

LEE LI MING PROGRAMME IN AGEING URBANISM

Bruges, Belgium: A whole-of-city response to dementia

The Urban Environment for Older Population

Emily Soh

The charming city of Bruges, with its canals, cobbled streets and medieval buildings, has another distinctive laurel to its name as the pioneer of dementia-friendly cities. It has been a case study for many cities that hope to learn the transformative elements necessary to make their communities more dementia-friendly. In addition to policies, programmes and changes to urban environment, it seems that a high level of awareness and a community-wide change in attitudes towards dementia sufferers are key to an inclusive, supportive environment for them, with stigmas shed.

People affected by dementia suffer a range of symptoms that commonly include deterioration in memory, thinking, ability to do everyday activities, and finding their way in familiar environments, and some of them may experience a change in personality and



DEMENTIEVRIENDELIJK
BRUGGE

The red-knotted handkerchief, a sign of remembrance, is a visible symbol of support for people with dementia in the city of Bruges.

(Image source:

<http://www.onthoumens.be/media/dementievriendelik-brugge-ook-internationaal-in-de-kijker>)

behaviour. In the more severe stages of dementia, sufferers face difficulty recognising friends and family members, and have an increasing need for assisted self-care and become highly dependent on caretakers.

In Bruges, a city of about 120,000 people, there are 2000 dementia sufferers, and two-thirds of them live in the community. The city has been pioneering novel measures to actively engage dementia sufferers so that they could continue to live in and negotiate the city within a wide support network of the community, business owners, civil society organisations and the local authority. Together, they tackle everyday activities in a city, such as taking public transport, going to the doctor, grocery shopping, less formidable so that dementia sufferers and their caretakers continue to feel supported, and an integral part of the community.

The knotted red handkerchief logo that is widely seen in the city is a symbol of the city's dedication to be dementia-friendly and a practical sign of widespread support by the community shopowners. The 90 shops that display this logo on their shopfront convey to those with dementia that the shop staff would be able to help, not just with shopping, but offer compassionate assistance, for instance if they are lost and need help to get home or contact family members, etc. Many such

shopowners report that they see many customers with dementia and recognise the roles that local businesses can play in the everyday life of those with dementia. These businesses make a big difference by being locales of safe havens in the city for those with dementia.

The knotted-handkerchief is the successful symbol of the 'Customer Remains King' initiative, one of the many initiatives that were born out of the '*Together for a dementia-friendly Bruges*' drive. To garner greater awareness on dementia and tackle associated stigmas, the project '*Together For a dementia-friendly Bruges*' seeks to present a more nuanced image of dementia, emphasizing the possibilities rather than limitations of living with dementia. In addressing the stigmas associated with dementia, it opens up conversations about and involving people with dementia, and by way of that, encourages social acceptance, understanding, recognition and contact.

The effort has been spearheaded by Foton, a charity with core expertise in dementia, to promote awareness, support and care for those with dementia in Bruges. Foton has a walk-in centre of expertise for dementia that provide information, a library on dementia, serve as an anchor for people with dementia and their caretakers to meet and share experiences in

the *Kopje Troost* (Cup of Comfort) meeting space, and enjoy activities together, including music afternoons, literary evenings, the Foton choir and seasonal celebrations.

Since 2010, a five-year action plan has been rolled out and some of the key initiatives include training programmes provided to service staff in local businesses and other organisations; the distribution of over 7000 compact dementia guidebooks with tips on communicating with those with dementia.

Between 2010 and 2013, there were 500 cases of missing persons with dementia in Belgium. Foton, in collaboration with the local police developed '*The Bruges Missing Project*', which maintains a database of those with dementia to facilitate efficacy in searches for those with dementia that go missing. While initially implemented among nursing homes, this was expanded in 2015 to include those with dementia who are cared for at home. The success of this project can be attested to in its widening implementation in the Walloon region, and even beyond Belgium.

As a trailblazer in dementia-friendly cities, the Bruges project faced inertia in public receptivity in the nascent stage when awareness of dementia was still low. However, with time and with deep collaborative efforts between Foton (the social sector champion),

the local authorities and buy-in from local businesses, the all-inclusive scope of the project to outreach to people with dementia, their caretakers and the wider community gradually took wing.

The success of Bruges as a dementia-friendly city has provided an inspiration and learning model for many European and other cities. The project was awarded the European Foundations' *Initiative on Dementia (EFID)* award in 2012 for its success in changing attitudes towards those with dementia and engaging the whole community to create a more supportive and compassionate environment for them.

As dementia-friendly projects gather momentum in Bruges and across Belgium, the King Baudouin Foundation and the Minister of State has commissioned some 30 dementia-friendly projects Belgium-wide. Towards more innovative urban solutions for age-friendly and dementia-friendly urban environments, the Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (VVSG) has published a guide on 'How to make your community dementia-friendly' and designed a dementia-friendly meter (Dementia-proof meter), which assesses the dementia-friendliness of a municipality.

The role of a dementia-friendly healthcare policy should not be overlooked. As part of its policy to support those with dementia to be cared for in the community and at home, Belgium's dementia-friendly healthcare policy harnesses the support of a network of specialised dementia care experts and volunteers to offer home-based dementia counselling and therapy, and community-based meetings groups for people with dementia and their caregivers.

For example, to encourage people with dementia to continue enjoying the city and the outdoors, *'The Pleasure of Walking'* programme "facilitates walking activities using reminiscence and sensorial experiences to find quietude in nature, and to engage in social participation". A *'Reminiscence Promenade'* was launched in Aalbeke, Flanders, as an inclusive, all-generational and universal access recreational amenity for all citizens. It is perhaps, especially beneficial for people with dementia as the promenade consists of several stops that make references to buildings and events in the past that stimulate discussions and collective social memories of the town.

Source: Alzheimer's Disease International, 'Together for a dementia-friendly Bruges'

<http://www.alz.co.uk/dementia-friendly-communities/bruges-together>. Accessed 16 June 2016; Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (VVSG) (2014), 'Dementia-friendly Cities: Age-friendly environment strategies,' <http://afeinnovnet.eu/sites/default/files/AFE-INNOVNET%20WS%2020%20-%20report.pdf>.

Accessed 16 June 2016; Williamson, T. (2016), Mapping dementia-friendly communities across Europe, European Foundations' Initiative on Dementia; 'Go back in the time', A Reminiscence Promenade in Belgium, [http://www.afeinnovnet.eu/news/"go-back-time"-reminiscence-promenade-belgium](http://www.afeinnovnet.eu/news/). Accessed 16 June 2016.