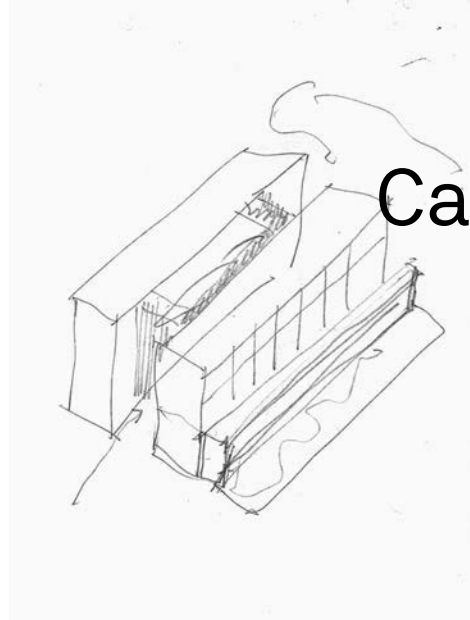


Estia House



Architect

Candalepas Associates

Review by Casey Bryant
Photography by Brett Boardman

A permanent residence for ten adults with disabilities, this group home in Sydney by Candalepas Associates demonstrates how a building designed specifically for group housing balances independence and care.





← With a philosophy that prioritizes people at its crux, Estia House is clear and thoughtful in its planning, fostering a community underpinned by socially inclusive care and independence.

← The building's facade is an elegant composition of concrete and splayed brick, with generous windows overlooking the numerous courtyards and gardens.

↘ The architecture of Estia House makes no suggestion that its residents should be housed differently – it is a space for them to live beyond their disabilities, where good domestic design elements are deployed.

Estia House by Candalepas Associates is a group home – a new model of care facility where people with intellectual and physical disabilities live together in a permanent environment. Group homes are increasing in favour over short-term respite care, due in part to the independence and sense of worth fostered in residents. People not normally able to live alone can create their own sense of home, live among constant neighbours and flourish within a system of socially inclusive care that prioritizes participation and self-sufficiency.

Group homes provide each resident with their own room, furnished with their belongings. Everyone moves around the house as they please and social interaction is encouraged by gathering for meals and activities. The care is passive and residents choose how they fill their time with activities such as cooking, gardening or reading. The aim is for people who normally require constant attention, and for whom privacy may be an issue, to enjoy individuality, a sense of achievement and a low-stress environment within which many of their ailments become less acute.

This innovative policy, created by experienced and mindful caregivers, is being bolstered by funding from the recent National Disability Insurance Scheme. Traditionally, group homes have been conversions of suburban houses and have not yet become a recognized “type” of architecture. However, this project shows how a building designed specifically for this new policy can create a wonderful and healing place to live.

Located in Gladesville, Sydney, Estia House is a permanent home for ten adults with disabilities such as Down syndrome, cerebral palsy and severe autism spectrum disorder. There is a permanent support staff, of whom at least three are usually on site. Each resident has their own room and most go

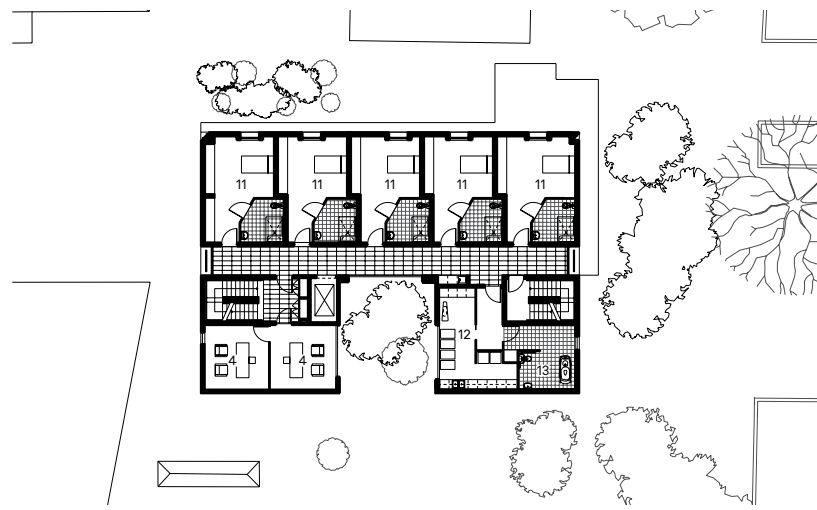
to day work programs, for which the house provides packed lunches and personal transport. The staff organize beach trips, picnics, arts and crafts and movie nights. They also organize healthcare – visits to specialists and regular appointments such as dental. Family and friends are welcome to visit.

Estia House is clear and thoughtful in its planning. On the ground floor is a central living and dining room, off which is a small kitchen. This is the heart of the house – a space for sharing meals, learning to cook, playing games, watching TV or drawing. It is wonderfully lit by an elegant facade of splayed brick and dappled glazing that opens northward to a sunny courtyard and garden. To the south, a main corridor is lit by a tall, south-facing garden and feeds quickly into offices, services and circulation and outside to the front entry and the church next door. The corridor is wide so friends can stop and chat, wheelchairs can pass by without fuss and everyone can easily be seen.

Upstairs, two floors of five bedrooms each benefit from a northern aspect and the same articulated brick and concrete facade. Each room is simple and practical and thus flexible to suit each resident's lifestyle. For example, in one room the wide entry is a space for art – a private painting wall for works the owner wishes to perfect before sharing. In another the entry space houses a sofa and small table – perfect for that person's family to visit and have long chats over tea.

The main corridor is repeated on each of the floors, acting as access to the rooms. But beyond this simple role, the corridors and their large windows are crucial in the operation of this building and aid the staff in caring for those who live here. The staff offices – discrete from the corridor so as not to intrude – all look obliquely through the open garden and down the length

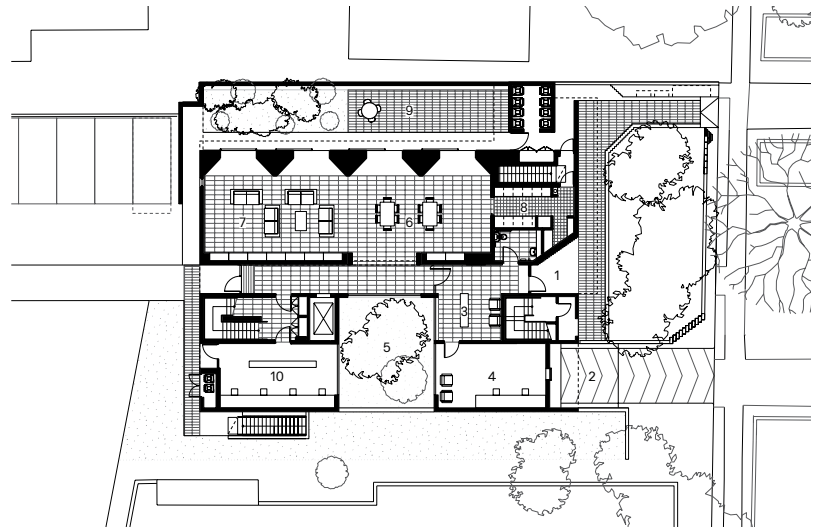




Level one floor plan
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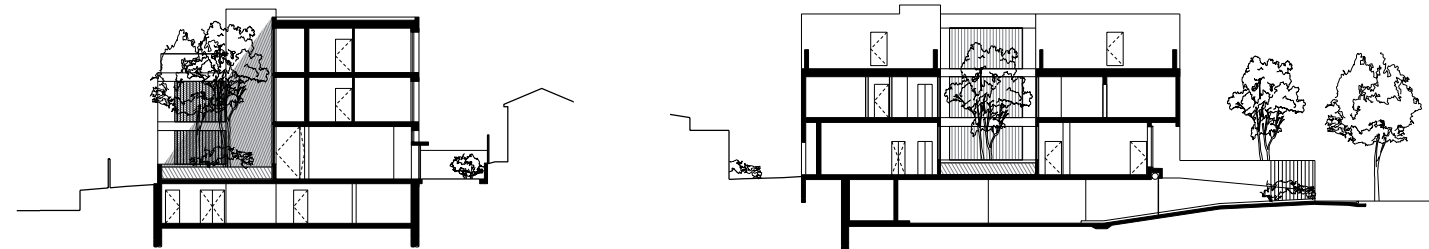
Key

- 1 Entry
- 2 Basement car park entry
- 3 Reception
- 4 Office
- 5 Landscaped courtyard
- 6 Dining
- 7 Shared living room
- 8 Kitchen
- 9 Communal courtyard
- 10 Meeting room
- 11 Resident bedroom
- 12 Laundry
- 13 Hydrotherapy room

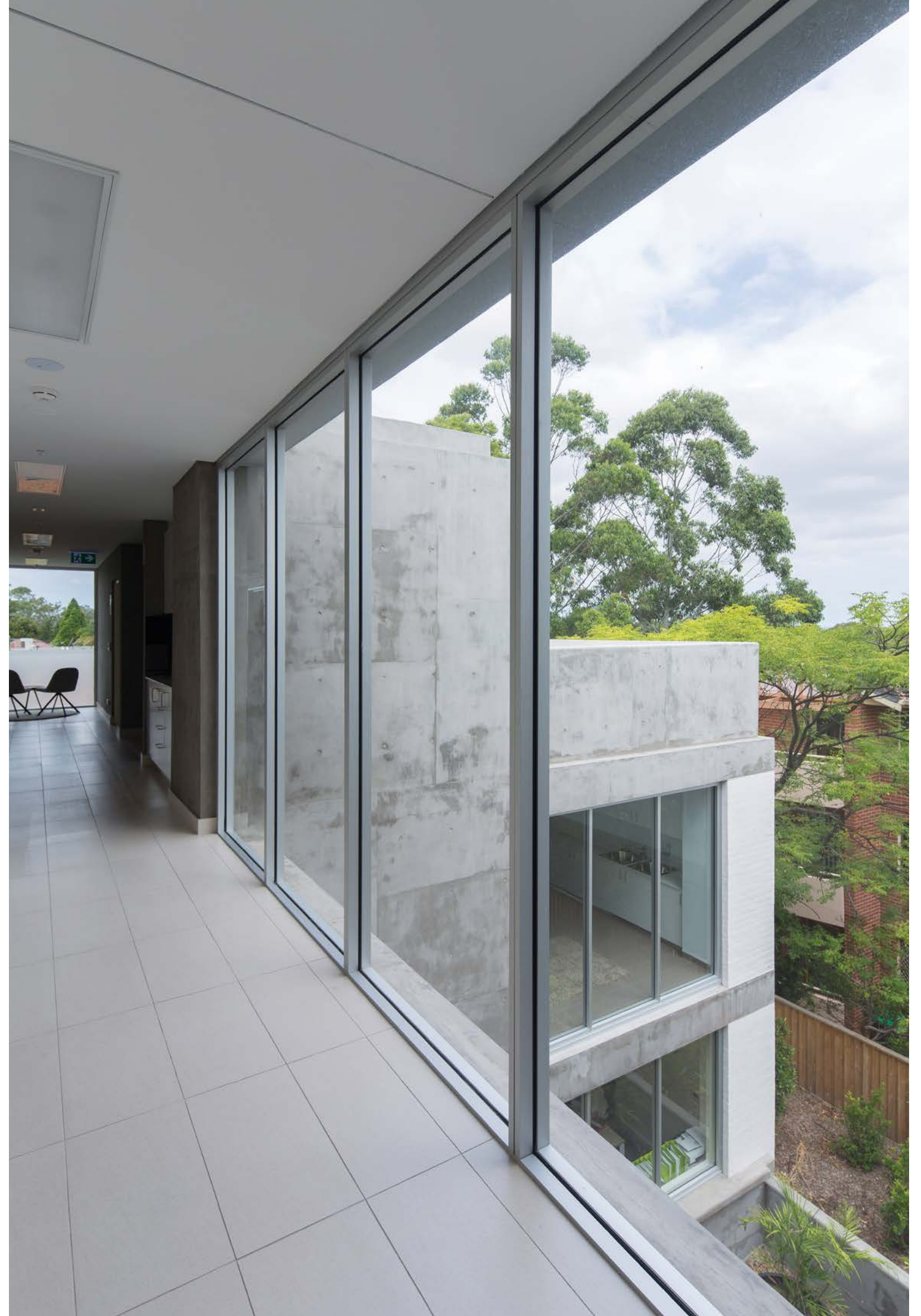


Ground floor plan
1:300

→ Lit by tall, south-facing windows, the main corridor is repeated on all three floors and is crucial to the role of staff in caring for the people who live at Estia House. Kitchenettes and furniture in the corridors offer places for retreat or connection.



Sections
1:300



of each corridor. From here, staff can quickly respond if someone is upset or if an issue might be brewing. The corridor is also a place of retreat if an activity, or another personality, becomes overwhelming. Small kitchenettes, collections of furniture and the generous windows viewing the suburbs beyond make these places appealing to visit.

Finally, the corridor helps to destigmatize the overt care facilities of this building. Its openness encourages residents to visit the laundry to do their own washing or take themselves to a session in the hydrotherapy room. The planning of spaces allows the residents control of their own lives, while giving staff the watchful eye required to adequately care for them.

When asked if this building is a new type of care architecture, architect Angelo Candalepas says that his design process deliberately ignores established typologies. He sees this as no different from his other buildings – be they apartments, houses or schools. “People are the only important thing,” he says. “Light and the plan” are his tools to design space for any function. It is clear then why this building is so successful – the philosophy of a group home is also the prioritization of people. The community builds personal resilience and uses it as a tool for caring.

However, designing for a specific group of people requires accommodating their specific needs. A group home is not simply a converted house; it requires a heightened level of observation, safety and accessibility for a disabled resident. There are elements dangerous to the residents, such as the kitchen, that most care facilities deem off limits. Herein lies the dilemma – how to balance independence and care. It would be irresponsible not to take people’s disabilities into account when planning for their safety, but excessive control ruins their freedom and often exacerbates their conditions.

Estia House solves this dilemma with clever elements inspired by good domestic design. Right outside the commercial kitchen – which is off limits without supervision – there is a large island bench where residents can be involved in cooking without exposure to danger. At this bench they help pack lunches, wash up dishes and set the table. One resident is learning to cook a traditional family recipe. Everyone enjoys these times and a roster is made to ensure everyone gets a go. Similar to the kitchen, the numerous gardens are visible from anywhere in the building and so can be used at any time – not only during allotted “outdoors time.” These are common traits of well-designed homes.

It is no surprise then that when you visit Estia House, you quickly feel welcomed in a homelike environment. Residents and staff are proud of their building. They enjoy light and ventilation and feel that their home is the same as anyone else’s. The architecture creates no suggestion that the people who live here are different or that they should be housed differently. It is a home for people who cannot make their own home – a space for them to live beyond their disabilities.

So successful has this building been that its operators have commissioned Candalepas Associates to design another that will follow the same model. While some locals were hesitant about people with disabilities living in their neighbourhood, the outcomes of Estia House were used as evidence for the success of such a community. Candalepas Associates may not be forming a new typology, but its architecture is enabling and inspiring a new approach to housing – and caring – for people in need.

— Casey Bryant is a director of Sydney-based emerging practice Trias.

↳ Each resident has their own room that is simple, practical and malleable to suit their individual lifestyle.



Architect Candalepas Associates; Project team Angelo Candalepas, Adrian Curtin, Alex Dircks, Louis Fauchoux, Eugene Soler; Builder Citi Building; Structural engineer Australian Consulting Engineers; Hydraulic and fire engineer Niven Donnelly and Partners; Accessibility consultant Morris Goding Access Consulting; Electrical and mechanical engineer Engineering Partners