

Rethinking Tourism in a Coastal Town – Engaging through design-experiments UNDERSTANDING, REFRAMING AND REDESIGNING¹

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1. ABSTRACT

The paper presents the overall approach and initial findings developed through the first 2 years of work by a research group at the Aarhus School of Architecture (AAA) working on developing transformative site-specific architectural strategies for a renewed tourism-dominated landscape in the municipality of Ringkøbing-Skjern (RKSK) at the western coast of Denmark. The research presented is a part of a larger 3 year research project done in an interdisciplinary group with researchers from Aarhus University (AU) in collaboration with the local municipality. The ability of architecture and physical design-interventions to both engage with and spark local collaborations and strategic development are at the heart of the project. Overall, the aimed at research contribution is to investigate the potential of architecture to become at the same time a catalyst for tourism as well as for the enhancement of everyday life-experiences, when using a strategic design-based approach. The project departs theoretically from the idea that tourism is a part of and entangled with everyday life in a hybrid urban network. Secondly the objective of the project is to discuss how mapping and 1:1 tests of spatial urban prototypes can be an appropriate way for research to both understand, learn from and impact small tourism-dominated towns.

Keywords: Coastal town, Denmark, Tourist gaze, research-by-design, design-experiments

2. INTRODUCTION

The project is situated in the paradoxical situation of Ringkøbing Skjerns coastal territory. Here we experience two opposing trends. 1) Stagnating economy and loss of population and workplaces as result of the general polarization going on in Denmark where people move towards the major cities. In this context, the territory is often negatively described as Udkants Danmark (Peripheral Denmark). 2) A large, and increasing, interests for the coastal territory as a tourist destination, hence a substantial seasonal exposure of local culture and landscape, and a temporary manifold increase of population (3.3 mio. annual tourists in RKSK). In this context, the territory is often described positively as Vandkants Danmark (Waterfront Denmark). This reciprocal growth trend gives a substantial significance to the tourist sector in the region, and in this context we find it relevant to reintroduce Gregory Ashworth question: *Which Urban Problems are you trying to solve with Tourism?* (Ashworth 2009)

Hvide Sande (White Sands) is a key location in RKSK, holding the lock between the North Sea and Ringkøbing Fjord. As such, Hvide Sande forms an active port in the Danish west-coast region,

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traditionally living of fishing and farming. Also, it has for decades been a prime tourist destination due to its wide white beaches and coastal landscape. This landscape is in a Danish discourse often perceived as the last and most pristine example of ‘nature’. Here written in quotations marks since it is clear that the landscape has been undergoing urbanization for a century, mainly for industrial and touristic purposes, dotted with an almost continuous structure of summer cottages.



At present, in Hvide Sande, the driving transformative forces for development are tourism-related investments and the continued, but changed, industrial use of the natural resources (wind farming and fishing). Often these two driving forces are perceived to conflict. An example is off-shore windmill farms changing the horizon and view from the beach and the summerhouses. The interest and outset of the research project, however, is to investigate positions beyond this dichotomy. By transgressing existing categories like tourist and local, urban and rural, natural and industrial, but looking into the restructuring processes of the physical territory from a broad initial mapping, the project group is looking deeper into the coastal town of Hvide Sande. This is done to investigate its potential based *on* and not *in spite* of this entanglement and easy dichotomy often used in both planning discussions, as well as in stereotypical tourist-oriented presentations of the site.

3. OBJECTIVES

The point of departure is the hypothesis that sustainable development of the urban coastal territory in RKSJ must be established in a more complex dialogue between places, residents, tourists, and other actors, using what is already there and thinking broader in terms of what things brought in and developed is *doing* and can *do*. This raises the question of how to engage with, understand and describe the complex network of actors and secondly how this knowledge informs a sustainable future development.

Through an onsite Research by Design approach the project is investigating situations of negative and positive interference between the various actors in Hvide Sande. Practice-based design methods are applied to map, understand and engage with these situations and through a series of physical design-interventions, site-specific potentials are tested and discussed in an iterative knowledge production.

Architecture is not about how it fxxxing looks, but about what it fxxxing does (Tredje Natur, n.d.)

This rather provocative statement from Third Nature links to a very relevant discussion about the role of contemporary designers and architects and how to engage with the socio material network that

constitute the hybrid urban territory. The question *what does it do* opens a relatively new discussion in architectural theory, by departing in an interest of performativity. This is linked to the growing focus on Actor Network Theory (ANT) as approach to a relational concepts of the urban territory.

(M)y argument is founded not on architecture as object, in which the visual presence often overwhelms critical thoughts, but rather on architecture as agency. (Till 2009: 146-147)

Tom Avermaete expands the notion of the urban territory as a network where the knowledge and skills of citizens are understood as immanent sources that are unlocked, activated and managed. In this case architecture and planning is no longer seen as an exclusively professional matter, but rather as a case of commoning between different urban actors. By perceiving the urban environment as a network of resources – human, build and natural resources, we can consider architecture as an intervention which holds the capacity to unlock some of these resources. (Avermaete, 2016)

As such the project suggests taking advantage of mixing abovementioned driving transformative forces and hence to break with traditional destination planning, and destination branding, which still in Denmark is the way tourism development and also tourism research has its focus (Pasgaard 2012). The strategic purpose of such a maneuver is to create denser and more ambiguous coastal towns holding a greater programmatic complexity. This is relevant because Hvide Sande, just as many other towns and parts of the Danish coastal landscape, is also a place where people live. The desired outcome is coastal towns which are less negatively impacted by standardized tourist gazes and damaging seasonal fluctuation, and hence an exploration into how physical planning can support a more sustainable, integral and placebased development and growth in the tourist industry.

The main hypothesis is that architecture, when using a strategic design-based approach and applying it to an urban and programmatically as well as aesthetically muddled situation, can become a tool for mapping, understanding and activating abovementioned resources and hence a catalyst for a more integral tourism. This is possibly of great relevance within the small towns of the Danish coastal region, creating much more value for money on the tourism investment than when they are developed in a more limited and secluded landscape setting.

4. METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMING

The project is developed in an inductive and explorative way, driven by a practice based approach. From an initial stage of the research it has been the intention to let the research practice evolve continuously rather than deductively apply to a defined methodology. This approach is inspired by the research paradigm Research by Design (Verbeke 2013) in the sense that the architectural practice is the primary driver used to generate insight, understanding and knowledge.

The project draws on a literature review for establishing its state-of-the-art baseline. The research draws on different theoretical insights and literatures: First of all the discussion of ‘the tourist gaze’

(Urry and Larsen 2011) and how this perspective can inform the perceived conflicts and polarization between the two transformative drivers of the town: Tourism and its drive towards ‘authentic’ landscapes versus the industrial gaze looking at the landscape as a natural resource that can be harvested. This leads to a discussion of performativity (Kiib 2010) and affordance (Gibson 1979) of the urban environment, and how this is affected by gazes.



Secondly, the above mentioned approach to a physical context is based in a relational concept of place drawing on Healey (2007), Hvattum's work on ‘the tyranny of place’ (Hvattum 2010) as well as Tietjen (2011) who has developed a relational concept of space-based in mappings and design experiments in Northern Jutland, also drawing on ANT. This opens for a hybrid understanding of the urban territory, more specifically how sites of everyday functions are entangled with sites of for instance touristic consumption, and how ‘urban’ is entangled with ‘landscape’ and ‘nature’. (Offner 2000, Sieverts 2003, Nielsen 2015).

The architectural discussion is linked to the ‘gaze’ discussion and follows on recent Scandinavian projects such as the National Tourist Routes in Norway² and the Danish campaign Stedet Tæller (Place matters)³ with their site-specific architecture. The question is how such place-based and design-oriented strategies apply in an urban and thus more culturally coded, programmatically diverse and layered context. Moving beyond architecture of the eye, and of the privileged and detached position in the landscape, to a more embedded and entangled one – moving from architecture as object towards architecture as agency.

The abovementioned discussions are continuously developed as a critical perspective and conceptual framework in dialogue with the site-specific design-actions. The mapping of the urbanized territory of Hvide Sande is using inspiration from James Corner's idea of ‘finding as founding’ (Corner 1999), which defines mapping as a creative practice with the capacity or *agency* to “*uncover realities previously unseen or unimagined, even across seemingly exhausted grounds. Thus, mapping unfolds*

² The National Tourist Routes in Norway has been mentioned and discussed in numerous publications. See e.g. Haukeland (2011).

³ ‘Stedet tæller’ is a campaign initiated by the member-based philanthropic organisation Realdania. For specific information about the campaign see: www.stedet-taeller.dk/ and for specific information on Realdania see: <http://www.realdania.org>. Accessed 2018-01-12.

potential; it re-makes territory over and over again, each time with new and diverse consequences” (Corner 2014; 197).

Based on initial cartographic mapping exercises a series of urban situations are chosen for further in-depth studies. The sites are all placed in Hvide Sande, and furthermore revolve around the hybrid territory surrounding the harbor. The mapping points to a current programmatic separation between the northern industrial port, the tourist center south of the harbor, residential areas, local and tourism activities. It is the intention to investigate the possibilities for increased interaction between these areas and their users, and how this links to the strategic planning discussion - both spatial and experiential.

This process is seen as an extension and expansion of the preceding mapping process and introduction of a dialectic design-approach. Central to this phase is the development of a series of site-specific design-interventions that serves as pivoting point for dialogue with various actors.

The initial method for pinpointing the abovementioned situations of interest has been explorative field-studies; using walking (Schultz, 2014), photography and ad hoc meetings as perceptual mapping tools.

The substantial time spent in the field, and the large amount of empirical data collected, started to resonate with the theoretical framework and the discussion of how various gazes are affecting the urban environment. A specific focus towards the ambiguous reading of and engagement with the urban industrial environment in Hvide Sande started to develop a common ground for further investigation. That the industrial fishing harbor of Hvide Sande is perceived differently according to cultural gazes is obvious, but this finding initiates a discussion of the performative capacity of the urban environment (Samson, xxx), and how this is expanded when exposed to different gazes, as the two simple examples underneath illustrates; 1) the south pier, established as wave protection for the harbor and as such a piece of technical infrastructure but is simultaneously used by various other actors utilizing its affordances as wind cover, seating, promenade, tribune, playground, ect. 2) the harbor environment performs as both working space for the sailor and as a scene for spectating for the gazing couple.

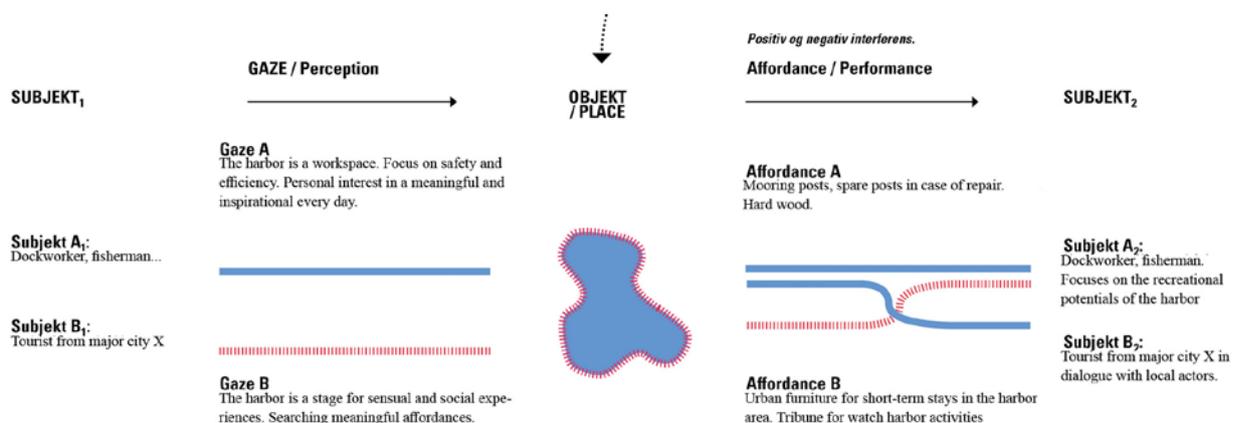


This focus raises a discussion of the concept of affordance (Gibson 1979). Affordances have to do with the meaningful action room that occurs between people and the environment, thereby being relational and dynamic. In Hvide Sandes complex actor landscape, where users' relationships with the area vary considerably, the affordance concept is particularly interesting to investigate. The various gazes of the area help to create environmental affordances, thereby enabling an experience full of compassion.

This tentative finding of how the scope of action is expanded as a result of the gaze diversity of the area becomes a focal point for the development of site-specific interventions. This focus is developed and tested in dialogue with central actors and stakeholders related to the area.

The design-interventions can be seen as a series of disruptions or rearrangements of familiar situations, behaviors and places in the industrial area. Through simple design actions the intention is to activate hidden affordances and amplify alternative gazes, and hence initiate a broader discussion of the potential and conflicts when increasing interaction between actors. At the same time, the well-known distribution of roles between expert/layman and local/tourist is distorted and hence questioned. The design actions are related to Design Probes (Gaver 1999), Design interventions (Halse 2014) and Prototypes (Mogensen, 1992), in its attempt to generate novel qualitative insights and knowledge by reframing what is usually taken for granted.

Departing in abovementioned field observations and the tentative findings of the apparent relationship between various gazes and affordances of places, the diagram underneath was developed as a conceptual framework for the design-interventions: here the arrow pointing towards the object/place is seen as a design action disrupting or shifting the predominant affordance and hence impacting the gaze of the involved actors. The objective of such a maneuver is to facilitate a debate about meaningful positive interference by expanding the scope of places.



Five design-interventions have been conducted in five different sites of the harbor. The designs are tested and refined in an iterative process involving local stakeholders such as local industrial actors, the port authorities (main landowner in central Hvide Sand), the planning department, and tourist



Figur 1

actors. As the design-interventions are site-specific and mostly depart in rethinking, rearranging and redesigning existing elements and places, the process has been a constant negotiation with stakeholders uncovering the scope of action, interests, conflicts, competencies and opinions. This qualitative data has been documented in various formats (email, images, phone call, adhoc meetings, workshops, interviews) as it has unveiled gradually in unplanned situations.

Departing in abovementioned diagram, and for practical reasons, the design-interventions are mostly established through simple design moves; such as rearranging, adding and subtracting. The choice of medium has been eclectic and varied from drawing to model, renderings, diagrams, mockups and 1:1 installations.

On the following pages the iterative and dialectic design process is illustrated in two diagrams. Figure 02 gives a simplified overview of the progress of the design-interventions. As the project is shifting focus in the next phase, from dataproductio to analysis and reflexion, it is the intention to develop this diagram into an extensive projectmap showing the iterative design process of how respective designs has generated debate, engagement and insight, and thus mutated into new designs and new insights.

The present, figure 01 illustrates an extended line of action and events from design-experiment 03 Fjordharbor. In this case the simple act of illuminating some yarnpoles stacked for storage, by the local fishermen, led to a series of local interactions subsequently tentative findings: 1) a romantic/nostalgic gaze on the area and hence a rift for and against the ongoing transformation into a cottage area. 2) Strong reactions to the design, spanning from onsite discussions about the use, the balance between tourism and fishing ect. towards more physical reactions with the strongest manifestation being an alternative prototype coproduced by a group of neighbors.

5. CONCLUSION

Conclusions are only intermedieate and partial since the project is still in development and the data generated from the design-experiments are yet to be processed.

The mappings and design experiments points to several preliminary conclusions: Firstly, the project's connection with a general Danish discussion

suggests a fundamental reflection or re-conceptualization of the issue of the tourism / local, culture / nature, work / experience and city / country dichotomies that much of the discussion of both tourism development and territorial development is linked to. The overall mapping of RKSK has shown a hybrid territory where many layers are written on top of each other through historical development. Here building on and negotiating differences between essentially opposing interests by being based on very specific site explorations (in a broad sense including actors both human and non-human) can provide new uses, new gazes and new collaborations. Findings from the design-experiments points towards the potential for a much wider scope of positive interference between actors in Hvide Sande.

Another preliminary conclusion, related to this, is that the design-experiments and thereby architecture and an architectural approach can be relevant as a way to open and make visible the complexities of the site in tourism dominated coastal towns. The research so far confirms that the more complex and layered situation requires long processes involving several stakeholders probably of a different kind and nature than in those projects arranging tourist gazes in more serene settings.

The work also shows that the approach and process in itself is of value to make visible the different gazes and interests in a site.

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