

Never waste a good crisis: How local communities successfully re-invent aged care facilities in the Netherlands

Peter Boerenfijn LLM MRE^{a,*}

^aWoningcorporatie Habion, Houten, the Netherlands; ^{*}Corresponding author: p.boerenfijn@habion.nl

P. Boerenfijn. Never waste a good crisis: How local communities successfully re-invent aged care facilities in The Netherlands. Gerontechnology 2017;16(4):239-241; <https://doi.org/10.4017/gt.2017.16.4.005.00> Due to the changing government policy towards housing the older adults and retreating its financial support a Dutch social housing association started an experiment with a local society. Combining local involvement and technology they succeeded in keeping the building from demolition. The result is a sustainable and safe multi purpose building which facilitates the demands of multiple residents and target populations.

Keywords: aged care facility, local community, fire control regulations, Røring method, smart fire control unit, behaviour and technology

Dutch Social housing association Habion owns 75 residential care facilities which house 5,000 older people. The present residents say they have a pleasant and satisfactory life. In order to keep residences attractive for future generations, the system of housing for older people in The Netherlands is in a constant process of change¹, for instance, to deal the financial crisis and major demographic shifts in society. This is why Habion started experiments to re-invent aged care facilities together with the local communities².

In November 2013 the residential care facility De Benring in Voorst, dating from 1971 was on the list for demolition. This was due to a diminishing demand for such housing and the changing government policies, which call for the closure of this type of housing and care. The local care institution wanted to end the lease and relocate the residents to other care facilities. A billboard announcing that the building would be 'knocked down' was the trigger for over 400 people to stand up and speak out why it was important that De Benring remained as an integral part of the town's community.

Habion has developed the Røring method² that makes it possible to create a plan and start renovations within 13 months. This is a sequential methodology involving a kick off to inspire participants, workshops and data analyses, a realisation and implementation phase, and which is concluded by a formal evaluation. In between these steps are various feedback moments and evenings to stimulate the 'life and soul' of the process.

The villagers were challenged to take ownership of the use of the building and to express their own dreams in a co-creation session. This resulted in more than 1,000 wishes that were shared by the participants in a workshop following the Røring method. These wishes included amongst others more involvement of the community (~65%), visions of privacy and independence (~20%), wishes concerning diversity in population (~15%), the need for affordable housing (~75%), and the provision of care (~55%). By taking full responsibility for future functionalities of the building and its occupants the local community literally 'stepped into' the building. The institutional partners 'stepped out' but still facilitated the transition process in order to transform the building while taking into account the residents' dreams. De Benring was officially opened in October 2016. After the opening, the institutional partners only provide the services that are needed by the residents, such as home care.

Combining dreams with functionalities which are aligned with safety and legislation were the main challenges during the transition process. The residents, being independent occupants now, wanted to have a mix of different functions available and easily accessible under one roof. Fire regulations make it difficult for the fire brigade to cooperate because of the expected risk of false alarms if the place is no longer a single care residence but a cluster of independent apartments. Habion is now experimenting with the use of so-called smart fire control units with double detection (at least

Communities re-invent aged care facilities

two sensors in one dwelling need to send out an alarm to the fire station) in order to prevent false alarms from occurring, for instance, due to steam produced by cooking activities. The residents now even have their own fireplace (*Figure 1*). Through a process of crowdfunding, a total of 512 solar panels was financed and installed on the rooftop³ in order to fulfil the dream to live sustainably.

In order to get more involvement of the community, large hallways (*Figure 2*) were transformed into extended living areas which support the vitality of the entire community (*Figure 3*). The cooking facilities are used for social activities by residents and villagers (*Figure 4*). Some of the apartments are even used as bed & breakfast facilities and are run by the community.

In De Benring every apartment can facilitate the provision of healthcare of any kind and intensity. All apartments can be used as a residential dwelling or as a care unit for multiple residents and target populations (*Figure 5*). This ensures that care and housing are future-proofed against changes in government policy. Every resident can choose his own system for home robotics (home automation) to create their degree of independent living.

There are several residential groups living in De Benring of different age ranges, who need differ-



Figure 3. Extended living area for encounters, cooking, and having dinner together



Figure 4. Cooking facilities for social interaction



Figure 1. Fireplace as a meeting point in the building



Figure 2. Transformed hallway to facilitate encounters

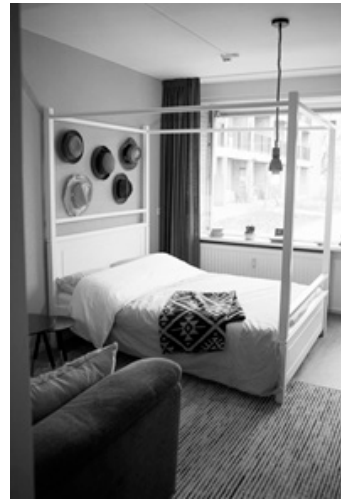


Figure 5. Short-stay facility, for instance, to recover from a hospital operation

ent kinds of care (including older residents with dementia). Three professional organisations for youth care, aged-care, and care for people with an intellectual disability provide specialised care to these residents. By having three tenants, none of these partners rents the building as a whole. This is a preventive measure to reduce the risk of vacancy when a rental contract is terminated. If a client is in need of nursing home care, Habi-

on leases the apartment to a specific aged-care institution, which then provides shelter and care to their client. In the Netherlands, nursing home care still includes the provision of housing within one financial scheme.

Demolition means a destruction of capital assets and is not environmentally sustainable. Due to the ageing of the population, there will be many frail older people and the present residential care facilities will again be used and in increasing demand. Re-inventing existing real estate also provides an opportunity to create added value and

affordable housing. By trusting local communities and giving them the lead it is possible to re-invent these buildings for the needs and wishes of future generations. Safety can be guaranteed by combining local community involvement and technology. The Røring method offers to speed up this process and create support among the broader community and future residents alike. De Benring was the first of a series of former residential care facilities that is re-invented using this methodology.

References

1. van Hoof J, Kort HSM, van Waarde H. Housing and care for older adults with dementia: A European perspective. *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment* (2009);24(3):369-390; <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10901-009-9143-3>
 2. Maas J. Een tweede jeugd voor De Benring. Een toekomstvisie voor ouderenhuisvesting. [A second youth for De Benring. A future vision of housing for older adults]. Habion, Houten, The Netherlands (2016) [in Dutch]
 3. Boerenfijn P, van Hoof J. Social housing for seniors: Best practices on achieving sustainable and energy efficient buildings. *The REHVA European HVAC Journal* (2017);54(4):34-35
-