

Stiftung Liebenau
Haus St. Iris, Eriskirch, Germany

“Senior Friendly Communities not just a concept in a Fairytale.”

By Dan Levitt



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Lake Constance is located in the heart of Europe bordered by Switzerland and the Alps to the south, Germany to the north and Austria to the east. The region is lined with lakeside retreats, beer stein size ferries taking mini cars and visitors across the lake, ferry (or fairy?) book castles, quaint villages with cobblestone pedestrian streets, vineyards and apple orchards. What most tourists who visit the area never see and what most locals take for granted is a groundbreaking community in the town Eriskrich, Germany where Haus St. Iris is located, an “Altenpflegeheim” (old persons caring village) operated by Shiftung Liebenau a European Catholic service organization.

As you walk into the lobby a framed pictorial gram?? in large font displays the latest government inspection of the community. On a happiness scale the nursing staff, caring, socialization, cleanliness, and food are individually rated and an overall grade is assigned to the community. Unlike other government inspection rating systems, this scale is based not just on the staff and management’s performance but on how the community functions as a whole. A central concept to the philosophy of the charitable organization is Gemeinschaft reflecting a belief of interdependence between each other and that each person contributes to the health of every other.

There are fourteen rooms per floor with personal shower ensuites; some seniors have a roommate; some couples share a room while others prefer to live alone. The bedrooms are chockablock full of personal items each one unique telling the life story of the senior. A chapel occupies a central space in the complex, and reflects their tradition as the community begins each meal with a prayer. Large tables define the dining room where seniors enjoy three meals a day with views into a courtyard. Breakfast is usually muesli and yogurt; for dinner cheese cold cuts and regional breads are served and lunch is served hot and brought in from a neighbouring kitchen the charity operates. And yes the seniors do enjoy Curry Wurst. The kitchens have high quality appliances including a specialty coffee maker. The seniors and the staff plan the meals together and choose the recipes. An aviary with small birds is part of the living room furniture. There is no central laundry, domestic size washers and dryers are located in each living area along with an iron and ironing board. Clothing not fit for the dryer is hung to dry in the hallways; sounds like home!

The nursing station has been replaced with an office desk and sitting area with locked cabinets for the minimal medications and individual files. The hallway walls are painted with bright colours that the seniors and staff have chosen in the decoration of their home along with the artwork from local artists. A unique feature in the dining and common area are ceiling lights that complement the floor to ceiling glass windows mimicking the outdoor sunshine or cloud cover or the colours of the setting sun. The whole living environment reduces the need for medications to manage boredom, helplessness and loneliness.

Directly across the shared bike path/pedestrian street/driveway is an intergenerational housing complex where children, adults and elders all live together in a cooperative living arrangement. The council manages itself and has a focus on service to each other as well as to the neighbouring senior’s residence. The community also does service projects for the seniors along with a larger community including a neighbouring grade school that supports the village.

One senior has taken up a project of caring for orchids which have replaced the spot where the handrail used to be located. Most seniors are either fine on their feet, use walkers or wheelchairs and the only one who requires the handrails are the government regulators. That’s the point of this community: to

create a place where seniors live alongside others of different ages and abilities including a special needs community breaking ground in 2017. Seniors are not cast aside to an old age institution. Loneliness is not a life sentence for pensioners in this village.

Stiftung Liebenau operates dozens of similar communities throughout Europe. It is a sign of the success of the European Union that a concept that works well in one country can be translated into the local customs of cultures around the continent. A half hour drive away, in Austria, a similar community has a restaurant and outdoor café serving Viennese coffee and apple strudel. Locals including many active seniors come to the area not just to visit grandma. They come because of the reputation for serving up delicious meals and recipes traditional to the region for generations. A mother with a child in a stroller and another walking alongside enter the building to pick up a third sibling who is attending a kindergarten located inside the seniors residence. The communities are situated in the middle of the neighbourhood and are part of the larger village not located as an afterthought next to the empty space left over from a sterile looking hospital serving hospital food in the nursing home.

A further 30 minute drive takes you to Switzerland and Helios Haus where an old grand Swiss chalet has been modified with an addition added on to create a similar community. The unique elements about this site are the outdoor area with views of the lake and the Alps along with animals on the grounds. An unleashed dog wanders around, goats mill about, a large aviary is home to local birds. The only things missing were local cows that live in the surrounding green pastures. They come to visit as well.

Storybook Hansel and Gretel would have been proud to have their 'oma' and 'opa' live in such a multigenerational residential community. While this idyllic setting may sound like a fairytale, perhaps one day in a land far, far away there will be a story no one believes of a hospital style old age institution located next to the acute care centre. Maybe there will be the things school age kids tell their parents about from a school field trip to a care home converted into a museum. Once upon a time, seniors were set aside in nursing homes. Wouldn't that be a nice story for the aging baby boomers running the nursing home industry to write? Sweet dreams.

Dan Levitt is executive director at Tabor Village, a seniors living community in Abbotsford, B.C., and an adjunct professor of gerontology at Simon Fraser University.

