

Oasis Senior Supportive Living Program: Reflecting on the concept of Aging in Place

Caryn J. Vowles¹, Katherine Vantil¹, Vince DePaul², Catherine Donnelly², T. Claire Davies¹

¹Queen's University BDAT Lab (Kingston, ON), ²Oasis (Kingston, ON),

INTRODUCTION

In Canada, it is projected that by 2030, one in four Canadians will be over the age of 65 (1). As a society, with these growing numbers, it is important that we have a system in place to support the well-being of older adults. The Oasis program is designed to support seniors living within their own homes and keeping their independence. The Oasis program was created by a group of older adults living in an apartment in Kingston, Ontario, Canada, and has recently expanded to 6 naturally occurring retirement communities (e.g. apartment buildings) in 4 cities in Ontario. At all sites, Oasis focuses on three pillars of well-being: Nutrition, Exercise/Activities, and Social Connections (2). The members of the Oasis program determine the types of activities and events held within their building. For example, at one location where a deaf individual is part of the program, sign language classes are used to help engage all community members. The main goal of the program is to foster connections among seniors, especially those at risk of social isolation. The focus of this practice paper is to understand how the OASIS environment shapes social interaction.

METHODOLOGY

This study had two phases: phase 1 included observing and acclimating within the Oasis environment, and phase 2 consisted of interviews with the members. Our study took place at two unique buildings within the Kingston region (Ontario, Canada) participating in the Oasis program. Building 1 is publicly subsidized, whereas Building 2 is privately owned.

Phase 1

Each of two researchers was assigned to a specific building (Researcher 1 with Building 1 and Researcher 2 with Building 2). In the initial phase, researchers attended and participated in Oasis weekly activities. This enabled the members of Oasis to become familiar with and gain trust in the researchers. Activities in each building were dependent on members' interests, wants, and needs.

After each visit, the researcher recorded their experiences using the AEIOU (Activities, Environment, Interactions, Objects, Users) journaling method which helped to direct the reflection process. Two researchers independently coded the AEIOU reflections focusing on a priori defined themes that included technology, communication, and safety. The goal of evaluating topics within each theme was to organize and capture the key elements of the data set (3). Themes were discussed through weekly meetings that enabled the two researchers to evaluate their experiences.

Phase 2

During the secondary phase, each researcher conducted an interview with one Oasis member. The earlier reflections and the a priori themes provided the guiding questions for the interviews. The participant from Building 1 was female, and Building 2, male. The interviews were 90 minutes each and took place at the participant's residence. The participants decided the locations of the interview and each chose their own home, possibly due to an increased comfort level within this environment, especially given mobility issues. The interviews were non-formal and unscripted; however, the researchers had prepared questions that could be used to further engage when pauses in the conversation occurred.

The study received approval from the Queen's University Ethics Committee and the interviews were audio recorded with consent from the participants.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The initial phase identified areas of interest around the a priori themes that focused the interviews in phase 2. Phase 2 emphasized those themes and the differences and similarities of participant experiences were explored between the two buildings.

Phase 1

Throughout phase 1 the AEIOU journaling method reflected on the researchers' experiences through Activities, Environment, Interactions, Objects, and Users as further discussed. Figures 1 and 2 show an example of the journal reflections from one of the researchers.

Activities

Coffee, dinners and board games were the most popular activities among members and fostered communication as they required collaboration among members. The coffee/tea was available at all times, and the members could visit the common room at any time of day to join others for drinks and conversation. The coffee and food permanency created a conversation starter with most members. The sign-up dinners were held once a week and outside food would be brought in at a reasonable price. These dinners were the most attended events and introduced discussions on weekly dinner decisions. Board games included Rummikub, dominoes, and while competitive, also provided an opportunity for the members to work together in teams or to chat about other activities in their daily lives. The American Sign Language classes led by a member who is deaf made the community more inclusive and aware of disabilities.

Environment

The researchers observed that most activities occurred on Tuesdays and Thursdays when the site coordinators were present. These observations suggest that without leadership of the coordinators, the aging population may not have the energy or means to organize themselves, while they do seek to engage in activities organized for them. The common room's open space and storage for different equipment allowed the room to be used for a variety of activities. Each activity fostered a deeper connection between members giving them a common interest. The easily moveable furniture with large spaces to walk between worked best to make the space accessible to those with mobility issues and their assistive technologies. When board games/meals were employed, a more stationary set-up where members could join different tables as they pleased.

Interactions

The section on interactions focused more on what researchers heard between members and how the facilitators fostered communication. Building 1 was perceived to have a greater number of episodes of inter-member conflict and member expressed concerns regarding building security. In an effort to improve communication and reduce potential for conflict, the onsite coordinator introduced a talking object for group discussions. The person who held the object was given the ability to speak freely without worrying about disruptions. In Building 2, member interactions were observed to take on an 'us versus them' focus (e.g. our age vs your age, building residents vs outsiders etc.) with members united in ideology.

Activity	Environment
Playing board games and cards(rummikub and wizard), small discussion after on why there isnt any events on Saturdays and that "many have lost there significant others and find weekends the hardest." They all seem to go to church so that takes up sundays.	initial tour of main floor as that's where most gathering happened. Laundry room area has an event board that is where the building gets info. Games wer in common room(picture taken), had snacks (cookies and cinnamon rolls) not much of the food was eaten but it was a nice feature to have as they all got to have something to talk about on the way out. Very clean and organized building. Lots of parking and very close to the [REDACTED] mall.

Figure 1. Example Journal Entries -Activities and Environment

Interaction	Objects	Users
Groups of 4 no shuffling between games/tables. At the Wizard table they were teaching another member how to take score so that when they weren't there someone would be able to. This was interesting cause they were very patient in teaching her and how to score. They mention "cottage season" I wondered if alot of members go away durring the summer to visit with family or what not. Two ladies weren't there for the full time. Lady came back at the end with her dog and was discussing events and such with others after. Interestingly other members(not present) want to do stuff but didn't want to get out and put away chairs/tables, one stated it could be cause they are physical incapable of doing so where others claimed it was cause they were "lazy"	tables with 4 chairs, inviting environment , card shuffler "for arthritis" all made sure to tell me that, wizard game and rubikub.	approx 10 total [REDACTED] Mostly female only 1 male, [REDACTED] and the new coordinator, myself as well. [REDACTED] spoke mostly of his family and how proud he was of them. The others said that what grandparents are supposed to do. They spoke of a lady in another building that son came to bring her Inch every day and all said she had a really good family.

Figure 2. Example Journal Entries -Interaction, Objects, and Users

Objects

Oasis enabled the members to have access to technologies that they may not have bought for their own environment. These included objects like card shufflers that improved their experience in participating within the activities. Oasis also supplied walkers and wheelchairs to temporarily assist members when needed. During member meetings, delivering the messages in multiple formats (written and audio) gave every member access to the information allowing all member to contribute to the discussion.

Users

Most events had 8-10 members in attendance with very few males. Lower participation by men may simply be due to building demographics (i.e. high female to male ratio), but could also be due to the types of activities. The Oasis programs were also open to non-members over the age of 55 who wanted to participate in the schedule activities which had the beneficial effect of helping the program grow and improve. Members participated due to its "family feel" and the connections between members.

Phase 2

The interviews in phase 2 allowed the researchers to understand how the ability to stay within an independent home environment with access to the Oasis space enhances connections and community. Both individuals said that the Oasis program helped them foster relationships and adds a social outlet in their lives. Each individual said that their friends and family support systems were very important in their ability to remain independent. In Table 1, the researchers' interview reflections are summarized.

Participant 1 reported many health struggles and issues with personal security that has made her more reserved. She adapted her own dwelling to accommodate for these different conditions. She uses and has access to many assistive technologies that she obtained from either medical care providers or independently based on her needs. She uses a laptop to keep in touch with family. She is very active in social housing to advocate for the rights of all tenants. The Oasis program has given her another social outlet.

Participant 2 is a widow who lives alone. He has made Oasis part of his routine to foster the human interactions that diminished when he lost his wife. He doesn't use very much technology and does not own a television but prefers Scientific America journals and newspapers. He owns very few assistive devices. His walker was seen in his apartment but when asked about he says he doesn't use it. His main social outlet other than Oasis is his religious group and his family. Participant 2 also mentioned that he relies on others to take him outside of his building. While he still has his license, he prefers not to drive. The members of Oasis act as a family to take care of one another. In Building 2 they have devised a check-in system to increase safety when living alone. Each night before bed, a resident places a hanger on their door and removes it when they wake up. If the door hanger is not removed in the morning, others know they need to check on the individual.

Table 1: Researchers reflective notes of interviews

Building 1	Building 2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Oasis has helped to facilitate greater social interaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Oasis has become part of Daily Routine Depends on Family/Friends to leave building

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Home is well adapted to suit the individuals needs • Very active in lobbying and advocating in behalf of the tenants • Strong network of family and friends • Very technologically engaged 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doesn't own a TV, but keeps up to date with Scientific America magazines • Has a walker but doesn't need/use it • Religion is used as a social outlet • Neighbors rely on each other for Safety
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The multi-tiered approach of participating in Oasis activities followed by an interview was beneficial to both fostering community and improving the lines of communication between researchers and participants. The free flow of interviews allowed the researchers to enjoy the process of the research more than if a written survey was given.

CONCLUSION

This evaluation focused on examining the environment that the Oasis program provides and how it incorporates social engagement and individual well-being into the lives of members. The AEIOU method allowed the researchers to identify the qualities that make the Oasis environment engaging and collaborative. The interviews highlighted the importance of communication and the value of keeping people who are aging safe within their own homes. The participants become inventors of their own accessible methods, based on necessity. Future research may involve follow up interviews to better identify how and which interactions occur outside the comfort of their own homes and a thorough qualitative evaluation of the AEIOU journals kept by the researchers. The Oasis program is very beneficial to the aging Canadian population and helps inform how to keep them engaged and motivated in their retirement.

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