CONFERENCE: HOUSING - A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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[FAVOURIT HOUSING] HOW TO CREATE NEW ARCHITECTURAL COMMUNICATION METHODS - COSTUMIZED FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF FUTURE HOUSING

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WITHIN WALLS

INTRODUCTION

Future housing – the consumption of space

How do we consume space? This is one of the key questions in the discussion of the development of our future housing. With a growing population in the cities, environmental challenges and a lack of not only affordable but also decent homes, a whole new mindset has to take form regarding the way we live. In today's society, inhabiting a space is not just to have a place to dwell it is also a capital investment and a reflection of your personality and your wealth. Our homes exhibit our happiness and success, and our social status is directly measurable in square metres. Can this architectural behaviour be changed? We need to set a new urban agenda together with the public by introducing a new mindset on how we consume and inhabit space. How do we communicate these kinds of questions? During a ten-year period from the sixties to the seventies, a political decision was made by the Swedish government to build one million homes. This became known as the *Million Homes Programme*¹. The intention of providing affordable housing to the masses was good but the end result was areas with poor architectural features without a human scale. Today these housing areas are the most challenged areas when it comes to criminal records and unemployment. Today, there is once again an excessive need for new homes in Sweden. The question is: how do we avoid repeating history?

At the same time, anthropologic studies in Denmark reveals that square metres of housing per person has increased from 29m^2 to 52m^2 from 1960 to 2000^4 and nothing indicates that this expansion is about to slow down. The study states that the Danes desire the impression of ample space in their homes; the square metres needed for this is an assessment made by each individual. At the same time the study states that too much space can be a stress factor; it leaves the inhabitants with the feeling of empty, uncanny rooms, hoarding of things, or rooms without function. Spacing is good, void is bad. Quite often the most valued zones in our homes are the tiny ones: the cosy nooks and corners. ⁵

The contradiction lies in the fact that the Danes prefer inhabiting tiny nooks and small spaces, because they consider them to be homely, but at the same time pursuit larger homes because they consider the amount of square metres to be a direct reflection of their economic and social success.

You are what you inhabit or in other words: You inhabit, what you are - Klaus Rifbjeg⁶

Quantity versus Quality

Is it time to suggest a new way of perceiving our homes? Change the perception in order to start seeing our home as a collection of favourite spots, nooks and corners? Is it possible to introduce a new equation where personal selection equals homeliness, happiness and status?

As the cities grow and the density increases, a new mindset amongst planners and the public has to take form. One of many parameters in the future of housing is not only to build attractive and affordable houses but also to critically discuss the values of a home. If social status continues to be measured through the mere size of ones home, we will have a problem that will grow at the same pace

as the growing housing problem. Can we challenge the perception that increasing square metres is equal to increasing social and economic value as a member of a modern society?

One of the challenges is how we as city planners and architects construct this mind shift. Instead of just dictating dense living through our design we need to start concentrating on constructing a public understanding of living more dense and change the attitude towards our homes. This requires setting up an environment where the dialogue can lead us to new solutions of how to inhabit space. This necessitates new planning tools where the public is engaged from the very beginning of the planning process, not just in order to fulfil the growing expectations of 'user participation' in the design process but also to form a new urban agenda.

A critical debate about our future housing has many factors but one that should be important is the public. The challenge is how to introduce a new architectural agenda of square metre quality versus square metre quantity in a format that inspires rather than instructs.

HOW TO START AN ARCHITECTURAL DEBATE?

Most of us are born inside architecture, we work within architecture, we raise our families within architecture and we most often die inside architecture. Especially in Denmark – it is almost impossible to find a piece of land that is not designed or controlled by humans, quite often by architects or engineers. Architecture is almost omnipresent.⁷

Still, the broader public considers architecture to be abstract and pretentious. They do not see architecture as something that has anything to do with them, which may be the reason that it is most often the same small homogenous part of the public that engages in the architectural discussions.

But the public do, contrary to what they think, have something to say about architecture. They are the super users, the experts. Without public opinions and user experiences, architects and engineers will not have the inside knowledge that is necessary to improve and evolve our built environment.

Give People a Language

Or Maybe it is the Architects Who Need to Learn How to Speak?

As for every profession, architecture needs its own terminology, tools and methods. But architects cannot necessarily use the same language and sketching methods outside the profession.

Just like engineers, lawyers and doctors, our work affects people's everyday lives. We, as architects, create surroundings that quite often shape social behaviour. But how can we improve the built environment if we are not able to discuss the spatial symptoms with its users?

If we want to challenge and develop our housing situation, an equal dialog must be established between those who design and those whom the design is for. Otherwise previous mistakes will be repeated. User participation in the building process is not something new but as the challenges of the future changes, methods to establish these dialogues must be changed as well.

These new planning methods should not only cover the demands of a dialogue for the sake of dialogue itself. They should be taken seriously; research shows that public dialogue used in the planning process as a cover up to "sell" an already drawn plan can undermine and threaten the democracy. This makes it even more important that these dialogues both fulfil the feeling of participation for the public and provides new insight to the planners.

How do we initiate these abstract, creative and informative interdisciplinary architectural dialogues? Architects need to critically review their traditional representational tools and vocabulary. When introducing new design and communication methods these have to be customized in relation to the specific challenge. In this case, methods that enable discussions about our future homes and the way we live. Discussions such as; what is a home? What makes you feel at home? What values does your home represent? How does your home reflect you? What is homeliness?

Through this dialogue a new set of architectural potentials can be outlined. Potentials that include not only quantifiable values but also values that comprise the psychological effects space have upon us. Hopefully we can come closer to new ideas about what our future homes should be like by establishing design methods that derive from a combination of these values.

NEW ARCHITECTURAL COMMUNICATION TOOLS

The architectural process will always depend on its representation methods. Unfortunately the written word, drawings, plans, sections and 3D visualizations can be excluding for the layman. Even though the technical progress has reached a point where we can almost sketch in 1:1, these often only

represent the structural frames and lack the ability to represent the atmosphere of the lives lived within.

When you [the architect] are not working with your familiar representation formats like models, drawings and descriptions, you end up with a very significant insight: in hope of making yourself heard, one needs to crystallize the train of thought to something directly appealing. – Jury Panel, *Bo Tæt*, discussing the communicative possibilities and obstacles that lie within exploring architectural representation through film⁹

If we want to initiate a public discussion about the concept of a home, we need to construct new communication methods. Methods that can address the classic architectural structures parallel with the emotional impact that the space these structures create have upon us.

The complexity of space needs the simplicity of a clear language. In this case simplicity should not necessarily be understood as graphic simplicity, such as *simple* diagrams to communicate spatial considerations, but simplicity in regard to a clear abstraction that can communicate the poetic and atmospheric values of architecture. There is a need for new methods that can supplement the classical architectural representation formats when they reach their communicative limit.



Figure 1. Example of diagram

New Media to Frame the Abstract Values of Space

Architecture consists of spatial relationships, movement, rhythm and time, as well as the relation between materials, light, sound, acoustics and aesthetics. No media can represent the full architectural experience, the atmosphere, the structure and the spatial relationships. But we may be able to improve the architectural representation by critically evaluate our formats and try out new combination of media.

Architecture exists, like cinema, in the dimension of time and movement. One conceives and reads a building in terms of sequences. To erect a building is to predict and seek effects of contrast and linkage through which one passes... –Jean Nouvel ¹⁰

The film media holds the possibility to capture materials, sound, light, time and movement in one. But beside these obvious representational references to the experience of architecture, film also holds the ability to represent atmospheric interpretations and abstractions. The majority of people are capable of filmic interpretation. The level of abstract information in film can be extremely high and still be understood by the broader public.

Architecture operates in the borderland of practice and theory, as well as art and the ordinary, and it needs a language that can contain these dynamics. The film as a media can enable a twist of the architectural language. With humour, abstraction and allegory this media can operate with heavy subjects and create a vocabulary that equalize the hierarchic relation between the architect and the user. Film is one example of a media that can develop the architectural communication toolset.

The Film Yndlingsbolig [Favourite Housing] as an Example

In 2010 the film *Favourite Housing* won first price in the Danish national competition 'Bo Tæt' [Dense Living] announced by The Danish Arts Foundation.¹¹ This was the first architecture competition in Denmark where the submission format was film. The aim of the competition was to change the public perspective on the explosive expansion of the square metres used in housing.

The film presents a modern urban collective accommodation where prestige is no longer measurable in square metres but in quality of life. *Favourite Housing* tries to capture space, not by presenting the structure that creates space, but by presenting the life that is lived within. The essence of the film is to focus on the rooms that are important to us, to address the discussion about how we feel at home.

The best home doesn't always biggest home. equal favourite pieces you only take vour there will be plenty to go around - Favourite Housing 12

Instead of expanding the home with spatial quantity in order to reflect your personal success, the film tries to twist the perspective, and suggest that we ought to show our personalities through spatial choices. In a world where time is one of the most valued commodities, the film suggests that smaller homes ought to be considered prestigious. The film suggests investmenting in personal time instead of empty square metres. It addresses the discussion of how a lower rent enables us to work fewer hours, and how smaller homes do not take as long to clean. If time is a commodity, and dense living frees our time, this could be an alternative expression of social status.

By using ironic metaphors such as a recipe on how to cook your own perfect home full of square metres, the film highlights the topic of how we consume and inhabit space. The film literally puts the "petty bourgeois" dream of the perfect housing coated with prestige and ideals through a meat grinder. Through preposterous aesthetics the film reach the conclusion that size doesn't matter. Different people have different spatial needs, and the film suggests that future housing should focus upon the meaningful value in adaptation.¹³

Recipe for a family home (four persons): Start your dream house with happiness, a dining kitchen, an entertainment room, a bedroom, a carport, hospitality, open space, a bathroom, clean lines, a summer room, a computer room, an utility room, a guestroom, a laundry room, prestige, a dining room, a game room, a wine cellar, space...

Lots of space...

- Favourite Housing¹⁴





Figure 2 & 3. Film stills from Yndlingsbolig [Favorite Housing]

HOW TO DISCUSS OUR FUTURE HOUSING AND HOMES

In regard to creating an equal and diverse discussion about our future housing conditions, the discussion needs a twist - a positive twist. But the population of Scandinavia today, do not like being

lectured or instructed. Especially considering people do not react well to architectural master plans – designed by architects who can afford to live in spacious villas far away from their vast concrete creations. It is not enough to rely on us wanting to live denser just because the planet cannot support our extreme consumption.

In order to create a change of attitude towards the concept of a home, we need to change the perspective within the public and within city planners. It is not about renouncing the possibility to live a good life, with plenty of space and freedom; it is about choosing to live dense in order to be free; economically, materially and socially. Shifting the perspective from square metre quantity to square metre quality, dense living has to be a choice, not an economic misfortune.

What Role is Left for the Architect to Play?

What role do the architects play in the matter of changing public perspective? There was a time when the architect would be considered the mastermind, and (s)he would only have to convince one constructor or benefactor, but time has run out for the Master Planner. We executed our grand housing experiments in the sixties, now it is time to analyse, start a discussion with the inhabitants of the housing projects and evaluate.

In many ways we have moved away from modernism, but when it comes to our buildings we still live with modernistic planning methods and that is contradictory.

- Christer Larsson¹⁵

The housing projects of the future need to be founded on a dialog with its users and not by a master plan designed only by architects. We want the city to grow dynamically, fertilized by the people, but at the same time using the vast knowledge that architects hold. Architecture is complex and consists of equal parts theory and practice. Architecture without theory is hollow and plain and architecture without human practice is intimidating, hostile and simply not homely. How do we enable cities to grow on a symbiosis of architectural knowledge and practical experience? And how do we build an environment where 'amateurs' and 'professionals' talk a common language, a common language deriving from the urge to develop the space surrounding and filling our homes.

If we wish only to develop the technological potential without touching human relationships, we end up with something like mass housing. - John N Habraken¹⁶

ENDNOTES

¹ The definition of the concept Million Homes Programme is a summary title of the building- and housing policy that were conducted in Sweden between 1964-75 Jörnmark. *Miljonprogrammet* [Million Homes Programme]. (Nationalencyklopedin. 2015) http://www.ne.se/uppslagsverk/encyklopedi/lång/miljonprogrammet

² Statistics shows that areas with low socioeconomically status such as the Million Homes Programme has a tendency to have a higher rate of criminal activity and mental illness. Joachim Vogel, *SCB* + *Perspektiv på välfärden* [SCB + Perspective on the welfare] (Örebro: SCB-tryck, 2004):127

³ According to statistics, there is a deficient of 25.000 to 92.000 homes in Sweden; the exact number varies,

³ According to statistics, there is a deficient of 25.000 to 92.000 homes in Sweden; the exact number varies, depending on how the statistics are calculated. Boverket: Myndigheten för Samhällsplanering, byggande och boende *Bostadsbristen ur ett marknadsperspektiv* [Housing crisis from a market perspective] (Karlskrona: Boverket internt, 2012):14

⁴Kyllesbech, *Great Living! En undersøgelse om at have god plads* [Great Living! A study about spacious living] (Copenhagen: Filmbureauet and Statens Kunstfonds Arkitekturudvalg, 2010): 2

⁵Kyllesbech, *Great Living! En undersøgelse om at have god plads* [Great Living! A study about spacious living] (Copenhagen: Filmbureauet and Statens Kunstfonds Arkitekturudvalg, 2010): 3-9

⁶ Rifbjerg, *Huse* [Houses] (Copenhagen: Arkitektens Forlag, 2008): 27

When considering that most Danish forests are agricultural, the total area controlled or design by humans in Denmark is more than 85%. In 2014 the land use of Denmark consisted of 66% farming, 16% forest and moorland, 10% town, road and construction and 7% lakes, meadows and bogs. Statistic Denmark. *Denmark in figures*. (Denmark: Statistic Denmark, 2014)

⁸ Tahvilzadeh, *Framtiden är redan här –Hur invånare kan bli medskapare i stadens utveckling* [The future is already here –How the public can be co-creators in the development of the city] (Gothenburg: Majornas Grafiska AB, 2013):18-21

- ⁹ The Jury Panel, Vis os hvordan vi skal bo tæt. 12 film om at bo tæt sammen [Show us how to live dense. 12 films about dense living] Publication regarding the Bo Tæt [Dense Living] competition http://www.botaet.dk/pdf/Botaet_booklet_301110.pdf (Copenhagen: Statens Kunstfond, Arkitekturudvalget,
- 2010): 9

 10 Pierluigi Nicolin, *Jean Nouvel Director and Architect* (Milan: Lotus 84, 1997)
- ¹¹ Within Walls. Favourite Housing. Film. Directed by Moa Liew, Christel Nisbeth, Annemie Sandahl and Agnes Mohlin (Copenhagen: Within Walls, 2010)
- ¹² Within Walls. Favourite Housing. Film. Directed by Moa Liew, Christel Nisbeth, Annemie Sandahl and Agnes Mohlin (Copenhagen: Within Walls, 2010)
- ¹³The Jury Panel, *Vis os hvordan vi skal bo tæt. 12 film om at bo tæt sammen* [Show us how to live dense. 12 films about dense living] Publication regarding the Bo Tæt [Dense Living] competition http://www.botaet.dk/pdf/Botaet_booklet_301110.pdf (Copenhagen: Statens Kunstfond, Arkitekturudvalget, 2010): 13
- ⁴ Within Walls. *Favourite Housing.* Film. Directed by Moa Liew, Christel Nisbeth, Annemie Sandahl and Agnes Mohlin (Copenhagen: Within Walls, 2010)

 15 Christer Larsson, City planning director Malmö. Quote from the film *Ung Bo*. Within Walls. *UngBo*. Film.
- Directed by Moa Liew and Christel Nisbeth. (Malmö: Within Walls, 2015)

 16 Habraken. Supports: An alternative to mass housing, (London: The Architectural Press, 1972): 92

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