

Spatial Determinism and the Rejection of Modernist Mass Housing in 1970s Denmark

- 1 Original quote in Danish: "Bajere og beton er hverdag for de unge i Gjellerup-planen. Det er denne samling af menneskesiloer i udkanten af Århus, der ifølge en frisk rapport i højere grad blev bygget af hensyn til betonindustrien end til de personer, som skulle bo i dem. Teenagere må drikke for at udholde den ellers så dræbende ensformighed med cementgiganter på alle sider." "Unge drikker for at klare sig i betonslum" [Young people are drinking to cope with life in the concrete slums], *Ekstra Bladet*, January 7, 1974.
- 2 Henrik Sten Madsen, "B.T. har valgt Danmarks kønneste by: Gjellerup ved Århus betonby med trivsel" [B.T. has chosen Denmark's most beautiful city: Gellerup near Århus, concrete city with well-being], *BT*, August 14, 1970.
- 3 For studies of the role of architecture in the shaping of welfare states, see Helena Mattsson and Sven-Olov Wallenstein, eds., *Swedish Modernism: Architecture, Consumption, and the Welfare State* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2010); Katrine Lotz et al., eds., *Forming Welfare* (Copenhagen: The Danish Architectural Press, 2017); Mark Swenarton, Tom Avermaete, and Dirk Van der Heuvel, *Architecture and the Welfare State* (London: Routledge, 2015).
- 4 Jørn Henrik Petersen et al., *Dansk Velfærds historie – Bd. 3. velfærdsstaten i støbeskeen: 1933–1956* [Danish welfare history vol. 3: The welfare state in the melting pot, 1933–1956], ed. Jørn Henrik Petersen et al., University of Southern Denmark Studies in History and Social Sciences, vol. 410 (Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag, 2012), 549–665.
- 5 Mikkel Høghøj and Silke Holmqvist, "Da betonen blev belastende. Den emotionelle kamp om Gellerupplanen i 1960'erne Og 1970'erne" [When concrete became a burden: The emotional struggle over the Gellerup Plan in the 1960s and 1970s], *Temp* 16 (2018): 128–32, <https://tidsskrift.dk/temp/article/view/109158>.

Beers and concrete constitute everyday life for the young people in Gellerupplanen. It is this conglomerate of human silos, on the periphery of Aarhus that, according to a new report, was built for the building industry rather than the residents. Teenagers turn to alcohol in order to endure the monotony of living amidst concrete giants.¹

These words stem from a sensationalist article published by the Danish tabloid newspaper *Ekstra Bladet* in January 1974. Entitled "Unge drikker for at klare sig i betonslum" (Young people are drinking to cope with life in the concrete slum), the article reported widespread alcoholism among children and young people living on the mass housing estate Gellerupplanen (Gellerup Plan, 1967–72), which had been built only a few years earlier on the western periphery of the Danish city of Aarhus. In the article, *Ekstra Bladet* not only condemned Gellerupplanen as a place of social decline, but the newspaper specifically blamed the spatial environment of the estate, and the matter of concrete in particular, as the primary cause of the youth problems it identified. By linking modernist architecture to juvenile alcoholism, the newspaper identified Gellerupplanen as a place of ultimate resignation. The feeling of hopelessness among young people had ostensibly reached a level where violent opposition was no longer seen as a viable solution. Only alcohol could soothe the pain.

In contrast, Gellerupplanen had, only four years earlier, been awarded the title of "the prettiest city of the year" by another Danish tabloid newspaper, *BT*.² Here, the estate had been praised for its multi-faceted and diverse environment, and the way in which it brought people of various generations together in a strong and affluent local community. From this perspective, Gellerupplanen materialized the architectural visions for family life in the emerging Danish welfare state.³ As private and volunteer organizations were increasingly, from the late interwar years onwards, replaced by the state as the main distributor of child welfare, family policy gradually developed into a cornerstone of the Danish welfare model.⁴ In many ways, the aim to regulate and facilitate family life became key objectives in the planning and design of modernist mass housing estates. With playgrounds, youth clubs, and a broad range of public institutions for child welfare, including nurseries, kindergartens, and elementary schools, Danish mass housing estates were designed to offer socially and spatially child-friendly environments and prepare a new generation for life in the Danish welfare society.⁵ Mass housing, in other words, was not only supposed to house the future generations of the Danish welfare society but also to facilitate happy and healthy childhoods and hence the development of thriving citizens. Already by 1974, however, Gellerupplanen was no

UNGE DRIKKER FOR AT KLARE SIG I BETON-SLUM

Beboerne i Gjellerup-planen er end ikke alene i deres egne stuer – de hører naboer på alle sider



— De kræver tilsmækning af bo her i Gjellerupplanen, siger familien Koltzsch.

Fra Ekstra Bladets
Jyllanderedaktion

Bjævre og beton er hverdag for de unge i Gjellerup-planen. Det er denne samling af menneskeslør i udkanten af Århus, der ifølge en frisk rapport i bjævre grad blev bygget af hensyn til betonindustrien end til de personer, som skulle bo i dem. Teenagerne må drikke for at udholde den ellers så dræbende ensformighed med cémentgiganter på alle sider.

KRAVET HJEM

— Her er drækningsfor- skubebere hver weekend. Det starter tidligt om lørdagen, og de sidste næsten kræver hjem her på søndagen, fortæller den 14-årige Leo Koltzsch, en af de tusinder af unge i den århusianske millionby. — Næsten alle ryger hash. Der er også mange, der sniffer reaktionsforstærker. De gør det bare for at få noget skæg. Vi har længe ønsket at give os til.



Ekstra Bladet's article from 1974 portrayed a group of children on a concrete deck in Gellerupplanen. The image was in black and white to emphasize the dismal atmosphere of the housing estate.

Brochure for the modernist mass housing estate Gellerupplanen from 1972. The housing estate was built on the western periphery of Aarhus between 1967 and 1972. Envisioned as an urban totality, it comprised—in addition to housing—a shopping center, a church, schools, and kindergartens as well as several cultural amenities including a swimming bath, a library, football fields and a tennis court.



- 6 For studies of the rejection of modernist mass housing in Denmark, see Sidse Martens Gudmand-Høyer et al., *Gellerup* (Copenhagen: Arkitektens Forlag, 2021); Jon Helt Haarder, "The Precariat as Place A Literary History of the Danish Ghetto," *Scandinavica* 59, no. 2 (2020): 29–50; Mikkel Høghøj, "Between Utopia and Dystopia: A Socio-Cultural History of Modernist Mass Housing in Denmark, c. 1945–1985" (PhD diss., Aarhus University, 2019). For Nordic studies, see Laura Falender, "Social Housing in Postwar Oslo and Edinburgh: Modernizing, Decentralizing, and Renewing the Urban Housing Stock, ca. 1945–1985" (PhD diss., University of Oslo, 2013); Per-Markku Ristilampi, "Rosengård och den svarta poesin: En studie av modern annorlunda-het" [Rosengård and black poetry: A study of modern difference], *Symposium Bibliotek* (Stockholm: Brutus Östlings Bokförlag, 1994); Guttorm Ruud, "Sites of Crisis: Histories of the Satellite Town" (PhD diss., The Oslo School of Architecture and Design, 2021). For studies with transnational and global perspectives, see Kenny Cupers, "Human Territoriality and the Downfall of Public Housing," *Public Culture* 29, no. 1 (2017): 165–90, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-3644445>; Kenny Cupers, Catharina Gabriellson, and Helena Mattsson, *Neoliberalism on the Ground: Architecture and Transformation from the 1960s to the Present* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvzxxb75>; Christopher Klemek, *The Transatlantic Collapse of Urban Renewal: Postwar Urbanism From New York to Berlin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Florian Urban, *Tower and Slab: Histories of Global Mass Housing* (London: Routledge, 2011).
- 7 Jesper Vestermark Køber, Niklas Olsen, and Heidi Vad Jønsson, *Citizen Categories in the Danish Welfare State: From the Founding Epoch to the Neoliberal Era*, University of Southern Denmark Studies in History and Social Sciences, vol. 623 (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2021).

longer portrayed as a place of well-being in the public discourse. As was the case in many other Northern and Western European countries, the public image of Danish modernist mass housing changed drastically in the 1970s.⁶ This change happened swiftly and was entrenched through a broad range of different channels. From architectural debates and social science research to fiction, music, and the mass media, contemporary observers now criticized the spatial environment of modernist housing estates and questioned the livability of these places. As the case of Gellerupplanen suggests, this discursive shift in a Danish context entailed—and was preconditioned by—new representations of the relationship between mass housing estates and the well-being of children and young people. As negative representations of mass housing started to proliferate, one strand of criticism specifically addressed the relationship between mass housing and contemporary problems of juvenile delinquency and violence. Suddenly, modernist mass housing estates were depicted as breeding grounds of an unhealthy and even dangerous youth culture that posed a significant threat to the social order of the Danish welfare society.

Historically and today, the Danish welfare society has been organized around different citizen categories such as the consumer, the patient, the immigrant, the worker, and the unemployed person.⁷ In various historical contexts, actors including politicians, unions, intellectuals, and professionals have mobilized such categories to either legitimize or challenge the social order of the welfare society. While some citizen categories have functioned as role models for the pursuit of individual happiness and social prosperity more generally, others have represented danger and threats to the welfare state. In this context, modernist mass housing estates have worked as more than just architectural expressions of welfare politics. After their construction, they have continued to exert influence and work as laboratories for broader negotiations of the Danish welfare city's social order and its citizen categories.

Thus, this chapter explores the public rejection of Danish mass housing through the lens of one particular citizen category: that of "the dangerous youth." In many ways, the category of "the dangerous youth" was modeled on its relationship with architecture and urban space. It emerged in the immediate postwar years, yet in the 1970s it specifically became linked to the public rejection of modernist mass housing. On the one hand, "the dangerous youth" became instrumental in the rejection of mass housing estates in public opinion. On the other hand, mass housing estates became formative in the reappraisal of "the dangerous youth" in popular imagination. This dialectical relationship hints at how Nordic welfare architecture became shaped not only within the realm of planning and design but also through popular representations in the mass media and popular culture.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE DANGEROUS YOUTH

In the immediate postwar years, "the youth question" occupied a prominent position in public debates in Denmark. In 1945, *Ungdomskommissionen* (Youth Commission) was created by the Danish government to improve social conditions and opportunities

- 8 Hans Sode-Madsen, *Farlig ungdom – samfundet, ungdommen og Ungdomskommissionen 1945–1970* [Dangerous youth: Society, youth and the Youth Commission, 1945–1970] (Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2003).
- 9 For studies of “the citizen-consumer” in an urban and architectural context, see Janina Gosseye and Tom Avermaete, eds., *Shopping Towns Europe: Commercial Collectivity and the Architecture of the Shopping Centre 1945–1975* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2017); and Alistair Kefford, “Housing the Citizen- Consumer in Postwar Britain: The Parker Morris Report, Affluence and the Even Briefer Life of Social Democracy,” *Twentieth Century British History* 29, no. 2 (2018): 225–58.
- 10 For studies of cultural transfers from USA to Denmark in the postwar decades, see Sissel Bjerrum Fossat, *Den lille pige med iskagen: Marshallplan, produktivitet og amerikanisering* [The little girl with the ice cream: The Marshall Plan, productivity, and Americanization], University of Southern Denmark Studies in History and Social Sciences, vol. 505. (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2015); Dorthe Gert Simonsen and Iben Vyff, eds., *Amerika og det gode liv: Materiel kultur i Skandinavien i 1950’erne og 1960’erne* [America and the good life: Material culture in Scandinavia in the 1950s and 1960s], University of Southern Denmark Studies in History and Social Sciences, vol. 425 (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2011).
- 11 Sode-Madsen, *Farlig ungdom*, 94.
- 12 Original terms in Danish: “Rockere” and “Læderjakker.” Bertel Nygaard, “Lyden af farlig ungdom og sort ekstase. Bill Haleys Rock Around the Clock hørt i Danmark – fra 1950’erne til 1970’erne” [The sound of dangerous youth and black ecstasy: Bill Haley’s “Rock Around the Clock” heard in Denmark, from the 1950s to the 1970s], *Temp* 10, no. 19 (2019): 156–78; Sode-Madsen, *Farlig ungdom*.
- 13 Ungdomskommissionen, “Betænkning om den tilflyttede ungdoms særlige problemer” [Report on the special problems of displaced youth] (Copenhagen: Ungdomskommissionen, 1948); Ungdomskommissionen, “Ungdommen og fritiden” [The youth and leisure] (Copenhagen: Ungdomskommissionen, 1952).

of young people, and in the course of the following seven years, the committee surveyed the general living conditions and behavioral patterns of young people in both rural and urban Denmark.⁸ This resulted in several reports focusing on topics such as leisure, social problems, education and residential patterns, which became formative in the development of Danish youth policy in the subsequent decades. Arguably, the work of the committee reflects the emergence of “the youth” as a distinct citizen category in Danish society. Besides putting the political and social rights of young people on the political agenda, the creation of the committee points to a wider public interest in *the youth* as a social and cultural phenomenon. With the massive increase in societal affluence in the 1950s and 1960s, this interest accelerated even further and led to an increasing individuation of the family into new consuming subjects and the construction of a new kind of citizen, “the citizen-consumer.”⁹ As the term “teenager” gradually took hold in the public discourse, young people became a new and powerful consumer group absorbing many new types of goods and cultural products, especially from North America.¹⁰

Indubitably, “the youth” was a contested social category in postwar Danish society. While the Youth Commission refrained from adopting a moralizing view on the behavior of young people and instead pursued a more pragmatic approach drawing on psychological knowledge, more critical voices also populated the debate. In the wider public, the youth spurred concern, fear, and fascination. These emotions were particularly elicited by the notion of *the dangerous youth* that, in addition to the committee’s work, found expression in various novels and films.¹¹ Initially, the category had been used to define booming crime rates among young urbanites during the lawless last phase of the Nazi occupation, i.e., 1944–45. In the postwar years, the category quickly expanded and became coupled with representations of new, problematic youth groups including “rockers” and “leather jackets” who embraced various cultural tendencies from the USA.¹² In this way, “the dangerous youth” emerged as a way of critiquing various aspects of contemporary Danish society. From a conservative standpoint, the dangerous youth was dangerous because it represented a break with traditional cultural values and, ultimately, the dissolution of the family. From another angle, as the work of the Youth Commission illustrates, this category also served as a prism to critique and thereby improve the social conditions and welfare of young people in the early postwar years.

Both in the work of the Youth Commission and in the popular imagination, the notion of the dangerous youth was from the outset intimately connected to urban culture. In the 1940s and 1950s, “the dangerous youth” was predominantly located on street corners and in the bars and coffee shops of Copenhagen, where the amusement districts around the central station in particular constituted an arena for this troubled generation. Thus, two of the commission’s reports specifically addressed the unhealthy impact that urban life could have on young people.¹³ In this context, newcomers—and particularly those who had moved to Copenhagen from the countryside or villages—were seen as vulnerable to the dangers and temptations of the urban environment. The perceived effects of the big city were highly gendered; while young men were drawn



The official posters for the movies *Farlig Ungdom* (Dangerous youth) from 1953 and *Bundfald* (Sediment) from 1957. Both films starred popular Danish actors Ib Mossin and Birgitte Price as representatives of the social and moral downfall caused by the urban environment of Copenhagen's inner city.

Ekstra Bladet fredag den 31. december 1976 side 3

VOLD OG TERROR HÆRGER FØRSTÆDERNE

Unge bander skaber skræk og rædsel - ingen tør anmelde dem

Forbuddet, som de ikke har bryddet sig om, har været nok til at gøre dem til en af de mest frygtede og skredende bander i landet. De har været aktive i alle dele af landet, men især i de forstadsmæssige områder. De har været aktive i alle dele af landet, men især i de forstadsmæssige områder. De har været aktive i alle dele af landet, men især i de forstadsmæssige områder.

SAG MOD 36

Det er ikke første gang, at de tre unge mænd, som er anklaget for at have været med til at begå en række voldelige gerninger, bliver dømt. De tre unge mænd, som er anklaget for at have været med til at begå en række voldelige gerninger, bliver dømt. De tre unge mænd, som er anklaget for at have været med til at begå en række voldelige gerninger, bliver dømt.

GLADSAXEGRUPPEN 'NOMADERNE'

VI ER IKKE VOLDSMÆND

Når folk ser en indvandringsgruppe, som de kalder 'Nomaderne', så tror de, at de er voldsmænd. Det er ikke rigtigt. De er kun unge mennesker, som har flyttet til Danmark og som gerne vil leve et normalt liv. De er kun unge mennesker, som har flyttet til Danmark og som gerne vil leve et normalt liv.

KØRSTEN

Ven og bekendt med den tidligere gruppeleder, som nu er i fængsel, har været med til at begå en række voldelige gerninger. Han har været med til at begå en række voldelige gerninger. Han har været med til at begå en række voldelige gerninger.

As this article from *Ekstra Bladet* from 1976 illustrates, the 1970s witnessed a shift in the imagined geography of urban violence.

- 14 Sode-Madsen, *Farlig ungdom – Samfundet, ungdommen og Ungdomskommissionen 1945–1970*, 83–94.
- 15 Original quote in Danish: “Skuepladsen for gade-volden er flyttet fra de traditionelle steder omkring Nyhavn og Vesterbro til sovebyerne udenfor storbyen.” “Vold og terror hærger forstæderne,” *Ekstra Bladet*, December 31, 1976.
- 16 For studies of the emotional history of modernist mass housing, see Høghøj and Holmqvist, “Da betonen blev belastende”; Christiane Reinecke, “Into the Cold: Neighborliness, Class, and the Emotional Landscape of Urban Modernism in France and West Germany,” *Journal of Urban History* 48, no. 1 (2022): 163–81, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144220931197>.
- 17 Povl Høst-Madsen, “Hærværk og vold i betonbyen” [Vandalism and violence in the concrete city], *Information*, May 19, 1978; Povl Høst-Madsen, “Politiets samarbejde med private og kommunale vagtværn giver store problemer for retssikkerheden” [Cooperation between the police and private and municipal security forces causes major problems for the rule of law], *Information*, May 23, 1978; Jørgen Kjærgaard, “Livet i betonbyen. angsten, volden – kedsommeligheden” [Life in the concrete city: Fear, violence—boredom], *Information*, June 9, 1978.
- 18 Høst-Madsen, “Hærværk og vold i betonbyen.”
- 19 Flemming Balvig later became professor in sociology and criminology at the University of Copenhagen.

into organized crime and violence, young women were invited to indulge in a promiscuous lifestyle that ultimately resulted in prostitution. This narrative was also reproduced through popular films including *Farlig Ungdom* (Dangerous youth) from 1953 and *Bundfald* (Sediment) from 1957, and novels including conservative journalist Kate Fleron’s *Afsporet Ungdom* (Derailed youth) from 1942. All portrayed the multiple temptations of the big city that corrupted young people into a life of prostitution, alcoholism, and violence.¹⁴ In these depictions, the big city was more than an arena of troubled behavior: it actively contributed to the social downfall of a new generation.

NEW IMAGINED GEOGRAPHIES OF YOUTH AND VIOLENCE

While Copenhagen’s inner-city constituted the main spatial setting for the dangerous youth in the early postwar years, popular representations increasingly linked this troubled group to the concrete suburbs from the early 1970s onward. This move coalesced with a broader shift in the imagined geography of urban violence. In an article entitled “Vold og terror hærger forstæderne” (Violence and terror ravage the suburbs) from 1976, *Ekstra Bladet* specifically pointed to such a shift in contemporary urban Denmark. The article argued that “the scene of street violence has moved from the old, traditional places around Nyhavn and Vesterbro to the new dormitory towns outside the big city.”¹⁵ Besides housing the urban working class, the districts of Nyhavn and Vesterbro were places of amusement, drinking, and thus temptation. In contrast, not much amusement was ascribed to the social and spatial environment of Danish modernist mass housing in the 1970s. Rather, these places were depicted through emotional values such as boredom, loneliness, and fear, and were specifically criticized for their lack of social facilities.¹⁶ In this sense, the *Ekstra Bladet* article not only identified a shift in the imagined geography of urban violence, but it also alluded to a shift in the imagined cause of this violence. While urban violence in the inner city had been rooted in the temptations of the big city, the violent behavior in the concrete suburbs ostensibly originated from a feeling of alienation.

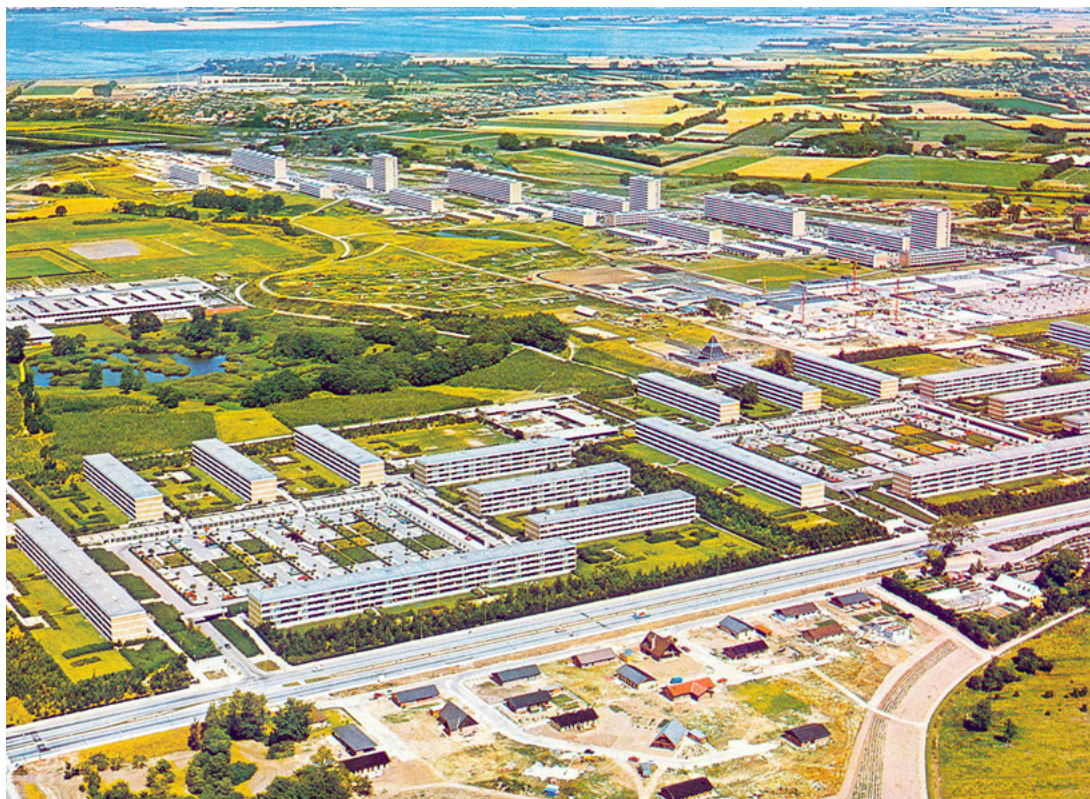
Two years later, the left-wing newspaper *Information* linked this shift to contemporary problems of juvenile delinquency. In a series of three articles, the newspaper sought to explain the destructive behavior of certain youth groups in modernist housing estates, consulting both local police forces and criminologist Flemming Balvig.¹⁷ The articles focused mainly on the housing areas Albertslund Syd (1963–68) and Ishøjplanen (1970–73), both located in the western and southern suburbs of Copenhagen, but they also addressed the links between criminal behavior and modernist housing estates more generally. The first article, the title of which translates to “vandalism and violence in the concrete city,” addressed the contemporary increase in vandalism, burglary and violence committed by the so-called “rockers” or “leather jackets” on the urban periphery.¹⁸ This was followed by an interview with criminologist Flemming Balvig¹⁹ who reflected upon the linkages between these behavioral patterns and the spatial and

- 20 Høst-Madsen, "Politiets samarbejde med private og kommunale avgtværn giver store problemer for retssikkerheden."
- 21 *Danmarks Radio*, "En kirke i beton," aired October 23, 1978.
- 22 Original quote in Danish: "På grund af forældres druk, skilsmisser og korporlig afstraffelse, henvender mange Vollsmose-børn sig til socialforvaltningen i Odense." "De skal vokse op på børnehjem – det er en tilværelse, fortvivlede børn i dag selv beder om" [They will grow up at the orphanage—that is a life that despaired children are asking for today], *UGEavisen*, January 17, 1979.
- 23 For studies of the role of fiction and literary thinking in the shaping of the welfare society, see Haarder, "The Precariat as Place A Literary History of the Danish Ghetto"; and Horne Kjældgaard, *Meningen med velfærdsstaten: Da litteraturen tog ordet – og politikerne lyttede* [The meaning of the welfare state: When literature took the word—and the politicians listened], (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2018).
- 24 Michael Buchwald, *Blokland* (Viborg: Arena, 1975).
- 25 Bent Haller, *Katamaranen* (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1976).

social structure of suburban housing developments.²⁰ In contrast to traditional provincial towns, he argued, the concrete suburbs did not offer many possibilities for diversion for the young people living there. The combination of the lack of social activities and the presence of unsupervised public and semi-public spaces on the estates encouraged acts of vandalism in particular. Thus, although *Information* did not reduce modernist housing estates to the main culprit, the spatial environment of such estates was nonetheless portrayed as complicit in the production of new geographies and patterns of youth crime.

This imagined link between juvenile delinquency and mass housing estates was even more explicitly articulated in other mass media representations. *Ekstra Bladet's* story about Gellerupplanen from January 1974, for example, specifically blamed the architectural monotony of the housing estate for the social demise of teenagers. In 1978, the television broadcast "En Kirke i beton" (A church in concrete) reiterated this point by arguing that the built environment of Gellerupplanen was producing a new generation of restless and vengeful young people.²¹ In the case of Vollsmose (1967–81), a mass housing estate located in the northeastern part of the city of Odense, the local magazine *UGEavisen* in 1979 portrayed the housing estate as a major source of the neglected children that were ending up at a local orphanage. The article argued that "due to their parents' excessive drinking problems, divorces, and corporal punishments, many Vollsmose children approach the social authorities in Odense themselves."²² In this view, Vollsmose actively contributed to the destabilization of the entire social structure of families living on the estate. To escape the abuse they experienced at home, children saw no other option but to abandon their housing estates altogether. Yet, instead of turning to alcohol or violence, they approached the public authorities, begging to be removed from their homes.

The representation of juvenile delinquency on mass housing estates not only found expression in the Danish mass media. It also featured in a range of novels from the mid-1970s, in which Danish authors addressed the imagined linkage between mass housing estates and the production of "the dangerous youth."²³ In the mock-documentary, multi-protagonist novel *Blokland* from 1975, Marxist author Michael Buchwald portrays everyday life on the fictive housing estate of Blokland, including the stories of a number of maladapted youth groups inhabiting the estate.²⁴ The most notorious of these groups was the so-called "black leather boys." Repeatedly assaulting innocent groups of people in the multiple pathways and underpasses of the estate, the group encapsulated the ruthlessness and violence of Blokland. Similarly, in the youth novel *Katamaranen* (The catamaran) from 1976, Bent Haller locates the violent and ruthless behavior of young people in the setting of the concrete environment of a modernist housing estate on the periphery of the city of Aalborg.²⁵ The novel provided a penetrating socialist critique of contemporary Danish society through the lens of two boys, Peter and Thomas, who attempt to escape the brutal reality of their housing estate by sailing to Sweden in a dilapidated catamaran. As in several mass media representations, Haller and Buchwald depict mass housing estates as more than the context of their plots. Instead, the spatial environment of modernist housing works actively to further the demise of the protagonists. On several



Aerial photo of the mass housing estate Vollsmose from the late 1970s. Like Gellerupplanen, Vollsmose included public institutions, communal and mercantile facilities as well as significant green spaces.

26 Besides “spatial determinism,” scholars and practitioners often refer to “environmental determinism” and “architectural determinism.” For studies of spatial determinism in architectural and urban thought in the twentieth century, see Simon Richards, *Architect Knows Best: Environmental Determinism in Architecture Culture from 1956 to the Present* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2012); Falender, “Social Housing in Postwar Oslo and Edinburgh,” 381–446.

occasions, Haller specifically identifies the spatial environment of the estate as the main catalyst of youth violence and crime. While Peter, who had only recently moved to the estate, still upholds a childish attitude and exhibits innocent behavior, Thomas and the other characters who have lived on the estate for several years are hardened and without any form of remorse.

As such, it is possible to identify both significant continuities and ruptures in the public representations of the relationship between juvenile delinquency and urban space in postwar Denmark. On the one hand, mass media and literary depictions of juvenile delinquency on mass housing estates echoed notions of the dangerous youth from the 1940s and 1950s. In both cases, the dangerous youth were depicted in leather jackets and portrayed as an unavoidable consequence of the urban environment. What had changed, in this context, was not so much the perceived links between urban space and the depravation of young people, but rather the geographies and architecture in question. On the other hand, notable differences can also be identified. While the social decline of young people in the big city was tied to the many forms of urban temptation, the destructive behavior of youth gangs on the urban periphery was portrayed as the result of alienation and boredom.

SPATIAL DETERMINISM AND THE REJECTION OF MODERNIST HOUSING

Thus, in 1970s Denmark both mass media and literary representations of mass housing were underpinned by a strong belief in spatial determinism.²⁶ Such representations specifically tied the social decline of children and young people to the spatial environment of the mass housing estates and thus criticized modernist architecture for actively depraving this vulnerable group. Whereas representations of “the dangerous youth” in the immediate postwar years had focused on the urban environment more generally, emphasis was now placed on the social role of specific forms of architecture. Arguably, this had dramatic implications for the popular representation of Danish modernist mass housing and architecture, as the belief in spatial determinism was a powerful discursive tool in changing the public opinion on modernist mass housing and architecture. The idea that mass housing estates actively corrupted children and young people—the future of the welfare society—into maladjusted criminals undoubtedly produced a striking image in conveying the idea of mass housing as places of crisis and stagnation to the broader public.

Yet, the idea that urban space and architecture had the capacity to shape social life was neither a particularly Danish, nor a particularly new, idea. As urban historian Rosemary Wakeman argues, it had underpinned the entire ideological framework of the transnational New Town movement that proliferated in the postwar decades and was central to the urban visions behind Danish mass housing:

Perhaps the most quixotic aspect of this vision was that physical design could affect human action and standards of conduct. With the correct urban design and configuration, it was believed, neighborhoods, towns, and regions, and ultimately

- 27 Rosemary Wakeman, *Practicing Utopia: An Intellectual History of the New Town Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 298–99.
- 28 See, for instance, Klemek, *The Transatlantic Collapse of Urban Renewal: Postwar Urbanism From New York to Berlin*.
- 29 Oscar Newman, *Defensible Space: Crime Prevention through Urban Design* (New York: Macmillan, 1972).
- 30 For studies addressing the transnational history of defensible space theory, see Cupers, “Human Territoriality and the Downfall of Public Housing”; Klemek, *The Transatlantic Collapse of Urban Renewal: Postwar Urbanism From New York to Berlin*; and Sam Wetherell, *Foundations: How the Built Environment Made Twentieth-Century Britain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).
- 31 This argument also found expression in Danish cultural sociology. See, for instance, Birte-Bech Jørgensen and Leif Thomsen, *Hverdagslivet i en forstad: drømme, realiteter og sociale konflikter* [Everyday life in a suburb: Dreams, realities, and social conflicts], Socialpædagogisk Bibliotek (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1978); Leif Thomsen, *Den autoritære by: Storbykrise, bykampe, sociale bevægelser og lokal magt* [The authoritarian city: Metropolitan crisis, urban struggles, social movements, and local power], Kultursociologiske Skrifter, vol. 14 (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1981).

the nation, would transmute into a modern way of life. In alliance with the modernization regime, the planning and new towns became a laboratory for this social engineering.²⁷

Thus, in its positive form, spatial determinism had justified a belief that better housing would produce better people. But in its negative form, spatial determinism was conceived as a condemnation of mass housing environments as places that prevented social well-being and produced antisocial behavior and crime. Both forms of spatial determinism found expression and travelled internationally in the postwar decades.²⁸ Notably, the negative depictions of mass housing that proliferated in the Danish mass media and fictional literature in many ways echoed American urbanist Oscar Newman’s theory of “defensible spaces.”²⁹ Linking the existence of high crime rates to the territorial indefensibility of modernist architecture and design, Newman’s theory came to influence urban policy in various European countries from the late 1970s onwards, with British geographer Alice Coleman’s role in legitimizing Margaret Thatcher’s infamous right-to-buy scheme of the 1980s as the most notable example.³⁰ Although the defensible space theory never gained a strong foothold in architectural theory in Denmark or the Nordic countries generally, the representations of Danish mass housing estates as generators of specific social problems in the form of juvenile delinquency and violence allude to the connections between the Danish case and wider transnational tendencies in urban theory.

The neoliberal potential of the defensible space theory points to the capacity of spatial determinism to encompass several ideological positions at the same time. In the case of Denmark, spatial determinism helped to legitimize both conservative and neo-Marxist critiques of the relationship between urban space and the delinquent youth. Whereas the depiction of the big city as a generator of youth problems had, in the 1940s and 1950s, mainly come from a conservative standpoint, the representations of juvenile delinquency on modernist housing estates were in the 1970s often rooted in a Marxist critique of late-capitalist society. From this point of view, mass housing represented the epitome of alienation and a loss of solidarity within the urban working class, and hence the violent behavior of young people was typically interpreted as a desperate attempt to oppose the hegemonic structures of Danish society.³¹ Thus, despite their contrasting ideological content, both positions reproduced the notion that urban space and architecture were capable of actively shaping social relations and subjectivities. In this sense, the ideological malleability of spatial determinism to some extent provides an explanation as to why the critique of modernist mass housing could become so powerful in 1970s Denmark: it resonated on both sides of the political spectrum.

CONCLUSION: MASS HOUSING AND THE “CITIZEN CATEGORIES” OF THE WELFARE STATE

In many ways, the evolution of “the dangerous youth” in Danish mass media and popular culture exhibits how modernist mass housing estates worked actively in shaping the citizen categories of the Danish welfare society. From a planning perspective, mass

- 32 Høghøj, "Between Utopia and Dystopia," 128–226; Claus Bech-Danielsen and Marie Stender, *Fra Ghetto til blandet by: danske og internationale erfaringer med omdannelse af udsatte boligområder* [From ghetto to mixed city: Danish and international experiences with conversion of marginalized residential areas], 1st edition (Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 2017), 7–25; and Gudmand-Høyer et al., *Gellerup*, 220–306.
- 33 Lotte Jensen, "Danmark – Lokal boendedemokrati och nationell korporatism" [Denmark: Local resident democracy and national corporatism], in *Varför så olika? Nordisk bostadspolitik i jämförande historisk ljus* [Why so different? Nordic housing politics in a comparative light], ed. Bo Bengtsson (Malmö: Égalité, 2006), 92–93.
- 34 Jensen, "Danmark – Lokal boendedemokrati och nationell korporatism." See also The Ministry of Housing, "Redegørelse fra udvalget vedrørende den almenlystige sektors fremtidige rolle på boligmarkedet" [Statement from the committee regarding the future role of the non-profit sector in the housing market] (Copenhagen: The Ministry of Housing, 1986).
- 35 Haarder, "The Precariat as Place A Literary History of the Danish Ghetto."

housing estates had been designed to fit the nuclear family, but already during the 1970s this type of housing became increasingly associated with socially disadvantaged citizen groups including receivers of social benefits, troubled young people, single mothers, and later on immigrants.³² In this context, the trope of "the dangerous youth" came to, in various ways, influence discussions about welfare in postwar Denmark. As a citizen category, "the dangerous youth" did not merely emerge in political language and legislation but also *through* the spatiality of the modern city. Representing both a threat to and a critique of modern Danish society, it became a powerful tool in entrenching the negative reputation that Danish mass housing estates acquired from the early 1970s onwards.

During the 1970s, Danish modernist mass housing transformed from a viable solution to one of the most urgent societal challenges of the twentieth century, namely the housing question, and into a political problem that needed to be managed.³³ The combination of an increasing housing surplus, the enactment of new housing policies promoting home ownership through favorable state loans, and a disproportionately high rent level compared to the rest of the housing market left many modernist mass housing estates battling severe socioeconomic difficulties.³⁴ As Danish social housing associations now struggled to rent out dwellings, modernist mass housing estates became key sites for the municipal allocation of socially disadvantaged citizen groups. While the political legitimacy of the social housing sector became increasingly tied to its role as a provider of housing to underprivileged groups, mass housing estates became prime markers of social decline and impoverishment.

In this context, the category of "the dangerous youth" came to work as a vehicle for identifying and understanding broader welfare issues related to urban poverty and social precarity. As literary scholar Jon Helt Haarder argues, Buchwald and Haller's novels represent the reinterpretation of modernist housing estates into places symbolizing the precariat in 1970s Denmark.³⁵ In other words, these literary depictions of juvenile delinquency on mass housing estates were not, first and foremost, critiques of modernist housing; rather, they used such housing estates as sites for discussing broader issues concerning class and precarity in the Danish welfare society. More broadly, this illustrates how urban architecture can serve as a symbolic battleground over the values of the welfare society. It also invites us to investigate further the welfare history of urban architecture through the citizen categories which have been imagined, produced, and experienced in relation to different architectural forms and typologies. By spatializing the social underbelly of the otherwise increasingly affluent Danish welfare society, mass housing estates came to influence how social problems and marginalized groups were constructed, understood, and visualized in the Danish public sphere.



Front cover of the 1978 report *Kvinnoliv, Förortsliv* (Women's life, suburban life) by Margareta Schwartz and Suzanne Sjöqvist, on the town of Norsborg, showing the fictitious character Gun-Britt, an unemployed single mother.