

JOB TALK

Garden retreat a safe haven for patients

Designing a garden for victims of Alzheimer's disease required knowledge of the symptoms and patients' special needs. Safety was the top priority.

by Craig R. Brown, ASLA

■ In 1988, The Renaissance, a suburban Cleveland, Ohio, retirement community, decided to add a courtyard for its elderly residents afflicted with Alzheimer's disease.

The Arbor Garden opened in the spring of 1990, and it now offers a soothing, stimulating and secure escape for patients who require special attention.

HWH Architects Engineers Planners, Inc. of Cleveland was chosen to handle the project. The biggest concern of the board of trustees was that the designers realize the ways Alzheimer's can affect its victims, and that the design be executed accordingly.

Knowledge of victims' behavior patterns would be necessary, not only for the patients' safety and enjoyment, but to maximize the experience for other visitors and minimize the amount of required supervision.

Alzheimer's victims are easily bewildered by simple skills, which can lead to extreme frustration that can thrust the victim into panic or harmful behavior. Designers had to protect the patient from himself, and still have enjoyable surroundings.

Two items were most important: patients must be kept away from walls or from seeing beyond the courtyard. A glimpse of the outside could frustrate patients who realize they can no longer move about freely. They might also try to escape by climbing

walls, fences or trees, risking injury or disorientation and panic.

Walkway design was important; the garden would need paths that permit both leisurely strolls and frenetic pacing—frequent traits in victims who try to diffuse the nervous energy often associated with Alzheimer's.

These walkways would need to double back on themselves, returning to a central location. Singular avenues that lead to landscape features or seating areas could confuse or disorient some patients when they reach a "dead end," and simply forget to turn around.

The courtyard was installed in a corner of the assisted-living residence hall. Architects designed a curved brick wall about six feet high, matching the original brick.

An old-fashioned garden arbor is the focal point of the courtyard. It's situated on a central access outside the main sliding glass doors that lead from the patients' recreation area. The arbor itself is a massive, wood-frame structure supported by eight-foot high brick piers.

The arbor is visible from anywhere in the garden, so patients can always remain oriented to their surroundings. The walkway leads to and through the arbor from several directions and also has glider seats set underneath. This allows users to sit and rest in filtered shade while observing other people, birds, flowering shrubs or hanging, rustling vines.

The surface walkway, although not as visually attractive as the arbor, is arguably the most important design element. Concern was for the type and color of material to be used. Because users are primarily elderly and physically handicapped, only minor grade change was acceptable. The pavement was made as smooth as possible, with no joints or cracks to trip up wheelchairs, canes, crutches or walkers.

Asphalt was ruled out, despite its smooth surface. The drawback was the heat it would generate on warm summer days, especially in the small, enclosed garden space.

An extra-thick concrete surface was chosen, slightly pitched for runoff, but otherwise level. The base material was carefully installed and compacted to minimize subsequent movement or settling. The full perimeter of the walkway was then sub-drained to collect sub-surface moisture before it could seep under the concrete, minimizing any freeze-thaw action from harsh northern climate. A rose-colored admixture softened the glare, and only cost about 25 cents more per square foot.

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The Arbor Garden walkway returns to a central area. The planter is for patients who like to grow flowers or vegetables.