

Article

## Constructing Common Meeting Places: A Strategy for Mitigating the Social Isolation of Disadvantaged Neighbourhoods?

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### Abstract

Community planning has undergone changes in direction over time, from a traditional neighbourhood approach seeking to ensure well-functioning local communities to a newer focus on the feasibility of neighbourhood-based urban renewal for combating segregation. The latter initially concentrated on the internal social relations of disadvantaged neighbourhoods, but nowadays the focus for interventions is changing towards opening up such neighbourhoods to improve their external relations with more affluent surrounding districts. This article unfolds the visions related to a new urban planning strategy for constructing common meeting places inside disadvantaged neighbourhoods, which seem closely related to the political discourses about the need for opening these neighbourhoods up. Specifically, the article scrutinises the visions for two meeting places currently being constructed in two Danish neighbourhoods characterised as disadvantaged, and it examines which problems these meeting places seek to solve and how they are intended to provide for publicness. The study reveals that, despite being part of the same strategic funding programme and having similar problem framings, it is claimed that the two future meeting places will provide for publicness in distinct and context-specific ways. Furthermore, we show that the way problem representations entangled in specific political discourses are being manifested in specific local planning strategies may have contingent, yet potentially pervasive social and physical consequences for local neighbourhoods.

### Keywords

Denmark; meeting places; neighbourhood planning; policy analysis; problem representation; public space; publicness; social encounters; social housing; urban renewal

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

The longstanding idea of planning for local communities on the neighbourhood scale is an integral component of Nordic welfare planning and policy (Mumford, 1954). This tradition builds on an understanding of neighbourhoods fulfilling a universal human need and as self-sustaining social units ensuring social integration and cohesion. The phenomenon of urban segregation, especially of neighbourhoods, was already being recognised a hundred years ago when the Chicago School

of Sociology described diversified neighbourhoods as a natural process of urban development (Jørgensen, 2010; Saunders, 1986). However, the unequal distribution of local resources also caused a recognition that well-functioning neighbourhoods needed to be planned for. In neighbourhood planning and practice, key meeting places, such as public schools, were highlighted for their social potential as generators of communities. Thus, traditional neighbourhood planning was centred around the local community, its internal relations, and community life (Kallus & Law-Yone, 2000).

Even though many scholars have questioned the relevance of conceiving contemporary communities and social relations as neighbourhood-based (e.g., Giddens, 1990; Wellman, 1979), the idea of the social potential of the neighbourhood is still strong in current urban policies and planning (Madden, 2014; Shirazi & Keivani, 2017). The increased awareness that segregation has unfavourable social consequences for citizens in disadvantaged neighbourhoods has resulted in urban renewal programmes with a strong focus on neighbourhood-based initiatives for mitigating the social consequences of segregation, especially in the context of disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The initial focus of such programmes was on renovating buildings, but it was soon extended to improvements to residents' internal social networks and their wider social integration (Christensen, 2013). In Denmark, this resulted in combined refurbishment and social projects that created improvements to the physical environment of neighbourhoods, though showing only limited social improvements for individual residents. Even after several decades of urban renewal initiatives, many residents in disadvantaged neighbourhoods experience worse life chances than citizens with comparable socio-economic profiles who live elsewhere (Andersson & Musterd, 2010; Bothe & Skytt-Larsen, 2019; Galster, 2019).

Over time, belief in the social potential of neighbourhoods has gradually faded in urban policies, and the assessment that there are too few internal resources to call upon in disadvantaged neighbourhoods has influenced political discourses. Also, the increasing awareness of segregation and its impacts on urban systems has directed attention towards the potential problems that go along with the physical isolation of disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Thus, initiatives to infuse social resources into disadvantaged neighbourhoods, for instance, by attracting more resourceful residents, have been added to the agenda (Christensen, 2013; Hedman & Galster, 2013). Consequently, urban strategies to open up and improve the connectivity of such neighbourhoods with the rest of the city by means of physical transformation have been resorted to. By constructing new connecting routes, a process aimed at linking physically segregated neighbourhoods with the rest of the city has started. This has been labelled the "everyday-route strategy" (Stender & Bech-Danielsen, 2019). However, current practices of funding bodies also seem to reflect Klinenberg's (2018) argument that physical space and the conditions that make up communal life require investment just as much as infrastructure. One example is the funding programme Common Space, financed by two philanthropic urban-development organisations that are prominent in Denmark, Realdania and the Danish Foundation for Culture and Sports (see Realdania, n.d.). This programme was launched in 2018 as a funding opportunity for municipalities and housing associations to establish new meeting places in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and thus "open up disadvantaged neighbour-

hoods, or neighbourhoods in danger of becoming disadvantaged, to the rest of the city" (Realdania, n.d.). By constructing attractive common functional spaces in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, the Common Space programme seems to reflect the ideas of "the destination strategy" (Stender & Bech-Danielsen, 2019), another opening-up strategy, which aims to attract citizens with different socio-economic profiles to visit disadvantaged neighbourhoods and spend time there. The political discourse on opening up and associated everyday-route-and-destination strategies have not yet been subject to much analysis or critical reflection. An exception is Stender and Bech-Danielsen (2019) who argue that the application of such strategies is highly dependent on the urban context and that social isolation may remain even when physical boundaries are removed.

Accordingly, this article attempts to address this gap in research by scrutinising the implementation of the new Danish common meeting-place strategy and its potential political and social implications. Applying a critical policy analysis approach (Bacchi, 2012), this article explores visions that unfold in the process of implementing two meeting places in two Danish neighbourhoods classified as disadvantaged. Here we emphasise the visions of proposed plans and design briefs, as well as those of different stakeholders, and examine their articulations about how the meeting places are meant to enhance public life and publicness in their specific neighbourhoods. By means of field studies, stakeholder interviews, and key document analysis, the article thus explores what is at stake when Danish municipalities, housing associations, funding bodies, and other stakeholders plan and provide common meeting places. The meeting places we examine have not yet been constructed, but they will enter into use within the coming years. The article, therefore, focuses on the results of the first phases of what will be a longitudinal study.

The article starts by presenting an analytical framework for understanding the shifting problems of urban public policy and the character of contemporary public space and publicness. After describing our methods and empirical materials, the analytical section provides a brief historical outline of shifting political discourses and urban renewal efforts in Denmark. It then unfolds the problem representations of two planned common meeting places by studying the visions of stakeholders, planning documents and design briefs, and scrutinising how these two future meeting places are intended to bring about distinct types of public places providing specific types of publicness. The final section discusses if and how the problem representations mirror the visions of the publicness of the new meeting places discursively as well as materially. It also assesses the degree to which the common meeting place strategy and its implementation can be said to reflect the political discourse and related problem representations on the need to open up disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

## 2. Analytical Framework

The analytical framework for the study is based on a combination of Bacchi's approach to critical policy analysis and theories of public space and publicness.

### 2.1. Critical Policy Analysis

Bacchi (2012) argues that there exists in society an underlying assumption that policies contribute to societal improvements. However, this entails an understanding of society as shaped by certain societal problems that needs "fixing," although most political discourses do not clearly state the problems they purport to address. Thus, Bacchi (2012) argues for a need to scrutinise critically taken-for-granted problem assumptions and recommends a critical policy analysis reviewing the underlying rationales or problematisations behind a given policy. Drawing on Foucault, she argues that statements of what a certain policy will contribute to change are also an indication of how the problem is constituted. Therefore, policy proposals can be conceived as prescriptive texts relying on certain problematisations that set out practice.

To identify such problematisations, research should focus on the implications of specific policies and study how the practices they involve represent complex relational phenomena as problems (Bacchi, 2012). By standing back from taken-for-granted concepts and instead determining how they come to enter practice through heterogeneous relations, it will be possible to gain access to "the system of limits and exclusions we practice without realizing it" (Simon, 1971, as cited in Bacchi, 2012, p. 4). The study of problem representations gives access to the spaces within which objects emerge as relevant, making it possible to study the strategic relations involved in their appearance. Examining political discourse in this way calls into question the presumed fixity of the thing *thought*. In this way, the constitution of problems is recognised as a powerful and yet contingent way of producing *the real*. Rationales are thus not simply mental ideas: They emerge in practices and refer to the constituted problems in specific localities (Bacchi, 2012).

### 2.2. Public Space and Publicness

The public is a core concept in the social sciences concerned with defining what is of common interest to the members of a society. However, it is a quite ambiguous concept, as it is understood from distinct but interwoven approaches (Latham & Layton, 2019). At an overall philosophical level, the concept implies whatever is of concern to a community, stressing, for instance, how aspects of equitable and participatory decision-making in the public sphere matter to the communality that is achieved (Sennett, 2010). In urban sociology, the concept is often used to describe how sociality takes place, that is, how people encounter each other and contribute to public urban life (Goffmann, 1971).

As interactions and meetings among citizens with various socio-demographic backgrounds are seen as important for alleviating the effects of segregation, as well as producing meaningful social relations that are important to the citizens' development, research has mainly been concerned about the social consequences of too little interaction. Without such meetings, it is claimed, social cohesion will deteriorate, and xenophobia, distrust, and stigmatisation will grow (Mitchell, 1995; Valentine, 2008; Young, 1990). Meetings of strangers are thus considered key to facilitating feelings of togetherness and citizenship that are beneficial to all groups in society (Hajer & Reijndorp, 2001; Sennett, 2010). Although such meetings are also recognised to be dissonant and full of conflicts, such aspects are seen as unavoidable and as forming part of the social learning in becoming a citizen capable of dealing with diversity (Sennett, 2010; Valentine, 2008). The anticipated productive aspects of social meetings have been described as the "contact hypothesis" (Allport, 1950) and as the "ideal of social surplus" (Latham & Layton, 2019). Thus, underlining the importance and productiveness of meetings of strangers can be understood as an ideal of democracy in that it positions all citizens as equals (Madanipour, 1999). However, life chances and welfare facilities may be unequally distributed, especially for citizens of disadvantaged housing areas (Bothe & Skytt-Larsen, 2019), and social meetings may therefore have divergent outcomes for different citizens.

The idea of the public also encompasses the material aspects of the public space, a key concept in understanding the rationales behind constructing common meeting places (Hajer & Reijndorp, 2001; Sennett, 2010). Public spaces are assumed to be fundamental to the collective social life of cities because an acquaintance of common spaces could engender meaningful encounters and increased tolerance among citizens (Fraser, 1990; Young, 1990). Thus, in this understanding, public spaces are important for alleviating the effects of segregation and ensuring the long-term sustainability of the wider community (Mitchell, 1995; Valentine, 2008). Latham and Layton (2019) suggest four aspects that define the degree of publicness of public spaces and of their success as meeting places. The first aspect is *accessibility*. According to Latham and Layton, the publicness of a public space is determined by its accessibility for a diverse group of people across society. The next aspect is the *abundance* of the public space which concerns its location and functionality. This aspect is not fulfilled if a public space is hidden away and located far away from everyday routes or if it only conveys one sense of functionality. The aspect of *diversity* extends the scale of the single public space and relates to the concept of social infrastructure. It encompasses all the characteristics of urban life where people seek out a range of activities and thus require diverse facilities and spaces. Therefore, regarding single public spaces, each needs to be distinctive and offer facilities in specific ways to become an attractive

meeting place. Finally, public spaces need to be *responsive* to local needs in order to sustain publicness. Public spaces that are programmed too narrowly or are based on volatile trends are likely to be less successful. Thus, Latham and Layton (2019) argue that it is important for public spaces to ensure opportunities for renewal and to create a balance between looseness and prescription of the design and of the multifunctionality and specificity of located functions.

### 3. Methods and Material

In the analysis, we review the shifting political discourse on the potential role of common meeting places in disadvantaged housing areas that has occurred in Danish planning practices for urban renewal over the last 30 years. Also, we unfold the problem representations that emerge when implementing common meeting places in two specific Danish neighbourhoods. Using a combination of critical policy analysis with theories of public space and publicness, we scrutinise the visions for common meeting places and explore their embedded rationale, i.e., which problems they are thought to solve, and how they are intended to provide for publicness as articulated in stakeholder interviews, key planning documents, and design briefs. Here, we first reveal the background to the establishment of a new common meeting place and identify the problems the meeting place is assumed to respond to. Secondly, we make a contextual description of the meeting place's location and identify its recreational functions and facilities before assessing its degree of publicness according to the parameters suggested by Latham and Layton (2019). Lastly, we compare the two visions in terms of the problem they seek to solve, the type of publicness they aim to provide for, and how the implementation of these common meeting places relates to prior activities in the local area.

The empirical material is based on a case study of two future Danish meeting places, the Garden and the Lanterna, both funded by the Common Space programme (Realdania, n.d.). The Garden will be constructed in a square in the middle of a disadvantaged neighbourhood in the Danish capital, Copenhagen, and will consist of the physical and functional transformation of an existing central plaza. The Lanterna will be located in an urban district with several social housing units in the eastern part of Denmark's fourth largest city, Aalborg, and will be constructed as an activity house in an extension to an already existing local community centre.

To review the overall political discourse embedded in Danish urban renewal efforts, we used a combination of scientific articles describing the policies and policy statements issued by funding bodies and municipal planning authorities. These were analysed to identify how shared themes of investments in the physical environment over time have developed and been differentiated, and how such efforts have been guided by shifting discourses of the social consequences of physical segregation—on the

individual, local communal, and societal levels—which also frame the recent opening-up policy proposal.

To review the problem representations and the potential physical and social implications of visions of the two specific common meeting places, data were collected by means of field trips, stakeholder interviews, and consulting key project and planning documents. During field studies in the summer of 2021, the existing urban infrastructure, recreational facilities, and surrounding contexts were mapped to acquire an initial understanding of the location and physical context of the planned common meeting place. During autumn 2021, 11 interviews were conducted. In Aalborg East, we carried out interviews with the chief development officer (CDO) of Himmerland Housing Association, a social housing worker from Alabu Housing Association, two municipal project managers from the Department of Health and Culture and the Department of Urban and Spatial Planning, the director of the local community centre, and a project manager from the local urban renewal office. In Copenhagen, we conducted interviews with the director of the board of the Folehaven social housing association, a social housing worker, a project manager from the local urban renewal department, and two project managers from the municipality's Technical and Environmental Administration. These interviews form the basis for understanding the two sites' histories, processes of urban renewal, and especially problem framings, as well as aspects of public involvement. Also, the interviews were important in gaining access to unpublished documents of design programmes and design briefs, which together with the contextual description were used to analyse the degree of publicness, using Latham and Layton's (2019) parameters of abundance, diversity, accessibility, and responsiveness.

### 4. Analysis and Empirical Findings

In the following, we start by briefly situating the current Danish urban renewal policy in its historical context. Secondly, the visions of each of the two common meeting places are analysed. Thirdly, the visions are compared in terms of the problems they seek to solve, the type of publicness they aim at, and how they relate to prior activities in the local area.

#### 4.1. Historical Overview of Danish Urban Renewal Policies

The Danish *opening-up* strategies form part of a tradition of community planning that is fundamental to welfare policies. Traditional neighbourhood planning was the dominant approach, but with the increase in segregation and polarisation, community planning has been directed towards mitigating the emerging problems of disadvantaged neighbourhoods. This relates especially to urban renewal initiatives, which in Denmark have undergone a gradual reorientation over the last 30 years.

The various urban renewal interventions in Denmark can be grouped into distinct categories (Bech-Danielsen & Christensen, 2017). Although seldomly clearly stated, the strategic interventions and policies in these periods seem to have been guided by shifting discourses of the social consequences of physical segregation. The initial focus on segregation started in the 1980s, when urban renewal policies focused mainly on renovating buildings. Throughout the 1990s, discourses about complex challenges in disadvantaged neighbourhoods took over, leading to an entangled range of social initiatives targeting various social improvements as well as physical refurbishment. This social housing approach targeted both individuals and community life and focused on internal neighbourhood relations. By the turn of the millennium, the discourse had shifted, and the perceived segregation-related challenges of neighbourhoods were now framed as “ghetto problems” (Nielsen, 2019) and underpinned by national policies. Efforts at urban renewal targeting a combination of physical refurbishment and social improvements continued. However, initiatives to infuse social resources by attracting new residents with more affluent socio-economic profiles were also deployed. This came with a deliberate focus on renovating outdoor spaces to enhance the perceived safety of housing areas (Bech-Danielsen & Christensen, 2017; Kjeldsen et al., 2019).

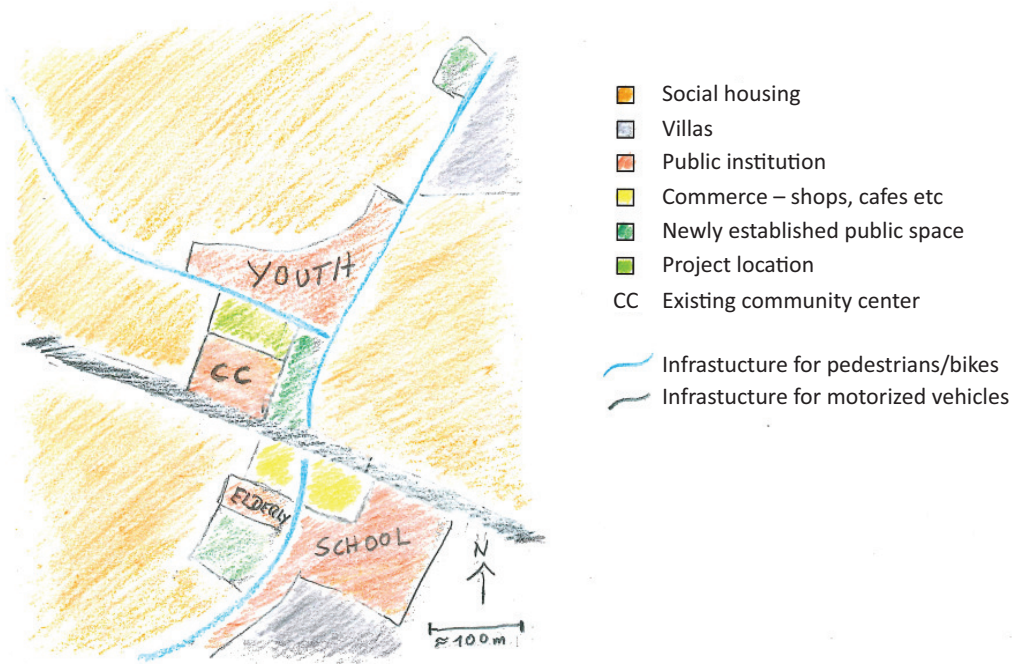
Thus, with the shift in political discourse towards segregation as ghettoisation, belief in the neighbourhood’s social potential and internal resources seems to have faded. Instead, efforts to improve the external relations of disadvantaged neighbourhoods increased in number. This indicates a novel belief that making disadvantaged social housing areas more accessible and improving their connections with the rest of the urban district would open up the neighbourhood and foster the necessary interactions between their residents and other citizens (Copenhagen Municipality, 2005). This political discourse of opening up can be observed in many recent renewal projects, with their focus on improving connectivity and accessibility by means of new routes and paths that connect disadvantaged areas with the wider urban system (Stender & Bech-Danielsen, 2019). To enhance the attractiveness and safety of disadvantaged neighbourhoods, their physical environments, especially their outdoor spaces, have become subject to “architectural boosts” and interventions for “beautification” (Realdania, 2004). These interventions seem to have a dual purpose. First, they support the perceived safety of the neighbourhood so that other citizens are not discouraged from passing through it. Second, they are used as a way of creating spaces within disadvantaged neighbourhoods that are attractive for use by more resourceful citizens who are not residents, or not yet. Furthermore, however, these inventions may also represent a shift away from believing in the social potential of the neighbourhood for combating segregation to a belief in the social potential of traditional public spaces. The common meeting place strategy

scrutinised in this article forms part of such opening up discourses, which prioritise investments in the physical environment (Realdania, n.d.).

#### *4.2. The Vision of the Lanterna: A New Attractive Activity House*

In the urban district of Aalborg East, a common meeting place called the Lanterna will be finalised by 2023. Aalborg East has about 20,000 residents living mainly in social housing. A large private housing association, the Himmerland Housing Association, owns about 80% of the social housing in the district, the remaining 20% being owned by two smaller associations. During the past 15 years, this district has undertaken a series of urban renewal processes that have changed its physical appearance and the socio-economic composition of its residents (Danmarks Almene Boliger, 2019). The main focal points for these urban renewal projects were public health and physical activity. In 2012, a health centre was built in the district, and, in 2023, the district will acquire a new university hospital. Furthermore, the physical changes implied not only changing the buildings and housing types, but also establishing recreational facilities and improving the infrastructure for pedestrians and cyclists to overcome the barrier of a major road in the area. In an interview, the CDO of the Himmerland Housing Association explained that the association’s board have had a vision of building an indoor culture and sports arena for its residents for many years. However, through discussions with the funding body Realdania, the board learned about the upcoming Common Space programme. Thus, they decided to latch their ideas related to creation of the culture and sports arena on to the district’s ongoing and already financed renewal processes. Consequently, in 2017, the project of establishing a new meeting place was born. When the project was selected to receive funding in 2018, a steering group was formed consisting of the CEO and CDO of the Himmerland Housing Association, representatives from the funding bodies of Realdania and the Danish Foundation for Culture and Sports Facilities, and project managers from the Municipal Departments of Family and Employment, Health and Culture, and Urban and Spatial Planning. This steering group has managed the project since its inception and has been the main decision-making body responsible for driving the project forward, including delivering input to the urban design studio.

As shown in Figure 1, the Lanterna will be located in the midst of four departments of social housing, three of which are owned by the Himmerland Housing Association, and at the intersection of two main pedestrian and bike routes. These routes connect enclaves of both social apartment housing and private detached housing and enable access for many different social groups across the urban district of Aalborg East. Also, the westward route is connected to urban areas beyond Aalborg East. The meeting place will be located near



**Figure 1.** The Lanterna: The project’s location in the district of Aalborg East.

existing recreational facilities and a public youth club and will be well connected to previous physical and social interventions. Thus, in line with Latham and Layton’s (2019) arguments on the importance of accessibility and the abundance of successful social infrastructure, the Lanterna will become an easily accessible location for a variety of people from different socio-economic and demographic backgrounds, including from outside social housing.

Interviews with representatives from the steering group revealed that their vision of the meeting place is to create an attractive destination that can improve the district’s reputation. The Lanterna will be built as an extension to the existing local community centre but will host other facilities and events in order to attract new users and visitors from the wider urban area. This was stressed by the project manager from the Municipal Department of Urban and Spatial Planning (interview, September 28, 2021), who stated:

In the last decade, the district has gone through a series of urban renewal processes that have changed both its socio-economic profile and physical appearance. However, citizens from other parts of the city still believe that Aalborg East is a “ghetto.” They don’t want to come here. The attraction of the Lanterna will hopefully change this, making them realise that Aalborg East has become a nice district with a lot to offer.

Likewise, the design brief (see Figure 2) presents an architectural vision of an “inviting space [in which]...people will encounter each other through various activities in

a series of transparent and light glasshouses” (LINK Arkitektur, 2022). The meeting place will thus have an architectural style that is quite different from the red brick building of the existing neighbouring community centre.

The prime aim of the steering group has been to attract an already acknowledged partner engaged in dance or gymnastics to occupy the building and act as the Lanterna’s main attraction. Accordingly, the CDO of the Himmerland Housing Association explained that the steering committee decided on a process in which the financial and governing structures of the new meeting place should be settled before informing and involving the residents. However, as the process of finding the right external partner has been long and challenging, there have been no public consultations on the establishment of the Lanterna up to the time of writing (June 2022).

#### *4.3. The Vision of the Garden: Renewal of a Well-Visited Central Public Plaza*

In the Danish capital, Copenhagen, a common meeting place called the Garden will be located in the disadvantaged neighbourhood of Folehaven. The Garden will be inaugurated at the beginning of 2024. The project was initiated by the Municipality of Copenhagen and run by the municipal urban renewal department, hosted in the neighbourhood. Folehaven is home to approximately 2,000 residents living in social housing apartments. In 2011, the Danish police classified the neighbourhood as one of the most insecure in Copenhagen, with high levels of unemployment and criminality, low



**Figure 2.** Plan and design of the Lanterna. Note: The lower left-hand corner illustrates the vision of an open, transparent, and inviting design. Source: Authors’ work based on LINK Arkitektur (2022).

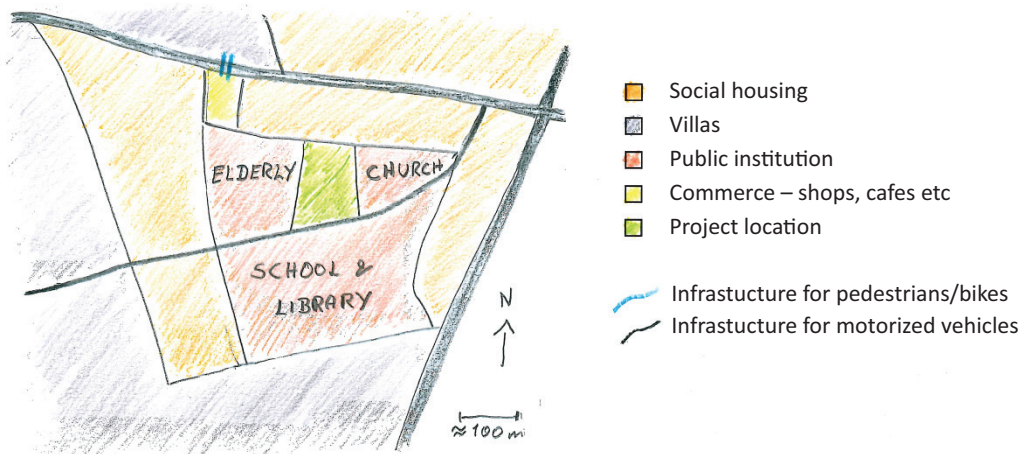
incomes, and low educational levels (Dansk Politi, 2016). Since then, there has been a strong focus on social housing work in the neighbourhood and on establishing a local urban renewal programme. The prime focus of these welfare policies has been on social work, especially directed towards young people, criminality, safety, and employment. However, according to a social housing worker from the local urban renewal department (interview, September 16, 2021):

Folehaven still struggles with many socio-economically disadvantaged inhabitants, who have very few relations to the rest of the city. You are not proud to say you live here—Then people will wrinkle up their noses. Folehaven is an area that is non-grata in the minds of the normal Copenhageners.

Folehaven functions as a self-sufficient neighbourhood with central everyday facilities such as a public school,

library, and supermarket. The neighbourhood is surrounded by two major roads, one of them crossed by a pedestrian bridge (Figure 3). The director of the board of the social housing association (interview, September 16, 2021) stressed the problem of the surrounding roads, stating: “These roads are a huge problem. They isolate us from the rest of the city. Also, 60,000 cars pass by every day, leaving our inhabitants with a lot of noise and pollution.” This physical isolation is also acknowledged by the municipality as problematic. Thus, there is a plan to establish a regional biking route to pass through the neighbourhood (Copenhagen Municipality, 2019).

The new meeting place will be located in the middle of the Folehaven social housing estate at a central plaza presently hosting a playground, a skating ramp, and a football field. The plaza is surrounded by a public school and library, a nursing home for the elderly, and a church (Figure 3). Throughout the last decade, the plaza has undergone smaller changes, including the establishment



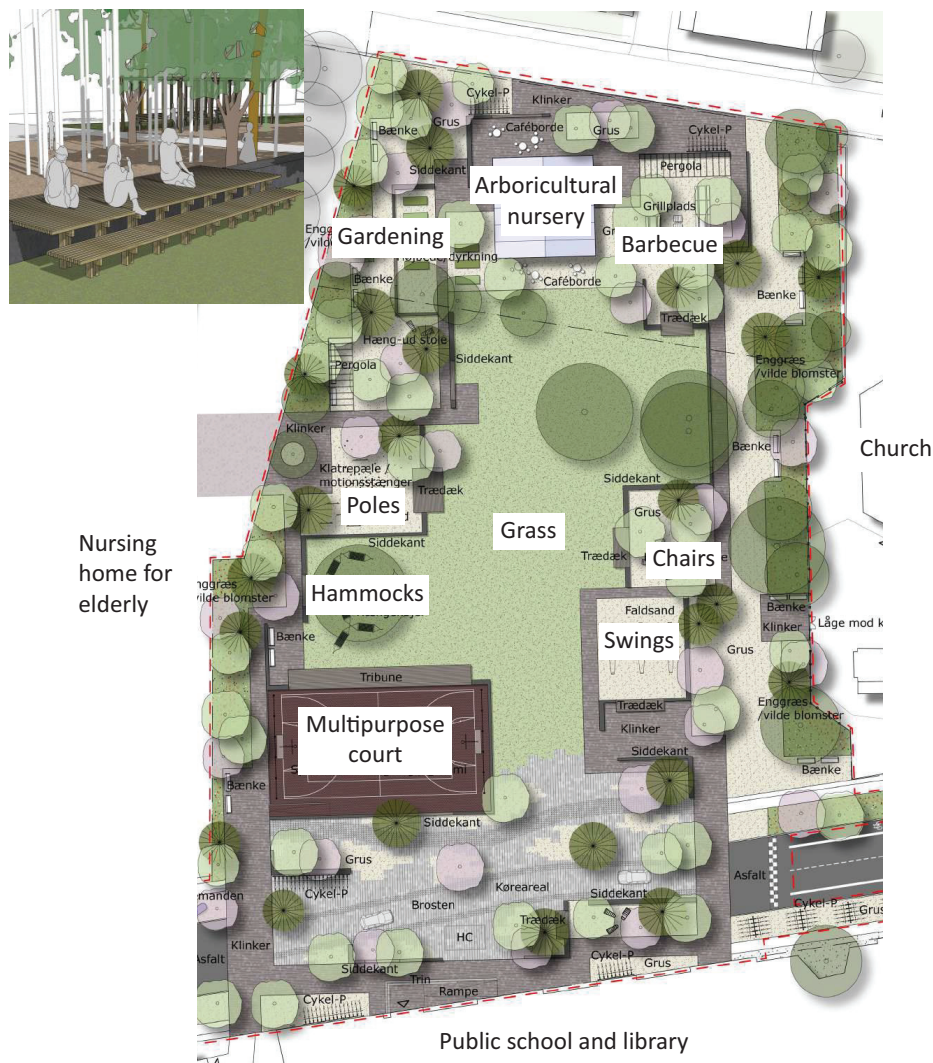
**Figure 3.** The Garden: The project’s location in the neighbourhood of Folehaven.

of a walking and cycle path, and replacing a tall fence between the church and the plaza with a lower one that is partially open and transparent. The project of establishing the Garden is governed by a steering group with representatives from the local urban renewal department, the social housing association of Folehaven, and project managers from the municipality's Technical and Environmental Administration. However, to ensure local engagement a committee has been formed consisting of representatives from the Folehaven's housing association, local residents, residents from the neighbouring enclave of villas, privately owned apartments, and other social housing associations, the local department for social housing work, the library, and the church. Over the last couple of years, this committee and other residents have participated in workshops, community events, and public consultations together with the steering group and the urban design studio to plan and design the new meeting place collectively.

The location of the Garden at the central plaza and the strong involvement of residents and local stakehold-

ers indicate a focus on the local inhabitants as the plaza's prime users. However, as the plaza is surrounded by public institutions, it also serves residents from the neighbouring enclaves of villas, social housing, and privately owned apartments (Figure 3). Therefore, the opportunity to attract people with varied demographic and socio-economic backgrounds is high, suggesting a meeting place with strong abundance and accessibility (Latham & Layton, 2019). In combination with improvements to the meeting place through the transformation of the existing plaza, future public investments in everyday routes for active transport may enhance accessibility to and from the urban district (Copenhagen Municipality, 2019).

As shown in Figure 4, the Garden's design brief presents a vision of a new green meeting place with several functions. The plan is to provide different zones for various activities in order to facilitate meetings between different people with diverse needs, while also aiming to be responsive to the changing needs of various visitors (Copenhagen Municipality & 1:1 Landskab, 2021). This indicates an urge for high abundance and some



**Figure 4.** Plan and design of the Garden. Note: The upper left corner illustrates the vision of facilities for seating between activity zones. Source: Authors' work based on Copenhagen Municipality and 1:1 Landskab (2021).



responsiveness in the design of functions. The design brief focuses on including facilities for people to take a seat between the zones, which, according to the design brief, offers possibilities for watching at a distance and potentially urging people to engage in activities with strangers. The project manager from the local urban renewal department explained that a central idea is to encourage the surrounding school, library, and church to make use of the new meeting place for inclusive activities. Furthermore, the plan includes an arboricultural nursery with an accompanying orangery to be run by a social enterprise, which is currently in the process of being established and supported by the local social housing workers. This idea reflects the history of the intense social housing work in the area. However, the project managers from the municipality's Technical and Environmental Administration (interview, September 14, 2021) also describe the greenhouse as "a unique activity [and] as a means to attract visitors from other parts of city."

#### *4.4. Visions With Shared Problem Framings but Distinct Understandings of Publicness*

The problem framing embedded in the visions of the two cases has a common base in the idea of social housing having a bad reputation, and thus being somewhat isolated from the rest of the city. In the case of the Lanterna, the bad reputation was presented as a problem mostly related to other citizens who were perceived as not visiting the area due to its lack of attractions. In the case of the Garden, its bad reputation was mostly seen as a problem to be solved for the sake of the residents, who, to some degree, were perceived as socially and physically isolated. Our analysis also revealed quite distinct visions of the two future meeting places. The vision of the Lanterna is to construct an architecturally attractive space in which a diversity of people will encounter each other. The vision of the Garden is to establish an attractive communal place for residents that is also an attractive destination for visitors.

In the case of the Lanterna, there is a clear vision to make the meeting place flexible and thus represents at present a responsive type of public space. By contrast, the design brief for the Garden affords a variety of functions and activities, and thus represents a type of public space with high abundance (Latham & Layton, 2019). Its users are therefore envisaged as being invited in by inclusive activities hosted by the local institutions. In the case of the Lanterna, there is a clear vision of diversity that aims to make the Lanterna a unique and attractive meeting place for citizens beyond the scale of the neighbourhood in a way that compares it with other social infrastructures of the wide city district. The Garden is partly envisaged as a unique place by means of the arboricultural nursery, but it is mostly aimed at being attractive to the local population.

As DeVerteuil explains (2000), the reasoning behind the localising of public spaces is the key to urban plan-

ning. The localisation of the common meeting places in this study can, to a considerable extent, be understood as path-dependent processes, in which prior planning processes and decisions regarding earlier urban renewal interventions have significant impacts. In recent decades, the district of Aalborg East has undergone several rounds of urban renewal that have focused on improving the quality of the built environment and its connectivity to the rest of the city in combination with social initiatives. The new meeting place, the Lanterna, is located in connection to these previous initiatives. In contrast, the Garden involves the transformation of an existing meeting place located in the middle of the social housing estate in the neighbourhood. This reflects close connections to the area's ongoing urban renewal programme and social housing work, which focuses on enhancing internal neighbourhood relations and empowering local residents.

The distinct visions determine whose voices are considered relevant to include when implementing the meeting place. The Garden project emphasises the involvement of potential local users, including public consultation meetings for any residents who are interested, and for specific groups. Also, a group that includes residents is following the planning process. The vision for the Garden set out in existing social housing work in the neighbourhood will involve the present users of the existing plaza, many of whom are residents. This implies that existing conflicts among user groups are addressed in the process. For instance, staff from the urban renewal office have attempted to include young residents in the planning process, as they do not feel welcome in the existing plaza. Conversely, the Lanterna project has an emphasis on facilitating good relations with external users in the initial phases of the project and will include residents in a later phase. Its design brief envisages open programming, which only prescribes the functioning of the site and does not address different social groups, whether residents or visitors. However, in the future, the actors involved may be changed, and other strategic relations may emerge.

## **5. Discussion and Concluding Remarks**

The article has analysed emerging visions for implementing particular common meeting places and revealed the problems to which they are thought to be a solution, as well as which type of publicness they are thought to provide for. The study identified similar problem framings in the two examples but revealed different foci in the reasoning for why the housing areas' bad reputation was a problem and for whom. The visions in the two examples both fulfil the parameters of accessibility, abundance, responsiveness, and diversity, which Latham and Layton (2019) stress for achieving publicness in social infrastructure. Both meeting places will be located close to pedestrian-friendly infrastructure, making them easily accessible for a large and diverse group of people.

When constructed, the meeting places will provide new functionalities and recreational activities in their respective districts. In the case of the Garden, a great abundance of planned activities is presented, whereas the Lanterna project takes the provision of existing public meeting places in the district into account in order to ensure diversity.

The overall aim of this article has been to unfold the rationale of the common meeting place strategy in order to be able to reveal what is at stake when Danish municipalities, housing associations, funding bodies, and other stakeholders plan and provide for common meeting places. In this final section, we discuss the implications of the common meeting place strategy and its implementation. First, we discuss the potential political effects of the common meeting place strategy by focusing on the degree to which it relates to the “opening up” political discourse, and hence can be said to indicate a reorientation of urban welfare planning and policies. Second, we discuss the potential social consequences of the new meeting places, including their potential for increasing social encounters among citizens from different socio-economic backgrounds, and how socially just the vision of opening up disadvantaged housing areas appears to be.

In neighbourhood planning, the opening-up discourse has recently become dominant (Bech-Danielsen & Christensen, 2017; Kjeldsen et al., 2019; Nielsen, 2019). The discourse assumes that there are too few possibilities for interaction and interconnectedness between the residents of disadvantaged housing estates and other citizens, causing worse life chances for the former. Hence, the relevant solution to this problem is to interweave and open up the disadvantaged housing areas with the rest of the city by building destinations and enhancing the areas’ physical connectivity. Whereas the idea of a local, central meeting place is derived from the earlier versions of neighbourhood planning, the idea still influences urban renewal programmes. This is also reflected in our two examples, but in separate ways that reveal a different balance between a traditional urban renewal approach, and the more recent “opening-up” political discourse.

The vision of the Garden focuses less on its assets as a destination and more on its benefits for the local neighbourhood. It envisions a common plaza that, with a great diversity of functions and activities, is striving to be both a local place for local residents and a destination for citizens from the wider urban district. In this way, the aim is to mitigate the social and physical isolation of the local inhabitants, many of whom already use the everyday facilities that surround the plaza. The vision has integrated the destination element in the form of a social-economic arboricultural nursery, which is also intended to employ some of the most disadvantaged residents. This underlines the fact that the strong focus on neighbourhood-based empowerment and capacity-building still dominates the district’s urban renewal politics, whereas politics targeting the area’s physical isola-

tion is governed on the municipal scale. This may be interpreted as an example of traditional community planning, which includes a strong focus on social housing work in the district. However, as other urban renewal efforts beyond the common meeting place strategy are simultaneously improving the connectivity of the neighbourhood, the everyday route strategy is operating in tandem with it.

The vision for the Lanterna, conversely, shows that the district of Aalborg East has a longer history of physical urban renewal processes. Previously, the everyday-route strategy has been implemented which has greatly improved the area’s connectivity. Thus, the new meeting place will be located at the crossing of two main pedestrian and bike routes, both upgraded. The project is largely influenced by the destination strategy. Its vision seeks to create a meeting place on a larger scale that, with aesthetic architecture and the attraction of an already well-recognised partner to host the meeting place, could be capable of attracting visitors from all over the city of Aalborg. This can be interpreted as a focus shift away from neighbourhood-based community life to a wider focus on urban life in the urban renewal politics of this district.

Our study stresses that the implementation of a particular urban welfare strategy is a path-dependent process, in which previous urban renewal interventions for improving the physical and architectural structures influence the provisioning of the meeting place’s publicness and the degree to which its residents are in focus and involved in its planning. Even though both projects were launched in the Common Space programme, different visions have emerged, and the meeting places are likely to be constructed in very different ways. Thus, our two examples show that the common meeting place strategy can to some degree be conceived as a reorientation when the destination strategy dominates. However, when the local community is the focus of the planning process, it mostly resembles traditional neighbourhood planning.

The new meeting places have not yet been constructed, and their precise design may still be altered. Hence, we can only vaguely assess their specific social implications. The vision of potential users of the Lanterna is citizens in general, with some focus on users from outside the local neighbourhood. In contrast, the Garden is presented as a meeting place that privileges the residents. Also, those who are involved and given a voice in the planning process underline the differentiated foci of future users of the two projects.

We have shown that the strategy for constructing a common meeting place relies on a problem framing of disadvantaged neighbourhoods as areas with bad reputations or even “ghettos.” Thus, constructing common meeting places might appear to be a taken-for-granted solution capable of attracting external visitors and infusing social resources into a disadvantaged neighbourhood, one that can eventually foster social meetings

and interconnectedness between residents and citizens with more affluent socio-economic profiles. Such anticipated productive aspects of social meetings might reflect a strong belief in the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1950). However, as this implies an idealistic understanding of society as equal, we argue that there is a risk that the common meeting place strategy will result in external users just visiting these meeting places without making meaningful contact with the residents, thereby leaving them with unchanged life chances. Therefore, as Stender and Bech-Danielsen (2019) argue, it is important that future common meeting places are also beneficial to their residents.

As these two meeting places have not yet been established, this article has only scrutinised the visions behind them. Therefore, a need remains to assess their future implementation and outcomes critically to conclude whether a belief in the contact hypothesis is enough to create the politically stated much-needed social surplus to mitigate the social isolation of disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Will the new common meeting places both turn into destinations for external visitors and become places for the residents? Will they provide for meetings among diverse social groups, and will such meetings contribute to a social surplus? These questions must be key in future research and will guide our longitudinal studies following the implementation phase of the meeting places and beyond. At present, it is difficult to determine whether the Common Space funding programme has a far-reaching political effect or whether the two projects indicate a reorientation of urban welfare policies, so a need remains for more studies of the potential impacts. However, when such strategies and programmes are woven into political discourses about the need to open up disadvantaged neighbourhoods, they will have potentially pervasive social consequences that are strongly indicated by the analyses presented here.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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