

Connected

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Figure 1: The view from my office. Photograph: Exner

Values

I believe architecture can contribute to peace and support the experience of coherence in life. At my work, I have a beautiful office where I can sit completely undisturbed and immerse myself. From my chair, I can see both landscape, sky on the horizon, and follow city life down on the street. At the same time, through my, always, open door looking towards a beautiful atrium in the interior of the building, I can sense the presence of people I care about and with whom I can easily come into contact with. My company and my workplace are woven into a collective community, with a lot of other small businesses. It makes me happy.

I found the premises that houses my work place in 2016, on the top floor of an abandoned modernist concrete building. The building is part of a former cultural centre (15,000m²) located in the district of Gellerup, Denmark's largest public housing area with 2,500 homes.

Modernist Architecture – No Longer Without History

Gellerup is located on the outskirts of Aarhus (Denmark's second largest city with 300,000 inhabitants).

The area was created with high ambitions for good housing for everyone and consists of town facilities and homes distributed in buildings of four and eight floors. The entire district was designed by the same architects, made of the same prefabricated concrete elements, and built in a modernist style in the period 1968-74.

Despite the original good intentions, recent recessions, unemployment, and refugee flows have led to Gellerup today being the poorest residential area in Denmark. To overcome crime and social problems, the politicians decided in 2011 to forcibly relocate residents and demolish well-functioning apartment blocks. During the past 10 years, 9 blocks of flats, a school, two kindergartens and a dormitory of the original buildings have therefore been demolished, and new housing types, institutions etc. have been built in a radically different architectural style.



*Figure 2: Gellerup with the apartment blocks of eight floors seen from the outside of the area.
Photograph: Exner*

Gellerup's modernist architecture has a bad reputation among the population. The criticism is that concrete, the brutalist idiom, the large scale of uniform blocks of flats create an inhumane environment and promote insecurity and crime. But that description is not accurate. There is also plenty of variety in the town plan, cozy meeting places, small gardens, green areas, and outside spaces to enjoy. The blocks are well-proportioned, with functional details, and the homes are well designed, bright, well proportioned, and all command a good view. Once this suburb was new, impersonal and without history. It is no longer. Today it is home to many people who have lived here for generations, who have shaped the place and who love it.

I believe politicians today are in danger of wiping out the soul in Gellerup with their decision making. They are destroying the city and the city life that the architecture and the residents have created over the past 50 years. They think it's smart to start over. But they are in danger of repeating failed post-war urbanism and gentrification, leaving urban development to developers who have no love for the place.

Every town has its troublemakers, and Gellerup today is neither better nor worse than so many other places. Gellerup is a nice place to be. I love Gellerup's diversity, its honest rawness, its history, and its people. Although Gellerup did not become what the architects had originally wanted in 1968, the district today represents both a beautiful and valuable cultural history of the heyday of the Danish welfare society with high ideals of equality and solidarity, and of the developments for a diverse and multicultural Denmark.

The Cultural Center – a Disgrace?

The cultural center (15,000 m²) is located together with the church, in the heart of Gellerup. The buildings were erected as the cultural and spiritual centre of the district, and originally housed a library, a theatre, party and activity rooms, cafeteria, residents' hotel, youth club etc., but were closed because of the recession in the 1970s.

The architecture of the cultural centre area consists of three sculptural buildings, very much designed for human scale. The three blocks gather around a beautiful square with the church framed at one end, establishing a visual central focus. The buildings' experiential spatial flow weaves together inside and out, and leaves opportunities for establishing all kinds of ad hoc meeting places, common areas and private zones. The architecture supports coexistence of private, shared and public spaces.

As a result of the closure of the cultural centre however, and since Gellerup's reputation has worsened, the buildings have been gradually vacated over the past 20 years, and no one has shown any interest in looking after them. It is a common opinion that the buildings are a disgrace and people want to get rid of them.



Figure 3: The three buildings and the nice square in the middle of the former cultural centre. Photograph: Exner

David and Goliath

When I came to Gellerup in 2016, I discovered that the city council had decided that the cultural centre should be demolished in 2020, and the building site should be sold to a developer. At the same time, I saw that the well thought out building system has enormous potential and flexibility of use. The architectural and cultural historical values are of high quality, and the buildings, when used well, can create a much needed coexistence between Gellerup and the outside world.

Together with some friends, we rented two empty floors at the top of the largest of the Culture Centre's buildings to create a community for small creative businesses. We wanted to show how useful the buildings were. The intention was initially to attract first movers and then develop the place as an attraction. We began to speak loudly in the public debate about the Cultural Centre's architectural qualities, inviting citizens, journalists, architects and politicians on tours, and people flocked.

It gave extra credibility that I, as one of the first, had moved my business into the empty buildings. It stimulated people's curiosity and made them listen when I said out loud to everyone that the buildings are beautiful and worth preserving, and that I love my working life in Gellerup every day.



*Figure 4: My workplace is at the top of the largest building of the abandoned former cultural center.
Photograph: Exner*

I try to be tactical in my way of discussing the architecture. People refer to the Cultural Centre as a dilapidated ruin. They are of course right. The facade is run down because no one has repaired it for 20 years, but the structure behind it is sound, and the worn surfaces of the buildings can be easily repaired.

People say the architecture and the concrete are ugly. I agree that the architectural style in Gellerup is not in fashion these years. But it has been, and it will be again, because fashion always changes. And concrete is just a neutral building material, which is neither beautiful nor ugly, but can be used in many ways.

Many people think the neglected buildings look terribly sad. I agree with them too. There is nothing worse than seeing empty, neglected buildings. But these buildings are functional and usable, and if they are filled with life, they will come to life again.

Outside citizens think Gellerup is an unsafe area because they hear so many bad stories in the media. But I invite them in to experience the place for themselves and show them how nice and peaceful it is.

Our actions received attention in the media. The municipality felt pressured because we criticized their plans. We said things about architecture that made people change their view of Gellerup, and as we brought more businesses into the community, it became clear that we were able to create an attraction in a place that was otherwise doomed.

Many battles are being fought in Gellerup, ours is just one among many. Other strong stakeholders have been working for a long time to start a college, and an interfaith dialogue centre. They have become aware that the Cultural Centre buildings are in fact of high quality, and now also want to be in the buildings.

It was hard work to get the first companies to see the possibilities and move into our business community in Gellerup. But today it consists of 55 small companies. People are excited to be there, and it has been a great success. Many people have subsequently proved us right, and after 6 years of hard fighting, the city council has now finally decided that the buildings must be preserved. We have won the first stage.

We Can Change the World

Now in 2023, I can see that back in 2016 I was at a place in my life with a great deal of energy and courage. Maybe, unconsciously, I was looking for a project where I could use my skills. I have always felt the urge to defend what is treated unfairly - whether it is maligned architecture, maligned neighborhoods, or maligned people.

In Gellerup I found high quality, and something that was about to perish. I asked myself if I could make a difference and the conclusion is that nothing is impossible. Yes I can.

References

<https://da.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gellerupplanen> (accessed May 8, 2023)