

Shared Lives, Shared Land: A South Australian Case Study

Research Report

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The ethical aspects of this study have been approved by
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Executive Summary

In this study we focussed on a single case study exploring the development of a purpose-built intergenerational housing environment in South Australia. We interviewed a range of professionals involved in this development and applied collaborative practice theory to better understand the drivers and challenges to best practice collaboration, as well as the built environment elements that facilitate intergenerational engagement. We present detailed findings on collaborative practice and emerging findings on built environment elements.

Key findings

Best practice collaboration drivers include:

- **LEADERSHIP:** Key leaders sharing a compelling vision for intergenerational practice. The vision sets the tone for the team from the beginning of the development, and formalises partnerships and mobilises support at the highest level;
- **BALANCED GOALS:** All partners coming to the project with an openness to embedding intergenerational practice, including being willing to temper commercial motives with other more social and even environmental goals;
- **EXPERTISE AND ATTITUDES:** Having the right combination of people in the team with rich expertise, shared attitudes and values, including supporting each other through each stage of development and a productive attitude towards constraints, that considers the end user first;
- **EARLY INVOLVEMENT:** Ensuring early involvement of any tenants including the early childhood provider and other providers such as café or gym operators;
- **COMMUNICATION:** Ensuring team communication is prioritised through appropriate messaging channels, being upfront, and having a mutual understanding of collaborator roles and attitudes; and
- **TECHNICAL STANDARDS AND DOCUMENTS:** The architect providing a good brief on the project with the design driven by big picture thinking and distilling the shared vision into guiding principles and concrete actions. To create this brief, team members also show a willingness to iterate and adapt.

Collaborative challenges include:

- Constraints and trade-offs in cost and time;
- Construction related practical matters;
- Challenges in translating ideas into reality;
- Turnover in critical staff leading to a reduction of the shared vision; and
- Misnomers about intergenerational activities for older adults living within the purpose-built intergenerational environment.

Elements of the built environment that facilitate meaningful intergenerational include:

- Purposeful design of shared spaces, including community gardens and cafes; a dedicated intergenerational room; and areas where there is flexibility to host intergenerational activities as needed;
- Accessibility and strategic location of shared spaces

Some unexpected findings include:

- Intergenerational interactions take place at a distance, for example 'hearing children from the balcony';

- Spontaneous interactions take place in unexpected places such as lifts and parking lots

Challenges and areas for improvement that were identified in this study include:

- The need to increase the level of integration of the built environment with nature;
- The need to increase adaptability of rooms so that they can be used for activities beyond intergenerational activities;
- The need for more consistent staffing to facilitate connection between spaces;
- The need to address issues of safety and access control, e.g. working with children checks potentially create a barrier for participation.

1. Introduction

With ageing trends in Australia showing significant increases in the number of people living to over 65 (20% of the population by 2066), and to over 80 (triple over the next 40 years) (AIHW 2024) there are several important social factors to consider as we support people as they age. In particular, how they will age in place (housing environment), how we can tackle ageism, and how we can reduce social isolation.

In 2023, as part of a campaign to combat ageism (WHO 2021), the World Health Organisation launched a strategy titled 'Connecting generations: planning and implementing interventions for intergenerational contact'. In this report WHO calls for a focus on intergenerational practice suggesting this is one of the most effective strategies to reduce ageism (WHO 2023). Intergenerational practice aims to 'foster interaction among people of different ages to ensure purposeful, mutually beneficial opportunities, promote greater generational consciousness and learning, as well as understanding, and respect and solidarity among people and contribute to building more cohesive communities' (WHO 2023). There is a range of evidence to suggest there are significant benefits for the physical, social, emotional, and behavioural outcomes across both generations (Cohen-Mansfield & Muff, 2021; Jarrott 2022).

In response to this evidence, both the aged care and early childhood learning sector leaders are recognising the value of facilitating sustainable meaningful intergenerational engagement. As such there has been significant work done in planning and implementing intergenerational programs.

However, to sustain these programs, providers are beginning to explore and build purpose built intergenerational housing sites that help facilitate these interactions on a more regular basis.

These arrangements require collaboration across a range of different sectors. Therefore, there needs to be a focus on how sectors that traditionally operate quite separately can work together to develop these purpose-built intergenerational housing environments where older adults age in place, and children and youth can engage with older adults via an educational setting on a daily basis.

While there has been much study on the benefits of meaningful intergenerational engagement, to date there is limited research on how these two sectors (aged care and early childhood) and other professionals (architects/builders etc.) successfully collaborate to deliver sustainable intergenerational housing environments. Therefore, in this study we focus on a single case study in South Australia where a range of stakeholders collaborated to develop a purpose-built intergenerational housing environment where older adults live and interact with children attending an early learning centre located on the same site. The community shares a joint aim of 'intergenerational engagement' which is embedded within the early childhood

program, allowing children to develop meaningful connections and regular contact with their 'grand friends' who live in the apartments, and vice versa.

To tell the story of this innovative collaboration and purpose-built intergenerational housing environment, we used a single qualitative case study design, with the application of collaboration theory. Through this theoretical lens we were able to explore the collaborative drivers and challenges associated with this collaboration and explore the research question: 'How can principles of collaborative practice theory explain the drivers and challenges to best practice purpose built intergenerational housing environments in Australia?'

2. Methods

In this study we focused on a single qualitative case study and used collaborative practice theory to better understand the collaborative drivers and challenges associated with the development of a purpose-built intergenerational housing environment in South Australia, established in 2022. Collaboration has been widely explored across different disciplines and work has been carried out to develop a theoretical conceptualisation of the term (Wood and Gray 1991). In a more general sense, collaboration can be understood as different stakeholders working and interacting jointly to achieve common good or shared benefits. In specific empirical settings, successful collaboration can be distilled into critical practices such as shared goals, shared space and shared history (London and Pablo 2017).

To recruit participants, the research team was provided with a list of key contacts of potential participants who were known to have participated in the development of the selected purpose-built intergenerational housing site in South Australia. We were also provided the name of an administrator who would distribute information about the study. The nominated administrative staff member emailed potential participants with the recruitment flyer. If interested, potential participants were directed to self-select and email the research team. Once this contact occurred the research team emailed the full participant information sheet and consent form. Once the signed consent form was returned to the research team, a mutually suitable time for an online interview was organised. Eleven emails were sent to potential participants with the recruitment flyer and we had six responses. Follow up emails were sent a month after the initial email.

We conducted 6 semi-structured interviews (total 164 A4 pages) with a range of professionals involved in various capacities in the conceptualisation, planning and implementation stages of the case study as a project. Specific interviewees continue to be affiliated with the project in its current operational stage.

A full list of interviewees is included in Table 1 (below):

Table 1: Participant professional roles and organisations

	ORGANIZATION	ROLE AT TIME OF PROJECT	NO. OF PAGES
1	Architectural Firm	Architect	26
2	Retirement accommodation provider	Client Growth and Innovation Manager (at the time)	29
3	Montessori teacher/ owner	Early childhood teacher/ Owner	28
4	Montessori teacher/ owner	Early childhood teacher/ Owner	33
5	Retirement accommodation provider	Chief Executive	23
6	Retirement accommodation provider	Manager, Community and Operations Development	25
Total			164

Table 1 shows that the research team sought to include a range of roles, with the aim of achieving maximum variation (Flyvbjerg 2006). Maximum variation helped ensure that a breadth of views about the project was obtained from across different organisations as well as different professions.

Data collection:

Semi-structured interview questions were developed by two researchers and were grouped into five categories:

1. The person's role in the project and their understanding of the project vision
2. Drivers and challenges of collaboration
3. Role of the built environment in facilitating/hampering intergenerational engagement
4. Prospects and strategies (if any) for scalability
5. Other possible comments

Interviews were conducted by two researchers online on Zoom. Interviews were audio recorded only and professionally transcribed. A total of 312.08 minutes / 164 pages were transcribed.

Data analysis was guided by the Gioia method (Gioia 2013), a widely-cited methodology that seeks to ensure that qualitative data analysis is carried out in a systematic, transparent and rigorous manner.

3. Findings

The findings of this study are presented here in three sections: (a) Collaborative drivers; (b) Collaborative challenges; (c) Elements of the built environment that facilitate intergenerational engagement.

a. Collaborative drivers

We found 49 categories across eight themes that were collaborative drivers including leadership, project environment, team members' initial attributes, timing of involvement, shared space, team organisation and communication, processes of cohesion and participation, and vision driven implementation, see Figure 1.

Figure 1 (below) highlights collaborative drivers (49) across eight themes

<p style="text-align: center;">LEADERSHIP</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VISION OF KEY LEADERS • PARTNERSHIP FORMALISED AT HIGHEST LEVELS • EVIDENCE FOR SHARED VISION • PAST EXPERIENCE/ EXPERTISE OF LEADERS • SUPPORT OF LEADER THROUGHOUT PROJECT • ATTITUDE OF CLIENT AND ARCHITECT ("SETTING THE TONE") 	<p style="text-align: center;">PROJECT ENVIRONMENT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WILLINGNESS TO TEMPER COMMERCIAL MOTIVES FOR OTHER GOALS • CLEAN SLATE/ OPENNESS OF PROJECT 	<p style="text-align: center;">TEAM MEMBERS' INITIAL ATTRIBUTES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SHARED ATTITUDES/ VALUES (ALSO PEDAGOGICAL ALIGNMENT) • RIGHT COMBINATION OF PEOPLE • CONSIDERATION OF END USERS • PRODUCTIVE APPROACH TO CONSTRAINTS 	<p style="text-align: center;">TIMING OF INVOLVEMENT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EARLY INVOLVEMENT-SUPPLY CHAIN • EARLY INVOLVEMENT-TENANT 	<p style="text-align: center;">OTHERS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SERENDIPITY • INVESTMENT IN RELATIONSHIPS/ PARTNERSHIPS
<p style="text-align: center;">SHARED SPACE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FACE TO FACE MEETINGS 	<p style="text-align: center;">TEAM ORGANISATION AND COMMUNICATION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DIRECT COMMUNICATION • APPROPRIATE COMMUNICATION CHANNELS ('WHO IS IN THE BEST POSITION') • BEING UPFRONT • MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING OF COLLABORATORS' ROLES AND ATTITUDES 	<p style="text-align: center;">PROCESSES OF COHESION AND PARTICIPATION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TRUST • ACTIVELY ADDRESSING OTHERS' CONCERNS • PRE-EMPTIVE PROBLEM SOLVING • GOOD RELATIONSHIPS • MOTIVATION TO GO BEYOND ONE'S ROLE • OPENNESS TO OTHERS' IDEAS REGARDLESS OF PERCEIVED DIFFERENCES IN EXPERTISE/ EXCHANGE OF KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING 	<p style="text-align: center;">PROCESSES OF COHESION AND PARTICIPATION (CONT'D)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CODESIGN/ BUILDING ON OR COMBINING KNOWLEDGE AND IDEAS • OWNERSHIP OF SHARED VISION • "LOOKING OUT FOR EACH OTHER" • PAST RELATIONSHIP HELPFUL BUT NOT CRITICAL • GIVING EVERYONE A VOICE • EXTENSIVE TESTING AND EXPERIMENTATION • WILLINGNESS TO LEARN FROM OTHERS 	<p style="text-align: center;">VISION-DRIVEN IMPLEMENTATION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • USE OF TOOLS LIKE SKETCHES • DETAILED DESIGN DRIVEN BY BIG PICTURE THINKING • GOOD BRIEF ON PROJECT • DISTILLATION OF VISION INTO GUIDING PRINCIPLES, CONCRETE ACTIONS • WILLINGNESS TO ITERATE AND ADAPT

Quotes that exemplify these points:

“There’s always a lot of external influences to get stuff done. Whether that be financial points in time or stage gates or calendar dates, where expectations, you know. And often projects suffer, I think, as a result of being managed purely to those timelines, whereas I think this one was allowed the time and space to take the time it needed.”

- Interviewee 1

“I think another reason why this is a successful development; it hasn’t got crept over into the realms of over commercialising something like that.” – Interviewee 2

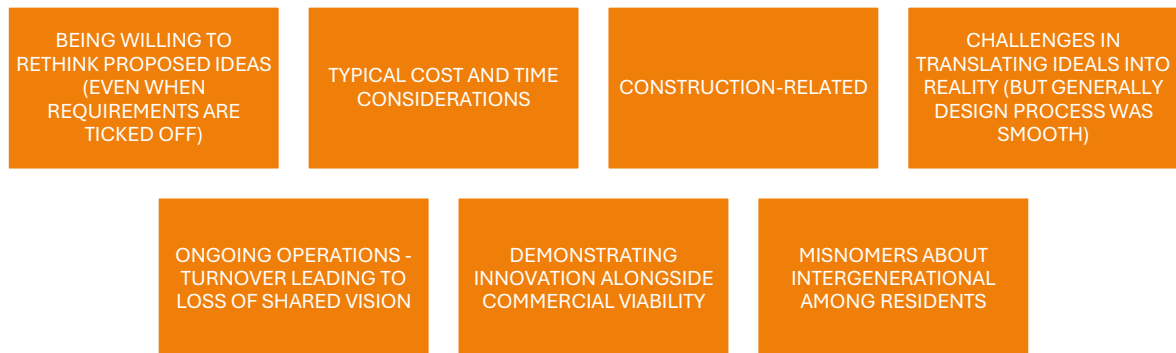
“And that vision is always described in say, five or six lines of key principles of design. And those key principles are not my idea, they’re not your idea, they’re not his idea or hers. They’re everyone’s because we did it together.” – Interviewee 1

“Oh, we had a lot of fun. It was a great... And I don’t remember ever being in those rooms and feeling like anyone was looking for the negatives, which is also rare. Often there’s at least one person in any project who’s always the naysayer or the devil’s advocate, but in this case it was that even when people were identifying obstacles, they were coming straight at it with, but we could try this and we could do that. It was an amazing atmosphere.” – Interviewee 3

b. Collaborative Challenges

We also found eight themes that were collaborative challenges including: being willing to rethink proposed ideas (even when requirements are ticked off); typical cost and time considerations; construction-related, challenges in translating ideals into reality (but generally the design process was smooth); ongoing operations – turnover leading to loss of shared vision, demonstrating innovation alongside commercial viability; misnomers about intergenerational among residents (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Eight themes that were collaborative challenges



c. Elements of built environment that facilitate meaningful intergenerational engagement:

In the below section we highlight elements of the built environment, in this purpose-built intergenerational housing environment, that appear to facilitate intergenerational engagement including: (a) purposefully designed shared spaces, (b) creating choice and flexibility in intergenerational engagement, and (c) challenges and areas for improvement.

Built environment strategies that facilitated intergenerational engagement:

Purposefully Designed Shared Spaces:

In this case study we found areas like community gardens and cafes encourage participation through shared activities like gardening together. Bringing food production in from the garden helps create an atmosphere akin to a "working village." The inclusion of half-height garden beds, for example, accommodates both children and residents with mobility challenges, promoting engagement across generations.

The 'intergenerational room' serves as a dedicated space for focused activities like reading and art, where both young and old can engage in meaningful interactions. While the room itself is narrow and limits capacity, it has been effective for extended projects (e.g., teaching children knitting) and has proven to be a key space for facilitating one-on-one or group interactions.

Other areas have provided flexibility for hosting various intergenerational activities, such as playgroups and specialized programs, while the presence of smaller, child-sized furniture in spaces like the library subtly reinforces the shared nature of the environment.

In short, specific spaces were created to intentionally foster a sense of belonging and collective effort. As one interviewee noted, *'this is what society should be like'*. These spaces were designed to encourage active, shared participation that could enrich daily life.

Accessibility of Shared Spaces: The intergenerational room and other spaces are designed for easy access, with minimal challenges to movement between areas, ensuring that interactions can happen naturally, without people having to intentionally seek them out. Access means both children and grand friends can get to specific spaces quickly and conveniently. Accessibility is still balanced with safety; this is discussed below.

Purposeful Location of Shared Spaces: The design of the site was carefully planned to create a sense of connection across the space, with residential areas located at the back of the site and the preschool positioned near the front. This setup drew people into the centre of the development, fostering greater social interaction. Placing the childcare centre at the front of the complex also ensured it is visible to the outside

community, highlighting the intergenerational nature of the space and fostering a sense of inclusion.

Supporting the Emergence of Planned and Spontaneous Interactions: While emphasis has been placed on planning spaces for intergenerational engagement, opportunities for spontaneous interactions cannot be overlooked. These have taken place in different locations including:

Outdoor spaces. The integration of spaces, like the café, foyer and garden spaces, helped cultivate organic, everyday intergenerational exchanges. Children could even meet their 'grand friends' while taking walks in the garden, promoting ongoing social connections.

Balconies. A pleasant surprise was the amount of intergenerational engagement occurring via the balconies. Residents from the south building were able to overlook the play space. Interactions such as paper airplanes being exchanged and waving became regular forms of connection between children and residents. This informal interaction was more frequent and meaningful than initially anticipated.

Service areas. The lifts have become a place for spontaneous, informal conversations, breaking down challenges and building a sense of neighbourhood. Parking lots also have the potential to facilitate unplanned interactions as well.

Integration of Shared Spaces with Nature and Natural Light: The design prioritized natural light and sustainability, creating an environment that felt open and connected to nature. This was crucial for ensuring that the spaces felt welcoming and enriching for both older adults and children.

Creating choice and flexibility in intergenerational engagement

Using Strategies to Support Different Types of Intergenerational Activity: Some shared spaces like the gardens support interactions that require physical activity, for example gardening. Others support quieter, more intimate activities, like areas for reading or crafting, encouraging interactions in a safe and relaxed environment.

Using Strategies to Optimise Visual and Auditory Connectivity: The design of spaces with visual connections, such as balconies overlooking outdoor areas like community gardens or childcare spaces, enables passive participation. Residents or visitors can choose to engage by simply watching, without feeling forced to interact. Auditory connection is also important; residents 'hearing' children play promotes a sense of involvement as well. While the design considers visual and auditory connectivity, it also seeks to avoid imposing on individuals who might prefer solitude. Ensuring that privacy is respected while fostering a sense of community is a delicate balance.

Using Strategies to Optimise Distance Between Buildings: The careful placement of buildings (15 to 20 meters apart) was carefully considered to allow for privacy while

maintaining the option for connection, balancing both independence and the opportunity for intergenerational interaction. The design of the site also took into account the need for people to move freely between different areas.

Challenges and areas for improvement

Potential for Increased Connectivity with Nature: The original vision had hoped to provide more direct access from a nearby park into the community space, but this was limited by road and drainage considerations.

Underutilisation of Some Shared Spaces: The dedicated intergenerational room was described as a positive feature, but one interviewee notes it often sits empty when not actively in use. It was suggested that for future developments, such spaces could be more versatile—serving as meeting rooms or spaces for corporate or tenant use when not occupied by intergenerational activities. This would increase the overall value and functionality.

Lack of Consistent Staffing to Facilitate Connection Between Spaces: The departure of key staff who facilitated connections between the childcare centre and residents has been a challenge. Without a clear point of contact, residents and staff may feel disconnected, which undermines the sense of community and intergenerational engagement.

Issues of Safety and Access Control: While fostering openness and connection, safety was also a key concern. Spaces were designed to be gated, particularly for children, while still allowing for free-flowing activities where adults and children could collaborate with appropriate supervision from staff. That said, physical elements limiting ingress and egress can only do so much. Other regulatory mechanisms like Working With Children checks are still necessary to control access; however, getting such certifications for older volunteers can be a barrier to intergenerational engagement, particularly for people with diverse life histories.

4. Conclusion

Our study explored collaboration, challenges to collaboration, and elements of the built environment that facilitated intergenerational interaction within a purpose-built intergenerational housing environment in South Australia. The findings suggest best practice collaboration involves strong leadership, having the right combination of people, a shared vision that is embedded across conception, planning and development, the early involvement of tenants, effective communication channels, a good brief on the project including guiding principles and concrete actions with the design driven by big picture thinking, and a willingness to iterate and adapt. Collaboration challenges appear to be mostly pragmatic and include typical cost and time considerations and construction related practical matters.

A preliminary analysis of the data suggests a wide range of elements within the built environment facilitate intergenerational engagement, most notably community gardens and cafes, a dedicated intergenerational room, and areas where there is flexibility to host intergenerational activities as needed.

While lessons learned from this study are not necessarily generalisable to other purpose-built intergenerational sites, these findings will be useful to a range of government departments developing policy to support housing and health needs across generations. In addition, both aged care providers and educators will likely be interested in these findings as they look to support housing models where older adults can age in place and interact with children on a daily basis, thus experiencing the benefits of intergenerational engagement.

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