



## Learn to Innovate – European lessons on designing for ageing well

In this viewpoint, we have collated the three blogs Sonia Parol wrote as part of Urban Edge's ongoing research to develop innovative senior living schemes in our towns and cities.

As part of this research, she spent some time visiting care homes and retirement living schemes in Europe that are taking a different approach to those found in the UK.

In the first of her visits, Sonia shares some of her observations from two urban care homes in Copenhagen that actively encourage social connection through the provision of shared and social spaces.

In her second visit she went to the Netherlands to see two care homes, De Hoegweyk and Humanitas, that have placed the happiness and wellbeing of residents at the centre of their design and operation. Both schemes are highly successful, yet differ greatly from models commonly found in the UK.

And in the final part of her 'learning to innovate' series, she and students from Lincoln University explore the lessons learned from their visit to the Humanitas centre in Deventer, Netherlands.

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## Part 1: Learning to Innovate – Copenhagen

One of the key observations we made at the last year's [Housing LIN annual conference](#) was that the senior living sector in the UK is at a pivotal moment: it is a sector that recognises the changing needs and expectations of its core demographic and is interested in innovation and evolution. Yet to do this, it must seek to challenge the rules and change the concepts that we have been applying to senior living schemes for years.

That the sector is poised to embrace innovation was good to hear as it backs up our long-held view that we need to find innovative new solutions for the people coming into retirement age now as they will have completely different lifestyle expectations to those that went before. For some time in the UK, the retirement or care sector has been focused at the high end of the market – luxurious care and retirement villages, often located in rural locations. These developments may suit the silent generation, who perhaps haven't travelled far and have worked and saved to feel safe and secure; but the baby boomers who are now entering retirement, who were brought up in the revolutionary era of The Beatles and the Stones and have often travelled widely are increasingly demanding the opportunity to engage in the social and economic life of the wider community. They want to live in urban and suburban areas and continue to lead an independent lifestyle, maintain and build new friendships, participate in community activities.

At Urban Edge Architecture we are interested in developing innovative senior living schemes in our towns and cities that actively encourage social connection through the provision of shared and social spaces. We want to create communities where young and old can live side by side, both benefiting from the social, cultural and economic opportunities of a multigenerational community. We are therefore always keen to further our knowledge of these types of development and, over the last six months, we have travelled to other parts of Europe to visit care homes and senior living schemes where there is a physical connection with the wider community. This ongoing research not only allows us a better understanding of the advantages of these schemes, but also to consider the challenges and how these could be overcome. After all, as physicist William Pollard once famously said: "Learning and innovation go hand in hand."

In September last year we embarked on a study tour to Copenhagen where our first port of call was to [OK-Huset Lotte](#) in the Frederiksberg district of the city. This state-funded, 60-resident dementia care home lies just 15 minutes' car journey from the main city centre and, upon arrival, it is immediately striking how different a model it is to those that we see in the UK. Lotte is designed over six floors and is very contemporary in style – the furniture, for instance, is very modern and minimalistic in keeping with the Scandinavian vernacular. The reason for this is simple: the majority of the residents were from Copenhagen and would have lived in apartments in the city before moving to Lotte and therefore the surroundings and living accommodation would have been recognisable to them.

The ability for residents to remain in the area where they had lived also meant that their neighbours who were still living independently could easily come to visit, ensuring a continuous and seamless connection to their local community. Whilst much store is set, quite rightly, on maintaining connections with family, it has to be recognised that a connection with your neighbours and friends is also very important. If you remove a person from one place to live in a care home that is 100 or even 50 miles away from where they were living then you break their connections with the community. In Copenhagen, having care homes in rural locations as well as in city centres and other urban locations gives people a choice to remain in the

community in which they lived. This couldn't be in starker contrast to many of the senior living and care home facilities we see in the UK, which often isolate older people from their local communities.

Physical connection to the local community couldn't be better exemplified than at the [Bomi-Parken](#) care home we visited next on our tour. Part of the Gyldenrisparken residential complex in Copenhagen, at Bomi-Parken there are no fences or gates and the care home is physically linked with the housing and schools that surround it, as well as being near to a local neighbourhood shopping centre. The elderly can interact with families and children going about their daily activities and greatly helps to combat loneliness and keep minds active.



*Bomi-Parken care home in Copenhagen, Denmark*

Lars Bo Sørensen, the Manager of Bomi-Parken, told us that visual and physical connection with the local community was the key design element when they considered the scheme. He said that the people who live around the care home use the facilities – they come in to use the gym and the café; they come in to use the food therapy room and the diabetes clinic. This is in marked contrast to care homes in the UK, where shops, hairdressers, cafés and therapy centres may well be included, but are often enclosed within the development – not facing a public square and local shops to be used by the local community.

Visual and physical connections are maintained in other ways, too. Residents of the care home could see and hear children at play in the adjoining school playground. A zipwire, running just 10m away from the windows of the care home, had children zooming along it; rather than it being annoying, the sound was happy and people from the care home were sitting on balconies watching, smiling and laughing. In many ways, it was really overwhelming to see the joy this brought to residents.

Observing the residents of Bomi-Parken choosing to sit on their balconies, go down to the garden, or visit the local shops, it struck me that in a lot of care and nursing homes in the UK, people don't have a need to leave their bedrooms as there isn't much activity – and the activities that are provided sometimes feel institutional and involve little personal choice.

Yet even facilitating a visual connection to the activities taking place in the local community can create tangible benefits, giving residents a choice to observe the world around them and feel like they are part of it as well.

One of the other key aspects noted during our Housing LIN conference workshop on the future of senior living, was that we need to spend less time focusing on age and more time on individual needs and lifestyle. From a design point of view, therefore, it was interesting to note the differences between Bomi-Parken and OK-Huset Lotte and how they have been planned to reflect the lifestyle of the residents.

Bomi-Parken care home is a two-storey building because the surrounding residential area is much lower rise and the interior is much softer than the contemporary designs found at Lotte. Bomi-Parken also has a much larger garden area because residents, having lived in the surrounding suburbs, were used to having gardens and seeing green open space. Lotte, on the other hand, was located in a town centre and only had a roof terrace and balconies. Also interesting to note was that, at Lotte, there were two key areas with large windows – one to watch a railway track and the other overlooking a very busy road where people would choose to sit and watch the city life because that's what they were used to doing; whereas in Bomi-Parken it was completely different, with views from windows looking out over the school playground, the zipwire and the square as one might expect in suburbia. When you analyse the social context you are able to design a building fit for purpose, creating a recognisable environment and a normal life for the residents.

Whilst we are starting to see more interest in locating care and senior living accommodation in urban areas in the UK, the focus tends to be on extra care or at the luxurious end of the scale, particularly in the South East. Care homes are still generally located in more rural and quiet locations. There is clearly a need for these rural developments, but people are increasingly demanding choice. Somebody who has lived all their lives in a rural area wouldn't want to move to the city centre, whereas people who have spent all their lives surrounded by cafés and shops and the buzz of the city wouldn't want to move away to the quiet country life.

Likewise, ageing impacts every social strata and it is our view that we should be looking into more mid-market models and maybe look for inspiration in some of the Scandinavian and Dutch approaches? These two developments in Copenhagen demonstrate what can be achieved – whilst our follow-up study trip to the Netherlands afforded us even further opportunity to observe approaches that allow for multigenerational integration and connections with the wider community through communal services. You can read all about that trip in Part 2 below.

## **Part 2: Learning to Innovate – De Hogeweyk**

As part of our ongoing research into senior living developments in urban settings, Urban Edge Architecture recently undertook a study tour of several innovative care homes and senior living accommodation schemes with students from the University of Lincoln. Our trip to the Netherlands follows a visit made to two care homes in Copenhagen last year where social connection is actively encouraged through the provision of shared and social spaces ([see Part 1 above](#)).

That spirit of challenging the norms could clearly be seen at the [Hogeweyk care village in Weesp](#). Also featured in RIBA's excellent publication, [Age Friendly Housing: Future Design for Older People](#), it was clear from the outset that this care home was very different from those we see in the UK. Whilst it is a nursing home for severe dementia, at no stage during our

three-hour visit did it feel like a nursing home. For a start, there were plenty of people walking around independently and it was almost impossible to distinguish whether they were residents, workers or visitors. Usually, when you go to a dementia ward or care home in the UK, you have locked doors because the focus is on creating safe environments – but in Hogeweyk doors are left unlocked and sometimes wide open, minimising the frustration and irritation that is often symptomatic for people living with dementia. Incredibly, even the main door to access the care village remains unlocked! The focus at Hogeweyk is on normality – a simple concept perhaps, but a really huge challenge to maintain in a care or nursing home setting. Eloy van Hal, Project Manager for the realisation of Hogeweyk and Senior consultant at Be (part of the Vivium Care Group), told us that keeping the doors open, having fresh air and encouraging people to leave their rooms and participate in daily life keeps residents in better physical and mental condition.

Eloy told us that 24 years ago, there was a nursing home on the site but it wasn't a great place for people to continue their lives because they had too many people living together and it was too institutional, more focused on care rather than wellbeing. He said that people want to continue their lives in recognisable environments with a normal daily life. So they decided to challenge the norms by introducing some changes, for instance creating smaller groups of people living together and matching those people who lived together according to their lifestyle, ideas, history, hobbies and values. After 10 years they noticed how beneficial this was and so decided to demolish the existing building and create something new.



*Hogeweyk care village in Weesp, Netherlands*

The result is the Hogeweyk village we see today – 23 homes (growing to 27 by the end of this year) with small groups of six or seven like-minded people living together, the matched lifestyles and preferences ensuring a regular rhythm to residents' lives, creating less stress, irritation and aggression. Residents, even with severe dementia, can leave their homes and walk inside the village neighbourhood, accessing amenities such as shops, restaurants and pubs.

Whilst Hogeweyk provides a really high level of nursing care, the priority is on creating **wellbeing** and as normal a day-to-day lifestyle as possible. In each house they cook their own meals, with residents buying ingredients and other household essentials from the village shop. Whilst the shop is part of the scheme, it can be accessed from the local neighbourhood and is also used by the wider community. Much like the Bomi-Parken development we visited in Copenhagen, spaces within Hogeweyk are also rented out, not only to provide additional revenue streams but also to provide more activity and opportunities for residents to interact with a variety of different people. Indeed, the scheme has been designed to make it very easy for visitors and is a much more pleasant place to visit than a standard nursing home.

Eloy explained that it was very important to bring people of different ages into the village – whether they are volunteers or visitors to the shop and restaurant – to create a liveable, vibrant society with lots of activities going on. This is important because it starts to question our understanding of ‘activity’. In the UK, we tend to have activity managers in care homes who run classes, whereas the Hogeweyk model focuses on natural and organic activity. Having a ‘normal’ lifestyle – whether walking around the village, going shopping, sitting in the café or cooking your own meals – generates natural and real activities.

Of course, many people reading this may be thinking, ‘Well, this is the Netherlands, they’re traditionally relaxed and probably don’t have the same volume of regulations as the UK.’ But, actually, there are lots of rules and regulations in the Netherlands that the care sector must follow – however, the rules and regulations often follow innovation, they do not stifle it. It concerns me that in the UK we no longer challenge the rules and considered norms. We have focused on creating safe and attractive environments, but still within the same standard concept of a nursing home. In other words, we are just wrapping the same concept in nicer material.

We still have a cluster of bedrooms with one lounge, a quiet lounge and a dining room. We might add a shop or a hairdresser, but they are only available to the residents and only accessible via an internal lift – residents don’t have to put a coat on, they don’t have to walk far, they don’t see anyone other than carers at the hairdresser or the shop. We are still worried about their interaction with other people, we want to keep them safe and in a completely risk-free environment. When you stop to consider it, this is about as far from a ‘normal’ environment as possible. I think we have to do better and we have to look for innovation.

Pointedly, Eloy also said that instead of following the rules, we should make our own. This may seem a like flippant statement, but in witnessing these different approaches to senior living in other parts of Europe it struck a chord and made me consider whether we have become too reticent to challenge the accepted norms in the UK. The majority of care homes in the UK may look architecturally different, but they are very similar in their concept, with operators and developers adhering to the concepts they have delivered for the last 20 years or so. However, the mindset of “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” will no longer wash because the people who will be moving into retirement or care homes in the future will have completely different lifestyles and expectations. In many care homes – as well as children’s developments, it has to be said – our focus has been on reducing risk rather than creating an environment for happy people. Perhaps it is time to challenge our risk-averse mindset?

### Part 3: Learning to Innovate – Humanitas

At Urban Edge Architecture we want to create developments that actively encourage social connection, where young and old can live side by side, both benefiting from the social, cultural and economic opportunities of a multigenerational community. There are numerous examples of this socially connected, multigenerational approach in the Netherlands, but perhaps the most famous is the [Residential and Care Centre Humanitas](#) in the riverside town of Deventer. Humanitas Deventer is not a new care home – in fact, the original building dates back to the 1970s – but it has recently attracted international media interest because it is one of the first long-term care facilities to also double as a student dorm. In exchange for 30 hours of volunteer work per month, students are able to stay in the centre’s vacant rooms free of charge. It’s an excellent example of intergenerational living and we were keen to see first-hand how it worked.

The first thing to note upon arriving in Deventer is how the care home sits within an existing residential area of the town. There are 160 residents and, incredibly, some 200 volunteers. This is the result of having the care home in the residential area where the majority of residents once lived – neighbours and friends volunteer for an hour or two each week and ensures a seamless connection to the area where residents have lived all their lives. As we saw in our previous study trip to Copenhagen, this is in marked contrast to senior living models in the UK where care homes are frequently located in rural areas and often isolate residents from the communities in which they once lived.



*The Humanitas centre in Deventer, Netherlands*

Allowing students to live in Humanitas has also helped residents stay connected with the outside world, whilst equally benefiting their mental wellbeing. There are different options available for the students – they can live there for three weeks, three months or three years... and anything else in between! There is no separate wing for students, they have individual rooms that are spread out throughout the home so that they can get to know and interact with their older neighbours. The accommodation is free on the proviso that they commit to 30 hours of social work a week. The social work does not involve ‘care’ and is based more on wellbeing and supporting residents in their daily activities, whether it be having a chat over a cup of tea or going for a walk.

When I asked Peter Daniels, the manager at Humanitas Deventer, if he could see any changes in the senior residents since the students moved in he said that, whilst there was no scientific proof, one just needed to look around to see how happy everybody is. He also noted that the young people benefit as well – they start to understand the importance of living in a community. One of the students said that, before he moved to Humanitas, he would avoid older people in town and on public transport; whereas now he has started to value the company of the elderly people, the many stories they can share and the history and experience they can impart.

Addressing us as architects, Peter Daniels said that we should focus our design intent on wellbeing as, in his opinion, this is what senior living should be about: happiness and wellbeing at the end of your life. He said that there are some care homes in the Netherlands that are much newer and brighter, yet there is still a waiting list to move into Humanitas because of the environment and community it provides. He also said that we should always consider the social context and be adaptable to the individual needs of the people who move in.

## Lessons learned

At Urban Edge Architecture, we are interested in all aspects of senior living, from retirement to extra care. We also believe profoundly in the benefits that can come from social connection and multigenerational living. Not only are shared and social spaces important for physical and mental health, but they will be considered a necessity for the next generation of senior citizens who want to continue to play an active part in society. Within the senior living sector, care and dementia care present the biggest challenges for connected living, yet examples in Copenhagen and the Netherlands prove just what can be achieved if we begin to challenge the expected norms.

## Note

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Housing Learning and Improvement Network.

## About Urban Edge Architecture

Since its foundation ten years ago, Urban Edge Architecture has built a diverse portfolio of projects across a wide range of sectors, including residential, retail, leisure, care and senior living.

Urban Edge is recognised as a leader in Care and Specialist Residential development and has led the design and delivery of several major senior living projects, including Bishopstoke Park, an innovative retirement village for Inspired Villages Group, recently shortlisted for the British Homes Awards Best Community Living category. With a dynamic and innovative team, Urban Edge has applied technical skill, design flair and commercial attitude to create a reputation for contemporary design, intelligent solutions and sustainable and deliverable schemes.

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## About the Housing LIN

The Housing LIN is a sophisticated network bringing together over 40,000 housing, health and social care professionals in England and Wales to exemplify innovative housing solutions for an ageing population.

Recognised by government and industry as a leading 'knowledge hub' on specialist housing, our online and regional networked activities:

- connect people, ideas and resources to inform and improve the range of housing choices that enable older and disabled people to live independently
- provide intelligence on latest funding, research, policy and practice developments, and
- raise the profile of specialist housing with developers, commissioners and providers to plan, design and deliver aspirational housing for an ageing population.

To view other examples of designing for an ageing population, visit the Housing LIN's dedicated 'Design Hub' at: <https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/Design-building/>

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