Paper for NSBB 2013: Workshop Session B // Architecture and everyday life

Author: Marie Stender, PhD-scholar at The Royal Danish Academy of Arts, School of Design & The Danish Building Research Institute, Aalborg University, mst@kadk.dk

Key words: Designed communities, ethnography, everyday life

**Designed communities? An ethnographic exploration of architecture and social life in three new residential spaces**

ABSTRACT

In current residential spaces there seem to be an increasing emphasis on small-scale communities. A number of new, high profiled residential complexes thus seek to promote new ways of social living by rethinking architectural design, typologies and concepts. In this paper I explore the emergence of these *designed communities:* What social life is promoted in such recent architectural visions? And to what extent can the social life and identity of a place actually be designed?

The paper discusses these questions based on a fieldwork in three new housing complexes in the Copenhagen Region: The A-house by architect Carsten Holgaard, the 8-house by BIG, and Lange Eng (The Long Meadow) by Dorte Mandrup. Rather than taking the perspective of either architect or user, the fieldwork has ethnographically traced the entire process from design to occupancy. The aim is to explore how the social life and identity of a place is initially formed through the hands of architects, developers and estate agents, and further shaped and realized by residents, when taken into use.

I suggest that by way of branding and iconic architecture these thoroughly designed environments reinforce the notion of residential space as an identity unit. In Ørestad residents thus tend to identify by the name of the house they live in, rather than by the street name. These residential spaces may thus be seen as promoting micro-urban entities, as social and urban life is designed and staged within the residential complex, and activities and virtual communities are provided for residents exclusively.

INTRODUCTION

The three cases differ in size, architecture and concept: The 8-house in Ørestad is designed and branded as a ‘modern mountain village’ around a common path and with a community room in the centre. The A-house is a refurbished industrial building located on Islands Brygge, now functioning as a serviced complex, where residents share common facilities in much the same way as a hotel. The Long Meadow in Albertslund is a cohousing scheme, where the residents have themselves been deeply involved in translating their visions of community into architectural form.

All of the three cases have however been promoted for their visionary architecture and have been subject of considerable attention, hence might be seen as expressing contemporary trends and dreams worthwhile examining. The three cases can also be seen as somewhat over-designed spaces, as not only their built environment, but also their identity and social life have been carefully planned for. Following French philosopher Michel de Certeau’s distinction between the urban designer’s view of the city form above and the pedestrian’s everyday appropriation of urban space, I understand the meaning of places as something that is created and altered over time and through everyday use (de Certeau 1990: 97). As these three cases bear witness to, also the meaning of the place is however increasingly considered as something that can be designed by way of branding, communication and various strategies to promote social life. I suggest that we therefore have to take into account the material as well as immaterial design of these new residential spaces as the lay out of the physical environment is related to the representations of the place in branding and virtual communication. In this paper I explore the relationship between architecture and social life in these place-making processes, and reflect on the (over)design of new residential spaces.

SOCIAL LIVING – FOR CONVENIENCE

The idea of designing for a more social way of living exists in all three cases, though in rather different ways: The A-house is a refurbished industrial building located on Islands Brygge, now functioning as a serviced complex, where residents share common facilities in much the same way as a hotel. The 8-house in Ørestad is designed and branded as a ‘modern mountain village’ with a common path winding up along the façade and with a large community room in the centre of the complex. The Long Meadow in Albertslund is a cohousing scheme, where the residents have themselves been deeply involved in translating their visions of community into architectural form.

Common for the three cases is the idea of common facilities forming the base for a community that is practical and convenient rather than ideological. As architect Carsten Holgaard explains, in developing the concept of the A-house, they were inspired by the collectives of the 70’s: “*We thought there was something socially right about it, of course we did not want a collective of the same kind as in the 70’s, but there are some practical advantages of living together. We may all dream about a ten-room apartment that we cannot afford, but if 200 people live together then they might actually be able to pay for a reception room with a fireplace and a smiling butler, a library, a fitness centre or a wine cellar. But also simple services like cleaning, laundry and catering can become more sustainable and affordable by sharing*”

The A-house offers serviced apartments aimed at an international group of mainly international residents, staying temporarily in Copenhagen, thus hosting a more exclusive group of residents than the two other cases. However, also in the Long Meadow the residents stress that the community is based on the practical advantages of living together rather than the ideologies of the earlier cohabitation schemes. The residents take turns in the communal kitchen and offer communal dining 6 days a week. One is not obliged to eat in the dining hall, but can bring the food to the private home as take away, which is preferred by many of the families. The majority of them have small children and two careers, and say they have chosen the cohabitation scheme first and foremost to make life easier: To save time buying groceries and cooking, and to have playmates for the children next-door as well as activities like soccer and yoga for grown-ups after the kids have been put to sleep.

FREE FLOATING COMMUNITIES

In coordinating the common activities, the virtual spaces seem to be almost as important as the common rooms and facilities of the physical spaces. The headline above “Social living” is thus also the name of a small IT-company that has designed the virtual social platform for the residents of the 8-house, called 8-book. Here – as well as on the intranet of the Long Meadow – the residents exchange practical information and announce social activities. But the virtual spaces are much more than electronic notice boards. Much grumbling and agitated discussions take place here, as many residents apparently find it easier to give vent to their frustration with noisy or otherwise annoying neighbours in the virtual fora, than knocking on the door and confronting the presumptuous. Nevertheless the virtual fora reinforce the social identification within the complex: Though a neighbour across the street might be physically closer than the residents in the other end of the 8-house, they do not have access to 8book, and consequently neither to the social activities taking place here.

The virtual space is also used as a village pond and a window mirror. Here residents size up each other, and stage themselves with personal profile pages, much like on facebook, with photos and informal descriptions of their background, jobs, hobbies, family members etc. In combination with the prevalence of smartphones that allow people to update themselves continuously, the virtual space extends the social space of the built complex to a free floating community where neighbours can constantly be in touch. Though emails are not always read carefully, the subject lines in the inbox alone - “*Coconut milk wanted – now*” or “*Dandelions – anyone who has a hungry rabbit?*” – provide residents with constant impressions of each other’s doings. Though conceived as primarily a practical tool, the virtual fora are also where the social identity of the place and its residents is negotiated. A common lingo thus gradually develops, and here the name and architectural shape of the built complex blends into the way residents address one another and name social activities, by referring to “the village” or “the meadow” or by integrating the number “8”, the name or “The Long Meadow” in various linguistic inventions. In the basement of the 8-house, one resident has installed a workshop, and now calls himself “the village smith”. The residents appropriate the brand and move into a story just as much as they move into a house.

LIVING IN A BRANDSCAPE

The architecture naturally plays a key role in giving shape to the social life within the built complex. Most strikingly in the Long Meadow, where the building shapes a large block around a shared green courtyard. Towards the inside the façade is open and transparent, towards the outside black and closed, clearly delimiting the borders of the community. In all three cases the architecture distinguishes itself remarkably from the surroundings. Seen from above the buildings constitute simple, logo-like characters – the 8, the A – that are also integrated in their names. They seem to be architectural icons designed to be seen from Google Earth or architectural magazines as much as from the other side of the street. Even though The Long Meadow does not form a figure or a character, it is due to the block’s square shape, likewise humorously nicknamed “the black hippie square” by residents and neighbours. The square block-typology is thus classic for Copenhagen, where most of the residents moved from, but foreign to the surrounding Albertslund. Much effort is invested in creating the place’s identity, but these efforts seem to relate to other places than the near surroundings.

As Anna Klingman argues under the notion of brandscapes (Klingman 2007) the focus of architecture in the experience economy has evolved from an emphasis on “what it has” and “what it does”, to “what you feel” and “who you are”. The architecture of these three cases is not only frequently photographed for architectural magazines; the residents themselves also decorate both their private homes and communal rooms with photographs of the building. The iconic architecture seem to hold a lot of identity for them, and in Ørestad where the 8-house is located, residents tend to refer to the place they live by the building names – the 8-house, the Gate-house etc. – rather than by the street names (Skovmand 2011). The architecture of these designed communities thus does not just provide space for the social; it also provides an important icon for a community that is located in the complex rather than the neighbourhood as such.

DIVERSITY IN DESIGNED COMMUNITIES

The high profiled architecture also serves as a vehicle of social distinction. The polycarbonate inner façade, double-high living rooms and small rooms of the Long Meadow have undoubtedly more appeal among some segments than others. Not to mention the whole concept of not having one’s own garden, but sharing green spaces as well as other communal facilities. Even the ideal of social diversity itself is a characteristic of the creative class, as demonstrated by Richard Florida (Florida 2002). The paradoxical result is thus a rather homogenous group of residents who all value diversity. In the Long Meadow most are young academics with small children, even though they actively tried to recruit residents of various ages and social backgrounds. Several express regrets that in this they did not succeed, and the few who are middle-aged and has no kids, now see themselves as a minority, as one woman explained: “*When my husband and I first heard about the place, we were attracted by the fact that diversity was stated as a core value... Only later did we realise that we were to be the diverse ones*”.

Whereas they in The Long Meadow thus ended up with a more homogenous group than intended, the opposite is actually the case in both the 8-house and the A-house. Both places were designed and branded with a strong notion of the creative class at sight. However, as the financial crisis occurred in the middle of the building process, prices were dropped in the 8-house and in the A-house apartments were let to a much more diverse crowd. During my fieldwork in the A-house, my neighbour thus turned out to be a war-veteran from Libya on rehabilitation organised by the Danish Aid Organisation. The place has become cosmopolitan in a very different way than anticipated. Also in the 8-house some of the residents tell me, they have the feeling, that the place was designed aimed at a different group of residents. The small ecological delicacy-shop, that the developer actively recruited to give the place a feel of urban life, is not popular among all residents. One went there at Christmas to buy flour for the gravy, but all they had was durum and spelt flour.

As these anecdotes bear witness to, communities are not easily designed – even if they are over-designed. I agree with Swedish ethnologist Orvar Löfgren, who problematizes the idea of designing a place’s meaning as inherent in notions of citybranding and placemaking. Löfgren writes: “As a person starts using the city by moving into Västra Hamnen or Ørestad, the setting will gradually turn into a soft experience which may also create shared experiences, routines, rhythms and perceptions. But a soft city cannot be prefabricated. An experiencescape can only be created by those who use a certain setting and these patterns of usage may often conflict to produce bad, good, trivial or indifferent experiences” (Löfgren 2007: 96). However, as my account of the three cases have illustrated, residents do move into stories and brandscapes as much as built environments. Through everyday life they appropriate the designed spaces as well as its stories, but many other factors than users alter and challenge the process of designing the place; among them are the market forces and their uncontrollable vissitudes. In relation to them, even architects, planners and powerful developers are not in control, but more like de Certeau’s pedestrians: “whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban text write without being able to read it” (de Certeau 1990: 93).

CONCLUSION

All three cases are attempts to create residential spaces out of the ordinary, representing architectural visions of a new kind of social living. The social living is characterized by an emphasis on convenience rather than ideology, and by residential space as providing identity. Though architectural space constitutes the framework of these designed communities, virtual fora extend them to free-floating communities that follow the residents wherever they are. The iconic architecture and its brand blends into residents’ language and way of orientating themselves, they move into a story and a brand, rather than just a space where a community might evolve over time among people living together.

The ideal of social diversity is strong in these cases as in the Danish welfare society in general. We do not have – and probably will not have - gated communities as in other parts of the world. However, I suggest that the three cases might be seen as representing the emergence of a new type of designed communities. In this type of complexes social life does not just evolve among people who happen to share space. Rather we currently seem to design spaces, brands and identities that cater for certain types of communities, not unlike on the Internet and social media where users increasingly do not meet the same interface, but receive only information and communication tailored for them. By way of architecture – as well as the design of social life and identity – these new residential spaces reflects but also recreates such notions of social living. However, I have also argued that the social life and identity of places can only to a certain extend be designed. As residents move in, they appropriate and alter the built environment as well as its stories and brands. But also market forces – in my fieldwork especially the form of the 2008 financial crisis – leave significant traces in the material as well as the social fabric of our everyday places and spaces.

*NB: The perspectives presented in this paper has also been published in relation with the Forming Welfare Conference at The Royal Danish Academy of Arts, School of Architecture, 26-27 September 2013 and will be included in the forthcoming publication Forming Welfare*

LITTERATURE

de Certeau, Michel: *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley and Los Angelse 1984: University of California Press.

Florida, Richard: *The Rise of the Creative Class.* [*And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure and Everyday Life*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Rise_of_the_Creative_Class)*.* Basic Books 2002.

Klingman, Anna: *Brandscapes – Architecture in the Experience Economy*. Massachusets Institute of Technology, 2007.

Löfgren, Orvar: "First we take Manhattan, then we take Berlin" i Gitte Marling og Martine Zerlang: Fun City. Arkitektens Forlag 2007.

Skovmand, Thomas Aagaard (red.): *Slipset – en bog om Ørestad. Af beboerne i Ørestad med flere…* København 2011: Byens Forlag