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Danish Housing Policy Can Find New Inspiration in the UK

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Under the title "Nyt tag over boligpolitikken")*

Under the present government, housing has largely lost its social dimension and become a mere market force and it is symptomatic for the change in attitude that the term 'housing policy' has been replaced by 'the estate market'. Similarly, some time ago social housing was renamed 'common' housing as the word 'social' apparently was considered superfluous and old fashioned; also, urban renewal with public subsidies has almost come to a halt or has been left to private property owners. The ideology is that the society's housing matters are to be solved exclusively through the market. It is also characteristic for the attitude that the separate Ministry of Housing has been abolished and housing policy issues scattered over several ministries.

There are, however, several signs that there is urgent need for the formulation of a new overall housing policy. Already, we see the first examples of stagnation in the building and construction sector with foreseeable and subsequent crises in the property and building sector. Likewise, the demand for housing is changing not only in the expensive end, but especially in the cheaper one. "The property market is under temporary pressure", it is argued when real estate agents and mortgage providers try to talk the facts down. However, there is no doubt any longer that the state of the market is in decline already. This development is neither exceptional nor especially epochal. If we look back at housing construction since World War II the sector has always moved up and down in varying wave-like undulations. The present crest has simply lasted somewhat longer than the previous ones.

Housing in world-class

For many years Denmark could boast of having one of the best housing policies in the world, and housing and building people from all over the world flocked to Denmark to study state-of-the-art housing and residential development. It all started just after the war, where an almost unanimous parliament decided to build a better and more just society. As the late architect Erik Nygaard writes in his fine book on Danish housing, "never before - nor after - has Parliament addressed the housing question so seriously". The outcome was an excellent, consistent and socially just legislation on housing. It was the time when the housing shortage was to be remedied – or quite simply, the Danes should have a roof over their heads.

And we got that. In 2006 we had almost 2.7 million housing units to just over 5.4 million inhabitants, which means that on average each home accommodates two persons. In 1981 there were almost 2.4 persons living in each home. Calculated in this way, the housing standard has increased by 20 % over the last 25 years.

In the same time span 170,000 new detached houses have been built and the number of flats increased by 127,000. All in all, about half a million homes have been built over the last 25 years. So quantitatively things are really progressing. Our consumption of homes is simply in world-class!

Lopsided development

However, as far as distribution is concerned, things are moving the wrong way. The market-led development results in an increasingly skewed and lopsided development on the respective housing markets. The prices for houses in the greater metropolitan area and in Jutland's growth areas have increased heavily. Something similar goes for the major cities. The result is what we call segregation with not only a class division between the various neighbourhoods within the same city but also, and to a disturbing degree, between various regions in the country. Around the major cities and growth zones well-to-do enclaves are created, while in other areas, and especially in many rural districts, we witness an impoverishment where part of the housing stock is so poor that it would have been demolished long ago under the old slum clearance act.

Perhaps as a demonstration against an absent, national housing policy, the City of Copenhagen – led by lord mayor Ritt Bjerregaard – is trying to fulfil her election promise to build 5,000 new homes at a monthly rent of 5,000 DKK? An interesting example of what you may call a local or regional housing policy with a special view to accommodate the needs of the lower income groups.

It was precisely such a socially oriented policy which characterised the Danish housing debate in the post-war years and on which there was a broad and general consensus. A policy which actually became a manifestation of a welfare society which would reach out and cover everybody. And a housing policy which comprised the cities as well as the outlying districts in order to avoid too much disparity between town and country.

It appears, however, that the prevailing housing policy has made Copenhagen's attempt to solve its problem almost impossible as national rules do not allow the city to dispense with market conditions to the extent necessary in order to solve some of the capital's structural housing problems.

It is a pity that a disease that could be described as “social blindness” is allowed to spread, and it is untenable that the social and cultural polarisation in housing is allowed to continue. In fact, this may constitute a serious threat to what is called the “social cohesion” in our highly praised welfare society.

Seek inspiration in England

It is claimed that the Danish prime minister has visited UK previously in order to seek inspiration in Tony Blair’s policy on the Third Way. I suggest that our ministers of Social Welfare and of Economic and Business Affairs (who has some co-responsibility for the housing policy) should visit their British colleague, Caroline Flint, who is the minister of housing in Gordon Brown’s government. Even though the British preconditions are significantly different, the ministers and their advisors would, through such a journey, be able to find new inspiration with regard to a revision of our housing policy but also on some new and interesting trends in urban planning.

Last year, the British government published what informed observers have described as Great Britain’s best housing policy over the last 30years. After the war there was, just as in Denmark, a consensus to solve the English housing problem through ambitious construction programmes which also embraced the creation of a considerable number of new towns. But like in Denmark, the housing sector experienced great social distribution problems.

The green paper “*Homes for the Future*” is the result of a thorough analysis of the lopsided housing development which has taken place in England in recent years. Problems which in many ways resemble ours with “ghettoisation” and exclusion of low-income groups and groups from a different cultural background from the housing market. The green paper also identifies socioeconomic changes among families with quite ordinary wage-earner incomes, thus leading to increased demand for affordable housing.

Among other things, the report predicts that the number of 30-34 year old people who are capable of acquiring their own home will decrease from 57 % to 40 % over the next 20 years. This is a quite disturbing message testifying to the fact that more and more young people, in the longer term, will find it impossible to buy their first home, as they are no longer able to pay the exorbitant prices conditioned by the market. When the mortgage payment ability in a society decreases so significantly it is a sign of a development which over time may lead to serious urban problems. Problems, which I claim that we also may experience in Denmark - albeit to a lesser extent - if we are not far-sighted.

One of the ways in which UK will ensure the production of financially affordable housing is through an active land and site development policy. Publicly owned areas, abandoned rail road areas and military areas which are no longer needed have already been singled out for future housing

development. Unlike in Denmark, Britain does not envisage these areas to be brought into play on market terms, only. On the contrary, such areas are considered as an opportunity to subsidise affordable housing through the establishment of a land bank system.

Against the backdrop of Great Britain's long, rich and noble town planning tradition which for one thing led to the establishment of the peaceful and humane garden cities and the post-war construction of almost 30 new towns surrounded by green belts, the British now recognize that the 21st century's greatest urban planning and environmental challenge derives from the climate changes.

The new eco-towns

For this reason the new housing policy is to be tied with the establishment of initially a dozen or so small new *Eco-towns*, which in overall terms are envisaged to achieve zero carbon standards. This implies that over a year, the net carbon emissions from all energy use within the buildings on the development are zero in order to reduce further burdens on the climate. One of the arguments is found in the fact that building construction is considered to account for around 27 % of the carbon monoxide emission. Furthermore, the new towns are to demonstrate best practice within at least one further environmental sustainability criterion, for example on flood risk and drainage, air quality, waste disposal, green space and biodiversity, travel or on homes and housing.

In order to counteract segregation in terms of population and housing each town shall accommodate between 30 and 50 % so-called 'affordable' (low-rent) houses, which are to be mixed with other (and more expensive) types of housing. Also, in order to promote social sustainability and 'local ownership', the new towns shall develop eco-towns criteria for community building and empowerment.

The eco-towns are envisaged to develop their own identity, they shall apply a Code for Sustainable Homes and they shall aim at high standards for urban planning and building. They are also to make travel and mobility plans which shall demonstrate agreed levels of modal shift from car to other forms of transport. Finally, it is envisaged that the eco-towns develop job strategies emphasising the employment potential of local areas, the promotion of teleworking and the encouragement of healthy behaviours among their residents. Obviously, they shall also think along lines of green infrastructure and the re-use of old industrial sites. All in all, with this vision of sustainable towns England is in full swing rethinking its tradition for reforming the society through urban planning.

Adapt the ideas to the Danish context

Many would probably think that at any rate, we should not have this kind of excessive and restrictive urban planning and regulation here in Denmark. Others may object that UK's settlement and housing

problems could never be compared to ours. Nevertheless, seen in an international context, Great Britain has for many years represented an important destination for urban planners from all over the world , and it has appeared as a flagship for a visionary (and sometimes utopian) urban planning. If we, however, look at the development of new urban planning thought , new ideas and innovative ways of planning in Denmark this would not be the first time that we have sought inspiration in the UK.

This does not mean that UK has made no urban planning mistakes. Of course, they have. However, in this light it is positive that they openly declare that the new era will be a process of learning-by-doing and that experience will be systematiccally compiled and evaluated. In this way England will once again become an important housing and urban planning laboratory.

Obviously, this does not mean that we should transfer their ideas to our context indiscriminately. There are, however, many indications that Danish housing policy could find new inspiration in Great Britain's new, visionary and innovative housing and urban planning policy.

For this reason I wish our ministers of Social Welfare and of Economic and Business Affairs a pleasant study tour to England in the near future.