

ALL GENERATIONS TOGETHER IN THE TINY VILLAGE OF TRIAMANT

# ‘By 2040 rest homes will simply not exist anymore’

‘People do not want to grow older on an old peoples’ island’, says Triamant. The residential care provider has created in Velm a tiny village that is brimming with vitality. ‘You can live here from the cradle to your last breath.’

Few people like to be uprooted. Unfortunately continuing to live at home is often simply not an option for older people. A survey of market research bureau iVOX shows that more than two thirds of Belgians live in a house that does not meet the conditions for comfortable care and independent living.

The alternatives are not always tempting. As such the resident care centres very often lack the homey feeling and are often associated with ‘waiting for the unavoidable’. In the event of assisted residence the care management remains borne by the resident. Living in with the children can lead to high tensions.

A better solution must be possible, believed a number of civil society operators who have a few years ago united in Triamant. ‘In that alternative we wanted to combine the best of the different living forms, without their disadvantages’, says chairman Jo Robrechts. ‘The homeliness of a private apartment, the independence of an assisted home and the care of a residential care centre.’

How that looks can be seen in the Limburg village of Velm, near Sint-Truiden. That is where Triamant started in 2010 with the renovation of a castle and an old school complex. Two thirds of the plans have already been achieved. If everything is finished at the beginning of next year, the location will offer care and housing to 300 residents, supported by more than a hundred staff members.

It is a beautiful site, located between the hilly fields filled with vineyards and fruit trees. All the apartments as well as the studios in the home care centre are spacious, modern furnished and have large windows and a

terrace.

Between the buildings there are paths lined with wild grass full of daisies.

‘Housing and care are necessary, but at the same time insufficient’, stresses Robrechts. ‘Continuing to live, this is what it is all about. Do not misunderstand me. Many operators of classical residential care centres do in their context brilliant things. But a growing number of people are rightly asking themselves if that is the way they want to spend their last days. Few people are eager to go to a rest home or a care centre. That determination speaks volumes.

I predict that the last rest home will close in 2040.’

That will simply be the result of technological advance and of what the seniors ask, he says.

And this is a welcoming, lively neighbourhood. ‘Our motto is “As long as possible, live a happy and healthy life”. That is based on three pillars: nice, comfortable homes, quality of life and the presence of care. Therefore, autonomy and vitality are crucial. Healthy food, movement and sports and intellectual stimuli help people to take control of their own lives.

In addition, care is available at any time of the day.

## Live for life

It is also notable that Triamant knowingly chooses for a mix of ages and generations. ‘People do not want to grow older on an old peoples’ island. But in a setting as normal as



‘Not many people are eager to go to a rest home. That says it all, doesn’t it?’

Jo Robrechts, chairman Triamant



→ In Triamant young and elderly people can live together in a setting that looks like a normal village.

possible' explains Robrechts. At the moment, the youngest resident in Velm is 57 years old, the oldest is 101. Where is the youth? 'We are still in the process of building family homes' explains site manager Heidi Werckx. 'More than half is already taken up by young families. The average age will therefore fall rapidly.'

At the end of the day, it is the intention that those who see the light of life in this area, will also live there with their family and give their last breath there. Living your whole life in one place means taking into account the needs of these different phases. That also explains why the Triamant site is a village on its own. There is a library, a hairdresser, a swimming pool, a local shop... Everybody is welcome. 'For example, the local schools make use of our swimming pool,' illustrates Werckx. 'We also organise regular lectures and walks where people from outside can join.'

Through I'O de Vie, the castle next to the living blocks offers a stylish hotel and restaurant with meeting spaces. Also here we welcome a

diverse audience, such as care needing tourists, families visiting their parents, ordinary tourists and businessmen who come to brainstorm.

**Take a holiday**

The 'village' is not a sleepy nest but is buzzing from activity. 'We do not only provide community promoting initiatives, but encourage our residents to also arrange projects themselves,' explains Werckx. 'As such, a group of seniors maintains the park, others have created a non-profit organisation to renovate the lapsed chapel, and have taken care themselves of the financing and hiring of the craftsmen. There is also a library that was built up from nothing by volunteers, with a lending service for those who are less well off.'

Choice stress is not only reserved for the working generation, it appears. 'Only yesterday resident Suzanne told me that she must take a half day off for all her planned activities. Knowing that she is already retired.' (laughs)

A guided tour of the buildings very quickly shows how good Werckx gets along with the residents. She makes a little chat with everyone and is clearly perfectly informed. 'Wait, there's Nelly. She has apparently fallen yesterday. I'll go and check how she's doing.'

That personal contact requires much time, but is a rewarding investment. 'If I step out of my office, I sit amongst my customers', she smiles. 'If they find the stew a little tough, I know that immediately. On the other hand, I can also pick up something for myself. A former HR manager sometimes gives a good tip, and a couple of retired contractors are only glad to give a comment on the progress of all construction works.'

#### Custom made work

A right of residence for an apartment of 60 square meters can be acquired from 150,000 euros, with a yield of 3.25% gross per year. In addition, Triamant also simply rents apartments and residential care studios for a daily allowance. To buy a residential home is a better idea than to buy a specific apartment, because it provides more flexibility, points out Werckx. 'Do you already know what you will wish for if you are 80? Maybe you will wish to live in a bigger place than you might think of right now or maybe smaller, or with the window to the north instead of to the south.'

'This living formula with its tailor-made options makes life cheaper', says Robrechts. 'We're saving costs for the public service. Healthcare providers who travel from home to the house are probably 30 percent of their time on the go, which makes that form of aid expensive. Here someone is present full-time. In addition, the areas are also far more efficiently used thanks to their flexibility.'

A good example is found with the resident Edmond, a baby boomer with twinkling eyes. He lives in an apartment, a floor above the residential care area where his wife Annie resides with early set dementia. Before they landed at Triamant, they were searching everywhere in Belgium for a way to stay together. 'I really encountered miserable situations that we left crying', says Edmond. There are many couples, just like them, couples with one partner that is heavily dependent on care and where the other is healthy. 'To take care of someone that is immensely dependent, in the long term, that makes a person despondent,' says Werckx. The result is often that one partner ends up in a residential care centre, while the other simply remains at home.

In Velm, they can stay together, because Triamant adapts its services to the care needs. 'We are the only one in the entire Benelux that offer the people this option', says Robrechts.



'Everyone is at home here. Also family members and friends of the residents share that feeling. Pets often come along, and visiting hours are unknown.' Today Edmond helps his wife, they often eat together, go out for a walk, and sometimes they go to the theatre. But in addition, he also runs his own life, filled with discussions, outings and books.

A group in the residential care centre has twelve residents. They have a private studio and share the living room. 'We absolutely did not want the feeling of a refectory,' explains Werckx, her look directed

### 'Elderly care can be done differently, but only if there is space to experiment.'

Jo Robrechts, chairman Triamant

at a group of seniors that sit at the table playing bingo. It must be cosy.'

#### Experimenting

Triamant builds on four sites at the moment, and would eventually like to go to a series of locations. Why are there not more provisions today for this kind of residences? 'The government must be careful that they do not overregulate as far that they would stand in the way of innovation in the sector', says Robrechts being very careful. 'Elderly care can be done differently, but only if there is space to experiment.' The difficult path can also be taken, as Triamant proves with

a new site that will shortly open in the West Flemish Geluwe. 'In Velm, we are still bound with some aspects to the rest home regulations, but we let entirely go of those at Geluwe. We can make the statement that nobody should ever have to go to a rest home or a classic assisted residence. Also in this case a healthy mix of ages is crucial. As such we attract young volunteers, who in exchange for their help get a rental discount on their home.'

In this manner you would almost forget that you are in a community that has started originally because of the needs of the elderly. Although it remains visible in the small things, but only if you pay attention. As such the underground parking spaces in Velm are wider than normal. 'That makes it easier for older drivers to turn in and out,' says Werckx with a wink.

#### An eye for family

At Triamant Haspengouw residents can also say goodbye to life in a homely environment. If death is on the threshold, on-the-spot palliative care can be given. 'People do not want to spend their last moments in an anonymous hospital,' says Werckx. 'We also have an eye for the family. In these difficult moments they have nurses around them that they know and trust. If desired, we simply add a bed so they can stay with their father or mother.'

We walk with another resident through the woods, who seems to know the story behind each tree. The man swears he cannot imagine a better place to grow old. 'In the city you have seen after some time what a facade has to offer', he sniffs. 'A stone does not live. A forest does.' And life, isn't that ultimately where it all revolves around?