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Nuances of “Ghetto” Policies in Danish Spatial Planning

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Introduction

It is a curious fact that over the past three decades, housing laws in Denmark have made extensive use of the term “ghetto” to describe neighborhoods with concentrations of non-western immigrants and their descendants. The controversial use of the term has gathered international media attention. On July 1, 2018, for example, a *New York Times* article headline read “In Denmark, Harsh New Laws for Immigrant ‘Ghettos’”. Moreover, UN human rights experts have pointed out that “Labelling neighbourhoods ‘ghettos’ [...] on the basis of the percentage of ‘non-Western’ immigrants and descendants raises serious concerns of discrimination...” (United Nations, 2020). Danish newspapers have also extensively covered the tensions, with headlines such as (translated from Danish) “Residents of Mjølnerparken are suing the state for discrimination and rights violations” (Bank et al., 2020). As opposed to those who argue that the initiatives are grounded in xenophobia and racism, others claim that the growing number of refugees is creating concerns about the sustainability of the welfare state and worries about “incompatible values” tied to religion and culture. Regardless, the labeling of neighborhoods as “ghettos” when researchers and policy makers for decades referenced more neutral measures, such as level of segregation (Massey & Denton, 1993), is concerning.

While the term “ghetto” has made its way into political and everyday discourse, it is a loaded and stigmatizing term most outsiders find difficult to associate with the prevalent image of Denmark as a country with relatively low inequality and segregation (Andersson et al., 2018). While language use has a certain significance, of equal or greater importance is the way urban problems are defined and how interventions are framed and implemented. Edward Soja writes (2010, p. 32): “...every place on earth is blanketed with thick layers of

macrospatial organization arising not just from administrative convenience but also from the imposition of political power, cultural dominance, and social control over individuals, groups, and the place they inhabit.” The use of the term “ghetto” generates the question whether Danish policies bring informed solutions to real urban problems—or whether they are mostly an expression of symbolic politics and the use of political power and cultural dominance.

The term “ghetto” brings to mind neighborhoods in the United States historically labeled as ghettos, and in order to reflect on how Denmark may learn from the much longer history of residential segregation in the United States, we bring this history into play as we discuss Danish policy.

Relating the Danish use of “Ghetto” to History

In the US context, Schwartz (2019) writes about the emergence of the term in relation to African Americans describing their own residential segregation as early as the 1910s, when American cities started passing zoning ordinances excluding black people from living in majority white neighborhoods. Walks (2020, p. 398) reflects on marginalized African American neighborhoods by contrasting slums and ghettos:

The ghetto was the result of racial discrimination which segregates a particular group [...] in urban space against their will, while the slum was the result of class inequality that concentrates the poor in the lowest-cost rental housing due to their low purchasing power.

Massey and Denton (1993) labeled this “American Apartheid,” and Rothstein (2017) documented how the segregation of African Americans was the direct result of laws that sought to maintain racial separation. In contrast, in the early twentieth century, a social movement emerged to work for affordable, decent housing for the working class in Denmark. By the middle of the century this movement formalized into non-profit housing with a tenant-led democracy. The original vision of housing for both working- and middle-class people in Danish cities somewhat eroded as the middle class increasingly gained buying power to move to the suburbs (similar to white flight into the suburbs as veterans returned from World War II, aided by federal loans only available to whites) in the 1970s, and the vacant apartments increasingly became part of the municipalities’ housing referral program for vulnerable families, including recent immigrants and refugees. As such, the neighborhoods of interest to this paper started out being relatively inclusionary in terms of class, housing both working- and middle-class families, then transitioned to lower-income areas with higher concentrations of minority residents as ethnic diversity in Denmark increased in the 1960s. In this way the municipal referral system played an important role in creating the concentration of minorities.

Decades before the word *ghetto* made its way into Danish legislation, it began to surface in political discussions in and surrounding the Danish parliament and in white papers produced by shifting administrations. Non-profit housing (NPH) areas are governed by the Act on Non-Profit Housing, and while not government-owned, is highly regulated through this legal framework. In figure 1 we summarize initiatives starting with the “ghetto package” from 1994. At the beginning of the period there were concerns about an emerging pattern of concentrations of low-resource residents, and soft initiatives focused on adding resources in the form of support for families and schools were introduced. As we move along the timeline from 1994 to 2004, we see the increased problematization of ethnicity evidenced by an intensive focus on how to define what counts as an immigrant and/or

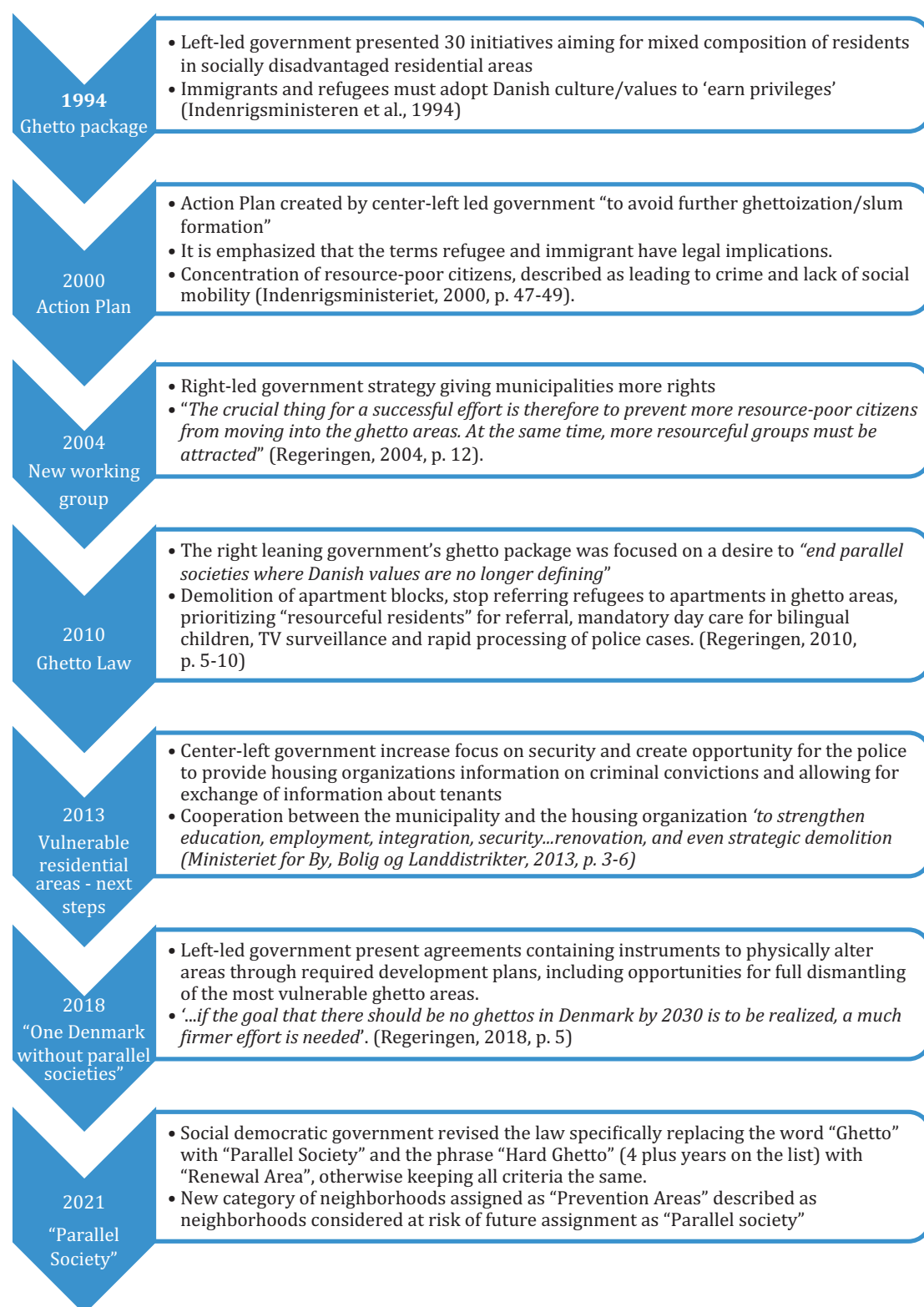


Figure 1. Timeline of Key Events Illustrating Evolution of "Ghetto" Policy in Denmark

refugee. A decade into the debate the political discourse tightened significantly, and the tools shifted away from social initiatives aimed at supporting integration. Within the set of tools available at this time, one topic stands out, namely municipal steering of housing allocation based on ethnicity and class. The concept of racial steering in housing has been documented and researched intensively in the United States (see for example Galster, 1990)

with a focus on the role of realtors in steering potential buyers toward neighborhoods based on race. The resulting neighborhoods were hyper-segregated and thus the opposite of what is sought to be achieved in the Danish context. The Danish municipalities did not bar any ethnic or racial identifiable group from living in an area, however the connotation that a certain level (50%) of non-westerners subtracts from neighborhood quality of life creates a flashback to the United States's racist past and has prompted the outcries mentioned in the introduction to this paper. Contrary to the US context decades ago, the purpose in the Danish case is desegregation, but the target of exclusion is similar—ethnic minorities' use of space is limited. It is critical here to question the role of the state in regulating values and the geographical concentration of such. If lifestyle and values do not conflict with criminal law, it appears manipulative to attempt to regulate such through planning.

“Ghetto” Becomes Part of the Law

When African American “ghetto” residents took ownership of the term, they found power in referencing the *de jure* segregation of Jews in ghettos during World War II as a comparison to the *de facto* segregation of black city dwellers (Schwartz, 2019). This reflection on the role of laws sends us into the phase of Danish use of the concept “ghetto” formalized into the legal framework. On the back of the events described above, an official definition of “ghetto” made its way into law. It was first used as a legal definition in 2010, when the Act on Non-Profit Housing established a “ghetto” as a geographically defined area containing at least 1000 NPH units with specific additional criteria met, related to ethnicity, attachment to the labor market, and a set bar for percentage of residents with criminal convictions. At this time, an area was put on a government-published “ghetto list” if it met two out of those three criteria. In 2013, the definition was adjusted to include a change from three to five criteria, of which three now needed to be met for an area to be designated as a ghetto. The added criteria focused on level of education and income. In 2018 the definition was adjusted again to its current iteration. Up until 2018 it was, at least in theory, possible for neighborhoods without an ethnic non-western concentration to be on the ghetto list. The current parallel society definition is a subcategory of areas defined as “vulnerable areas,” defined as an area with at least 1000 “non-profit housing units” that also meet two out of four criteria related to percentage of residents employed, number of residents convicted of a crime, level of education, and household income. A vulnerable area becomes a ghetto only if a criterion related to ethnicity is also met. This criterion establishes a threshold of 50% residents of non-western background as a benchmark for the ghetto label. The term “non-westerners” can best be described as a social construct with complicated rules (Zhang, 2020), and non-westerners also include residents who were born in Denmark but to parents that did not have Danish citizenship.

The criteria regarding number of *convicted* residents was introduced in 2010 and registers anyone above 15 years with a criminal conviction. There is no triviality limit, which is an important note in relation to quality of life in the areas, as the counted as committed do not necessarily correspond to serious crimes. In connection to this topic, it is important to note that changes to the Act on Police Enforcement in 2018 (Civilstyrelsen, n.d., § 6 a) has established that the police can designate an area as “aggravated punishment zone,” where the punishment for certain selected, insecurity-creating types of crime is increased for a period. In the US context it is relevant to note the “Broken Windows” approach, which is an aggressive crimefighting strategy started in New York City in the 1990s. The idea behind the approach centers on addressing minor infractions fast and hard in order to curb the growth of more serious crime. It has been critiqued heavily for contributing to mass incarceration

and disproportionate punishment of minorities in low-income areas (Gau & Pratt, 2010; Alexander, 2012). In the Danish context we must reflect on this shift in narrative from effort to integrate and strengthening education to one that signals a “tough on crime” priority. In 2013 a more radical change was enacted by adding the option to tear down buildings to reduce concentration by lowering the number of affordable units in a given area. One of the most interesting changes in 2018 is the distinction between a vulnerable area and a ghetto. A vulnerable area can have the same issues as a ghetto but house mostly ethnic western residents and is thus exempt from interventions.

The definition of the spatial boundaries consisted in its original version of three elements: an area that a) contained NPH associations, b) the area was contiguous and c) at least 1000 NPH units were within the boundary. The amendment in 2018 removed a vulnerability to manipulation, where, by changing boundaries (for example, by splitting in two to get below the 1000-unit threshold) could move off the ghetto list without any real change occurring on the ground. This is an interesting example of the state-level instruction’s vulnerability to local implementation. Being targeted for changes from outside forces bear resemblance to US urban policies labeled “urban renewal” implemented in the period between 1949 and 1974. It was described by Hyra (2012) as “a massive national effort to remove blighted properties and poverty from areas surrounding central business districts.” Justified by arguing that it would help cities become more economically viable, urban renewal centered on physical revitalization of what outsiders deemed “slums” or “ghettos,” but also led to the displacement of black people out of neighborhoods that were the foundation of their existence, including not just housing, but also black-owned businesses, jobs, schools and social capital that were not replaceable as neighbors were dispersed (Smith et al., 2021; von Hoffman, 2008). The projects generally did not alleviate urban blight and poverty as many displaced people had no other choice but to relocate to public housing in other parts of the city (Hirsch, 1998; Holliman, 2009; Zipp, 2010). Urban scholars have written extensively about urban renewal approaches and their aftermath, and Teaford (2000) establishes that while some cities were successful in replacing demolished “ghettos” with either government buildings or areas designed by famous architects, the overwhelming experience was one of displacement, loss of affordable units, loss of social capital, and significant difficulty in attracting the private development that the clearances were supposed to generate space for due in part to the difficulty of overcoming stigma.

The idea of remaking “hard ghetto areas” into thriving mix communities in the Danish context is governed by so-called development plans. Since 2018, NPH organizations and municipal councils have been required to jointly prepare such plans for areas labeled “hard ghetto/renewal area,” aimed at decreasing the share of NPH within the geographic boundary to a maximum of 40% by 2030. In the period January 2019–March 2022 a total of 17 plans were approved within 12 municipalities. A summary of outcomes and strategies used can be found in table 1.

The bottom line is a collective reduction of affordable units; while some areas focus on demolition, others are densifying and planning to reach the goal of 40% NPH concentration through private development. In the case of one of the best-known ghetto neighborhoods, called Vollsmose, the development plan states its main objectives as: Demolition of approximately 1000 NPH units, renovation of remaining NPH, construction of 1600 new private homes, construction of new commercial buildings for private or public purposes, and establishment of new infrastructure with a fine-meshed road network and pedestrian paths. In short, the neighborhood land-use plan aims to diversify from all NPH to a mix of housing types and other land uses with increased density but a net loss of NPH units in

Table 1. The Authors' Review of Approved Development Plans (published at Bolig og Planstyrelsen, 2022) for Residential Areas on the Ghetto List per March 30, 2022

Summary of pre- and post- plan implementation, total number of NPH family units across 17 areas			Avenues taken toward goal of max. 40% NPH family units using one or more of the three available tools		
Number of NPH family units in 2010	Number of NPH family units projected for 2030	Units of family NPH lost	Relabeling of NPH housing (administrative restriction to use former family units for only Youth-/Senior occupancy)	Densification through new construction, renovation (such as splitting large units in two, making them senior/youth units) and/or sale to private	Demolition of NPH family units
17689	11607	6390	2345	11097	3839

the specific area. In the US context this approach has been labeled “upzoning” (Freemark, 2020)—where areas are given public planning approval to allow market-rate higher-density housing, resulting in the displacement of low-income households (Angotti, 2016) in areas previously zoned only as residential. The part of the Danish approach that introduced mixed land uses has similarities to what Rabin (1989) has called “expulsive zoning,” described as more permissive zoning introduced to allow, for example, commercial development in previously affordable housing areas, raising cost and eliminating affordable units (Whittemore, 2020). There is reason to be concerned that in the heated housing markets of the largest cities in Denmark, the tools available to municipalities and NPH associations to move neighborhoods off the government lists can have similar results as zoning practices discussed above. The resulting gentrification that can be anticipated is thus a concern and it can be argued that such developments could be described as “state-led gentrification” (Hochstenbach, 2017). Here it is important to note that the 17 development plans only very superficially address displaced residents’ need to be rehoused. The NPH organizations can work with existing residents to encourage them to relocate and must provide rehousing if a lease is terminated. It is, however, a fact that fewer units will be available in the immediate areas, thus necessitating that units in other geographies are used for parts of the rehousing. In some ghetto areas, economic opportunity attached to the transformation proposed is easily identifiable, as illustrated in the following quote:

The five hard ghetto areas Mjølnerparken and Tingbjerg in Copenhagen, Bispehaven and Gellerupparken in Aarhus and Vollsmose in Odense are all ghetto areas located in attractive Danish cities [...] there are good opportunities for the sale of housing in the ghetto areas to both private and institutional investors (Næss-Schmidt, 2019).

This example illustrates consequential loss of affordable housing units in prime locations. Lack of planned initiatives to ensure that the resegregation of displaced residents does not occur is a critical issue illustrated in the following quote:

A large part of the residents in Gadehavegård work in service professions such as bus drivers and cleaning assistants and cannot afford to move because the government wants it, says the residents’ chairman and calls the new parallel society initiative a pure symbolic policy (Redder, 2021).

While the intense focus from government leads to the assumption of serious problems, many have expressed disagreement with this premise (Strandholdt Bach, 2019). For example, social workers who have spent much of their career in the neighborhoods have stated: “I have for many years worked as a social worker in Vollsmose. The apartments are really good and there are a lot of active residents and activities that make a positive difference.” (Jørgensen, 2018). Similarly, residents organized in the group “Almen Modstand” (non-profit housing resistance group) have repeatedly expressed that they love their communities (Almen Modstand, 2022).

In 2021, the social democratic government revised the law, replacing the word “ghetto” with “parallel society” and the phrase “hard ghetto” with “renewal area,” otherwise keeping all criteria the same. The revision’s larger substantial change consisted of adding a whole new category of neighborhoods assigned as “prevention areas,” described as neighborhoods considered at risk of being assigned as a “parallel society” in the future. Here the bar for non-western residents is lowered to 30% and is still the overarching criteria. Although the ghetto legislation has been the subject of a round of “language washing,” it has in this way been further solidified.

Conclusion

The effort to “deghettoize” Danish NPH areas is at first glance an easy and catchy approach to large and complex problems. But on closer inspection, the effort is full of dilemmas and unfortunate side effects. The literature about African American “ghettos” has helped us expose concerns not currently probed in the Danish political debate. This includes issues such as displacement and resegregation, as well as gentrification. Segregation is a complex concept that the Danish legislation treats as simple. Assessing physical decline, socioeconomic composition, quality of schools and other public services, housing cost etc. can, without focus on ethnicity, be used to select neighborhoods in need of intervention. The initiatives implemented under the auspices of ghetto legislation may address physical and social problems, but the focus on ethnicity creates a sentiment of putting differences perceived as stigmatizing into “window displays”. Even more concerning is the loss of affordable housing and resulting displacement. At the same time, as the ghetto legislation is being implemented, there is also policy and planning work in Denmark with a focus on inclusionary housing (IH). The Danish Act on Planning, which was amended in 2018, gives municipalities the right to require developers to include up to 25% NPH in a new residential area. This approach has only seen very limited use (Granath et al., 2024), raising questions around municipal interest in and/or willingness to regulate developers. This is in sharp contrast to government insistence on firm goals for the desegregation of existing NPH by 2030. Soja’s (2010) arguments surrounding political power and cultural dominance are relevant considering the NPH residents who, in comparison to developers, appear to have little power.

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