

Transforming the Welfare City

16-17 November 2023

A two-day seminar at the University of Southern Denmark, and in Vollsmose, Odense

Objective

Which collective images and narratives do we as a society attach to the post-war welfare state city and its architecture? How are they constructed? How do they work, and in which ways do they circulate?

International research has pointed out that the representation of the welfare state city has changed over time and rewritten the values of so-called welfare state architecture. The post-war social housing areas in the Western world in particular have had a bad reputation. Irrespective of the many differences between diverse national contexts and welfare state models, the same narrative seems to apply: it looked so promising in the 1950s and the early 1960s—or so the narrative is often told—but then the areas turned into ‘holding cages for the poor’, as the writer Lynsey Hanley puts it in *Estates: An Intimate History*. With this interdisciplinary seminar we want to ask: How does the story continue? More specifically, we wish to address the representation of the many ambitious transformation plans carried out all over the world: What narratives about past, present, and future do they offer? We also consider the contemporary contexts of the plans and discuss the cultural mediation of the areas and their possible futures in literature, music, film, et cetera.

Background

Scholarship has pointed out that many of the transformation plans are as ambitious as the original New Towns. As such, they are a continuation of the visions of what the urban historian Rosemary Waksman, in her *Practicing Utopia*, has called ‘The New Town Movement’, by which she means the generations of artists, architects, politicians, and planners that shaped the idea and the reality of New Towns. However, the temporality and historicity of the transformation plans are anything but linear: the architectural scholar Owen Hopkins has suggested that the gentrification of British brutalism signifies a kind of retro-futurist nostalgia for the values of the now dismantled welfare state, at a time when it was still possible to believe in a future made accessible by modernist planning and architecture.

Organisation

The seminar is jointly organized by the research network The Representation of the Welfare City and the research project ‘Reassembling the Ghetto’. The ambition is to bring together scholars from different academic fields, including history, architecture, linguistics, and literary studies. The seminar will be hosted by the University of Southern Denmark, where the first of two days will take place. The second day is case-oriented and will be held in Vollsmose, the largest housing area on the infamous Danish list of ‘parallel societies’ (formerly known as ‘the ghetto list’), where well over 9,000 people live. We will meet representatives from the municipality and take a guided tour to see the area and the realization of the ambitious transformation plan named Fremtidens Vollsmose – The Future Vollsmose.

The seminar is centred around four questions:

1. What are the theoretical stakes of the concept of ‘transformation’ and of the transformation plans understood as narratives about a better future?
2. What practical outcomes do the plans have? How do planners, architects, artists, and inhabitants intervene in order to affect the outcome of the plans, that is, the future?
3. What are the contexts for the plans? How are they related to a contemporary moment characterized by neoliberalism, and thus very different from their moment of origin? What does this mean for the symbolic content and narrative potentiality of the welfare city and its concrete blocks?
4. How are the plans narrated, mediated, and interpreted in public discourse as well as in cultural representations?

Organizers

The Representation of the Welfare City is a transdisciplinary international research network funded by [the Independent Research Fund Denmark](#) and headed by associate professor Anne Elisabeth Toft, [Aarhus School of Architecture](#). The network examines the way the architecture of the welfare state is represented in the mass media and wishes to stimulate interaction between researchers and promote research exchange, with the

aim of bringing forward new perspectives and knowledge that can contribute to development in architectural research.

'Reassembling the Ghetto' is a research project funded by the Independent Research Fund Denmark in 2021–24, based at the University of Southern Denmark and headed by associate professor Jon Helt Haarder. It is divided into two subprojects. One covers the literary history of the concrete suburb in Denmark by charting the changing depictions of public housing estates found in Danish literature (and to some extent films as well) from 1945 to the present. The second project studies the relation between the concrete suburb and the emergence of rap in Danish.

Registration

Participation is free of charge, but the number of participants will be limited. Please send us an e-mail before November 7 if you wish to participate. Registration required.

Contact

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Programme

November 16. Venue: Meeting Room Comenius at the SDU [Find the way](#)

9:30	Arrival and coffee
10:00-12:30	Welcome by the organizers Rosemary Wakeman, professor of history, Fordham University, USA, "Tales of Tomorrow: Welfare Cities and the Architectural Imagination" Anne-Mette Exner, architect and activist, Denmark: "The Power of Narrative" Mette Mechlenborg, senior researcher, Department of Built Environment, Aalborg University, Denmark: "Representations of transformation of Danish 'parallel societies' in media, architecture and everyday life"
12:30	Lunch at the SDU
13:30-15:30	Jon Helt Haarder, associate professor in Scandinavian literatures, University of Southern Denmark: "Four Colours of Concrete, Literary History of the Concrete Suburb" Troels Obbekær, PhD-student, University of Southern Denmark: A Genre in Transformation? Masculinity in Danish Ghetto Hip Hop"
15:30-16:00	Coffee
16:00-17:00	Artist talk: Professor in immigration studies at Roskilde University, Denmark, Garbi Schmidt in conversation with poet and writer Sara Rahmeh about her novel <i>Betonhjerter</i> (Concrete Hearts), 2023.
19:00	Dinner in downtown Odense

November 17. Venue: Vollsmose Library [Find the way](#)

9:30 -12.30	Welcome by the organizers Xander Vermeulen Windsant, architect and founder XVW Architectuur, title TBA Pia Quist, professor in Linguistics, Copenhagen University, Denmark: "Linguistic imaginaries – Vollsmose as a speech community" Tove Skrumsager Frederiksen, CEO of Fremtidens Vollsmose (Vollsmose of the Future): "Transforming Vollsmose" Suna Madsen, Markedschef Boliger, arkitekt maa, Erik Arkitekter: "Strategies & Experiences Vollsmose"
12:30	Lunch at Vollsmose Center
13:30	Walk in Vollsmose with Erik arkitekter
15:00	Last round of discussion and goodbye