

Weathering the Storms of Life

Jaap (73), co-founder and resident, and privately a pastor and scientist, talks about sustainable senior co-housing in Olst, Holland.

Community

A post on the community's blog reads: "Permaculture is an ecological model, one example of which is nature itself: (it is) the art of creating beneficial relationships. Though the relationships between soil, insects, bacteria, water, and plants are very complex, we often know more about them than we do about navigating our relationships with other people. Permaculture in gardening follows a handful of rules, including: diversity is valuable; where two systems meet, a third emerges spontaneously; and capture and store energy. (...) Permaculture sees humans as an integral part of nature. That means that the differences between us actually enrich society. But we need clear rules governing how we form relationships and resolve conflicts."

Challenges

Jaap: People who have gotten used to living on their own can find it challenging to set aside their own habits for the good of the community. We hold open house events for prospective members twice per year. Guests come and visit the grounds, meet our members, and if a home opens up, they are invited back to take part in our activities. That gives them a taste of what it's like to live in our community. The rules we set up when we started are reevaluated yearly, so move-ins present a convenient opportunity to make amendments. We make decisions using the Socratic method; each proposal is discussed in three rounds: presentation, forming opinions, and decision making. If I still have my doubts about a proposal when we reach the final round, but the majority decides it's important for the community, then I don't object.

Organization

Jaap: Duties are assigned to residents of each of the four houses on a rotating weekly basis: making coffee for community, garbage disposal, and cleaning the common building. On Monday afternoons we all work in the garden. If, for some reason, someone can't take part in these tasks, they're required to notify the community. We cook in our own homes, and sometimes communally, but it's not a requirement.

Architecture

Jaap: Instead of relying on natural gas as our source of energy, our community uses geothermal power and solar panels.

Aleksandra Zbroja: Your website lists all the efforts you've made to implement what's known as the Climate Guarantee, or a energy-neutral lifestyle. The community harvests rainwater and has its own small farm.

Jaap: It's also important to me, personally, that my house can "weather the storms of life," meaning that I can stay here for as long as possible, even if I end up using a wheelchair.

Motivation

Jaap: I'm a plant ecologist and theologian. I was a professor of vegetation ecology at the Universities of Amsterdam and Münster, and later served as the pastor of a church in Olst and a minister in a retirement home. My wife was also involved in senior citizen's organizations. When we began looking for a home, we decided to limit the number of things we owned. I currently share a car with four other homes, and my neighbors all use one electric bicycle. Aside from that, we live separate lives. I'm busy restoring an old motorcycle, refreshing my Greek and Latin, and working on my Sunday sermons. I also play the organs and study mosses. The community doesn't detract from my passions: in fact, it enriches my life with something else, togetherness. We live with people who were complete strangers just five years ago. We have plenty of differences, but we have a lot in common, too. The most important thing we share is our understanding that we are only the stewards, not the owners, of our planet, and we must do everything we can to leave it in good shape for future generations.

Aleksandra Zbroja