

'Welfare Landscapes: Open Spaces of Danish Post-war Housing Estates Reconfigured'
by Ellen Braae, Svava Riesto, Henriette Steiner and Anne Tietjen (University of Copenhagen,
Landscape Architecture and Planning)

The premises on which the Danish welfare state developed in the post-war period have changed remarkably over the last decades, and today's welfare policies have become more entangled with market-driven mechanisms (Pedersen, 2011). These changes have significantly altered the conditions for citizens to find affordable and suitable places to live, and they directly affect who provides new housing, for whom and where. In recent decades, most large housing complexes in Denmark have been provided by private developers for private owners, and have been located in growing cities where there is an influx of citizens and an emerging housing crisis. This trajectory also entails a high building percentage, which again directly affects the quantity and quality of parks, urban squares and other open spaces for residents close to their homes. New Danish housing complexes are built in ways that contrast with the large housing complexes realised in the decades following the Second World War.

Post-war housing in Denmark was realized in close relationship with a continuous debate about welfare, housing and landscape/open space. From the 1950s onwards many estates followed a green urban ideal, while others were later realized with a higher density and open spaces inspired by pre-modern cities or villages.

Today these multiple open spaces on post-war housing estates stand as markers of historical urban ideals (and alternatives to current ideals), while also providing potential values and spatial resources in the present. These are not static or essential values; rather, the uses and

understandings of the open spaces of post-war housing estates, as well as their materialities, have changed throughout their lifetimes, and today face significant changes with countless renewal, reconstruction and renovation projects.

The open space, and in particular the green open space, played a significant role in 20th-century mass housing. In Denmark, with the construction of the welfare state after the Second World War, these landscapes were directly associated with ideas of social welfare and well-being related to citizens' health, morals and ethics. We therefore suggest calling the open spaces of the post-war welfare city 'welfare landscapes'. These welfare landscapes of social housing were iconic in terms of attempting to counteract all the shortcomings associated with the dense, socially unjust, aesthetically outdated and slummy housing that had arisen from late 19th- and early 20th-century urbanisation processes.

In the materialisation of European national welfare politics, architecture and planning played a prominent role, aiming to ensure good living conditions for all citizens (Swenarton et al. 2015). Social housing in particular became a cornerstone of these efforts, and millions of Europeans now live in various forms of post-war social housing. In Denmark today, 17–20% of the whole population lives in social housing (Rogaczewska et al. 2017). A significant number of these residents live in mass housing complexes from the post-war decades, and especially from the building boom of the 1960s and early 1970s, when open spaces played a core role in the design on multiple

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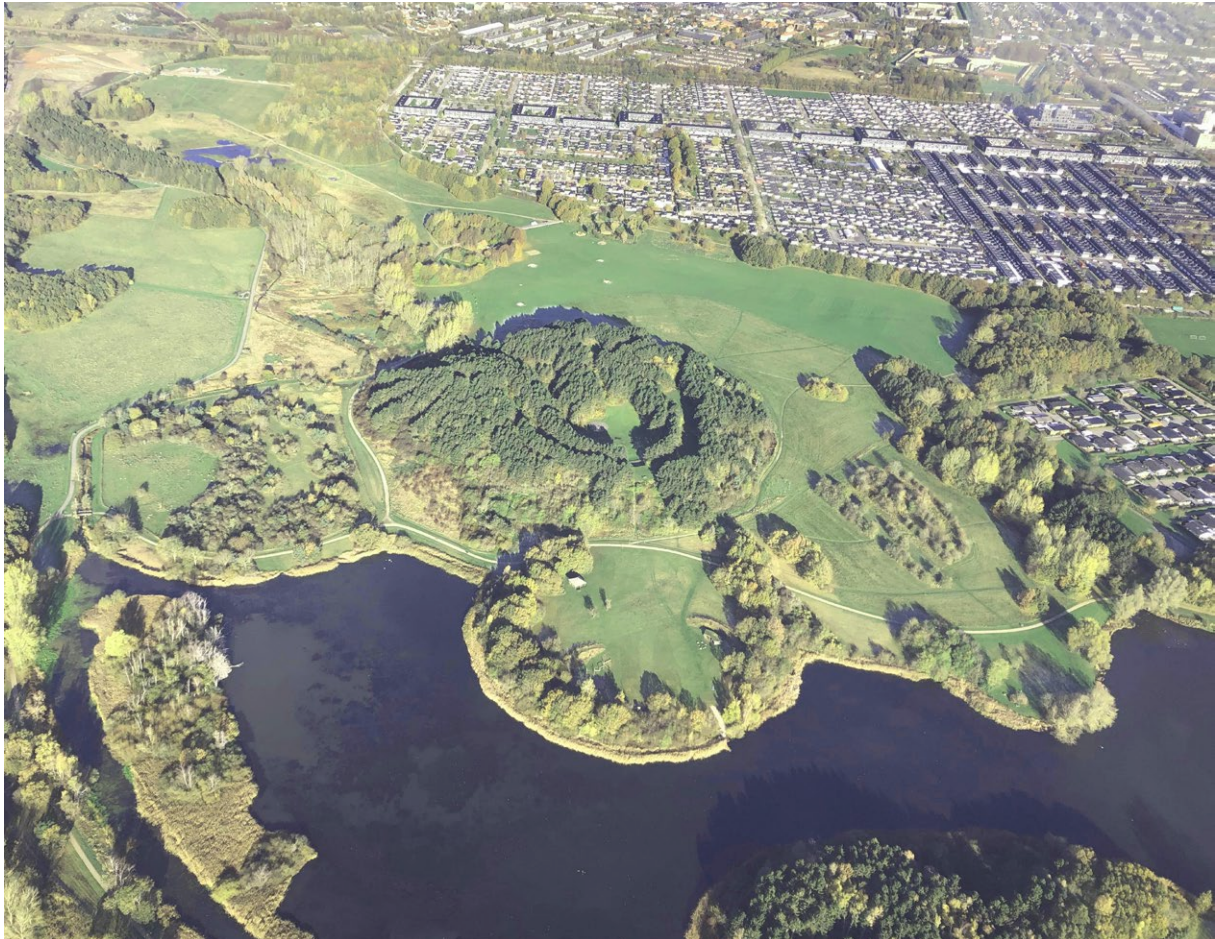


Figure 1 Many estates were carefully designed as part of larger landscapes with vast park system to which residents had access. Albertslund Syd social housing (1963-1969) to the back right of the picture, was planned together a new town centre and the park Vejleådalsparken as part of a new-town-development to the west of Copenhagen.

scales. Particular to many estates from this period is their carefully designed common open spaces spanning from shared gardens to large lawns, small gardens, urban squares, playgrounds, car-free pedestrian paths, and large-scale park-systems adjacent to the housing estates.

Yet surprisingly, beyond canonical architectural histories, little knowledge exists about the open spaces on these social housing estates – that is, about welfare landscapes. As in many other countries, Denmark's large-scale housing from the 1950s- 1970s is connected with negative public

discourse. This has most recently been expressed in the Danish government's 'ghetto list', which identifies social challenges on numerous housing estates across the country. The government has responded to these challenges by instigating national policies that force residents to move out, demolishing buildings, densifying the estates by building on their landscapes, and introducing private ownership over some of the homes. While these policies, along with countless other renovation and renewal projects in recent years, have given rise to public debates about how to manage the buildings, the landscapes of such estates are

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Figure 2: Particular to many post-war housing estates is their carefully designed common open spaces spanning from shared gardens to large lawns, small gardens, urban squares, playgrounds, car-free pedestrian paths. This picture shows the large shared park in the newly built Farum Midtpunkt to the north of Copenhagen, in 1977.

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still a terrain vague in the discourse. In effect, the landscapes of post-war housing estates are often changed radically without further enquiry or discussion of the specificities of those landscapes.

In response, we contend that their existing landscape-architectural and spatial qualities may be a valuable resource for the future development of these landscapes as welfare landscapes. In the Reconfiguring Welfare Landscapes research project, we explore new ways to revisit the open spaces of social housing estates in their own right, with their own histories and as part of a larger urban landscape. By doing so, we aim to understand what ideas about well-being and welfare these welfare landscapes materialise, and how

they change over time together with changing conceptions, ideas and uses. We assume that the answers to these questions can guide social housing estates' development and their capacity to be welfare landscapes in the future, providing meaningful and sustainable landscapes for living.

Sparse research attention to post-war welfare landscapes

Danish social housing from the post-war decades was often planned in a close collaboration between planners, architects and landscape architects (Woudstra 1995). This interdisciplinary tradition is often highlighted in research and may explain why a great number of these estates are considered to possess unique architectural and spatial qualities, and why they serve as important architectural references internationally (Boye 1948; Hiort 1952; Woudstra 1995; Treib 2002).

Recent international research in architectural history has interlinked with new theories of the socio-politics of welfare states, revealing the need to develop analytical strategies that bridge architectural and sociocultural research to better understand the relationship between architecture and welfare (Avermaete et al. 2011; Mattson et al. 2010; Swenarton et al. 2015). Also, in Denmark, there has been an emerging interest in understanding postwar architecture and urbanism in relation to the welfare state (Bendsen et al. 2012; Bæk Pedersen 2005; Sverrild 2008).

The landscapes of post-war housing estates have received relatively little attention (Swenarton et al.

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2015; Wolf & Kirchengast 2014:3; Krippner et al. 2014; Harwood 2000). This is surprising in light of the historical significance and sheer quantity and extent of these landscapes. Further, recent scholarship has pointed out that the landscape qualities of large-scale social housing are more significant to contemporary local residents than the built structures (Wolf & Kirchengast 2014; Kroppedal 2007). This calls for new knowledge that explicitly focuses on the open spaces of social housing estates. Our assumption is that welfare landscapes constitute culturally rich material precisely because they are particular expressions of the complex relationships between private and (semi-) public, and between the individual, the collective and the state, thus allowing the inherent ambiguities of the welfare project to become visible (Creagh 2014; Avermaete et al. 2011; Nielsen 2008). Such knowledge, we believe, can substantiate how, why and whether we may preserve, maintain, change and reuse such landscapes in the future. Hence, our Reconfiguring Welfare Landscapes research project aims to develop and prototype generative spatial readings of these landscapes, which in turn have the potential to inform further studies and to ensure the best possible future reconfiguration of these spaces. This will help us to uncover how the spatial qualities of post-war architecture may be aligned with changing cultural practices, and with the concerns and values of the present. To do this, we work with landscape architecture in an expanded theoretical and methodological field. We thus seek answers to how we can understand the histories and spatial qualities of post-war social housing landscapes as a point of departure for considering

their possible futures.

Changing premises

Cultural ideas about social welfare and individual well-being have changed over time. Immediately after the Second World War, the substantial quantity of new mass housing was an adequate answer to the housing shortage, and the way it was undertaken was a clear response to the poor living conditions in industrialised cities, which had small, crowded apartments in densely built and polluted environments (Bjørn et al. 2008; Dirkinck-Holmfeld et al. 2013; Beck Danielsen et al. 2014; Kvorning et al. 2012). However, the need for physical rest at weekends after long hours working in manufacturing jobs gradually diminished.

During the 1970s, women also began to go out to work, while children would spend their weekdays in a nursery or kindergarten. Moreover, the starting point during the early post-war decades had comprised cultural homogeneity (in terms of both ethnicities and family structures) and Modernist universalism – both of which were subsequently challenged. Modernism was rejected from within; cultural homogeneity was challenged from without, particularly by immigration from outside Europe. The latter peaked in the 1970s with the arrival of invited guest workers, many of whom came to live in affordable social housing areas alongside the socially vulnerable groups placed on these estates by municipalities. Subsequent periods of low employment, social neglect etc., have led to the current situation where many Danish social housing estates are perceived as the locus of

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multiple social challenges.

Besides the questions of decay mitigation and ongoing maintenance, the maintenance of an ever-evolving 'designed nature' is a particularly challenging endeavour. On the one hand, plants need care, which also entails their gradual replacement. Some species evolve fast; others work more slowly, such as the trees that have finally attained the size and aesthetic impact envisioned decades ago by the architects and landscape architects. However, one of the changing premises with the greatest impact is climate change. Hitherto in Denmark this has been perceived as a matter of changing precipitation patterns, leading to a quest for large open green spaces to retain and percolate storm water – a quest that has pointed towards the welfare landscapes of social housing estates. Moreover, increasing attention to globally decreasing biodiversity is starting to affect ideas about what a beautiful landscape is, aesthetically contesting the layout of many post-war social housing estates' landscapes.

Examining space – how to approach the concept of spatial quality?

If post-war housing estates are material structures where ideologies of the 'good life' have been concretely materialised, they are phenomena that bridge architecture and culture in a very direct way. To unravel how this relationship was first established and later transformed and challenged, we require a theoretical framework that can grasp such dynamic relationships. With its conceptual triad of materiality (form, structure), practice

(creation, uses) and discourse (representations, ideologies), and its fundamental drift towards understanding how space itself is produced and reproduced, the proposed research draws on French philosopher Henri Lefebvre's (1991, 2003, 2004) relational conception of space. With regard to the green open spaces of the post-war housing estates in question, this offers an approach that considers these structures as meaningful cultural products, takes seriously the socio-material production and gradual alteration of these spaces over time by their many users, and critically examines the way they continuously foster a cultural imaginary in and through representations.

To navigate this overarching theoretical framework, we introduce three analytically operative themes. These themes allow us to reveal the slippages and paradoxes reflected in the welfare landscapes. They also point to those landscapes' future reconfiguration, focusing on central aspects such as multiple and related scales, the concept of welfare, and the status of post-war social housing estates as potential heritage objects.

Spatial Connections and Relations: Rethinking Dichotomies. Urban theorist Neil Brenner (2014:15) argues in line with Lefebvre for a new form of 'urban theory without an outside'. He thus urges us to rethink traditional dichotomies such as urban centre versus suburb, natural landscape versus cultural landscape, community versus privacy, expert versus layperson, and built versus unbuilt. Traditional centre-periphery relationships (among others) are challenged because suburban social housing estates are increasingly embedded

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in urban regional structures. This prompts an enquiry into how welfare landscapes attest to these new relationships, and how their spatial qualities may be described in light of dissolving dichotomies (Sieverts 2003; Viganò et al. 2012). By focusing on the green open spaces of welfare housing as both 'built' and 'unbuilt', 'culture' and 'nature' etc. (Spirn 1998), we may consider how can we understand welfare landscapes at the intersection of traditional theoretical dichotomies, and how we can allow new connections and relationships to become visible.

Welfare Open Space: Green Spaces as Community Markers. Equal access to green open spaces is a dogma of modernist urban planning (Sørensen 1931; CIAM 1933): besides providing sunlight and fresh air, green open spaces are seen to ideologically inspire a healthy life (Wagenaar 2004). This follows a long tradition of European thought, whereby green urban spaces become universal symbols of liberty and equality, mirroring a collective and humanistic proposition for a new and better life (Worpole 2000; Bolt & Lund 2009). This was heavily reinforced after the Second World War. Regarding housing estates as neighbourhoods, or even as projected and 'imagined communities' (Andersson 1983), the design of green open spaces enfolded certain ethics and morals. It therefore concerns the question of what formal qualities, practices, programmes, values and narratives are embedded in welfare landscapes – and also how we can articulate the ethical demand that they be spaces held in common by many people.

Heritage as Sense-Making: Reappraising Welfare Landscapes. Today, many post-war Danish housing estates are crossing the 50-year legal threshold for consideration as heritage in the traditional sense: as objects for preservation. But when it comes to these estates' open green spaces, we face the challenge of 'preserving' dynamic contexts rather than static objects (Arrhenius 2012; Riesto 2018), and of abandoning the nature-culture dichotomy that underlies most established heritage practices (Riesto & Tietjen 2018). If we consider heritage as a process (Roymans et al. 2011) that is not only about the past but also about 'caring for the future' (Harrison 2015), heritage-making becomes an activity with huge potential to sustain meaningful living environments (Fairclough 2009). Regarding housing estates' landscapes as contributing to human well-being (as is implicit in the European Landscape and FARE Conventions), we may enquire into what meaning-making processes occur in welfare landscapes, how people reappropriate them, and what future roles these open spaces may possess.

Empirical grounding – why three iconic cases?

The project revolves around three case studies, internationally renowned (Kirschenmann et al. 1977) and landscape-architecturally significant housing estates situated in different locations in the greater Copenhagen area: Bellahøj (1951–1957), Albertslund Syd (1963–1968) and Farum Midtpunkt (1970–1974). This selection covers the decades of construction, prototyping and realisation during the roughly 30 years (1945–1979)

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Figure 3: Five examples of open spaces in Albertslund Syd: extracts from photogrammetric point clouds

- 1) Square partly fallen out of maintenance.
 - 2) Dwelling entrance furnished with bench and planter.
 - 3) Local resident and land art artist Mikael Hansen's unauthorised redesign of square.
 - 4) Rhododendron planting in disused sandbox.
 - 5) Long-term parking of caravans.
- © Asbjørn Jessen.

when most Danish social housing estates were built (Tietjen, 2010; Bæk Pedersen, 2005). They also attest to the ambiguity of Danish architecture which is internationally acclaimed and yet also faces problems related to material decay, changing social life and a bleak public image. All three are therefore undergoing urban renewal, representing three different phases: planned (Bellahøj), in progress (Farum Midtpunkt) and completed (Albertslund Syd). Furthermore, they represent three well-known modernist housing types: the park settlement (Bellahøj), a low-rise carpet settlement (Albertslund), and a terraced

megastructure (Farum Midtpunkt). Using the cases as empirical stepping stones in combination with our theoretical framework, we explore new methodological terrain relative to landscape architecture, challenging outdated views of landscape architecture as preoccupied with aesthetics and ecology (Meyer 2000). Instead, we trace the idea of spatial quality. This central yet vaguely defined precept of landscape architecture and planning practices is only graspable in a relational and integrative manner that encompasses uses, users and the material structures themselves (Khan et al. 2014), thus elaborating our relational



Figure 4: The social housing estate at Bellahøj (1951–1957) highlights a transition in green ideals: from the ideal of escaping to nature, to the desire to live in it. The green open spaces became more than a metaphor, not only for healthy living, but also for a healthy residential life.

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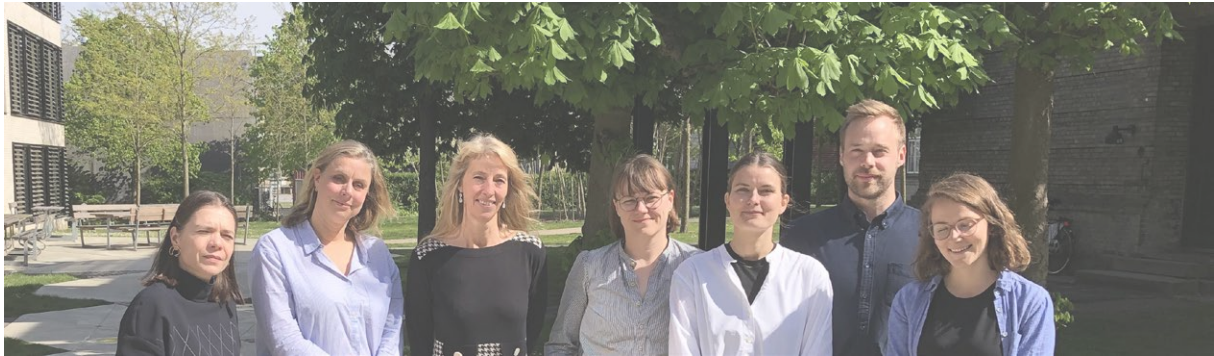


Figure 5: The researchers in the project. From the left: Anne Tietjen, Svava Riesto, Ellen Braae, Henriette Steiner, Lærke Sophie Keil, Asbjørn Jessen, Kirsten van Haaren

spatial framework. Expanding landscape architecture perspectives from urban theory, heritage studies, cultural history and architectural philosophy will help us to unfold the three theoretical themes and reveal the paradoxes embedded in welfare landscapes. While these paradoxes are central to the welfare ideological programme, we contend that they may also allow us to point towards meaningful future reconfigurations.

Bringing theory into practice – how we work

The project is hosted by the Section for Landscape Architecture and Planning at the University of Copenhagen, the institution which launched the first landscape architecture education in Scandinavia in the early 1960s. It is known for its role in substantiating the development of the post-war welfare city and its many green open spaces (Hauxner 2003). To build on this foundation while also ensuring disciplinary renewal, the team of researchers contributing to this project has both a strong grounding in the discipline of landscape architecture and a broader interdisciplinary embedment. While the PI and three young PhD fellows are all trained as landscape architects, the

three subproject leaders (SPLs) contribute other disciplinary and methodological perspectives.

The first subproject, *Materialising Welfare*, focuses on how welfare landscapes materialise in and around post-war social housing estates as socio-material assemblages. Drawing on new materialism, especially actor-network theory, it examines how relationships between materialities, welfare politics and spatial design are constituted, and how they change over time, with a focus on the role of non-human things. This subproject is led by Anne Tietjen and includes a PhD project by Asbjørn Jessen.

The next subproject, *Practising Welfare Landscapes*, examines the social housing estates as lived spaces. It questions the socio-material relationships of specific landscapes, from the original ideas about architecture's effects on residents' social life, to everyday contestations over issues about communality/individuality and flexibility/control, up to present-day renovation plans. This subproject is led by Svava Riesto and includes a PhD project by Lærke Keil.

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Figure 6: This project investigates the role of landscape elements, e.g. fences and plantings, in a Danish welfare landscape. By focusing on the relationship between use and materiality, the project contributes to a nuanced understanding of a welfare landscape as lived over time, beyond polarised perceptions of social failure or success. © Lærke Sophie Keil.

The third subproject is called Welfare Imagined: Landscape as Common Ground? It elaborates on conflicting discourses about the social housing estates, looking at the original ideas behind the projects in relation to their current-day reception and their potential reuse and re-narration. The subproject is led by Henriette Steiner and includes a PhD project by Kristen van Haeren.

With this research project, we will provide two kinds of result that will contribute to knowledge about 21st-century mass housing. First, we will deepen the understanding of the relationship between welfare and landscape in post-war mass housing, and of how that relationship has changed over time. Second, we will develop new research approaches and methodologies to grasp the complexity of spatial quality in post-war social housing estates from a past, present and future perspective, and on a more generative level to sustain the underlying conception of landscape

– including the landscapes that accompany mass housing – as something that evolves in a space-time continuum.

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PAPER 3

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the Independent Research Fund Denmark. It is hosted by the University of Copenhagen. The project group includes UC researchers PL Professor Ellen Braae, SPL Associate Professor Anne Tietjen, SPL Associate Professor Henriette Steiner and SPL Associate Professor Svava Riesto, and UC PhD fellows Asbjørn Jessen, Kristen van Haeren and Lærke Sophie Keil. The project is supported by an advisory board consisting of Professor Anne Whiston Spirn (MIT), Professor Tom Avermaete (ETHZ), Professor Rodney Harrison (UCL), Professor Thordis Arrhenius (KTH) and Professor Paola Viganò (IUVA). <https://ign.ku.dk/english/welland/>