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Seniors House

The building and the architectural ideas
behind Denmark's first homes for the elderly
designed for people with autism

Specialområde
AUTISME
Hinnerup Kollegiet – Gudenåkollegiet – Bæketoften



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Background and vision

“What are the residential needs of people with autism as they grow older, and how can we create the best possible setting for this group of people as they enter their twilight years?”

Specialist Area Autism posed these questions with a view to contributing answers, as the Specialist Area discovered there was very little knowledge of autism and ageing, or of homes designed with this target group in mind. That was how the Seniors House came into being – four residences for elderly people with autism.

Right from the start, the vision was to establish Denmark's first specialist environment for elderly people with autism, bringing in new and familiar knowledge about the ideal physical settings for elderly people with autism. The vision was also for the building to function as a knowledge platform as a source of inspiration for other buildings for similar target groups in Denmark and abroad.

The Seniors House came into being as an experimental centre, right from the initial concept, all the way through to the positioning of the furniture. Thus, at the heart of the process, planning, design work, construction and subsequent operation of this sheltered housing, there has been and still is an open, inquisitive and investigative approach to elderly people with autism and the other stakeholders regarding the existing frameworks and new possibilities, e.g. in the form of welfare technology.

Landsforeningen Autisme (Autism Denmark), the National Board of Social Services and Realdania have been involved ever since the initial brainstorming phase in the construction of these residences, and Realdania supported the construction project financially. The building is based on the model programme for sheltered housing designed for elderly people with autism (“Modelprogram for botilbud til ældre med autisme”), which Realdania helped to develop. The Seniors House was designed by Wienberg Architects in conjunction with Frier Architecture.





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Focus on user involvement

In the process, the focus has been on user involvement, including people with autism as well as their relatives, and the project steering group includes representatives from Realdania, Landsforeningen Autisme (Autism Denmark), the National Board of Social Services and relatives. User involvement is thus evident:

“The idea is that a kitchen window will make the four residents of the Seniors House curious about life outside their own door. We hope this will reduce the risk of the residents becoming isolated.”



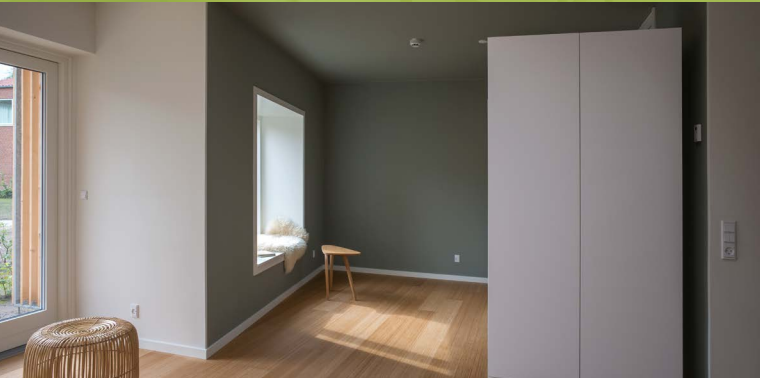
“It has been very interesting to get input for the architecture and interior design from people with autism. For example, they liked the idea of the kitchen having a window, and of having dark, somewhat sheltered rooms, wooden materials, plenty of vegetation and, overall, the colour green. All these ideas and impressions have been incorporated into the finished building,” the architect behind the Seniors House, Mette Wienberg, explains. About the kitchen window, she adds:





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Architecture first

The basic idea of the architecture is to exude assurance and tranquillity, with low ceilings and choices of colours that avoid strong contrasts. Another important factor was for the building not to signify an institution. This is achieved in part by the four apartments for the elderly residents each having their own unique characteristics, e.g. using bricks, the bond of the brickwork, colours on the walls and the ceiling inside the individual dwelling.

To create a holistic feel and improve cohesion with the other two sheltered housing complexes, Ådalen and Engstien, which are on the same site, it was built with one storey. This also ensures that the Seniors House does not overshadow the other two sheltered housing complexes. The Seniors House, Ådalen and Engstien have a green arrival area with vegetation, and the Seniors House has green façades. The colour green is a leitmotif throughout the interior and exterior of the building.

“Outside, the façades are green so that the building helps to reinstate the green area, because there was already a small site to build on. This colour counteracts a feeling of confinement and helps to create a holistic, tranquil feel. The colour also supports the intention of a soft, welcoming environment,” architect Mette Wienberg continues.

Another feature of the Seniors House is that there are trees and bushes planted outside many of the windows. This way, the vegetation helps to establish a kind of filter so that the residents can sit by the window, enjoy the daylight and feel they are a part of the community, and yet be shielded by the vegetation, once it grows.



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Materials and colours

To create a sense of assurance and tranquillity for the elderly people with autism, the colours and materials indoors and outdoors have been kept consistent in natural shades of grey–green. This brings the outdoor atmosphere inside the residences and communal spaces, thus helping to establish the building as a cohesive whole.

which is what a small bedroom can feel like; if the partitions and cupboards are moved, they can instead be in one large, bright room,” the architect, Mette Wienberg, explains.

In the corridors connecting the three housing units – one of which is the Seniors House – colour zones have been employed to catch the eye and guide staff and residents through the building.



Colours also mark transitions, e.g. from private dwellings to communal areas, and are additionally used to signify a safe buffer zone between the apartment and the communal area or kitchen, which is identified by a different colour from the lounge. Colours are used on the walls and ceilings of the four residences to create an intimate atmosphere when the resident comes through the door.

Another recurring feature of the building is the small alcoves where residents can occupy, both in their homes and in the communal spaces. Colours and materials have been used to create a reassuring, cave-like atmosphere from which the residents can observe communal life.



“In the four apartments, as well as exploiting the choice of colours, we have also incorporated flexible room dividers and cupboards instead of permanent solutions. This way, if the residents end up bed-bound at any time, they do not need to be lying in a dark box,

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Intimate furnishings and tranquillity

Just as the building uses experimental tools such as changes in ceiling height, materials and colours, it also employs soft, organic designs.

“The idea is to break down barriers with gentle transitions instead of the usual severe boundary delineations that people with autism often react to. The intent of the soft architectural shapes is to support and motivate the residents to come out of their apartments and get around the building,” according to architect Mette Wienberg.

The doors are in the form of old-fashioned stable doors so the residents can open the top section first and look out, while still being protected by the door. Afterwards, they can open the whole door, and then come out into a little alcove with a lower ceiling than their apartment, clad in a different material or in a different colour; the alcove incorporates a little bench. They can sit here and spend some time in a secure position, observing communal life, if that is what they feel able to do on that particular day.

“Overall, we have incorporated intermediate zones throughout the building. Small, sheltered zones between being outside and inside the apartments, and between the apartments and the communal areas. The intermediate zones also enabled us to avoid stark transitions that could be difficult to deal with for people with autism. For example, the residents can choose to sit on the bench outside their own apartment before perhaps summoning up the courage to move on into the communal area,” explains the architect behind the Seniors House, Mette Wienberg.

Background facts about the Seniors House

- The project was designed by Wienberg Architects in conjunction with Frier Architecture.
- Architects Frost Larsen A/S is in charge of the design work.
- Wienberg Architects served as client consultants and was in charge of design during the design work and construction period.
- The Seniors House was built by the brickwork and contracting firm Ole Sommer A/S.

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