PERSPECTIVES ON CONSTRUCTION REFORM

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Agenda

• A bit of background and some general and theoretical considerations

• Setting the scene: A brief overview of construction reform in Denmark

• Three shortcomings of construction policy (and research)

• Perspectives on construction reform
A bit of background (SBi)

- **SBi** is the Danish Building Research Institute – founded in 1947
- **The task of the institute is** 
  
  "...to follow, promote and coordinate technical, economic, and other examination and research work which may contribute to an improvement and cheapening of housebuilding, and to disseminate the results of the building research"

- Historically SBi has exercised its activities in close connection with industry and public authorities
- SBi has been involved heavily in the political efforts to develop the sector

A bit of background (personal)

- Started working at SBi in 2003 on the “downslope” of the policy development curve
- **First years:** wrapping up and handing over evaluation reports to the government on the ‘results’ of various demonstrations programmes.
- **Later:** participation in a wide range of governmental policy advisory projects relating to innovation, regulation, internationalisation, etc. in construction
- **Spare time:** trying to write about the role played by policies, institutions and professional associations in construction reform
Some (general) considerations

- **Basic research interests:**
  - How construction is framed as an object of governance
  - The constitution of policy problems and their codification
  - The social 'functioning' of policies
  - The relationship between macro-strategies and micro-practices
  - The 'great problem solver' and a 'trip down the lake…'

- **Theoretical influences:**
  - Foucault (all four of them)
  - Discourse theory
  - Institutional theory

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Some (theoretical) considerations

- **Foucault's dispositve analysis:**
  - A combined archaeological and genealogical analysis

- **Archaeology:**
  - "...simple disinterested registration and mapping out of the practices as events"

- **Genealogy:**
  - The problematisation and questioning of contemporary discourses and practices by referring them to the conditions of hegemony and power under which they are established
Foucault’s dispositional analysis

**Genealogy:** Continuity / discontinuity

**Archaeological analysis:** Regularity/ dispersion of statements

**Dispositive analysis:** A historical analysis of problematizations

Breaks, ruptures, exclusions, struggles
Forgotten or subjugated knowledge/practices

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**SETTING THE SCENE**

A VERY BRIEF OVERVIEW OF CONSTRUCTION REFORM IN DENMARK
Occasion

- Denmark: Construction political strategy
- No attempt (whether on purpose or not) to understand the object of governance
- 34 initiatives within five focus areas
  - “Quality in regulation”
  - “Increased competition”
  - “Efficient public construction”
  - “Growth in the value chain”
  - “Sustainable construction”
- Not a word about past, present or future role played by construction

Construction reform in Denmark: Highlights of the development

- 1940s – 1950s: Housing shortage and rationalization
- 1960s: Introduction of the phase model
- 1970s: The three turns:
  - From large-scale to low-dense
  - From new built to refurbishment
  - Energy savings
- 1980s: Quality assurance reform
- 1990s – 2000s: Productivity
- 2000s: Benchmarking
- Early 2010s: Energy, energy, energy, energy...
- Coming years: Internationalisation, marketization, deregulation
Reform frenzy: 1990s- and the productivity discourse

- The resource consumption in construction (1990)
- Double Up (1990)
- The construction/housing resource area: a business economic analysis (1993)
- Construction Political Action Agenda (1998)
- Construction in the 21st century (1999)
- The construction/housing resource area: a business analysis (2000)
- Construction Political Task Force: From tradition to innovation (2000)
- Construction in the knowledge society (2005)

The common denominator

- The inability to understand “construction” as a political construct
- The inability to acknowledge the productive aspects of multiplicity and ambiguity
- The inability to engage with fundamental institutional changes
First shortcoming: The inability to understand “construction” as a political construct

- Most policy reforms have neglected or been blind to the fact “construction” is a political construct – and not a “thing out there”

- Construction can attain a status of social objectivity as certain discourses become hegemonic / taken-for-granted

- Politics is the (re-)articulation and propagation of meanings of the social and the ordering of discourses (linguistic and material)

- Policies are developed in incubation rooms – but they are not ‘hopeful monstrosities’ and things do not develop in an institutional vacuum
Sociality as sedimented history

- Partnering
- Phase models and contracts
- National competitive bidding
- Professional associations
- Craft guilds and statutes

Politics as a reordering of the social

- An example of reordering and discursive re-articulation

- 1947: The birth of a sector
  - Current sociality as black-box that could not be acted on
  - Age-old technical traditions
  - The irrationality of the "traditional"

- The necessity of opening the black-box
  - Transparency as precondition for collective action
  - The 'sector' as a societal infrastructure
Second shortcoming: The inability to acknowledge the productive aspects of multiplicity and ambiguity

- An aspect of all (but one or so) policies and reform initiatives is the attempt to homogenise construction

- Instead of purifying different logics, we tend to amalgamate or subsume them into a "super-logic"

- Multiplicity is seen as a threat; as detrimental to change as there is a strong tendency to measure change along a single dimension...

- ...and alter the starting point, if the results do not quite fit anymore
Third shortcoming: The inability to engage with fundamental institutional changes

- Do we lack the courage for fundamental changes?
- Reform initiatives have a strong tendency to focus blame people for the perceived lack of change:
  - Changing mindsets
  - The need for a cultural change
  - The reluctance to change
- The need to engage with also structural aspects
- Sectorial change as navigating a terrain
  - When you’re lost, any map will do...

Topography: Construction reform as navigation
Some general observations on construction policies

- Construction is ill-defined, multifaceted, complex and not just one homogenous configuration
- Policies focusses on integration rather than differentiation
- There is a mismatch between aspirations and means: radical vs. incremental
- The understanding of the role played by existing institutions, structures, practices, etc. is underdeveloped
- History matters. We should understand previous developments and learn from the past

Perspectives on construction reform

- Critical analyses of the underlying assumptions upon which much industrial policy is premised, with the aim of developing policies based on alternative assumptions
- The role of existing institutions and institutionalized structures for transition and the possibilities for changing these institutions
- Popularizing basic ideas in heterodox strands of thought that enable us to escape the dichotomy of micro- and macro and inform a discussion about policy making that are based on the diversity of micro-practices rather than being abstracted from it