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ARCHITECTURAL TRANSFORMATION OF DISADVANTAGED HOUSING AREAS – EDITORS’ NOTES

**CLAUS BECH-DANIELSEN, MARIE STENDER AND
METTE MECHLENBORG**

With this theme issue of the *Nordic Journal of Architectural Research*, we focus on the large-scale housing areas built in the post-war period. Constructed with the use of new building techniques that enabled rational mass-production of housing, and thus industrialisation of construction, these buildings were seen as the way to improve the living conditions of the people. Today a number of them have become disadvantaged housing areas in need of thorough refurbishment, in some cases they are even demolished. Different architectural strategies have been applied in order to deal with the problems, but the results remain questionable. In this theme issue of the *Nordic Journal of Architectural Research*, we therefore we ask: Can architectural development pave the way for social change?

In the Scandinavian countries, the post-war housing areas were an important part of the social improvements of the welfare societies. For many families who came from the dark and unhealthy back yards of inner cities and moved into the newly built housing blocks in the suburbs, this was a significant improvement of their quality of life. As past records show, there was a euphoric delight in the results; the scenic surroundings, the well-functioning dwellings, the peaceful playgrounds and the traffic-free outdoor spaces were among the qualities that were highly appreciated in the past. This was indeed the future dwelling for the new citizens of the welfare state. Nevertheless, the residential areas quickly experienced a drastic change. Despite the optimism of the

decade and the fact that these buildings were built on the basis of carefully considered ideals of “the good living”, the housing areas quickly met fundamental challenges. Many of them soon faced constructional problems and social issues like unemployment, crime, and abuse increased.

Simultaneously, social norms and cultural values changed. When the post-war apartment blocks were subject to heavy criticism only 10 years after their construction, it was not only because of their poor physical condition. Just as important was that the criteria on which they were assessed had changed. Cultural norms, family patterns and everyday life rapidly transformed in the 1970s and the 1980s. The class society dissolved and was replaced by a lifestyle society in which the individual increasingly needed to manifest herself and her personal values. Thus, the homogeneous and uniform facades of the post-war buildings that were hitherto seen as a positive expression of social equality were suddenly perceived as an inhibiting framework that made it impossible for individuals to express themselves.

Considering the current statistics, the large-scale housing areas from the 1960s and 1970s predominate the lists of socially disadvantaged housing areas. This fact has given rise to the idea that the architectural style and structure of these areas produced the problems. This is of course not the case as such, though it is part of the problem that this architecture has a bad reputation and is usually deselected by residents of the middle class.

In the Nordic countries, both physical and social programmes have been carried out in several post-war housing areas over the last 30 years. Both constructional, architectural, social and organisational efforts are being implemented to improve the conditions in the disadvantaged housing areas. It is often a goal to attract middle-class families in order to develop a more balanced social mix. In some housing areas a positive development can be seen, nevertheless many areas still have problems and a high concentration of vulnerable residents. The basic explanation is that the residential areas in question remain at the bottom of the housing market hierarchy. In these years, new strategies are therefore being developed in order to transform the disadvantaged housing areas. These strategies are described and analysed in the six papers in this theme issue.

In the first paper, *Karin Grundström* focuses on a strategy which has been developed in Sweden during the last decade. “Stråk” is the Swedish notion of this kind of new pathways aiming to upgrade disadvantaged neighbourhoods by linking them to the urban fabric and to counteract segregation and urban fragmentation. In her paper, Grundström study Rosengård Stråk that was established with the ambition of supporting the integration of one of Malmö’s disadvantaged neighbourhoods, Rosengården. The study shows that Rosengård Stråk has contributed to

increasing the movement through the neighbourhood, and Grundström suggests that planning for “stråk” implies a shift towards planning for connectivity on an urban level instead of focusing on the neighbourhood scale. Planning for connectivity implies creating a network of connections with the aim of also making people leave their neighbourhood to access services and amenities necessary for everyday life. The paper concludes that although investments in creating connectivity on an urban level may make it easier for people to exercise their right to move, they carry the risk of reduced investment at neighbourhood level, since adjacency matters less when connectivity matters more.

In the second paper, *Marie Stender and Claus Bech-Danielsen* also focus on transformations of an urban strategic scale, linking the neighbourhoods to their surroundings. The two authors present case studies from three Danish social housing areas – Gyldenrisparken, Finlandsparken and Mjølnerparken: A variety of physical transformations were carried out in order to overcome the isolated character of the housing estates and to link them to neighbouring areas – also with the purpose of overcoming the social isolation of the residents living in the areas. The analysis shows that especially everyday-route strategies adding new public functions within the area can pave the way for integration with the surroundings. However, the authors state that the applicability of such strategies is highly dependent on the urban context.

Mette Mechlenborg bases her paper on the Danish ghetto strategy and a recent architectural evaluation of social housing renewals for the Danish National Building Foundation (2017). In a Lefebvrian perspective of a spatial trialectic between the conceived space, the perceived space and the space of everyday life, the author investigates the importance of the local context as a site for conflicts. The paper shows how transformations are influenced by social programmes, consultants, municipalities, local knowledge, specific needs or challenges in the process. An overall finding is that struggles and conflicts should be considered as privileged insights into the dynamic relationships between what we would like it to be (conceived space), and the instruments we use in order to transform it (the perceived space) and the actual, disorganised and local, specific spaces of everyday life.

In the fourth paper, *Jonas Bach* focusses on the residents’ perceptions of the prestigious renewal of Gellerup-Tovehøj, a large housing estate in Aarhus, Denmark. Based on anthropological methods, the paper takes its academic starting point in the ongoing architectural transformations and the mud and messiness of construction work and how it affects the residents living in the middle of it. A significant finding is that architectural transformations only takes “the before” and “the after” into account, at least when it comes to illustrations (masterplans and visualisations). This, the paper argues, leaves residents in what is defined

as a liminal phase of “betwixt and between” in which hopes and fears constantly reconstitute the present and the past. The author suggests framing the matter with the concept “future-together”, a state of mind in which residents work to see themselves in the future drawn by the housing association and planners.

Paula Femenias’ paper is based on case studies of renovations of four Swedish housing areas, all having pronounced ambitions for sustainability. Femenias studies the sustainable housing renovation as she explores the role of the architects in these complex transformation processes. As part of her analysis Femenias also studies the influence of architectural perspectives and knowledge in these long-term processes dealing with sustainability based on a transdisciplinary viewpoint. The analysis shows, that the influence of architectural perspectives is limited. One of the reasons is that the overall transformation is divided into shorter sub-projects having a series of different architects in charge. Femenias points to lessons learnt from integrated design suggesting that architects could play a productive role as educators of the design teams. However, in order to fulfil that role, the architects might need to review their approach to sustainable renovation.

In the last paper *Satu Huuhka, Nanda Naber, Claus Asam and Claes Caldenby* discuss cases of extreme architectural deconstruction of mass housing blocks in Sweden (Gothenburg, 1984), the Netherlands (Middelburg, 1986), Germany (Berlin, 2004) and Finland (Raahe, 2010) against the background of disadvantaged urban housing areas. The four authors compare circumstances, aims, design choices and outcomes of the cases in order to identify generalisable aspects of future regeneration of mass housing blocks in shrinking cities. Specifically, the part related to chosen measures and outcomes is richly unfolded. Here the authors provide detailed insight in technical details of the different construction systems and plan layouts and potential and challenges for deconstruction, transformation and reuse of reclaimed building elements. The conclusion is that it is, indeed, technically feasible and economically (more or less) viable to partially demolish and transform existing prefabricated mass housing blocks with different construction systems and to reuse reclaimed building materials in new constructions.

Together these six papers demonstrate a broad range of approaches to current transformation of post-war housing estates. In the decades to come, thorough refurbishments, transformation and demolition will probably take place in the post-war housing areas as a means of changing their social situation. It is basic lesson learnt that such extensive alterations build on and are followed by research. Hopefully, this theme issue of the *Nordic Journal of Architectural Research* can incite further research into the architectural transformation of disadvantaged housing areas and to what extent architecture can pave the way for social change.