

# Experiencing Israels Plads

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Nordic Journal of Architectural Research  
Volume 20, No 1, 2008, 10 pages  
Nordic Association for Architectural Research  
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TOPIC: DESIGNING THE EXPERIENCE CITY

**Abstract:**

Experience, sometimes specified as fun or atmosphere, has become a keyword in the efforts to describe the development of modern urban culture. One of the causes behind this development is the growing emphasis on the interests of the individual. The consideration for the individual and its experiences presents a major challenge for modern urban planning. In this article a recent project for Israels Plads, one of the major urban squares of Copenhagen, will serve as an example of how this challenge has been answered.

**Keywords:**

experience society, individualism, aesthetics of the urban square, urban history

## Experience and urban culture

Over the past 10 years 'experience' has entered the language of urban planners and politicians, and indeed, experience has become a keyword to developments within present urban culture, sometimes specified as experiences of fun, at other times specified as experiences of fear. The city has been described in metaphors such as 'jungle', 'body' or 'machine', but during the last 10-15 years it has increasingly been understood as a scene of events, and disneyfication and branding are two recurring buzzwords in the recent debate on new urban developments. It was a German sociologist, Gerhard Schulze, who in 1992 introduced the concept of "Erlebnisgesellschaft" in his efforts to understand his own time. Now the more instrumental concept of "experience economy" has become the darling of politicians and social commentators.

The word experience comprises and reflects two meanings, which in Danish (and German) are expressed by two different words – on one hand 'erfaring'/'Erfahrung' that refers to the gradual and interpersonal accumulation of knowledge, and on the other hand 'oplevelse'/'Erlebnis' that refers to momentaneous, but intense feelings. It is obvious that in the first sense of the word experience relates to tradition and collectivity, whereas experience in the other sense of the word relates to modernity and individualism. It is this second meaning which is expressed by the idea of present society as an experience society.

The prominence of culture as a parameter in modern urban planning – cf. the idea of cultural planning – is a further evidence of this tendency towards an urban life marked by the demand for experiences of intensity and individuality. The new emphasis on experience has also led to a shift in the understanding of culture. Formerly culture was either an anthropological concept dealing with "a whole way of life" or an aesthetical concept dealing with the values of the "cultured" elite. Culture was something you "had". Now the anthropological and the aesthetical concepts of culture have become collapsed in a concept of culture as something you "do". Culture has become a question of performance, and more often than not these performances involve a break with the habits and routines which formerly were conceived of as the essence of culture.

In his analysis of the concept of presence Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has put forward the contrast between 'meaning culture' and 'presence culture,' where presence implies an

increased focus on bodily presence, emotions and being in a particular space.

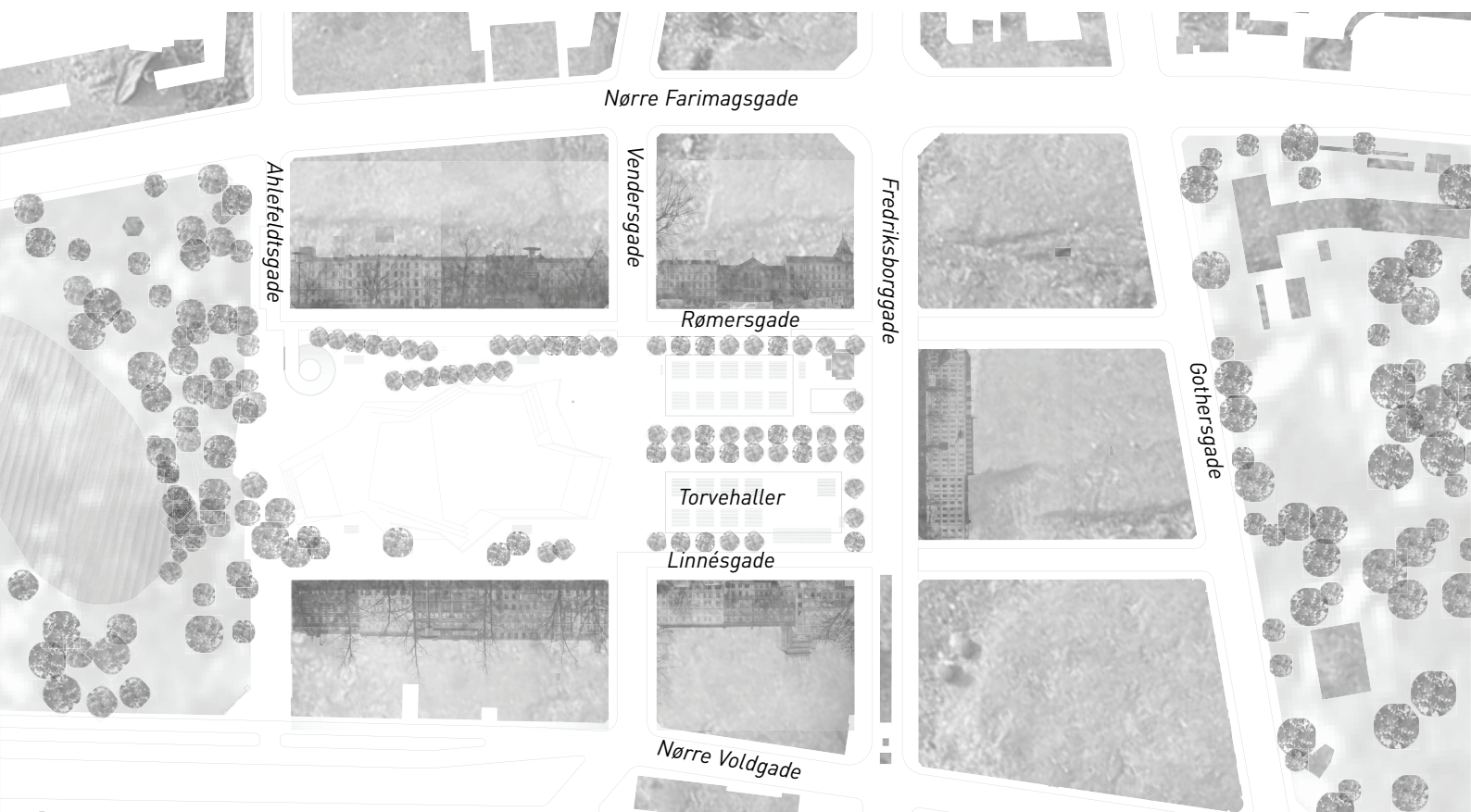
The same attention to bodily presence and experience is manifested in the phenomenon of atmosphere – as described by Gernot Böhme. According to Böhme aesthetics as conceived by Immanuel Kant had a cognitive character. It focused on the ability to distinguish and to verbalize these distinctions in judgments of values. In contrast to this the "new aesthetics" – as described by Böhme – emphasizes the sensuous experiences, the modes of perception, the different moods. "Atmospheres emanate from things, and therefore atmospheres can be produced by – for instance - architects. Atmospheres are "spaces insofar as they are "tinctured" by the presence of things, of people or their constellations, i.e. by their extasies." (Böhme, p. 33)

In the modern city experiences are staged, and architects increasingly treat urban space with the eye of an scenographer. And to the inhabitants and users of this city sociability and sensibility have become interchangeable terms. While some observers emphasize the rise of new communities ("the social society" – Stig Hjarvard), other observers emphasize the individualism that has been a consequence of the disintegration of traditional social ties ("the personal society" – Ralf Pittelkow).

Last year Gitte Marling and I published *Fun City*, a collection of essays trying to encircle and pin down the consequences of these developments. Following this publication I have had the opportunity to reflect on these developments in connection with my participation in a competition for a new lay-out of Israels Plads, a neglected and dilapidated public space close by Nørreport, the busiest spot in Copenhagen. As it will appear from the following the consideration for the individual perspective, the historical experience and the changing atmospheres served as a guide for this project.

## The Commission for a new Israels Plads

First a few words on the competition: In August 2007 10 Danish groups of architects were invited by the municipality of Copenhagen to offer their assistance and advice concerning the reconstruction of Israels Plads, the largest public square of Copenhagen. Among these groups three groups were chosen to participate in a process of "dialogue competition" to send in their suggestions for a new Israels Plads. The following will concentrate on the



proposal made by Byens Hold (the City Team). According to the description of the commission for a new lay-out of Israels Plads the municipality of Copenhagen wanted or wants a solution to the problem of fitting existing functions and users into a new and updated frame as well as an opening-up for new functions and users, which would make this square "a square for the whole city". The lay-out should combine a design concept, giving the square "a new identity in the city", with a detailed plan for the arrangement of the square.

The commission demanded that the design concept should relate itself to the history of the square, to the architecture of the surrounding houses, to the Ørstedspark at the southern end of the square and the Botanical Garden and the market halls at the northern end of the square.

To these demands of history and context the commission added a demand for a solution that should take into consideration the activities on the square, the already existing activities of the school children from Zahles Skole and the potential activities of the new-arranged square. Thus, the question of 'experiences' had a very high priority in the commission:

"The design concept must describe the new functions of the square and the life and the opportunities for self-realization – summer and winter – offered by these new functions."

The creation of a city square involves two things: giving shape to an urban space and stimulating the life in this space. Making Israels Plads into a living urban space demands a creative cooperation between people from many disciplines, people of many talents. From the very beginning the City Team aimed at a synthesis of the insight of the historian, the knowledge of the engineer, the creativity of the architect, the inventiveness of the expert on lights etc

In accordance with the commission the City Team started its work by making an analysis of the historical background, and it turned out that in fact the whole of the history of Copenhagen can be seen as crystallized in this neglected part of Copenhagen, Israels Plads deserves the same attention as Rådhuspladsen (the City Hall Square) and Kongens Nytorv (the Royal New Market).

### The historical context

The history of Copenhagen begins at the old beach – at “Gammel Strand” as this place is called today. Since Absalon founded this city, this has been the centre of Copenhagen. Slotsholmen – the island of the castle – testifies to what historians would call the “longue durée” of Copenhagen’s history.

Right on the other side of Slotsholmen there was a beach, which till this day is held in memory by the name of the street: Ved Stranden, i.e. “at the beach”. From here a street went up to Gammeltorv – the old market – and since the middle ages Copenhagen has unfolded from this spot in the three directions indicated by the names of the streets: Vestergade, Nørregade og Østergade, each ending – at least since the 17th century – in the three gates into and out of the city: Vesterport, Nørreport and Østerport.

In the 18th century the chaotic area at the end of Østerport, jokingly called ‘Hallandsås’ was made into Kongens Nytorv, an aristocratic square with a castle (Charlottenborg), a theatre (the Royal Theatre), a number of mansions and, at the very centre, an equestrian statue.

Around 1900 the chaotic “Halmtorv” – haymarket – at the end of Vestergade was reconstructed as the city hall square with the new city hall as an architectonic **homage to** the bourgeoisie and citizens of the city. Entering the monumental building one reads the words: “As the city so its citizens”.

And now, just after another turn of the century, a process has been initiated, where the chaotic and proletarian Grønttorv – the vegetable market – at the end of Nørregade, since 1968 carrying the name of Israels Plads, is going to be reconstructed as an urban square, that should bring its history into a new century and simultaneously points into the future possibilities of urban life.

Just by being situated where it is in the geometry of Copenhagen Israels Plads reveals its history which goes back to the founding of the city. But whereas the geometry is only visible from a bird’s perspective, every passer-by, who visits the square, will notice its connection to the old ring of ramparts surrounding Copenhagen. With Ørstedsparken on one side and the botanical garden on the other side Israels Plads has metamorphosed the old ring into a part of the modern city.

### The modern break-through

History is not only the history of ties to the past but also the history of cutting of ties so that a new history may begin. In this perspective Israels Plads is the urban space of Copenhagen which most forcefully tells the history of what has been called “the modern break-through”.

The word break-through must be taken quite literally. In 1856 Nørreport – the northern gateway into the city – was torn down, and even if the gate itself was a masterpiece of architecture, nobody wanted to preserve this symbol of the old society of rank, characterized by a rigid system of guilds. As with the Bastille and later on the Berlin-wall people took their revenge on the old oppressive system by destroying its architecture.

In 1870 Georg Brandes initiated his career as a prominent critic by calling for a modern break-through, that should synchronize the development in Denmark with the cultural main currents in England, France and Germany. The demolition of the walls around the city was a physical expression of this break-through. This demolition also was the background for a new focus on urban experience. In fact, the concept of experience took up a dominant position not only in the literary aesthetics of the modern break-through but also in the architectonic programmes of the period, for instance in the official city-architect Ferdinand Meldahls constant demand for atmosphere (stemning).

Another of the contemporary Danish writers, Herman Bang, referred to this physical break-through as a precondition for the cultural break-through. In his book *Realism and Realists* (1879) he stated, that “what is characteristic of the latest development in our literature is, that the walls around the city are being demolished and that the currents, which have been moving the rest of the world for more than 30 years finally have reached us.”

One of these currents was the emancipation of women. Brandes translated *The Subjection of women* (1869) by John Stuart Mill, and one of the emancipated women, Nathalie Zahle, founded a number a schools to further the education and thereby the emancipation of the upcoming generations. In 1877 she founded a school on Grønttorvet, the later Israels Plads, going from classes for the small children to classes for the new female teachers.

All the facades of the three rows of houses surrounding Israels Plads contribute to this story of a modern break-through. People no





longer wanted to subject themselves to the uniform, classicist style of the absolutist society. In the liberal society of competitive capitalism each individual wanted to assert his rights and shape his life, and the new freedom as well as the new competitiveness was also expressed through the facades. All genres were allowed, and stucco and pillars and all sorts of ornaments bear witness to this roar of energy coming from the modern breakthrough.

As a vegetable market Israels Plads also demonstrated the enormous powers in the social exchanges between the growing city and the expansion of agriculture. Photographs show thousands of horses and carriages lined from one end of the square to the other, and around this market a lively popular culture developed, fuelled by the spirits in the many surrounding pubs and inns. This social atmosphere is testified by the nicknames of the market people: Jens Many-money, The Foam-blower, Jørgen Hole-in-head, Perl-Tooth, The Reserve-baron, Karen Pussycat...

To those who wanted to do missionary work among these god-forsaking proletarians it was obvious that they needed a house, and in 1882 the Home Mission of Copenhagen founded Bethesda which became the starting point for their efforts to turn the modern development into a Christian track.

While the Christians addressed themselves to the new mass society through missionary work, the socialists expressed themselves through political agitation. Not very far from Bethesda the newly started, but rapidly growing Social Democratic party erected their first house, which was used for meetings, for union work etc. The square itself often became the scene of political demonstrations. Today the house functions as the Danish Worker's Museum.

In 1968 a rock or rather a big stone from Israel was placed near one of the corners of the square, which at the same time was rebaptized as Israels Plads, but apart from this stone there are no statues or monuments on this square, for since its founding in the 1870es this square more than anything else has served as a starting point and meeting point for the forces of modern life. In the neighbouring Ørstedsparken, dating from 1876, the visitor will pass by a great number of statues – from copies of ancient Greece to modern heroes such as H.C.Ørsted and Nathalie Zahle – but the main character of the square is the seething life of human exchanges.



## Interpretation and intention

The first requirement to make a successful project is to become familiar with a site, to get it under your skin. But, even with a minimum of historical knowledge it was obvious that this square had its background in the period, when the old "medieval" city of the king had to yield to the modern city of the people. A historical interpretation could choose a retrospective point of view by mimicking the old royal wall around the city, but it could also choose a prospective point of view by emphasizing the break-through, the new epoch of democracy and individual rights.

The history worth telling about Israels Plads is the history of modernization, and the modern break-through is the general inspiration behind the solution presented by the City Team. This applies for the design concept that covers the whole expanse as well as for the manifold details shaping smaller, separate spaces. *Uden Midtpunkt* – Without a Centre – was the title of one of the major novels of the Modern Breakthrough, written by Sophus Schandorph in 1879, and the City Team have taken up this idea in their efforts to shape the square as a mobile multiplicity of centres.

The modern break-through was a break-through for new spaces, and a structure characterized by fractures will tell this story of new departures. In the fractures older spaces become visible, and the modern break-through introduced a layered space, a kind of palimpsest revealing the simultaneous presence of different times, or a kind of montage juxtaposing different perspectives. Modern art developed the montage as an artistic condensation of heterogeneous spaces, and in the solution of the City Team it is suggested that instead of separating the different spaces and activities on Israels Plads, the square should be shaped as a montage of possibilities.

The modern break-through also implied a breakthrough for light and enlightenment.

J.P. Jacobsen, one of the major writers of the period, declared that "light over land, that is what we want", and quite literally the process of modernization involved a lightening up of the city. In 1857 gaslights lightened up the streets of Copenhagen, in 1882 electric light was demonstrated for the first time, and around the turn of the century electric signs became a characteristic facet of the image of the city. According to Georg Brandes "the super terrestrial power and mildness of the white, radiant electric light" marked our "arrival into a new epoch, whose essence was light and happiness



over light". By lightening up the facades of houses from the last decades of the 19th century the City Team has made a reference to this modern conquest of the night, while the low horizontal light rays (LED) are used to create new frames for life and movements on the square. Thus, the directional character of the light makes it possible to put up a video-projector for the "Friday night movie" without interfering with other activities on the square.

The modern breakthrough also manifested itself in the handling of water. In 1859 the Waterworks of Copenhagen opened, and the spectacular pumping house was a concrete manifestation of the coming of the industrial age. In his introduction to *Main Currents* (1871) Georg Brandes pointed to the engineer as the modern hero, and called for the modern artist to act as these pioneers, because "their main work would consist in conducting those currents originating in the revolution and the ideas of progress through a diversity of channels". And following Brandes, the City Team suggests that water springing directly from the surface of the square may contribute to its dynamic appearance.

The modern break-through represented itself as a breakthrough of natural forces, an alternative to the artificial and inhibiting structures of the premodern society, and the urban tree took an important part in this representation. At both ends Israels Plads is adjacent to major examples of the new urban nature, the Ørstedspark and the Botanical Garden, and the square itself is – with more or less success – articulated by trees in different formations. In 1881 Ludvig Feilberg, a Danish philosopher, published a little book on Holberg's tree in Fiolstræde, and his observations on the space-making powers of trees may easily be translated to the importance of trees on the new Israels Plads. On the one hand a row of trees may articulate the design concept, the continuity from the park to the garden, on the other hand small groups of trees and solitary trees may contribute to the shaping of smaller spatial structures within the overall-structure of the square.

### Activities and experiences

It has been the intention of the City-Team-project to create a large, unpretentious urban space. Not a monument that challenges or defies its surroundings, but an accommodating space shaped by the activities taking place here. A democratic space with few specific functions and therefore open to a diversity of activities. The modern monument is life itself as it takes place on the square – in passing-by, in casual encounters, in cafés, in street-basking, in market days, in open-air friday night movies etc.

The English concept of "sport" was introduced in Denmark by W. Hovgaard his book *Sport* from 1888. Compared to traditional concepts as games and plays sport represented another aspect of the modern celebration of dynamic movements, and for decades soccer and street basket have taken place on Israels Plads. The project of the City Team wishes to support this part of the life of the square, but as far as possible integrated in this life. Thus, the football ground will be equipped with mobile barriers boards that after the game may be hidden away in furrows in the surface. And two masts with baskets for street basket are made so that the baskets may be turned around and thereby create different playing grounds.

Functioning as a schoolyard for the children at the schools of Zahle the life of Israels Plads is also vitalized by a lot of informal, spontaneous movements, but it would be wonderful if the

lay-out of the square as such could stimulate the curiosity of the children. Herman Bang once talked about the students who before starting their studies in the city went studying the city, and in the City-Team-project these preliminary urban studies might start by the big table placed beside the school, by the water post or by one of the edges demarcating a "protected" space within the larger space of the whole square. The complex structure of the square with larger and smaller spaces fitting into one another facilitates different uses – for instance spaces for quiet girls and places for louder and perhaps more violent boys.

At the corner at Ahlefeldtsgade, where the square meets the park, it would be natural to establish a café – as a favourite place for observing the life of the square or perhaps the little children in the playground on the neighbouring park. During the 19th century cafés became popular meeting-places where artists, politicians and all sorts of people would reflect on the modernizing processes, that from one day to another would transform their life world, and since the 1980es café culture has revived as an attendant circumstance to the new urbanizing processes. As the café the whole square should have this quality of combining public life and intimacy, and it is to be expected, that the new Israels Plads will surround itself with a number of cafés.

### Implementation

As already mentioned the commission requires a design concept as well as careful detailing in the layout for a new Israels Plads.

As regards the design concept, the project of the City Team has chosen to emphasize the total expanse of the square by reusing the old paving stones and kerb stones so that the square will appear as one gigantic blanket of paving stones reaching from facade to facade, from Ørstedparken to Frederiksborggade. Similarly the lines of trees will contribute to an overall impression of totality and continuity, and so will the lights - during night-time the lights along the facades, the light-fittings under the trees and, the lights from the four stair towers in each corner of square and the lights from two pillars in the middle of the square.

As regards the detailing and the conscious decentering of the square, it is created by the complex geometry of surfaces, planes, edges, ramps and steps. This layering of the square may be read as a reference to the modern



break-through that suddenly made visible the different historical layers of the place. But at the same time the decentering in time as well as in space allows for improvisation. This is not an urban space where functions and movements are defined and organized on beforehand. Instead it is an open and at the same time highly varied spatial structure – challenging maybe, but first and foremost in sync with a modern mentality characterized by individualism and dynamism and tolerance for diversity.

### **Concluding remarks**

The proposal of the City Team did not win the competition. The reader of this article may compare this proposal with the two other proposals by visiting the homepage - <http://www.cphx.dk/> of the municipality of Copenhagen, where they since March 2008 have been presented in a digital exposition on the homepage of the municipality of Copenhagen. The aim of this article, however, is not to discuss the relative merits of the three proposals, but it should be evident from this account, that the proposal of the City Team aimed at giving the Copenhageners an evocative space, full of atmosphere, where they would be able to experience themselves situated in the midst of social and historical processes pointing towards a metropolitan future.

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