

## Unblocking Complaint Practices in Common Housing Paperwork

Heidi Svenningsen Kajita

### INTRODUCTION: SITING AND SIGHTING COMPLAINT PRACTICES ON PAPER

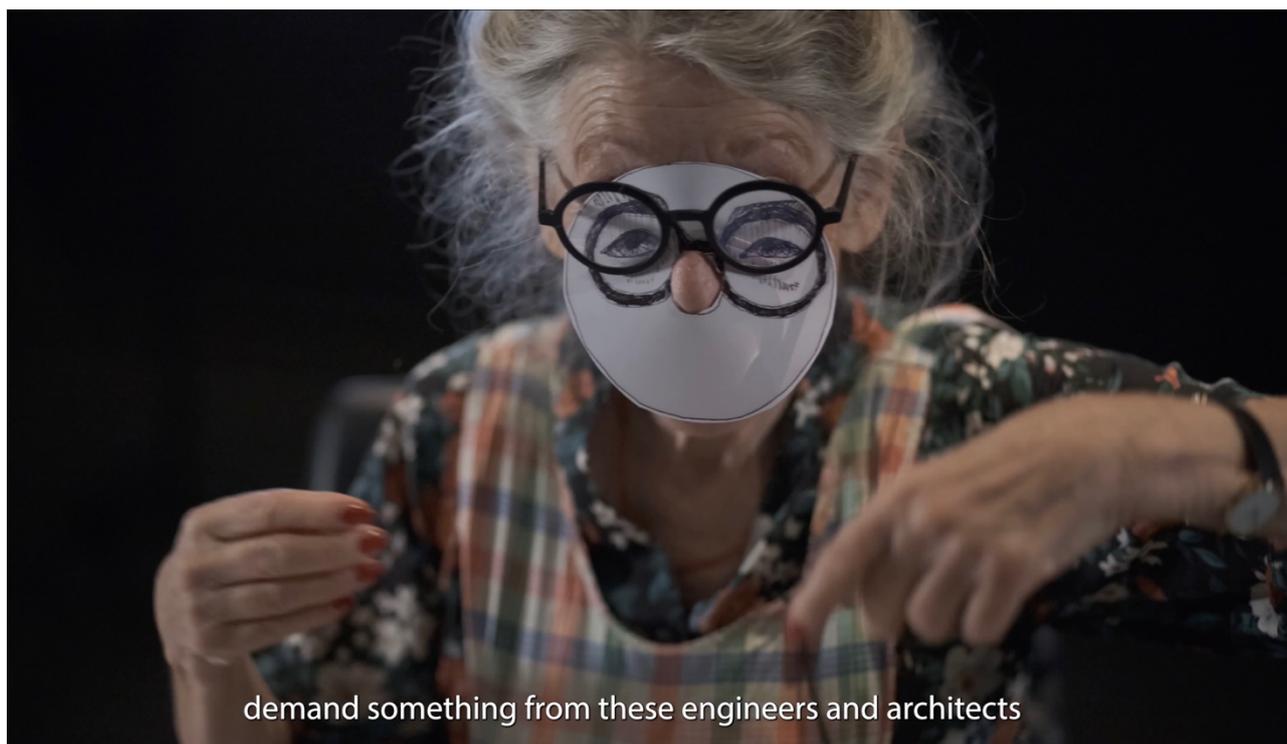


Figure 1. Anne Marie Helger as narrator in the short-film *Klager i praksis* [Complaints in Practice]  
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Broken lifts, dog fouling, and neighbourly disputes – these are some of the everyday irritations that residents complain about in the large-scale housing areas of the welfare state era. But residents do not merely grumble and complain. They act. They do what they can in small eventless ways. And they organise bureaucratically against narratives of failure and systemic neglect.

Over time and more broadly, plans for social and public housing – here termed common housing – have been systematised and narrated to holistically sustain both social and physical measures. Systems have been engineered to uphold order and prevent slippage of information and responsibilities among its many actors. Citizen and resident participation has been integral to architecture and urban planning processes since the 1970s. But even so, their grievances and complaints have mostly

been bureaucratically blocked; kept at bay by managerial actors, or simply ignored, in favour of smooth operations.

In this essay, *complaint practices* are therefore explored not as a fixed procedural category but rather, broadly as: residents' – often marginalised – critical and creative engagement with material and immaterial upkeep in common housing situations aligned both with the paperwork of planning and design and with what this formal work tend to render invisible. Can residents' complaints – from daily moans about creaking floorboards to legal action against discrimination – reveal blockages in the predetermined paths?

Squeezing complicated histories into a paper, onto paper, is a matter of delimitation. And the two episodic accounts that follow below, give only incongruent insight into complaint practices. They draw on my already published and exhibited work on Northern European modernist housing areas first constructed in the 1960s and 1970s. This research is informed more broadly by feminist theory and histories of participatory design and planning, materialist archival and document studies, as well as resistance studies including Sara Ahmed's work on institutional complaints in the book *Complaint!*. Ahmed argues that citizen participation often involves conforming to established practices. Complainers, she shows, are non-conformative in institutionalised systems.

To site and sight complaint, architectural histories must do more than trace and reassemble scraps in the archive. I use creative practice to tell new stories. I analyse and imagine new functions of architectural paperwork, such as design documents, housing policies, and a roadmap, mostly focusing on marginalia and talk at the periphery of formal processes. This research-creation draws on creative and arts-based methods employed in humanities research to explore various societal aspects by integrating creative practices throughout the entire research process, from project conception to enactment and dissemination. (Loveless, 2020).

Working across time and social situations, I first show how residents' lists and letters of complaint came to inform, if scarcely, the architectural design process of *Byker Redevelopment* in Newcastle upon Tyne (UK) designed by the Swedish architects Ralph Erskine Arkitekter AB's (hereon REA) between 1968-1983. Second, I reflect on situated knowing ways of imagining complaint practices with a range of creative practitioners and common housing actors in Denmark that resulted in a

manuscript and a short-film [fig.1]. While broadening what counts as institutional and opening space for new imaginaries, these two episodes do not offer conclusive answers regarding how complaint can be practiced in architecture and planning. Rather than closing or silencing, the possibility of these critical-creative histories lies in keeping the demon alive.

**EPISODE 1: LIST AND LETTERS OF COMPLAINT IN THE BYKER ARCHIVE**

In early 2020, I started out a year’s fieldwork in Newcastle upon Tyne in North East England to research the community-based practices characterising the Grade II listed housing estate *Byker Redevelopment*. Here, the architects uniquely established and worked from a site-office during their fourteen years of involvement. Initial fieldwork directed me to the archives in the ArkDes and RIBA Collections, and more specifically to files holding records of participation in the pilot scheme for the rolling redevelopment of the housing area. However, both fieldwork and visits to the archives were soon halted by Covid 19 lockdown. Until I later revisited the archive, my desk-based work instead focused on the few files that I had already photographed and scanned. Closely examining even just a few files from the pilot scheme, I found rich and varied methods inscribing residents’ voices. These included lists and letters of complaints written by residents both informally and on request by the architects. I followed the critical issues raised in these into design documents such as drawings, technical audits, instructions, and meeting minutes.

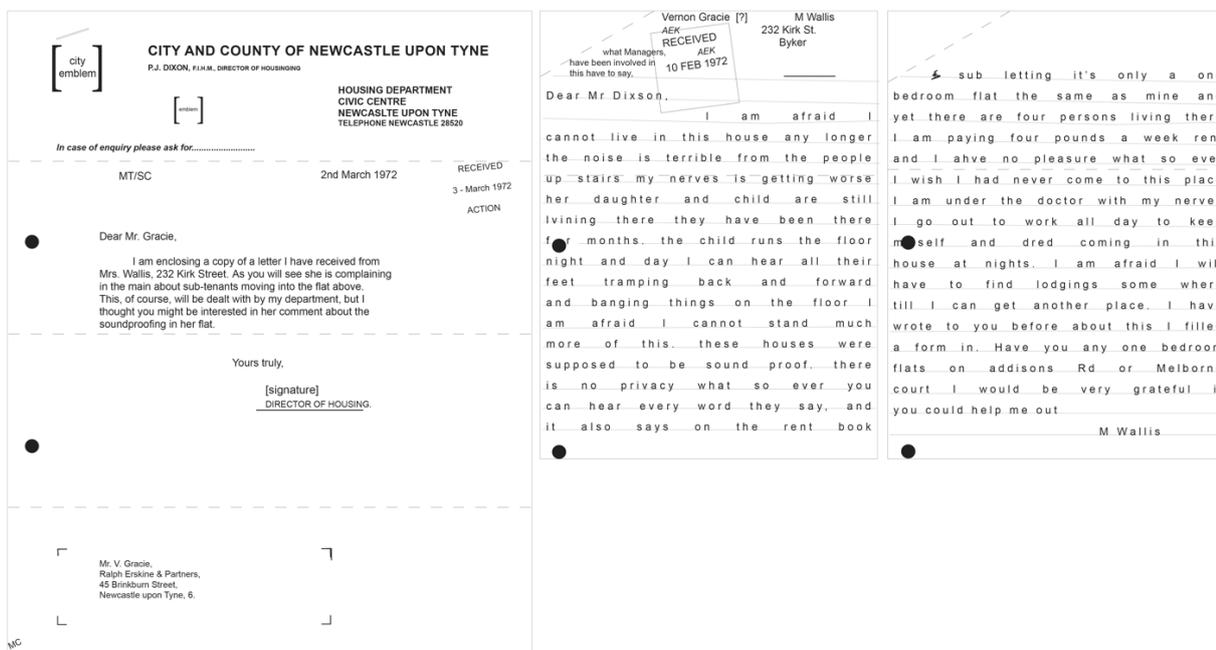


Figure 2. Visual transcripts of letter to Mr Gracie from Director of Housing and letter to Mr Dixon from M Wallis, 1972. Original in Byker, RIBA Collections. By Heidi Svenningsen Kajita, 2023.

In a short summary of previously published texts: In the archive, I came across small stacks of complaint lists and letters – social documents filed alongside technical design records. Using InDesign, I visually transcribed these handwritten records based on scans and quick snapshots, painstakingly spelling out all the writing errors, scribbles, line breaks, and deeply personal aspects of complaint writing. By tracing text and graphics, I did not just read what people complained about; I also engaged with the records as material artifacts, noting stamps, signatures, and paper creases to understand mechanisms of complaints in the paperwork [fig. 2]. As such, I followed frustrations over lack of privacy, vandalism and misbehaving children in the pilot scheme into the minutes from residents' gatherings and from meetings between municipal housing officers and the architects. More closely, I followed residents' complaints about noisy floorboards to a document submitted by a housing officer discussing overcrowding, then examined by a technical inspector who reported on construction flaws, and later incorporated into revised instructions for architectural design. (Kajita, 2023 and Kajita, Lloyd Thomas, 2023).

These visually transcribed complaint lists and letters are seen as micro-level examples of concrete historical situations, where residents' rage and nagging were embedded within planning and design processes. Minutia, such as scribbles and hole punches, inform about the processes through which the papers were circulated and picked up for different purposes over time. The material traces reveal how residents' complaints were received, processed, repurposed and filed. By studying how technical papers were used socially – both inside and outside the archive (Eichorn, 2013) – this research shows how residents' grievances can be circulated among people in different roles over time. In Byker, residents' chattering voices found their way – however narrowly – into formal decision-making. In the manner of the archival papers, this happened not only during specific phases of the design or on occasion of significant events. Rather, complaints were practiced along slow and tangled routes.

## EPISODE 2: COMPLAINTS IN PRACTICE: A ROADMAP FOR COLLABORATION IN COMMON HOUSING

### Scene 1 – Complaint (De)Tours

**The narrator:**

No thank you!

*(The narrator answers a phone call and tries to hang up as quickly as possible.)*

No thanks!

Yes, hello? I don't care to participate. I've been asked if I wanted to participate, but I declined. Why? Part of me says no because I don't think that complaints, grumbling and objections are part of my job. Part of me hasn't wanted to participate – with or without other reasons. Part of me doesn't respond to your emails at all.

No. I'm not the one you need to talk to. I'm an urban planner and resident. I'm an architect, social caretaker, historian and landscape architect. I'm a housing activist, community organiser and researcher. I'm also a property manager and work with communication. And conflict management, citizen involvement, sustainability and climate adaptation. I have several degrees and many years of experience. But complaints, no, they're not within the scope of my duties.

*(To the camera)*

There is just a lot of complaining and grumbling and the residents are also threatening actual complaint cases. I didn't realise that their garden is right where we want to build the new meeting place. It should strengthen the community. I understand the frustration. Admittedly, it is their neighbourhood. And now I've found out that they've applied for access to the documents. And what does that cost? Well, systemically, something is very wrong.

*(On the phone)*

Hmm. But yes... resident democracy is a central issue in the Social Housing Act...  
(*The narrator drinks their coffee, stares at the phone and puts it down with a sense of regret, looks at their many folders, papers and drawers. Considers their possibilities.*)

I look for paths of complaint in the system, in procedures, in techniques. In practice.

(*Finds the report with the illustration "Complaint (De)tours" on the cover on the desk*)

Let's have a look. Here: "Complaints in Practice".

(Kajita and Sand, 2024: 7-10. Authors translation)

The quotation above is taken from the opening scene of a manuscript co-written for performance with playwright Rosa Sand: *Klager i praksis: Et roadmap for samarbejde i almene boligområder* [Eng. *Complaints in Practice: A roadmap for collaboration in common housing*]. The roadmap takes a humorous, yet serious, look at complaint practices. The manuscript mobilises various communicative techniques, such as lists, small talk, lifting work, and relationship building, that embed residents' critical voices in planning and design practices.

While residents' complaints may be provoked by significant events, such as major transformation plans, grievances are more often slow-moving practices in creeping social situations. They are therefore best studied over longer durations of time and in multiple sites, not limited to project funding or fixed phases. To sight the unseen, I reached out to different actors in common housing in Denmark, including residents, housing activists, architects, landscape architects, an artist, an urban planner, a facilities manager, a historian and a social worker. Using a range of formats – personal interviews, two oral history seminars with the research group *Aktion Arkiv* (de Carvalho et al., 2024), email exchanges, archival and popular media searches including letters to editors [fig. 3], telephone conversations, and informal chats in research situations over the years – I inquired among common housing actors about their bodily, oral, textual, and graphic practices. I asked these *connoisseurs*, to use Isabel Stenger's term, about their paid and unpaid complaint work, and importantly, about the work they do not yet do.

These queries involved more refusals and dead ends than answers. As Scene 1 above illustrates, individuals were often reluctant to participate. There may be many reasons why invitations to talk about non-conforming practices were declined. In these years, common housing research in Denmark is largely affected by the controversial *Ghetto Law*. Preparing for oral history seminars held in 2021 and 2023, as part of the Danish-Swedish research group *Aktion Arkiv*, I noticed a sense of fear amongst professionals to discuss their work in the context of this law. Some voices are hard to access but no less important. Moving forward, I inquired more broadly into the eventless and multi-sited work of complaints in common housing – work that, in some instances, scarcely occurred at all, in others was tied to a specific period of engagement, and in still others unfolded across a lifetime of employment within a single estate.



Figure 3. Lisbeth’s letter to the editor discusses discrimination, evictions in the ‘concrete jungle.’ Visual transcript by Heidi Svenningsen Kajita, 2024. Original published in *Information* 14th December 2020.

By courtesy of Lisbeth Saugmann.

To reveal the often-invisible practices of complaint, I collaborated with Rosa and other creative practitioners including an actress, film photographers and -editor, and a book designer. To describe complaint in common housing, we need to situate ourselves in the uncomfortable sites outside established knowledge and organisational systems which can be challenging and lonely. The meetings with common housing connoisseurs and creative practitioners fostered a collective expression of interest in complaint practices – an interest unburdened by fear of the gendered sounds of nagging, dissonance, quiet protests, and high-pitched complaint. In the script, this interest is organised in a fictive collective voice mixing verbatim quotes and paraphrases from interviews with indirect

references to historical and theoretical sources. Rather than taming words about friction into a neutral policy-writer or technicians voice, this fictional narrative functions as an opening – words sometimes spoken in fear was moved forward by story-telling. The manuscript tangles different people’s tales according to thematic analysis removed from their original contexts. Relationships and linkages are established in a chattering loose fit. As an imaginary mode of inquiry, it integrates embodied knowledge and practices of making in the responsibilities and commitments of knowledge production. Choosing messy, situated ways of knowing over simple explanations creates space for accumulated experience that can come to tweak normative architectural services.

### **CONCLUSION: UNBLOCKING COMPLAINT PRACTICES IN COMMON HOUSING PAPERWORK**

From quiet nagging to loud roars, complaints are familiar to most, but they are often judged too personal and too particular, and even irrational and too hard to grasp to gain formal status in the paperwork of common housing. We already know a lot about how citizens can be brought into architectural services through participatory design methods, but we need also to consider how architectural communities can better participate continuously with local communities’ varied critical practices. My hope is that attention to complaint practices will foster a sensitivity and a productive unsettling of frictions within situations, where members of common housing communities, in both paid and unpaid roles, can come to trust one another and rely on interdependencies. In short, I suggest unblocking complaint practices in common housing paperwork by:

- A. Using technical paperwork socially
- B. Attending to both eventful and eventless, slow-moving practices across multiple sites
- C. Creating collective imaginaries
- D. Allowing communicative techniques to work in chattering slow ways. See Kajita and Sand: *Klager i praksis: Et roadmap for samarbejde i almene boligområder* [*Complaints in Practice: A Roadmap for collaboration in common housing*], 2024; and scan QR code below to watch film (figure 4):



Figure 4. Use QR code to watch the short-film on your own device.

## Acknowledgements

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## BIO:

Heidi Svenningsen Kajita, PhD, Associate Professor at University of Copenhagen, member of Aktion Arkiv, and co-founder of Bureaus. Kajita works for social change in everyday spaces. Combining architectural history, creative practice and ethnography, she focuses on the history and transformation of welfare state housing areas. She mobilises histories associated with marginalisation by revealing techniques for combining social and technical expertise. Works include: *Practicing Materials in Postwar Modernist Housing Estates* [ethnographic drawings], 2025; "Gossip and Complaint" (in *High Rise*, Tattara, Migotto, 2023); *Solidarity Report* (w. Aktion Arkiv, 2024); "Urgent Minor Matters" (Architecture and Culture, 2022); *Paperwork of the Everyday* [appropriated archival drawings], 2020.