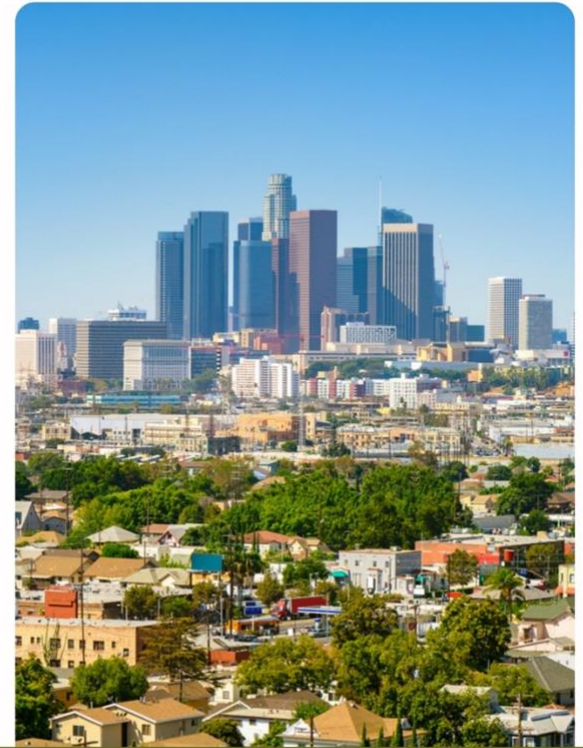


Environment and Design Practice

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Background

Permanent supportive housing (PSH) provides unhoused individuals with a unique rehabilitative environment, facilitating stabilized recovery through subsidized, affordable housing assistance and voluntary support services.¹ Within a PSH atmosphere, residents are provided solace from previous conditions, complemented by strong supportive services. Residents' experiences within supportive housing, however, can greatly determine rates of retention and ability for healing. The physical design of PSH sites may influence how residents perceive themselves, as well as their general sense of trust within the given environment. Homelessness is rarely addressed within residents' relationships with their physical surroundings, neglecting the need to incorporate concepts of proactive engagement, dignified design, and self-perception through design factors such as natural light and inviting communal spaces. Community enrichment through tenant-informed programming, forums for resident input, and active feedback between residents and providers, as well as within resident communities, empowers individuals by increasing their agency and fostering a sense of participatory action.

¹ National Alliance to End Homelessness, "Permanent Supportive Housing," 2023, <https://endhomelessness.org/resources/toolkits-and-training-materials/permanent-supportive-housing/>.

PSH sites demonstrate the observable difference between housing and home; the goal of housing is to provide sheltered living away from harsh conditions, while a home implies safety, centering of the individual, self-ownership, and a lack of alienation or uncertainty in belonging.² Physical factors contributing to successful retention in a PSH site include location, cleanliness, personalization, and sense of community.³ The location and quality of the surrounding neighborhood may also contribute to resident satisfaction through security, stability, and overall quality of life. Utilizing tools such as proactive engagement within PSH, dignified design methods, and radical hospitality may aid sites in attempts to support the successful retention of residents. Additionally, observing other intentional housing designs may give insight into the holistic needs of residents, as exemplified by successfully implemented models.

Proactive Building Engagement Models

The proactive engagement model fosters outreach and relationship building for individuals lacking access to rehabilitative resources within PSH. The purpose of engagement is to prevent re-entry into homelessness, focusing on reintegration into housing and socialization through practices that emphasize flexibility, empathy, and relationship-building. Through proactive engagement, providers establish trust with their clients, ensuring a constant channel for input and service feedback.

One method of instilling proactive engagement is through the use of Tenant Advisory Councils (TAC), noted as tenant-led committees intended to provide individuals with opportunities to participate within community-focused administrative decision-making, as well as generally improving communication and leadership skills.⁴ TACs enable peer-led listening and engagement, allowing residents to influence building policies or program design while creating impactful community events. TACs allow residents to share insight and opinion on decision-making strategies internally within housing environments, as well as potentially to policymakers or the general public.⁵ A TAC may serve as a platform to empower and organize residents, providing a space for open communication between residents and providers. Based in Los Angeles, A Community of Friends (ACOF) stands as an example of PSH that utilizes a TAC network, establishing values of peer-listening and representation amongst tenants.⁶ Through TACs, property managers may also gauge community interests for planned programming, as well as environmental design suggestions.

² Kimberly A. Rollings and Christina S. Bollo, "Permanent Supportive Housing Design Characteristics Associated with the Mental Health of Formerly Homeless Adults in the U.S. and Canada: An Integrative Review," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18,18 (2021): 1-37, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8465794/>.

³ *Ibid.*, p.17.

⁴ A Community of Friends, "Tenant Advisory Council", <https://acof.org/tenant-advisory-council/>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

Another intervention that aligns with proactive engagement is “assertive community treatment,” which provides 24-hour coverage from intensive case managers, reserved for individuals dealing with serious mental illnesses. Assertive treatment emphasizes a personalized, solution-based approach, where case managers meet clients where they are, rather than in third-party off-site locations.⁷ This method mitigates the risks of missed appointments while leveling the power imbalance that may exist between case managers and their clients. When case managers consistently approach clients at their preferred location, it demonstrates their commitment to service provision and their desire to accommodate their clients' comfort. Receiving confirmation for follow-up visits is a crucial step in maintaining progressive engagement, implying a relationship of trust between providers and clients.⁸ While not all PSH recipients require intensive case management, progressive engagement ensures that case workers can provide measured solutions incrementally, observed through short-term goals and achievable outcomes, strengthening clients' sense of stability and recovery.⁹

On-site visibility of case workers plays an additionally important role in coordination across multidisciplinary teams for high-risk clients who fall into multiple intersections of care. Effective engagement requires service providers to have specialized knowledge of their target communities, existing surrounding care systems, and the availability of resources for substance use treatment, housing, medical, and physical health. Social isolation is frequently cited as a cause of relapse and re-entry into homelessness. A majority of individuals recovering from substance abuse assert that access to community-oriented work, like volunteering at food banks or supporting others currently battling addiction and experiencing homelessness, provides a constructive avenue for personal recovery.¹⁰

While physical design with community input can be valuable in assisting residents in personal growth and long-term housing stability, siting of permanent housing also plays a major role in resident outcomes. Los Angeles County is currently divided into eight Service Planning Areas (SPAs) with the intention to create networks of health, social, and housing services within each geographic region. In theory, this system of regional networks can help deliver high quality services to those in need wherever they reside, regardless of location within the County. However, the determination of site locations has previously sparked discussions regarding potential patterns of segregation of BIPOC individuals, particularly Black residents, as political dynamics may subsequently concentrate BIPOC residents within areas, such as South and

⁷Amanda Rosado, “Case management series: Engagement and Assessment,” Department of Economic Opportunity, 2018, <https://flhousing.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Case-Management-Engagement-and-Assessment.pdf>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Benjamin F. Henwood et al., “Understanding Risk Environments in Permanent Supportive Housing for Formerly Homeless Adults,” *Qualitative Health Research*, 28,13 (2018): 2011-2019, doi: 10.1177/1049732318785355.

Central Los Angeles.¹¹ Participants expressed a preference for districts with greater safety, security, aesthetics, and greenery, and fewer negative attributes like noise, traffic, garbage, and stigma. Improved neighborhood quality was linked to higher housing satisfaction, demonstrating that the surrounding environment can shape residents' fulfillment with the built environment and related outcomes.¹² Additionally, access to communication methods such as handheld technology, computer workstations, and wireless internet empowers residents to engage with their community through increased access to educational and employment opportunities. Service coordination similarly improves when utilizing formerly unhoused individuals who have exited PSH as outreach workers, highlighting benefits associated with providing employment opportunities to those who are currently and formerly homeless, allowing individuals to apply personal experience towards relationship building.¹³

Further, education about supportive services is vital to resident engagement. LA County's Supportive Housing Community Outreach Toolkit outlines messaging guidelines on effectively explaining supportive services and best practices for community meetings. Cross-collaboration between developers, local governments, service providers, and residents through community meetings can be used to gauge insights and collective experiences of residents, providing a critical platform for feedback. Listening sessions, community open houses, and weekly forums are examples of strategies frequented to incentivize community input. Community engagement can also be strengthened by explaining supportive services, highlighting thorough vetting for tenant selection, service provider accountability, and humanizing homelessness. Paying attention to these factors would demonstrate providers' concern for residents' safety through both their external and internal environments.¹⁴

Dignified Design

Environmental design is critical to promote healing and supportive mechanisms for those experiencing homelessness. As a design-practice framework, Trauma-Informed Design (TID) emphasizes the importance of integrating physical, emotional, and psychological safety for both providers and residents within overall PSH site development.¹⁵ TID's foundation utilizes

¹¹ Norweeta G. Milburn et al., "Inequity in the Permanent Supportive Housing System in Los Angeles: Scale, Scope and Reasons for Black Residents' Returns to Homelessness," California Policy Lab (2021), <https://www.capolicylab.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Inequity-in-the-PSH-System-in-Los-Angeles.pdf>

¹² Kimberly A. Rollings and Christina S. Bollo, "Permanent Supportive Housing Design Characteristics Associated with the Mental Health of Formerly Homeless Adults in the U.S. and Canada: An Integrative Review," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18(18), (2021): 22, doi: [10.3390/ijerph18189588](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18189588).

¹³ Jeffrey Olivet et al., "Outreach and Engagement in Homeless Services: A Review of the Literature," *The Open Health Services and Policy Journal* 3 (2010): 53-70. <https://endhomelessness.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/TOHSPJ-3-53.pdf>.

¹⁴ United Way Greater Los Angeles, "Supportive Housing: Community Outreach Toolkit," County of Los Angeles, California (n.d.), <https://homeless.lacounty.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Supportive-Housing-Community-Outreach-Toolkit.pdf>.

¹⁵ Ajeen et al., "The Impact of Trauma-Informed Design," p.681.

Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, which demonstrates the internal human desire for fulfilling needs of deficiency and growth, including physiological safety, love/belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization.¹⁶ A qualitative study examines how core TID principles—choice/control, comfort, connection, and safety—are experienced in PSH settings, highlighting the importance of preserving both individual well-being and dignity.¹⁷ To support these elements, three key design attributes are identified as essential in creating a dignified environment: nested layers, sensory engagement, and identity anchors.¹⁸

Nested layers offer varied spatial options that support individuals' changing needs over time, catering to different requirements for engagement and comfort, identified in examples such as reading nooks and other variations of seating arrangements.¹⁹ The ability of residents to access privacy is associated with increased feelings of control, stemming from senses of physical and psychological safety.²⁰ Allowing residents reference points of choice, such as through the ability to lock individual unit doors or access the site's front desk, can allow for increased trust towards providers in alignment with community goals.²¹ Comfort was noted as absent within spaces lacking intrapersonal safety measures, with residents noting aspects such as institutional design finishes, decreased natural lighting, or uninviting communal spaces being stressful and incompatible with needs for emotional regulation.²²

Sensory engagement elements present gentle stimuli used for self-regulating emotions and stress management through opportunities that offer natural materials or noise modulation, such as communal gardening or natural lighting in common areas.²³ Effective connection elements are noted to be opportunities for tenants to voluntarily socialize with others while also maintaining the ability to retreat to private personal spaces for rest and solitude when needed, thereby avoiding overstimulation from excessive interactions. Outdoor spaces, such as designated smoking areas, are frequented often and also allow for residents to voluntarily socialize in discussion.²⁴

Identity anchors consist of elements that acknowledge the variation in resident culture and history, allowing options for personalization in design elements. An example of resident ability

¹⁶ Saul Mcleod, "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs," *Simply Psychology* (2007), <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15240897>.

¹⁷ Daniel Brisson et al., "Impact of Trauma-Informed Design on Health and Well-Being of People Formerly Experiencing Homelessness in Permanent Supportive Housing," *Social Sciences* 14,417 (2025): 1-20, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14070417>.

¹⁸ Christina Bollo et al., "Dignified Design: An actionable conceptual model informed by residents and staff in permanent supportive housing," 2021, *Emerging Challenges: technological, environmental, social* (n.d.): 1-8, https://shopworksarc.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/DignifiedDesign_ARCCaims_to_eliminate_barriers_that_would_otherwise_2025.pdf.

¹⁹ Christina Bollo et al., "Dignified Design," p.4.

²⁰ Daniel Brisson et al., "Impact of Trauma-Informed Design," p.10.

²¹ *Ibid*, p.12.

²² *Ibid*, p.5.

²³ *Ibid*, p.4.

²⁴ Daniel Brisson et al., "Impact of Trauma-Informed Design," p.11.

to individualize the space includes decorating personal shelves or murals, cultivating a sense of community and belonging within the built environment.²⁵ Imagining a supportive and safe environment for residents involves consideration of tenant design needs, ultimately fostering dignity for the community while accounting for residents' history and experiences. Intentional design can empower individuals and provide a sense of control and ownership, while also encouraging feelings of comfort and community within recovery.²⁶

Despite TID's efforts to integrate dignified healing within overarching housing initiatives, research notes that housing architecture often degrades individuals through careless or unenthusiastic design. Dignified Design, formerly recognized as TID, seeks to explore ways in which housing architecture can positively impact well-being outcomes for individuals who have experienced homelessness²⁷, further prioritizing ideals such as autonomy, respect, and freedom.²⁸ Previous means of increasing site security features, such as automated locks, greater surveillance efforts, or strictly enforced guest protocol, may not contribute to feelings of safety, but rather of paternalism and distrust, necessitating other dignified elements for ethical co-existence.²⁹ Dignified Design continues TID's efforts to stress the importance of vital design elements in contributing to senses of safety, choice/control, comfort, and connection. Prioritizing autonomy building through site design enables residents to build trust within their environments, encouraging resource utilization on PSH sites. Centering dignified design remains essential in accounting for past traumas experienced by residents, as well as enforcing mechanisms for future mobility beyond homelessness.



Figure 1: Shopworks Architecture “Nested Layers” – Varied Outdoor Environments³⁰

²⁵ Christina Bollo et al., “Dignified Design,” p.4.

²⁶ Elizabeth K. Hopper, Ellen L. Bassuk, and Jeffrey Olivet, “Shelter from the storm: Trauma-informed care in homelessness services settings,” *The Open Health Services and Policy Journal* 3,2 (2010): 80-100, <https://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/cenfdthy.pdf>.

²⁷ Daniel S. Brisson, “Dignified Design,” University of Denver: The Center for Housing and Homelessness Research, n.d., <https://socialwork.du.edu/chhr/research/project/dignified-design>.

²⁸ Christina Bollo et al., “Dignified Design,” p.2.

²⁹ Ibid, p.4.

³⁰ Ibid, p.5.

Based in Denver, Shopworks Architecture utilizes a four-phase approach in adapting TID to dignified design site projects: vision setting, pre-occupancy research, design/collaboration, and post-occupancy research.³¹ Resident input is additionally used in considering design elements in order to prioritize feelings of tenant autonomy. Taking into consideration resident histories and needs incentivizes Shopworks properties to equip features such as computer workstations, therapeutic rocking chairs, secure dorm lockers, soft lighting, high windows, and staff offices located within dorms.³² Shopworks utilizes design elements that provide a sense of safety for residents, like natural lighting, as well as features that regulate sensory stimulation, such as carpeted floors to reduce noise caused by footsteps.³³ Clear sightlines between staff and residents within common spaces enables individuals to feel secure yet independent when using them.³⁴ These features encourage residents to interact with one another through surroundings that facilitate secure communication and encourage inter-resident collaboration.

Radical Hospitality

Included within PSH service provision, harm reduction practice implements strategies most often aiming to decrease adverse impacts experienced from drug use, both symptomatically and environmentally.³⁵ A prominent approach within harm reduction practice is the implementation of radical hospitality, otherwise known as defiant hospitality. Radical hospitality is often utilized amidst other therapeutic methods with the intention to “make room” for others, creating an environmental space of simultaneous vulnerability and inclusion.³⁶ The framework attempts to dissolve barriers that otherwise would prevent individuals from potentially entering and participating in supportive programs. Similar to Housing First’s³⁷ practice of service provision with no minimum requirements, radical hospitality works with recipients to create mutually beneficial care plans. Through the provision of unconditional support for residents, radical hospitality offers spaces where communities can be created and flourish through mutual participation.

³¹ Shopworks Architecture, “Implementing a Four-Phased Trauma Informed Design Process: Promoting Physical Health, Mental Health, and Well-Being Through Trauma-Informed Design,” (2021): 1-68, https://shopworksarc.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/TID_Process_10_12_2021.pdf.

³² Urban Institute, “Trauma-Informed Housing: An Approach to Empower Residents in Affordable Housing Design, Services, and Management,” 2024, <https://www.urban.org/apps/trauma-informed-housing/shopworks>.

³³ Ibidenable.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ National Harm Reduction Coalition, “Principles of Harm Reduction”, <https://harmreduction.org/about-us/principles-of-harm-reduction/>.

³⁶ Rene C. Millet et al., “Defiant Hospitality: a grounded theory study of harm reduction psychotherapy,” *Addiction Research & Theory* 29,6 (2021): 445-453, <https://doi.org/10.1080/16066359.2021.1900129>.

³⁷ Housing First is defined as a homelessness assistance approach that prioritizes the provision of permanent housing for individuals experiencing homelessness, providing opportunities to pursue personal goals and improve quality of life previously obstructed by experiencing homelessness, <https://endhomelessness.org/resources/toolkits-and-training-materials/housing-first/>.

Providers trained to pursue radical hospitality aim to instill trust amongst guests, emphasizing themes of flexibility and understanding for the variety of needs presented to them. The Tenderloin Prevention Center in San Francisco, California implemented radical hospitality as a framework in their operation of an overdose prevention site, with the motivation to give guests dignified, non-judgmental care.³⁸ Staff members describe practicing radical hospitality as extending humanity to guests, emphasizing the importance of participant engagement within healthcare services. In this work, the trust-building occurred not by approaching participants from a position of power, rather by providing high-quality services, without judgment of current behaviors, while offering options of treatment. Guests who had previously attempted to receive substance use treatment through radical hospitality found themselves able to access service assistance from staff members who had considered their holistic needs, including housing, drug use, medical treatment, or connections to other services.³⁹

Practicing radical hospitality can work to create anti-oppressive, horizontal relationships between service providers and residents, moving away from hierarchical principles of power.⁴⁰ In dissolving traditional dynamics between provider and resident, individuals experience a practice of welcoming others with unconditional acceptance and safety, thereby facilitating a smooth transition into supportive spaces. After receiving judgement-free assistance, participants may feel more welcome and confident to explore services and treatments that they would otherwise refuse. Radical hospitality can be utilized within purpose-driven housing initiatives to provide open environments that foster non-judgmental support and offer potential for rehabilitation to residents. Heart Forward stands as a Los Angeles project site that centers radical hospitality within PSH practice, striving away from traditional provider-recipient power dynamics and welcoming residents in purposeful engagement and community,⁴¹ possessing transformative potential that may benefit both staff and residents.

Common Ground (Australia)

As an example of intentionally designed supportive housing, Common Ground Australia exists as a PSH model designed to serve adults who have previously experienced chronic homelessness, rough sleeping, or are earning a low income. Despite Common Ground Project sites being first introduced within the United States and United Kingdom, their influence has been particularly noted in Australia, possessing a high profile in addressing chronically homeless

³⁸ Lynn D. Wenger et al., "Radical hospitality: Innovative programming to build community and meet the needs of people who use drugs at a government-sanctioned overdose prevention site in San Francisco, California," *International Journal of Drug Policy* 126 (2024): 1-12, doi: [10.1016/j.drugpo.2024.104366](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2024.104366).

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Heart Forward LA, "Radical Hospitality," 2024, <https://www.heartforwardla.org/radical-hospitality>.

housing needs.⁴² The Common Ground model is equally composed of tenants having previously experienced homelessness and individuals seeking social housing. As a mixed-income approach to housing, Common Ground foregoes any behavioral requirements to provide housing and supportive services.⁴³ Residents are given housing assistance as a first priority and then provided on-site services, such as case management support, substance abuse counseling, physical and mental health support, as well as employment training and opportunities.⁴⁴ Common Ground provides purpose-built, self-contained apartments with an environmentally sustainable design. In addition to on-site services, the multi-storey facility also offers accessible and culturally safe shared functional spaces, as well as communal indoor and outdoor areas.⁴⁵ These design elements reflect the intentionality and communal and individual safety emphasized in dignified design.

As a result of intentionally designed and accessible housing, residents observed increased employability through training opportunities, improved health, and well-being. Common Ground Queensland (GCQ) employs place-based plans to reflect dignified design through an increased sense of autonomy amongst tenants.⁴⁶ Intentional design elements include 1-bed or studio units, common and multi-purpose areas onsite, and offset doorways for private entry to units.⁴⁷ In addition to dignified design, Common Ground utilizes a participatory design process intended to create a mutual relationship between tenant and provider, using mutual assessments as opportunities for information sharing pertaining to an optimal service provision relationship.⁴⁸

⁴² Cameron Parsell, Suzanne Fitzpatrick, and Volker Busch-Geertsema, "Common Ground in Australia: An Object Lesson in Evidence Hierarchies and Policy Transfer," *Housing Studies*, 29,1 (2013): 69-87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2013.824558>.

⁴³ Department of Western Australia: Department of Housing and Works, "Common Ground Model," 2021, https://www.wa.gov.au/system/files/2021-10/common-ground-process-principles_0.pdf.

⁴⁴ Department of Western Australia: Department of Housing and Works, "Common Ground," 2025, <https://www.wa.gov.au/organisation/department-of-housing-and-works/common-ground>.

⁴⁵ Department of Western Australia: Department of Housing and Works, "Common Ground Model."

⁴⁶ Deloitte, "Common Ground Queensland's Supportive Housing Model," (2024): 18, <https://commongroundqld.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/CGQ-Supportive-Housing-Model-Report-FINAL-20240816.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Tom Alves et al., "Common Ground Housing Model: Practice Manual," *Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute*, (2021): 1-60, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/sites/default/files/documents/2022-02/AHURI-Common-Ground-Housing-Model-Practice-Manual.pdf>



Figure 2: Common Ground “Ozanam House” – Communal Kitchen⁴⁹

Common Ground has noted positive outcomes since its installation, with particular emphasis on housing retention and preventing re-entry into homelessness. Increased housing supply has contributed to expanded commercial opportunity for local businesses, as well as a resulting reduction in governmental costs.⁵⁰ Brisbane Common Ground (BCG) notes administrative cost reductions resulting from providing permanent supporting housing, estimating \$455,800 in savings per tenant over a ten year period.⁵¹ The Common Ground model is designed to benefit participants through increased health benefits, social cohesion, and feelings of safety and security.⁵² These benefits improve tenant life expectancy in providing services for those with chronic illness and mental health needs, while simultaneously reducing loneliness amongst participants. Integration of essential housing provision, supportive services, and social connectivity reveals to foster resident growth within a safe, home-like environment.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p.39.

⁵⁰ Department of Western Australia: Department of Housing and Works, “Common Ground Model.”

⁵¹ Deloitte, “Brisbane Common Ground,” (2024): 1-31, <https://www.deloitte.com/content/dam/assets-zone1/au/en/docs/services/economics/brisbane-common-ground-case-change-paper-2025-110225.pdf>

⁵² Ibid, p.19