

A PLACE OF BELONGING: REFLECTIONS ON BEING A MEMBER OF THE TAIERI BLOKES SHED

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INTRODUCTION

Occupational therapy recognizes the transactional relationship between person, occupation, and environment (place) as a key determinant of health and well-being. When place affords the occupational wants and needs of individuals, and collectives, subsequent health, and wellbeing benefits result. This paper examines this transactional relationship at the Taieri Blokes Shed, a community that is part of the Men's Shed Movement. The Men's Shed movement originated in Australia as a way of addressing older men's health and well-being issues through engagement in meaningful trade based occupations. Shed Members work shoulder to shoulder on constructive work projects for the benefit of the wider local community, their Shed, and themselves. Research on Men's Sheds indicates a number of benefits related to health, well-being, education, and vocational training for those who are active in these communities. The aim of this study was to understand the culture of The Taieri Blokes Shed as viewed through an occupational lens, in turn capturing the benefits of active membership. An ethnographic methodology was used where the author was a participant observer over a six-month period, after which qualitative theme checking interviews were conducted with six selected Shed members. Cultural records and secondary sources were also used to inform findings. Findings revealed constructive work was the reason individuals joined this community and attended on a regular basis. Constructive work is organized into projects that have identified purpose and meaning, benefiting the wider community, the individual member, and the Shed. The Taieri Blokes Shed is a place, which has been fashioned to afford constructive work and community. Engagement in constructive work projects facilitates occupational identity and satisfaction, social inclusion and community contribution. Findings are discussed in relation to the link between place, occupation, health and well-being. Implications for occupational therapy are acknowledged.

Background

Of all the clubs, I've ever been in my life, and there are quite a few, this is easily the most united in its members and its aims, without doubt'

(Taieri Blokes Shed Member)

Men's Sheds are places centered on occupations of constructive work, where members are male and often retired from full time paid employment. The author was a participant observer at one Men's Shed, The Taieri Blokes Shed, for six months in 2011, and drew additional understandings from qualitative interviews with selected members. Background information is provided on occupational therapies understanding of the transactional relationship between person, occupation, and environment (place), the Men's Shed movement, and the Taieri Blokes Shed. The methodology of this research is outlined and the findings are presented and discussed in relation to occupational therapy's philosophical beliefs about the interconnectedness of person, place, and occupation, and the association to health and well being.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the last three decades, the occupational therapy profession has focused increasingly on the quality of place as well as how these qualities contribute to health and well-being through the enablement of meaningful and purposeful occupation (Kielhoner, 2008; Ulrich et al., 2008; Dunn, Haney, Brown, & Youngstrom, 2003; Gitlin, 2003; Rowles, 2003; Corcoran & Gitlin, 1997). More specifically occupational therapy research, and practice, has attended to place as a factor in the spatial-temporal patterns of an individuals, or collectives, lifeworld. Where lifeworld is a phenomenological topic that looks at the everyday world, that which is taken for granted, or generally unnoticed (Finlay, 2008; Toombs, 2001; Seamon, 1979).

In the broadest sense, place is a defined area of space, where perceptions are fluid, associated with occupations that have happened, are happening, or will happen in the future. Individual and collective human occupation is central to our attaching meaning to places. What begins, as undifferentiated space becomes 'place' as we get to know it better and endow it with value (Relph, 1976, 2008). Place is an environmental locus, gathering meaning, intention, and action (Casey, 2009; Malpas, 1999; Relph, 2008, 1976). Places allow, or require us, to engage in occupation, realizing who we are, what we can achieve, and how we belong. Places guide our doing, being, becoming, and belonging (Wilcock, 1998). The places we access on a regular and routine basis provide insight into how we are occupied and what we value in life. Alongside this understanding is awareness that loss of place, or barriers and presence in place, have substantial impact on a person's identity and their physical and mental health.

The occupational therapy profession sees enablement of occupational performance and subsequent realization of health and well-being as being dependent on the transactional relationship between person, occupation, and environment (place) (Law, Cooper, Strong, Stewart, Rigby, & Letts, 2016).

Occupational situations have three components: places, people (with their attributes, thoughts, feelings, and memories), and the occupations in which the people engage. Thus the link between person, place, and occupation is so strong that one cannot consider occupations without considering they involve people in places.

(Hamilton, 2010, p.252)

Occupational therapy comprises working with individuals, and groups, to enable occupation engagement in place, often following injury, disability or complications arising from ageing or health events. This practice involves analysis and adaptation of occupational tasks or the environment (place) to support engagement. Sometimes the focus is on assisting reengagement in familiar places, at other times it may require supporting individuals, and significant others, to manage transition of place from the familiar to the unfamiliar; while acknowledging what has been lost (occupational transition). Occupational therapists accesses, and advocate for, place orientated communities that provide health, and well-being benefits for those they work with. In this paper an occupational lens is applied to one community, the Taieri Blokes Shed, which provides a number of health and well-being benefits for its members. The Taieri Blokes Shed is a physical defined place that is bestowed with meaning through individual and collective engagement in purposeful constructive occupations. It is a place associated with the wider Men's Shed movement.

The men's shed movement

The Men's Shed movement originated in South Australia in the early 1990s with a subsequent proliferation of Sheds throughout Australia, New Zealand, Ireland and the United Kingdom. Most Sheds have 'grass roots' origins in local communities that contribute to their individual association with the geographic region and its unique profile. Retired elderly males working 'shoulder to shoulder' on construction projects benefiting their local community, their Sheds, and themselves predominantly populate men's Sheds. At the time of writing over 60 Shed communities, exist throughout New Zealand with the majority affiliated with MENZSHED New Zealand (<http://menzshed.org.nz>) a registered charity that provides national support for Member Sheds, assisting governance structures and facilitating public access. Each Shed community has their own individual flavor based on their membership, the work they undertake, and the wider district in which they are situated.

There is a growing body of research on the Men's Shed Movement, predominantly based in the Australian context. Men's Sheds are viewed in the literature as meaningful community based organisations that offer health and well-being benefits to those who attend. Early research on the movement focused on the quantifiable health, education, and vocation benefits resulting from Shed membership (Golding, 2009; Golding, 2008; Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey & Gleeson, 2007; Golding, 2006). More recent research conducted by Moylan, Blackburn, Leggat, Robinson, Carey and Hayes (2011) established that the collaborative nature of the Men's Shed contributes to the health and well-being of participants as does the sense of purpose provided by the work and the structure it provides for participants. Additional studies have also provided evidence of the physical, mental and emotional health benefits of the Men's Shed movement and include, Fildes, Fildes, Cass, Wallner and Owen, (2010); Ormsby, Stanley and Jaworski (2010); Morgan (2010) and Ballinger, Talbot and Verrinder (2009).

The Men's Shed Movement: The Company of Men provides a definitive overview of the development of the Men's Shed movement. Golding (2015) acknowledges that Men's Sheds provide social inclusion for men (commonly retired men) because of the multiple benefits derived from men working in a community that does together. What Men's Sheds provide in relation to social inclusion and active participation links to identify requirements for successful retirement and wellness in ageing (Koopman-Boyden & Wadegrave, 2007). What is important is finding the right match between the needs of the individual and the affordances of the Men's Shed community. Men's Sheds, although having recognised benefits, are communities not health care, or therapy facilities. Golding (2015) states "[i]n practice most Men's Sheds welcome and admit men of any age or background, with a range of disabilities, though many are reluctant to take men as regular workshop participants if they require high level care without the support of a regular carer" (p. 379).

There are limited studies of Men's Sheds within occupational therapy. Martin and Wicks (2008) studied the experiences of meaningful occupation of members of one Shed, The Berry Men's Shed. More recently Wicks (2013) has documented a transactional view of Shedding, highlighting its complexity and multidimensional nature, which have associations to the findings of this research.



Figure 1. Exterior of *Taieri Blokes' Shed*. Source: Author

The Taieri blokes' shed- a brief overview

The Taieri Blokes Shed is located in Mosgiel, Dunedin, and is part of the wider Men's Shed movement. The Taieri Blokes Shed is a community that has assisted a group of men to cope with the transition from paid employment to retirement. For the majority of members this transition has meant the loss of routine engagement in familiar work places, farms, or rural communities. Many members have moved to Mosgiel after retirement. This move posed unforeseen barriers to engagement in chosen occupations and social interaction. Mosgiel is a small town of 10,000 persons situated fifteen kilometers southwest of Dunedin (Figure 2).

All members of The Taieri Blokes Shed, from here on referred to as The Shed, are male with an average age of 75 years. Roughly half of the members have trades-based employment backgrounds; with others having work, home and community construction histories, as well as this, a number of members are retired farmers. Over 70% live with wives and partners while the remainder live alone. The members of The Shed are, in general, mobile and independent. Many manage health issues common to their age group including, hearing impairments, vision loss, and reduced mobility.

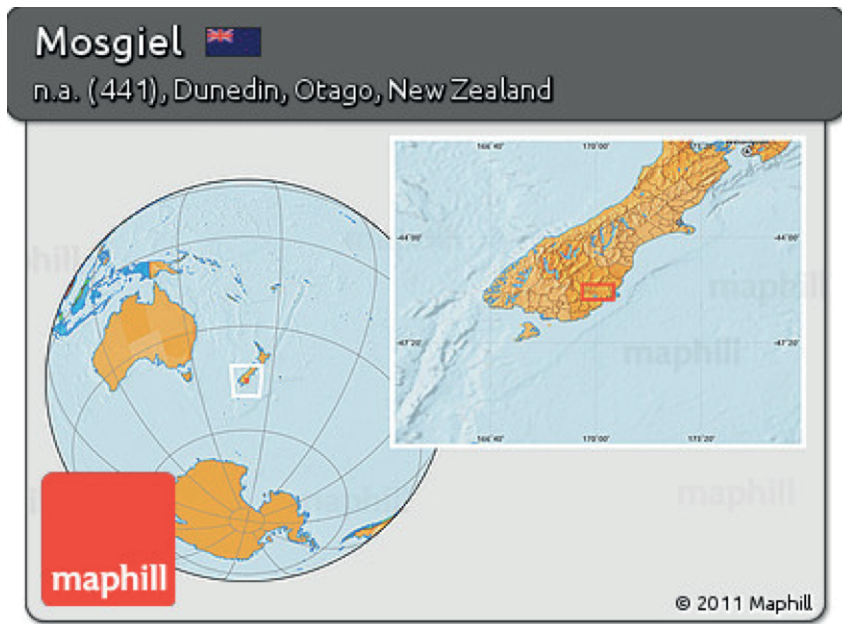


Figure 2. Mosgiel, Otago, New Zealand. Source: Maphill (2017)

Research aim

The primary aim of this study was to understand the culture of the Taieri Blokes Shed viewed through an occupational lens. This viewpoint directed focus on comprehending the following areas:

- Occupations that are attributed meaning and purpose by Shed Members.
- The structuring of occupation in relation to members (persons), and the environment (place)
- Health and well-being benefits derive from active occupational engagement
- The Sheds connection to the wider Otago community

Through understanding these areas subsequent links can be made to the wider Men's Shed movement and occupational therapy

METHODOLOGY

This research used an ethnographic methodology. Ethnographical research aims to represent the nature of people within social collectives and demands the researcher's immersion within a community of interest, which involves enactment of social roles and relationships, which places the self (researcher) at the heart of the enterprise (Coffey, 1999, p. 23). Although an ethnographic methodology was used, this is not a traditional anthropologic study. This research is underpinned by key philosophies and concepts from the fields of occupational therapy and occupational science.

This research documents and interprets the culture of the Taieri Blokes Shed. An analysis of the Shed community from an insider (emic) and outsider (etic) perspective is provided. An emic approach is an insider's view and captures how people think within a community or culture (Kottak, 2006), how they perceive the world, categorise, imagine and explain events and proceedings. An etic approach recognises that members of a culture are so involved in what they are doing that cannot be impartial in interpreting their culture. An etic approach shifts the viewpoint from the member of the culture to the researcher and what they consider to be important (Kottak, 2006). An occupational perspective informed the etic view.

Data collection

Data (empirical material) were collected in this research by employing three primary methods: participant observation, qualitative interviewing, and analysis of cultural artifacts. Secondary data sources were examined to broaden understanding of the wider context of the research and the Men's Shed movement. The researcher was a participant observer at the Taieri Shed for six months and following this conducted six qualitative theme-checking interviews with selected Shed members.

Data analysis

Although there are multiple approaches to the detailed analysis of data collected in ethnographic research the basic mechanics are relatively straightforward. Figure 3 provides a summary of the data analysis procedure. Data collection and analysis often happen simultaneously when the researcher is trying to make sense of what they are observing as it happens (the here and now).

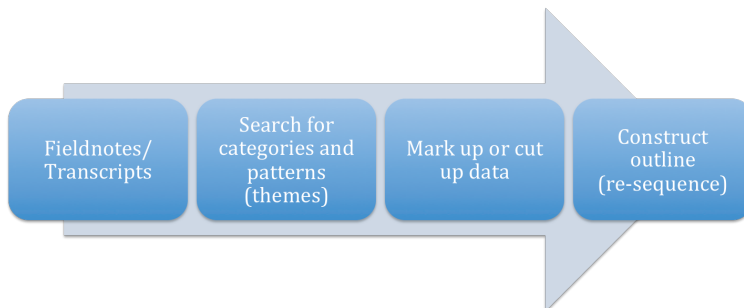


Figure 3. Data Analysis Summary for Ethnographic Research Source: Fielding (2011, p.27)

In this research, all empirical materials were subjected to an analytical phase using the 'Framework' matrix-based tool for qualitative data analysis developed by the Qualitative Research Unit at the National Centre for Social Research in the United Kingdom. This tool requires the organisation of data into a series of matrices from which a thematic analysis is conducted (marking up and constructing outline). It aims to organize and manage empirical data. Matrices assisted in the generation of meaning and interpretations (Smith & Firth 2011).

Ethics approval

Ethical approval for this research was granted by the Otago Polytechnic Ethics Committee in October 2011.

FINDINGS

Research findings are included under three identified areas of benefit for members of the shed, meaningful and purposeful occupation; social inclusion; and community contribution. These areas of benefit are realised through regular engagement, alongside others, in the physical setting of the Taieri Blokes Shed.

Meaningful and purposeful occupation

For many members engagement in constructive work at The Shed directly links to their previous identities as tradesmen, farmers, or home repair peoples' occupational identities that are compromised because, of retirement. Kielhofner (2008) defines occupational identity as "... a composite sense of who one is and wishes to become as an occupational being generated from one's history of occupational participation. One's volition, habituation, and experience as a lived body are all integrated into occupational identity" (p. 106).

Constructive work provides challenge and enables them to realise their skills and knowledge, gaining occupational satisfaction. Occupational satisfaction is about getting what one wants out of occupational pursuits, achieving flow where challenge meets skill, while finding balance with other occupational life requirements (Morgan, 2010). Project work offers opportunity for teaching and learning roles as well as management and governance roles. There is a strong work ethic within the Shed membership, where application to task and the quality of end products is enforced. Projects are allocated, after discussion amongst the membership, to a work team where a leader is appointed based on required skills.

All members of the Taieri Blokes Shed are able to have a say about decisions that are made in relation to community projects, Shed design and maintenance, social activities, and funding applications. Equality is a core value as is self-governance. The Shed has elected representatives in the roles of president, vice president, secretary, and treasurers as well as media liaison. These roles provide a structure for Shed processes and those elected to these positions are often done so in recognition of their past employment skills and community involvements. Members in these roles recognised that these roles are additional to constructive work and have a clear purpose that benefited The Shed. On reflection, the members in these roles found they provided meaningful occupation, although not without frustrations.

Workshop spaces are highly organised to afford specific activities (woodwork, painting, metalwork). Storage areas are clearly defined and health and safety policies are in place for machinery use, layout, and the lighting and ventilation of work areas. This organisation is reflective of members past work experience and is formalised in the policies and procedures of the Shed.

Involvement in The Shed has helped address occupational deprivation for many members. Occupational deprivation is a state in which members were unable to disseminate the practical skills they had being restricted from doing with others (Whiteford, 2000). For the majority of members restrictions came with retirement; including not having access to a workshop environment and tools; no longer having a reason to make and create moving to a new area where knowledge of services, supports and social connections are diminished. Retiring from paid employment or moving from known communities affected the occupational identity and balance of members. This is not to say individuals were doing nothing before Shed membership. However, active involvement at the Taieri Blokes Shed provides a structure to access social support, and to do meaningful work in which they can identify. For some, Shed membership has added to already active lives. For others it filled a large gap in their weekly routine.

With the transition from paid employment to retirement, a number of members talked about finding ways of productively using their time as opposed to just passing time.

We've got a lot of people with a lot of experience and they're living in their little corners. I live in my shed, you live in your fiat, and you do your crossword puzzle in the morning and you walk down to the shop and you walk back and you're really just decaying away health wise and mentally, and all this resource knowledge you have is not being disseminated

(Bob)

'When you work over 40 hours per week, for over 40 years of your life, it can come as a bit of a shock to the system when that finishes and you find yourself with a lot of time on your hands'

(John)

There is a robust belief amongst members that constructive work is the key to realising other benefits of social inclusion and community contribution.



Figure 4. Members of the Taieri Blokes Shed Source: Author

Social inclusion

For several members, the initial attraction of The Shed was access to tools and 'work' opportunities they did not have at home, due to downsizing homes (land, garaging, and workshops) and retiring from paid employment. Yet the health and connectedness of The Shed community requires that the focus move beyond individual gain to reciprocity in the conduct of not only constructive work but also social engagement. Presence in The Shed as a place is essential, sharing time together 'at work' and socially.

With the transition from paid or self-employment, to retirement, and moving to Mosgiel, members talked about being isolated from previous social networks. The Shed, although not the complete solution to these issues, has helped members find a routine and valued social network in their retirement.

The Shed provided a chance to make new friends as we've recently moved to Mosgiel. Mosgiel properties, particularly in the new regions, all have high fences and the only time you see your neighbour is when you go in the street ... we came from the place where you had low fences and were in constant communication with our neighbours so we found it quite a struggle when we moved here

(Don)

Smoko is an anchor point for the daily activities of The Shed. Within New Zealand the term smoko has its origins in the cigarette breaks taken in military service. Over time it has been altered to include coffee breaks and outdoor rests. The term is used primarily in New Zealand amongst the building and manufacturing communities ("Smoko," 2017). Smoko occurs during every morning session between 10-10.30am. The smoko room is a room that is separate from the workshop areas. There is a clear physical definition in regards workshop and social/meeting places. There is an expectation that all members take a break for smoko.

Smoko puts the social side of The Shed to the forefront. Smoko is a time when general Shed information is passed on to the members including up-coming out-of Shed events. Wider community relationships and significant personal milestones are acknowledged. Smoko provides a time when members catch up and visitors, or potential members, can be included,

We put a lot of emphasis on our lounge room and having morning tea there. Just the fellowship we have in that room. People can sit beside different people at morning tea and you talk about things. That lounge or smoko room is the making of The Taieri Shed

(Don)

The way members shared information at The Shed indicates good networks of communication outside of The Shed. If someone is absent for more than a few sessions it is likely they will be phoned by a Shed member;

Anyone's only got to be sick or have a partner in the hospital or something and there are always two or three enquiring how they are, or can they help

(Colin)

There is emphasis on mixing as a group at The Shed as well as including wives and partners in regular social events in the wider community. Shed members share in each other's lives. Meaning is also found through contribution to their local community.

Community contribution

Being of use to others is the other key benefit recognised by The Shed members. As a non-profit organisation members are aware of not competing with local businesses, aiming to be of use to other non-profit groups, and individuals, in the local area. Projects are designed and built for purpose. Pride is taken to ensure projects are durable, reliable, affordable, and well finished. The membership understands that there are limits to the projects they can take on, given the parameters of their own resources.

This is a community where things get done and people know what you do. We're happy to take on community projects within our ability. It should never be an intention to do things to make money ...Community connections come with the project work

(Neil)

There are identified procedures within The Shed to liaise with the wider community about project work. This relationship starts when there is a project enquiry. If the project is commissioned a person or persons are delegated to liaise with the community until completion. The members of the Shed are conscious that The Shed needs to be visible in its local community. The members of The Shed makes themselves available to local media and have regular stories published in local and regional newspapers and magazines, which along with word of mouth from project work, helps to generate new members and ongoing projects. Finished projects are delivered to community groups and individuals. These parties are often invited to The Shed to discuss projects. The support The Shed has is evident in not only the media coverage they receive but also through the numerous, cards letters, and morning tea shouts local groups have provided in appreciation. In addition to contributing to the local community two members are active in assisting other Men's Shed with the logistics of setting up services, and helping structure governance. Having experienced the benefits of involvement in a Men's Shed they are committed to offering others these opportunities.

DISCUSSION

Membership of the Taieri Blokes Shed provides access to a place where members feel valued; where they can learn and share skills with the support of others; and where they can contribute to their wider community. Membership of The Taieri Blokes Shed requires productivity as well as engaging on a social level, where members value each other's company, care for one another, and can tolerate difference.

As with other Men's Sheds constructive work is the anchoring occupation. Shared occupations are the basis of all communities (Poplin, 1994). There is an understanding, within The Shed, that the main purpose of The Shed is productivity. As such the physical place, the workshop areas, have been built to afford constructive activities while also considering safety, accessibility and the storage of materials and equipment. Constructive work provides the platform for social inclusion and community contribution. For individuals to achieve personal benefit, including health and well-being benefits, they must finding a match between their own occupational identity and needs, and the ethos of The Shed. Men's Sheds are not for everyone.

The Taieri Blokes Shed offers something that other retirement activities do not. This is not a sporting pursuit, a golf, croquet or bowls club. It is not a place to commune and engage with others who have served in the military like the Returned Service Mens' Association. It is not based on beneficence through fundraising and business connection like the Rotary and Lions clubs. The Shed is a place where the focus is squarely on constructive work, where members plan, design, build and engineer alongside others who share these interests, or these skills, however acquired. Within the Men's Shed literature there is recognition of the centrality of meaningful constructive work to productive involvement of Shed members, many of who are making life transitions (Golding 2009; Martin & Wicks, 2008).

The Shed provides a community where members reconnect, or remain connected to, an occupational identity that includes constructive work and community work, where engagement provides occupational satisfaction, autonomy, and positive recognition from others. These are known factors in enabling wellbeing in retirement and wellness in ageing (Koopman-Boyden & Wadegrave, 2007). The Shed provides the opportunity to connect, not only with their previous occupational experiences but also to people with similar interests, skills and knowledge. These connections are instrumental in preserving and growing occupational participation following transition/retirement (Klinger, 2005).

The Shed offers regular, routine occupation that is set in place. And a necessity in orchestrating successful transition to retirement (Wiseman & Whiteford, 2009).

Men's Sheds succeed when they are self-governing and the products of their industry serves local communities, growing from 'the grass roots', rather than being prescribed or requiring the ongoing facilitation of a third party (Golding, 2015). Men's Sheds are not intended as places to hide; they are not refuges from the outside world. Men's Sheds need to be open to new projects, new members and their local community.

There is a strong synergy between what Men's Sheds can offer and occupational therapy's core belief about engagement in meaningful occupation as a determinant of health and well-being. Given this complementarity, the profession has a role in advocating for the Men's Shed movement. However, this does not mean occupational therapists should be involved in the day-to-day activities of Shed Communities. Giving the findings of this and other research there is value placed on self-governance and control. Occupational therapy can offer support in the form of research (such as this study), which in turn could benefit advocacy, funding and governmental recognition of the movement. Occupational therapists may choose to provide practical support and become involved with Sheds at a local level. Support of the Men's Shed movement is in line with the World Federation of Occupational Therapies positioning on human and occupational rights. Their position states that all people have the right to access and participate in occupations that enable them to be involved in the community and find satisfaction in occupations that have educative, productive, social and restorative benefit (Position Statement on Human Rights, 2006).

Practical occupational therapy support may include projects such as the ones completed by students of the Otago Polytechnic Occupational Therapy School (tool drives, advertising pamphlets). Where appropriate practitioners should look to build relationships with local Men's Sheds informing the referral persons who might benefit from membership. Sheds relationships have the potential to be reciprocal. For example, given the body of knowledge and skills at the Taieri Blokes Shed there is an ability to make aids, devices and products for groups and individuals that occupational therapists work with. The Taieri Shed has already completed a number of projects for disability communities such as CCS and Riding for the Disabled. Men's Sheds have the potential to take on some of the project work traditionally conducted by occupational therapy workshops, especially if a need cannot be addressed by commercial equipment.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this study, although limited to one Men's Shed, complements and expands on the body of research. The Taieri Blokes Shed provides a place where members feel valued; where they can learn and share skills with the support of others; and where they can contribute to wider society. The Shed is non-hierarchical, self-funding, and strongly affiliated with the local community. Benefits depend on individuals finding a match between their own needs and the ethos of The Shed. Membership means associating on a social level where men value each other's company, care for one another, and can tolerate difference. As with other Men's Sheds constructive work is the anchoring occupation.

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