundamental processes of human adaptation and change emerge'³¹. The complexity of the project is also evidenced in its ability to sustain the research of two PhD students; one who is undertaking an interior design-focused phenomenological study, and another who is using critical discourse analysis to understand and contribute to relevant Australian and local housing policy.

Addressing what is sometimes regarded as a dichotomy, the collective also explicitly negotiates the relationship and inherent tension between the individual private and external professional dimensions of those involved in the project, particularly the design and other consultants on the project, all of whom are volunteering their services outside their normal work responsibilities. An aspect of this negotiation is to see these elements as different subjectivities contributing to the identity of the designer or consultant. Fisher & Owen³², citing Stronach et al³³, describe how professional identity itself can be caught between 'economy of performance', that privies policy frameworks, and 'ecologies of practice' that recognise and value experiential knowledge, in particular the affective and relational aspects of practitioners' work. One of the first research activities for the Livingin project was to invite participants to share their experience, motivations and fears in relation

to the project – in the process affirming the value of all aspects of their identity and of the need for the project to ensure that these are recognised and where possible addressed. Owen & Fisher's³⁴ position equates this to awareness of the need to open up spaces for recognition through inter-subjective processes of identification.

The responses provided by the participants began to illustrate how the project could enhance their social positioning by enabling a more positive sense of self through the opportunity to participate in relationships not normally afforded in their everyday practice; an external, public, paid role complemented by an internal, private, unpaid caring role. Many saw the project as a means of developing expertise which would in turn enhance their design their own professional design skill and have wider application beyond the project. Overall, involvement in the project represented a 'calling to social change agency'³⁵ and a 'corporeal generosity' or openness to others.

While the project originally started as a response to the need for adult children with a disability to remain in a familiar home environment when their parents could no longer care for them, it quickly became apparent that this was tied to larger social justice issues. As highlighted by Pike & Selby³⁶:

Problems cannot be understood within a simple cause(s) and effect(s) framework. They are locked into a dynamic, interwoven and multi-layered web in which interaction and relationship are the principle features...³⁷.

In this sense then, what was originally conceived as an extension of usual professional roles changed to recognition of the need for multiple roles; for example, the designer as researcher; the designer as educator; the designer as activist. This recognition of designers and researchers as social change-makers further reinforced the need to undertake this project in a more integrative and holistic way. Further, it highlighted a requirement to accept the need to work from the local to the international, from the small to the large, from the inside to the outside, from a few disciplines to many disciplines, and ultimately iteratively between and across these areas and associated boundaries. One small example of

how this is manifest in the project is by involving designers in all aspects of the house design regardless of their discipline.

SUBSTANTIVE FOCUS

According to Cooley³⁸, the concept of 'ecologies' has several interconnected meanings, including the original Greek reference to it in relation to a 'house' or 'dwelling'. As mentioned previously, the collective decided to use 'home' as a fundamental generative concept. This was considered appropriate for several reasons. First, the longer the children with disabilities could remain in their home the less pressure this placed on hospitals and government-funded institutional care. In this way 'home' is seen as a form of health and social care intervention. Second, 'home' denotes a sense of dwelling, inviting and even demanding a more holistic and integrated approach to the design and provision of housing.

In addition, the collective's approach is at the family and community level as well as the individual level. Unlike traditional interventions and policy that equate independence with self-sufficiency and overlook inter-subjective processes³⁹, the focus for this project is on the individual, family, carers and others as physical, social, emotional and existential support networks. In the context of our project then, the notions of independence and empowerment are understood more as a positive sense of self-emphasis informed by inter-subjective processes, as opposed to the individual moving to being totally autonomous and in control⁴⁰. By taking this position, the approach challenges managerial discourse prevalent in UK and Australian health and disability policy, that for Owen & Fisher⁴¹, gives emphasis to the public sphere and the role of the 'citizen' as a self sufficient individual. This outlook operates at the expense of (in the case of this project) parenthood and the role of 'family' in providing a meaningful life for their children with disabilities; one based on recognition and potential rather than deficiency and stagnancy. In contrast, the project explicitly recognises the private/interior sphere in a relational way with the public/exterior sphere. In all, the project seeks not to find deficiencies within individuals who might be seen as lacking the ability to live independently; preferring instead to recognise the complexity of people's lives,

and the role of family and others in supporting all individuals, regardless of their circumstances⁴². In this respect, it supports a model of citizenship that includes 'an ethic of caring' based on acknowledgement of human interdependencies⁴³ and the development of the 'ecological self'. In contrast, from a psychological perspective, this project regards disconnection as one of the primary sources of human suffering, further supporting 'Western notions of "self" rooted in separation, competition, and unbridled devotion to autonomy'⁴⁴.

Added to this is an attempt to understand Kristine and her disabilities and capabilities in a more holistic way, recognising that aspects of individuality and the human condition (physical, cognitive, emotional and existential) are interconnected, and that an environmental response to one disability may in fact exacerbate the ability to cope with another disability. In this respect, the project explicitly challenges current Universal Design guidelines that fail to recognise multiple and interconnected disabilities, preferring to focus almost exclusively on access and mobility aspects. While research exists about the relationship between disability and the environment, this tends to be somewhat homogenous with little information: '...on the varied experience of disabled persons [sic] within their everyday environments or life-space'⁴⁵. However, of the studies that have been undertaken, what has emerged is increasing recognition of '...the role of the environment in the personal redefinitions that accompany chronic illness [or increasing disability]⁴⁶ and how '...environmental experiences underline and perpetuate social divisions between the able and the disabled [sic]'⁴⁷.

IMPLICATIONS

Reflecting on this project from an ecological perspective, it is now apparent how 'emotional work'⁴⁸ constitutes a significant component of the labour required to develop 'ecologies of practice' but how these also 'involve considerable organisational and practical dimensions'⁴⁹. The challenge then is how to do both things without one impacting in a negative way on the other; but rather informing the other in positive and constructive ways. As believed, the research component of our collective has

a crucial role to play. The action research model, adopted as the umbrella methodology for the project, is well placed for critical exploration and evaluation of the operation of the collective as well as of the substantive aspects and the ultimate goal of effecting social change. The latter will involve explicit investigation into how we can facilitate the designers and other project participants in using their multifaceted identities to, as described by Gardner⁵⁰, navigate complex environments and strengthen integrative change.

Adopting an ecological perspective has highlighted the recurrent interplay of movement and complementarity between:

- hermeneutic and critical interpretative processes
- the whole and the particular of participants' experiences
- the collective and the individual
- the intuitive/emotive/creative and the analytical/intellectual structured
- the context (or scene) and the plot (or action)
- the inner and outer domains
- the strengths and limitations⁵¹

In relation to design practice, the focus shifts to increasing the responsiveness of the physical environment while being cognisant of its connection to other physical environments, the social environment and the potential of all people concerned to learn and grow. Professional intervention is understood to be concerned with: '...(1) liberating, supporting, and enhancing people's adaptive capacities (coping), and (2) increasing the responsiveness of social and physical environments to people's needs'⁵². Ecological theory also highlights the need for 'environmental intervention' to help clients review their environments in order to participate more fully in their shaping and associated meaning making.

Overall, the ecological lens has brought into focus the need to move beyond familiar spheres and build alliances between and across sectors such as environmental and social justice⁵³, and at macro and micro levels, recognising that in many cases there are global forces such as capitalism at the root of social and other

injustices⁵⁴. This is of particular relevance for the Livingin project, and all the design disciplines involved, as it currently grapples with its not-for-profit status while seeking to generate funds through social enterprise activities which ultimately are utilised to sustain the organisation.

What does this mean for a specific discipline such as interior design? With a focus on the ecological concern for intimate modes of being, interior design is well placed through its association with environments in which people spend most of their life, and through powerful concepts such as 'interiority' which link to fundamental existential notions of 'self' and identity. As evidenced in this project, the interior has been a generative force – but not to the exclusion of other disciplines. Ignoring territorial urges to claim areas and concepts as one's own, the project has actively encouraged design disciplines to trespass in each other's territories and experiment with a range of discipline-specific concepts. Ecologies for, and of, the interior while being aware of the need for discipline autonomy, also recognise the many benefits of multidisciplinary even transdisciplinary practice.

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