

ART ON THE WALLS

Evidence for improving dementia care environments

The Project

This project was a partnership between the Fraser Health Authority, Emily Carr University of Art and Design, and the University of British Columbia. Its purpose was to **create art** for people living with dementia, and to **build evidence** of the art's impact for these individuals.

The Art

Emily Carr students created 55 paintings for display at Yale Road Centre, a transitional care facility for recently hospitalized patients who were waiting for admission to residential care. Images included landscapes and structures, activities, abstract patterns, animals, and food.

The Research

UBC researchers conducted conversational-style interviews with ten residents who had dementia. The interviews were organized as a kind of “gallery tour” where residents were asked about the art and how it made them feel. These conversations were recorded and analysed to answer two questions: (1) ***did the paintings help residents with dementia orient themselves in the environment?*** and (2) ***did they find the paintings emotionally and socially engaging?***



“I was thinking it looks like Hawaii, but it should have a palm tree. I want to go back to Hawaii. My sister lives there.”



“The horse. I’d like to get up on its back and ride it. I’ve been riding horseback since I was two years old.”



“It makes me feel like getting out of here so I could see the actual flowers.”

Findings

Remembering the Past and Imagining the Future: In the context of transitional care, the art served as a bridge, evoking stories from the residents’ past and prompting them to consider hopeful possibilities for their future. Many of the conversations were about travel, freedom, and a desire to be elsewhere.

Landmarks and Way Stations: The paintings acted as distinguishing cues for residents. This was particularly important for those with impaired mobility who used the paintings as resting places along the facility’s long halls.

Engaging a Critical Voice: Residents were intrigued by the paintings, and when asked, were eager to share their opinions. The abstract patterns elicited some of the most interesting conversations as people felt free to imagine whatever possibilities emerged for them in the moment.

Places of Dialogue: The paintings created places where people could come together to talk, exchanging ideas and opinions, feelings and perceptions. The staff noted that the paintings provided a focus for “real conversations” that allowed them to know the residents better.

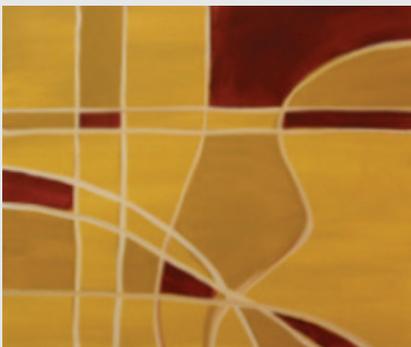
Conclusions

The paintings helped orient the residents to time and place by prompting them to reflect on how they were living in a kind of “no-place”, in-between the stories from their past and those of an uncertain future.

- While there was no clear evidence to support the idea that art helped with way finding, for some residents the paintings served as a kind of landmark, providing meaningful resting places in an otherwise aesthetically impoverished environment.
- The paintings engaged residents’ emotional responses in many different ways, with the interviews providing opportunity for their critical voice to be heard. While it was not always easy to get an immediate sense of what people were trying to say, these conversations are themselves probably the most important finding from the study.
- The paintings, and particularly the landscapes and abstract patterns, invited richly detailed stories and provided meaningful social connections as people shared their ideas, opinions, feelings and perceptions.

Implications

- This project provides evidence that art makes a positive difference in the lives of people with dementia who are living in care. It creates a sense of place and is a focus for social and emotional connection.
- These findings challenge the assumption that art in dementia care environments must be “safe” and “easy to read”. Abstract patterns are particularly engaging for people with dementia. The extent to which residents participated in these conversations demonstrates that people with dementia could and should play a more active role in engaging with art in care facilities.
- It is time to consider how people with dementia can be better involved in decisions around the selection and placement of art in care settings, as well as contribute their perspectives to institutional design guidelines.



“...I know what it is but I can’t say what it is... like a country, a country it represents (moving his hands across the width of the painting) a country.”



“I do like that one. It’s kind of light and flowery, and it makes you feel light and flowery.”



“Everyday when I go for a ride, sometimes now I have to stop for a rest by the sheep, now I have to by the cattle and so and so. They are sort of a landmark to me.”



Alison Phinney	PROFESSOR UBC School of Nursing
Michael Wilson	SENIOR FACILITIES PLANNING LEADER Fraser Health Authority
Landon Mackenzie	PROFESSOR Emily Carr University of Art and Design
Alison Shields	PHD STUDENT UBC Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy
Shelley Canning	PHD STUDENT UBC School of Nursing
Lillian Hung	PHD STUDENT UBC School of Nursing
Kevin Sandgren	BSN STUDENT UBC School of Nursing
Julia Lai	BSN STUDENT UBC School of Nursing