

LIHIANE QWAF- TERS

Providing a fresh look on aged-care design, Living Quarters is a Sydney residential complex that houses retired nuns from the Catholic order Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul. Drawing on the communal living experience the sisters grew used to, the cleverly divided facility offers a village atmosphere with plenty of room for individual privacy and retreat.



Nick Harding obtained his B.Arch at University of South Australia, working at John Wardle Architects before establishing Ha in 2011. Guided by the core principles of longevity, community and sustainability, Harding facilitates projects of varying scales, spanning architecture, interior design, urban design and more.

Each dwelling is divided into two distinct areas: A private programme of these four en-suite bedrooms; and a public programme that includes a communal kitchen/living/dining space, bathroom, laundry, office and prayer room. The bedroom arrangement features views to the common garden area, openable windows and substantial natural light. Each indoor communal area also features framed views to the natural landscape – and across to the neighbouring dwelling. The outdoor dining table brings the two dwellings together and becomes the common hearth of the village. Smaller courtyards adjacent to the prayer room serve as a quiet retreat for one or two people. The shared garden doubles as the main arrival point to the village.

What priorities did the retiring sisters have for their new living space?

After previous dormitory-style housing projects, the Daughters of Charity approached us with a new development to house up to 20 of their retiring nuns. The location was Marsfield in suburban Sydney, where the organisation is based. A primary two-hectare block held the old convent and an existing aged-care facility. The retiring sisters were a unique group of prospective residents. Convent life had accustomed them to a high degree of communal living, many aspects of which they wished to retain. However, our preliminary interviews revealed a unanimous desire to leave dormitory life behind, and transition to a smaller scale of dwelling that better balanced the private with the communal. Furthermore, as the sisters had to be independent to be assigned to this accommodation, they specifically requested we avoid aged-care design. Another key requirement was design for longevity and durability, with no maintenance required. Despite the preference of the Daughters of Charity organisation to use two of their residential properties nearby, this proved unfeasible. So, we moved forward on the main property, on unused land adjacent to St Catherine’s aged-care facility. However, we continued to work on a design that would be significantly more residential in typology and go beyond typical aged care in Australia.

How did you balance of private and public space?

An equilibrium of public and private is inherent in the Living Quarters design. To maintain a human scale, we worked with the idea of one repeatable residential scale design that could be duplicated and inverted to create a village atmosphere. The opportunity to connect is balanced by the opportunity to retreat. Conceptually, the project is articulated as four quarters. Living quarters are, of course, the rooms where people live. And in each Living Quarters dwelling, a resident occupies one of four en-suite bedrooms: They literally have their own ‘quarter’ of the house.

Isolation is a huge issue in elderly communities, even among individuals who reside in retirement facilities. How can design help tackle this issue?

At a time of worsening social isolation among the elderly, the Living Quarters design facilitates a life of connection. The residents connect with each other. With nature. With their spiritual practice. And with the convent, just across the grounds, that was previously their home. These dwellings are houses – not hotels or hospitals. This fundamentally transforms the lived experience of the residents. But there are lessons that can be applied to larger retirement facilities – especially the importance of diverse communal spaces. With a range of spaces to choose from – from the intimate to the large-scale – it is more likely each resident will find somewhere they feel comfortable to interact with others.

Based on your experience with your project, what would you say are the most important pillars of designing healthy environments for retired communities?

An ageing community should feel like home. This means maintaining a human scale wherever possible. Another key is to design for interaction – creating a diversity of spaces and opportunities that encourage a social life. Living Quarters includes courtyards, nooks, gardens and communal indoor areas, all balanced by generous bedrooms and study spaces for private retreat. A relationship to the natural landscape is also crucial. As with all of our projects, we designed Living Quarters from the inside out. We specifically oriented the modular building designs to the east, ensuring existing native trees were the backdrop to the public living spaces.



Photos Clinton Weaver

Connection and privacy
coexist in this intimate retirement
village for Catholic nuns

