

THE ARCHITECT'S ANGLE

John W. Baumgarten Architect, P.C.

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Do You Know That...?

- John Baumgarten is a LEED accredited professional and he is currently a "Green Consultant" on several New York City based mixed use projects seeking LEED Certification.
- John W. Baumgarten Architect, P.C. is actively working with numerous nursing facilities to upgrade and reconfigure their emergency power generation system to serve dialysis and ventilator units.

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Designing for Dementia

Many of our skilled nursing clients face the same questions regarding how to best care for their dementia residents. The answers usually depend on a facility's case mix, its ability to find and keep specialized staff and the degree to which the physical plant can be cost effectively modified for the special needs of their dementia residents.

If a facility's case mix has a high volume of late stage dementia residents, then most often a discrete unit is not strongly considered. However, if there is normally a high percentage of early to mid-stage dementia residents, or if a facility wishes to differentiate itself from its competition, then a discrete dementia unit should be considered.

The problems of mixing early and mid-stage dementia residents with baseline nursing residents are well known and have the biggest impact on facilities with a low percentage of private rooms. The costs associated with creating and operating a discrete dementia unit are not insignificant and they must be balanced against the long term costs of a potentially lower census.

Our job as health care architects is to translate the special needs of dementia residents into a built environment that is supportive and comforting. The nature of dementia is a varying degree of disorientation. In an "old school" institutional environment, disorientation breeds fear and agitation.

Harsh contrasts in light levels and finish colors can increase disorientation and agitation. Therefore, we customarily specify indirect light fixtures which produce diffused illumination and less glare. When designing finish palates, we stay away from intense geometrical patterns and use soft contrasts between field and accent colors.

We also utilize color as a "way finding cue" to help confused residents better navigate their environment. This is usually done in conjunction with three dimensional symbolism to reinforce the message. For example, the doors of a dining room would be painted a unique color. A shallow canopy and signage with restaurant symbolism are placed above and near the door to help residents "make the connection".

The tendencies of dementia residents to wander, to "rummage" and to lose track of time also dictates physical changes to a typical nursing unit. It is usually relatively easy to create a "rummage room" and/or a quiet room for "sun-downing" residents. Creating a wandering track is usually somewhat more difficult depending on the floor plan.

In any case, the track should have destinations that are identified with color and symbolism and should be linked by a system of way-finding cues such as tactile signage/artwork. If the physical conditions permit, a protected exterior track should also be created to allow dementia residents to connect with the outdoors.

John W Baumgarten Architect, P.C.: Recent Dementia Projects:

