

Aging & Society



Stories of connection in The Hague Southwest

A project from Leiden University College The Hague – in collaboration with senior living complex Muidenstein, Staedion and the Thesis Hub The Hague Southwest

A few words from the teacher

Lying in front of you is the magazine produced by students of the Aging & Society course at Leiden University College (LUC), The Hague. The magazine is the result of a collaboration between LUC, Staedion Housing Corporation and the Thesis Hub The Hague South-West. For this project, students of the Aging & Society Course spent time with the residents of the senior-complex Muidenstein in Morgenstond, the Hague South-West about social connection within the meeting room of the building but also social connections that extend the walls of the building.

In the Aging & Society course we set out to explore what successful aging entails in practice, in line with Sarah Lamb (2017) edited volume 'Successful Aging as a Contemporary obsession' which describes dominant western cultural and public health movements that describe 'successful aging' in terms of individual agency, achieving productive activity, valuing independence and avoiding independence, and permanent personhood. In our project we explored this overarching question through storytelling. Students spoke to residents during an artworkshop with coffee corner organised by the Thesis Hub the Hague South West in collaboration with local artist Marjolein Sijmons. Staedion provided a guestlecture at their headquarters on their liveability policy, and facilitated our first acquaintance with the residents of Muidenstein. Resident Layla Mukhtar worked tirelessly to facilitate the coffee mornings and welcoming the students - with delicious cakes.

The stories in this magazine are not just stories of connection of residents, they are also testimonials of the connection that was forged between the students and the residents through spending time together. For Leiden University College, engaging with The Hague is a key aim. The students in this course went the extra mile. They went to the artworkshop, coffee mornings, decorated for Christmas and contributed multiple creative ways of telling the stories they heard. This is the true value of educational projects such as this.

We are grateful to the residents of Muidenstein for hosting us and sharing with us. We also would like to thank the Thesis Hub The Hague Southwest for facilitating the partnership through the organisation of the artworkshop, the coffee corner, the flyers and for producing this magazine. It has been invaluable assistance. We are very grateful to Staedion Housing Corporation, who has given us the possibility to do this study, and for the in-house lecture. It was immensely helpful to the students to see policy in action and visit Staedion's headquarters.

Special thanks to Layla Mukhtar, Saïda Daouyry, Antoinette Epping, Marjolein Sijmons, Mandy Koenraads, Ginger Wouters and Jonne Huiveneers. As a teacher I would like to thank all the students for their commitment, enthusiasm and creativity.

Josien de Klerk



Muidenstein challenged my assumptions about what it means to age successfully. It demonstrated that preventing decline is not the sole objective; building relationships, fostering connection, and affirming human dignity are equally essential.

—
Poppy Dipper (student)

A brief introduction

Our society is changing: more and more people are growing older, and many older adults are living independently for longer. This brings wonderful opportunities, but also raises questions. How do we stay healthy, how do we continue to meet one another, and how do we ensure that everyone feels at home in their own neighborhood?



Population aging presents both challenges and opportunities for cities seeking to promote health, autonomy, and social participation among the elderly. In the Netherlands, independent living for older people is increasingly emphasized in policy. These policies are further supported by social housing arrangements, and some neighborhood initiatives. The framing of independence has repeatedly been a marker of successful aging. However, this raises important questions about social connection, and the environments older adults live in. Housing is not only a material structure, but is also a social space that can participate in either facilitating or hindering meaningful social interaction.

Urban neighborhoods undergoing this phenomenon of regeneration face particular difficulty addressing these issues. Efforts to improve health, safety, and participation rely on collaborative efforts between residents, housing corporations, municipalities, and social organisations.

Yet, there is a gap in understanding how these ambitions translate into the daily life of older residents. Examining concrete living environments can therefore aid in giving valuable knowledge into how broader aging is experienced in practice.

In this report, we explore the concept of successful ageing and examine how it takes shape within Muidenstein, a senior housing complex managed by the Staedion Housing Corporation in The Hague. Staedion, together with Thesis Hub The Hague Southwest and resident volunteers, posed a central challenge to us as students: Where do the residents' strengths lie, what are their needs, what can they do themselves, and what do they need from Staedion as a facilitator?

Our role as student researchers was to analyse the relationship between the formal institutions involved in old-age care and the broader societal ideas about ageing, participation, and community support.

This work is situated within several wider developments. Nationally and locally, there is an increasing emphasis on ageing in place, supporting older adults to continue living independently at home for as long as possible. At the same time, The Hague positions itself as an “age-friendly city,” and Staedion places a strong focus on liveability within its housing complexes. Together, these trends highlight the importance of social connection, accessible communal facilities, and opportunities for older residents to engage with one another.

The questions we explore are: What role does the Muidenstein meeting space currently play, or has the potential to play, in fostering social connection among older residents? Second, more broadly, how do residents connect socially within and beyond the building, and what barriers or opportunities shape these patterns? This report investigates these issues to provide grounded recommendations for revitalising the meeting space and strengthening community life in Muidenstein.



Background information

Important facts and numbers about aging in The Hague Southwest

The Hague South West consists of: Moerwijk – Morgenstond – Bouwlust - Vrederust. It is one of the greenest areas in the Hague. The Hague South West is part of a 20-year plan to improve the area, on health, safety, education, participation, living, and working. Everyone has to work together: residents, entrepreneurs, social partners, the state, and the municipality (Gemeente Den Haag, 2025). 95.5% of people above the age of 65 live independently. People are generally satisfied with their living situation (Den Haag in Cijfers, 2025). There are municipality-funded social projects for elders to meet each other, do things, and get out of the house.

About Muidenstein

Figure 1 shows Muidenstein, one of the social housing complexes owned by Staedion and located in the Morgenstond neighborhood of The Hague Southwest. Built in 1985, the building consists of 100 apartments designated for senior residents aged 55 and older, with the oldest current resident being 95 years old. On the ground floor, the complex includes a communal meeting space and garden that are accessible internally and through an external side entrance.



Figure 1
Social Housing Complex "Muidenstein" Owned by Staedion.

In the past, residents frequently used this communal space for various activities, including card games, bingo, streaming football games and sharing meals. However, due to conflicts and unsafe behavior this participation declined. After Staedion refurbished the room and added a small kitchen —see Figure 2 for the new ground plan—a few active residents revived the space and hosted weekly coffee mornings and soup gatherings.

However, the organization of these activities proved too heavy, and most resident volunteers were not able to continue. Today, one resident keeps the activities going, but others in the complex still seem to miss social connection. While residents find this connection important, they feel unable to organize it themselves, and Staedion does not currently see a direct role in coordinating activities either.

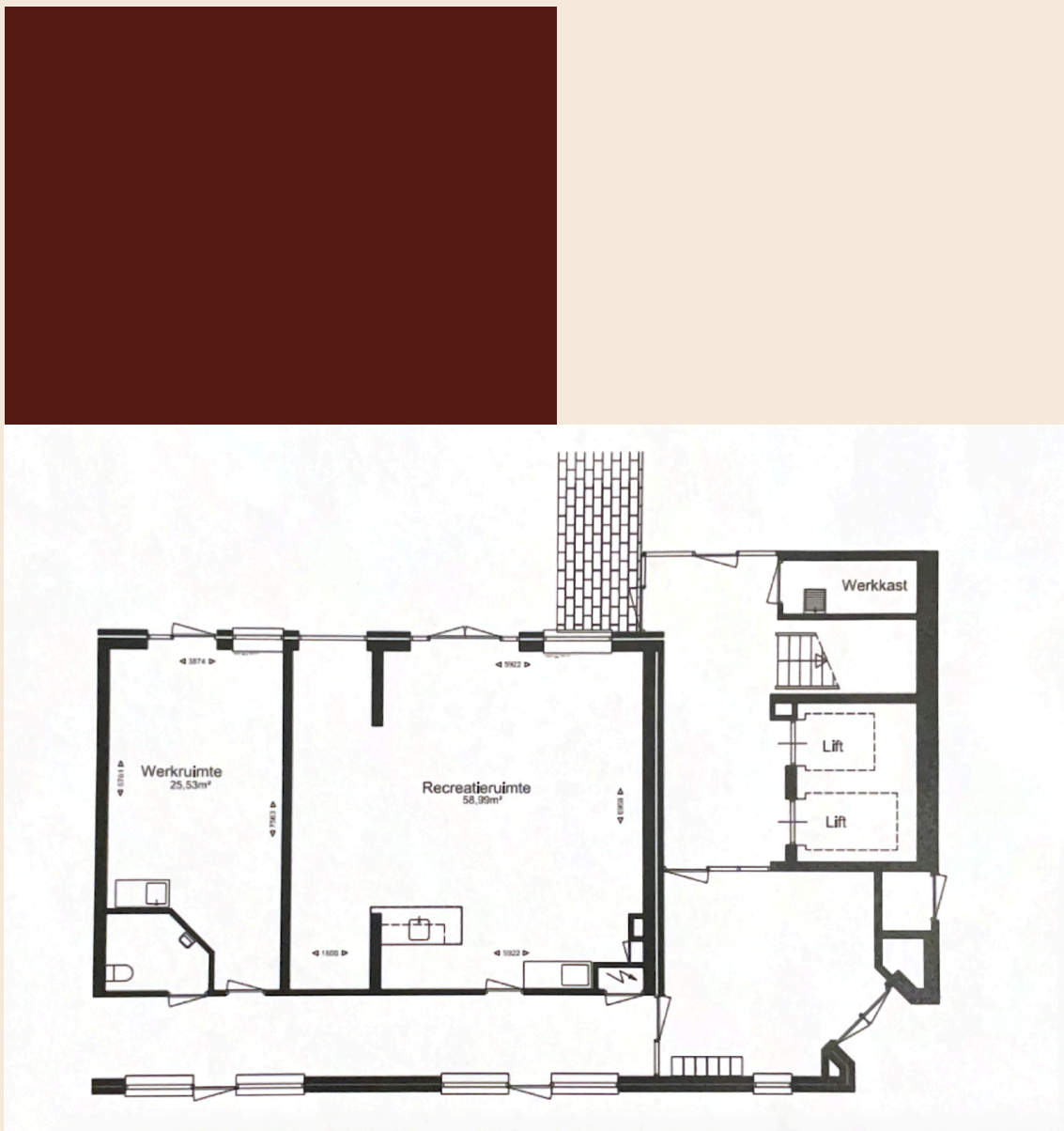


Figure 2
Ground Plan of Communal Area in Muidenstein After Refurbishing

What did we do?

To gain a clear understanding of how residents of Muidenstein experience living and social life in the building, we engaged in conversations in various ways. Our main aim was to listen to stories, wishes, and ideas in a manner that felt comfortable and relaxed.

The Autumn Workshop

We began with an autumn-themed painting workshop in the communal space. Residents could take part in painting or simply drop in for a chat. During this afternoon, we got to know one another and spoke with residents who later wished to share their stories in more depth.

Visits to Muidenstein

Between November and December 2025, we visited Muidenstein five times. We conducted in-depth interviews with five residents and also spoke with six residents during short, spontaneous conversations in the hallways, elevator, or communal areas. Everyone gave prior consent to share their story or photograph in this magazine.

How we conducted the conversations

We used several approaches to gather stories, all designed to keep conversations as natural as possible:

- **Theme-based conversations:** We discussed familiar topics such as important life moments, family, hobbies, and memories. This allowed conversations to relate to the central research question while leaving ample space for personal experiences.
- **Photographs and personal objects:** Personal photos and objects from residents' homes were used as conversation starters. These tangible items helped residents recall memories, experiences, and emotions that might otherwise have been difficult to express.
- **The three-circle diagram:** Residents were asked to place people and services in a diagram of three circles, depending on how close or distant they felt emotionally or practically. Those closest were placed in the inner circle, while more distant or less positive relationships were placed further out. This provided insight into how residents experience their social environment.
- **Doing activities together:** Because conversations often flow more easily during shared activities, some interviews took place while doing things together. During the Christmas period, students and residents decorated the communal spaces, which naturally sparked stories. Conversations also emerged during the autumn workshop, while folding origami, and while making music together.
- **Feedback from residents:** Once all stories had been collected, we organized a joint feedback session. Residents could indicate whether their story had been represented accurately and whether any changes were needed. Staff members from Staedion were also present, allowing everyone to reflect together on what these stories mean for the future of Muidenstein.



Through interviews and informal encounters at Muidenstein, I now see that connection and the privilege of growing old with people around you are the true measures of success.

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Elena Graham (student)

Absences - *Polly Dipper*

Family ties, the feeling of 'home', intimate care needs, a home-cooked meal, odd jobs being done, warm passionate conversations and daily human interactions - all severed from the lives of those that used to be deemed as useful members of society.

These absences are not the circumstances of all who live in the Muidenstein Senior Housing complex, but they are woven too frequently into the lives of the ninety-eight households spread across its four floors in The Hague South West. In an area teeming with multicultural life and thousands of people living side by side, they fail to look up and see one another.

I hear the mourning, soaked into the walls of half-empty rooms, reminiscent of lives before. Not just the losses of friends and family, but mourning the memories of young mobility, sharp sparring brains, dreams of adventures, times of being rushed off their feet without a minute to themselves.

But now all they seem to be accompanied by are long stretches of minutes by themselves.

On Wednesdays, the Coffee Moment always begins the same way: with the soft hiss of the kettle, the clink of teaspoons hitting the side of coffee cups, the tentative creak of the door as residents step inside the bright common room. It's a weekly rhythm of people craving connection and a good gossip.

A lady is already there when I arrive, seated at her usual table near the window. The silver walker rests beside her as a loyal companion, and her hands are cupped around a lukewarm tea. She removes her handbag from the chair next to her as I come nearby, a silent invitation that welcomes my company.

"Cold today," she remarks, her voice soft and deliberate. She furrows her brow in thought, struggling to decipher her Dutch thoughts into words I'll understand.

"My English, I learned in school. Sorry, my husband was my translator," she shifts her gaze down towards her lap, disappointed that there is not more she can contribute.

I give her a warm smile and reach to point at her gold ring, delicately hugging her skin like it has sat there for decades. "What a beautiful ring. Tell me about your husband"

This is where I call over my Dutch friend so the lady can speak more freely, and I can hear it through my very own translator. She gently adjusts the wedding ring to display the bright jewels, her promise of love, displayed in pride and place.

"He provided a good life for our children and me. He worked fifty hours a week in construction. Never missed a dinner and took me on a cruise when we retired..."

We sit with her for forty minutes, as she unravels stories of her family's struggles, her husband's heroic acts of sacrifice, and lessons learned from being in the care system in the 1950s. Her face glows with pride when she explains how her children are now living transnational lives in business and teaching, thousands of miles away. A youthful vibrancy exudes from her as she recalls anecdotes of love and loss. Occasionally, she cranes her head back to release a great cackle that reverberates off the walls of the common room. She seemed to forget where she was, her mind replaying a tape of experiences she's had throughout her lifetime.

I reach for her mug to refill her tea, but she grabs it protectively and states that she only has caffeine once a day. My friend repeats this back to me and explains that she said, "That's enough socialising for one day". I sit back a little astonished at the shift in demeanour. It appears the conversation has worn her out a bit, and she needs to get back to her errands. I feel I could stay for hours more, mesmerised by the grit and humour that frames her experiences of neglect and her and her husband's determination to build a life from humble beginnings.

"It was a pleasure hearing about your life with Albert"

I watch a tide of sorrow wash over her face, and her posture shrinks as if she's drawing inward for protection. Perhaps it's the grief of hearing me utter the familiar name of her late husband.

"He would have loved this, you know, having students visit here to listen to us oldies yap about our lives. He was always a big talker," She pulls a stamp-sized photo of him from her purse, and strokes it tenderly with a distant haze in her eyes, drifting somewhere far beyond the room.

I sit with her in the soft hum of the room, pretending to straighten napkins on the table so she doesn't feel watched. There is a particular kind of dignity in choosing quiet, and a particular kind of arrogance in assuming silence is an invitation to disturb it.

Drawing herself back to the moment, she lifts her handbag onto her walker and excuses herself. She says in Dutch, "It takes me double the time to do the shopping since he's passed. The shops close soon, so I need to get on."

I pull back the assault course of furniture blocking her way to the exit, as she affectionately squeezes the shoulder of a fellow resident and arranges to see her later in the week. As she passes me in the doorway, her eyes flicker toward mine, holding years. Whole decades stacked like layers of sediment. She pulls my neck down, eager to whisper something in my ear.

She pieces together her half-forgotten English and clearly states, "Hold onto your people and leave nothing unsaid. They won't be around forever." There's a plea woven through her shaking words, drawn from a deep place of longing.

I clasp her cold hands with reassurance that I will try never to forget that fact of life. Releasing her grip, she shifts her focus to the task of getting down the narrow corridor. I push the button to open the door and wave her off, deep in thought of her present reality. Without Albert, but choosing to live on.

Like many of the residents here, they are still all the ages they ever were.
Still full of stories.
Still needing to be seen.

Humans were never designed to age alone; the question is whether we will look up in time - to notice, to remember, to hold on to one another while we still can.

Windows - *Anna Yates*


I lift the latch and push the window sideways just before the clock strikes twelve, a slight rush of cold December air rushing in from the corridors. I checked their windows – all four are open. I see her in the window and lift my hand and she lifts hers, and for a moment it is as though we are sharing the same heartbeat, gentle and alive, before we each step back into our own quiet rooms. If one of us forgets, the doorbell will ring after lunch. That's the pact. It started years ago over concern and it still holds.

Today the knock came early. Someone on the third floor can't make the delivery website accept her card and another resident appears ten minutes later with a phone that keeps muting itself mid-call to her daughter overseas. I settle them at my little table, show them where to tap, help them buy items or teach them how to work a laptop. They leave laughing and grateful, promising something in return. I never keep count. These small rescues are my currency now. Better than money, they buy me happiness, stories, the feeling that I matter in this big building, even if the requests do get overwhelming at times.

While the kettle boils I drag the boxes into the living room, getting ready to set up some Christmas decorations. I'm slower than I used to be, knees complaining, but the ritual is sacred. I wind the string lights around the railing first, then hang the ornaments and lights on the windows. While decorating, I look outside to my balcony to the low plastic fence my brother bolted there ages ago. It didn't look the prettiest, really, but it did its job. I smile at the memory of a tiny black whirlwind who could squeeze through any gap wider than a teacup. More than once he made it off the balcony into the grass and flowers below, and getting a phone call from the neighbour that he had once again been spotted free in the neighbourhood gave me heart attacks each time. Inside, above the grand jet-black piano that I recently started to play again, his photograph still hangs in the same spot. Dark and light gray fur, long fluffy ears and the cutest face, I still recall his tongue lolling in eternal triumph. I stare at the picture...it is enough, I don't need more. He's in the stories people still tell when they drop by, "Remember the day your little devil escaped and was found in the grass field again?" and he's in the laughter that follows.

Wednesdays have become the day to look forward to. At 11 o'clock we drift together to the tearoom, settle around the ivory table like birds returning to the same branch, and let the hours tick by until the afternoon passes. It used to be something else a few years ago. We used to cram in there on winter afternoons, the television blaring football while we shouted at the referees and celebrated goals. But little by little the balance tipped, it became loud in a way that made some of us feel small, and one day a decision was made to reverse this. While I do miss being able to watch football together, the tea-time room has turned into something calmer. Something where many would feel more comfortable in.

I leave the balcony door open while I work at the table, folding red-and-gold paper into cranes with the goal of folding 1,000 cranes, if one can do so it means your mind is healthy. I used to make bigger things like big owls and snowmen and I'd prop them outside my door on a little shelf. Then came the afternoon in 2014, when the building jumped. I was folding a new heron, wings half-spread, when the floor shook and every window in the place rattled like teeth. A boom rolled down from the fifth floor, followed by smoke that smelled of burning plastic and something worse. My origami figures flew off the shelf in one violent gust and scattered across the corridor in shreds. Later, when the firemen left and the police tape came down, we heard the story in pieces. An old man up there had ended everything after his girlfriend walked out for good. Gas bottles, they said. Loneliness can be louder than any explosion. I finish the last crane for today, set it gently beside the others.



Evening settles. The corridor and courtyard glow from sets of Christmas lights reflecting off and shining through the window. Somewhere above, a doorbell rings, someone must be visiting the upstairs neighbour, and footsteps hurry along the corridor. The building exhales, listens, answers. I sit with my tea, watching the lights wink across the dark. Tomorrow, my daughters and grandchildren will be visiting. Oh, how I look forward to tomorrow. Before noon, the windows will open again...ours will, at least. But I know there are other windows that stay closed. Curtains drawn tight even at midday, doors that never quite answer on the first knock, lights that come on only when the sun has already gone. There are people in this very building who have never tasted our Wednesday tea, who never learned the small black dog's stories, who sit alone with the television murmuring to an empty room.

However, the windows that know how to open will keep opening and the tearoom will still have its kettle boiling on Wednesdays. Because one day a closed curtain might twitch, one day a hesitant knock might answer back and one day someone who thought the building had forgotten them will look out and find that there are people waiting for them. Until then, we keep the ritual alive, for the five of us, yes, but also for the ones who aren't ready yet. We are still here. And we are still waiting, quietly and patiently, for the rest of the windows to remember how to open.

Wednesday Mornings: The Warmth between the Walls - *Maelis Knight*

The building did not reveal itself immediately. From the outside, it blended into the rows of structures around it quietly. Its entrance was partially covered by bicycles and shadows. The doorway was dark glass, the type that reflects the world back before allowing anyone to step inside. Visitors pause, uncertain of whether they had found the right place.

Inside, the corridors were narrow, softly lit. The lights, low, steady, flickered when someone walked beneath them, acknowledging each presence. The floor held hidden imprints of countless footsteps, and the air held a faint, familiar scent of life. A combination of morning coffee, and something warm simmering far away in the countless kitchens. Yet, beneath the dim lights, the building contained a secret. It was a place where people aged alongside one another, each resident carried memories from decades of life elsewhere. Their stories settle into the walls like a whisper, sometimes little hidden, or sometimes unexpectedly bright. Every door kept a past, every hallway held hints of the present.

At first, the building seemed still, almost reserved. But there was a subtle choreography that unfolded routinely within its walls. Residents moved daily, shaped not by schedules but by instinct. Some ventured out early, as others waited for the calmer hours of the afternoon. Some caught the corridor through barely opened food before even deciding whether to step outside. The sharp contrast between the simple building's structure and the social life inside it was intricate.

On the first floor lies the communal room, a modest space where sunlight drifted in more generously than in the hallways. Its tables were worn at the corners, its chairs slightly mismatched, yet the room carried a welcoming feeling. Some residents gravitated towards it the way birds gather at a familiar perch. Not always predictably, but reliably over time. This is where the warmth accumulated. Someone would bring a tin of biscuits, someone else would boil water for tea. Another would ease a chair into place for a neighbour without making it look like help. Conversations rose and settled. People spoke with a gentle rhythm, accustomed to one another's presence. Short exchanges, shared silences, comfortable nods. In this room, connection was not formal. It appeared organically, in small, invisible gestures. A resident might quietly share what they read on the news that day. Others might remember how someone likes their tea, perfectly warm. Someone else might notice when absence arises. These subtle acts formed the building's social infrastructure, one built not of bricks, but attentiveness.

Though the building had rules and notices, like any other residential space, the daily care residents offered each other was of a different warmth. The formal parts of life, letters, repairs, administrative instructions, moved at their own pace, practical and necessary. But alongside grew a soft network of mutual understanding.

When residents received a confusing letter, someone usually offered to read it with them. Every Wednesday, when the silence filled the hallways, life would radiate from the common room. If a resident seemed lonely, someone would gently check in, sometimes under the guise of asking a small question. Sometimes by simply lingering a few minutes longer during coffee mornings. These gestures were subtle enough to be missed by strangers, yet strong enough to keep the building feeling inhabited, rather than simply occupied. Over time, the quiet friendliness between residents shaped the atmosphere. The corridors, at first glance seemingly dim and reserved, became pathways which care would circulate. Slowly, calmly, without calling attention to itself.

Newcomers often found this building difficult to understand, in the beginning. Its layout is fairly boxlike, its concerns folding into one another, its doors stood side by side, the countless hallways feeling like a soft labyrinth. Yet as people spent time there, logic became clear. The building became familiar.

Each resident contributed something different to the space. Some have a sense of humor, others a steady presence, an ability to listen, a habit of saying hello to anyone that passed by. Some offered warmth through conversation, others through consistency. Together, these qualities formed a kind of collective care that did not depend on big gestures, but a simple Wednesday coffee morning. Even those who rarely joined maintained their own rhythms of connection, a nod in the hallway, a very brief greeting through a half-open door, a faint smile exchanged while collecting the mail. These understated interactions knitted the building together in ways that did not always show on the surface.

At times, a resident's absence shifted the atmosphere. When someone fell ill or spent days without coming downstairs, others began to notice. One would knock softly. Another would call. A third might inquire indirectly, just to ensure that everything was alright. Loss, too, left its scars. When a long-time resident passed away, the building absorbed the change quietly. Conversation would shift, soften. People paused more often near the empty apartment taken over by another. In these moments, the building felt like a single shared space shaped by many hands, many stories, many memories.

Yet the warmth did not fade. Instead, it rebalanced itself, continuing in a new form. Just like a river finding a new path after encountering rocks, continuing in new forms.

Seen from the outside, the building could appear dark, even uninviting. But from within, it was a place where people practiced small forms of connection every day, gestures that filled the space with more warmth than lighting ever could. For those who stopped coming down, the building's warmth began to feel distant. Small conversations, shared smiles, the rhythm of everyday connection, all these slipped away. Days became quieter, meals lonelier, and stairs heavier.

The building's design provided structure, but without its residents the atmosphere would slowly drift away. Through their routines, relationships, and understated kindnesses, they created a subtle but resilient sense of community. In this way, the building learned to shift, not from brighter bulbs or modern renovations, but from the steady light that people tending quietly to one another within the space share.

Circles of Family, Objects of Memory - *Victor Xie*

It was a rainy afternoon, the puddles splashed up against our shoes as we hurried towards the senior housing building. We were late after class, backpacks heavy with notebooks, 2 bags of apples knocking against my leg, and a small packet of cookies turning soft in my hand. The building ahead of us looked dull and grey, a block of concrete pressed into the wet sky. For a moment I wondered how many stories could really live inside a place that looked this tired from the outside.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, something flickered.

One window broke the monotony: a frame of warm Christmas lights and glowing decorations, small figures silhouetted against the glass. It was as if that single window had decided not to obey the colour of the rest of the building. As we came closer, the door beside it opened and an older woman lifted her arm in a small, careful wave.

We had found her.

Inside, everything changed. Her apartment was like stepping into a different season. Where the corridor was linoleum and echo, her living room was soft and layered: tinsel draped across a cupboard, a string of lights reflecting in the glass of framed photographs, a table set with the mat she'd once received from family. The air smelled faintly of coffee and something sweet. We handed over the cookies and apples; she smiled and laughed at how much we'd brought for her, then insisted we sit, as if we weren't visitors but grandchildren who had simply taken too long to appear.

The first thing that caught my attention was the wall of photos. Generations looked back at us: a young girl with wind in her hair, two children in black and white sitting and eating in front of a modest house, a cluster of adults smiling at the camera, her two daughters among them, with four grandchildren squeezed together and smiling at the camera. Time, frozen and rearranged, had been hung carefully so that everyone fit.

"This one," she said, following my gaze. Her finger tapped a black-and-white picture of a boy and a girl sitting side by side, feet almost touching. "That's my brother. That's where it all starts."

We hadn't even taken out the paper and pen yet, but the "circle of people" exercise was already visible on her wall. In the centre were her family members, fixed there by tape and habit. She told us about them slowly, her brother and sister, still the closest, still the ones she calls when something big or small happens. Her children. Her grandchildren, two boys and two girls, who bring noise and chaos on weekends and leave behind the quiet echo of their laughter.

Her apartment, I realised, was full of bridges like this, objects that stretched between the life inside these four walls and a wider network of people who weren't physically here.

On a sideboard sat a tall candle in an elegant candlestick. The wax had burned down in uneven steps, each layer a past Easter.

"One year my parents brought us a candle from the church," she said. "Catholic tradition. This one is from a long time ago. But I still keep it."

She told us how, when she lights it, she thinks of them, of Easters at home, of the old house where that black-and-white photo was taken, of the songs her mother liked, old popular songs and sentimental tunes that used to play on the radio. The candle is no longer just a religious object; it is a line stretching backwards to parents who are gone and sideways to siblings who still call. When the flame flickers in this small living room, it pulls the past into the present and makes the room more crowded than it looks.

On the table in front of the window stood a fishtank. A single fish swam in slow, confident circles, tail flicking like a small flag.

“He’s named after a football player,” she said, with a little laugh and a glint in her eye. She mentioned a famous striker, and suddenly the room shifted again: her stories moved from quiet family scenes to the roar of crowds, the thrill of big matches, the way the building used to gather around a television downstairs to watch tournaments together.

“Back then,” she told us, “we’d sit together in the communal room to watch the big games. I was always in the front. We argued about referees, shouted at the screen. You’d think we were in the stadium itself.”

The fish, circling calmly in its glass dome, carried all of that: not just a fondness for football, but memories of sitting shoulder to shoulder with neighbours, of shared excitement, of having something to look forward to on long winter evenings. Now that her mobility is more limited, she doesn’t go down as often, but the game hasn’t disappeared. The commentary still hums through the building on match days, the conversations still continue in the corridor, and the little fish with the big name swims in the centre of her room like a mascot of those connections.

Later, when we took out the A4 paper and drew three circles like a target, her pen hovered for a moment over the smallest one. She told us the names of her siblings first, then the children, then the grandchildren. The innermost circle filled quickly with people who do not live in the building but live in her room anyway, through photographs, phone calls, and the warm expectation of future visits.

In the second circle she mentioned neighbours she sees often, people she drinks coffee with, people she chats with in the corridor or in the meeting room downstairs. That room, she explained, used to be noisier, full of football and loud conversation; now it has a calmer rhythm, with regular coffee gatherings where stories are poured out alongside tea. For her, it is like an extension of her living room: another place where she can show up as herself, where familiarity lives in the shape of chairs and the shared joke that always comes back.

The outer circle remained strangely important, even half-empty. There were people she knew only by sight, people she greeted occasionally, people who lived behind doors whose names she sometimes forgot. And then there were others, the ones who walked past without a hello. They didn’t take up much ink on the page, but they were present in her awareness, like unlit windows in the facade of the building. The circles, I realised, weren’t just about closeness; they were about possibilities: who might move inward one day, and who might never.

When we asked if there was an object that said something about staying connected to others, she hesitated only for a second before pointing to a box on the shelf. Inside were photographs and printed snapshots: a huge snowman made of paper, colourful animal figures, and a cascading cloud of folded paper swans.

“I made those,” she said, a little proudly. “Four hundred swans, can you imagine? My fingers hurt afterwards.”

She told us how she used to sit for hours at her table, folding paper into birds, into owls, into elaborate decorations. At Christmas or special occasions, she would bring them out of the apartment and into the corridor, into the meeting room, sometimes into the small garden. A snowman made of paper stood outside her door one year, she said, and for weeks people stopped, smiled, commented, or knocked to say how much it brightened the hallway.

It struck me that this was another way her private world spilled out into the building. Her creativity didn't stay confined to the walls of her living room; it seeped into shared spaces through decorations, through little surprises that turned anonymous corridors into places where you might pause and talk. A strip of tinsel, a string of lights around her door, a paper crane perched on a shelf, each of these small acts quietly invited others into contact.

Our conversation moved like that, from object to object. A small decorative mat on the table held the story of an in-law who gave it to her. The chair in the corner was “the visitors' chair,” where friends or neighbours naturally sat. A shelf near the door, she explained, had become an improvised help desk: people brought letters they didn't understand, phones that didn't work, laptops that refused to cooperate. She would sit them down at that table, beside the candle and under the family photographs, and together they would figure it out.

“I help them order things online,” she said. “Sometimes reset clocks after a power cut. It's no big thing.”

But it is. In a building where many residents live alone behind thick fire doors, her willingness to let “small problems” cross her threshold turns her apartment into a node of support. Someone comes in with a stubborn device; they leave not only with a solution but with a cup of coffee, a shared complaint about modern technology, perhaps a laugh. These micro-moments accumulate. Over time, the building is no longer just stacked apartments; it becomes a network of people who know where they can knock.

When we asked about her health, about using the wheelchair more often now, she didn't dramatise it. “The world shrinks a bit,” she said simply. Long walks are out of the question. Some parts of the building are harder to reach. Slopes feel steeper than they look on a floorplan.

And yet her world had also learned a new shape. The route from her front door to the entrance, from the entrance to the meeting room, from her balcony to the small patch of garden below, now resembled a walkability map of connection. The surfaces she can cross, the corners where she might meet someone, the places where she stops for a chat: those are the lines that matter. A neighbour passing by on the way to the lift. A quick exchange in the entrance hall. A familiar face at the mailbox.

As we talked, I began to see the building differently. On paper, it is a senior housing complex with standard corridors, a communal room, a terrace, an inner garden. In her story, it is more like a fabric being constantly stitched and re-stitched by invisible threads: a candle tying this apartment to a childhood home; photographs tying it to people scattered across the city; decorations tying it to the corridor; conversations tying it to the meeting room; memories of crowded football evenings tying it to a communal “we” that still echoes, even if the sound is softer now.

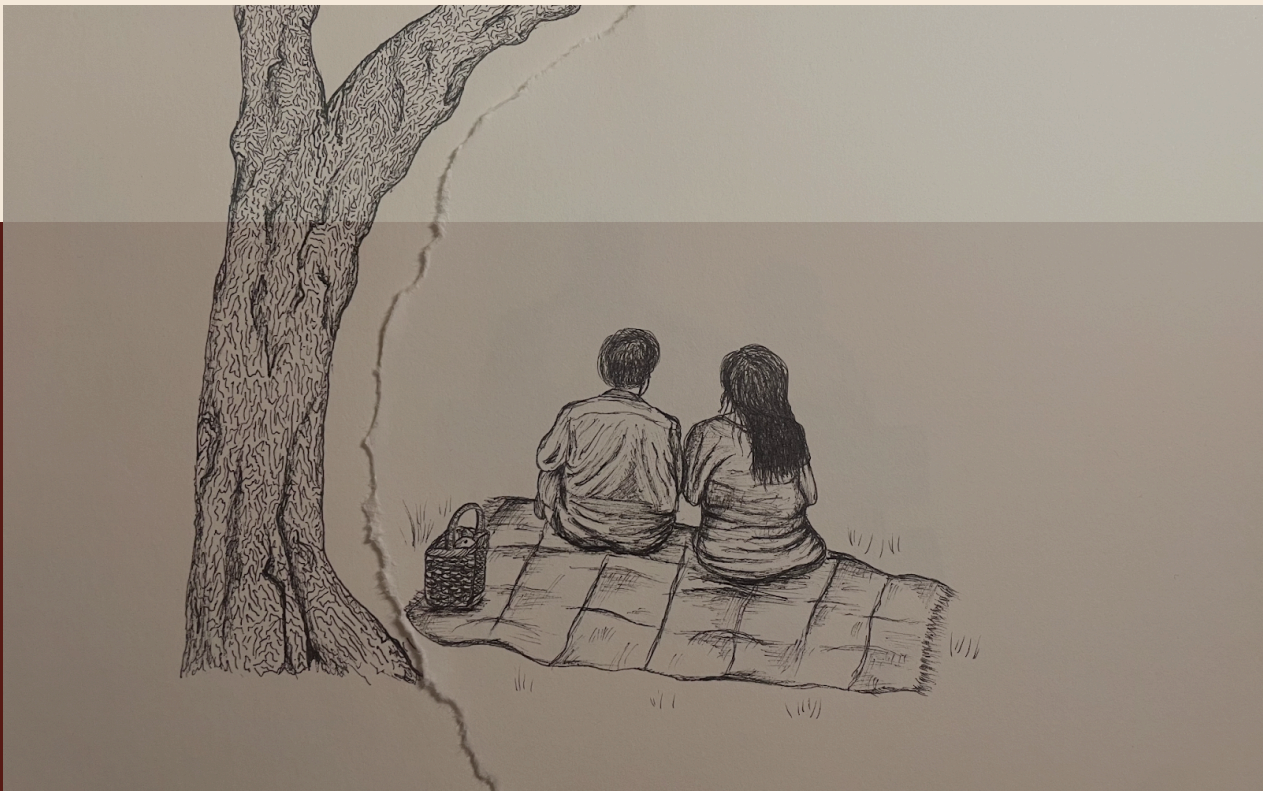
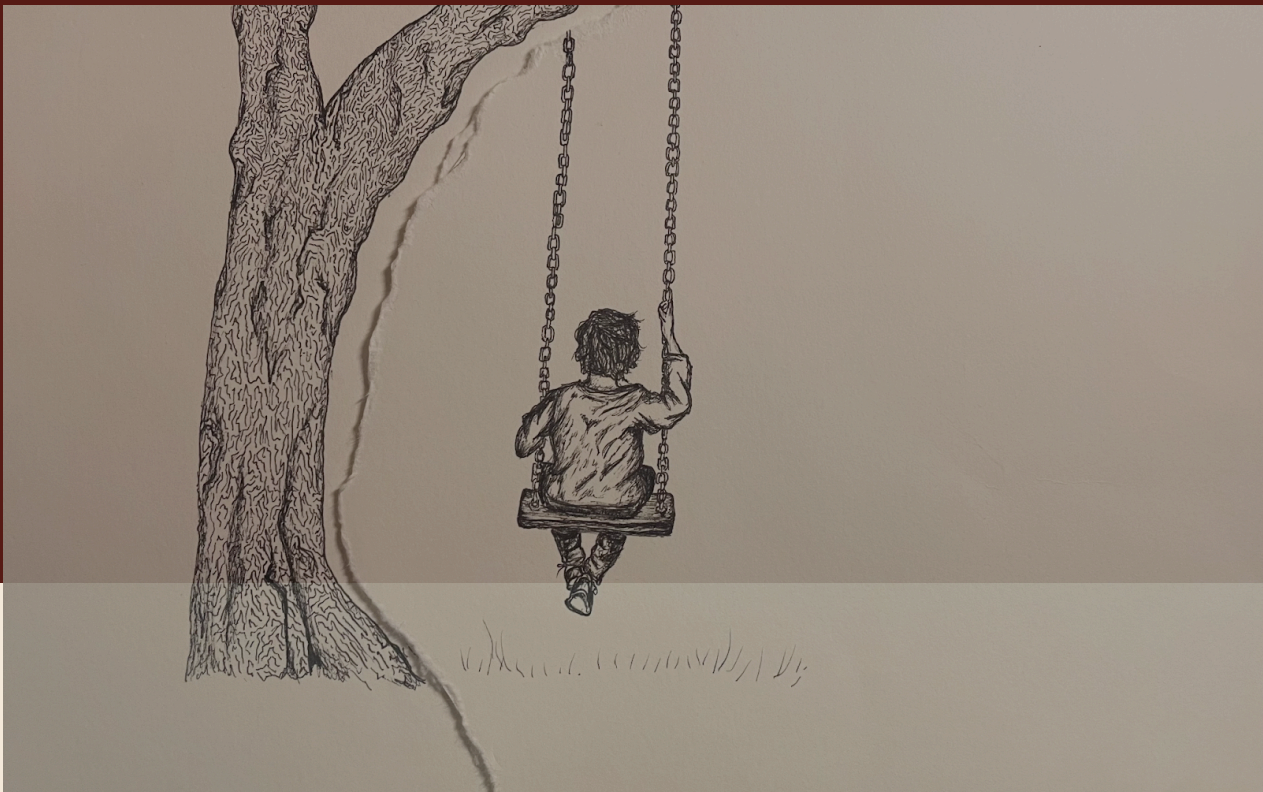
Loneliness, in this context, isn't something that disappears completely. You can sense it in the hesitation when she talks about doors that stay closed, in the awareness that some neighbours rarely leave their apartments. But the way she arranges her room, the way her private life deliberately spills into shared spaces, is a clear attempt to push back against it. She does not control the whole building, but she can control how this one apartment glows in the dark, how this one door feels when you stand in front of it.

My last impression, before we put our notebooks away, was of the three circles we had drawn together. The ink had bled a little into the paper, lines slightly fuzzy, names clustered in the middle and drifting outward. If you placed that drawing over a floorplan of the building, the circles wouldn't line up neatly with walls or staircases. They would stretch beyond concrete, connect balcony to living room, to city, to memory.

When we finally stepped back out into the rain, the building looked almost the same as when we arrived: long, grey, anonymous. But now I knew that inside, behind the glowing window, there was a room where past and present shook hands over a coffee cup; where a candle could light up an entire family tree; where four hundred paper swans had once turned a corridor into a festival.

From the street, it was just another housing block. From her armchair, it was a village made of doors, lights, and stories. And somewhere between those two views is the quiet work she does every day: turning a standard apartment into a small engine of connection, and letting that warmth leak deliberately into the rest of the building, so that loneliness has a little less space to grow.

Absence - Polly Dipper





But what about the elderly? - *Elena Graham*

I rush towards the tram stop, Dutch rain
drumming loud,
Soaking through my unwaterproof jacket, at the
mercy of the clouds.
I hop aboard in seconds, breath caught just in
time,
I'm lucky for my speed, my stride still in its prime.
I need no ramp, no arm, no hand extended
steadily,
Not that any was offered, anyway.
But what about the elderly?

I jump down at my stop, a spring set in my feet.
The pavement's cracked and crooked, no safe,
forgiving street.
Dark holes, raised ledges, weeds that tug and
pull my knees,
A minefield built of hazards, gaps, and impending
casualties.
I skip, I leap, I swing past every flaw so readily,
But what about the elderly?

I reach my destination - chants and placards fill
the air,
A march for rights and justice, passion
everywhere.

My throat grows hoarse, my feet throb heavily,
Yet still I feel such fortune burning steadily.
To fight for what I love, to stand in solidarity.
But what about the elderly?

The elections came and went with promises
galore,
New generations flattered, catered to, and more.
Identity, support, fresh futures framed so
tenderly,
Yet something in the speeches rings so
unfriendly.
But what about the elderly?

Laws and policies protect my joints and lungs from
strain,
My workplace isn't perfect, yet it shields me from
the pain.
I trust my future body will be guarded sensibly,
My safety net intact, my rights held carefully.
Not to be taken for granted, thinking about those
before me.
But what about the elderly?

I check my glowing phone, my income arrives on
time,
My money moves in pixels, my wallet is online.
This digital economy rewards digital literacy,
The ones who click, who swipe, who navigate
efficiently.
But what about the elderly?

Time for my appointment; the doctor's on a screen.
My face appears reflected in the webcam's glossy
sheen.
Virtual consultations, my new normal, easily.
No crowded waiting rooms, no travel, no delay for
me.
But what about the elderly?

Christmas came early, my housing corp spoils
With eco-friendly showers, and radiator foils.
I fetch it, fix it, fit it all quite effortlessly,
Still, I can't help it and think
But what about the elderly?

My world is not perfect, but support surrounds my
days,
Communities uplift me in thoughtful little ways.
I've never been dismissed, made small, or treated
carelessly.
What fortune I have, something I didn't before see,
So I sit and ponder quietly,
But what about our elderly?

Connection in Muidenstein

-
Elena Graham

Throwing it open
My door is agape
Cabbage and plums
With love I do make

The smell wafts away
Flooding the halls
Inviting, beckoning
With love it calls

Coffee is next
In the room downstairs
An effort to go
And yet I still care

It's our time to meet
Chat, and catch up
Talk about our lives
All round a coffee cup

Back in my room
My window is open
This is my signal
I stand waiting, frozen

Maybe I should call?
It turns twelve o'clock
Relief floods my veins
Four windows unlock

This is our signal
Our communication
We look out for each other
Affectionate dedication

I head to my car
Ready to shop
I provide for others
For those who cannot

I grab some food
Treats and snacks
Hauling to my boot
I bring it all back

Small gestures
Open windows, open doors
Coffee cups
And a time to pause

We look out for each other
It holds us accountable
Keeping us connected
For this we are thankful

When friends grow old - *Saskia Türk*

When friends find each other later in life,

Strangers become neighbors,
turning into companions.

We met over coffee.
That's how simple it can be.

When friends find each other later in life,

there's a lifetime to tell,
yet no reason to rush it.

So we met for coffee.
That's how simple it can be.

When friends find each other later in life,

They step into places,
of family long dispersed.

No grand plans or longings,
but friends that care for each other.

When friends find each other later in life,

It's as simple as can be.

Description:

This poem aims at highlighting how two residents were satisfied with their living situation and the connection they have. While we tried so hard to learn all the details and find aspects to improve, they seemed happy to have each other without feeling the need to overthink it. Shrugging their shoulders they agreed "Ja, het is erg mooi hier."

We are just like them - *Emma Rosekrans & Saskia Türk*

Three friends wander through The Hague.

They live in the same building,
That's how their paths had crossed.

They see each other often,
Weekly market visits.

Happiest going on walks,
Sharing ice cream after.

The three musketeers, that's them,
Sticking together at all times.

Dirt appeared on their porch,
Returned to the postbox upstairs.

Anecdotes will have them laugh,
Nobody needs to understand.

They complement each other,
Sharing wisdom and meals.

Love in the quiet forms,
Taking care of each other without having to ask.

Making the days a little lighter,
Through grief and joy.

They are living this life together,
They are inseparable.

Who would have guessed they are old?

Who would have guessed they are students?

Who would have guessed they are just the same?

Description:

This poem is intended to represent the similarities between friendships across ages. Whether old or young, friendship enriches life through shared routines and little adventures.

A year in the life of the Three Musketeers - *Paulis Baškevičs*

WINTER

The grass outside sagged from the weight of the early-morning frost. Inside the building was warm, the dark walls protecting from the vicious wind and all the heaters running at full power. The woman made her way up the staircase, slowly making her way from one step to the next. A man was on his way down. His cane tapped on each step, the only noise between them two as they passed each other with nary a glance spared to the other.

In her room, the woman barely managed to sit down before the sound of a phone rang out. She looked down to see her daughter's name flashing on the screen. The calls had gotten more frequent over the colder months of the year.

"Seeing if I'm still alive?" The woman laughed as she held the phone to her ear. This got her a scolding from her daughter, mad that her mother could read her so easily.

"Are you still coming this weekend?" Her granddaughter was back home for the winter, finally home after a semester in Belgium. Everyone was growing up so fast. It felt like only yesterday when she was just a tiny little thing wrapped in a soft blanket, staring out at the world with curious eyes. A blink of an eye later and she was all grown up.

"Of course." The date had been circled in thick blue ink in her calendar for the better part of a month. It sat on the wall, a constant reminder of the upcoming holidays.

A knock on the door startled her out of her thoughts. Saying a quick goodbye to her daughter, she hung up the phone and went to peer through the peephole. A young man stood outside, a black toolbox in hand.

He worked with a smile, gladly accepted a cup of tea, but did not linger much longer. There were five others in the building waiting for him to fix various issues around their apartments. Say what you want about the building, she thought, at least we're never kept waiting for long.

When the door clicked shut after he left, she glanced at her calendar again. There was a time when it was filled to the brim, pen marks spilling over the neat boxes of each day. Weekly soup kitchens, daily exercise, moments filled with connection. Maybe they would return again one day.

She sat back down on the armchair, turned on the TV, and turned back to watch the frost melt outside.

SPRING

Bright daffodils were already in bloom when the woman first met her. The elevator, as it always did, was taking its sweet time to reach the ground floor. While she usually took the stairs, eager for some activity, the heavy load of her weekly groceries kept her from them that day.

Another woman came to stand by her, muttering something under her breath.

"The elevators always take too long, don't they?" She said to the other woman, eager to dispel the silence. She smiled, and they fell into easy chatter that lasted long after the elevator had dropped them off on their floor. They felt like old friends, despite this being the first time they had talked. How could they have gone five years living here without ever interacting?

The tea she had offered her new friend was long cold by the time they said their goodbyes. The smell of mint still lingered in the air as they promised to see each other at the next coffee morning. Once the door closed shut, she ran over to her calendar. In bright blue ink she scribbled a reminder for tomorrow's event.

The next day, the lingering spring cold snuck its way into her apartment. Not even that could ruin her day. She turned on the TV and started her daily boxing exercises. It was important to keep moving, even when sitting and relaxing in front of the TV seemed like a much more appealing idea. When that was done, she put on her nicest clothes, fixed her hair in the mirror, and left her apartment with a smile.

The woman from the previous day was already there when she entered the common room. She had a steaming mug of coffee in her hands that she sipped at in between sentences said to another woman sitting next to her on the sofa.

They both smiled widely when she walked over to join them. Conversation flowed freely for the next hour, so much so that the woman did not realize she had not even gotten a coffee for herself. It had been a while since she talked so much to a new person.

As the coffee morning rolled to a close, the third woman looked to the other two and declared, "I think we have just become the three musketeers of Muidenstein." And so it became. The first woman was deemed Athos, the second Porthos, and their newest member Aramis. Anyone who joined them for a chat would become their d'Artagnan for the day.

SUMMER

As the summer heat swept through the city, the three musketeers searched for ways to make the most of it. Every week they would go on walks through the neighborhood. Their only purpose being to move around and spend time together.

When the sun got too bright to bear, the three of them would hide in an air-conditioned ice-cream store and try new flavors. It was a good break from the routine of daily life.

Athos's daughter slowly lost the worry in her voice when they called. Instead, she would question her about the latest adventure the three women had gotten up to.

And while they were all very grateful for the lives they were living now, some days were spent reminiscing on each of their pasts. Moments spent with now gone family members, travels half-way across the world, and more nearby. Each new day bought new memories, different but just as good.

AUTUMN


The trees outside slowly changed colors and shed their leaves as the year went into Autumn. The lazy days of summer heat were gone. Athos glanced at her now full calendar. Tuesdays were for going to the market. The three of them bundled up in their coats, hopped on the tram, and spent their morning exploring the variety of items on sale in each stall. After their bags were all full, they occupied a table at a cafe for a coffee and pastry. Then they wandered home for some quick boxing exercises.

Wednesdays were for the building's coffee morning. They sat on their usual sofa, talking with whoever had joined that day. It was mostly the same crowd, Dutch-speakers who had already formed social bonds with the rest of the residents, but on occasion someone new joined. On those days the three of them practised their foreign language skills, brushing off their mistakes with a laugh.

Thursdays were reserved for grocery shopping. Porthos would gather lists from their neighbors who could not go out that far, and the three of them would make sure everyone got what they needed. Groceries were just more fun when you had company.

They had all gotten used to their routine. Over all these weeks there had yet to be a day when they all could not make it. But cold weather brought with it sickness, and the three musketeers were susceptible to it like anyone else.

One Wednesday morning Porthos did not make it down to the coffee morning. Athos and Aramis waited an hour. Then another. When the event came to a close and she still had not shown up, the two of them found their way to her door. A very tired Porthos opened her door. Before she could greet them, she doubled over coughing. One of the three musketeers had succumbed to the cold passing through the building.

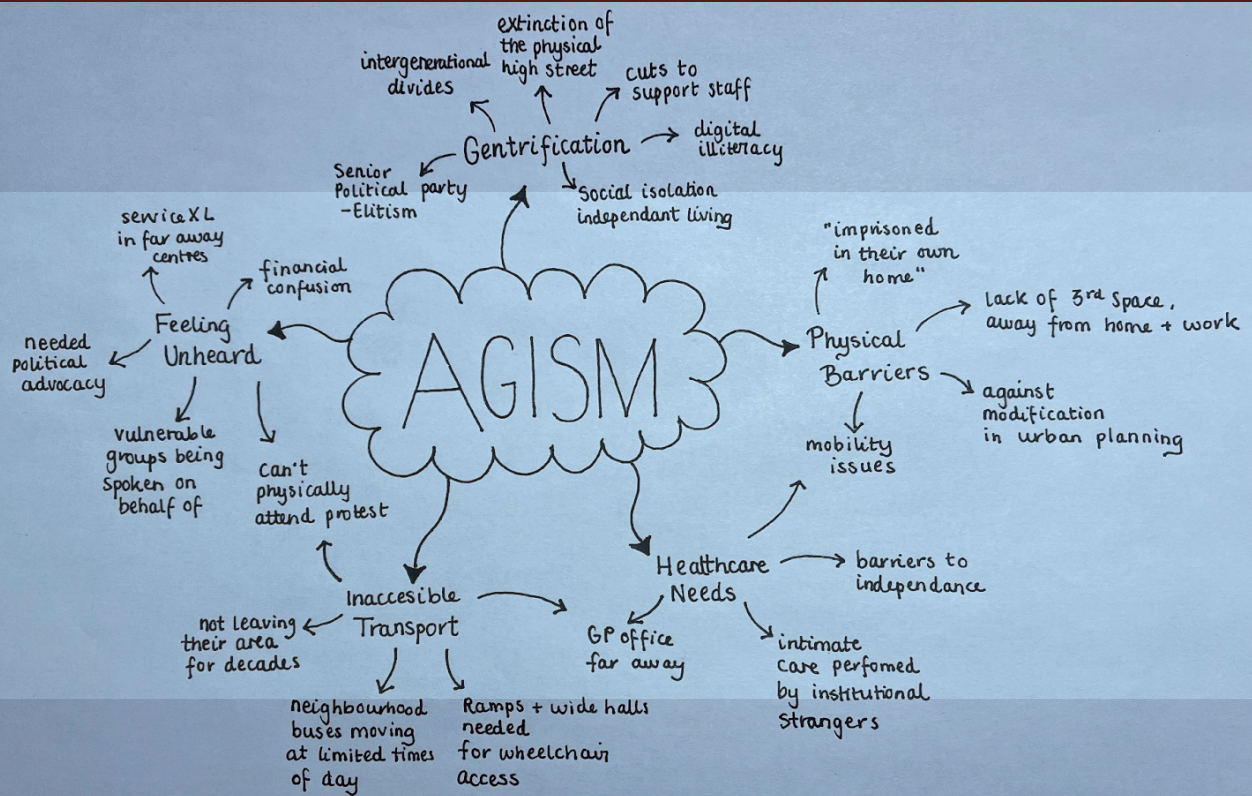


For the next week, Athos and Aramis spent the mornings cooking healing food. Their kitchens overflowed with different soups and broths. Each afternoon they walked over to Porthos's door and left a new pot. They let themselves in and washed the previous pot. Then the three of them sat on the sofa and watched some television until Porthos fell asleep again.

When the sickness finally passed, Athos and Aramis were convinced it was only due to their magic soups. Porthos let them believe it.

How lucky they were to have each other. What started as a conversation in the elevator room blossomed into a deep friendship. No one could have forced this connection, but it was meant to be.

Agism - Polly Dipper



Press here for connection - *Sofie Delansay*

I have been standing here for quite some time now, listening to the bustling street behind me, grateful for the nearby park that acts as a buffer against sensory overload, yet troubled by the sight of the yellow high-rise reflected in my own windows. Contrary to what people may think, I do hear it when they speak so highly of Pharos and so condescendingly about me. Sometimes I wonder whether it is because it is younger than I am, even though the difference is only twenty-four years. Since 2009, my view has been obstructed by Pharos, named after the very first lighthouse in history, which guided ships across the Mediterranean Sea. That is why they call it the neighborhood's "guardian angel." If you ask me, Pharos' confidence has grown a little too large, with its roof caught up in the clouds. As a young thing, it does not yet understand the value of modesty—but I like to believe that I do, just like some of the other apartment complexes in this neighborhood that were built in the postwar period.

I do not boast about my exterior; I prefer to invest my energy in the people who shape my interior. My residents come and go—some stay longer than others—and fill the air with stories of lives lived elsewhere. And now I have become part of that history, a fact I will cherish until the municipality decides to demolish me. Until then, I will engrave their life stories into my walls, like ancient Egyptian hymns preserved in hieroglyphs. Whether long or short, joyful or sorrowful, every story is unique in its own way.

The residents' stories bring color to my cold, bare walls—aside from the decorations that Ria stubbornly hangs around her front door and in the hallway, even though my owner, Staedion, has repeatedly told residents that this is no longer permitted. I value her act of resistance, and I wish Staedion could feel the cold draft that has been blowing through my metal skeleton since this rule was introduced. Instead of the gentle hum of Christmas lights plugged into mechanical timers, I now hear the sloshing of liquids behind closed doors—doors that promise quick relief from everyday life. Instead of the bright colors and lights that once changed with the seasons and were draped around my pillars, I now see dark, empty corridors that remind people that I am not their home. They say change brings growth. And change does come—but rarely where I wish it would. My entrance windows are repeatedly smashed by mobility scooters forced to maneuver through an overly narrow space. The glass is replaced without altering anything else, yet a different outcome is expected. Perhaps this should become the new dictionary definition.

Meanwhile, the weekly smell of soup—accompanied by lively chatter and memories of home-cooked meals—has completely disappeared. One might assume this was because an organization stopped providing the meals, but everything was cooked and organized solely by my resident Mieke, and it all fell apart when she became ill. These days, Mieke still organizes a weekly coffee gathering every Wednesday—preparing all the coffee and tea herself—and she arranges the Christmas dinner and decorations in the communal space. I sometimes wonder how people would have reacted if I had proposed being built with only a single column to support the weight of my upper floors. The architects would probably have laughed at the absurdity of it.

The connections between my residents seem to be strung together by fragile, delicate threads. Only one person holds the key to the space on my ground floor—where friendships might be able to bloom. It is not merely locked, but concealed behind several large red buttons, each one inviting people to press for connection, only to reflect back the absence that hangs like a shadow over so many lives. I witness all of this and long to act, but I am bound by my unchangeable fate. All I can do is show how I feel when the rain comes—my windows weep with tears that are not my own.

And yet, some residents show me that their bonds are stronger than such a fragile fate would suggest. I think of Ria and Sally, living at opposite ends of me, yet continuing to stay in touch despite the distance. And of the five women who open their curtains every day before noon—a ritual I have come to see as a signal to one another that each of them is doing well. I will forever long for the scent of cake drifting from Walter's deliberately open door, when his specialty—after weeks of macerating—comes back to life. It tells me that soon I will hear the soft patter of cautious footsteps through my corridors, drawn by the promise of flavor and a warm smile that invites others to linger. And when it is not these moments—or the Wednesday coffee mornings that bring people together—it is the cold, familiar shiver along the cement between my stones that tells me Christmas has arrived, and that people may once again gather around a table full of food.

Although sorrow is a feeling too often shared, tightening my beams, my residents also show me warmth that allows them to loosen again. I can only hope they will find the courage to press the buttons for connection, so that I may stand here in peace, knowing that my residents are doing well.

Happy accident - *Isa Taylor*

“Hey girl are you at the housing complex yet?”

By the time Google Maps had successfully directed us to a wide apartment building just opposite the nearby train stop, our initial anticipation had morphed from relaxed curiosity to anxious anticipation. The usual confidence with which we navigated between classrooms or performed our usual commute to school or entered our friends' and families' homes was of no use here; we've stepped into unfamiliarity.

Waiting outside the entryway we endured the wind's bitter chill, lost in our uncertainty, and apprehensive of the best course of action to take in the absence of those who were meant to give us direction.

I had sent a quick text to a friend to check when they would arrive, just to find something to ease my nerves.

Up on the 4th floor was an elderly man and a younger woman visible in the window. They seemed to be in conversation for a while, then turned their gazes down below to where we were congregated. They stared curiously for a few moments, perhaps not quite sure what to make of a random group of people loitering in front of their homes.

A few uneasy minutes later, the rest of our group arrived, and we found ourselves welcomed into the main lobby of the building. The door on the left unlocked with a sharp click and swung open to allow us through. The first door on the right beyond it revealed a spacious, plainly decorated common room. To the left of the entrance was a small kitchenette, to the right was a long counter lined with boxes of pastries. The rest of the space was occupied with 3 groups of tables, the surfaces of which were filled with plates of sweets, mugs, napkins, canvases, paintbrushes, and tubes of paint for the workshop which was meant to help our first meeting go smoothly.

A few residents sat at different tables while some volunteers kept them occupied with light conversation. As we entered, they observed us with caution, interest, and apprehension as our group spread to the vacant spots around the tables and tentatively took our seats.

“I'll come.”

I peeked through the bay window next to the door and saw a pair of unfamiliar faces patiently waiting for my presence to appear. I tentatively opened it. One of the strangers introduced themselves as students, and extended an invitation to join them downstairs where there was plenty of coffee, tea, and snacks waiting.

Not exactly what I had in mind for my schedule today.

I hadn't heard anything about such a thing happening downstairs, so this caught me off guard. It was early—far too early—to even consider attending a public event so spontaneously. I wanted to let them down easily; I was tired, uninterested in talking to people, and had other things to take care of...

My initial reluctance gave way to concession after a few minutes of their persuasion.

Now I'm here, immersed in rare, lively interactions with fresh, young faces. But not everyone is enjoying themselves, or is happy being in the vicinity of our neighbors.

“I don't come here often. I don't care for these people.”

Despite encountering a language barrier every so often, conversation flows easily throughout the room and between us old folk and the young students we had met not an hour ago. The tension quietly slips away as they ask about our lives, our past, and our relationships.

Some are not as willing to dig up the old memories, especially with strangers, but others are happy to talk about anything and everything our minds wander to as long as there is an ear nearby willing to listen.

Many of us don't spend any time in this common area, or have ever stepped foot in it. The only reason we find ourselves here now is because of an unexpected interruption. This interlude is welcomed in what would usually be a typical day, but it also requires us to be surrounded by our neighbors, and we don't always get along.

For the most part, we residents are civil to each other, but inevitably we often clash: different political ideologies, harassment, gossiping, noise complaints, or just plain personality differences. Some of us are too busy with our own lives to bother spending time in the building; many residents have frequent doctor appointments, and one neighbor often visits their siblings in other cities. Some rarely leave their homes unless absolutely necessary, or otherwise persuaded by the offering of food or alcohol.

When there were weekly soup nights here a few years ago, it was easy to get people out of their rooms, but it's not the same anymore. Even with the weekly coffee hours on Wednesday mornings many residents don't want to get up that early, or bicker with the people who frequent these gatherings, or simply don't have the strength to carry themselves down here.

But despite this, we still want to get to know each other. We want opportunities like this, to meet those with whom we can develop connections as we did years ago: people who can provide a sense of comfort during those sometimes lonely, stagnant moments in life.

"I'm free always. It was a nice time, and thank you."

"Thank you. I love you guys."

Unexpected encounters blossom into new connections. New paths are forged from the shortest conversation, a few words of pleasantries even, which leaves a lasting mark.

A short hour spent gathered around old tables, dishes of cakes and sweets carefully placed within our eyesight, half-full cups of tea and coffee going cold as our words and laughter overwrite the once stiff atmosphere to create comfort, camaraderie, belonging.

A memory that can persist in our minds and encourages us to continue bridging across the chasm of ignorance between generations, a distance that leaves us empty of the presence of those with so much to give, but little opportunity to do so.


It is neither difficult nor impossible, only foreign. It requires an act of courage. A willingness to leave behind comfort and routine to build anew what we've lost, but will always need.

Bruises - *Rozalia Tryfonidou*

Mornings are serene and quiet. I experience everything because I see everything, and everything I see is so profound I can't help but internalize it. I grab a coffee. I let its warmth, bitterness, and its nostalgia course through my body. The people here are the same every time. I look up from my mug, no longer observing the shapes in the frothy milk of my cappuccino, but rather looking at the blurred faces of those around me. I don't understand if it's my own watery eyes distorting their image or if growing up grows you thin, and blurs you more and more. I watch their faces and their mouths open and close. I do the same in return, but the words and sounds we make are no longer clear in my mind. The room feels cold and empty, the chairs and the tables blind me with their whiteness. Maybe there is too much resin in my ears, the worries buzzing in my head buzz closer to my eyes and come closer to my forehead carrying a sharp pain, and I find myself not wanting to listen to anything anymore.

My eyes dart from face to face, but my interest diminishes in each moment. In this sea of emotion, I try to find my raft. I hear laughter, and the room becomes warmer. I stop shivering under my sweater, and feel my own pulse warm me up from the inside. My fingers relax around the handle of the mug and I notice small specks of paint on the inside of my fingers. I cannot tell the origin of this colour, but quickly assume it's a sore bruise. I rub my eyes gently and re-focus my vision, looking at the blurry faces around me. I feel something warm and wet slide down my cheek, and I understand that I've started crying. A few weak tears fall down my face, and I look back to the faces around me. I received the answer I was looking for. I simply had to blink to see my friends clearly again, but it was scary to get rid of my tears. I smile in recognition and blurry faces become clearer, as strangers become friends. I watch my coffee slowly run out as I drink it, each sip oh-so enjoyable, so much so that I fear the moment I take my last sip. Looking at my friends around me, in turn enjoying their own warm gulps and small bites, my eyes dart to the blindingly white table. I feel the urge to lift up my mug. All I expected to see was the round outline of my initially overfilled coffee on the table, and I did. I stared long and hard at the compelling gaze provided by my own coffee stain. There was part of me that was happy the pearl white of the table was corroded, as it no longer blinded me. I looked deeper into the white eye of the brown stain, pulled further in its latches. I felt a soft pop in my eardrums, as if a tiny person has just announced their presence in my ear canal, before noticing a small freckle of colour in the middle of the stain. More of my questions came to be answered. As the freckle on the table began to expand and spread in beautiful hues of blues, purples, pinks, and reds, I lift my hand up and spread my fingers open, observing my nails and knuckles. No longer do I see a bruise in between my fingers, and my theory is all at once verified. I managed to transfer my colored bruise onto the white table. I expect an immediate scolding, a loud, high-pitched sound in my ear, but I see my companions stare at the table equally as fascinated, all of us with eyes wide open, as if we're seeing colour for the first time. Mumbling voices fade away as I watch the colors spread and expand all over the table, consuming the legs first, and then coming together to embellish and dull the jarring white colour of the table. We never realized how much the reflecting white blinded us.

Our humbly numbered group stands in awe as our eyes follow the colors back and forth like a tennis ball, our eyes darting to all edges and corners of the room, watching as new and brighter hues of greens and shimmering yellows envelop the room around us. We giggle in glee as we watch magic happen. Our excitement is only intensified as the colour escapes the following gaze of our eyes, unstoppable even as the closed door for the room tries to prevent this force from passing its gates.

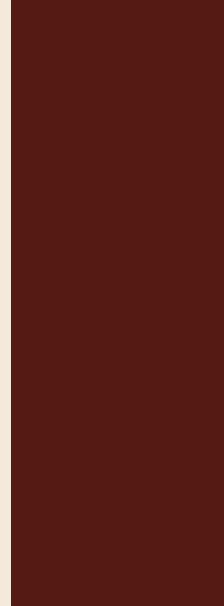


The resilience of the colour excited us even more, I don't remember the last time I stood up this quickly. We follow the magic throughout our apartment building. I feel someone hold my hand, and take me to see more of the colors. The brushstrokes grow quicker in their journey. I climb on the back of my friend's wheelchair, and she pedals fast, with a swiftness that ignites a similar fire in me. We travel to all corners of the building, watching as the old gray carpets become red and lush, as the glass windows become stained like those of a church, as the overhead lights turn warmer in temperature and color. People begin to open their doors in confusion, I can only assume the colour reached the white plates they were having breakfast on, embedding them with blue flowers and intricate designs. I can't help but laugh at their shocked faces when they open their doors, peeking out like afraid children looking out of their covers on a stormy night. More and more begin to follow us, beaming with the joy of shared experience, constantly in awe. I have stopped trying to identify what is delusion and what is reality in my life. I cannot lose these emotions. We follow the trail for a while, exploring our own apartment building like adventurers exploring the fiercest most beautiful jungle, before we're back where we started. My unfinished coffee is still on the table.

We sit and stare at each other when the colors have swallowed all corners of our surroundings. After a few beats of silence – a laugh. Then more, and more. In moments, all of us are laughing hysterically, in shock, but also joy. In the soft, quiet moment after the chaos, I get up and make another coffee. I froth my milk, and I drink it warm.

Day of giving back





Conclusion

A common theme in the stories we presented is a shared longing for connection found amongst many residents of Muidennstein. They expressed their need for social connection, which could enable them to care for themselves and each other; something especially important as many have grown distant from their families with age. We've heard about how they open their windows to check on each other, use food as a tool for invitation, help others with the shopping, and, most of all, offer support through grief and joy. The weekly coffee hours are a start in fostering connections, appreciated as a space that promotes routine get-togethers that allow for different groups to stay in touch. Additionally, many residents remembered the soup evenings as a warm and welcoming space and expressed their hopes to reinstate this ritual. The residents in the spotlight have proven their eagerness to create warmth and connection in the building, yet also highlighted the need for assistance in order to facilitate more communal activities.

Above all, a theme that stood out was their gratitude for being listened to, being heard. This raises the question of how we can continually make these residents feel heard, and encourage social connections, to fight against the isolation many seem to experience. During the project, unexpected connections amongst students and residents emerged, creating warmth and mutual appreciation. This project has shown that, while hesitant at first, with residents often second-guessing the value of their stories for the younger generation, many were ultimately eager to share crucial insights for understanding their lived experience in the housing complex. Positive feedback regarding students' integration into coffee mornings demonstrates that residents are open to new input and voices, showing their appreciation of both the common room in which events are held, and the people who come with change. Diverse efforts, as per our recommendations below, can be made to create more social opportunities in the building, for residents are willing and able to engage.

Residents' strengths, needs, and the role of Staedion

The residents' strengths lie primarily in their everyday relational practices. As seen in the examples above, they maintain connections through routine encounters and mutual monitoring. Shared activities further foster a sense of community, while residents' practical support to one another underscores their strong interdependence, creativity, and genuine willingness to care for others, even as their mobility declines or energy levels change.

Their needs emerge where these strengths reach limits. Residents want to feel heard and to have continuity in shared routines, but face reduced mobility, uneven participation, interpersonal conflicts, and the loss of earlier communal rituals, like soup evenings. Not all residents can or wish to be constantly active.

Residents can maintain peer check-ins, informal help, and resident-led invitations such as sharing food, putting up hallway decorations, and supporting each other in daily life. What they need from Staedion is to facilitate and support sustained communal activities (for example, reviving soup evenings), assist in organizing inclusive events, and make participation feasible for residents with limited mobility or energy.



Afterword

Across the five days of visits and the narratives, later-life wellbeing in Muidenstein appeared less as an individual achievement and more as a relational practice, underpinned by shared spaces, routines, and small acts of mutual care. The communal room, hallways, and apartment doorways functioned as social infrastructure. People gathered for Wednesday coffee; some met coffee buddies every Friday, watched football together, and stayed connected through corridor chats and informal check-ins. In one interview, one resident's closest ties were mapped through a three circles exercise consisting of inner, middle, and outer circles. Family occupied the closest circle, including siblings, children, and grandchildren, while everyday stability relied on neighbours and predictable micro routines, such as a window check protocol used by four women who opened their windows before noon to signal that they were okay.

These observations partially align with the dominant Euro-American “successful aging” paradigm as described by Lamb and colleagues in that social participation and shared activities were meaningful sources of connection for many residents (Lamb et al., 2017). At the same time, the project strongly challenges two core moral claims within that paradigm. First, it contests the idea that successful aging is primarily “dependent on individual choices and behaviors” and therefore “in our own hands.” Second, it challenges the elevation of independence as the supreme marker of dignity, alongside the portrayal of dependence as bleak and something to be avoided. In Muidenstein, connection persisted precisely through interdependence. Residents helped one another decode letters, troubleshoot phones and laptops, order items online, and reset clocks after power outages, while also creating small reasons to knock and talk. Rather than signaling failure, these everyday forms of dependence supported belonging and continuity.

The findings also complicate the expectation that productivity and busy-ness are mandatory features of later life (Lamb et al., 2017). Engagement was present, but unevenly taken up, and conflict was part of the social landscape. Some residents did not participate in common area life, and limited participation was shaped by frequent doctor appointments, avoidance of early mornings, a lack of physical strength to come downstairs, or discouragement caused by bickering, differing political ideologies, gossip, or simple personality differences. This matters because Lamb et al. (2017) argue that the contemporary model of successful aging can turn disengagement, vulnerability, and visible decline into moralized personal failure and social exclusion. Our material points to a more mixed reality in which wellbeing did not require perfect harmony, constant activity, or a single standardized lifestyle. Instead, it depended on allowing space for variability, including selective participation and periods of low energy, without diminishing recognition of a person's full value.

Finally, the project speaks directly to Lamb et al.'s (2017) critique of permanent personhood and the pressure to deny old age by remaining ageless and unchanged. Mobility limitations did not erase identity; rather, they reshaped daily routes and rhythms. One resident captured this plainly, without dramatization, noting that “the world shrinks a bit.” Even so, her personhood remained visible through relationships and meaning-making.

It was expressed in family photographs (“That’s my brother... That’s where it all starts”), objects of memory, such as an Easter church candle from her parents, and practices that extended the private home into shared space, including paper decorations that invited neighbours to stop, smile, and talk. In this sense, the project supports Lamb et al.’s (2017) broader argument that “successful aging” is culturally and historically specific rather than a universal scientific truth, and that ways of valuing later life that normalize interdependence and changing capacities fit uneasily within the dominant North American and Euro-American ideal.

From a student perspective, participation shifted attention from evaluating whether older people meet a standard of independence, agelessness, or constant productivity to documenting how social life is actively maintained through mundane, often invisible work. As one student narrator wrote, “I began to see the building differently.” The building’s exterior could appear dull and closed, but inside, connection was built through repeated small gestures: a shared chair pulled out without making help explicit, a knock after someone’s absence, a corridor greeting, or a familiar seat at coffee morning. The collective takeaway is that the project’s main themes of interdependence, adaptation, and everyday care support Lamb’s critique that later-life wellbeing can be robust without fitting the moralized ideal of total self-management, permanent independence, or the denial of decline (Lamb et al., 2017).

“Now that we have reached the end of this magazine, we would like to once again warmly thank the residents of Muidenstein for allowing us to learn these lessons.”

Anna, Victor, Elena, Maelis, Sofie, Polly, Emma, Saskia, Paulis, Rozalia, Isa

Recommendations

Many residents show enthusiasm at the prospect of increasing interactions between tenants and with individuals who come visit the building through interactive events and opening the common rooms of Muidenstein to the public (in a limited capacity). This is something that Staedion could consider in negotiations about how to improve the quality of life for residents.

Some of the needs of the residents that were either observable or explicitly mentioned by tenants that we encountered are: 1) addressing a persistent feeling of isolation or vulnerability because of their inability to organize collective action to make their concerns known publicly (for example, they cannot protest because of distance from governmental organizations or densely-populated areas), 2) disputes between residents and infrastructural issues (broken appliances, repairs, etc.) are not being properly or efficiently solved, and 3) the lack of a social network between residents is preventing the necessary exchange of information and offering of support when needed.

Residents themselves can help address their own needs by being transparent and honest with Staedion and each other when challenges arise, as opposed to staying silent. Some residents can be more proactive in developing their social networks by maintaining cordial relationships with other tenants and attending communal events if possible.

In terms of what Staedion can provide, the organization should provide more volunteer support at the building to provide aid in setting up communal events, facilitating conflict resolution or exchanging information, and providing help to residents who need assistance in important tasks such as grocery shopping, traveling, or bureaucratic processes.

A list of specific observations include:

- Door to communal space – curtains are closed. If they open it allows people to walk past and check in on the situation inside, see if they would like to enter.
- Corridors are quite narrow – this makes it difficult for residents with mobility scooters to get around easily and can quickly lead to problems if anything would obstruct the hallway because then people cannot get past anymore.
- Make the door at lift an automatic sliding door – this way it does not need that much space when opening, especially since the space is not big enough.
- Replacement for glass window wall in entrance - people apparently often ram their mobility scooters into it when backing up since there is not enough space to manoeuvre.
- Outside of the building should be more attractive, what about allowing art students to do a mural – or a mutual project where the residents can paint as well with art students
- Discuss with residents how to make the meeting space more inviting. Right now it is a big table and a lot of noise, and some people were overwhelmed by that and need to recover. Perhaps add smaller tables, or smaller group activities. A game table, other activities.
- Many residents are waiting for someone to be there for them. Instead of flyers, perhaps knocking on people's doors and saying we are having these and these events will improve the diversity of attendance.
- Many residents said they are satisfied by having a few connections. Some have their social networks outside of the building (in allotments for example).
- Decorating hallway: easygoing policy on decorations outside or on doors or shelves around help people express identity: create a day where people decorate
- A lot of people want to take part but not take charge, taking charge feels too much.

- Soup night needs to come back – perhaps working with younger volunteers? Explore volunteering possibilities. Perhaps even with students - LUC Volunteer or through Campus The Hague volunteering networks. Residents do not have the capacity to do this, physical capacity or are shy. If soup night comes back - cooking together generates connections. Soup could be distributed in the beginning, over time people can come down. Some people cooking in groups together.
 - Fixed place in the lobby to announce activities. Large writing on A3 but pay attention to the level of a mobility scooter vs walking person. Announcement on two levels.
 - Participation also takes time.
 - There should be more light above the induction stoves in residents' apartments, since many cannot read the screen display when it is dark, which makes it harder to cook.
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