Farum Midtpunkt between the Formal and the Informal

Riesto, Svava; Lamm, Bettina

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Between the Formal and the Informal

In Farum Midtpunkt, everything was planned down to the last detail, from how individual terraces should be planted, to how craft tools should be shared among neighbours. These authoritative, strategic planning ambitions are highly present in the spatial organisation, landscape and architectural elements. Yet over the years, through numerous everyday activities, people have begun to use the spaces in ways that were not planned. Reacting to some of these often rigid spaces, people have invented new ways of using and being, of doing publicness, privacy and communality in Farum Midtpunkt. Some intended spaces of publicness have become privatised, and new forms of publicness have begun to take place in spaces that were meant for parking, school teaching or shopping.
But this has not been the simple replacement of authorised intentions with informal uses. Rather, Farum Midtpunkt is characterised by multiple both/and situations. For instance, the authorised plan intended from the start to stimulate informal social encounters and creative uses. And some spaces that seem informal are actually highly planned and regulated. This allows an intermingling of formal and informal that characterises Farum Midtpunkt. Informalities are defined here as situations where people and other actors, such as dogs or plants, act in ways that counter the authorised initiatives, plans and narratives.

Research Team:
Svava Riesto, Bettina Lamm, Section for Landscape Architecture and Planning, Faculty of Science, University of Copenhagen, Denmark
1. Car park – negotiating publicness

All of Farum Midtpunkt’s buildings stand on a parking space that is roofed with decking and supported by large columns. Keeping all the cars on ground level was a way to ensure traffic separation, and there are car-free zones above the parking space, with pedestrian walkways, playgrounds and more. The parking space is connected to the three roads that lead in and out of Farum Midtpunkt, and it opens towards the forest-like areas between the buildings, which are also on ground level.

Planned for 2.5 cars per household, the vast parking space reflects the optimistic planning regime, which had little thought for the ecological concerns raised by car use, or for the oil crisis that arose while Farum Midtpunkt was being built. The idea that all residents would be able to afford cars also proved to be too optimistic. Instead, because many parking spaces remained empty, the parking space became an empty space – for some people, a rather uncanny one. For others the space offers a shield from the public eye, which some young people in and around Farum Midtpunkt seem to find particularly attractive. The local newspaper has reported several cases of drug dealing in the car park.

Today, large expanses of graffiti can be found in some parts of the parking space. This may seem to be an informal appropriation, a secret intervention by young people. However, although it looks informal, it is the result of a highly planned process: elected representatives (mostly seniors) from the tenants’ association wanted to make physical interventions that would attract young people. They proudly present the graffitied wall and columns on guided tours.

A number of new ‘hotspots’ with installations to promote teenage play have been established – colourful swings, table tennis, etc. This was part of the Realdania renovation project in 2014, and was one of many attempts to stimulate informal activities and an informal look through planning.
2. Terraces as borders between private and public

Privacy was an important guiding principle for Farum Midtpunkt’s planners. Most of the flats – both the small ones of 50 square metres, and the large maisonettes of 150 square metres – have large shielded terraces (some flats even have more than one) that can be accessed from multiple rooms in the home. The terraces’ borders are designed to prevent neighbours from seeing into the flats.

However, community spaces in the buildings that have different terraces. These were designed as more open towards the streets, squares and green forest-like spaces. The idea seems to be for community spaces to have more contact with the public than the private terraces have. Nevertheless, there are numerous signs that residents have intentionally changed the borders between their community spaces and the public domain of the streets. These small-scale variations are visible highlights in the otherwise uniform structures of Farum Midtpunkt.

Sometimes, planting boxes facing a public walkway represent a tactical approach to variation within uniformity, intended to shield even community spaces from the public eye, or perhaps from theft. Little by little, these small changes have helped to diminish the community spaces’ public appearance.

Many terraces on corners facing the green planted spaces and the pedestrian walkways tend to be shielded by curtains, furniture or other objects that block view by by-passers.
3. Green happenings between privacy and publicness

When the first tenants moved into Farum Midtpunkt, these green spaces were without use. The housing association KAB suggested that eventually some of them might be developed into playgrounds, yet this idea was dismissed as it would be on the same level as car parks and roads would compromise the traffic separation, and thus the children’s safety.

The landscape architect Søren Harboe called these planted spaces ‘green happenings’ where anything might occur over time. He planted tall pines, which later became a characteristic view from the flats above and the parking space at ground level, obstructing visual access from beneath or across the blocks.

Although officially planned and maintained, the planted spaces between each of Farum Midtpunkt’s blocks mimic wilderness. The forest-like areas between the buildings establish distance, shielding the flats’ private terraces while also providing a green view. These spaces were an important element in creating the privacy that the planners assumed tenants would want, making the flats an attractive alternative to single-family houses for middle-class dwellers. The densely pack vegetation and lack of paths discouraged people from gathering in these in-between spaces on warm, sunny afternoons and evenings. These forest-like areas are today one of the things that many residents treasure the most. Teeming with squirrels and a broad variety of bird species, they give the impression of shared ‘natural areas’ – for looking at, but not for entering.

In 2014, however, the shape and official programming of many of these areas changed radically. The Realdania Foundation – Denmark’s largest foundation for the built environment – initiated a renovation project to ‘open Farum up […] to increase the experience of community and the perception of safety’. The project was an attempt to make Farum Midtpunkt more attractive to new residents and new social groups. At the time it was difficult to attract tenants, due to e.g. the odd-sized flats, which did not fit people’s needs, as well as problems of vandalism, perceived unsafety, and stigma. As part of the project, a new ‘playful’ path was designed in collaboration with the official tenants’ association. This encouraged access through the green forest-like spaces for the first time. It also fostered publicness in various ‘hotspots’ with urban furniture and installations that encouraged play. These in turn led to new discussions, as many who lived nearby felt disturbed by the noise of people hanging out there. Not many people use these paths today, and the green spaces remain quiet, yet with a lot of birds and squirrels.
4. Creative mobility in the face of traffic separation

When realised, Farum Midtpunkt received praise for its strict traffic separation, which keeps cars away from the central street, playgrounds, community spaces, park etc. In line with ideas circulating in international architecture at the time, Farum Midtpunkt’s planners wanted to ensure that children could play freely, and that neighbours could meet on the pedestrian walkways and squares without noise from cars.

But despite all the good ambitions of the official planning, the traffic separation also presented residents with numerous challenges. If you are moving from one flat to another, or if you have bought furniture at the local second-hand shop, you might wish that you were able to transport things by car or some other wheeled vehicle.

The adjacent shopping centre of Bytorvet, to the east of Farum Midtpunkt, has become the local place to go shopping. For most residents, it would make little sense to descend into the underground car park and then drive the few hundred metres to Bytorvet for groceries. Rather, they walk – but that can mean carrying heavy shopping bags over a relatively long distance. Such challenges are perhaps the backdrop for a special practice that characterises Farum Midtpunkt: people take supermarket trolleys from Bytorvet to bring their groceries home. This is a handy solution, since Farum Midtpunkt’s concrete streets suit the trolley wheels, and all the buildings are accessible by ramps as well as stairs. The wide internal streets and many empty parking spaces are appropriate places to leave a trolley until the next time it is needed – or at least, trolleys can often be found here. This spatial practice, which seems well suited to Farum Midtpunkt’s particular physical spaces, may even have enhanced the estate’s relationship with the nearby shopping centre, making it a convenient place to shop. Undoubtedly, however, this informal practice amid the highly regulated traffic separation has been an efficient everyday solution. Yet, it has also provoked conflict over the uses of Farum Midtpunkt’s spaces – and the ownership of the trolleys.