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THE *PRECINCT*, THE *STOEP* AND THE *AGORA* AS TRAVELLING IDEAS FOR URBAN TRANSFORMATION

NIELS BOJE GROTH

Abstract

Redesigning urban space has become integral to urban planning as a means of dealing with urban restructuring. It is about functional and spatial aspects. But also, it is about introducing new meanings into urban space when former meaning has become obsolete. In this paper, the disappearance of retail shops from urban centres forms the impetus to a search for new meanings and designs of urban space. A transformation of obsolete urban centres into residential usage is considered. Three traditional urban elements are suggested as metaphors for a new hermeneutics of urban restructuring: the British PRECINCT, the Netherlandish STOEP, and the Greek AGORA. These elements are presented in their respective historical contexts, and their use in the present context of urban restructuring is considered as a remedy for transforming former vibrant shopping streets into residential districts. While the precinct and the stoep are still meaningful design concepts, the agora invites supplementary considerations due to the proliferation of ways people meet in urban space.

Keywords:
urban design, urban transition, precinct, stoep, agora, heterotopia, residential urbanism

Introduction

In recent years, second hand shops, if not simply empty ones, have entered the scenery of urban centres. Formerly vibrant shopping streets are decaying, while in outlying zones, new shopping centres and discount grocery stores are mushrooming. If not decaying, the city is certainly undergoing a restructuring.

It is the argument of this paper that our planning tools and traditions, focused as they are on the urban centre, are not prepared for coping with this kind of urban restructuring. Planners keep the old urban centre as a stronghold of urban identity. Based on a recent study of small towns in Denmark and observations in a number of medium-sized towns, it is argued that the current functional decline of main streets should be considered permanent, and hence, that these streets are in need of a new identity. "Travelling ideas" from one context to another, as remedies for restructuring the urban centres into residential areas, are presented, making use of the British *precinct,* the Dutch *stoep,* and the Greek *agora* in a contemporary Danish context.

Identifying the problem

The ideas of this paper were provoked when witnessing the opening, in 2010, of a new shopping centre in the Danish town of Frederikssund (15,000 inhabitants). It soon became obvious that the new shopping centre was not just bringing some 75 new shops to the town. Several existing shops on the main street closed their doors permanently, or moved to the indoor shopping centre.

It was estimated that 13–17 shops would relocate to the new centre or close down. Today 29 shops are empty (March 2014), and a number of shops – second hand goods and curiosities, hairdressers and other personal services – have replaced closed shops in the main street. The formerly vibrant shopping street has become a quiet place for personal care, second hand shopping, and fast food services.[1]

The changes that took place here were not just about scale. They were structural: 20 years earlier, part of the main street had been refurbished, pedestrianized, and enriched by a lateral urban enclosure formed by a bank, a hardware store, and a new supermarket. The hardware store and the supermarket relocated, however, to the new shopping centre, leaving the enclosure obsolete. A similar situation occurred with an older shopping enclosure, now almost closed down. The transformation of the urban structure was further emphasised by the partial closing down of a former access road – central to the former urban planning paradigm – at the rear of the shops in the main street, called for by the traffic generated by the new shopping centre.

1 An estimate in the statutory Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) accompanying the local plan of the shopping centre concluded that 9–11 shops in the main street would relocate to the shopping centre, and about 4–6 shops would close down. Today 12 shops with second hand goods and curiosities and 22 hairdressers and other personal services area located in the main street

Taken together, the substitution of outdoor for indoor shopping, the abolition of two enclosures and the throttling of the access road, indicate a new agenda for the future of the city centre. Formerly, the urban milieu was considered an asset for retail. Considerable investments in re-pavement and pedestrianizing the shopping streets accompanied the protection of historical buildings and urban districts. It was a great time for the growth of traditional urban planning ideals. Contrary to the integral development of retail and the urban milieu, the new retail milieus have been formed on their own, substituting urban milieus with shopping centre concepts. These concepts are offered to cities as part of the new agenda for urban competition. Thus, the key argument for building the shopping centre in Frederikssund was not urban. It was economic, suggesting that the city of Frederikssund will increase its gravity as a retail centre at the expense of the two competing retail centres in the region.[2]

The question thus identified is: if a new relation between retail and the city has taken place permanently, what should be done with the emptied main streets? Should we wait for new shopping concepts to fill up the empty shops, or turn the empty main streets to the use of new non-retail urban functions?

It is the second answer that is proposed in this paper, based on further evidence from a recent study of small Danish towns. It must be emphasized that the context of the reasoning in this paper is a focus on small and medium sized towns. Thus, e.g. regional and national capitals are not dealt with, nor are some recent developments in American cities.[3]

Studying the Problem

While the initial ideas of this paper developed along with experiences of the new competitive urban agenda in a medium sized trade town, my decisive theory developed along with a study of small Danish service towns (Groth and Fertner, eds. 2013).

The study dealt with service towns of 1,000– 5,000 inhabitants. A special focus was on about 100 of these towns that lost their position as municipal centres in the wake of a municipal reform in 2007, consolidating 275 municipalities into only 98. Statistical analyses were accompanied by case-studies in six selected towns situated in diverse geographical settings, from remote peripheries to expanding hinterlands of national growth centres.

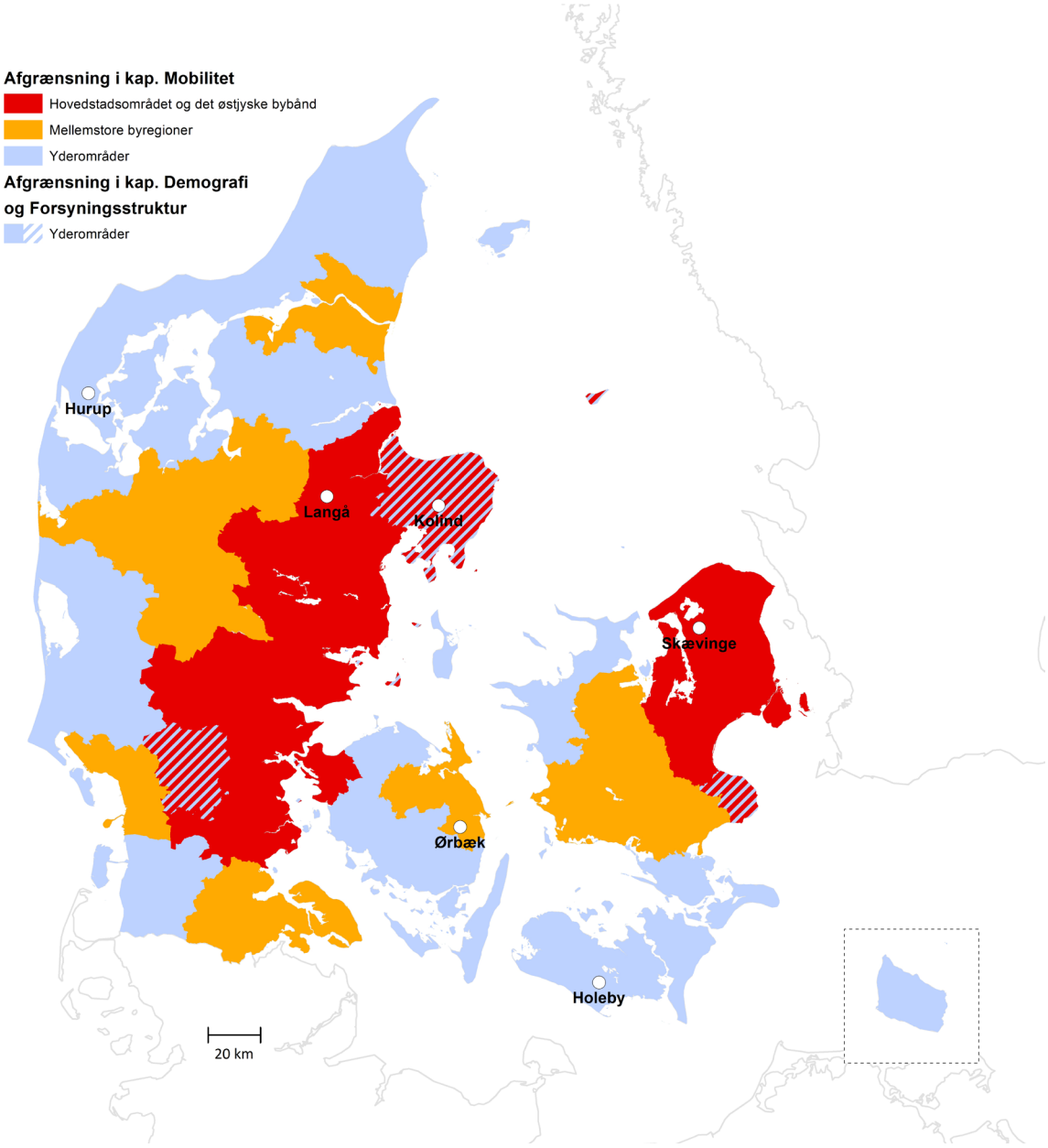
At the outset of the study, a functional decay was expected, especially in the former municipal centres. They lost their town halls, and the municipal council and most of the public administration relocated to the more distant larger municipal centres. Additionally, the restructuring of the retail and service sectors became increasingly visible in the decaying main streets.

2 The EIA report stated that the new centre would enhance the central position of Frederikssund as compared to the two adjacent trade towns in the region, Hillerød and Roskilde (NIRAS, 2007, pp.9, 54–55).

3 Kern (2008) analyses the more recent introduction of retail centres formed as urban outdoor milieus in large American cities. These centres are formed as new replicas of traditional urban centres, or are established by refurbishment of old urban districts. In both cases, however, they are developed and managed by private developers and policed by private security patrols – as theme parks cleansed of panhandling, street kids, and political groups addressing the public.

However, in parallel to these negative trends, these towns were also characterized by new investments in leisure, housing, and discount stores. Contrary to earlier investments, these recent investments are taking place outside the town centres: (1) housing at the edge of the city, (2) leisure areas in connection with sport arenas and (3) discount grocery stores by the entrance roads to the town.

Figure 1
The six case study towns situated in different geographical settings: Hurup (2,765 inhabitants) and Holeby (1,423 inhabitants) in remote peripheral areas (grey), Langå (2,869 inhabitants) and Skævinge (2,583 inhabitants) in the Århus and Copenhagen growth regions (red) and Kolind (1,807 inhabitants) and Ørbæk (1,592 inhabitants) between peripheral and central regions (hatched/red and yellow, respectively).
SOURCE: GROTH AND FERTNER (2013), P.15.



Thus, rather than simply declining, these small towns are restructuring. New nodes of housing, leisure, and retail are developing in patterns of lateral and "punctual concentration", leaving the old centre increasingly obsolete. In the wake of these trends, the question arises: what should we do with the urban centres?

Residential areas at the urban fringe

The new residential areas are developing on the fringes of the small towns with panoramic views to the landscape, eventually with a stream valley, a fjord, or a forested area. These new housing areas offer perfect settings for social life with friends and family, and for young people who increasingly use their homes as meeting places. Between the houses, the green areas and playgrounds are used by children and childcare workers, while teenagers can be found "hanging out" in the more isolated zones of the green areas.

Leisure and culture

Formerly, the sports grounds and centres were almost the sole representatives of the active leisure life in the small towns. Nowadays, a broader range of activities adds to the leisure scene. In the same region as the traditional sports centre in Hurup, there is now a swimming pool and a large wellness centre. In connection with two new discount supermarkets, the school and a new medical centre form a new urban district with important meeting places for many groups of citizens.

In Ørbæk, the sports centre has been enlarged and further extended, with the addition of a library, fitness centre, cafeteria, and in the former old school facilities for lectures, music events and theatre. Together with the school and the medical centre, the entire ensemble of urban leisure, education and health functions forms a new centre for communal activities outside the old urban core. On the other side of the main street lies a day-care and activity centre for the elderly, run by employed staff and assisted by 90 volunteers. Considerable meeting activities unfold here, a location which is outside the urban centre.

Shopping

Along with the functional depletion of the urban cores, the shops of the small towns have relocated from the town centre to the roads connecting it with the hinterland. In Langå and Otterup on Funen, costly refurbishments of the main streets, with new pavements, street "furniture" and urban squares, were carried out in the 1980s and 1990s. Attractively settled in these refurbished milieus were the discount supermarkets Rema 1000 in Langå, and Fakta in Otterup, until fierce competition for customers led both shops to move to more suitable traffic environments on the fringes of each of the two centres. These kinds of relocations often take place jointly with a competing supermarket, leading to the building up of new centres for shopping for daily groceries outside of

the urban centre. By means of this process, the carefully planned urban milieu is emptied for the benefit of the new logistics of more suitable traffic environments. In neither town have new retail outlets appeared to replace the closed ones in the centres.

These relocations of urban retail outlets seem difficult to reverse, since they participate in structural trends in the retail sector. On one hand, specialized goods and services are concentrating in the larger cities, if not in cyberspace, thus exiting the urban milieus of the small town. On the other hand, the provision of everyday groceries is becoming dispersed,[4] and is thus not leaving the small towns, but rather relocating from the centre to the periphery.

4 In Denmark, down to hinterlands of 3,000 inhabitants and towns of 1,000 inhabitants (Nyborg, 2013; Olsen, 2012).

Interaction

This new urban life is evolving not only in one district but in but several districts of the town or city. In line with the aforementioned pattern of punctual concentration, urban life unfolds outside the main street, in the laterally located new leisure centres, housing areas on the town fringes, and in the village greens and around the new shopping areas. Therefore, the urban issue and the task of the planner are the facilitation of the development of each urban district to attain its full uniqueness and to foster the interaction between the different urban districts, open to individual unforeseen patterns. When the city centre was the core of urban activity, interactions in the towns were characterized by the hierarchical hub-and-spoke types of interaction. Focus was on the activities that took place in the centre. Nowadays, the footpaths, as the access points to nature outside the city, bicycle lanes and formal and informal shortcuts have become appreciated by people living in the small towns, along with increased use of private cars for shopping in the outlying discount supermarkets.

The patterns of interactions that are developing in the small towns resembles the non-hierarchical semi-lattice as characterised by Christopher Alexander (Alexander, 1967). Compared to hierarchical interaction models, the semi-lattice is inviting rather than prescriptive. It invites alternative shortcuts as well as detours to the individual user of the town.

In its extreme version, the town formed by individual activities rather than planned places was portrayed by Pieter Bruegel in his painting of *Netherlandish Proverbs,* all of which unfold in a hamlet without a common centre, since each proverb seems to form a centre of its own.

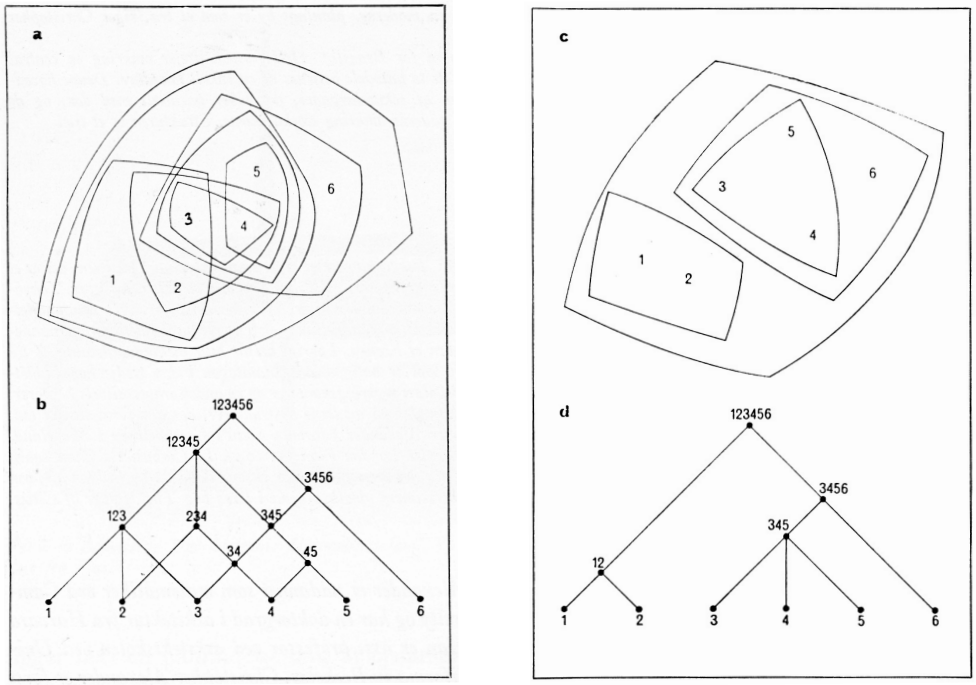


Figure 2
The tree and the semi-lattice. C. Alexander (1967) used these diagrams to illustrate the division of labour in hierarchical structures: the "tree" (right) and over-lapping structures: the "semi-lattice" (left). The semi-lattice allows crisscrossing hierarchies led by chance, and impulse more than goal-oriented behaviour. The mono-centric town is hierarchical and vulnerable, because it does not tolerate the diminishing importance of the centre. The punctual concentrated town is characterized by overlapping interactions between the scattered functions of the town, related to each other not by one dominating order but through several individually orders.

SOURCE: ALEXANDER (1967, P.604), COURTESY OF CENTER FOR ENVIRONMENTAL STRUCTURE, BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA.

Figure 3
Pieter Bruegel (1527–1569): *The Dutch Proverbs,* 1559. Bruegel's painting reveals the plurality of life condensed into folkloristic proverbs. The scenery is without a centre of common meaning, hence showing an antithesis of the city and society based on one centre of meaning and urban functions. Arguably, Bruegel's painting mind-maps the change from the one-centre town to the poly-centric town.
SOURCE: WIKIARTS, PUBLIC DOMAIN.

The town and the region

The new development trends in the small towns are not just urban. Rather, they signify new structural relationships between the town and region. Thus, the changes observed are supposed to be enduring and structural, characterised by new regional divisions of labour, by fragmental development of the built-up areas (Sieverts, 2003) and by functional specialisation of spaces as shown by Kunzman (2003). The regional fragmentation is stimulated, according to Andersen, Møller-Jensen and Engelstoft (2011), by the fact that accessibility rather than mere proximity to jobs is a decisive factor for urbanisation. Thus, the steady increase of daily commuting signifies an expansion of the residential geography from which jobs are accessible. The physical city as the site of the co-location of jobs and residences has been replaced by the "regional city" with jobs in the centre and residences dispersed into the region.

The regional understanding of urbanization was greatly advanced by Ascher in the mid-1990s in his distinction between metropolization and metapolization (Ascher, 2007). Metropolization is the kind of regional enlargement radiating from the concentration of human and material wealth in ever larger cities, whereas metapolization characterizes dispersed growth of towns and villages stimulated by the metropolization and formed by reticular networking between diverse urban areas in the

region rather than just radiating from the *metropol*. The *metapol* supplements the centre oriented hub-and-spoke transport structure with criss-crossing "percolation" of individual mobility.

This kind of criss-crossing traffic was confirmed by the observation that commuting patterns over time are generally becoming more polycentric (Grunfelder, Nielsen and Groth, 2015). People simply choose their place of residence increasingly influenced by the fact that residential preferences follow other patterns rather than the geographical concentration of workplaces. This development is considered negative by planners, whereas the single family equates commuting with freedom to choose a residence on its own terms.

This freedom of choice is one of the factors behind the transformation of small towns into residential milieus formed by the triangle of residential necessities: attractive housing, supply of daily groceries, and leisure facilities. Fertner, et al. (2015) thus venture the hypothesis that recent regional development trends give way to a "residential urbanism" in enlarging regions. Strong hinterland relations are further enhancing this kind of urbanization. Those of the small service towns that became municipal centres from the 1970 administrative reform until the recent 2007 reform seem to benefit from enduring hinterland relations created during their status as municipal capitals. Thus, in the wake of the 1970 reform, they became centres of new jobs and services to the municipal community followed by an outstanding increase of population (Illeris, 2010, pp.35–41). Today, these small former municipal centres still enjoy a position as favourite towns for the retirement of elderly people in the hinterland, as does the town with the school for children and the shopping centre for groceries. Many of these towns, especially in the more prosperous regions, are being integrated in the regional metapolization. Therefore, they are able to specialize as residential towns profiting from double relations - with the hinterland and the region.

Planning policy

Since the protests against large-scale urban renewal in the early 1970s, in the aftermath of Jane Jacobs' battle with Robert Moses (Flint, 2009), planners and politicians have shown a great concern for the protection and cautious development of inner cities. This concern is closely connected with an imagination of the centre as *the* urban meeting place. It was thus declared by the Danish Committee for Planning and Retail Trade, the aim of which was to save the urban centres from the centrifugal forces of shopping malls being located outside the centre and the hollowing out of the centres, that "each city can only have one urban midpoint" (Udvalget for Planlægning og Detailhandel, 2006, p.10).

Traditional planning regulations of retail and urban environment fall short in the new situation. Thus, in Denmark measures were taken to restrict the construction of new large shopping centres outside the old city centre and by assigning special zones for retailing to concentrate retail in the central urban areas. These zoning measures were taken for monitoring flows of retail investments entering the city. However, they are not suitable to monitor flows leaving the city. Along with these zoning measures planning regulations restricting the ground level of the buildings in the main streets to shopping have become obsolete. These planning measures were taken to establish undisturbed rows of shops at street level in the main streets. Today, these regulations no longer make sense, since the task has changed from the protection of shops to replacing empty ones with new functions. It thus seems straightforward to revoke the regulations and launch the idea of turning the empty parts, if not the entire main streets, into new usage such as residential use. Turning the ground level into residential use is not to introduce something entirely new. Rather, it profits on residential usage at the floors above the ground level, hence turning the main street into a residential district.

Turning the main streets into residential districts would enhance the supply of apartments for smaller households of one or two adults without children. This kind of dwelling is often lacking in the small towns, dominated as they are by larger family houses and small enclaves of attached houses for the elderly. Thus Aner and Hansen (2014) call attention to the migration of young professionals in need of modern apartments for rent in the small towns. Even though young professionals consider settling down for only a period, they are keen to test living arrangements and the building up of social networks, especially with other in-migrating professionals, during their stay.

I suggest that crucial for a successful turnaround of the main streets into housing is making use of an urban design that clearly signifies the new function of main street as an attractive place for living, hence avoiding the history of former shopping streets with their signatures of closed shopping windows.

Travelling ideas

In such a transformation, I suggest making use of design typologies closely connected with urban living: the semi-private front area, the enclosure, and the meeting place. In Danish small towns, there is a tradition of small gardens in front of houses adjacent to the roads just outside the urban centre. In the centre, however, there is no room for gardens. But when turning shops into apartments, there might be a need for keeping the public domain at some distance by establishing a small semi-private front area. One such remedy is the Netherlandish *stoep*. Secondly, the study of small towns revealed several instances of enclosures often

established on former industrial premises by new small attached housing. They might not be as remarkable as the spatial enclosures so appreciated in classic studies of urban space. Rather, by their functional distinctiveness, they add facets to the urban environment that signify privacy and residential quality, as represented by the English *precinct*. Finally, new meeting places have developed along with the aforementioned punctual concentration. This is why the Greek *agora* will be considered as a concept of meeting place not burdened with hierarchical meaning. Let us start with the *stoep*.

The stoep

The Netherlandish *stoep* is a strip of private area in front of a house. It is elevated above street level. It is too small to be a garden, but large enough for a bench, a staircase, a small fence in cast iron, sidewalk bollards or potteries with small bushes or flowers. It forms a platform, a kind of stepping stone towards the house, signifying something between a private floor extending from the house and a public sidewalk. The Dutch literal meaning of the word is a "pavement" or a "doorstep". In the sixteenth century, it denoted a "sitting bench in front of a house or a raised drive-in" (Bas, 2013). The stoep is an old traditional Netherlandish design, portrayed in paintings of Johannes Vermeer and Jan Steen (Koch, 1972), see figure 4.

The small front area is a logical outcome of living in the narrow canal-streets, keeping the public at some distance and leaving room for a few outdoor activities. This old tradition has survived in Dutch cities and was further developed in the Dutch colonies (Cusack, 2013).

Figure 4
The stoep in Dutch painting.
Left: Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675): *The Little Street*. The two children play at a stoep. It is elevated from the street level and painted as a floor. Benches are situated along the façade as well as at across the stoep at each end. The floor and the benches signify clearly the private character of the stoep. Source: Courtesy of Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.
Right: Jan Steen (1626–1679): *The Burgomeister of Delft and his Daughter.* The Burgomeister sits on a stoep, formed as a staircase with repos, bench and railing. The woman he addresses is standing on a public sidewalk next to the stoep. If not indicated by elevation, the division between the stoep and the sidewalk is indicated by a shift in pavement – or both.
SOURCE: COURTESY OF RIJKSMUSEUM, AMSTERDAM.

Figure 5
Examples showing how front areas are provided in dense urban milieus as a mediator of the public and private spheres.
Upper left: Amsterdam. Railings and staircases keep the public from using the stoep as sidewalk. The bench further signifies its private character.
PHOTO: NIELS BOJE GROTH, 2014.
Lower left: house with stoep in Megen, Holland. Running along the entire façade, the stoep forms an integral part of the architecture and is kept private by an elevation from the sidewalk and the cast-iron fences at each end.
Source: Paul van Galen (1977), Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed, Wikimedia commons, public domain.
Right: Elevated stoep with stone bollards and cast iron railings, Delft.
PHOTO: NIELS BOJE GROTH, 2014.

In Danish building culture, we are not familiar with the stoep. Now and then, small areas of pavement adjust irregularities in building facades to the sidewalk. These small strips keep passers-by at some distance, without, however, signifying privacy within public space as does the stoep.

If the transformation of former main streets in Danish towns and cities into residential streets were to take place, it is not only the conversion of former shopping façades into residential facades that would come into play. In addition, the front area should act as a mediator between the private and the public. This is not just about functionally keeping the public at a proper distance from the private. It is also about providing the street with a certain private ownership. Thus, Newman (1972, p.8) notices that the privacy signified by the stoep is further reinforced by the windows establishing a territorial claim to the streets "by providing unmistakable surveillance from within the dwelling".

Embedded as it is in another urban culture, the question is whether the stoep could be grafted onto Danish towns. We thus deal with the question "how do general ideas about improving cities migrate and mutate, synergize and conflict in the encounter with specific contexts and their traditions, narratives, and politics".[5] This question is pressing in our globalized era. However, there are no direct answers, since transferring ideas from one context to another context is not about deductive proof

5 One of the key questions of the conference World in Denmark (Lamm and Braae, 2014).

Figure 6
Usually, the stoep is used for keeping a distance between private and public. But it also offers a space, however small, for greenery and outdoor living, as in this modern housing area in the central part of Amsterdam.
PHOTO: NIELS BOJE GROTH, 2014.

of proper existence. Rather it is about metaphorical relief of the potential subsistence. To see similarity across different contexts is to "metaphorize" well. It is a creative act of the displacement of meaning – of "traveling ideas".[6] Thus, the present suggestions on importing the stoep, as well as the precinct and agora, from each of their cultural contexts into a Danish context, is about reassembling foreign urban designs into Danish urban potentials for change.

6 These ideas of metaphorization as a creative act were inspired by Ricoeur's Aristotelian-inspired treatise *The rule of the metaphor* (Ricoeur, 1986).

The precinct

The *precinct* is a pedestrian enclosure belonging to the buildings by which it is enclosed. Thus, the green areas in the middle of English squares are often referred to as precincts (Rasmussen, 1973). In fact, the precincts of London signify a city based on communities rather than central power, as for example in Paris and Rome. After the Great Fire of London in 1665, the King ordered that no rebuilding could take place until an overall plan was elaborated. Robert Hook presented a practical grid plan, whereas Sir Christopher Wren and John Evelyn each presented their own baroque style plans showing "Vitruvian geometry and Augustian magnificence", with triumphal vistas and interlocking fora (Bell and Bell, 1972). According to Colin and Rose Bell, the greatest problem with baroque plans of this scale is that they automatically preclude planning for the neighbourhood. "There is no room for the smaller scale, the milder tone" (ibid. p.74). As we know, London was not rebuilt as a baroque city. Citizens were offered new lots of the same size as those they had before the fire, but in new environs according to the master plan. However, they refused. The citizens did not trust the plan, and they did not have time for its implementation. Thus, London was rebuilt, in principle according to the same layout as prior to the fire, but with a building code dealing with street widths, building fronts, paving, sewers, building heights and other relevant standards. Numerous squares built by the landowners

formed a city of precincts very different from Baroque cities with their monumental fora, signifying grand design. Squares, on the contrary, are self-sustained communities, like cloister garths inhabited by residents of the same social class (Rasmussen, 1973, p.184). Gregor Paulsson argues that this kind of self-sustained urban communities date back to medieval corporative bodies formed by people of common interest settled in enclaves, such as the Vicars Close in Wells.

> *This "precinctal" principle derives its origin from the monasteries, but it has survived them, e.g. in the colleges of the university towns and the Inns of Court in London. The typically English square has the same origin* (Paulsson, 1959, p.41).

The precinct belongs to the estate or the owners of the houses enclosing the precinct. The green patches of the London squares were fenced and were not open to the general public. As a visitor, you could only enter the peripheral roads of the square. Through history – from the seventeenth century until today – the status of these squares as private has been debated, and numerous initiatives and reforms have resulted in a range of decisions about their formal status (Longstaffe-Gowan, 2012). However, beyond their formal status, the precinct appears to "belong" to the encircling estate. This belonging endows the precinct with a private character signifying that the proper attitude of a visitor is that of "guest".

Figure 7
Enclosed garden in a medieval castle precinct. The modern urban enclosures and garden squares originate in the gardens of the medieval monasteries and castles. This miniature reveals a castle precinct as it developed in connection with the kitchen garden. As it appears on this miniature, it resembles the lay-out of the garden squares in London, i.e. a garden in the middle of an enclosure fenced-in by and accommodated with places to sit. "The aesthetic appeal of all medieval gardens was incidental to their function of providing fruit, vegetables and medicinal herbs. Within the castle *precincts* they were carefully restricted, each garden being surrounded by a low fence and frequently consisting of a patch of grass with a raised turf seat on a brick base such as often occur in the illustrations of the time" (Woodbridge, 1986, p.17). Source: Miniature of Renaud de Montauban making amorous advances in an enclosed garden, de Loyset Liédet (1420–1479), Roman de Regnault de Montauban (1468–1470), p.71v.

The precinctual principle came to the fore in Foreshaw's and Abercrombie's plan for the rebuilding of London after the Second World War (Forshaw and Abercrombie, 1943). They realized that the numerous enclosures of London were valuable elements of urban life, that they should be protected from through-traffic and left open only for approach traffic. This planning principle came to be called "precinctual planning" (ibid., p.10). It still applied in the Traffic in Towns (1963) prepared under the leadership of Sir Colin Buchanan for the Ministry of Transport.

In Danish urban planning, these kinds of enclosures are scarcely conceptualized. The Danish word *enemærke* (preserve) expresses much of the private character of these enclosures. But the reason they lack a proper name is that enclosures are not planned as such. Usually, they are planned as part of an ensemble of buildings. Some examples of this would be the Danish Royal Library Garden in Copenhagen, the cloister garden in Elsinore, and the former square between the police station, the courthouse and Solbjerg Church in Frederiksberg. More anonymous examples can also be found in small and medium-sized cities, such as built-up residential areas with small terraced houses situated around a common yard or garden on the former premises of timber yards or industrial buildings, very often situated in the second row behind the main street and protected from the outside world. These enclaves are endowed with a kind of secretive character, and they seem like relaxing oases, especially for the elderly who have moved from large houses in the hinterland to manageable houses with easy access to the services of the town.

As argued here, the future of small towns and medium-sized cities is very much related to their roles as residential settlements. Classic studies of urban space (Sitte, 1986; Zucker, 1959; Cullen, 2010) emphasize the spatial qualities of the enclosure. Besides its spatial characteristics, the precinct is characterized by its innate meaning, due to the inescapable relations between place and buildings in the perimeter. In this respect the precinct differs from urban places that are empty of meaning, however ripe for something to "take place".[7]

7 Olwig (2006) introduces a third term into the binary of place and placelessness, which are places that are waiting for something to happen. These are places not empty spaces ripe for meaning as opposed to having no meaning. Rather they are ripe for transgressions of meanings, set in motion by activities beginning, ending or moving through.

Figure 8
Left: The precinct of Queen Square, Bloomsbury, London.1812. One of the numerous garden squares in London, situated in an enclosure of terraced houses. The gardens in the middle of these squares were reserved for the private residents of the precinct and protected from the general public by railings. Between the garden and the terraced houses, perimeter streets or pavements ran on all sides.
SOURCE: ARTIST UNKNOWN, ACKERMANN 1812, @ LOOK AND LEARN/P. JACKSON COLLECTION.
Right: An institutional precinct in the middle of Copenhagen: the library garden enclosed by the Royal Library, the State Archives and Royal Arsenal Museum.
PHOTO: NIELS BOJE GROTH, 2014.

Figure 9
Left: Nyenstad. The Nyenstad houses in the Danish town of Nyborg are situated in an early extension of the city, dating back to the Renaissance, when King Christian III made Nyborg into a royal residence town. Christian III extended and ramparted the town. The eastern-most area was called Nyenstad ("the new city"). During the late 1960s, the city responded to the tendency to commercialize the town centre and planned for an urban renewal of the Nyenstad district. A beautiful enclosure shaped by two parallel rows of terraced houses with a portal at the one end was built. You may walk here, but the enclosure, the pavement and the trees invite you only as a "guest" into this world of privacy and secretiveness. Cars do not move here. They just enter for parking at their premises.
PHOTO: NIELS BOJE GROTH, 2014.
Right: Begijnhof, Amsterdam. The homes of the old Roman Catholic Beguines form an inner courtyard, situated in the middle of Amsterdam. A poster at the entrance reads: "A visit to the Begijnhof allows you to leave the vigour of the city behind. For a few moments, you can imagine yourself in another world and as you move through quietly this feeling will intensify".
PHOTO: NIELS BOJE GROTH, 2014.

The agora

One of the most pronounced changes in small towns and medium-sized cities is the appearance of new meeting places and venues situated outside the old centres in the residential areas; the new cultural centres, the event-markets, the discount-markets, and the green areas. A plethora of activities takes place in different spaces, patches, places, and institutions. Francois Ascher has taken the proliferation of these new kinds of places as integral to metapolization: "The emergence of new kinds of places, in particular the spaces of mobility, of transit and of passage [is] a useful and attractive component of urban form" (Ascher, 2007, p.39). These new places are emerging within privately owned spaces in shopping centres, and within public squares, as well as in new ephemeral spaces, such as at raves and festivals that temporarily transform and redefine all sorts of places. As a metaphor of the new meeting places, Ascher has used the Greek *agora*.

> *The cafe terrace, while not exactly a new type of place, is the modern transposition of the Greek agora enriched by new methods of transportation, communication and exchange; new rhythms of life; overlapping activities; cross-breeding between public and private; hybridizations between interior and exterior* (Ascher, 2007, p.39).

The Greek agora was the meeting place of the citizens. It was the arena for policy and trade, for the formulation of urban affairs in public, and the forming of active citizens in full appearance (Arendt, 1998). It differs from another classic urban space, the Roman *forum*, which was the locus of the sovereign and of the citizens who were there not as free, but as subject to the power of the sovereign. Gregor Paulsson (1959) emphasizes the difference between the two: the Greek and the Roman city were both formed by a grid plan, but "the forum was placed in the intersection of the two main streets, [i.e. in the middle of the town] whereas in democratic Greece, the agora was the ground for a block left free."

The architect Vitruvius added to the Roman grid schema:

> *the radio centric plan, with streets running from the periphery towards the public region in the centre. Such is the town structure of the Roman principate, manifested particularly clearly in the imperial fora. It is an expression of a political structure: a dominating senate and a submissive people* (Paulsson, 1959, p.35).

Today, urban development deviates from that of classic Roman and Greek towns. Nevertheless, the connotations of the two, the authoritative and the democratic, remain relevant. In the small towns we studied, the loss of the city hall, the deprivation of the urban centre, and the punctual concentration of new urban functions outside the centre, connotes loss of authority at the expense of activities closely related to the lives of citizens in their homes, gardens, and neighbourhoods, during their shopping, leisure time and social activities. This development in the small towns is about people meeting each other, thus connoting the agora rather the forum.

Figure 10
Places of encounter.
Left: The classic Greek agora was often bordered by open buildings with a façade of columns – called stoa. Here, the "Atalos" stoa in Athens. The stoa served as place for the city council, for marketing, bargaining and public announcements (Zucker, 1959).
SOURCE: WIKI MEDIA COMMONS, PUBLIC DOMAIN.
Right: The modern "agora": "Israels plads" in Copenhagen. Close to the centre of Copenhagen a former open market place has been refurbished and extended: One half became an indoor market place with small stalls – the other half became a place of "places", inviting people for sitting, glancing, talking, scatting, playing basketball, selling second hand and small designs at improvised outdoor stalls. It is a place of "hidden appearance", since people next to each other don't have to communicate about common affairs. On the one hand, they appear in the public realm – on the other, they remain hidden to each other.
PHOTO: NIELS BOJE GROTH, 2015.

The question, however, is whether the classic agora is the proper concept for the arenas of the new meeting places in towns of the metapolized geography, as suggested above by Ascher. The agora was *the* place for meetings and markets, usually signified by the colonnaded *stoa*. Foucault turns this idea of space-forming activities upside-down in his analysis of space between proper categories of space: between private and public, family and social, leisure and work space. This is the kind of space he called *heterotopia* (Foucault, 1966/2008). It is space without a proper syntax, and thus tends to undermine our language about space (Foucault, 1994, p.xviii). Following the idea of space-in-between, De Cauter and Dehaene (2008) argue that heterotopia offers a "dialectical third" to Hannah Arendt's dichotomy of the hidden activities of the private sphere (*oikos*) and the public sphere of appearance (*agora*) (Arendt,1998). This third sphere, they suggest, is one of "hidden appearance" unfolding in space that has no place in either the public or the private spheres – in "special, different, other places where entrance is restricted, initiation or membership required" (De Cauter and Dehaene, 2008, p.94). This third sphere comes close to the spheres of religion, arts, sports and leisure. De Cauter and Dehaene venture the idea that while *work* and *labour* belong to the private sphere and *action* to the public sphere in Arendt's universe, the proper activity of heterotopia is "play" (2008, p.95). De Cauter and Dehaene's "heterotopia" offers an interesting explanation of space as formed by residential urbanism. Thus, as with heterotopian space, the space of residential urbanism is decoupled from economic space (workplaces) and political space (town halls and public administration) – it is the space of culture, leisure, and residence.

People meet not as citizens, fully in public, but in clubs or groups of acquaintanceships in these places created by themselves – not by the planner. Thus, in forming these places the planner is not an initiator. She may, however, play an important role as a facilitator. Especially, in the

Figure 11
The modern agora is where people meet. It is not a fixed place as was the classic stoa. The modern places of encounter are created by membership, as with a school, or simply by acquaintanceship, as with people sharing common interests.
Left: A group of young skaters. The boy in the centre is asking a skilled skater for his signature – a kind of *rite de passage* for membership. Also, the meetings of encounter include ephemeral places such as the seasonal market place.
PHOTO: NIELS BOJE GROTH, 2014.
Right: Ørbæk "Summer Market". The summer market is organised by a citizens' organisation of Ørbæk town. Profits from the summer market are used for cultural and leisure activities in the town.
SOURCE: COURTESY OF ØRBÆK BORGERFORENING.

"grey zones" between formal planning regulations and new spatial activities, the role of the facilitator is crucial.

Stoep – precinct – agora – forum – heterotopia

In this search for remedies for urban transformation, I have endeavoured to respond to the diversity of urban life. The stoep, the precinct, the forum, and the agora represent a diversity of the legal status of the space. The stoep is private, the precinct is owned by the estate, but sanctioned as public with some reservations. The forum is restrictedly public. The agora in its classic form is owned by the city, but fully accessible to the public. In its modern derivative ownership of heterotopian space varies between public and private. These ideal types of urban space cast the urban visitor differently: the private stoep accepts the visitor as a "passer-by", the precinct accepts the visitor as a guest, the agora invites the visitor as a responsible citizen with full "membership", whereas the visitor at the forum is a subject to the power of the palace or the military parade. Finally, access to heterotopian space requires some kind of membership, formal or informal.

Table 1 summarises the types of urban space by origin, legal status and role of the visitor.

Table 1. Urban spaces
The stoep, precinct, agora, and forum are here characterised within a common taxonomy of urban space, due to different legal statuses and subsequently by different roles of the visitor: the 'passer-by', the 'guest', the 'citizen', the 'member' and the "subject". The Foucauldian concept of heterotopia is about "non-places" which evade common taxonomies. Ownership of heterotopian space may be private, public, or in a "grey zone of ownership", permanent or ephemeral. Entrance requires membership or acquaintanceship. Strangers, thus, are inappropriate visitors.

Taxonomy	Urban space	Origin	Legal status	Role of the visitor
"Sameness" – order of congruence within a common syntactic space	Stoep	Dutch	Private	Passer-by
	Precinct	English	Owned by the estate – sanctioned public with restriction	Guest
	Agora	Greek	Owned by the city – public in full	Citizen
	Forum	Roman	Owned by the city or sovereign – restricted public	Subject
"Otherness" – order of appropriateness outside a common syntactic space	Heterotopia	Foucauldian	Private, public or blurred – membership or acquaintance required	Member / acquaintance or stranger

In the urban context

In what follows, the remedies of urban transformation shall be applied in two urban contexts: the city of Frederikssund, and the small town of Ørbæk. Frederikssund is the city referred to at the beginning of this paper, and Ørbæk is one of the six small case study towns used as examples. They are situated in each of their regions as shown in figure 12.

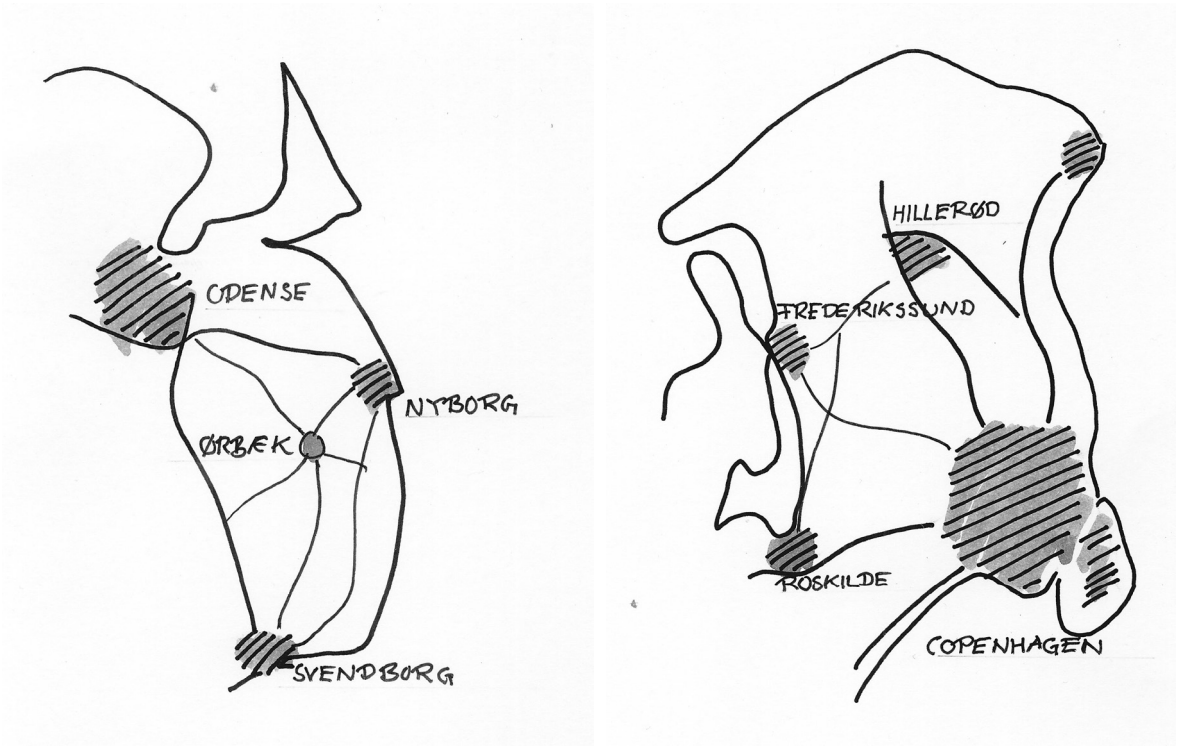


Figure 12
Ørbæk and Frederikssund in their regional settings.
Left: Ørbæk (1,592 inhabitants) with the municipal centre Nyborg (16,528 inhabitants / 16 km), Svendborg (26,672 inhabitants / 24 km) and Odense (172,512 inhabitants / 26 km).
Right: Frederikssund (15,725 inhabitants) with its nearest competitive neighbours, Roskilde (48,721 inhabitants / 27 km) and Hillerød (48,695 inhabitants / 22 km) and Copenhagen (45 km).

Frederikssund

Frederikssund is a former "market" town, now a municipal capital. In the 1960s, a plan for the centre of the town was elaborated. From this plan dates a rational urban design with shopping in the old main streets and a parallel "service street" providing access to the shops. The two parallel streets are formed as a half circle at the perimeter of an urban meadow to the south.

After the turn of the century, urban competition made way for the building of new commercial centres. Thus, in 2010, a new shopping mall with 75 shops was built just outside the old centre, adjacent to the traffic terminal and with its own three-storey indoor parking facilities. The new shopping centre had a major impact on the existing town centre: the closure and downgrading of many shops, the abolition of two enclosures and the throttling of the access road. These impacts seem to be unavoidable consequences of the new agenda of urban competition accepted by the city. Therefore, the function, meaning, and design of the main street need to be considered anew.

In figure 13, three problem areas are indicated for such reconsideration: the dotted section of the main-street west of the town hall square, and two precincts of the former shopping arcade and former warehouse, respectively. I suggest initiating the transformation into a residential area of the section of the main street suffering seriously from shop closures, and an attempt to implement the Netherlandish stoep in front of the houses. Such a transformation from a shopping into residential district should take place in connection with transformation of the almost empty shopping arcade. It is formed by terraced shops at the perimeter of an enclosure, currently a parking lot. If transformed into terraced apartments, the enclosure could be formed as a garden precinct of the apartments, and become part of a new residential milieu in the transformed main street. The other optional precinct is situated in front of a former retail store, now empty. Currently on the agenda of the city are new premises for the municipal library. If relocated to the premises of the empty warehouse, a garden precinct could be added in front of the library, with direct access to the pedestrian street.

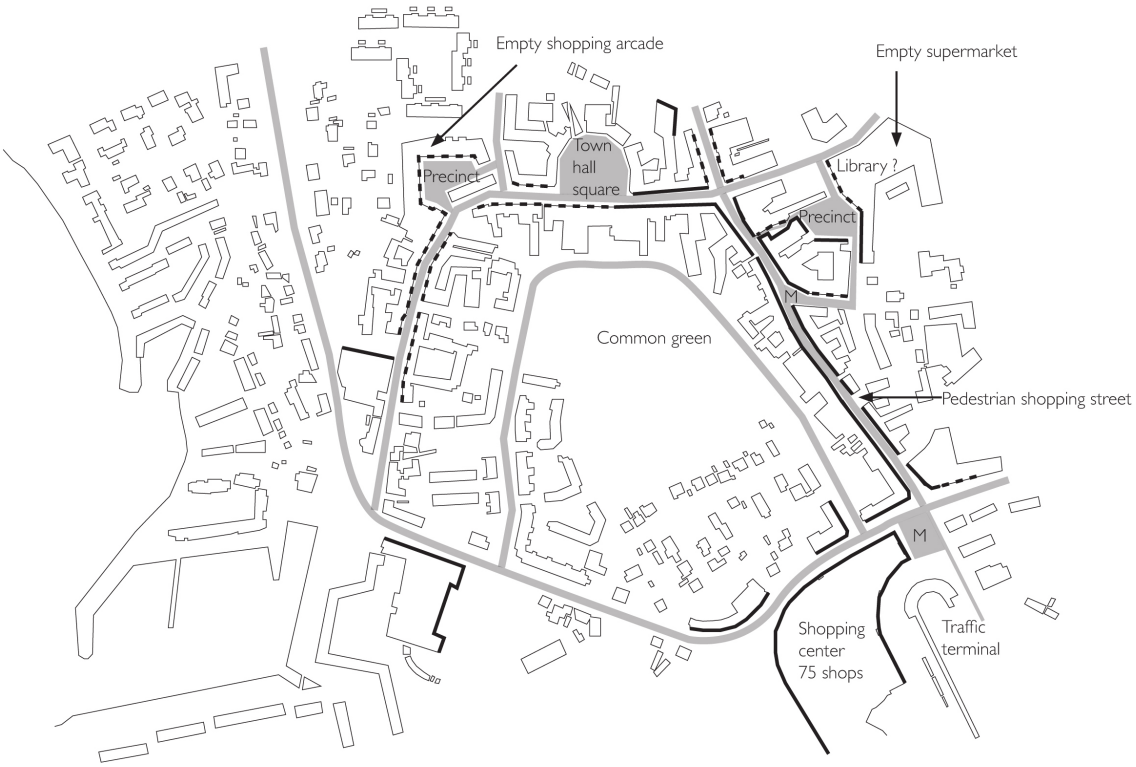


Figure 13
Frederikssund. The main street and the parallel service street owe their semi-circular ∩-form to a former lagoon of the Roskilde Fjord. The construction of the harbour made drainage of the lagoon possible, and it was turned into a common green. In the early 1990s, a new large supermarket ("empty supermarket", upper right) was built on the premises of the former bus station; the station relocated to the new "traffic terminal" (lower right). The ∩-formed centre paradigm was further strengthened by the lay-out of a pedestrian street ("pedestrian shopping street"). In 2010, a new shopping centre with 75 shops was built next to the traffic terminal, and a new urban centre paradigm replaced the old one. Several shops closed down and some replaced by second hand shops. Today, the former supermarket (upper right) is empty, as is the shopping arcade (upper left) and the shops in the main street adjacent to it. These three areas are ripe for an urban transition. The supermarket and the shopping arcade are endowed with small precincts. Optional are a relocation of the existing library to the supermarket and the development of the precinct into a library garden. Further, the shopping arcade could be transformed into a residential precinct, and the adjacent shops on the main street could be transformed into housing, altogether forming a new residential region of the town.
SOURCE: GROTH AND MIKKELSEN, L.A.

Figure 14
Left: In this part of the main street there are several empty shops.
PHOTO: NIELS BOJE GROTH, 2015.
Right: The former shopping enclosure "Tuborggården" almost empty now. This part of the main street is shown by dooted lines at figure 13, and the shopping arcade is indated by "precinct".
PHOTO: NIELS BOJE GROTH, 2014.

Ørbæk

In the small town Ørbæk, many shops on the main street have disappeared and become residences; several of these homes have been refurbished with new façades. The refurbishment is a great advantage as compared with simply leaving former shop windows empty. However, some owners are removing the entrances to the house from the main street to the back. In the lower part of the main street, two retail discount stores are forming a new shopping environment, each with their own separate entrances, separate spaces for display of goods and fenced in from each other by a retaining wall and curb stones.

Optional as part of a residential transition is the section of the main street indicated by dark buildings in figure 15, a refurbishment of the two precincts, construction of a new meeting place, and a common parking area between the two food stores and improvements of the foot path system.

An earlier refurbishment of the main street dealt with the traffic lane, the sidewalk, parking and street furniture, leaving the front areas of the houses in the street untouched. To "residentialize" the street requires more than rethinking traffic. It is important to facilitate residential life functionally and symbolically, by redesigning the front areas, e.g. by use of the stoep. In the northern section of the main street is a small residential precinct. It is called "Tømmergården", formerly a timber yard, now relocated outside the city. The precinct is private. However, it exists like an oasis and signifies the character of a residential milieu. Between the two food stores, there is the possibility of constructing a new public meeting place, as a combination of the two discount stores' outdoor display of seasonal goods and a common meeting area; see figure 15. Another precinct is situated east of the main street, in the area of the school, cultural, and sports facilities. It is an institutional precinct, adding a distinct character to the cultural meeting places situated in the area and connected by footpaths that allow access to several urban functions and green areas along the stream valley. These footpaths are important trajectories facilitating the punctual concentration of the town.

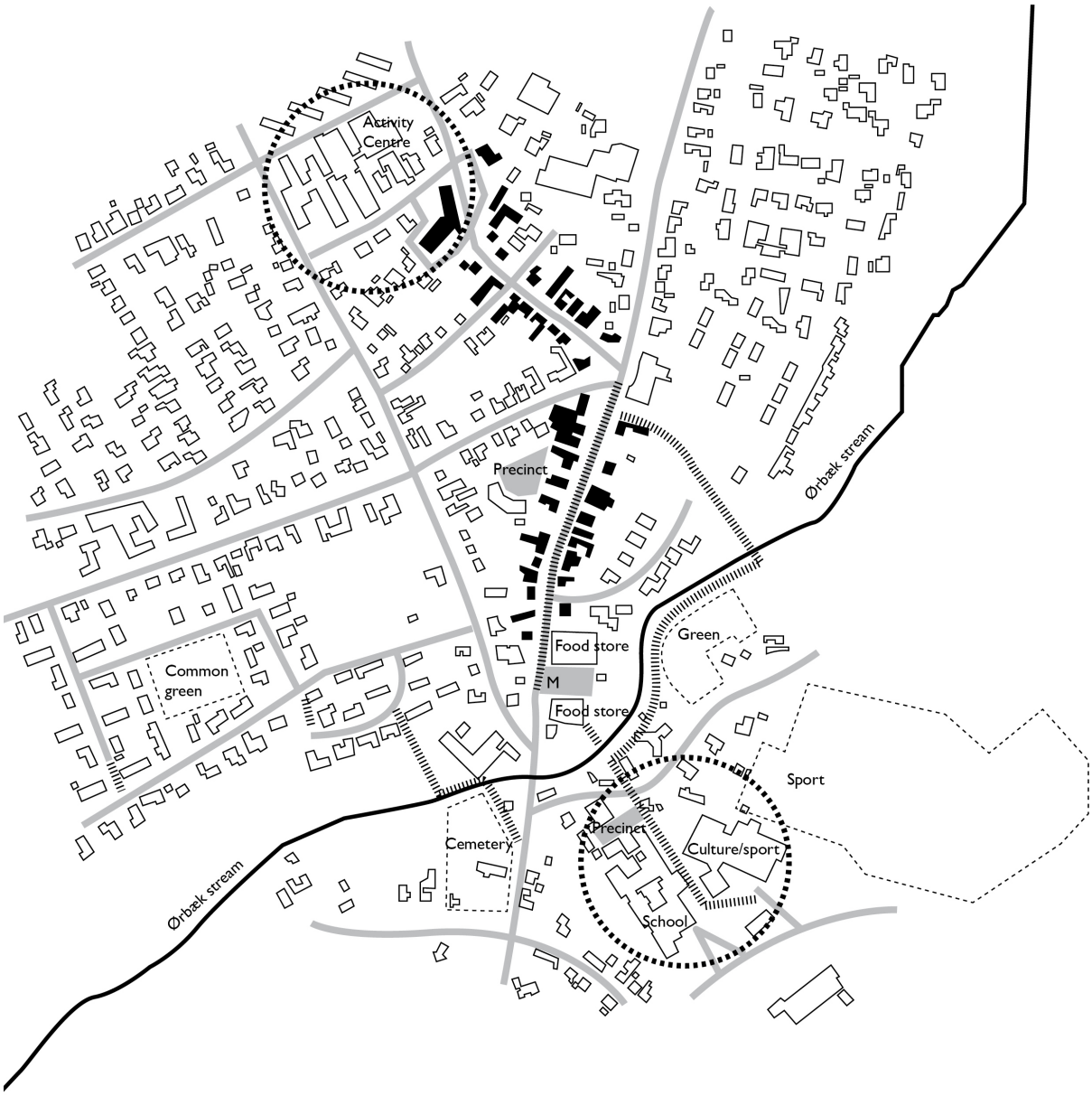


Figure 15
Ørbæk. The map displays the options for transition: the houses in the central part of the main street (in dark colours) formerly contained a number of shops. Now several houses are emptied of shops and ripe for a transition jointly into a residential street with "residentialized" facades and new "stoepen-like" front areas established as part of a redesign of the profile and pavement of the main road. South-east of the main street, a new urban region has emerged (dotted circle), with school, sports centre, cultural centre with library, café, youth club, fitness centre and a small cultural precinct. West of the main street an attractive residential housing area developed with a panoramic view of the Ørbæk Stream. In the north-western corner is situated the day-care and activity centre (dotted circle). Common green areas popular with young people, but also with daycare workers and childminders, are situated east and west of the main street. Two precincts, a residential and an institutional, are enriching the milieu. Finally, footpaths connect the areas in attractive green settings, including the stream.
SOURCE: GROTH AND MIKKELSEN, L.A.

Figure 16
Left: The main street. With refurbished traffic area. On the left side of the street, houses with empty shops, some of which have been turned over to residential usage.
PHOTO: NIELS BOJE GROTH, 2013.
Right: A residential precinct adjacent to the main street.
PHOTO: NIELS BOJE GROTH, 2013.

Figure 17
Ørbæk lost its potential for a new urban square. Two neighbouring discount shops are located here, each with their own separate parking lots, separate areas for outdoor displays of seasonal goods, further separated by a small retaining wall. Not only in Ørbæk, but in most towns, these new retail milieus are ignored by urban planners. They develop according to their own logics within the borders of each shop's private property. Lost are the potentials for designing joint spaces for the common good of customers and citizens. The area is seen at the map, figure 17, which also indicates the possible connection from the area to the new Ørbæk Midtpunkt.
PHOTO: NIELS BOJE GROTH, 2013.

Figure 18
Left: On the rear side of the main street: houses at the urban edge towards the Ørbæk Stream valley with one of the lateral paths offering detours and short cuts to the supermarkets and the Ørbæk Midtpunkt with sports, library, meeting facilities and café.
PHOTO: NIELS BOJE GROTH, 2013.
Right: People in one of the two sports arenas at Ørbæk midtpunkt.
SOURCE: COURTESY OF ØRBÆK BORGERFORENING.

Conclusions

When shops leave a small town, this signals the decline of the community. But when such shops do not leave but relocate in another district of the small town, eventually with a newly-arriving competitor, then, urban restructure rather than urban decline is on the agenda.

This paper is thus about urban restructuring, and it focuses on accommodating structural change. In particular, I have concentrated on around 100 Danish small towns which, until the municipal reform in 2007, enjoyed a position as municipal centres. Many of these towns are developing as residential settlements sustained by the three pillars of *residential urbanism*: residence, leisure, and the retailing of daily groceries made possible by regional enlargement and ongoing metapolization.

It is argued that the emptying out of the main streets is structural and irreversible, and hence that parts of or entire main streets should develop as residential districts, offering these small residential towns a supplementary type of residence, e.g. small apartments for rent. In order to be successful, such a transformation should add to functional transformation, the symbolic transformation of the very meaning of the main streets – from shopping areas to residential ones. I have suggested the import of urban residential related designs from elsewhere, rooted in tradition, rather than in elitist visions: the Netherlandish stoep, the English precinct, and derivatives of spaces of encounter, from the Greek agora to the Foucauldian heterotopian space.

Concrete designs are not dealt with within the scope of this essay, since the stoep, the precinct and the agora are not fixed physical designs. The focus is hence conceptual, and these three concepts are presented as metaphors or travelling ideas from one context to another. One result of using these three concepts is that of bringing a diversity of urban encounters into urban transition: encounters between the passer-by and the private resident at the stoep, between the guest and the host of the estate at the precinct, and between general citizens as well as members of diverse groupings in temporary as well as institutionalized settings.

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