Creating a home

Smart technology plus key design and layout features allow facilities to adapt to the differing and changing needs of residents. NATASHA EGAN reports.

Bedrooms at Scalabrini Village Drummoyne include ceiling hoists and a programmable smart floor.

P rogrammable smart floors that discreetly monitor movements and detect falls along with ceiling hoists that aim to ensure the comfort and safety of residents are among the assistive technologies incorporated into all bedrooms at Scalabrini Village's newest facility in Drummoyne, Sydney.

Other technology includes keyless access to rooms, automated doors as well as automated colour-coded lifts throughout the four-level 126-bed facility, which opened in February,

The assistive technology helps the environment to adapt to the differing and changing abilities of residents, says Elaine Griffin, CEO of Scalabrini. The sensor floor within each bedroom, for example, is programmed according to the clinically assessed needs of individuals.

"We are aware of a resident's capability and how best to support them. The floor can be programmed accordingly so we can ensure we are not being intrusive, interrupting or disturbing their privacy unnecessarily. That freedom, privacy and dignity is important to us," Griffin tells *Australian Ageing Agenda*.

She says the ceiling hoists aim to ensure the comfort of residents, who have reported they feel more secure in a ceiling hoist than they do in the traditional lifters. This technology is also important for staff, says Griffin. "It minimises manual handling, which from a safety perspective is absolutely critical both for the residents and our staff."

While technology features strongly in the village, equally important has been the design and layout of the built environment, says Griffin.

"We have taken the view that we want to ensure that there is normalcy in the environment and the lifestyle at the village. We thought about that carefully in terms of both the built environment and also the technology."

As is becoming an increasing trend in the sector, Scalabrini's facility is designed around a cluster model to provide small-scale living, with

Scalabrini Village Drummoyne includes domestic-style kitchens, automated lifts and colour-coded doors.

residential spaces that uniquely surround an Italian-style piazza with a fountain at its centre.

"We have created small spaces that emphasise a feeling of home. Those spaces include things like kitchens, living spaces and balconies," she says.

Balcony access is particularly important, say Griffin. "If residents are not able to go downstairs to the main piazza area they can easily access outdoor space, breathe fresh air and all the rest of it."

The outdoor spaces downstairs also suit residents of all needs. "The flooring throughout all of the downstairs area is totally level. We wanted to provide our residents with freedom to move around easily. There are no steps anywhere."
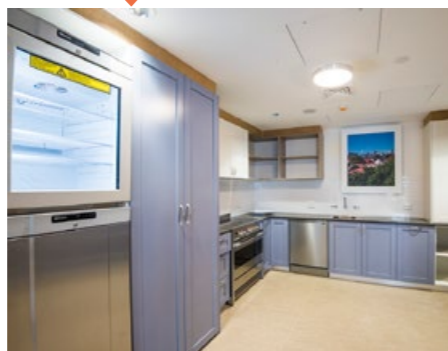
It means residents can easily join activities such as Tai Chi, visit and feed the chickens in the garden, and access the café and chapel, she says.

Aged care architect Nick Seemann says there are clever ways providers can use technology to make care less intrusive. "Scalabrini is a good example of technology being used effectively," Seemann tells *AAA*.

While technology can assist it doesn't address other issues, which are related to size and scale, access to the outdoors and wayfinding, says Seemann, director of Constructive Dialogue Architects.

A small-scale approach to living and socialising and being able to easily get outdoors and find the

way are the recurrent themes of environments designed for the health and wellbeing of aged care residents, says Seemann.

For providers, it is about how to bring the scale of the building and the scale of the social group down so rather than 40 people having a meal together, there are smaller groups of people, smaller spaces and smaller sizes of domestic fittings, he says.

In terms of access to the outdoors, it is more than "just having sunlight through windows but actually going outside" and "ideally to gardens but also out to decks and the community beyond," he says.

"[Wayfinding] has to do with finishes, different tonal contrasts, clear markers in the environment and things like lighting and reducing noise and clutter," he says.

Another important element is room configuration, says Seemann. Residents should be able to see where they want to go and how to get there, such as when walking out a bedroom door or what they can see from a living room. There also needs to be a strong contrast of tone "between a wall and a floor so it is easy to perceive where one stops and the other starts."

However, it is not about having a one-size-fits-all or universally-designed approach but rather "that staff are setting up each space or each room to the needs of the individual and that the staff are trained to do that," says Seemann.

When a resident moves in, minor changes to furniture, for example, can allow somebody to create a home, he says.

"It is up to the staff whether a building is cluttered or uncluttered or whether it is noisy or not noisy. The environment can amplify or help reduce that but it starts with an approach from staff about setting up and using a new environment and how they are supporting residents."

Returns on the investments

This kind of approach is mutually beneficial for residents and staff. "When you look at smaller scales of groups, they are nicer places to live and nicer places for people to work. The same issues that make it positive to go outside for residents are positive for staff. They make the spaces better. If your residents

are essentially living happier and more meaningful lives that is always going to be good for staff," says Seemann.

It is also cost-effective. Seemann points to Flinders University research published in June, which found that a smaller home-like cluster model of residential aged care had a positive impact on residents' health and wellbeing and did not cost more.

Griffin also agrees there is a strong business care for this kind of approach. While enhanced IT is certainly expensive, she says Scalabrini is taking a long-term view of the return on investment.

"We have done that given the competitive nature of the aged care industry. If we put these investments in place now and they last us and we continue to maintain competitiveness into the future, then it is worth it."

It is also about enabling residents to live their lives well and if putting smart systems in place help to do that it will also make a more attractive proposition, which is important for attracting residents and their families to the village, she says.

And it's not just new facilities that can benefit from good returns.

Grant Corderoy, senior partner at aged care accountancy and benchmarking organisation StewartBrown, says quality investment in existing facilities can bring good returns.

He told the Aged Care Reform after the 2018 Federal Budget in Sydney in July that StewartBrown is frequently asked about the difference betwen the top 25 per cent of facilities over the rest and why they do better.

About 80 per cent of the top 25 per cent of facilities are new or have had significant refurbishments built around an operational model that is effective, he says.

"They have invested back into the facility [but] not just in making it look nicer. They have changed the structure of the facility to make it operationally efficient as well as being appropriate for today's residents. They are the ones who are getting a greater return on their investment."

While it often means a major cost initially there is proof it can bring desired results in the future, but it is important to look beyond how well built it is to how operational it is, he says. ■