

'Mass Housing and the Emergence of the 'Concrete Slum' in Denmark in the 1970s & 1980s' by Mikkel Høghøj (School of Culture and Society, Aarhus University, Denmark)**Abstract**

By investigating how modernist mass housing was turned into both an 'object of criticism' and an 'object of study' in the 1970s and early 1980s Denmark, this article seeks to bring new perspectives to the early history of Danish mass housing. Even though the rejection of urban modernism constitutes a well-established field of research internationally, surprisingly few scholars have so far investigated how this played out in a Danish context. This article addresses this research gap by analysing how mass housing was portrayed and re-evaluated as a 'place' in Danish mass media and popular culture as well as within social scientific research from the 1970s to the mid-1980s. The article argues that the public rejection of Danish mass housing cannot be reduced to a question about architectural aesthetics. Rather, this process entailed a complete reinterpretation of the role in which mass housing occupied as a specific type of 'place' in Danish society.

Introduction

Today, the rise and fall of urban modernism in the second half of the 20th century constitutes a well-established narrative all over the Western World. As demonstrated in the rich international literature on the topic, modernist mass housing epitomised this development. Across Europe and in the US, mass housing estates such as Pruitt-Igoe, Sarcelles, the Märkisches Viertel, Rosengård, and the Bijlmermeer were uniformly rejected from the late 1960s onwards.⁽¹⁾

However, in a Danish context studies of how and why modernist mass housing developed from being emblematic of urban modernity in the 1950s and 1960s to serving as a prime marker of societal crisis in the 1970s and 1980s are surprisingly few – especially when considering how contested these places are today. The present article addresses this research gap by examining two ways in which Danish mass housing was reappraised during the 1970s and 80s. More specifically, I analyse how modernist mass housing transformed as a particular type of 'place' in Danish society by being turned into both an 'object of criticism' and an 'object of study'. Yet, in order to explain this transformation, certain characteristics of the planning and construction of Danish mass housing in the 1960s must be outlined briefly.

Meticulous modernism

As in most parts of Western Europe, the 1960s constituted the pivotal decade for the planning and construction of mass housing in Denmark. Since the 1930s, Danish governmental authorities had increasingly fertilised the ground for planners, yet it was not until the passing of the 'Governmental Circular on Prefabricated Dwellings' (Montagecirkulæret) in 1960 that the economic and technological preconditions for the production of Danish mass housing were established.⁽²⁾ This circular secured funding for 7,500 prefabricated dwellings over the next four years, resulting in the mass housing plans for Albertslund, Høje Gladsaxe, Ballerupplanen, and Sydjyllandplanen. Although these means were not utilised to construct the largest mass

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housing plans in Denmark, the circular was still instrumental for the realization of these plans, as it promoted further modernisation of the Danish building industry.

From the mid-1960s onwards, the scale and comprehensiveness of Danish mass housing reached new heights. This found particular expression in the plans for Gellerupplanen in Aarhus, Vollsmose in Odense, and Brøndby Strand southwest of Copenhagen. Rather than just housing schemes, these plans were conceived as urban totalities comprising public institutions, new urban infrastructures, and various amenities for consumption and leisure. In this way, these plans echoed the utopian aspirations of the contemporary new town-movement.⁽³⁾ However, when scrutinizing these plans more closely, it becomes evident that their meticulousness was, to a great

extent, motivated by an emerging critique of modernist planning and architecture. Already in the first plan for Brøndby Strand, which was developed in 1962, the renowned Danish architect Steen Eiler Rasmussen initiated the planning proposition by warning about the risk of creating 'dormitory towns' (sovebyer).⁽⁴⁾ In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the plans for Gellerupplanen, Vollsmose, and Brøndby Strand were all reworked to meet this emerging critique. In 1971, the main architect of Gellerupplanen, Knud Blach Petersen, noted that the third stage of the plan, Holmstrup, was explicitly designed as:

A reply to the prevailing criticism of the stereotypical residential areas in the industrialised housing estates, an attempt to create a varied residential area that, with widespread green areas, could serve as an alternative to the monotonous



Figure 1: Newly constructed housing blocks from the first stage of the Gellerup Plan, Gellerupparken, 1971. Photographer: Jens-Kristian Sogaard. Image located at Den Gamle By's Photo Collection



Figure 2: Newly constructed housing blocks from the first stage of the Gellerup Plan, Gellerupparken, 1971. Photographer: Jens-Kristian Sogaard. Image located at Den Gamle By's Photo Collection

single-family home developments and housing estates.⁽⁵⁾

This, I argue, shows how a critique of Danish mass housing was never far away in the 1960s, influencing the design of the most extensive mass housing plans from this decade. As I elaborate below, from the early 1970s onwards, this critique branched out and proliferated.

The emergence of 'concrete slum' in mass media

Although various Danish architects already identified modernist architecture as an 'object of criticism' in the 1960s, this critique did not dominate popular opinion before at least the 1970s. One channel, which was instrumental for the dissemination of this critique, was the Danish mass

media. Thus, this section examines how a public critique of modernist mass housing proliferated in the Danish mass media landscape during the 1970s.

Throughout the 1960s, media representations of Danish mass housing were predominantly positive.⁽⁶⁾ Especially, the large-scale housing plans commenced in the late 1960s including Gellerupplanen, Vollsmose, and Brøndby Strand were portrayed as emblematic of the high technological and social standards of the emerging Danish welfare society. However, already in the early 1970s media representations changed. Through new concepts such as 'concrete jungle' and 'concrete slum', mass housing was gradually ascribed new meanings. In this context, it was not just the architectural expression of the buildings that was questioned. Rather, this development

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entailed a complete reinterpretation of these estates as places. Here, I wish to focus on two examples illustrating this. Targeting one specific estate – Gellerupplanen in Aarhus – these two examples reflect how Danish mass media rejected modernist mass housing by defining the estates in opposition to the rest of society. One way in which this found expression was through a depiction of Gellerupplanen as a hostile environment for children and young people.



Figure 3: The television broadcast “En kirke i beton” generated multiple angry responses from the people actually living in Gellerupplanen

In January 1974, the Danish newspaper Ekstra Bladet published two articles focusing on the ostensible links between the spatial environment of Gellerupplanen and the emergence of alcohol problems among young people living in the estate.⁽⁷⁾ According to these articles, children and young people were particularly vulnerable to the damaging effects of the concrete environment. Among other things, this had resulted in an excessive consumption of alcohol among the teenagers in the estate:

“Beers and concrete constitute the everyday life

for the young people in the Gellerup Plan. It is this collection of human-siloes in the periphery of Århus that, according to a new report, was built to accommodate the needs of the building industry rather than the people living within them. Teenagers must drink to endure the killing monotony of living with the cement-giants on all sides.”⁽⁸⁾

Moreover, the articles emphasized how the lack of social activities on the estate had generated severe speech difficulties among the younger children in the estate. Compared to children in other parts of the city, they were more frequently referred to child psychologists.

A similar message found expression in the broadcast “En kirke i beton” which aired on Danish television the 20th of October 1978. With the grey concrete blocks looming in the background, the broadcast was opened by a set of quotes originating ostensibly from people residing in other parts of Aarhus:

“Gellerup? No one wants to live there, unless they are forced. If you bring your car to the Gellerup Plan, - then remember to lock it even though you are only gone for five minutes. A woman does not walk alone in Gellerup after 10 o'clock. Gellerup is the first place the police goes to the morning after a large coup or robbery. Notice the children – they are restless. When they become a bit older, it is likely that some of them will feel that there is something to avenge. I can tell you that much that I would rather have an arm sawn off than let my children grow up in that environment.”⁽⁹⁾

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In this way, the atmosphere of the broadcast was established, and throughout the remainder of the show, the social conditions of the children living within the estate constituted a recurrent theme. Furthermore, in both cases the criticism of Gellerupplanen entailed a certain use of emotions.⁽¹⁰⁾ Instead of neutral, the spatial environment of the estate was portrayed as a catalyser for emotional qualities such as fear, desolation, restlessness, and anger. By ascribing Gellerupplanen such emotional qualities, Danish mass media not only associated the estate with a certain atmosphere but also explained the problematic behaviour of the inhabitants as an unavoidable outcome of the emotionality of the estates.

In both cases, this way of depicting Gellerupplanen generated several angry responses from inhabitants living on the estate. Besides filing official complaints to the independent press council, these responses found expression through critical articles written by various inhabitants seeking to defend both the children specifically and Gellerupplanen in general.⁽¹¹⁾ As ironically noted by an inhabitant in 1978: "We are not a bunch of concrete criminals."⁽¹²⁾

These two examples were just the tip of the iceberg. During the 1970s, Danish mass media recurrently portrayed mass housing estates as signifiers of social problems in the otherwise increasingly affluent Danish welfare society. In other words, these places were not only periphery of the cities, but also in the periphery of society.

The emergence of 'concrete slum' in popular culture

However, it was not only through mass media that a negative image of modernist mass housing was mediated to the Danish population in the 1970s. Popular culture constituted another channel through which this found expression.

The popular Danish comedy series *Huset på Christianshavn*, which aired between 1970 and 1977, is one example of this. Examining the social and cultural ruptures of the 1970s through a romanticised portrayal of life in the old working class neighbourhoods, the series was conceived in direct opposition to the modernist planning agenda of the 1950s and 1960s. Yet, mass housing was not just implicitly criticised in the show. In a number of episodes focusing on alternative housing options for the inhabitants living in the Christian's Harbour neighbourhoods, mass-produced housing estates located in the urban periphery were specifically used to illustrate the worst-case scenario.⁽¹³⁾ In contrast to the thriving social community of the old working class neighbourhoods, these estates were depicted as places characterised by anonymous relations and even isolation. The show, however, did not target mass housing built within the social housing sector specifically, but rather the material outcome of modernist planning more generally. Nevertheless, in most cases the show visualised this through the lens of industrialised and mass-produced housing in modernist style. This suggests that the emerging critique of mass housing often intertwined with a broader cultural critique of the 'urban periphery',

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Figure 4: Children sitting on top of a concrete underpass in the Gellerup Plan. Cited from Ekstra Bladet 7/1-1974

and given the immense popularity of the series, it was arguably one of the most effective ways in which a critical image of modernist mass housing could reach the Danish population in the 1970s.⁽¹⁴⁾

Another genre through which a critical image of Danish modernist mass housing found expression in these years was fictional literature. In the mid-1970s, this found expression in socially critical novels such as Michael Buchwald's (1943-) *Blokland* from 1975 and Bent Haller's (1946-) *Katamaranen* from 1976.⁽¹⁵⁾ In both novels, a mass housing estate constituted the main spatial setting of the storyline, and – as it was the case in Danish mass media – Buchwald and Haller specifically used children and young people to ascribe a sense of social misery to the estates.

In *Blokland*, Buchwald outlined how the estate housed a broad variety of maladjusted youth groups who not only inhabited Blokland but had emerged as direct results of the estate. The most notorious group was called the 'Black leather boys' (Sortlæderdrengene). Portrayed as extremely ruthless and brutal, these repeatedly attacked innocent people and vandalised different types of property. In *Katamaranen*, the main storyline was in itself concentrated around the friendship of the two boys Peter and Thomas. In order to escape the social misery hardship of their home – a mass housing estate located in the periphery of the city of Aalborg – they unsuccessfully attempt to sail to Sweden in a dilapidated catamaran. In the 1980s, critical depictions of modernist mass housing also found expression in the works of authors such as John Nehm (1934-) and Tage Schou-Hansen (1925-2015).⁽¹⁶⁾ Whereas Nehm used mass housing to illustrate the loss of a social identity within the Danish working class, Schou-Hansen depicted Gellerupplanen as the ultimate marker of the unfulfilled expectations of modernity of the 1960s.

In all of the novels, yet in various ways, modernist mass housing estates were portrayed as places of poverty. While Nehm primarily focused on the impoverished social community of the estates, Buchwald, Haller, and Schou-Hansen all depicted the decline of the estates as a symptom of a societal crisis. In this way, their depiction of modernist mass housing converged closely with how the estates were concurrently portrayed through TV-series such as *Huset på Christianshavn* and in the Danish mass media.

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The emergence of 'concrete slum' in the social sciences

As demonstrated above, modernist mass housing was increasingly highlighted as a spatial expression of societal crisis in the 1970s and 1980s in both Danish mass media and popular culture. Concurrently with this development, various researchers – especially social scientists – also re-evaluated the societal role of modernist mass housing in Denmark.

In a Danish context, scholars turned mass housing into an 'object of study' while the largest mass housing projects were still being built in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Seeking to explore different links between modernist architecture and social behaviour, these studies were mainly conducted by psychologists, sociologists, and architects employed at the Danish Institute for Construction Research (SBI).⁽¹⁷⁾ Yet, the perhaps most comprehensive study from the early 1970s was conducted by a group of researchers employed at the Danish Institute for Social Scientific Research (SFI).⁽¹⁸⁾ Focusing on seven mass housing estates, this study aimed to investigate whether the public criticism of mass housing as places of inactivity and isolation was legitimate or not. On the basis of more than 3,000 interviews with inhabitants on the seven estates, the researchers concluded that suburban mass housing estates could not be regarded as 'dormitory towns'. Although some differences could be identified between the social behaviour of inhabitants in high-rise and low-rise estates, neither of these people lived in isolation from each other nor

from the rest of society.⁽¹⁹⁾

From the late 1970s and until the mid-1980s, a new wave of studies were published.⁽²⁰⁾ Compared to the studies from the early 1970s, these were more comprehensive and drew upon a wider selection of theoretical approaches. From one perspective, urban sociologists adopted the Neo-Marxist sociologist Manuel Castells' theory on 'collective consumption' to study everyday life and social relations in the modernist housing estate Hedemarken located in Albertslund.⁽²¹⁾ From another perspective, an architectural firm adopted the American urbanist Oscar Newman's theory on 'defensible spaces' in order to critically assess the spatial and social environment of modernist mass housing.⁽²²⁾ Furthermore, Danish scholars also imported images of demolished mass housing estates to visualize the future scenario of Danish mass housing if no intervention was undertaken. Focusing mainly on cases from the Anglo-American world, scholars often referred to images of the demolished Tower Hill-estate in Liverpool and the iconic demolition of Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis.⁽²³⁾ What all of the studies from the late 1970s onwards had in common was that the researchers no longer questioned whether modernist housing estates were problematic or not. This was, in other words, no longer posed as a question, but constituted the starting point of their analyses.

Judging from the findings above, Danish modernist mass housing was turned into an 'object of study' especially from the early 1970s onwards. These studies, I argue, did more than reflect the changes

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that Danish society underwent in these decades. Rather, they demonstrate how Danish modernist mass housing came to function as a privileged observational field for the investigation of social change actively influencing the construction of social problems and poverty in the otherwise affluent Danish welfare society.

Concluding reflections

This article has examined how a criticism of Danish modernist mass housing was formulated and entrenched through various channels including Danish mass media and popular culture. Concurrently with this development – and sometimes as a direct response to the changing public perceptions – scholars also identified modernist mass housing as an object of study. Especially, social scientists approached the estates, seeking to understand how mass housing formed and was formed by social relations and interactions in the Danish welfare society.

These findings, I argue, suggest that the public rejection of modernist mass housing in the 1970s and 1980s should not be reduced to a question about shifting architectural aesthetics. Rather this development ought to be understood more broadly as one of the ways in which the 'human subject' and 'social order' of Danish welfare society were renegotiated and recast in the 1970s and 80s. In this process, mass housing estates were not just neutral backgrounds onto which the social order of society was projected. By serving both as the ultimate symbol for the megalomania of the 1960s and as an 'object of study' for social

scientists, these estates actively influenced how societal problems were perceived and constructed in contemporary Danish society.

NOTES (as referenced within text):

(1) See for example: Cupers: *The Social Project*, Cupers: "Human Territoriality", Gold: *Practice of Modernism*, Gunn: "Rise and Fall", Hall: *Cities of Tomorrow*, Klemek: *Muthesius & Glendinning: Towers*, Swenarton et al.: *Architecture*, Wakeman: *Practicing Utopia* and Ward: *Planning*.

(2) For studies of the modernization of the Danish housing and building sector from the late inter-war period onwards, see for example: Bertelsen: *Bellahøj, Ballerup, Brøndby Strand*; Bro: "Velfærdsstaten og boligen"; Larsen & Larsen: *Medgang og modgang*; Fode: *A/S Boligbeton*; Gaardmand: *Plan over Land*.

(3) For a study of the intellectual history of the new town-movement, see Wakeman: *Practicing Utopia*.

(4) See Ministry of Housing: *Brøndbystrand Byplan*, 1.

(5) Ad-hoc udvalget: *Ikke nok at bygge boliger*, 4. My translation.

(6) See Skov: "Fremtidsbydelen" and Høghøj & Holmqvist: "Betonen blev belastende".

(7) Ekstra Bladet 7.1.1974: "Unge drikker for at klare sig i beton-slum" and Ekstra Bladet 7.1.1974: "10.000 må leve i slum fordi betonindustrien skal støttes"

(8) Ekstra Bladet 7.1.1974: "Unge drikker for at klare sig i beton-slum". My translation.

(9) Cited in Høghøj and Holmqvist: "Betonen blev belastende". My translation.

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(10) See Høghøj and Holmqvist: "Beonen blev belastende"

(11) Høghøj: "Betonjunglens genealogi", 53-55.

(12) Aarhus Stiftstidende 8.11.1978: "TV og Gellerup-parken". My translation.

(13) This, for example, found expression in the. See Huset på Christianshavn: "Vi Flytter", 06:18-10:33 & 21:08-22:35 and Huset på Christianshavn: "Hus til salg", 25:57-27:30.

(14) Agger: "Tv-drama", 157 and Nielsen & Halling: "Seeradfærd", 348.

(15) See Buchwald: Blokland and Haller: Katamaranen.

(16) See Nehm: Social mand! and Schou-Hansen: Krukken og stenen.

(17) See for example Morville: Børns brug, Morville: Planlægning, Gehl: Bo-miljø and Schjerup Hansen & Holm: Værebros Park.

(18) Kühl et al.: Boligmiljøer and Martini: Nyere forstadsmiljøer.

(19) Martini: Nyere forstadsmiljøer, 11-25.

(20) See for example Bech-Jørgensen & Thomsen: Hverdagslivet, John Allpass ApS: Frygten for vold, Agger et al.: Forundersøgelse, Agger et al.: Programoplæg, Vestergaard: Organisation af økonomi, Kirkegaard: Forbedring and Rhode & Skov: Boligområde til bymiljø.

(21) Bech-Jørgensen & Thomsen: Hverdagslivet.

(22) John Allpass ApS: Frygten for vold. Newman's work, for example, became instrumental for the liberali-

sation of the British housing market in the 1980s. See for example Cupers: "Human Territoriality".

(23) See for example John Allpass: Frygten for vold, 4; Agger et al.: Programoplæg, 52; Magnussen: "Byen i forfald", 174-181; Hindrup Andersen & Solgård Thomsen: Elastiske etageboliger, 6.

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