



The Analytical Tool of the Element

Re-reading the Post-War Social Housing Estate Albertslund Syd

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In the post-WWII period 1945-1975, social housing became one of the pillars in the construction of the Danish welfare state, in an attempt to solve the need for affordable homes. Designers worked towards a refined spatial mediation between building and landscape, often in close interdisciplinary teams. However, while architecture historians have shown great interest in examining the building mass, the knowledge about the landscapes of these places remains sparse. In recent years, many of the Danish post-war social housing estates undergo large transformation projects, due to material decay, negative public images, new demographics and new urban agendas. In this reconfiguration, more substantiated knowledge about the capacities and challenges of the existing landscape is required. Thus, the question on how we can explore the landscape of these housing estates arises.

This paper studies the landscape of a particular post-war social housing estate Albertslund Syd (1963-1968), built as a low-rise high-density area with 1500 homes, in the outskirts of Copenhagen, Denmark. The housing estate became highly influential in architectural discourses of its time. The designers own descriptions of Albertslund Syd's landscape have been preoccupied with defining its meticulously planned system of different open spaces for different social situations: from small, highly private gardens, to collective spaces, to a large public park. Architectural historians have later repeated this perception of Albertslund Syd's landscape. Despite the large number and extend of its open spaces, critics from the year of the realisation, argued that the division between those spaces, in particular the way that each garden secluded itself with a 1,70 m. high fence made people feel "trapped and unprotected" (Kirstein, 1976). The recent comprehensive renovation plan for Albertslund Syd (2008), aims at dissolving the distinctive line between private and collective space, which makes the fence between private and collective space a key issue. The contested nature of this fence makes it a valuable starting point for understanding Albertslund Syd beyond the canonical perception.

Inspired by the British architectural historian Robin Evans' essay "Figures, Doors and Passage", this paper explores the fence as an element that are able to articulate and shape different social structures and discourses. This paper proposes a re-reading of Albertslund Syd's landscape, not as a stable structure, but focusing on the fence as an architectural element, through which to understand the mediation between each home and collective spaces. Through archive sources, literature and on-site explorations I study the fence and its relation to social processes, discursive and material shifts in the landscape from the time of inception until today. The aim is to contribute to substantiated knowledge about the capacities of post-war housing landscapes, for discussions on their past, present and future.

References:

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