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CONSIDERATIONS FOR IMPROVISATION, PARTICIPATION AND THE COMMONS IN A DANISH CONTEXT

Acting in-situ and drawing retrospectively

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ABSTRACT

Public space in the welfare state is managed and controlled with defined borders and boundaries. Almost nothing is left for improvisation. This practice based research explores the potential for a relational logic in planning and design proposals. Instead of beginning with designing buildings, it begins with imagining a place by observing things and situations found on site and letting the found relations manifest themselves through full scale in-situ built structures. Through the work by The Office for Art in Town - a project space running parallel to the municipality of Ballerup, a Copenhagen suburb - this paper discuss possibilities for creation of a collective suburban realm. Which questions and perspectives can contribute to the discussion of participation and organization of the commons from a Danish point of view?

In her talk, 'Women, Reproduction, and the Construction of Commons', political theorists, Silvia Federici [2013] describes how the commons often are being promoted as a buffer between the public and the private. Rather than looking at the principles of the commons as a true alternative that can transform society and its social relations, conceptions of the commons are trying to create spaces that humanize the present capitalism system. Federici asks how to ensure the efforts made to create different forms of social relations, based on cooperation and principle of sharing, are not being corrupted by capitalism, using the commons as its last shore to regenerate itself?

In: 'On the Commons: A Public Interview with Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides', architect, Stavros Stavrides and political economist, Massimo De Angelis [2010] are discussing what the commons and participation actually mean. Stavrides imagines the production of common space to be differentiated from today's capitalist production of space. Common space is to be conceived as relations instead of quantities, where space always has a value and can be divided and sold easily; - and as a potential network of passages linking one space to another, rather than a sum of defined places to be controlled or liberated. Stavrides makes a distinction between the concept of the commons based on the idea of a community and based on the idea of the public. Community refers generally to a homogeneous group of people, whereas the public emphasizes the relation between different communities. De Angelis argues that whenever producing commons based on the concept of the public, a production of the respective community and its forms of 'commoning' is needed. A new common and its community cannot only consist of the organizers, since facilitating the meeting and negotiation across diverse communities is necessary. De Angelis stresses that a common space based on the concept of the public is different to a 'public space', where individuals do not have to take responsibility, since it is managed by the local authority. De Angelis claims that a fundamental aspect of 'commoning' is the role of reproduction and that for every visible work of production there is an invisible work of reproduction. Therefore, the people who want to share a common space will have to work for its reproduction, which does not only mean maintenance and cleaning, but also reproducing the legitimacy to claim the space regarding the community, the municipality etc.

The Danish welfare state has experienced several citizens driven alternative models for urban welfare organization in alternative communities since the early seventies. Inspired by international discourses and practices that stimulated social issues and liberation from authorities, unplanned settlements as The Thy Camp, 1970 took place and squatting of former military barracks lead to the proclamation of The Freetown Christiania, 1971. Christiania is situated on lucrative ground of high financial value in the center

of Copenhagen. It is based on ideas of an unplanned, non-consumerist city within the city, transgressing norms and regulations.

Art historian, Signe Sophie Bøggild [2011] describes how Christiania's ideas of an unplanned, non-consumerist city within the city, transgressing norms and regulations, made Steen Eiler Rasmussen, godfather of Danish welfare city planning, recognize and speak up about Christiania's potential. Eiler Rasmussen defended and protected Christiania because of the individual possibility of free expression and marking of the physical framework of peoples own life, the relations between the planned and the unplanned city and the creation of communities. Christiania accepts marginalized people, reuses old buildings and dream of being a true sustainable society, compared to contemporary consumer societies.

Over the years Christiania and The State have confronted each other many times. Christiania challenges The State by replacing official rules and regulations with the claim of self-governance and it challenges the nuclear-family citizen life and the very foundation of capitalist system on private ownership of land and buildings.

Practitioners and theorists have incorporated many aspects of the Free-town into contemporary planning procedures: temporality as methods to initiate urban projects, participation of the individual, empowerment, mixed use, site-specificity, sustainable solutions, local democracy, small-scale, preservation of historical structures, re-use, focus on urban processes, culture, the relation between the private and the public, transparency, communication, dialogue and identity etc. They disagree in their understanding of the degree of democracy and its premises, openness, questions and decision-making in relation to participation.

Architect and writer, Markus Miessen, [2016] argues that transparency can be dangerous to critical work and in some cases to democracy too. In his latest book, 'Crossbenching', Miessen favours a proactive and self-initiated way of involvement, where people force themselves into contexts, frameworks and discourses that they have not necessarily been invited to take part in and without being trapped in internal political matters. His crossbencher is thought of similar to a member of parliament who have no party-political affiliation and participate in parliamentary proceedings independently.

Following the role of the outsider, political theorists, Chantal Mouffe [2000] introduces the concept of 'agonistic pluralism' - claiming that it is important to accept the public realm as a conflictual and constantly challenged space. Mouffe [2007] argues that artistic critical work can empower the site with a disruptive energy and expose hidden contradictions of the site.

Architect and theorist, Jane Rendell, [2006] suggest that 'critical spatial practice' can transgress the limits of art and architecture practices and en-

gage with the social and the aesthetic as well as the public and the private. The term draws attention not only to the importance of the critical, but also to the spatial, indicating the interest in exploring the spatial aspects of interdisciplinary processes or practices that operate between art and architecture. Rendell points out, that boundaries drawn around notions of private and public are not neutral lines, but contours that are culturally constructed and which indicate specific value systems. Public and private, and the variations between these two terms, can mean different things to different people - protected isolation or unwelcome restraint, intrusion or invitation, exclusion or separation.

According to political theorists, Bonnie Honig, [2017] public things are under pressure, but crucial to democracy. Public things like libraries, schools, transportation etc. are necessary, even if not efficient, because they help people develop healthy attachments to the world and to each other, which then enables people to gather into collectives. Honig insist that new rituals and actions should be created in order to preserve public things.

Today, Danish municipalities are inviting people to participate in socially engaged urban regeneration programs. Usually the models for city planning are based on harmonious participation, trying to avoid friction and therefore organized with inherent control. Often people can only participate from a list of pre-set options, which usually generates predictable reactions. This research wants to begin with the things, situations and relations already present before the municipalities engage with citizens.

Ballerup Municipality is mainly driven by market forces. Place making is dependent on developers, retail is dominated by a shopping centre and cars are in favour. At present, The Station Forecourt is being redesigned by an architectural firm, including a compression of the bus terminal, which creates possibility for a new town square that could become the town's new entrance when arriving by train.

Since 2011 The Office for Art in Town / Gitte Juul [2017] has been operating parallel to the municipality of Ballerup, working outside the town hall, directly on the streets and squares. Material, immaterial and social structures have continuously been constructed and embodied the value of discussion and dissensus. The Office for Art in Town has operated from a rebuild container at The Station Forecourt, in an empty shop in the Shopping Center, in an empty shop in the pedestrian street and in a 'Waiting Hall' at the bus terminal, built for the occasion. Full scale in-situ structures have been built directly in collaboration with local citizens in order to create public encounters for discussions as a critical comment to conventional regulations. The Office for Art in Town has interacted with public things such as libraries, schools and public street inventory, identified and involved public things that create

common cause among citizens and identified citizen driven organizations and involved them in projects. With Silvia Federici's concern in mind about the commons being corrupted by capitalism, The Office for Art in Town points toward a crossroad, where authorities and a critical spatial practice maybe can intersect in a productive manner. Through its in-situ actions - manifested in performative, improvisational and provisional built form - it challenges standard municipal routines and hence, seeks to inspire the municipality to search for alternative ways of thinking about city planning and ways of including alternative planning methods in the economic framework of big development projects.

The practice and the research uses the built in-situ actions to explore and unfold particular aspect of planning and participation. Instead of beginning with designing, it begins with imagining a place by being directed by things and situations found on site such as relations between people, places and things. The method involves gathering things and situations (from present and past) and letting them find their own logic through full scale built structures. At various stages during the in-situ actions, the emerging planning / design ideas are discussed and tested by the local community, through the concrete built arrangements that people can wander about and react upon directly.

A main track in the doctoral research is an investigation between ownership, use and liability, which raises the question: when and how informal strategies can become an integrated part of the distribution system / infrastructure of the collective realm?The research explores the relations between people, places and things found on site, during which time certain confronts with property, liability and risk-taking are discovered.

The effort made by The Office for Art in Town to create alternative public spaces in Ballerup in collaboration with identified public things as the local library, the local museum and citizens driven organizations, can be seen as a case, through which ideas about what it means to share or what it means to live in public can be tested. According to De Angelis and Stavrides, [2010] spaces, that do not simply impose the values of authorities, are produced and inhabited through negotiating exchanges between different groups of people. Therefore, such spaces cannot simply belong to a certain community that defines the rules; there has to be an ongoing, open process of rulemaking. Besides the psychical architectural Forecourt and new town square in Ballerup, a framework of rules needs to be made for the new common, which has to do with the operation, timetables and protocols of everyday life and use, in order to investigate how the diverse communities can come together to share the work of reproduction of the new square.

This regulative work can eventually feed back into the practice of designing mobile, adaptable and re-useable public things to be used by different

groups of citizen driven organizations. Amenities that can turn spaces to public advantage.



Figure 1: 'Waiting Hall', The Office for Art in Town, 2015.

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