



## **Stories Under Your Feet.**

### **Review of the Renovation of the Pedestrian Area Købmagergade**

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The new Købmagergade emphasizes the unity of Copenhagen's busy shopping street. Special details and carefully hewn and sawn stones for the paving are the main elements of the design.

# STORIES UNDER YOUR FEET

Renovation of Købmagergade in Copenhagen

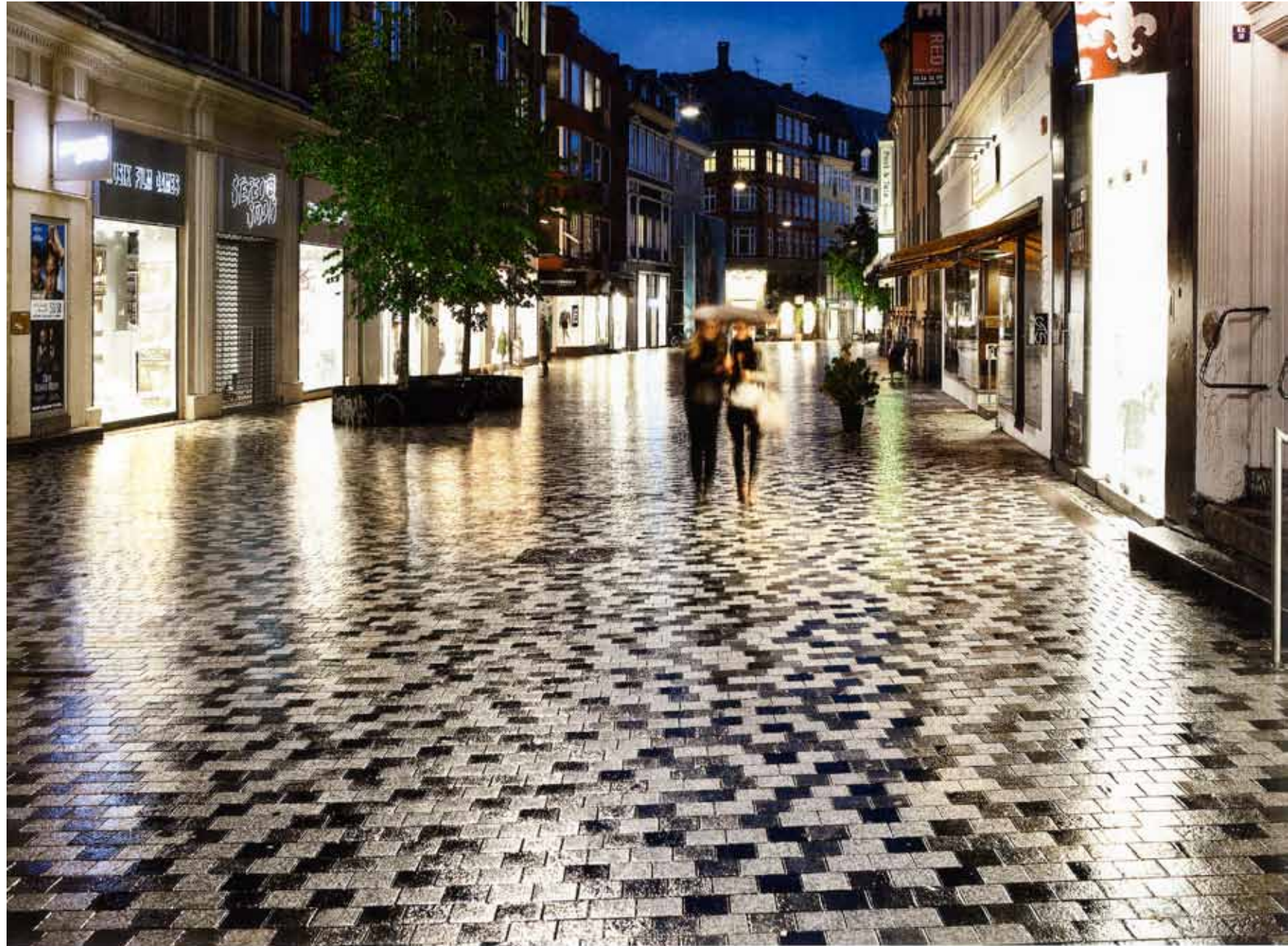
New paving covers the centrally located shopping street Købmagergade from façade to façade. The colours of the small granite setts range from light grey to dark and black.

Strolling through Copenhagen's historic city centre, you will probably reach Købmagergade Street, which connects the main high street of Strøget with Denmark's busiest train-station, Nørreport. Købmagergade is a curving street that dates back to medieval Copenhagen and is framed by continuous building façades. Its surface at once looks historical with its small granite setts, but is also situated in the digital age, as it appears pixelated. The pattern of setts, in colours ranging from light grey to dark and black, seemingly moves before your eyes. Walking down Købmagergade, you will see the mosaic of setts getting darker before ending in an enclosed square of different textures and shades of black. The surfaces of the pavers change from rough to smooth and the pavers are laid out in a pattern of polygons.

No matter how aware you have been of this differentiated floor pattern, or of all the people, shop façades and signs along the way, your straight path is interrupted at the square. You cannot just hurry from one shop to another. In the middle of the square, there is a large, circular fountain with a wooden edge around the circumference, meant to sit on. You will probably hear people talking and the bench will probably not be empty – it never is. A large robinia reveals that this is an old square.

Leaving the square, the Købmagergade continues, curving slightly. You might look up to see the Round Tower, a tourist attraction, or you might look down at the base of the Tower, to see the mosaic surface now dark, but with pixels of light granite stone. Nothing seems to break the continuity of this large, public surface that ties together all the disparate shops and people, historical monuments and the public fountain.





## Copenhagen's urban space boom in the 2000s

The Købmagergade urban design project was planned during a busy period in which the City Council, along with private foundations, made unprecedented investments in Copenhagen's urban spaces. This was because of new thinking about urban planning and design. Urban space renewal was not only seen to be about solving particular, local challenges, but also closely connected to other agendas. There was a strong political will to use urban design as a means of creating a pedestrian-friendly city and to promote social encounters. There was an interest in identifying Copenhagen as a liveable city, a design metropolis and a tourist attraction as well as to distinguish it internationally from other cities in its league.

Within a short period of time, Copenhagen became a laboratory for designs that encouraged the use and positive effects of public spaces. Many of the new projects were by younger Danish architecture firms, often in collaboration with foreign colleagues. The red-carpeted Superkilen by Topotek 1 and BIG (competition 2007, opening 2012, see *Topos* 78) is a famously representative of this period.

Although Købmagergade was renovated in the 2000s, its history as a shopping street is older. In the 1960s, the city began removing vehicular traffic in certain streets. In 1962, the current main shopping street, Strøget, was designated as strictly for pedestrians and cyclists, followed by Købmagergade in 1970. Later, other streets in the city core were converted to shared space streets for cars, cyclists and pedestrians, but prioritizing pedestrians. At first, there was no money for elaborate design and materials in these new streets and shared spaces, but in the early 1990s a few carefully selected urban squares in the city centre were enhanced with new paving, art and sculpture.

Things changed quickly around the turn of the millennium with an increased public and political awareness of the value of urban spaces and economic optimism. During the 2005 City Council election, living conditions, quality of urban spaces and affordable housing in Copenhagen became hot topics. In 2006, the City of Copenhagen launched "The Urban Space Action Plan", which was developed in collaboration with the French urbanist Jean-Pierre Charbonneau and inspired by experiences from various other European cities. Copenhagen imple-



The design by Karres en Brands and Polyform suggested to change between 12 different paved mosaics for Købmagergade and the adjacent squares. The surfaces of the granite setts change from rough to smooth. Details like metal markers for visually impaired are skillfully integrated.

At Kultorvet, a circular fountain at the lowest point of the square invites people to stay and kids to play. The water feature is surrounded by a large wooden bench.

mented a whole range of broader, more comprehensive urban space projects, including the renewal of Købmagergade. These projects experimented with design solutions and used a diversity of approaches. The Action Plan aimed to establish Copenhagen both as a “unique European metropolis” with a strong “urban identity” and to provide a “diverse and high quality daily life” for all citizens. It was followed by a series of architectural competitions and workshops with international architects, planners and citizens. The open competition for Købmagergade was launched in 2006. No fewer than 12 teams were selected to come up with a proposal, including offices like Dominique Perrault, Arriola & Fiol, Gehl Architects and SLA Architects.

Today, after eight years and the global financial crisis, the economic landscape and political interests have changed. The City Council is now concentrating on improving “deprived residential neighbourhoods” and on building child-care institutions and schools for a rapidly growing population. Effort is currently put into experimenting with cheaper, sometimes temporary urban space interventions. However, the city’s ambition to be the first CO<sub>2</sub> neutral capital by 2025 is still followed by initiatives to promote cycling in the city. Most of the large urban space projects that were planned for central Copenhagen in the 2000s, like the Købmagergade renovation, are already finalized.

### A more attractive shopping street and better public squares

In the years prior to the renovation, Købmagergade was an easy place to stumble due to the many ad hoc repairs in the paving. Despite the fact that it is Copenhagen’s busiest street with approximately 3,200 pedestrians an hour, the poor access and shabbiness detracted from the street’s appeal, and made local shopkeepers unhappy. In the invited competition (2007-08) “Renewal of Købmagergade, Hauser Plads and Kultorvet,” the City of Copenhagen asked for designs that could enhance the street, while also respecting its historic character. The brief also requested a new concept for three squares, including the biggest square, Kultorvet, which was then primarily used as a place to pass through and not a place to stay.

### Kultorvet: explicitly public space

A partnership between young Danish architects Polyform and the Dutch landscape architects Karres en Brands won the competition with a project that concentrated on the paving and proposed much less street furniture and lighting than the majority of competition entries did. Their concept was simple, working with two main elements: new surfacing and a large circular fountain at the square.







The new paving was conceptualized as one continuous surface connecting all the different activities and people. The design reverses the previous topography where the highest point was in the middle of the square and lets a circular fountain articulate the now lowest point at its center. The fountain invites playing and staying and is surrounded by a large wooden bench. It is placed at a height low enough to enable everyone to easily step up and occupy it. The water can be turned off to allow for theatre and music performances. The plan is that this will only require sending an SMS for the fountain to shut down for a performance.

### Købmagergade: stories below your feet

The new paving at Købmagergade emphasizes the unity of this hectic street with shops competing to get your attention. The former gutters have been replaced by a continuous façade-to-façade carpet. This introduces a new kind of variety; between different patterns of grey and black in the paving setts. The mosaic narrates local history in an associative way. Close to the Round Tower, built as a star observatory for the astronomer Tycho Brahe (1546-1601), the paving is designed to shine as stars with small uprights and light grey granite stones between black ones. At the square Kultorget, whose name "Coal Market" evokes its historical function, the paving tells another story. The historic topography has changed and the new surfacing draws its patterns, colours and textures from the material that was once traded there.

The meticulous attention to the paving extends even to a solution for the visually impaired. To compensate for the lack of gutters, which often serve as a means of orientation for the visually impaired, a new design invention is tested: metal guiding knots are laid out in a narrow, slightly curving line that mimics a trodden footpath. This traces the routes of the nameless individuals that have walked here in the past. With these special details and carefully hewn and sawn paving stones as the main design contribution, the new Købmagergade is one of those projects that is in fact expensive, but also almost invisible.

Yet it also communicates another story: that of the design competitions during the urban space project boom of the 2000s. Competitions easily encourage distinct and rhetorically convincing concepts and often do not promote much thinking beyond the boundaries of a particular physical competition site. The edges where the Købmagergade paving abruptly stops and where other places (made according to other design concepts) begin, are interesting relics of the architecture competition that framed the new design for the street. But still, Kultorget and Købmagergade work as facilitators of public street life and are pleasant urban spaces to be in.

Hauser Plads is more peaceful than the busy shopping street and the other squares. It features a mixture of materials and shapes. Children can play on real and artificial grass, mounds and concrete sculptures.

#### KØBMAGERGADE, COPENHAGEN, DENMARK

Client: City of Copenhagen

Design: KBPEU, a joint venture between Karres en Brands, Hilversum & Polyform, Copenhagen

Collaborators: Oluf Jørgensen Engineering, Ulrike Brandt Lighting

Competition: 2006 – 2007

Construction: 2010 – 2013

Area: 21,000 square metres

Cost: 10 million euros

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