



'You can simply say no': Narrating the effects and affects of Danish and Swedish housing in crisis

Sara Brolund de Carvalho

KTH School of Architecture

Maryam Fanni

HDK-Valand Academy of Art and Design, University of Gothenburg

Heidi Svenningsen Kajita

University of Copenhagen, Landscape Architecture and Planning

Jennifer Mack

Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study and KTH S. of Architecture

Helena Mattsson

KTH School of Architecture

Svava Riesto

University of Copenhagen, Landscape Architecture and Planning

Meike Schalk

KTH School of Architecture

Abstract

Narratives about the 'failure' of large-scale post-World War II housing are now guiding major physical, social, and economic changes in neighborhoods all over Europe. This is true even in Denmark and Sweden, which have long been known for their welfare states and benevolent housing policies. Today, however, both countries have enacted new national anti-segregation measures that call for major physical and social changes to neighborhoods built in the postwar era, even as the opinions of local communities and residents of such neighborhoods have been only sparsely heard—if at all. By working with the method 'witness seminars', we—as the research collective *Aktion Arkiv*—foreground residents' perspectives and their collective resistance: the effects and affects of top-down changes. While sharing their lived experiences and actions, residents say that architects and planners can 'simply say no' and thereby refuse to participate in these actions.

Keywords

Housing, lived experience, crisis, affect, repressive politics, oral history

Sara Brolund de Carvalho, Maryam Fanni, Heidi Svenningsen Kajita, Jennifer Mack, Helena Mattsson, Svava Riesto and Meike Schalk are part of the **Aktion Arkiv** research collective.

Contacts:

sarabc@kth.se maryam.fanni@gu.se
hsk@ign.ku.dk, heidi@bureaus.dk
jennifer.mack@arch.kth.se
jennifer.mack@swedishcollegium.se
helena.mattsson@arch.kth.se
svri@ign.ku.dk
meike.schalk@arch.kth.se

‘Some of what we have worked very hard on, as people who are active in opposition against the “ghetto law”, is by spreading information, spreading information about legal rights, spreading information about tenant democracies, how they work, and about what is being planned up in the organizations, and mobilize resistance against it. When you do that then you are called all kinds of things. You are called naïve. That is one of the mildest things to be called. You are called a rumor spreader, you are called... What was it Frank Jensen [then mayor of Copenhagen] called us? ‘Troublemakers.’ – Fatma Tounsi, resident of Bellahøj, Copenhagen, Denmark and activist in *Almen Modstand* (Common Resistance)

Narratives shape cities. Sometimes, stigmatizing narratives justify radical changes to the built environment, a condition that we see repeatedly in stories told about large-scale, post-World War II housing estates all over Europe. Today, pejorative accounts of housing estates as ‘failed’ neighborhoods support major renewal and regeneration projects that often disregard residents’ wishes and perspectives. In recent years, narratives of ‘failure’, policies about housing and segregation, and materialities of the built environments of large-scale housing estates have become closely entangled in the two Nordic welfare states of Denmark and Sweden.

Notably, the dominant, negative narratives about these areas—often featured in sensationalist media accounts and in political campaigns—take so much bandwidth that it can be almost impossible to hear any others in the public domain. We take this as a call to activate public scholarship to locate and make space for other characterizations of the same neighborhoods. These narratives can both work against stigmatization and sometimes confirm it, potentially creating a messy, yet also more diverse and hopeful perspective.

In this text, we, members of the *Aktion Arkiv* research collective¹, highlight narratives that come directly from residents themselves as they respond to, fight against, and reimagine current housing policies. These policies present themselves as solutions for urban segregation and rely on narratives about selected neighborhoods of rental housing—usually built as large-scale, welfare-state era housing during 1960s and 1970s—and give them the value-laden names ‘parallel societies,’ ‘ghettos,’ ‘vulnerable areas,’ and others.²

To do this, we have employed a specific oral history methodology from contemporary history: the ‘witness seminar.’ The method calls for ‘witnesses’ of historical events to tell their own accounts in their own words, while the researchers carefully listen and collect these stories, crafting new archival material in the process (Mattsson and Schalk, 2019). We organized two such seminars in Copenhagen and Stockholm in 2021 and 2022, respectively, in which we called on residents to explain their lived experiences and own perspectives about

¹ *Aktion Arkiv* is an independent research group made up of the authors of this text. For further information see www.aktionarkiv.org.

² The Swedish and the Danish general common housing systems differ and their organization have evolved over time. Please see [FACTSHEET The State of Housing in the EU 2023.pdf](#)



Figure 1

Protest banners and stickers against renovation displayed on balconies of housing blocks and a map, while the housing estate is being renovated to adhere to the “Ghetto Law,” Mjølnerparken, Copenhagen, 2023. The banners say: “*Stop social udrensning*” (Stop Social Cleansing), “*Vores boliger er ikke til salg*” (Our homes are not for sale); “*Stop diskrimination*” (Stop Discrimination); “*Nej til tvangsflytning*” (No to evictions). Photo: *Aktion Arkiv*.

the policies. These residents’ narratives offered insights into the human costs of recent housing policies that typically rely on logics of economics and politics. In the following essay, we first illuminate what witness seminars can tell us about what we call the ‘affects and effects’ of these policies as residents experience them. We then describe the significant changes that are taking place in housing policies in Sweden and Denmark. By integrating the excerpts of residents’ accounts into the text we aim to give voice to those individuals most affected by contemporary repressive housing policies.

Our title, ‘You can simply say no,’ are the words of a resident, housing organisation board member and housing activist from Copenhagen, Søren-Emil Schütt. He suggested that architects who are currently working to implement the new Danish policies (commonly known as the ‘ghetto law’ and resulting in mass demolitions and renovations) might just choose to refrain from this status quo practice of adherence to fulfilling work assignments. Instead, he encouraged architectural and planning communities to take a more critical position: to enact their profession differently, to refuse their given tasks, to opt out. In documenting words like his and narratives from residents who are now targeted by these policies, we investigate the ‘affects and effects’ of current housing policies in Denmark and Sweden. By this, we denote the emotional costs and fallout from these policies, and we highlight the impact they have on both physical space and on residents’ everyday lives.

Challenging dominant narratives

Working *in-medias-res*—as these policies are being implemented not as rhetorical flourish but in tangible measures in real neighborhoods with real residents—we use witness seminars as a methodology to account for both the effects and affects of policies as experienced on

the ground. In the two witness seminars we organized, we asked residents and engaged actors from Denmark and Sweden to explain how the new policies affected their personal lives, their built environments, and their local communities.

The two witness seminars were organized as public events, where the ‘witnesses’ were local residents of the neighborhoods being targeted by the policies, housing activists, tenant representatives, community organizers, and others. The Danish seminar, presented under the title ‘Caring for Plans’, took place in October 2021 under the auspices of the Copenhagen Architecture Festival (CafX) in a community building of the Lundtoftegade neighborhood.³ We held the Swedish seminar, entitled ‘Solidarity in Times of Repressive Politics’, in October 2022 as a stand-alone event at Folkets Husby, a community center in the neighborhood of Husby on the outskirts of Stockholm.⁴

As the research collective *Aktion Arkiv*, we advertised the two witness seminars both to architectural communities (including students) and locally within the neighborhoods themselves. We framed them as storytelling events, where each panelist began by giving a five- to seven-minute account of their position and experience with the neighborhoods and the housing policies. We used our positions as researchers and educators to stage this as an event of relevance to students, professionals in the field of architecture, academics, and local audiences alike. The preparations enabled active listening and conversation rather than polemical debate. This made room for uninterrupted speech acts, drawing from the tradition of radical pedagogy and understanding listening as active and political rather than as a passive act. In this, we also challenged the idea of ‘giving voice’—typically associated with ‘participatory planning’ and other methods used to gather residents’ opinions—because the

³ The full Danish seminar title was ‘Caring for Plans: Narratives of the Parallel Society Package’. Panelists were Alex Young Petersen, resident, chairperson of Bispehaven housing association and activist in *Almen Modstand* (Common Resistance) (<https://www.alexyoung.dk>), Copenhagen; Fatma Tounsi, resident of Bellahøj, housing activist and activist in *Almen Modstand* (Common Resistance); Elsebeth Frederiksen, resident of Gellerupparken; editorial secretary at the resident produced journal *Skræppebladet*, and activist in *Almen Modstand* (Common Resistance); and Søren-Emil Schütt, resident of Lundtoftegade; chairperson of Lundtoftegade housing association and activist in *Almen Modstand* (Common Resistance), and the panel was moderated by Heidi Svenningsen Kajita and Svava Riesto from Action Archive. Further, Beata Hemer and Marie Northrup Christensen, founders of *Almen Arkiv* (Common Archive) exhibited and presented their archival work, while students from the University of Copenhagen’s course ‘Theories and Methods in Landscape Architecture’ exhibited their work on neighborhoods targeted in the Danish ‘ghetto plan’, emphasizing portraits of everyday life. The workshop was led by Heidi Svenningsen Kajita in dialogue with course instructors Ellen Braae, Kris Nilsson, and Svava Riesto. The seminar was simultaneously interpreted into English with headsets provided, in order to allow for an international audience. It was organized by *Aktion Arkiv*, financed by ARQ c/o White AB and FFNS Foundation for Research, Development and Education, and presented as part of the Copenhagen Architecture Festival programme.

⁴ The full Swedish title was ‘Solidarity in Times of Repressive Politics: A Seminar on the Effects of the Terms “Especially/Vulnerable” Areas’. Panelists were Nazem Tahvilzadeh, democracy researcher, Stockholm; Marlen Eskander, resident of Södertälje and founder of Läsfrämjarsinstitutet (Institute for the Promotion of Reading); Ilhan Kellecioglu, resident of Husby/Kista, Stockholm and activist in *Ort till Ort* (Area to Area); and Beata Hemer and Marie Northrup Christensen founders of *Almen Arkiv* (Common Archive), Copenhagen; moderated by Sara Brolund de Carvalho and Maryam Fanni. The witness seminar was organized by *Aktion Arkiv*, and financed by ARQ c/o White AB and FFNS Foundation for Research, Development and Education.

engagement occurred without the goal of gathering support for specific planning measures or input for new designs (Cook-Sather, 2007; Lacey, 2013; Wiberg & Nyberg, 2017).

The panelists were provided with a set of key questions in advance of the seminars to support their thinking about which stories they might want to relay and which narratives they might see as particularly important to architectural communities. The audience for both seminars was diverse, comprising residents, activists, students, social workers, architects, planners, housing administrators, and curious others. The panelists were not necessarily representative of the ‘average’ resident of these areas but were instead residents engaged in various forms of resistance and engagement that *Aktion Arkiv* considered particularly relevant in our efforts to diversify existing narratives about the areas and their futures. As we continue work, we intend to organize additional witness seminars in which the presenters would be other residents, as well as planners, housing administrators, maintenance personnel, and other involved actors. All speakers agreed to be recorded, to have their stories transcribed, and to read and revise the transcripts as active participants after the events concluded. Our role as researchers was thereby to create new archival material; material that we understood to be missing from the historical and contemporary record.⁵ The witness seminars themselves—the moment where we bring people together to challenge dominant narratives—are, however, the main takeaway of this research.

During the Danish seminar of October 2021, we took testimony from residents of five housing estates in Copenhagen and Aarhus that are directly or indirectly affected by the Danish parallel society legislation, or ‘ghetto law’: Gellerupparken, Bellahøj, Aldersrogade,



Figure 2

Poster for Copenhagen Architecture Festival 2021, on the theme ‘Landscapes of Care’.
Photo: *Aktion Arkiv*



Figure 3

Witness seminar at Lundtoftegade, Copenhagen, Denmark, in October 2021. From left to right: Elsebeth Frederiksen, Alex Young Pedersen, Fatma Tounsi, Søren-Emil Schütt.
Photo: Francesco Martello

⁵ The full transcripts, translated into English and in the original Danish and Swedish, will soon be available on the *Aktion Arkiv* website, <https://www.aktionarkiv.org/>

Lundtoftegade, Bispehaven. The seminar addressed this 2018 law and its successors as a series of historical events.

First, the panel of four residents/activists were invited to recount their experiences and the effects of the law where they live. Panelists gave, for example, accounts about how they first found out about the law, how it has affected their everyday lives and those of their families and neighbors, and how it has triggered their own intensifying engagements in tenant democracy. Panelists also discussed *Almen Modstand* (Common Resistance), the nationwide housing activist network of which they are part that was specifically formed to counteract the ‘ghetto law’ (Wang, 2018). The conversation foregrounded differences between mainstream media and political narratives (from outsiders to the neighbourhoods) vis-à-vis the insider perspectives from the panelists. Furthermore, all the resident panelists – regardless of background and although they lived in five different housing areas – all addressed, in various ways, the racialization and ‘othering’ of their neighborhoods that they observed in the political discourse.

During the Swedish seminar in October 2022, panelists included residents/activists living in or working with affected areas in Sweden: Husby, Kista, and Södertälje. To support the cross-border connections and understand the narratives as interconnected, *Aktion Arkiv* also invited members of the Danish groups *Almen Arkiv* (Common Archive) and *Almen Modstand* (as noted above, Common Resistance).⁶ To echo and cross-reference participants’ voices from the 2021 witness seminar in Denmark, we also organized a poster exhibition displaying quotes from that seminar in black text on yellow paper, which we hung behind the speakers in Sweden in 2022. This allowed Swedish seminar participants and audience members to discover synergies and dissonances with different people’s experiences across the two countries. Furthermore, two activists from Denmark took part in the seminar in Sweden and thereby contributed to new connections, mutual learning, and support. For

Figure 4

Seminar at Folkets Husby, Stockholm, Sweden, in October 2022. From left to right: Maryam Fanni, Nazem Tahvilzadeh, Marlen Eskander, Ilhan Kellecioglu, Marie Northrup Christensen and Beata Hemer. Photo: *Aktion Arkiv*



⁶ *Almen Arkiv* is run by anthropologist and housing activist Marie Northrup Christensen and architect Beata Hemer.

instance, Danish activists described how the housing legislation affecting them has evolved over time and motivated them to organize, such as in Marie Northrup Christensen's comment in October 2021:

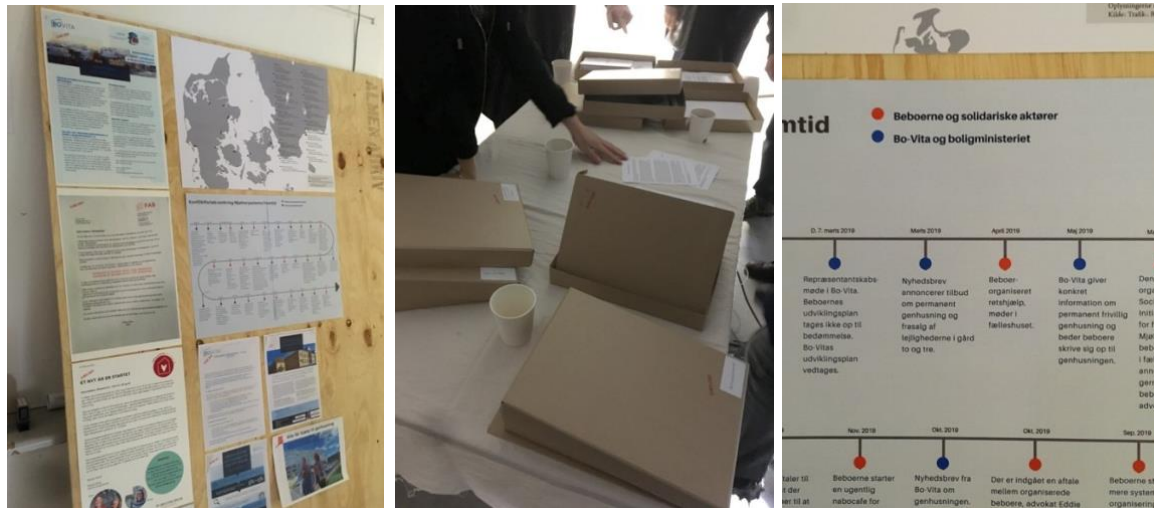
I am attendant of 'common housing' neighborhood in Copenhagen, Aldersrogade, that has been defined as a 'ghetto', categorized as a 'ghetto' and now categorized as a 'parallel society', because our government changed the categories on the list, so now they don't use the term 'ghetto' anymore, but we still face the same legislation. ... We were a few tenants coming together when they launched the law in 2018, to form this small association, and after that we launched this resistance platform called *Almen Modstand* (Common Resistance). ... We are a loosely organized network with a flat horizontal structure and active tenants' groups in different affected neighborhoods in different parts of Denmark. And we don't have any spokesperson or central leading organ, so I'm only here today as an individual. – Marie Northrup Christensen, resident of Aldersrogade, Copenhagen, Denmark, and founder of *Almen Arkiv* (Common Archive)

In the Swedish seminar, the panelists explicitly called on architects in the audience and beyond to support this housing struggle by spreading information about the stories told and resisting participation in the demolitions and renovations that the law promotes. The agency of architects and planners took center stage in several comments, as follows:

And we have a very absurd situation here with regard to architects. That when architects build houses in Sweden and do it well, they have built a nice house. When you do it in an area like Husby or another suburban area, you have counteracted segregation. I don't understand that logic, because there is no logic in that. ... So, I accuse you architects, urban planners, of building a discourse ... you have helped to entrench a way of looking at the problem of our cities in terms of segregation as if the problems are only in the built environment in these areas. – Nazem Tahvilzadeh, democracy researcher, Stockholm

Now I was introduced as an architect, and I can speak from that position—and about our profession helping to implement this legislation. ... I don't know if this quote here behind me, 'you can just say no', if it comes from an architect or from a resident. But it makes me think of us architects: ... I think what you can also do, it's to ally. ... So, to create some kind of connection, alliance, between the people working in these processes and the activists and that there is not an us-and-them division as there has been some of...a rhetoric that divides the two. So, I think that ... Yes, alliances there can break that division. – Beata Hemer, architect based in Copenhagen and founder of *Almen Arkiv* (Common Archive)

In focus for the Swedish seminar was the use of the terms 'vulnerable areas' and 'particularly vulnerable areas' in government policies and documents, political and popular rhetoric, and

**Figure 5**

Almen Arkiv presenting their collected materials during the seminar ‘Caring for Plans’ in Lundtoftegade in 2021, including a visual timeline mapping the processes of the housing politics in Denmark. Photo: *Aktion Arkin*

media coverage, as well as to reflect on how the Swedish trajectory might follow in the footsteps of the Danish one (or not). Both audience members and activists participating in the panel there expressed their concerns about these labels and their effects on communities:

They call it an ‘especially vulnerable’ area. Why? I want to know. Is it the building that is ‘especially vulnerable’ or is it me as a person? – Audience member at the witness seminar in Stockholm, Sweden

I remember being so damned angry when I started it. *Läsförmedlingen* is an organization that works with the promotion of reading, literature, and culture amongst children and their adult caregivers in so-called ‘socioeconomically vulnerable areas’.

We almost never talk about this: we say that these are structurally disadvantaged areas, but *why* are there not adequate activities, but why—we are asking—isn’t enough being done to raise health and wellness in these areas? Why aren’t there any museums? Why aren’t there libraries? Why don’t these things exist in such areas? We started working with areas where everything had been dismantled, where beyond perhaps a housing company, there was nothing left. – Marlen Eskander, founder of *Läsförmedlingen* (Institute for the Promotion of Reading)

The Swedish witness seminar brought together around 70 people in the audience, of whom approximately half lived in the local Järva area where Husby, the site of the seminar, was located. The other half came from all over Stockholm, many of them architects, planners, social scientists, and students. These figures are estimates based on a voluntary survey conducted on site after an audience member suggested that attendees raise their hands to identify with the different categories.

After short opening statements from the panelists, the conversation quickly veered into deeply emotional content about old and new threats to tenants’ rights and democratic ideals

in Swedish suburbs, which had intensified after a conservative, right-wing government had won the election the previous month. Panelists urgently called for local-level organizing, especially among neighbors. They also charged that residents and nonresidents alike should engage within established, national organizations such as *Hyregästföreningen* (the Tenant's Rights Association). Some panelists contended that this organization should recall its initial mission: to galvanize tenants to search for a more democratic and just future, as follows:

We must protect an opposition in Sweden. ... In Sweden, it is not possible to bypass the established civil society organizations that exist, ... I mean, the Tenants' Association is still a central organization for housing policy in Sweden, ... So, we have to protect and radicalize the kind of established organizations that exist. ... So, it's also important that we engage with the established while our dissatisfaction is also expressed in creating new organizations that are pushing in all directions. – Nazem Tavhizadeh, democracy researcher, Stockholm

By listening during these two witness seminars—one year apart and in the wake of major political events and upheavals—we foregrounded the creation of a missing archival record of residents' experiences, the influences of anti-segregation policies on their everyday lives, as well as their resistance strategies. These narratives suggest that residents are not only actively claiming their right to remain in their homes and local communities, but that they are also fighting for housing justice more generally. They also present a different narrative of the neighborhoods—as places of value and of neighborly continuity and engagement—than the disparaging and dystopian accounts that are more commonly told about them.

Danish and Swedish housing in times of repressive politics

Since the 1990s, many post-World War II neighborhoods in Denmark and Sweden have undergone numerous renovation and development projects thought to support 'social mixing' and other demographic changes. In 2018, such efforts became the key issue in Danish national politics, when the Danish Ministry of Economic Affairs and the Interior (under a conservative government) launched a new political strategy to create 'One Denmark without parallel societies' (2018). In the publication with the same name, the government outlined new political practices that aligned with a simultaneous efforts to define one streamlined, top-down narrative about large-scale housing areas, leading up to the policymakers' final ostensible goal: 'No ghettos in 2030' (Danish Ministry of Economic Affairs and the Interior, 2018).

In this policy document, language, images, numbers, and diagrams constructed a reality, where narratives of the past and the present were intertwined to create future scenarios (Kajita, Mack, Riesto, Schalk, 2022). Lars Løkke Rasmussen, then the Prime Minister, had called selected neighborhoods 'cracks' in the map of Denmark in his New Year's Speech as broadcast on national television in January 2018, and these cracks could, he argued, only be remediated by significant measures, such as to 'break up the concrete', 'demolish buildings' and 'spread the inhabitants' (Rasmussen, 2018). The Prime Minister's speech and the strategies that followed had little foothold among the residents, who had not been involved

in the discussions that produced them. It thus came as a major shock, as several residents described during the Danish panel:

But then there was this New Year's speech by Lars Løkke Rasmussen, the Danish Prime Minister, on the first of January 2018, when he began to talk about blank spaces on the world map, and a 'parallel society' and social control. And I just sat there and was completely... I became so angry, because basically the whole New Year's speech was just about that. I mean, that is not how Gellerup is for me. – Elsebeth Frederiksen, resident of Gellerupparken, Aarhus, Denmark, editorial secretary of the resident produced magazine *Skræppebladet* and activist in *Almen Modstand* (Common Resistance)

I was at a children's birthday party with my daughter and the news came out and began to show up in all the media. We were talking with the parents at this birthday party, and she overheard it and burst out in tears because she realized that now her childhood home evidently stands to be torn down. – Alex Young Pedersen, resident at Bispehaven and chairperson of Bispehaven Housing Association, Aarhus, Denmark and activist in *Almen Modstand* (Common Resistance)

The 2018 'ghetto law', which has since attracted international attention, classified selected neighborhoods as 'vulnerable areas', 'ghettos', or 'hard ghettos', defining these categories through metrics of income, the prevalence of crime, unemployment, education, and—most controversially—so-called 'non-Western' residents (Jensen 2021; Mack 2023; Seemann, 2021). After providing this diagnosis, the policy then offered its version of a cure: a catalogue of comprehensive spatial and social interventions, including privatizations, renovations, and



Figures 6 and 7
Covers of the official publications 'Ét Danmark uden parallelsamfund' (2018) and 'Rätt insats på rätt plats' (2020)

demolitions of the housing in the identified neighborhoods.⁷ Residents explained how they found this to be counterproductive:

Well, one of the most bizarre things about this legislation is that they claim to work against segregation in the city and segregation in the housing market by actually forcing people to move and taking away the rights from the ones who are most discriminated against in the housing market. And that is... it's bizarre that they were able to sell such an opposing idea at all. A real package of inconsistencies, but yes, in the end we learned that anything can be done in Danish politics if they just add enough racism to it. Then they can sell anything. – Fatma Tounsi, resident of Bellahøj, Copenhagen, Denmark, and activist in *Almen Modstand* (Common Resistance)

Urban development plans and other architectural documents became crucial for implementing this legislation, positioned as they were at the conjunction of legal frameworks, visions about both current and imagined future residents, and the practices of architectural and planning professionals. These intersections of agents and interests have produced numerous conflicts, yet there has been consensus about its necessity across nearly the entire political spectrum. In 2018, the Danish 'ghetto law' was adopted by a large majority vote in parliament, making it unsurprising that the program continued under the Social Democratic Government that came to power in 2019. Under the latter government, however, politicians decided to alter the official language and they replaced the label 'ghetto' with 'parallel societies'.

In fact, the main techniques of intervention remained constant across the shifting governments: police 'visitation zones', a singling out of 'non-Western' residents, and the use of the built environment (especially the home, the most intimate of human spaces) as a site of intervention in social mixing and anti-segregation strategies. The policy has since had significant effects on Danish housing areas and led to residents' initiatives to fight it, both in everyday practices and through legal measures. Affected directly by social and urban planning programs that displace residents, organizations and local communities have responded and invented new tactics to resist the physical changes proposed for their areas, and they have also found strategies for helping their neighborhoods stay off the so-called 'ghetto list' that requires these interventions.⁸

The Danish residents' statements showed us that the 'ghetto law' in its various incarnations has had devastating effects in its significant changes to the built environment and in displacing people:

⁷ Current large research projects into these ongoing transformation projects include the ten-year (2019-2028) research project 'Følgeevaluering af danske ghettoomdannelser for Landsbyggerfonden,' by Mechlenborg, M., Bech-Danielsen, B., and Stender, M.: <https://vbn.aau.dk/da/projects/f%C3%B8lgeevaluering-af-danske-ghettoomdannelser-for-landsbyggerfonden>; and the three-year (2021-2023) project: 'Fleksible Fællesskaber: Bæredygtige sociale bymodeller i almene boligområder' by Nielsen, M. et al. <https://pure.kb.dk/da/projects/fleksible-f%C3%A6llesskaber-b%C3%A6redygtige-sociale-bymodeller-i-almene-bo>.

⁸ E.g. <https://www.almenmodstand.dk>; see also <https://llo.dk>.

The problem is that these areas will be converted, not for those who live there, but for those who *will* live there. So that's why they don't care about what we think, because anyhow we will... They want us to move. But I wish that in the future the people who should do the developing, that they would talk with the ones who live there. Because it might be that we actually have some good ideas as to what should happen. – Elsebeth Frederiksen resident of Gellerupparken, Aarhus, Denmark, editorial secretary of the resident produced magazine *Skrapplebladet* and activist in *Almen Modstand* (Common Resistance)

Even so, the law has also inadvertently produced new modes of intervention into how residents participate in the democratic management of their local housing associations, a long tradition in Denmark. For instance, resistance to the law has inspired new democratic residents' initiatives to develop *between* various neighborhoods in different parts of the country, such as *Almen Modstand* (Fabian & Hansen, 2020). Residents and other local actors have organized across the affected housing areas, for example by means of public campaigns such as 'Hands off our homes'.⁹ Other networked activities have included organizing legal aid for residents and legal action against the policies.¹⁰ Residents emphasized how the policies had paradoxically produced organized, collective action:

I find the 'ghetto law' to be something that mobilized us. And we realize that, hey, the fact is that we haven't been good at defending our rights, and we have sort of taken it for granted that we have democratic rights. And we have rights, such as that a dwelling/home is a right. But now we've realized that if we don't continue to defend these rights, just as the housing movement has always done, then they will be taken from us. And the only way we can do it is by spreading information, by explaining and mobilizing. ... So, yes. I would encourage all architects to help do this. So it is not enough that you sit with the ones who are controlling things from the top. You also have to be engaged in explaining to very ordinary people why things are being done in the way they are being done, so they can have an actual influence on how things can be done. – Fatma Tounsi, resident of Bellahøj, Copenhagen, Denmark and activist in *Almen Modstand* (Common Resistance)

In 2022, in fact, residents of one of the government's identified 'parallel societies' (the updated name for 'ghettos' after 2019), Mjølnerparken, sued the Danish state for discrimination.¹¹ Even with these active efforts to fight back, however, public discourse about the same areas is still dominated by narratives about 'failure' and segregation that align with the government's own deeply pessimistic version of the story.

⁹ The Danish name of this campaign is 'Fingrene væk fra vores hjem'

https://www.facebook.com/almenmodstand?locale=da_DK

¹⁰ See e.g. 'Repeal the law on demolition and sale of social housing and abolish the so-called "ghetto lists"'

('Ophæv loven om nedrivning og salg af almene boliger og afskaf de såkaldte "ghettolister"').

<https://www.borgerforslag.dk/se-og-stoet-forslag/?Id=FT-04982> (Accessed 3 March 2023);

<https://solidaritet.dk/borgerforslag-til-behandling-stor-dag-for-almen-modstand-blev-som-vi-havde-regnet-med/>

¹¹ <https://www.justiceinitiative.org/litigation/tenants-of-mjolnerparken-v-danish-ministry-of-transport-and-housing>.

Figure 8

March against demolition of affordable housing, organized by *Lejernes Landsforening* (the Association of Danish Tenants) with posters saying ‘We want housing, not profit’ and ‘[we say] no to more than 1000 homes being demolished’.

Photo: Bo Sigismund/Brabrand Boligforening



In Sweden, on the other hand, a host of housing privatizations has remade the housing stock into a site attracting venture capitalists and where so-called ‘renovictions’—that is, renovations that cause residents to have to relocate owing to significantly higher rents—have become commonplace (Polanska & Richards, 2021). As populist winds blow through the country, these developments have lately met a new rhetoric inspired by the Danish policy that sees intervention into the neighborhoods as a starting point: a rhetoric turned into the potential for concrete policy proposals during the campaigns for the national election in September 2022. The far-right nationalist party, the Swedish Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*), introduced similar language earlier and, by spring 2022, their concepts appeared more broadly in the Swedish political discourse (Orrenius & Lundborg, 2022). This new narrative, however, was not isolated to the right wing but, as in Denmark, appeared in different forms across the political spectrum.

During the campaign, light reference to a history of failed policies and architectures seemed to justify these ideas. In 2020, the national police of Sweden had already identified areas in need of further police presence and resources, labeling them ‘vulnerable’, ‘risk’, or ‘especially vulnerable’ areas (*utsatta områden, riskområden, särskilt utsatta områden*) (Orrenius & Grosshög, 2022; Riksrevision, 2020). When the new government came to power, an intensified rhetoric suggested that a destiny of future failures could be avoided through major actions directed toward these ‘vulnerable areas’. The so-called ‘Tidö Agreement’ was launched on October 14, 2022, after members of the new conservative Government, backed by the far-right, met in Tidö Castle to outline policies just after the election, making good on these agendas with new, wide-ranging proposals (Tidöavtalet, 2022), a development about which housing activists were acutely aware:

Thinking of the Tidö Agreement, the fascist element in our societies is getting bigger and stronger, and we need some solidarity. But it is not solidarity with Husby, it is solidarity in your area. In solidarity with the people who are hit hardest by the politics that are coming now. – Ilhan Kellecioglu, resident of Husby/Kista, Sweden and activist in *Ort till Ort* (Area to Area)

The agreement presented the government’s ambitions, following the example from Denmark, to create ‘visitation zones’. It also called for new research into existing Swedish law to identify ‘enhanced possibilities for internal alien controls, intensified return work,

transit centers throughout the asylum process, deportation' (Tidöavtalet, 2022). Panelists commented on how this represented a coming to fruition of proposals that were previously deemed too extreme:

... the political rhetoric and the political discourse have evolved over the last, say, ten-fifteen years, in Sweden, with a particular focus on an obsession in politics with this issue of vulnerable areas that ties in with several different political topics, doesn't it? It ties in with immigration, what you call integration, and generally the hatred of Muslims, and a general value-conservative turn in our political discourse, where criminality also stands out as an area. So why is it interesting to talk about 'vulnerable areas'? ... this is something that we should perhaps take seriously, ... on how absurdly a democracy itself can screw up its politics, still call it democratic, still call it liberal, but in fact dismantle the foundations that are democratic politics, including the rule of law, respect for basic human rights in as well as political administration and so on. ... And this hatred that then exists against suburbs, the fear, the hatred against immigration, immigrants, the hatred against Muslims, all of these things come together in the same ideological mass, and are presented to the public as a policy in the name of democracy. It is unfortunate, it is absurd, but from the point of view of knowledge, we can also look at it as effective. ... In Denmark, they have won elections by this method several times in a row, and I think we have to listen to that. – Nazem Tahvilzadeh, democracy researcher, Stockholm

Supporting these updated imaginaries of housing policies in Denmark and Sweden were statistical data and other 'technologies of power' that the policy reports in Denmark and the police reports in Sweden then use to identify (in current terminology) certain neighborhoods as 'parallel societies' (*parallelsambällen*) or 'vulnerable areas' (*utsatta områden*) (Kajita, Mack, Riesto, and Schalk, 2022). Directly and indirectly, such categorizations have led to urban design projects of densification or demolitions, and to the privatization of existing affordable housing, often then leading to processes where existing residents are forced to move out of their affordable apartments (Baeten et al., 2017).

Not surprisingly, such processes affect existing residents dramatically, including their loss of longtime homes through evictions or renovations that make their apartments too expensive for them. Critically, these same residents have been only sparsely heard—if at all—by those who manage and execute these major physical, social, and economic changes. When the built environment often is seen as 'functional, innocuous, and pre-political', to use the words of the legal scholar Sarah Schindler, or when crime and other social problems are linked to certain neighborhoods, the policies themselves have often avoided critical review. Politicians and many members of the public alike understand it as 'common sense' that policies (like social-mix or anti-segregation) and physical acts (such as demolition and radical renovation) are needed. Residents commented on how this perception arose from the lack



Figure 9

The community center at Lundtoftegade, where the Copenhagen witness seminar took place.

Photo: *Aktion Arkiv*



Figure 10

Facades with balconies in Husby, where the Swedish witness seminar took place. Photo: *Ort till Ort*

of contact between nonresidents making decisions about neighborhoods and those who held valuable knowledge based on everyday experiences of them:

This distancing gaze that comes from the outside is shared by everyone who doesn't live here.... Many people who come from the outside with good intentions, people who do a lot of volunteer work and people who just see the area from the outside do not necessarily have insight into what it means to live in Bispehaven and the qualities that the area offers. You can never get this insight under your skin just by coming there, you can get it only through living there. – Alex Young Pedersen, resident of Bispehaven and chairperson of Bispehaven housing association, Aarhus, Denmark and activist in *Almen Modstand* (Common Resistance)

How then can we hear residents in this deafening silence of consolidated, macro-narratives that are often based on assumptions and distant political agendas? How can we bear witness to residents' struggles, losses, and gains in the transformation of this often-maligned postwar housing? In our telling, to listen is also to engage methodologies of public scholarship that can be used to tell the story of disparaged neighborhoods.

Narrating shared futures of housing in crisis

The experiences that residents and others engaged in the local communities narrated at the two witness seminars in 2021 and 2022 showed some of the effects of the housing policies enacted in Sweden and Denmark, and how these effects, in turn, triggered affective registers for angry and grieving residents ready to fight for their communities and homes, their affects. From the first discovery of being subject to these new policies, the panelists who took part in the witness seminars described the ways in which they began to question the 'othering' of their neighborhoods that the policies seem to rely upon. They reacted to

what Alex Young Pedersen described above as the ‘distancing gaze’ of the national governments, and they accentuated that this discourse transformed their communities into ‘problem areas’ rather than homes, as another Danish resident described:

It was that ‘othering’ of alienation that they tried to put down on my neighbors. And that was definitely not ‘care’ in any form. It is handling. And I think that a political distinction has to be made. Consequently, people have to be made into objects to be able to treat them in the way that is being planned in the parallel society legislation. Because when you are a foreigner, then you can be managed, and that is what they’re trying to do with us, isn’t it? – Søren-Emil Schütt, resident of Lundtoftegade, Copenhagen, Denmark, chairperson of Lundtoftegade Housing Association and activist in *Almen Modstand* (Common Resistance)

The stories and calls for action that residents provided in the witness seminars demonstrated the human, community, and physical costs of the pejorative narratives that have supported redevelopment projects. These projects, whether for the demolition of buildings, the renovations of public spaces, the eviction of residents who can no longer afford the rent, or privatizations, have powerful effects on residents’ everyday lives, opportunities, and feelings of belonging and the right to maintain their communities and envision a future for their families. At the seminars, residents’ witness testimony meaningfully entered the public realm where it has usually been absent. As we listened, we heard tales of despair, but we also heard stories of resistance and of new solidarities within each neighborhood and across the cities and between the countries. We also heard about new collaborations and networks, as well as various forms of engagement and activism –among teachers, parents, residents, and others.

Thus, residents’ stories—their witness testimony—emphasized how they have been able to navigate highly precarious housing situations, form new alliances, develop methods to work together, and stimulate care for their areas. The witness seminars foregrounded the insider-perspectives that have otherwise often been lacking in the high-pitched, incessant discourses of failure, crime, and segregation found in the media and in political speeches, campaigns, and documents. The narratives we witnessed (and that we now share and archive) demonstrated that the residents want not only to be heard, but to claim agency in decisions about the renewal, maintenance, and development of their neighborhoods.

Importantly, residents at the seminars also questioned the way in which architects and planners choose to position themselves within the highly polarized conditions that the new policy documents created. As noted, one resident, Søren-Emil Schütt, pronounced that this collaboration was actually a choice, a form of complicity. He said that architects and planners, even when commissioned to follow the policies’ mandates, could just decide not to do so. In this sense, he, together with other residents, outlined the potential for practitioners of architecture and planning to take an ethical stance vis-à-vis discriminatory governmental policies. In doing so, the residents not only foregrounded conduits for local actors to be empowered through their challenges to the policies and their effects, but also highlighted the agency of architects and planners as agentive figures who do not have to take the stance of merely being ‘neutral’ professionals. Architects and planners are not simply designing the

shapes of programs already planned by politicians, but, as the residents presented it, they are actually active agents who have the choice to position themselves differently.

These witness seminars were, in this way, a method of co-inquiry that not only documented and archived but supported the generation of new observations, collaborations, and directions for research. By creating a framework for these stories to be shared, the two witness seminars provided snapshots of social processes: representing critical moments in the context of developments that are often moving so quickly that taking stock of their effects has been nearly impossible. As such, the witness seminars were not only places for narration; they were also sites and contexts that facilitated the sharing of activist strategies and networks, among participants, with participants and the public, and also between activists in Denmark and Sweden. The stories told in these witness seminars, and later stored as transcriptions, narrate a shared future that allows us to see a broader picture of people and places that have often been silenced.

We understood that the two seminars, organized by *Aktion Arkiv* as a group of architectural and urban researchers, could not immediately change the narrative of government officials. Nonetheless, we considered it critically important that members of the panels and, especially, the audiences, could craft and experience alternative stories about places where, often, only one (dystopian) tale has been told. We position our efforts to create new narratives as a blockade in the path of the *fait accompli*-policy acts now renovating or demolishing people's homes – often without their consent. With these efforts, we may be unlikely to stop it, but we can, for example, encourage practitioners to reconsider whether they want to be complicit and demonstrate how residents organize and have many different ways in which to do so. These stories may also call for new approaches to design in stigmatized neighborhoods among the future architects and planners now learning their craft. In short, the witness seminars were positioned as acts of solidarity with residents who often believe that they are alone in their respective fights. Even if we cannot change policies overnight, someone is listening.

So, all that about both listening, but also really taking seriously whether you say yes to working for a policy that is incredibly problematic and has been criticized by the UN and Amnesty. That would be my warmest recommendation. You can simply say no. – Søren-Emil Schütt resident of Lundtoftegade, Copenhagen, Denmark, chairperson of Lundtoftegade Housing Association and activist in *Almen Modstand* (Common Resistance)

About this Conversation's participants

Sara Brolund de Carvalho is an artist, architect, and lecturer at KTH School of Architecture. Her practice is situated in the borderland between architecture/urban planning and art. She is the co-editor, with Meike Schalk and Beatrice Stüde, of the publication *Caring for Communities* (Stockholm: Action Archive Publishing, 2019).

Maryam Fanni is a designer and PhD student in Design at HDK-Valand Academy of Art and Design, Gothenburg. She was a co-founder of the trans-disciplinary collectives

Söderorts Institut För Andra Visioner (2013–2017) and Mapping the Unjust City (2015–), counter-mapping ownership and civil rights in the built environment.

Heidi Svenningsen Kajita is an architect and Assistant Professor at the University of Copenhagen. She works for social change in everyday spaces. Recent publications include *Urgent Minor Matters: Re-Activating Archival Documents for Social Housing Futures* (Architecture & Culture, 2023); and *Gossip and Complaint: Ways of (Re-)Producing the Social in Housing ‘Expertly’* (in Migotto & Tattara (eds) *Contested Legacies*, 2023).

Jennifer Mack is a Pro Futura Scientia Fellow of the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study and Associate Professor of Theory and History at KTH, Stockholm. She is the author of *The Construction of Equality* (2017), co-editor of *Rethinking the Social in Architecture* (2019) and *Life Among Urban Planners* (2020), and a member of the editorial boards of *Thresholds*, *Human Organization*, and *Housing, Theory and Society*.

Helena Mattsson is Professor of Theory and History at KTH, Stockholm. She is the co-editor of *Architecture and Capitalism* (Architecture and Culture, 2017); *Neoliberalism on the Ground* (2021), and the author of *Architecture & Retrenchment: Neoliberalization of the Swedish Model* (2023). She is on the board of *Journal of Architecture*.

Svava Riesto is an Associate Professor at the University of Copenhagen, where she leads the Research group for Landscape Architecture and Urban History. Her publications include the co-edited *European Mass Housing Welfare Landscapes* (Landscape Research, 2021) and the co-written *Examining the Publicness of European Social Housing* (ARQ 2023) and *Untold Stories. On Women, Gender and Architecture in Denmark* (Strandberg, 2023).

Meike Schalk is Associate Professor in Urban Design and Urban Theory at KTH, Stockholm. She examines spatial practices through a feminist lens. She is co-editor of *Feminist Futures of Spatial Practice: Materialisms, Activisms, Dialogues, Pedagogies and Projections* (2017) and *Species of Theses and Other Pieces* (2022).

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