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RESEARCH
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MODELLING **SUMO**

Communities of thinging: Everyday life, objects and architecture in social housing

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COMMUNITIES UNDER PRESSURE

Local communities must in the future take on more welfare-related tasks — from the prevention of loneliness to increased household waste management. Unfortunately, the residents' democracy — which is so unique to the Danish social housing system — is rapidly changing, and the number of people participating in organised collective activities continues to decline.

This does not, however, mean that robust local engagement and communities do not exist.

INFORMAL COMMUNITIES ARE HIGHLY ENGAGED

Based on a combination of historical, anthropological and architectural research, Fleksible Fællesskaber (Flexible Communities) suggests that strong local engagement should be sought in informal communities, which engages and connects residents across social, cultural and economic divides. These communities are often overlooked as they emerge and operate informally, without fixed meeting places, meeting times or memberships. Such communities nevertheless have a great impact on residents' sense of belonging and for the care of their dwelling areas.

These informal communities often arise as a result of residents' use of and interaction with things. We refer to these practices as *thinging.*

As the next page will show, examples of informal relationships and connections between neighbours are very much rooted in residents' *thinging* with everyday objects, such as shopping trolleys, fairy lights, decorative objects, potted plants and other items.

ARCHITECTURE FOR ROBUST FUTURE COMMUNITIES

The importance of thinging to community-making raises the question: *how do we build for future communities if thinging is crucial for communal engagement and relationships of residents?*

Danish social housing has always been characterised by the ambition to create highly engaged residents and social communities through the built environment. Social housing must continue to be central to Danes' local engagement and residential communities, but it's time to rethink the built environment to support the kind of communities that are strong among residents.

Residents' many and varied ways of *thinging* their community and caring for their neighbourhoods are never isolated from the architecture of they live in. Architecture is thus a key tool for creating the best possible framework to support the existence of such informal communities. We suggest focusing on architecture that supports *thinging* as a way of strengthening local, informal communities in Danish social housing.

COMMUNITY THROUGH CHRISTMAS DECORATIONS

One year, some residents started decorating their facades for Christmas. The next year more followed, and the year after, even more. The decorations began to have an impact on the way residents perceived their neighbours and the area. A retired woman leaves her Christmas lights on, so her neighbours' kids don't feel scared to leave for school on dark winter mornings. An early retiree and a family with children put up Christmas decorations across their shared house facade and love to hear passersby commenting on the decorations. Dog owners walk new routes so they can see this year's decorations. A decoration competition is organised and encourages discussions: is it fun or is it undemocratic? A 'decoration battle' between courtyards spontaneously activates the residents' competences: some are electricians, some get discounts in shops, some have a ladder, some make coffee, some direct, some spy, some research etc.

COMMUNITY THROUGH SHOPPING TROLLEY

Getting rid of litter and rubbish isn't always an easy task. Nevertheless, it is a task residents undertake for the sake of both neighbours and neighbourhoods. Over time, shopping trolleys have become essential assets in an informal network of residents, who swap discarded items and keep neighbourhoods free of rubbish. A mentally vulnerable woman uses a shopping trolley to control and remove the rubbish in her garden, so it won't bother her neighbours. An elderly woman with physical disabilities has a feeling of pride as, using a shopping trolley, she can move her rubbish to the local recycling station by herself. A family shows how the grass is not ruined when garden waste is stored in a shopping trolley rather than a pile. At the local recycling station, the work of volunteers is made easier when residents can transport their waste all the way to the containers themselves using trolleys. Residents leave re-usable furniture and decorative items outside for other residents to pick up with the help of shopping trolleys.

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Graphical work was done by intern Helena.
During her stay at SUMO she is investigating and designing new standard staircases for future high-rise dwellings, to promote *thinging* and informal communities.

DESIGNING FOR INFORMAL COMMUNITY-MAKING

In my internship I have undertaken research on how to design spaces for informal community-making in high-rise residential dwellings. My research was informed by empirical data from interviews with residents of social housing in Denmark. Four anthropological journal articles have been used to provide analytical perspectives on the formation of informal communities in Denmark.

Based on the research findings, I propose five themes of investigation of particular relevance when designing for informal community-making in high-rise: common areas, *thinging*, negotiation, front façades and windows.

All the themes concern liminal space between the resident's private home and public shared spaces of the building. Liminal spaces, such as windows or door frames, provide residents with the opportunity to extend their home-sphere into common spaces like hallways or stairwells. Through *thinging* practices, such as decorating their entrance areas or windows, residents negotiate how active they want to be in the informal community.

Creating niches for *thinging* allows informal community making through things.
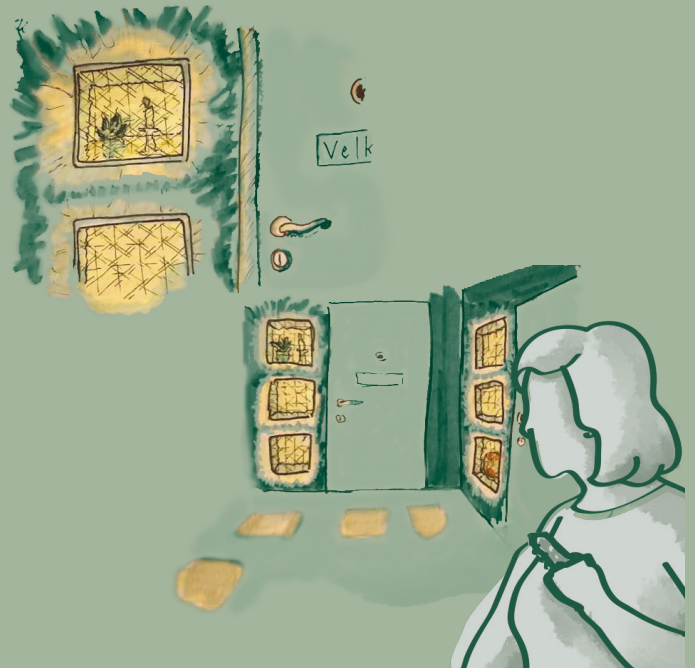
Windows allow passing residents to sense life behind the walls and experience the atmosphere from the light spilling out into the hallway. To maintain privacy, distorted glass blocks can be used for windows in narrow hallways.

Angled windows allow indirect view of the private sphere without exposing private life, while the angled cavity provides space for *thinging*.

Flexible Communities

One of the greatest challenges of our time is the generation and implementation of sustainable urban development. Especially challenging to urban planners, developers and researchers is the question of what it takes to create sustainable city development for growing populations. Populations progressively challenge the social fabric of cities as well as their infrastructures.

The challenge is to develop cities in a way that takes into account both architectural and technological issues. This is compounded by the need to incorporate the massive social resources for sustainability that are inherent in citizens' own organisations, initiatives and local knowledge. Dealing with this challenge requires knowledge of both technologically and socially sustainable ways of living in urban environments.

Today, there is no established tradition of integrated, interdisciplinary collaboration in the development of cities. New, robust methodologies must therefore be developed, which combine cultural history and architecture to establish fundamental knowledge about the relationships between social life and the built environment. In a collaboration between the Aarhus School of Architecture and the National Museum of Denmark, Fleksible Fællesskaber explores how this can be realised in practice.

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