

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TRADITION IN CONTEMPORARY HOUSING

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INTRODUCTION

In recent times, and especially in this century, population growth and increasing urbanisation have radically changed the demand for urban housing in all industrialised countries. In Denmark, the number of new urban dwellings built in the twenty years between 1950 and 1970 was equal to all the dwellings built in our long history prior to 1950. With that increasingly urgent demand for new housing, the old way of building—filling in the spaces one dwelling at a time with the careful but slow methods of traditional construction—simply doesn't work. Instead, most housing in industrialised nations like Denmark, especially for the less affluent members of society, is now built in large batches, very quickly, using new, industrialised methods of construction.

And here a problem arises. In all those centuries during which the old provincial towns were evolving into richly supportive places to live, the evolving rules for "the making of good towns" were never consciously articulated, much less written down. Indeed, the process was probably never viewed as an intentional process at all; it was simply a matter of doing what had "always" been done, and occasionally making changes as new needs and new opportunities coincided. But when we build a hundred, or a thousand, new dwellings all at once, we are faced with a huge number of decisions which must be made all at once—about the housing per se, which is complex enough, but also about how dwellings will be arranged, about utility systems, about common facilities, and landscaping, and much more. And these decisions must be made intelligently, consciously, based on whatever insight and knowledge we can bring to bear.

However, by the middle of the 20th century, the pressure on the housing industry in Denmark was so severe that the only real concern had become the building of as many dwellings as possible in the shortest possible time, and a new, highly industrialised construction process developed to accomplish that objective. The traditional ways were irrelevant, and traditional forms were viewed with nostalgia, or even scorn, but not as models. But once the immediate need for shelter began to be satisfied, the meagerness of these new dwellings began to be felt—by residents, by designers, and by developers. Since that time, the story of urban housing in Denmark is largely a story of exploration: a search for the qualities that must be part of any development that hopes to go beyond the simple provision for household shelter toward the creation of places where people can live full and satisfying lives.

In theory, the search for relevant principles for the making of urban housing could be undertaken anywhere that a long tradition of indigenous housing is still in evidence, and

indeed there are certainly lessons—essentially the same lessons—embodied in all such housing. In fact, though, there may be no other place in the world that allows us to see so clearly the connections between traditional patterns of housing and town-building on the one hand, and contemporary designing and planning on the other. For one thing, Denmark's small size and relatively peripheral location in Europe have allowed it a very long, continuous cultural history, without the cultural pluralism, and without the invasions or population shifts that make the search for "tradition" such a complex undertaking in most societies. Denmark is also highly unusual in the degree to which it has committed itself to consciously engaging the modern problems of housing and community design, both in its popular culture and in its official policies. It is really the combination of these two things—a long, but simple and continuous tradition for making houses and towns, and a contemporary commitment to effective designing and planning—an ongoing process of continuity and change—that is uniquely Danish, and it is this unique combination that makes a study possible, and immensely fruitful.

When a group of people live within a relatively small, stable world, with few threats to the patterns of their individual and collective lives, it is possible over many, many generations to develop a physical framework for life that through small, continuing adjustments eventually becomes extremely comprehensive in its support for those people's needs—physical needs, emotional needs, spiritual needs. The old provincial towns of Denmark are like that. They have evolved gradually, over many centuries, until today they are wonderful, rich settings for human life, providing for a healthy balance between community and privacy, using resources efficiently and conservatively, and adapting to change through time.

ÆRØSKØBING

The old town of Ærøskøbing on the island of Ærø in southern Denmark is typical of the provincial urban building tradition. The rows of connected houses lining the streets are evidence of a method of town-building that has been practised in Denmark from the end of the middle ages. The walls of these buildings not only designate the boundary between public and private, they physically and perceptually define the public streets and squares, which are outdoor "rooms" in which the community lives its collective life.

At the same time the series of buildings form the walls of the inner cores of the town, which contain the yards, gardens and outbuildings hidden from the public eye. These spaces give the town's residents the opportunity to grow a garden, enjoy the

sun, listen to birds, or simply to escape from the pressures of urban, or domestic, life. Buildings and homes are links between the town's private and public spheres, and have direct access to, and become integral parts of both.

The buildings themselves, constructed by their owners, are different versions of the traditional Danish *laenge*—a long and narrow building shape, one or two stories high, with a loft under a steeply pitched roof, comprised of varying numbers of transverse structural bays.

In addition to being structurally sound, and appropriately designed for the specifics of Denmark's climate, the *laenge*

- is able to connect with buildings on either side to help form the division between public and private outdoor spaces;
- is variable in length, within the modular and incrementally consistent rhythmic pattern of doors and windows in adjacent buildings;
- is low on the street frontage, one or two stories, with a roof sloping away from the street to allow light into the street, with the same configuration on the garden side;
- is adaptable to streets running in all directions, both straight and curved, and flexible enough to form part of the boundaries of other public spaces where those are needed;
- allows light to enter its rooms from either street or garden side (preferably both);
- has an interior layout allowing access to both street and garden;
- has a basic structure that is permanent and capable of being used for many generations; it is also flexible, allowing many different users to adapt it to their own living patterns and tastes;

In effect, the building type defined by these criteria is the *laenge*. In other cultures, of course, there are other kinds of towns, and other building types that best fit the local urban structure. The thrust here is not that the *laenge* is the only workable urban dwelling type, but that in Denmark, as in other cultures, where workable towns and cities have developed over long periods of time, the town and the town's buildings are essentially interconnected. The building is dependent on its context to a degree where if the context is changed, the building changes. More importantly even, houses and homes are integral parts of the neighbourhood and the urban environment; home is more than simply the house, it is also the neighbourhood.

NYBODER

Nyboder, in the centre of Copenhagen, was built in 1631 to house the families of naval personnel. This housing scheme was Denmark's first large scale residential development, and it revealed a new vision, both in site planning and building design. The long, narrow, housing blocks lie parallel to each other, far enough apart to ensure plenty of light and air to the relatively shallow dwellings. Between the buildings there are alternating streets and garden areas, so that each dwelling is given access to both. This concept is similar to the traditional "Ærøskøbing-pattern." Each of the dwellings in Nyboder enjoys fresh air and good light and each is given access to space for growing vegetables. These were unusual attributes for housing of that time, and it is in the bringing together of well designed dwellings and a well planned neighbourhood that Nyboder achieves its brilliance; it remains one of Denmark's best examples of good building design in urban housing.

It is to the planners' credit that they were able to produce an entirely new design for an urban dwelling, based on

the tradition of Danish rural housing, seen here for the first time in a large scale urban development.

Nyboder is the first known example of standardised and mass-produced dwellings with gardens, based on an overall plan, and the first use of the traditional *laenge* in a planned urban context. The project is unique for its time, and a model for the renaissance of Danish row-house development three centuries later.

BRUMLEBY

Following the great cholera epidemic in 1865, sanitary housing for workers families was built on the outskirts of Copenhagen. In many respects this design reflects important aspects of Denmark's traditional urban residential patterns, primarily the two-sidedness of dwelling units.

To a large extent the richness and complexity is accomplished by the careful juxtaposing of opposite and complementary site characteristics. For example, the architect Bindesbøll has carefully zoned the quiet and noisy areas for the site: the street side is allocated to the noisy activities, whilst the side with small gardens and the large, green common, is allocated to quiet activities. Regarding these two sides in another way; the garden side is primarily for pedestrians, whilst the other side is for vehicles, one side is "soft," the other "hard;" one side is "recreational," the other "business-like;" one side is "rural," the other "urban." There is nothing complicated in the way this is achieved, in fact, it is extremely straightforward, the buildings are aligned in rows with generous spaces between them. Each space between rows alternates between two "patterns," so that each building faces a different "pattern" on either side.

There are small, private gardens connected to the "soft" side of each block. The gardens provide both a social and a physical transition between the "hardness" and the privateness of the buildings and the "softness" and openness of the green. Over time, this narrow transitional band has become the area where the most creativity has been expressed by residents, a place where differing needs and lifestyles extend beyond the privacy of dwelling interiors into public visibility, setting its imprint on the buildings.

The experience of the alternating worlds on either side of the buildings is nowadays more striking than ever, as each tenant has had the opportunity to add informal structures on the garden side of the buildings. This has resulted in a more or less haphazard construction of small sheds and outhouse structures, which serve as informal extensions to the living space, giving the large blocks a less formal appearance. Despite their uniformity, no two blocks today appear quite the same. Also, these structures give the communal space an atmosphere of informality and create a collage-like effect. The contrast between this area and the street side has therefore become even more marked.

This results in an overridingly positive experience of the scheme, where the inhabitants are encouraged to create a community by virtue of their involvement in the actual physical development of the scheme, thereby consistently providing opportunities for the residents to congregate for collective activity. The linear "village green" provides perhaps the most dramatic of these opportunities. However, of equal importance is the provision in the plan of a narrow central zone, running the full length of the site, which is at present reserved for shared facilities, and which provides ample space for future expansion.

In the original construction, a small portion of this zone was used for laundry facilities and toilets. Later inclusions were Copenhagen's first workers' co-operative store, a bathhouse, meeting hall, children's nursery, library, woodshop, and even a fire station. Each of these activity centres was constructed as the result of initiatives taken by Brumleby's residents. We will never know whether this was the result of the architect's foresight and good intentions, as he left no personal notes, but it is clear that the organisation and the details of this development have encouraged social activities and generated community participation.

Brumleby is one of the earliest examples of a designer having intentionally traded public amenity for private, perhaps in this case because providing richness and variety for collective consumption is far cheaper than providing it privately, dwelling by dwelling, but also perhaps because it was a trade-off that would be most beneficial in the long term. This was a revolutionary concept in its time, when workable and enjoyable public spaces usually developed by accident, if at all. The design of Brumleby effectively balances built form and open space, vehicles and pedestrians, privacy and community in achieving a wonderful living environment for Copenhagen's least affluent citizens.

JYSTRUP SAVVÆRK

The residential community Jystrup Savværk planned by the Vandkunsten design team and built in 1984 is a co-operative housing community based on a traditional "street" concept. It is an extraordinarily compact building, one large single structure containing 21 family dwellings with shared guest facilities, and common recreational and dining spaces, which are all linked by a glass-covered public space and connecting inner walkways.

There are strong references to the small traditional village clustered on either side of its main thoroughfare. It is interesting to note that the residents of this cooperative have surrendered a considerable 40% share of their private dwelling space to the community. Private space is clearly defined and provided with minimal kitchens and limited living areas. The residential community's central area includes a common kitchen and dining hall, laundry room, workshops, hobby and music rooms, as well as guest rooms for visitors.

The glass-covered street linking the dwellings is unheated, but is suitable for play and active recreation for a large part of the year. This project helped to expand our perceptions of the interface between private and communal dwelling space.

DESIGNING FOR ALL USERS

While traditional patterns of housing development are typically based on a process in which household groups design and build their own dwellings, contemporary dwellings in industrialised cultures are almost always designed and constructed by people who have no direct knowledge of the eventual occupants. Thus the contemporary developer usually designs, consciously or unconsciously, for a hypothetical group of users—mythical residents with a certain set of physical, psychological, and cultural characteristics that are believed to be typical of the eventual real users. This circumstance is both inevitable and challenging, and many of the most serious shortcomings of

modern housing can be traced to poor decisions in this part of the design process.

One of the most common failings in housing today comes from the developer's assumption that it is the "typical" or "mainstream" user who should be considered when making design decisions: adult, average height and weight, healthy, fully mobile with a job outside the home, etc. But a substantial proportion of any population does not fit this picture—young children; people who are ill, or injured, or permanently disabled; people who are not part of the mainstream culture. And in the life span of virtually any dwelling, there are sure to be many occupants who in significant ways do not fit the "typical" mold. In fact, rather than design for the middle of this spectrum of human variation, it makes much more sense to design for the extremes. If one were to design a dwelling with young children and elderly people as the resident models, most of the range of variations would be included and be considered in the design decisions.

While a broadly inclusive view of potential occupants is important, even more important is the understanding that *whoever* the initial residents are assumed to be, over time the needs of those residents themselves will change, and then, eventually, there will be new residents, and again, and again... Even though the *laenger* in traditional Danish towns were designed and built one at a time by their initial occupants, the basic structure of each one follows a pattern that time has shown to guarantee usefulness for people of all kinds, and for changing family and social patterns, far into the unknown future. This kind of adaptability is required of any housing that hopes to effectively serve the full range of housing needs.

WHO DECIDES?

One of the most troubling issues for those involved in housing and community development is deciding what the role of professional expertise should be; or more specifically, how much of what happens in a dwelling, or street, or community, should be determined ahead of time through design, and how much should be left to the decisions of unknown future residents. This is not an easy question to answer. Consider Copenhagen's earliest worker-initiated urban housing, Kartoffelrækkerne, where the residents themselves made the basic decisions, including the decision not to include any space for structured community activities—recreation, marketplace, schools, services. One's first response might be, "Well, they decided; they can live with the consequences." But there are far more residents who had nothing to do with those decisions who have, during the past century, had to live with the lack of services, and the lack of opportunities for community life. Who was representing those future users? Or, in the complementary example of Brumleby, where an enlightened professional saw the advantage of sacrificing amenity in the dwellings for the sake of building a strong and effective community life, the example of Kartoffelrækkerne tells us that the Brumleby residents themselves would probably not have approved of that trade-off, had they been asked. Is that acceptable?

There is probably no definitive resolution for this dilemma, but a good rule of thumb is that any non-user (architect, planner, politician, developer, banker, builder) who is making decisions, should *never do more than is absolutely necessary*. This rule accepts the importance of prior planning,

and it accepts the need for wisdom and expertise in prior planning decisions, but it also demands that the “wise expert” limit decision-making to aspects of the development in which appropriate form, or appropriate rules for form, are critical to the development’s long-run success. One reason that the traditional Danish towns work so well is that the “necessary” result is not a town that looks a certain way, but a town that solves certain important problems. Thus the really crucial decisions are not site-specific decisions at all, but general rules: always use the *laenge*, the *laenge* should always have one face right on the street; be sure there is a yard attached, opposite the street; etc. These rules do not guarantee that every building will be beautiful, or that every street will be a wonderful, richly varied experience. They allow the differences between personalities—intuitive or rational, inventive or prosaic, clever or dull—to become manifest. But the framework ensures that the town as a whole will work in spite of—and to some extent because of—these variations. People will still have fundamentally good homes; the community will work well; resources will be carefully, appropriately, used, so the town can be ensured of survival.

CONCLUSION

In our times, urgency usually demands that much of the construction itself be decided and executed at once, before even the first round of users is known. Still, more than most people imagine, there is much more, even under modern conditions, that can be left to the users than usually is. The development of the site by the residents of Brumleby is a perfect example. To reach this goal today, an appropriate *framework* must be created, a framework of rules and options wherever possible, a physical framework where necessary. If the framework is a good one, if it insures that necessary issues are effectively dealt with, but no more, it will provide freedom and guidance for the actions of residents, but it will also provide an assurance that critical needs will be satisfied, whatever the specific actions of residents. Within such a framework, residents can be given real, meaningful responsibility, and they will use that responsibility to make places that really work—places that work for themselves, but also places that work for the community at large, and will continue to work for future generations.

It is absolutely clear that the process that generated the traditional towns and buildings of Denmark cannot be duplicated in our time. Our needs are too urgent, our contexts changing too rapidly, our cultures too varied. We must consequently use our intelligence to make good housing; we cannot rely on time and patience for the answers to our questions. Substantial renewal in housing is dependent on the understanding of precedents, and durable innovations are, most often, rooted in ideas from the past. Meaningful and workable new concepts in housing invariably have precedents.

This is why the traditional models for housing and community structure are so important to us now—they represent the cumulative knowledge of many generations of “research and development,” in the field, full scale, with real subjects, and real consequences. Certainly no one resident, past or present, of a traditional Danish town, or any other traditional town, would be able to tell us the principles upon which that town’s success as a place to live depend, but the principles are there, evident for those who would look for them, in the structure of the places themselves.

Today, the greatest challenge in housing is to define the balance between the individual and the community. The role of architecture is to establish a framework that allows people to participate in developing their home and its neighbourhood within a structure that allows and encourages social activities. The best way of achieving this goal is by constantly ensuring that essential elements of traditional housing be incorporated into contemporary design.

Tradition has a vital role to play in contemporary housing. A living tradition is dynamic in the sense that elements are continually being reassessed and discarded, whilst other elements are introduced. In that sense, upholding tradition is synonymous with being farsighted.

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