

# DESIGN GUIDE

# Space for Wellbeing

How we can design homes that contribute to the wellbeing of (future) older adults



## Colophon

This publication was developed within the framework of the HOUSE research with project number S007122N. This project was carried out with the support of FWO Flanders. Thanks to all participants, architects, students, HOUSE Elderly Panel, and colleagues for their commitment and dedication.

**January 2026**

### Authors

Phlix M., Ielegems E., Smetcoren A.-S., Petermans A. - HOUSE consortium

### Design

Bortnik D. & Ielegems E.

### More Information?






[www.HOUSE-research.be](http://www.HOUSE-research.be)  
[info@HOUSE-research.be](mailto:info@HOUSE-research.be)

### Recommended citation

Phlix, M., Ielegems, E., Smetcoren, A.-S., Petermans, A. - HOUSE consortium. (2026, januari). Ontwerpgids 'Ruimte voor Welbevinden'. UHasselt-VUB. <https://www.house-research.be/nl/publications>



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# Context

## WHY THIS DESIGN GUIDE?

Living is about more than walls, surface areas, and functions. It is about **a sense of home, stability, autonomy, daily rhythms, and connection**. For older residents, these aspects become even more meaningful, yet they are not always sufficiently considered in design decisions. This guide invites designers to adopt a **broader perspective on ageing** and to create spaces that evolve with people, their life course, and their stories. Because **there is no such thing as a typical older resident**: their needs and housing preferences are as diverse as their life paths.

Many older residents **prefer to remain in their familiar homes**, even when these no longer meet their daily needs. Sometimes a house becomes too large or too demanding to maintain; sometimes stairs and thresholds become obstacles, or the home is too isolated to stay connected to the neighbourhood, shops, and social activities. At the same time, we see that many older adults are **open to sharing** certain spaces or facilities when this enhances their living comfort and daily life.

With this design guide, we aim to support (interior) architects and housing professionals in creating living environments where the wellbeing of older adults is central. We offer **inspiration and scientifically grounded insights**, while also emphasizing that design is only one part of the puzzle. Good housing solutions emerge through **collaboration** with older adults themselves, with policymakers, with housing stakeholders, and with everyone involved in shaping how we collectively give form to **“ageing well in the right place”**: growing older in a meaningful and comfortable way in an environment that suits the resident.

## HOW THIS DESIGN GUIDE CAME ABOUT? THE HOUSE RESEARCH PROJECT

This design guide emerged from a four-year scientific research project, **HOUSE**, which investigates how housing can contribute to the wellbeing of older adults. Within HOUSE, **various research methods were combined**: a systematic literature review on housing elements that affect older adults' wellbeing, 70 in-depth interviews with current and future older adults, and surveys (n=240) conducted among older adults. **The perspectives of architects** were also included through 20 **interviews and design-based research**, a method where design is used to make new insights visible and discussable.

This design guide is the result of design-based research conducted with three architectural firms: **Osar, RE-ST, and a2o architects**.

The research proceeded in three phases:

- **Phase 1:** Based on previous research insights, an initial version of the “design drivers” (design guidelines) and design tools was developed.
- **Phase 2:** The three architectural firms applied the developed design drivers and the HOUSE toolbox to (re)design one of their housing projects. Their (re)designs and accompanying explanations were analyzed and later discussed in a focus group with the participating architects.
- **Phase 3:** Based on the analysis of the design outputs and the focus group, this design guide was developed.

More information about the HOUSE research project:  
**[www.HOUSE-research.be](http://www.HOUSE-research.be)**

## HOUSE TOOLBOX

Did you know that, alongside this design guide, there is also a HOUSE Toolbox? While the guide introduces the design drivers and offers inspiration, the toolbox provides designers with **practical tools** to engage with residents, clients, and colleagues, and **to gather insights that strengthen the design.**

You can use the guide perfectly well on its own, but those who need additional structure, methodology, or dialogue tools during the design process will find exactly what they need in the toolbox. Together, **the toolbox and the guide** form a powerful combination: **for each design driver, we refer to tools that help deepen ideas, test them, or translate them into spatial design choices.**



### What can you find in the HOUSE Toolbox?

Six practical tools, developed based on the HOUSE research, that support both before and during the design process:

**TOOL 1:** Empathizing through personas

**TOOL 2:** Capturing housing history

**TOOL 3:** Understanding the current home (tour/floor plan)

**TOOL 4:** A day in the life

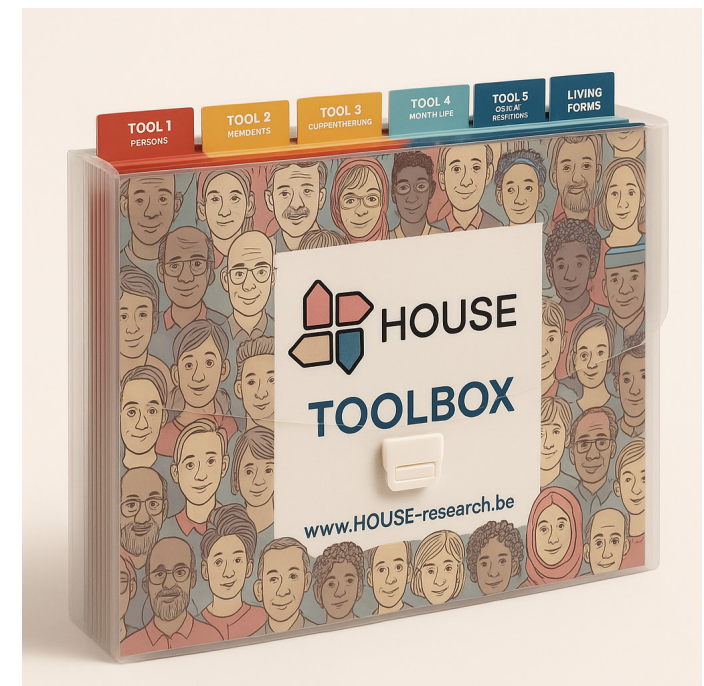
**TOOL 5:** Housing future

**TOOL 6:** Identifying and exploring housing typologies

All tools are available free of charge.

Discover the full toolbox (in Dutch) at:

<https://www.house-research.be/nl/tools>



# Reading guide

This design guide is structured as a source of inspiration for designers and building professionals that can be easily browsed. You don't need to read it linearly: each section can stand on its own, but together they form a coherent whole. This reading guide helps you get started smoothly.

## FIVE DESIGN DRIVERS

The core of this guide consists of five design drivers that guide the design of housing where the wellbeing of older adults is central. Each driver has its own color and includes a **brief explanation, design strategies, and real-life examples.**

## FRAMES AND SYMBOLS

Throughout the guide, the following frames and symbols appear, each with a consistent designation:

**Quotes** from older adults and designers in the HOUSE research. These quotes help clarify the examples. The names of the older adults are fictional.

**“Did you know”-boxes** with insights from previous research that provide additional context on the topic.

Link to tools from the HOUSE toolbox that help gather insights related to the specific design driver:



**APPLICABLE TO  
TOOLS 1-6**





# Design Driver 1

*Space for the diversity of older adults*

## WHAT?

Older adults are still too often wrongly seen as a single, homogeneous group, with **stereotypical thinking** as a common pitfall, while there is no such thing as “the older adult.” In reality, this group is **highly diverse**: in financial means, ownership, housing type, migration background, mobility, education, family relationships, health, social needs... and also in how they want to live.

This diversity therefore relates to their **housing needs and wishes, and how they use their home**:

- Some older adults consciously choose to live in a smaller home to keep household tasks manageable, while others may prefer to retain a large living area to host visitors.
- One person might convert the garage into a ground-floor bedroom, while the same space may be used by someone else daily for a hobby.

- One older adult wants to live in a location surrounded by nature, while another greatly enjoys the bustling city life where everything is nearby.

The living situations of older adults also vary greatly, partly due to **financial means** and whether someone **rents or owns** their home. Some have the resources and autonomy to adapt their home or move to something more suitable. Others rent or live with limited financial means, which often restricts their ability to modify their living environment. This requires designers and clients to maintain a **keen awareness of inequality** when making decisions throughout the design process. Each design project offers an opportunity to creatively address this diversity and develop solutions that are meaningful and feasible even for older adults in financially vulnerable situations.

## DESIGN STRATEGY

ENGAGE WITH THE RESIDENT(S)  
AND/OR  
MAKE USE OF PERSONAS

Because the **diversity among older adults** also leads to a wide range of housing needs and preferences, it is important for designers to be aware of this from the very beginning of the design process. By engaging in **conversations** with (older) residents before, during, and after the design process, you gain insight into what they truly need and what works for them.

When **direct contact with older residents is not possible**, you can work with **personas**: realistic user profiles based on research. They bundle typical characteristics, lifestyles, and needs of different groups of older adults, making it easier to empathize with diverse user situations.

In the HOUSE Toolbox, you will find a set of detailed personas (Tool 1).

*"Don't see me as a sixty-plus. Yes, I'm getting gray and older, and I don't really mind that. But I want to stay young in my mind [...] You can't put a label on me. I don't like that." \*laughs\**

**- Henrik, 66 years old**

*"[...] of course, every story is individually different. I think my story is completely different from my friend who also turned sixty, for example."*

**- Rita, 60 years old**

*"[...] I think subjective wellbeing is a little different for everyone. The emphasis may be somewhere else for each person, for one it's acoustic comfort, for another it's visual comfort, for others it's space for social interaction or space for creativity. [...] And yet I believe that these spaces should actually meet all of these aspects together."*

**- Architect**

### Did you know...

Many older adults experience ageism, or age discrimination. This refers to prejudices and stereotypes that treat older people as a single group or portray them as dependent, passive, out-of-touch, slow, and so on. In reality, however, they are an extremely diverse group.

Unia records all complaints about ageism in Belgium, and the numbers reflect this: more than 4 in 10 older adults experience age discrimination, and among those over 80, this rises to more than 5 in 10.

That is why organizations such as Vief and the Flemish Council for Older Adults call for a new perspective on aging. Internationally, there is also movement: in April 2025, the Human Rights Council launched a working group for a convention on the rights of older persons. *Unia, 2025; Vief, 2025*





# Design Driver 2

Space for change

## DD2. Space for change

APPLICABLE TO  
TOOLS 2, 3, 6

### WHAT?

As people age, their **spatial needs can change significantly**. Children's rooms may become hobby or guest rooms. A spacious home can suddenly feel too large to maintain, whereas at other stages of life, extra space was needed (e.g., when children were young and living at home). **The body also changes:** stairs, thresholds, or narrow passages only become real obstacles when mobility decreases and the space is not designed to accommodate this.

For designers, it is therefore essential to explore **how a home can grow and adapt to the changing physical, social, and emotional needs of residents** – both today and in the future.

By incorporating flexibility, a home can adapt to changing life situations and better respond to the diversity among older adults.

To translate this Design Driver into design practice, we developed two design strategies.

### Did you know...

From the age of around 70 to 75, the willingness to move or undertake major renovations drops significantly, even when people themselves indicate that their home is no longer suitable for comfortable aging. That's why it is so important to consider later-life housing early and to plan ahead while options and choices are still available.

*KBS, 2022*

### DESIGN STRATEGY

#### A. INCORPORATING FLEXIBILITY MAKES DESIGNS MORE FUTURE-PROOF

This begins - where possible - already at the **building's construction**, by designing the floor plan so that later changes can be made without major interventions. When designing the basic plan, consider **possible future uses** or scenarios for different life stages, for example by including strategically placed **non-load-bearing walls** or using a **partition wall with storage** instead of a load-bearing wall (see Example 1).

Flexibility is not only in the floor plan but also in the **room functions**. An additional room can serve different purposes at various life stages (e.g., guest room, hobby room, storage, etc.), depending on the residents' needs. Therefore, provide **conduits** in the right places so that the space can be easily repurposed later. For example, a child's room next to the bedroom could later become an adjacent bathroom (see Example 1).

## DD2. Space for change

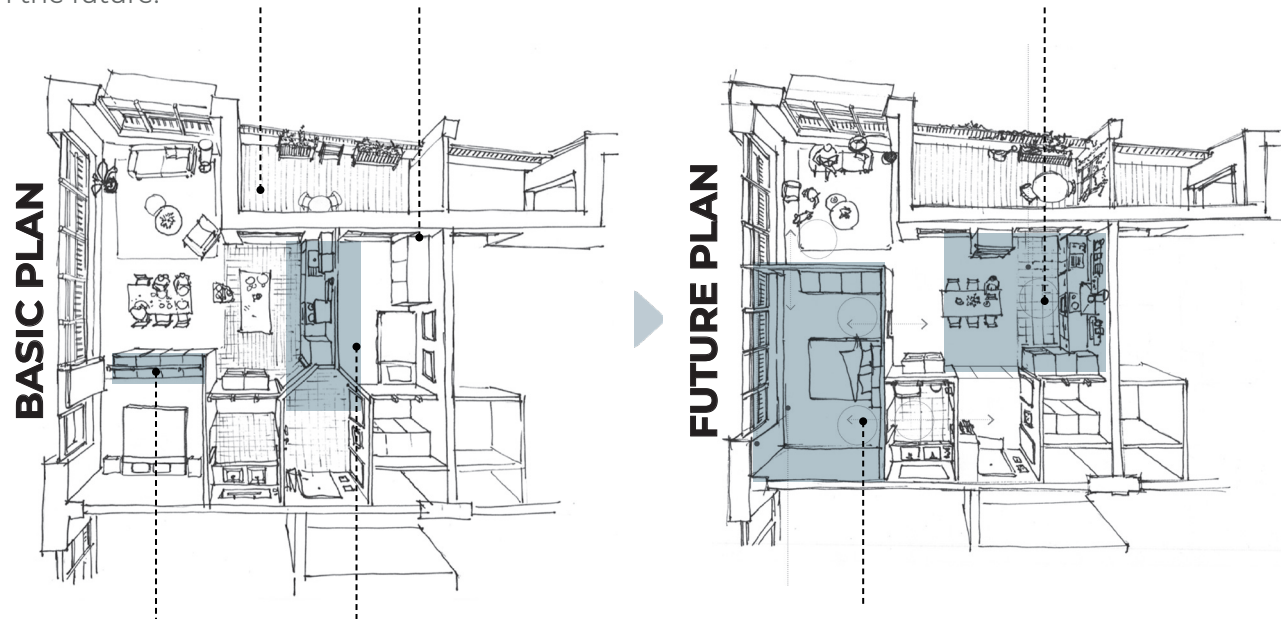
APPLICABLE TO  
TOOLS 2, 3, 6

### Example 1. Kruitfabriek, Vilvoorde (a2o)

The covered terrace functions as an outdoor room for the living area, kitchen, and hobby room. Its structure and orientation allow it to be converted into a conservatory in the future.

Provide a **conduit** in the hobby room to allow for future flexibility.

By **converting the hobby room into a kitchen**, space is created for a fully accessible home.



The **wall** between the bedroom and living area is a **piece of furniture**: wardrobe, door, and transom window all in one. This can be easily adapted in the future.

The **walls between the entrance hall, kitchen, and hobby room** are **lightweight partition walls** that can be adapted to changing housing needs.

The **bedroom has been made fully accessible** and has a **connection** to both the dining room and the living room.

The **bathroom with a shower next to the bedroom** allows for quick and comfortable use.

*“An architect must be able to think ahead and indicate for themselves what is practical and what is not. For example, we currently have a walk-in shower but I don’t know if that will still be practical at 80.”*

*“Who knows, my thoughts might change in 10 years? I just turned 66, my wife 64. I still believe in an evolving mindset. A progressive understanding, so that ideas can change over time. What I thought about this house when I got married will be different from what I think about it now.”*

**- Henrik, 66 years old**

*“What we as designers can certainly take on our side, is to provide the shell, to provide that generosity, to provide that adaptability.”*

**- Architect (a2o)**

## DD2. Space for change

APPLICABLE TO  
TOOLS 2, 3, 6

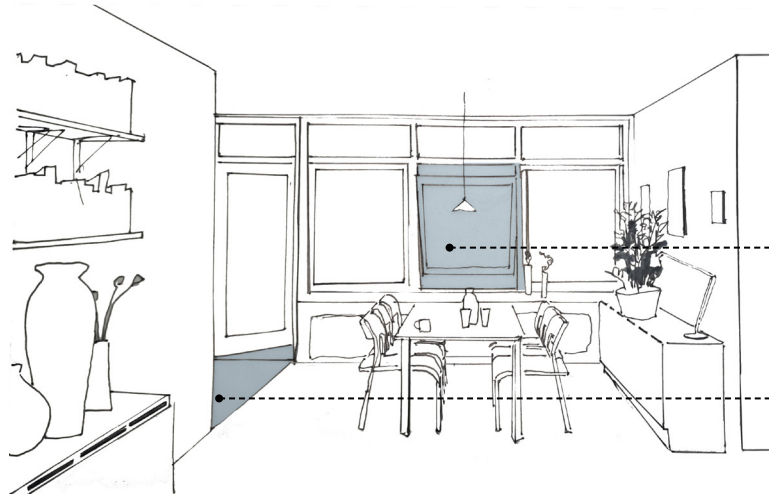
### DESIGN STRATEGY

#### B.

#### SEEK A BALANCE BETWEEN AGE-FRIENDLY DESIGN AND DISCREET ARCHITECTURE

Much is already known about **age-friendly design**, where accessibility principles often take center stage. Think of avoiding thresholds (see Examples 2 and 4), providing wide doorways and turning circles (see Example 3), sliding doors, handles, etc. Such interventions are important to support older adults as their needs change.

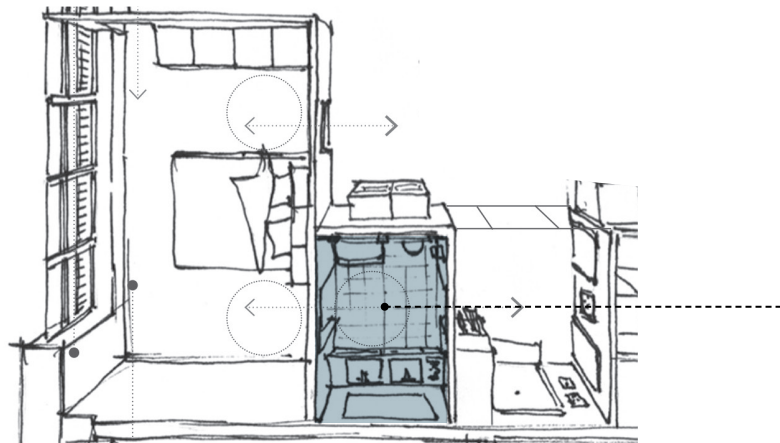
**At the same time, avoid stigmatization and aim for a subtle integration of care.** This can be achieved, for example, by intertwining housing and care, so that **support is discreetly present** without dominating the quality of the home (see Examples 3 and 4). An additional advantage: when care needs arise, support is already embedded in the living environment, **reducing the need to move** (see Example 4).



#### Example 2. ADL-cluster, Herentals (RE-ST)

French windows that are easier to operate than sliding windows.

Spacious passages, doorways and rooms with level floors and smooth transitions (including between indoors and outdoors).



#### Example 3. Kruitfabriek, Vilvoorde (a2o)

By also connecting the **ensuite bathroom** to the entrance hall, care can be organized discreetly. At the same time, turning circles are provided in all spaces and on both sides of the bed.

## DD2. Space for change

APPLICABLE TO  
TOOLS 2, 3, 6

### Example 4. Klein Veldekens, Geel (Osar)

**Mixing housing & care:** Master plan with group homes, a residential care center, apartments, assisted-living units, and public spaces beautifully integrated. People who need more care over time do not have to move. The care comes to them.

*“The positive image of independent living reflects on the residential care center by making it architecturally one cohesive unit.”*

*“Not the person who moves, but the care that moves.”*



**Balance between age-friendly design & discrete architecture:** The houses and apartments are arranged to meet the residents' needs. There is a custom, threshold-free bathroom, an ergonomic kitchen, and an easy-to-use system for lighting, heating, communication, and safety. Care is discreetly present.

The accessible bathroom (e.g., with a wheelchair-accessible sink, walk-in shower, accessible mirror, and seating) is **not stigmatizing but instead feels warm and homely.**

#### Did you know...

Did you know that 84% of homes in Flanders do not meet basic accessibility standards? This means there are thresholds to enter the home or to reach the bedroom and bathroom. Yet only 20% of older adults indicate that their home is unsuitable for comfortable aging. *de Smalen & Van den Broek, 2025; KBS, 2022*



# Design Driver 3

Space for memories

# DD3. Space for memories

APPLICABLE TO  
TOOLS 2 & 3

## WHAT?

Throughout our lives, we collect **countless memories**, often linked to **places or objects** in our home. Sometimes objects evoke memories of past events, where the emotional value is more important than the physical object itself.

Architects can respond to this spatially. Which **spaces, sightlines, or objects** make the resident feel **connected**? How are memories experienced; not only **emotionally** (e.g., during family celebrations, when the children were small, the fireplace as the central focus of the home) but also spatially, by literally **moving** through the home (e.g., a view of a part of the garden tied to memories) or through the way spaces are arranged (e.g., all furniture oriented toward family photos).

The past also plays a role in how older adults want to live today and in the future.

To translate this Design Driver into design practice, we propose three design strategies.

### Did you know...

memories can also be linked to smells, colors, and sounds? Familiar environmental sounds, such as a creaking house or babbling water, can evoke a strong sense of familiarity. Projects like "Sounds Like Home" use sounds from a person's former home to recreate that feeling of home when people with dementia move to a different living environment. This can help make the transition from home to a new living environment easier.

*Bankaert et al., 2021; Feenstra, 2021*

## DESIGN STRATEGY

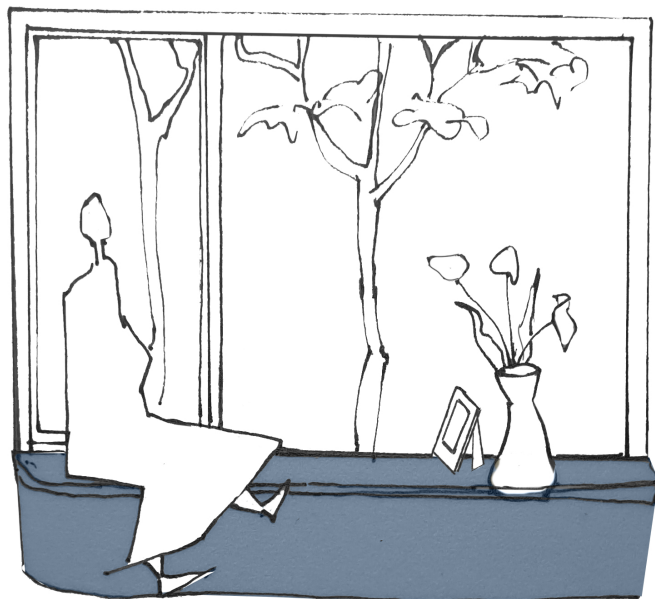
### A. PROVIDE SPACE FOR PERSONALIZATION

*Residents need spaces where they can **display personal belongings and memories** or **express themselves** in the interior (e.g., decorations, photos, their own arrangement, furniture). Fixed furniture, such as a windowsill or built-in cabinet, can be valuable for this (see Example 1).*

*Focus on a **homely, cozy atmosphere** by choosing **warm materials and residential quality**, so that the home feels like "home" rather than immediately like "care" (see Examples 2 and 3).*

## DD3. Space for memories

APPLICABLE TO  
TOOLS 2 & 3



**Example 1.** ADL-cluster, Herentals (RE-ST) & Schoolstraat, Wijnegem (Osar)

**Windowsills (inside) and window ledges (outside) were oversized** to display personal belongings or to sit on.

### Did you know...

past living experiences play a major role for many older adults in their housing preferences and wellbeing today?

*Smectoren et al., 2024; Vanbellinghen et al., 2025*

## DD3. Space for memories

APPLICABLE TO  
TOOLS 2 & 3

### Example 2. Mandana, Genk (Osar)

*“At Mandana in Genk, the **furniture is second-hand** or comes from the residents’ own homes. You’ll find sofas you can stretch out on, **cabinets with drawers full of items** that residents can rummage through. Very **familiar for older adults**. Each resident also has their own room where they can keep **personal belongings** that connect them to their past and provide a sense of stability.”*

- Architect (Osar)



DESIGN STRATEGY

## B. ANCHOR FAMILIARITY IN DESIGN

Whenever possible, talk with residents to find out which **past living experiences** are still important to them today and in the future (see Example 3). **A connection with the past is important for many older adults' sense of home.**

When someone moves or becomes less mobile, this connection can be disrupted. Encourage **familiarity**, for example by providing a connection to greenery, incorporating furniture from a previous home (see Examples 2 and 3), stimulating scents, or reintroducing certain colors, graphic patterns, or interior styles.

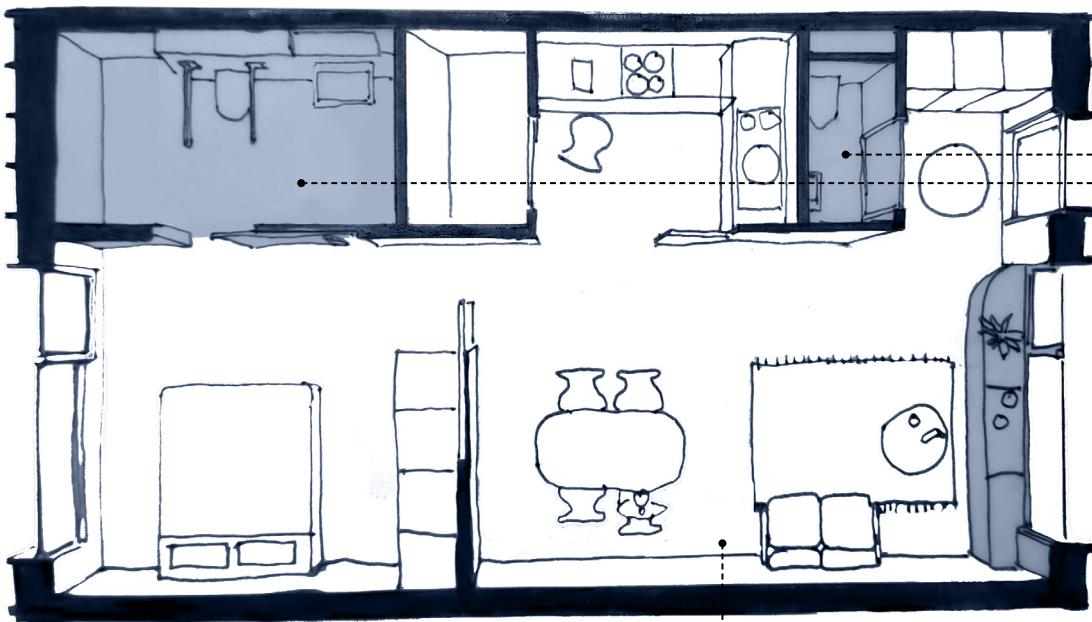
## C. CREATE SPACE FOR NEW MEMORIES

In addition to providing space for old memories, also **provide space for new memories**. Think of a meeting place in or around the home where **new connections** can be formed (see Examples 4 and 5). Such places can also act as a **"pull factor"** toward a new living environment: they can make moving more attractive or encourage people to take that step.

## DD3. Space for memories

APPLICABLE TO  
TOOLS 2 & 3

**Example 3** Schoolstraat, Wijnegem  
(Osar)



**Previous living experience:**

*"I don't use the separate toilet myself, yet I am very glad that my visitors do not have to pass through my bedroom and bathroom. This was also the case in my previous home."*

- Resident project

**Familiarity & personal furniture:**

*"My grandfather clock gives me a sense of home, simply through the sound of its ticking."*

- Resident project

*"You notice that the residents have carefully chosen their furniture. It is nice to see how each home is furnished differently. You will usually find a cabinet, painting, or photo that is meaningful to the residents."*

- Architect (Osar)



## DD3. Space for memories

APPLICABLE TO  
TOOLS 2 & 3



### **Example 4** Residential project Witsele-Putkapel (RE-ST)

**Planting** in the central courtyard that stimulates the **senses** (smell and color) and serves as a **point of orientation** in space and time (seasonal planting). A place that **both evokes old memories and allows new memories to emerge**.



### **Example 5** Residential project Diepenbeek (a2o)

The monastery and chapel were carefully preserved so that **familiar places and layers of meaning remain legible**. New interventions connect to this through sober brick architecture and a colonnade that refers to the neo-Gothic chapel. Gardens with their own character, adapted to the site, create **recognizable views and walking routes** that strengthen spatial memory and support continuity in experience.



# Design Driver 4

Space for independence & routines

## WHAT?

For older adults, their sense of wellbeing is closely linked to **independence** in daily life and in and around the home. Many older adults find it **important to be able to do certain things themselves and in their own way**. Independence is not only about physical actions, but also about **autonomy**: being able to decide who enters, how spaces are used, and to have a say in decisions about the home. In practice, this is not self-evident for everyone, especially not for tenants or residents of collective housing forms.

Independence is also about continuing **familiar routines**: cooking, doing laundry, or going to the shop. Such habits provide stability, strengthen the sense of home, and contribute to wellbeing

and identity. At the same time, they are **highly individual**. Architecture plays a crucial role in this: **a home can support these routines or make them more difficult**. A well-designed home makes daily activities feasible and meaningful; a poorly designed home creates barriers, makes maintenance burdensome, or limits the resident's freedom of choice.

To translate this Design Driver into design practice, we propose three design strategies.



### A. SUPPORT SELF-RELIANCE THROUGH DESIGN

Ensure that the **design allows routines to be continued**. Think of being able to cook, do laundry, receive guests, etc. **For example, combine private functions with shared facilities**, but ensure a good balance so that older adults can choose how to shape their daily activities. In this way, the choice remains with the resident.

An example: alongside a large shared kitchen and living space, a kitchenette can also be provided in the private area (see Example 1). This makes it possible to cook or wash up independently, while also offering the option to eat in a cafeteria or receive guests in the shared kitchen. In this way, **the choice remains with the resident**, and routines can be continued in a personal and suitable way.



#### Example 1 Schoolstraat, Wijnegem (Osar)

*"At midday I always eat warm meals in the shared living space. I don't use my oven. I do find a microwave very useful."*

**- Resident project**

## DD4. Space for independence & routines

APPLICABLE TO  
TOOLS 3 - 6

### DESIGN STRATEGY

#### B. PROVIDE SPACE TO ADAPT THE HOME TO ONE'S OWN PREFERENCES

Independence and autonomy also relate to the **arrangement of one's own home**. It is important that designers gain insight into the aspects over which older adults want to retain control. In this way, the design can support these points of attention regarding control over the home. **Create opportunities or leave room for residents** to adapt the way they use the home to their own preferences, so that it aligns with their familiar, individual routines and activities (see Examples 2 and 3).

#### Example 2. Schoolstraat, Wijnegem (Osar)

**Adapting the home to one's own preferences:**  
*"I placed a small bench in my front garden. I consider this my own private space."*

- Resident project



## DD4. Space for independence & routines

APPLICABLE TO  
TOOLS 3 - 6

*"That is my space, and I decide who can enter and who cannot. I determine the atmosphere there, I decide what is in it [...] Literally and figuratively my place."*

**- Marie, 63 years old**

*"We painted it ourselves, but it is a rental home. You can't do whatever you want with it."*

**- Henrik, 66 years old**

### Did you know...

5% of people aged 65 and over in Flanders live in a residential care center? A very large group therefore does not live in a residential care center. As many as 9 out of 10 older adults live independently at home, and the vast majority of older adults also prefer to stay at home for as long as possible.

*Statistiek Vlaanderen, 2021; Pani-Harreman, 2020*



### Example 3. Schoolstraat, Wijnegem (Osar)

#### Adapting the home to one's own preferences:

*"I put up an easily accessible shelf for the things I use every day."*

**- Resident project**

# DD4. Space for independence & routines

APPLICABLE TO  
TOOLS 3 - 6

## DESIGN STRATEGY

### C. PROVIDE AUTONOMY THROUGH PARTICIPATORY DESIGN

Independence is not only about autonomy within the spatial context of the home, but also about autonomy throughout the design(process) itself. By **actively involving residents** during the design process, through conversations, workshops or simple choice sessions, a design is created **that better aligns with their familiar routines**. This creates space for residents to shape and use the home in their own way.

*"I want to continue making all decisions myself for as long as possible."*

- **Pascal, 78 years old**

*"What is most important for older adults? That is autonomy [...] I can decide for myself that I'll have a sandwich now and a hot meal tonight."*

- **Henrik, 66 years old**



### Example 4. Mandana, Genk (Osar)

The residents and their families are part of a residents' council and meet once a month. This way, **they make decisions themselves about the layout** of the outdoor spaces and the interior, activities, food, and similar matters. Each group home of eight also receives a **monthly budget** that they can spend as they choose.



# Design Driver 5

Space for social interaction

# DD5. Space for social interaction

APPLICABLE TO  
TOOL 6

## WHAT?

Social contact and interaction are very important for **wellbeing**, including for older adults. Interaction is a social phenomenon that can take different forms and intensities (e.g., a conversation, a greeting, observing from a distance) with various participants.

Meeting also always has a **spatial aspect: every encounter is place-bound**. However, not every older adult has the same need for contact at all times. Design **can be a powerful tool to enable different levels of social interaction**: purposeful encounters in a collective space (e.g., cooking together), incidental encounters in a (semi-)public space (e.g., passing someone on the way to the shop), receiving guests in the home, or observing a social event without participating.

Alongside interaction, attention must also be given to privacy,

especially within a residential care context. Care can put pressure on **privacy**, but architecture can mitigate this by providing opportunities for choice, distance, and proximity. Moreover, the care aspect does not have to be seen negatively, it can also have a **positive impact** on “space for interaction”: interaction with caregivers is also a form of social contact, and through care (both formal and informal), bonds can be built.

To translate this Design Driver into design practice, we propose three design strategies.

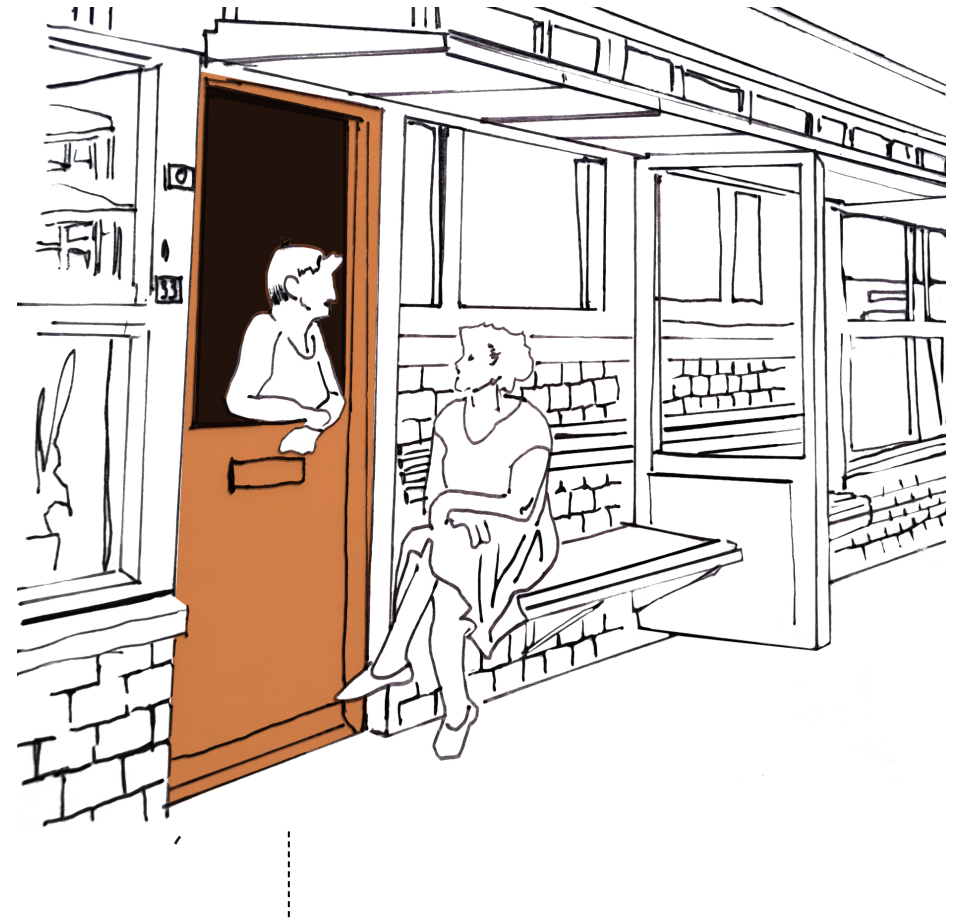
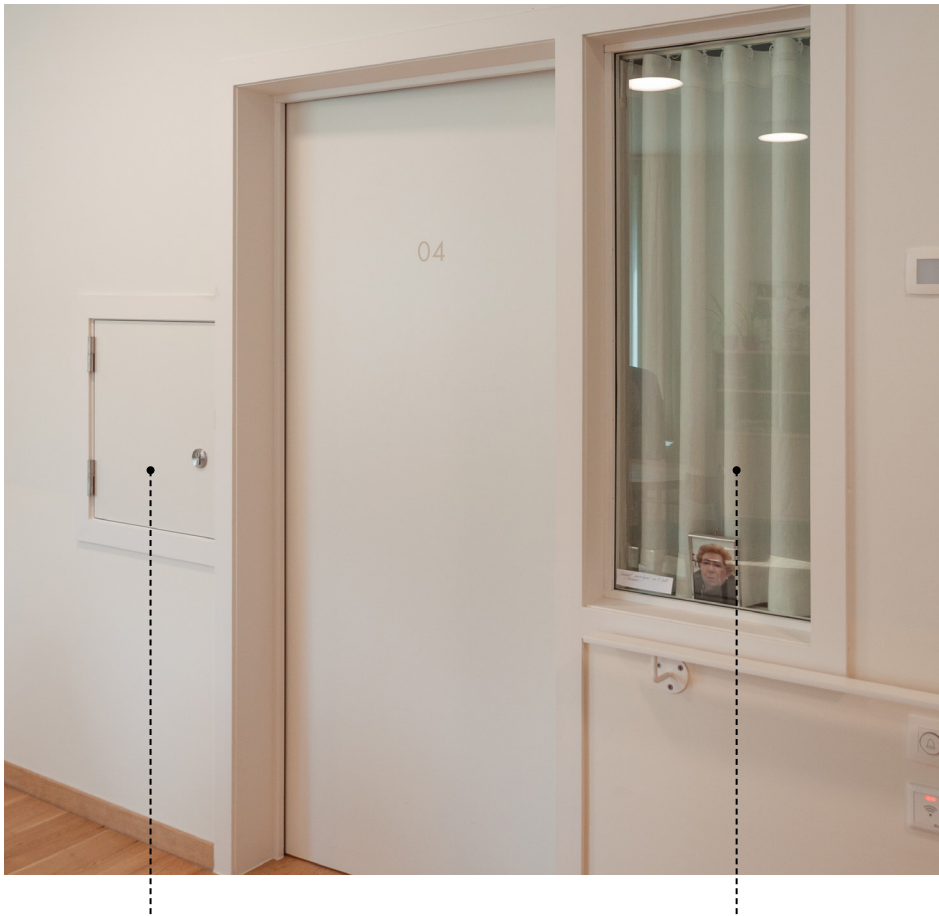
## DESIGN STRATEGY

### A. SEEK A BALANCE BETWEEN INTERACTION & PRIVACY

When providing opportunities for interaction and social contact, privacy must be ensured, even within collective housing. Sometimes shared spaces can feel a bit imposing, but **casual proximity should also be possible** (see Example 2). Consider the importance of private access to the resident’s living area and limiting visibility into the home (see Example 1). **Buffers**, such as planting or partitions, can help achieve this. **Routes** should also account for casual proximity so that residents are **not forced to pass through communal areas**. On the other hand, a bench along a route (e.g., to the front door) or a half-open door (see Example 2) can encourage interaction in a casual way (e.g., a chat in passing).

## DD5. Space for social interaction

APPLICABLE TO  
TOOL 6



### Example 1 OCMW Beveren (Osar)

This door separates a private room from the shared living room. The window with a curtain allows for both **connection and privacy**. Alongside the door, a mailbox and pass-through cabinet are provided so that staff do not always have to disturb the residents. In this way, both **independence (DD3)** and the balance between **privacy and interaction** are supported architecturally.

### Example 2 (RE-ST)

**Casual proximity through half-open doors:** Small architectural gestures can be enough to comfortably have a passing chat, without it feeling forced or imposed.

# DD5. Space for social interaction

## DESIGN STRATEGY

### B. INTEGRATE LIVING WITH THE SOCIAL FABRIC OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Where possible, try to facilitate **interaction between the residential project and the surrounding neighborhood**. Connect residents with the neighborhood through facilities and services, or bring the neighborhood into the residential project (e.g., shops, care, activities in the building; see Example 3). In this way, **even older adults who are less mobile** or become less mobile can maintain a **connection** with social life in the neighborhood (see Examples 4 and 5).

### C. DESIGN GRADATIONS OF SOCIAL CONTACT

Provide **different levels of contact** to respond to individual and changing needs for interaction: in the private home (e.g., guest toilet, extendable dining table), in semi-public spaces (e.g., shared kitchen or storage), at the transition between private and public (e.g., a bench in the front garden, space in the stairwell for personal use), and in public zones (e.g., an adjacent park, a connecting walking path, or a public indoor street with shops and facilities) (see Examples 3, 4, and 5).

#### Did you know...

In 2022, 12% of Belgians aged 60 and over were open to co-housing or care-living, and this percentage doubled in just two years?

A HOUSE survey of 241 Flemish older adults shows that the willingness to share spaces or activities is even higher. Two-thirds are open to sharing a garden or bike storage. Even sharing a car (33%), a laundry or storage room (32.8%), or a party or playroom (46.5%) is considered by a significant group of older adults.

*KBS, 2022; Ielegems et al., 2025*

# DD5. Space for social interaction

APPLICABLE TO  
TOOL 6

## Example 3 Kruitfabriek, Vilvoorde (a2o)

### Gradations of social contact:

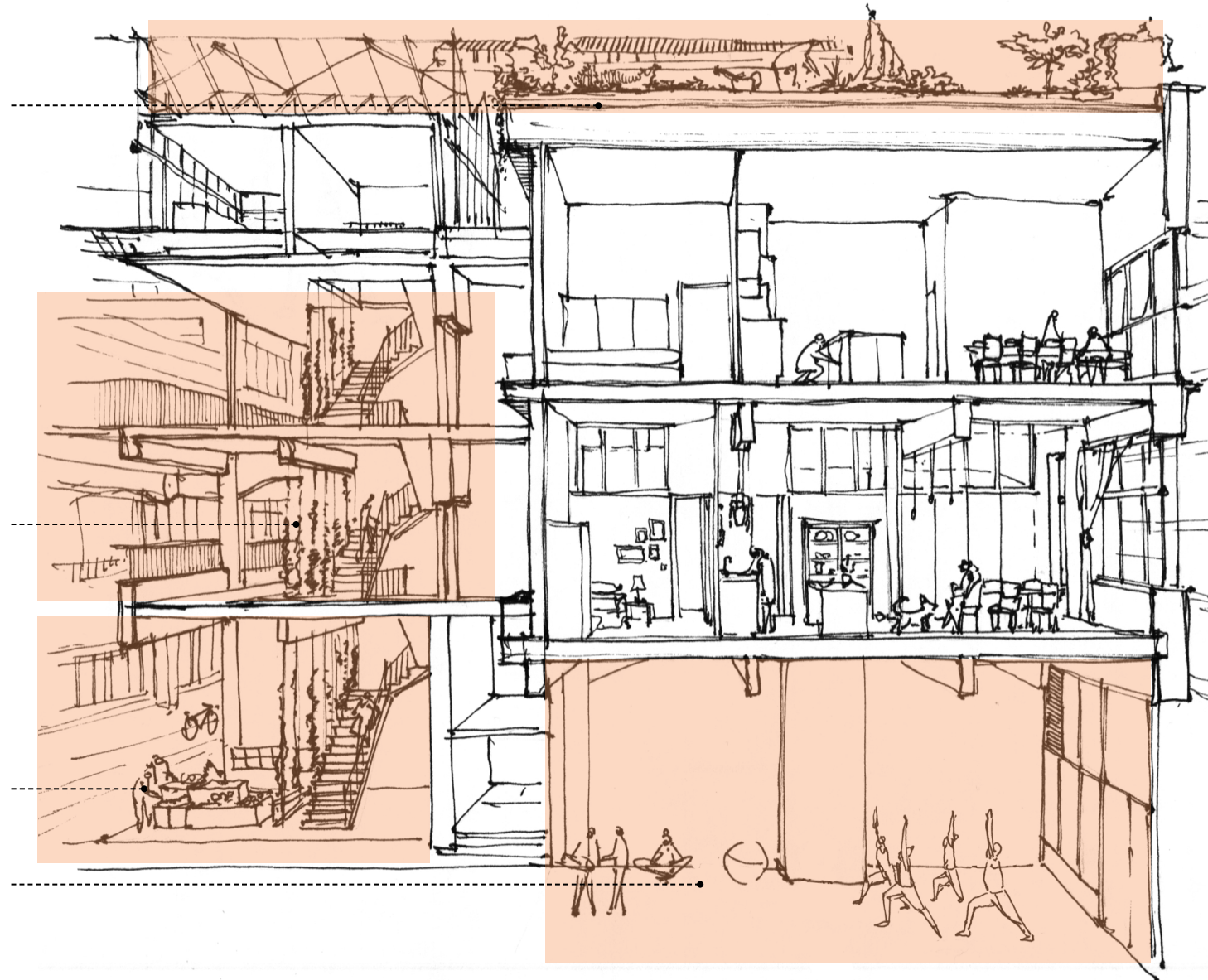
The productive rooftop garden forms the collective heart of the project and provides additional outdoor space for residents.

### Gradations of social contact:

By designing the horizontal circulation as wide walkways, space is created for encounters between residents and non-residents.

### Integration of living & interaction:

The ground floor serves as a public base with small-scale uses such as a yoga studio, café, or bakery. This makes the building feel like a self-contained community [...]. The weekly market in the indoor street brings grocery shopping close to home.



## DD5. Space for social interaction

APPLICABLE TO  
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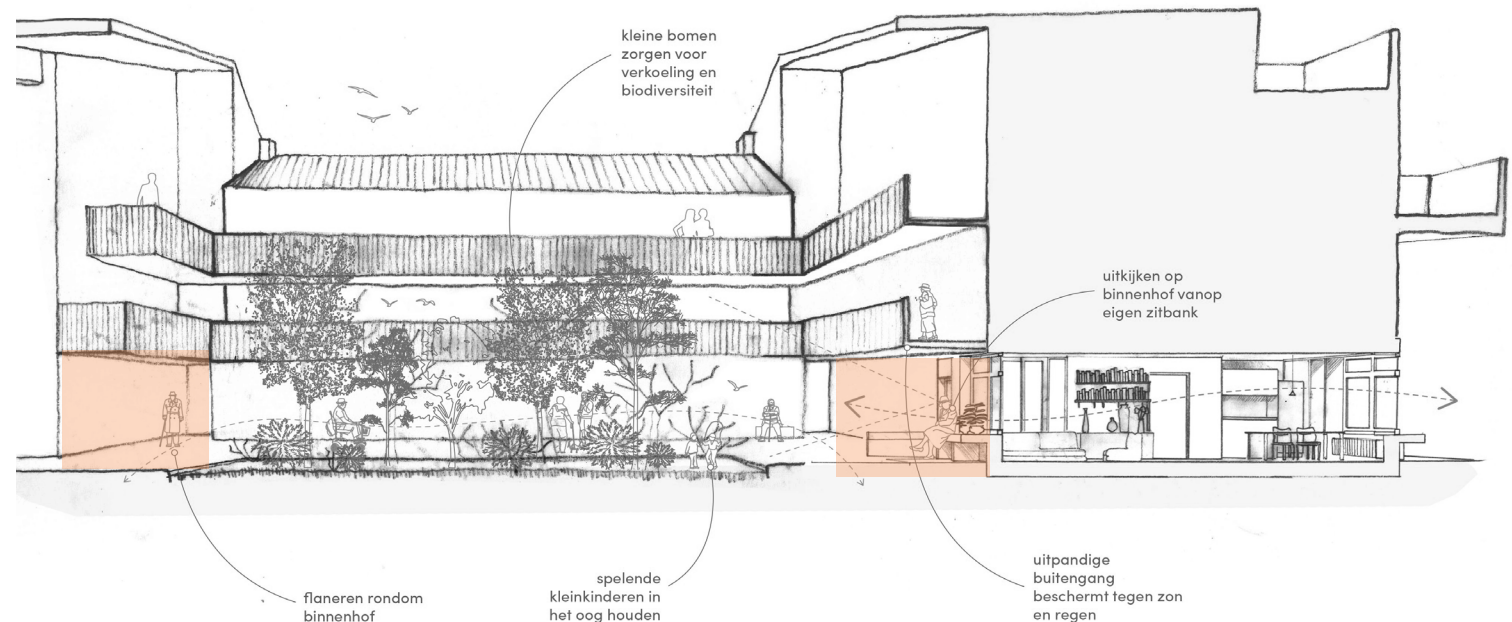
### Example 4 ADL-cluster, Herentals (RE-ST)

#### Integration of living & interaction and gradations of social contact:

Larger lowered, outward-opening windows provide generous views of and connection to the collective garden and covered walkway. Outdoor benches and partition walls create a balance between social interaction and private spaces.

*"Sometimes I wonder if I should request something different from the social housing association. Something more on the outside, so that I can look outside when I get older and am no longer so mobile."*

**- Karine, 58 years old**



## DD5. Space for social interaction

APPLICABLE TO  
TOOL 6

### Did you know...

Nearly half of people aged 60 and over sometimes feel lonely? Loneliness occurs at all ages, although it is often mainly associated with older adults. However, it is not only a matter of age but also of environment: the research project “A Lonely Planet” emphasizes that the quality of the living environment plays a major role in breaking loneliness. For this reason, it is crucial for design to pay attention to places that stimulate interaction and social contact, both within and across generations.

*De Witte et al., 2023; A Lonely Planet, 2024*

### Example 5 Residential project, Zonhoven (a2o)

The residential project is designed as **an open campus in the village center**, where public routes and a central green area facilitate encounters between residents and passersby. **Open stairwells** with wire mesh for climbing plants soften the transition between building and landscape and function as **shared, informal meeting zones**.



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## Images

The architectural examples shown come from projects by the architectural firms (a2o Architects, Osar, RE-ST) that participated in this research and were published with their permission. Some images were redrawn by Bortnik D.

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