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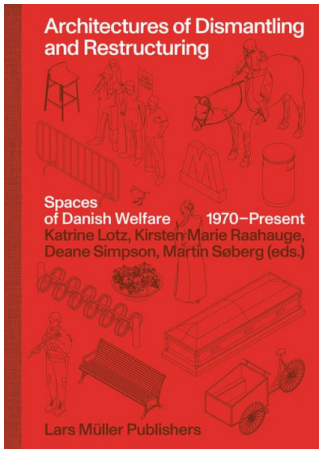
Photo, front cover: Photo: Magnus Rönn. From "Lights in Alingsås", the 2022 outdoor light festval

BOOK REVIEW: KIRSTEN MARIE RAAHAUGE, KATRINE LOTZ, DEANE SIMPSON, MARTIN SØBERG (EDS.) *ARCHITECTURES OF DISMANTLING AND RESTRUCTURING SPACES OF DANISH WELFARE, 1970–PRESENT*

REVIEWER: ANTTI AHLAVA



Lars von Trier's television series *Riget* from 1994 deals with the ideological foundations of a big Danish hospital and conceals a critique of the whole Danish governmental administration. The haunted and chaotic hospital is raised as an allegory for a Nordic welfare state, despairingly claiming legitimacy and authority in the middle of spreading dysfunctionality. The societal control is contrasted by the enthusiasm of the ultra-rationalistic management of the institution against irrational events taking place in the hospital. This represents the downside of welfare's ideological edifice, people's occult beliefs and strange habits counterweighting the official, progressive positivism. *Riget* shows that welfare is a mental construction, a ghost as well.

Riget is also a building, and the spatial resonance – architecture – of Danish welfare society after its golden age shows how designers, especially architects, have contributed to social reforms, less as changemakers and more as loyal servants to the ghost. Socio-political changes in Denmark after 1970 have manifested in the regional concentration of public services and in the experimental digitalisation of hospital interiors but, according to this provocative book, the most essential change has been ideological and normative in the design principles themselves. This book explains how welfare does not only refer to human rights and equality, but also to the reproduction and optimisation of social norms entangled with ideological economy. It might be a coincidence that Lars von Trier

has just returned to dissecting Danish welfare society with his *Riget Exodus* (2022), where the hospital – a sort of crown jewel of the Danish welfare system – needs to be saved from doom.

Illustration: Riget Exodus, Zentropa / Christian Geisnæs.

Doom would be the opposite to a good life, which is usually considered to be the object of welfare. The present institutional conditions for a good life are meticulously analysed in Architectures of Dismantling and Restructuring. This massive combination of articles by 23 authors is associated with the research project Spaces of Danish Welfare, accomplished at the Royal Danish Academy in Copenhagen during 2017-22, but the cross-disciplinary anthology clearly directs to wider and deeper socio-political concerns about community and public services than only the Danish realm. Of the editors representing different fields, Kirsten Marie Raahauge is a spatial anthropologist, Deane Simpson and Katrine Lotz are architects interested in societal changes and Martin Søberg is an art historian who specialises in architecture.

Architectures of Dismantling and Restructuring seems to be aimed at large international audiences. It is written in American English and made available by a Swiss publisher. Its topics must interest not only architects and urban and regional planners, but also everyone adhering to public policies, governance and the spatial dimensions of contemporary ideologies.

The articles of the book display a variety of research methods. Most of the chapters combine empirical research and interviews with literature sources. The somewhat dry but very practical design and diagrams of the

publication are created by Studio Joost Grootens, and they create association to architectural publications rather than to conventional research. This may be misleading because the opus is backed up by extensive references. Most of the material, as well as the prologue and epilogue, are rooted in critical theory and political economy.

For audiences interested in the earlier stages of architecture associated with Danish welfare and more scrutiny on actual physical architecture, the book *Forming Welfare* (2017), partially by the same authors and also based on critical cultural theory, can serve as a warm-up. Now the emphasis is even less on celebrated architecture and even more on mental and political structures. The purpose of this book is to continue expanding the research on welfare by concentrating on its spatial implications.

Housing, education, social security, employment and health are the five canonical welfare institutions; the book tackles the built environment associated with these spheres, with the exception of the sector of employment, if one does not count the analysis of voluntary work in community movements.

The book does reveal how new kinds of social inclusions and exclusions have appeared within the spaces associated with welfare. They have been empowered by such vehicles as social engineering, gentrification and tourism. The authors claim that another concept of welfare discourse – justice – has been transformed from early universalism to presently enforced diversity; simultaneously, the former cohesive feelings of equality have mutated into feelings of existential insecurity in society. A lot has changed since the 1950s, and not only in the physical environment. Many chapters in this book touch upon how the former core attribute of welfare environments – progress – has been replaced by an ideological imperative to cure and care, also by means of architecture.

In a similar manner to many of the illustrations, which not only support the arguments of the text, some of the chapters live their own lives by having only a vague connection to the main narrative. This is quite common for "thematic" architectural books nowadays, and placed on the background of this genre, the visual imagery and layout are skilful. They increase coherence and understanding but also detail the generally abstract analysis.

One of the best parts of the book is its introduction, which is excellent in its clarity, courage and compactness. Also the third part of the book, "Adaptability", is dynamite in its critical analysis, scrutinising mercilessly how the concept of welfare society has proven to be adaptable to changes in other hegemonial ideologies and new forms of value and power, manifested and lived in people's normative expectations and experiences. For example, the statistical approach of social engineering has reappeared, changing the principles of welfare when family dwellings in "vulnerable" suburban housing areas have been excluded from the sphere of welfare, for fear of "parallel societies" taking effect. The book is also enlightening in describing how previously non-existent, tangible compo-

nents have become included in the realm of welfare architecture, such as closed borders, fences and gates.

However, because of the varying quality of the chapters' analytical power, the book self-amputates many of its cleverest insights, or at least creates the impression that some of the writers didn't know what the others were doing. The book is partially its own research material, when naïvely described use value ("basic needs") of architecture or the quality of dwelling can be simultaneously considered as opposites to the machination of neoliberal capitalism, and at the same time be essential parts of it.

Despite some hidden internal contradictions, the articles draw a cohesive picture of the spaces of contemporary Danish welfare society, made for individuals who are victims of environmental threats, the oppressive state and vicious capitalism. The two articles on the new Ghetto Plan of the Danish government and the evolution of design principles in healthcare described by Runa Johannessen show in a compelling way how battles between ideologies have nowadays also become battles between groups of people.

This tome of 464 pages asks repeatedly whose dreams the Danish welfare society manifests and bravely runs against canonical notions on good intentions in public administration. It was particularly informing to read how the very celebrated architecture of the first decades of welfare architecture, with its serially reproduced social housing communities, uniformity, natural seclusion and rationalist aesthetics has become the actual opposite to what is nowadays considered a setting for a good and secure life. The dreams behind architecture have turned upside down, from the satisfaction of solving problems of the underprivileged and the freedom of open air into the present doctrines of selective interaction and ritualistic communication.

Runa Johannessen's account on the recent history of principles in the design of health care facilities is brilliant, describing how the 1970s' industrial approach later evolved into equally technocratic "evidence-based design" with its neuro-sensory control of people and with the optimisation of spaces – this is rationalistic scientification in disguise of a human-based approach. It is clear that the present care-oriented approach, its focus on affects, atmosphere and immersivity is also a tool for neoliberal rationality and optimised marketisation.

Alison J. Clarke's research on Victor Papanek's quasi-anthropological impact on Nordic social design in the 1970s is as well eye-opening. When Clarke writes about the paternalistic export of Danish ideologies to Greenland, one cannot but recognise how the very principles of that decade's critique against corporate capitalism are part of today's mar-

ket mechanism. Papanek and his Nordic followers had a limited view on needs, without considering psychological and ideological motivations, and it is ironical how the profit-driven entrepreneurial market nowadays runs on the very same ideologies of activism, difference, environmental thinking and social equality as this 1970s' anti-capitalistic movement.

This book is mind-boggling in its account on how presumably non-commodified, "original" welfare institutions have now helped to produce a competition state, where previously non-commodified human labour and resources are turned into an asset, social capital and monetarised, for example, through local differences and participatory culture in global competition between places. Deane Simpson's chapter is very insightful in this sense, describing how the aims of liveability, smartness and the right to public space have come to encompass gentrification, predictability and essentially non-adventurous life. Simpson describes in a fascinating manner how liveability produced by urban greening, community events, bicycling culture and art interventions contribute to local differentiation, but in a mentally hygienic form, allied with securitisation and control, and most of all to support the city as an asset in global competition. It would be short-sighted to assume that nowadays urban activism exists outside of postliberal capitalism. A pragmatic reader might reason that there is nothing wrong with that – economic and architectural tendencies can support each other – but this book brings light and clarity to wise argumentation.

For example, Mette Mechlenborg and Marie Stender's take on the controversial Danish ghetto policies emphasises people's right to voluntary withdrawal. They discuss cleverly how people's optional exclusion from normative practices may seem to create a threat to welfare. Simultaneously, the original idealised suburban areas of the welfare society have turned into their reverse, with exactly their original characteristics. Similarly, certain formerly important building and apartment types have become stigmatised.

This book clearly shows how welfare institutions, and the abstract notion of welfare itself, are key venues for economic and value production, wherever new social and spatial practices become sources of value. However, the analysis remains partially superficial. Additional effort could have been put into scrutinising how the original 1920-1970s' welfarism in Denmark probably already included the seed of ideological consumerism in its emphasis on the logic of satisfying needs. One would have also hoped for a more explicit discussion on the origins of welfare – the notion of the good life. This concept apparently is the kernel of welfare idealism. Some of the book's best parts describe what the good life is in the presently prevailing neoliberal and entrepreneurial mindset, attained through liveability or other gentrifying acts and simultaneously increasing land value, but it remains unanswered how one concretely

evaluates the amount or quality of the good life, and what the role of architecture is there.

The designer's role as a contributor to the good life is non-existent in this book, which has a rather structural and political emphasis. Between the articles there remains therefore a gap – a space where numerous consulting designers eagerly act as curators, facilitators and protectors of communities. A designer's role in participatory design today sustains local welfare, but the approach is still in its beginnings and could have been critically approached here with proactive suggestions. Because the concept of welfare and the ideals of the good life behind it stem rather from dreams than reality, it should be necessary to talk about expectation management as well. This is especially crucial when promising "homely" environments to patients and other customers of welfare services. It is not enough to carry out research on the assumption that the architecture of welfare is based on the pursuit to attain a "good life", or "dreams" without opening these terms to critical scrutiny in their physical, psychological, social and institutional practices, diversity and genealogies.

A factor that remains an unattainable but focal point for the book's core subject matter is therefore the linkage between physical architecture and welfare, and not just between decision making and welfare. Was there something in the architecture of welfare institutions during the past 50 years that is a specifically architectural expression, symbol or an effect of "welfare", so that without this linkage the architecture could have been different? It is only Lars Bo Kaspersen who briefly mentions this difficulty in addressing design. It appears that at least some of the authors have been aware of the paradox between the name of the book and its contents, as well as of the difficulty in proving that the architectural expressions, contents and aesthetics would have been different without the local welfare ideology. Comparing the Nordic architecture of public services and housing to its Central European or American counterparts might have been practical when showing how the modernist standardisation and rationalism has turned into the present neoliberal production of monetised local differences and identities. In a similar manner to how the illustrations of this anthology sometimes break free from the strictly descriptive function, it would also have been welcome to include images of architecturally successful buildings or neighbourhoods, even if they might simultaneously represent commercial values. After enough time has passed in the future, people will forget the present technocratic and economic circumstances, but great buildings and places will hopefully still remain.

Empty common spaces in Danish care homes are presented just as a fact, while as it could have also been connected to the book's deeper discussion on the contemporary relationship between welfare and

participation. Deeper discussion would have been welcomed on the topic of how participation is in itself part of the neo-liberal economy, and how it cannot be the essence of welfare itself; welfare is rather what only successful participatory projects create. Concerning the problematic role of participation, one can point out Papanek's Copenhagen Flowchart, which gets notable emphasis in Clarke's article. There, Papanek evidently opposes participatory democracy as well as ecology, damning them because they are based on "false needs"; Papanek calls for alternative types of communities instead. Copenhagen's Christiania is a concrete example of an alternative manifestation of the good life. Where are the other Danish examples?

Architecture is naturally not empty spaces, but room programming plays an important role as well, thus one wonders why changes in the principles of spatial programming have not been discussed much in this book. These would have included new combinations of uses and user groups. Raahauge touches a little on this topic in her article on a town called Tønder, mentioning that such private amenities as bars and buses can be identified as spaces of welfare, if we emphasise the gathering and community aspect of the term. However, this attitude raises the threat of the inflation of welfare, though it might really be that some people practically dwell in bars or learn about the world in public traffic. The welfare society cannot be reduced only to publicly supported buildings; it has entered people's hearts and minds as well. However, what is the point of discussing a topic if practically everything can be included in its sphere? Keeping this in mind, one striking absence of welfare-related spaces is the administration buildings where the welfare society was developed and later orchestrated: all those rationalist office buildings and pompous town halls, which epitomise the very spirit of welfare.

While Max Pedersen points out in his article that there is only limited empirical knowledge on how the positive qualities of neighbourship manifest in everyday life, Claus Bech-Danielsen exemplifies this when he writes that politicians nowadays link the isolation of post-war suburban areas into derogatory "parallel societies". The original ideal of a neighbourhood unit has revealed its underside: a community is one of the basic constituents of postliberal market economy, but its very form also posits a threat to the normalisation demand of the markets. The alliance between community participation and neoliberal capitalism can be exemplified by housing cooperatives. This is a confusing topic in this book, however. Towards its end, community participation is presented as an alternative to market-led architecture, even if most of the book has explained how seemingly beneficial bottom-up movements can become as part of the present stage of capitalism, with the entrepreneurial sharing economy, gentrification and privileged seclusion. This constitutes a political gridlock where an urge to create communities, the fear of uncontrolled communities, participatory planning and segrega-

ting gentrification stall each other's movement. On a pragmatic level, all is fine in Denmark as long as community activism concentrates on increasing the monetary value and exclusivity of the cooperatives running on their non-paid voluntary work. Public spaces, curated co-creation, good architectural design, shared maintenance tasks, urban greening and bicycle racks are part of this formula. The prevailing social utopia is seemingly motivated by "solving challenges together", but essentially it is also based on present greed and today's short-sighted, unsustainable needs in micro-communities. Therefore, the next step of Raahauge's research community could be an inquiry into the logic of needs in architecture: how the welfare-based approach and the present hegemonic market ideology, emphasising participation and community, turns its back on sustainability because it does not consider the future citizens and the affordability and quality of the future society.

I am looking forward to reading a possible next book from Raahauge's group, where it will not be enough to ask about which new spatial models can be developed to "grasp" welfare, but perhaps even to question the aim of questionable type of the "good life" in architecture itself.

I can warmly recommend this book not only to anybody obsessed about Nordic architecture, social institutions, policies and their spatial manifestations, but also to all interested in critical thinking on the interplay between economy and space, as well as all fans of Lars von Trier's *Riget*.