Public art projects in exposed social housing areas in Denmark – dilemmas and potentials

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ABSTRACT

Western European cultural policies increasingly target marginalized and socially deprived communities. In Denmark, this happens in the political and discursive context of the so-called “ghetto act” (2018), a set of laws and amendments aimed at radically changing low-income public housing neighbourhoods with a high percentage of “non-Western” residents. Consequential, several Danish public housing neighbourhoods undergo drastic renovation and demolition. Simultaneously, cultural governing bodies and institutions approach the neighbourhoods with a variety of publicly funded projects in arts and culture. These are part of a general strategy to reach new audiences / user groups by supporting art manifestations outside the formal art institutions but also of a more specific betterment agenda based on the assumption that the deprived social housing areas can be “elevated” through art and cultural projects.

Based on research in four Danish social housing areas in urban margins, the article introduces the social and cultural policies targeting the areas. We identify a triple exposure to social inequality, stigmatization and intervention, and ask how public art projects in the areas interact with and may resist this exposure. From the perspective of Chantal Mouffe’s notions of antagonistic politics and dissensual artistic practices, we explore a range of public art projects in four selected social housing areas, and identify four different types of art projects: 1) permanent physical interventions, 2) temporary (re)makings of the neighbourhood, 3) reinforcement of creative skills and agency, and 4) co-inhabitation. Presenting cases from each of these four types, we outline their challenges and potentials. Finally, we discuss how they fit into and/or negotiate the “betterment” agenda and the seemingly neutral vision of the mixed, balanced, or creative city.

KEYWORDS

Social housing areas; danish ghetto act; art and cultural policies; public art projects; betterment agenda; agonistics

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Western European cultural policies increasingly target marginalized and socially deprived communities (Jancovich 2019; Sand 2019). In Denmark, this happens in the political and discursive context of the so-called “ghetto act”—a set of laws and amendments from 2018 in the wake of a broad political settlement in the Danish parliament aimed at radically changing low-income public housing neighbourhoods, designated as “ghettos” or “hard ghettos”, on the basis of five criteria, including the percentage of “non-Western” immigrants and descendants (The Prime Minister’s Office 2018). Consequential, several Danish public housing neighbourhoods right now undergo drastic demolition, rehousing, and renovation, and simultaneously face increasing stigmatization.

Formally independent of but parallel to this, we witness an interest in the residents of the same neighbourhoods from cultural governing bodies and institutions, and an initiation of a variety of publicly funded projects in arts and culture. These are part of a general strategy to reach new audiences/user groups by recognizing and underpinning art manifestations outside the formal art institutions and closer to the citizens. But they are also part of a more specific betterment agenda based on the assumption that the deprived social housing areas and their residents can be “elevated” through art (The Danish Arts Foundation 2019) and that engagement in cultural projects can counteract isolation and prevent the formation of “parallel societies” (Ministry of Culture 2019).

The article builds upon research carried out in the project “Citizen-near art in deprived social housing areas” (2019–21) by Anne Mette W. Nielsen, Mia Falch Yates, and the authors. The project is part of an overall research program on “Art and social
Based on our research, we in this article introduce the rise and contestation of “the ghetto” in Denmark since the 1970s and the social and cultural policies targeting it to constitute a triple exposure of social inequality, stigmatization, and intervention. Building upon critical art theory and practice (Kester 2011; Mouffe 2013; Schrag 2016) we suggest a typology of art projects with each their artistic strategy to enhance socio-aesthetic relations in the present cultural and political context: 1) permanent physical interventions, 2) temporary (re)makings of the neighbourhood, 3) reinforcement of creative skills and agency, and 4) co-inhabitations. In the article, we present cases from each of the four types and outline how they relate to the socio-economic agendas. Finally, we discuss the aesthetic, social, and political potentials as well as dilemmas of the various types of public art projects in social housing areas.

**Contested neighbourhoods**

Gellerup, Stengårdsvej, Værebro Park, and Vollsmose are all part of the Danish non-profit housing sector and were constructed around 1970 in the urban margins of some of the bigger cities in Denmark. Influenced by the functionalist ideals of Le Corbusier they are characterised by modernist concrete architecture. Gellerup (including neighbouring Tøveshoj) and Vollsmose are the largest housing projects in Denmark with approximately 8–9000 inhabitants, while Værebro Park and Stengårdsvej are significantly smaller (with around 3000 and 1300 inhabitants). All four neighbourhoods have been contested since the beginning. While they were constructed as visionary architectural and functional units with modern apartments and local institutions, shopping centers, and green spaces between the blocks, they soon became part of an emotional discursive battle (Høghøj & Holmqvist 2018). In the 1970s, the debates mainly focused on the impact of modernist concrete architecture on social well-being and—with strong traits of architectural determinism—on the neighbourhoods as a catalyst for dysfunctional youth. While residents defended the areas, mainstream media often used concrete blocks to symbolize social problems and crime. In addition, architects and urban planners criticized the functionalist housing areas for their lack of jobs, businesses, and varied social life. In the 1980s, the now established polarization, which by geographers has been termed an emotional geography, was reinforced by demographic changes (Høghøj and Holmqvist 2018; Høghøj 2019). Since the late 1980s, the negative portrayals of low-income housing areas increasingly became linked to the growing number of residents with minority-ethnic background. Simultaneously, several of the public housing areas were included in social programs and other area-based governmental initiatives.

Since the turn of the century, the contested areas have been a key concern of leading national and local politicians. Various prime ministers have linked social problems like unemployment, non-education, and crime rates to immigration and ethnicity, and identified the communities as “parallel societies” that do not share our “Danish values”, or even as “holes in the map of Denmark” (Hansen 2018). These harsh rhetorical demarcations of “the other” have paved the way for an official classification of the areas as “ghettos”, and complementing political interventions—most radically described in the strategy plan “One Denmark without parallel societies—no ghettos in 2030” (The Prime Minister’s Office 2018). The laws and amendments of this “ghetto act” build upon a so-called “ghetto list” published by shifting Danish governments each year since 2010 (The Prime Minister’s Office 2010). The criteria for being included in the list have been modified several times but now comprises a lower than average level of education, employment and income, higher than average crime rate, and—particularly controversial—a population consisting of over 50% “non-Western” immigrants or descendants hereof. Based on these criteria, the list distinguishes between “deprived” housing areas, “ghettos”, and “hard ghettos” (Ministry of Transport 2020). For the latter, defined as areas that have been “ghettos” for four years in a row, the legislation sets double penalties for crimes committed in the areas and collective eviction of entire families, if one member commits crimes, besides mandatory day-care for preschool children in kindergartens with a maximum migrant intake of 30%. The physical consequences of being labelled a “hard ghetto” are severe, since a rule about reducing council homes in the areas to 40% of available
housing leads to eviction of tenants, demolition of entire blocks, and/or sale of properties for private housing projects (The Prime Minister’s Office 2018).

Despite both national and international critique and lawsuits for discrimination, a broad alliance in the Danish parliament supports the policy. The supporters argue that the policy is necessary to avoid ghettoization, provide mixed neighbourhoods, and ensure social coherence. The critics respond that the “ghetto” discourse and legislation reinforce rather than solve the problems (Public Resistance website; Gilliam et al. 2020; UNHumanRights 2018) when it presents an opposition between two internally homogeneous groups, and “them” as a danger to “us Danes”. Building upon Sara Ahmed’s concept of sticky feelings, Mons Bissenbakker and Michael Nebeling (2020) describe the stigmatization of the areas as part of an emotionally charged discursive struggle by which the negatively valorised categorizations assemble and stick to specific areas and their inhabitants in a way that circulates strong, negative emotions in an escalating spiral of “us” versus “them”.

Following sociologist Loïc Wacquant (2008; 2013), one may argue that the social housing areas in the urban periphery consist of many different ethnic groups, and rather constitute a new poverty regime, which is initiated by a general precarization of working life, a neoliberal policy that creates increased social inequality, and a territorial stigma. The four housing areas in our research confirm this. While three of them—Gellerup, Vollsmose and Stengårdsvej, which are all categorized as “hard ghettos” (Ministry of Transport 2020)—have approximately 80% of “non-Western” origin or descent, they are also already “mixed” in the sense that the residents are of multiple ethnic and national backgrounds, including Danish. Gellerup and Vollsmose thus have around 80 nationalities each. Værebro Park has 51% residents of “non-Western” origin or descent, and even though it has not appeared on the lists since 2017, it is often described as a “deprived” housing area with serious social problems, and still is subject to strategic development plans aiming at “social balance” (The National Building Foundation 2019).

A triple exposure

In the areas in question here, the emotional geographies linked to modernist concrete blocks, to poverty and social problems, and to ethnicity and migration together form a territorial stigma that paves the way for radical political interventions and an extended social engineering. We therefore use the term “exposed” rather than “disadvantaged” or “deprived” housing areas. When we use the term in the following, we refer to a triple exposure where the areas and residents are exposed, first, to socio-economic inequality. Compared to the population as such, they have lower levels of education, employment and income, and higher levels of social problems. Since one of the aims of the non-profit housing sector is to secure housing for disadvantaged people this is hardly surprising. However, this aim of the sector is often ignored in policy discourses, which address social problems as unrelated to socio-economic inequality and as something that can be eliminated through urban development.

Secondly, the areas are exposed to a discursive stigmatization that includes an emotional polarization of “them” versus “us”. According to Wacquant (2008), internalization of stigma inevitably leads the residents to dis-identify with their neighbourhoods and counter-acts collective mobilization and solidarity. In a Danish context, the stigmatization may have severe consequences since it is continuously repeated by leading politicians and in public discourse. As Richard Jenkins (2008) has argued, the categorization of a specific group by a more powerful Other is not only a matter of classification but also an intervention in the world of the less powerful that will change the experience of living in it. In Denmark, the categorization of particularly young males of migrant background as a threat (The Prime Minister’s Office 2020) further contributes to an emotional mobilization against feelings of insecurity, and paves the way for eliminating the imagined threat to the general population rather than respecting the basic citizen rights of the targeted group (Butler 2009). When the residents in the areas experience higher penalties for crimes, specific rules for children of migrant origin in kindergartens or schools, demolition of blocks, mass eviction, sale into private housing and more, they are, thirdly, also exposed to political, material, demographic and legal interventions.

This triple exposure affects the areas in question, how they are experienced from within and without, and what kind of agency they enable. While Wacquant regards internalization as inevitable, Jenkins (2008) leaves some room for the residents’ own agency. In a Danish context, this room is confirmed by Public Resistance, a national association of tenants in the areas, who fight for non-profit housing and against discrimination and eviction. It is further confirmed in research that documents how residents regard the stigma as a major problem but may react to it in different ways, ranging from internalization over resignation to radical passivity and direct protest (Jensen, Prieur, and Skjott-Larsen 2020; Strandholt
In Foundation health as strategy, Værebro Foundation has publicized the notion of “deprived” social housing areas. They are now also targeted by a range of art and cultural programs, projects and pools at different levels from the state to the municipality and through different public as well as non-public agencies. The strategy has come forth through a range of related agendas for art in public domains and site-specific art (The Agency for Culture and Palaces 2015) to form a specific strategic engagement in what is conceptualized as “Art and culture in deprived social housing areas”. At state level, it is presently implemented partly through funding from the Danish Arts Foundation (2018–21), partly through a bigger pool from the Danish Agency for Culture and Palaces (2019–22). In continuation of the former, the Danish Arts Foundation has joined extended partnerships with other agents at different scales as spelt out in an inspiration catalogue that reports on the engagement in two of the areas that we study, Værebros Park and Stengårdsvej (Danish Arts Foundation 2019, see also Danish Arts Foundation a, b, c, d).

The rationale behind the enrolment of art and culture in the general integration and social housing strategy, expressed by the “ghetto act”, is a post-welfare or—as expressed by the artist and art historian, Anthony Schrag (2016)—betterment-rationale according to which art and culture are for all, can do well and elevate people and places. It is a rationale that goes all the way back to the Kantian idea of Enlightenment as citizen empowerment and of art and aesthetics as the societal realm where we meet as equals. This belief has since been rephrased as the ground of modern art and cultural policy institutions. In today’s post-welfare society, it has however, according to Schrag, rather than being an aesthetic norm, anchored in a democratic vision, been turned into a notion of betterment as a means of social and health ends and as part of an extended social engineering.

Still, the enrolment of art and culture in integration and social housing policies constitutes an inbuilt paradox that we in the following will understand as an antagonism, adapting the notion from the Belgian philosopher and advocate for a radical or pluralist democracy, Chantal Mouffe (2013). The antagonism is spelt out as a clash between two competing rationales: whereas the integration rationale aims at undoing the present areas and their communities by diluting people and preventing negative so-called neighbourhood-effects, the art and culture rationale aims at strengthening them by providing new experiences, bringing people together, and initiating new stories and images about them. According to Mouffe, antagonisms cannot be settled or done with, but they can be addressed through an agonistic politics, that challenge the origins in a hegemonic order to disclose itself as a post-political consensus and expose the inherent conflicts. According to Mouffe, the goal of an agonistic politics is to convert antagonisms into agonisms to be handled by adversaries, advocating for a pluralistic democracy. The role and strength of art and art institutions in this is not to make a neighbourhood more liveable or people more viable, then, but rather to expose what is taken for given or considered natural or sensible through a dissensual practice that operates counter-hegemonic and situated in people’s actual lives and lived conflicts (Mouffe 2008). According to Mouffe, the public space of the modern metropole and modern city planning not only mirrors but reinforces the asymmetrical power relations in liberal societies, which makes it the more important for art and art institutions not to partake naively herein and overlook the inbuilt structural inequality but to practice what Mouffe would see as strategic dissensus.

Within the art field and among artists and art historians the belief in the generality of art or art as a universal welfare benefit has been challenged since the end of the 20th Century. In continuation of avantgarde movements such as Dadaism and Situationism, new artistic practices have come forth under signatures such as relational, dialogic, collaborative, or social art (Bourriaud 2002; Jackson 2011; Kester 2011, 2013)—besides explicit political art (Bishop 2012). Together, they stand for a transformation of the art field itself by which the generality of art is shifted from a confidence in the unique artwork and its invocation of a non-specific audience to the involvement of specific audiences in art as a process. It is highlighted by Schrag and others how such artistic practices are most often participatory in the sense that audiences are turned into co-creative and co-decisive participants and the artistic process itself makes a radical democratic statement (Bala 2018; Schrag 2016).

What can art projects in exposed housing areas accomplish in the given political and discursive context of a triple exposure, then? In the following case study of present art projects—supported by “Art in deprived housing areas” and other pools—we ask if
and in what sense they might at least provisionally repeal inequality and stigmatization, and invoke (new) encounters and dialogue? Might they even stir conventional distributions of identities, power, and prestige—including the power to represent? When asking these questions we draw on our wider study on art projects in the four above mentioned social housing areas to in this article pinpoint examples of different types of projects and how the involved antagonisms are present and eventually met (Eriksson et al. In press a and b).

**Permanent physical installations**

One strand of art projects refers to the socio-aesthetic and emotional history of the housing areas as “deserts of concrete” (Høghøj 2019). The chosen projects are in contrast often playful and colourful and are supposed to make the neighbourhood in question more liveable and more attractive and change its image in the public eye. Adhering to this overall ambition, the projects can take very different forms.

A pertinent example of this type is *The Galaxy Path* (*Galaksestien*) in Vollsmose to be realised in 2020–21 by the artist Jens Settergren. It is financed by the Visual Arts Committee at Danish Arts Foundation together with the Municipality of Odense and won an open call in which a range of local representatives took part. The art project is designed to traverse an already existing path connecting a housing section with the—from August 2021—merged primary school, Odin. The old path is a trampled walking and cycling path across the worn out territory in-between housing area and school and the assignment has been to transform the spot from a place you have to pass to a place you want to visit, thereby changing also the infrastructure of the whole area and its patterns of movement. The new path is made of marble and contains a series of mosaics that vision the universe/cosmos at different points in history, at various places, and with a reference to modern media and computer games to make a kind of world-making art across cultures. A professional curator/art communicator, Julie Tøllinggaard Bonde, is engaged to via her bureau AiR establish various forms of dialogue within Vollsmose but also among the wider public, starting with an (outside) exhibition at Art Museum Brandts, called *Worldbuilding*, during March and April 2021. The ambition to have the residents of Vollsmose, and in particular children and youth, engage at an early point to contribute to the motives has had to be cancelled due to COVID19 lock-down (Figure 1).

A similar example is related to Danish Arts Foundation’s contracted engagement in Værebø under the signature “Art in Værebø Park”, again financed by the Visual Arts Committee but this time as a response to a request raised by a group of residents through their local committee. The result is an installation by artist Javier Tapia called *ThePause (Pausen)*, meant as an offer to not least elders to literally take a rest at a place at the end of one of the grey building blocks that hitherto has only been used by cyclists passing and with a view to a green belt along the path, shielding towards one of the trafficked bypasses. The installation consists of a bench, an umbrella shield, a big ashtray, and a gate across the path circled by painted asphalt to halt the by passers and eventually invite encounters between settlers and movers. By keeping concrete as the basic material and the grey colour except from the orange of the umbrella shield, the installation addresses the fact that the place is a non-place in Marc Augé’s (1995) sense of the word with a twist and turns the passage point into a possibility of unexpected meetings and experiences (Figure 2).

Yet another example is part of Danish Arts Foundation’s contracted engagement in Stengårdsvej with the municipality of Esbjerg and Realdania under the signature, including the local zip code, “6705

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Figure 1. *The Galaxy Path* (*Galaksestien*). Digital projection, the artist Jens Settergren (project outline)
school, also made into a memory game to be played out in school classes. The school further has been equipped with a fanciful local branch of a story tree at the main library in Esbjerg, built by artist Thomas Dambo, to make a stage for a continued story telling practice at the school.

Such art projects fit well into the overall political integration and social housing strategy in the sense that they attract positive public attention and prestige even if they also all each their way address the context they are situated in and are meant as resources for the local citizens. Another take to rather illuminate and work with the inherent conflicts is seen in Gellerup where the independent art platform Sigrids Stue (Sigrid’s living room) has been physically present since 2011. Sigrids Stue, which is supported by a range of agencies, among them Danish Arts Foundation and the municipality of Aarhus but also EU, involves local residents in collaborative projects, hosts international artists in residence, and has been the locus of a range of projects that critically address questions of the postmigrant (Schramm 2019) city space. One of these projects is Collect-ive-ing: *An attempt to build up a cultural logography*, in which residents, in collaboration with the Turkish artist Secil Yaylalı, have created a visual cultural alphabet or logography. Part of this is placed on the top of two of the higher buildings of the area, facing the new thoroughfare Karen Blixens Boulevard to lighten up when it is dark. The *logography* consists of colourful signs taken from different symbolic universes, bowed in neon, to visualize the multiplicity of the area and its residents, and express feelings of longing as well as belonging, also suggesting a joint sense of displacement. Such art projects are in accordance with architects and designers, working in Gellerup, who argue for the possibility of a revitalization of the concrete architecture of the 1960es-70es in a new

+Statens Kunstfond” (2018–21). The whole project has a centre of gravity at the local school, Bakkeskolen, even if the school management in the beginning was reluctant due to the many projects, they are exposed too (Danish Arts Foundation 2019). The school has now a new art floor with colourful, playable hotspots, covering 200 m2, and created by artist Astrid Marie Christiansen after a period of research, dialogues with school managers and teachers, and workshops with school classes (Figure 3). The school has now also a permanent exhibition of an artwork in 100 pieces in the big aula, created by the artist Svend Hagen on the basis of the many languages and cultures present at the

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**Figure 2.** The Pause. Digital projection, the artist Javier Tapia (Instagram)

**Figure 3.** The art floor, Astrid Marie Christiansen. Bakkeskolen. Danish Arts Foundation. Photo: Torben Meyer
historical context (Exner 2018). It also can be an argument for art and culture to expand on the inherent controversies and address them with a twist.

Also physically based in Gellerup, and working in a variety of formats including film screenings, video productions, artist talks and debates, workshops on self publishing, the parallel, independent art platform, Andromeda 8220, takes the approach further by posting videos on its Facebook profile that praise the “simple, honest and artistic material, concrete” as a comment to the predominant dismissal of modernist, concrete architecture (Andromeda 8220, Facebook 17. & 24.5.2020). Along the same lines, the local section of Public Resistance has challenged the “ghetto act” and the obligatory comprehensive plans following it, by using one of its flagships in Gellerup, The Golden Gate (Den Gyldne Port), for political messages by equipping it with big banners demanding to stop demolition, the eviction of tenants, and the ongoing replacement of public with private housing.

**Temporarily (re)making the neighbourhood**

Another type of art project to be initiated as part of the intended transformation is temporary remaking’s of the neighbourhoods through collective, artistic processes and guided by artists who have experiences with public art or site-specific art or may know the specific neighbourhood. “Art in Værebro Park”, initiated by the Danish Arts Foundation, provides an illustrative example of this in the sense that four artists were invited to make an Art Residency in the local shopping centre in a dismantled butchery and use it as an outset for different activities with various groups of residents in a period from 2018 to 2019—Karoline H. Hansen, Jesper Aabille, Javier Tapia, and Heine Thorhauge Mathiasen. The place was called “ArtWild (Kunstvild)—bureau for contemporary art” and made into a combined atelier, exhibition room, activity centre, and meeting space. Familiar with the area and now also known by the locals, the artists subsequently were asked to initiate a range of site-specific projects during 2019–21, some of them, such as Tapia’s *The Pause*, separately financed.

Karoline H. Hansen worked with the local children’s institutions to create a Sensory Path (Sansest) in the area and the route Discover your city (Opdag din by) to be continuously reshaped by the local children and youngsters by filling in distributed blue circles with ideas and spots to explore. This project has further generated several semi-permanent sculptures of rather humble materials, The Zigzag Bridge and The Circle Bridge (Zigzagbroen and Cirkelbroen), located at each side of a green belt that is physically divided by a highway to attract children and families and thus playfully connect Værebro with the near-by housing area (Figure 4). Jesper Aabille has helped reshape and decorate Poul’s Pizza House (Pouls Pizzahus) as a place for the residents to make their own pizzas and eat together, close to the city gardens. During the project period, Aabille together with residents also established Let’s Make Pizza that made more than 350 pizzas at various occasions (Figure 5). Simultaneously, he collected stories from residents to now be built into a semi-permanent installation of 35 table-benches to be used by the residents at various occasions and in various combinations, suiting the social event.

Another example of this type of art projects is a theatre project in Stengårdsvej, Next Stop Stengårdsvej, chosen by the residents among several inputs to an open call and part of “6705+Statens Kunstfond.” The project is set up
by the German theatre group Collective Bleeding and is meant to culminate with a travelling performance at five different locations, in the fall 2021. It is raised on the back of workshops during 2020-21 with various groups, among them school classes at Bakkeskolen and the local youth centre, even if down scaled due to the COVID-19 lock-down periods in 2020-21. The theme of the theatre performance and the workshops is the future of Stengårdsvej as anticipated by participants in the workshops and collected and put together by the theatre group.

These projects have, as spelled out in interviews with participants, brought more life, activities, and resources to the area in general (Eriksson et al. In press a). To some, they have also strengthened their sense of place and being part of a community. However, the obstacles to artists as well as residents have been manifold and participation as ambition often compromised. From the perspective of this article, the important question is if and in what sense the many projects have contributed to an empowerment of the local community vice-a-vice ongoing processes of exposure and stigmatization. Our findings suggest that in spite of betterment intentions some of the projects almost inevitably contribute to the triple exposure for instance by asking participants to vision their residency otherwise as is the case in the theatre project in Stengårdsvej. During one of the theatre workshops in fourth grade in the local school, the children rather expressed why they liked their neighbourhood than what they wished for should change. Similar findings have been articulated in comparable Swedish research (Clavier and Kauppinen 2014; Sand 2019).

A contrasting example again is to be found in Gellerup and initiated by the independent art platform Andromeda. The initiative is called Demolition Tours and is a deliberate alternative to the official tours, arranged by the municipality and focusing on the wished-for transformation into a mixed and balanced creative city. Contrary to this, Demolition Tours offer tours with residents as guides to tell the local stories and demonstrate how the area is erupted in the wake of the strategic development plans. In Gellerup, five entire blocks have already been demolished, and at least seven more will follow. Addressing the consequences of this, Demolition Tours call forth resistance and creative bottom-up initiatives and insist on dialogue and possible alternatives related to ideas of the postmigrant city space. As such, they rather highlight how antagonisms prevail in art and cultural policies as well as in integration and social housing policies. The concept includes groups and classes, who can book a tour, or bypassing visitors who can hop on-and-off the tours, led by volunteers, thus adapting a well-known touristic schema.

Reinforcement of creative skills and agency
A third type of projects aims at reinforcing the creative skills and agency of residents, in particular children. These projects set out to offer creative skills and communities to all, in their own neighbourhood. This is typically done through informal, artistic workshops, which are found in all four neighbourhoods of our study. Some of the workshops engage a wide range of residents, whereas others are directed at specific groups, often children. At Stengårdsvej, textile artist Tina Ratzer has made workshops with children, young people and adults, respectively, the aim of which was to co-decide the colours for a permanent artwork on the facades of the blocks. While her project involved various groups, it also revealed the challenges in engaging people in artistic projects they have not asked for. When Ratzer distributed colour cards to all apartments on Stengårdsvej, some of the residents thus mistook it
for colours that they could choose for their new bathroom. On the Danish Arts Foundation’s website for “6705+Statens Kunstfond” this is described as “inevitable” and “a funny misunderstanding.” However, it seems more appropriate to understand it as an indication of the distance between cultural policy programs that use “art as a lever” and (well-meaning) artistic intentions of involvement on one side, and what is important in people’s everyday lives on the other side. It may well be in the residents’ own apartments rather than in an externally defined art project in public space that they prefer to practice their creative skills and agency.

Most of the initiated programs address children who are also often easier to involve because they can be reached through their institutions (kindergartens, schools, clubs)—thereby making the projects less voluntary but (at least ideally) also less dependent on the resources of the family. Most workshops focus on enabling children to work creatively with drawing, painting, writing, music, and theatre. In Værebå Park and Stengårdsvej, the workshops are mainly organized in a collaboration between one or more artists and a local institution—in Stengårdsvej especially Bakkeskolen, which for many years has struggled with stigmatization and a large majority of pupils of minority-ethnic background. The workshops in general try to make the children co-creators of specific products and to strengthen their creative agency.

In one workshop at Bakkeskolen, Electrify the Children (Strøm til børn) the pupils produced electronic music on iPads with an app. They were all very engaged in experimenting with and producing their individual music and clearly enjoyed sharing their processes and products with each other. In addition, they succeeded in hacking the app; creating visual images in ways, it was not designed for, showing it to each other, and listening to each other’s music in secret. In this way, they demonstrated creative skills and reclaimed an agency not foreseen by artists or teachers (Figure 6).

Another workshop, where the pupils from Bakkeskolen were mixed with children from a voluntary creative school in Esbjerg, turned out to be much more problematic. Here, the process was not sufficiently framed, and the local children did not understand what they were expected to do or why. The effort to combine them with children from other parts of Esbjerg, who were more motivated and had more experience in the field, thus ended confirming what it tried to dismantle. Rather than strengthening creative skills and agency, the workshop made many of the local children confused and insecure. Ignoring the inequality between the local children and the ones from outside did not generate new aesthetic communities but on the contrary made inequality a bodily experience for the children, whom the project had wanted to empower.

In Gellerup, Sigrids Stue makes informal, artistic workshops that are independent of schools or other institutions. The platform runs both a drawing school and an outdoor building workshop, where children have drawn for instance plants in the small gardens between the blocks, and made wooden signs, benches, and flagpoles. Often, the children produce elements together with the artists at the platform—like lightning concrete stones (Sigrids Stue, Facebook 9.2.2021). Many of these creative productions are placed outside Sigrids Stue and thereby make the children’s creative agency regarding their own neighbourhood materially present for themselves as well as the many by-passers (Figure 7).

Figure 6. Electrify the Children (Strøm til børn). Danish Arts Foundation. Photo: Torben Meyer
Whereas Sigrids Stue expands the workshops from traditionally artistic media like drawing and painting to carpentry and other crafts, Andromeda takes a more explicit political approach to agency. The platform presents itself “as a safe space for expression and exchange of knowledge, made for the empowerment of our community and to connect with the global majority. The intention of having an independent local art platform is to reclaim the agency as inhabitants and individuals in the urban development discussion” (Andromeda 8220, website). Earlier initiatives of Andromeda include for instance a “Pimp your banner and sign bootcamp” (ibid. 18.10.2018) before a demonstration against the ghetto act, and a “Decolonize your tastebuds” (ibid. 17.10.2018) with a production of a Somali-Danish recipe book in collaboration with Gobaad, a local Somali Cultural Association. Recent activities include a zine workshop, where one can use “the creative, tangible and community-creating craft” to “communicate thoughts, experiences, or whatever you like” (Andromeda 8220, Facebook 31.8.2020); and “Her Selection”, a DJ-workshop and outdoor concert with established and upcoming “female, femme-identifying and nonbinary DJs” (ibid. 20.12.2019 & 15.9.2020). Common for all these activities is that the step from developing or practicing creative skills to putting them on the square, in a publication or on stage is very short. Andromeda explicitly resists the triple exposure and opens up an agonistic space, where agency and empowerment may not be gained solely by achieving new creative skills but also by questioning conventional distributions of identities and power. This happens for example by establishing new intersectional alliances with other stigmatized groups, and by replacing categorizations as “non-Danish” and “non-Western” with selfdefinitions linked to the “global majority”.

**Co-inhabitation**

Our fourth and final type of art projects differs from the others by consisting of long-term physical and socio-artistic engagements in the local communities. Our main example here is again from Gellerup where Sigrids Stue has been physically present as an independent artistic platform since 2011. We call this type co-inhabitation in order to highlight how Sigrids Stue and similar site-specific platforms are part of an expanded creative and artistic ecology in the neighbourhoods where they are based. The long-term sharing of habitat means that one could question whether this type actually is a “project” since it seems to oppose the very idea and temporality of projects that are key in public and private funding of arts and culture but also, as argued by Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello (2005), in contemporary capitalism. Our reason for identifying it as a project type is mainly that our examples in this fourth type combine a more permanent presence with temporary projects and funding for them, and that they embody many of the characteristics of the project regime identified by Boltanski and Chiapello, including in particular the flexibility, the heterogeneous activities and collaborations, and the engagement in local and global networks. We thus use “project” in line with Sigrids Stue that on the website self-identify as an “art project” and a “long term collaborative project”, thereby emphasizing not the temporariness of projects but rather the artistic ambition and the explorative and collaborative character of the activities.

Sigrids Stue, which functions both as an art project and a platform for contemporary art, is run by artist Grete Aagaard and a team of other artists, anthropologists, and students. It began as an art satellite, established by Kunsthall Aarhus, but later became an independent association. The platform develops projects in dialogue and cooperation with both local, national, and international partners. Physically, Sigrids Stue includes an apartment on the third floor in one of the blocks, UdeStuen (the conservatory or literally outdoor living room) and a small kitchen garden between the blocks. UdeStuen is the place where most people now meet the art platform, as many pedestrians pass it on their way to and from the local shopping centre and library. It consists of a
mobile two stock wooden pavilion, supplemented by a shack and a wrecked container.

Sigrids Stue has—like the other residents in Gellerup—been exposed to the consequences of urban development plans and demolitions. The platform’s first apartment was in a block that became demolished, and the present apartment is going to be flattened in a new round of demolitions. Equally, UdeStuen, which has existed for five years, had to move in early 2020 when the previous location was allocated for an upcoming sports and culture campus. With its humble and mobile physical structure, UdeStuen seems to match a Gellerup in constant transformation. Sigrids Stue, however, is not only exposed to the transformations but also intervenes actively in the development of the area.

Most visibly, the artists intervene in the non-space around UdeStuen, which is gradually taken over by outdoor furniture and artistic and creative installations—thereby transforming it into a place or what the local newsletter Gellerup.nu—in line with several of the local inhabitants we interviewed—describes as a “small oasis” and “a cozy and warm corner where artists work on their projects, and you can always stop by and get a cup of mint tea” (From 2020). In the summer of 2020, the visiting artist Camilla Nørgård built the work Stone, Path, Dike (Sten, sti, dige) together with residents, who collected stones and discarded building materials from the area and produced artificial concrete stones in various shapes, colours and sizes. The herbs for the tea now grow on the dike (Figure 8).

Stone, Path, Dike presents an alternative to the urban planners’ top-down transformations of Gellerup. Nørgård has explained how she wanted to break with the “aggressive” boulders that prevent cars from entering in various places, by introducing smaller stones, reusing discarded materials, and making some fake, concrete stones, thereby showing how concrete as well as the place where one lives can be recreated (ibid.).

Another intervention is Plant Sanatorium (Plantesanatoriet) by Lars Henningsen, who is part of the team of Sigrids Stue. He has collected and received unwanted and ailing plants and trees, which he has planted in boxes outside UdeStuen, where they are taken care of. The plants—including an olive tree that appeals to the memory of many elderly by-passers—are further equipped with info signs with names and stories: e.g. a red spruce that has suffered by standing too close to a burning scooter. In the context of this article, we are tempted to interpret the care for ailing plants as a symbolic contrast to the evictions and indifference to the needs of vulnerable and exposed residents in the area.

Care is also a key aspect in the project Garden Value (Haveverdi), in which Grete Aagaard has made a series of garden walks: guided tours in small groups to the small utility gardens (including Sigrids Stue’s own), which will be destroyed with the next demolition. On the tours, Aagaard tells about the history, communities, and current prospects of the gardens. She has spent time in the gardens, drawing and learning about the plants while talking to the predominantly older women and single men who intensively grow vegetables on the small plots of land. Based on this, she has drawn a flora with the plants in the gardens and engaged critically in the political discussions around them. Aagaard talks warmly about the value of the gardens that some of the older women have had since the early 70s, and for whom they are one of the few places where they go out and meet. She ends the tour by encouraging the visitors to object to the destruction of the gardens, which the planners, contrary to trends of sustainability and urban gardening, ignore (Figure 9).

A common trait for all the projects in Sigrids Stue is that they are site-specific and collaborative. Contrary to our two first types, the permanent installations and temporary remaking, they do not prioritise colourful and conspicuous interventions or positive external communication or branding. Instead, they work internally where they care for and revalue the discarded and overlooked—with clear symbolic and more implicit political potentials.

Permanent and site-specific artistic platforms like Sigrids Stue are rare in the social housing areas. However, Gellerup has another example in Andromeda and in Vollsmose, the young association Respect has grown out of diverse former local initiatives to now form a joint food, gardening, and green community. Respect holds a coffee and food house in the local centre, small city gardens to deliver to communal meals as well as private households, and a range of activities connected to sustainability and making the area green. Volunteers uphold the daily activities, and special arrangements are held with various artists and experts. Respect has also engaged in the public debate and tried to counteract a new wave of stigma, caused by high Covid-19 infection
rates in Vollsmose, spring 2021. While the government suggested compulsory testing in Vollsmose, Respect demonstrates how the community itself can take care, and argues how the authorities might act better. Whether Respect will have a long-term presence in Vollsmose is yet to be seen. It does not present itself as an art project, but its conceptual approach borrows aesthetically from citizen-centred place-making art projects in similar contexts. And exactly citizen-centred place-making—as opposed to mainstream creative place-making—is key in the projects based on co-inhabitation.

**Conclusion**

What kind of socio-aesthetic relations have the projects established then? How have they responded to the context, they are situated in, and addressed—explicitly or implicitly—the issues of inequality, stigmatization, and exposure that have characterized the neighbourhoods historically and intensified with the "ghetto act"? In the article, we have—inspired by Chantal Mouffe and her notion of agonistics—looked for patterns related to processes of top-down versus bottom-up, outside versus inside, stigmatization versus gentrification, categorizations by powerful Others versus alternative distributions of identities and agency.

In terms of the projects that aim to enhance the physical environment through permanent installations and improve the infrastructure, an obvious challenge lies in their close relation to the actual eruption of many of the areas with the official vision of the mixed or balanced city in mind. Projects such as The Galaxy Path in Vollsmose, The Pause in Værebro, and the art floor at Bakkeskolen in Stengårdsvæj no doubt offer new colourful environments to the residents and simultaneously provide new images that may contribute to change the conception of the area as a grey wasteland in the eyes of the public (The Pause however with the important twist that it rather valuates the concrete and the architecture). There is, however, a very thin line between these projects and the top-down development plans that also imply masking the grey concrete with more varied facades in other materials, forms and colours—besides reducing the social housing and breaking up the areas in more flexible and accessible units. An alternative to this masking, suggested also by architects, could be to pursue the road taken by Javier Tapia to revalue the histories, heritage, and qualities of the modernist concrete—and thereby the neighbourhoods. Another alternative could be to revalue diversity not only of the facades but of the residents. An example of this is Collect-ive-ing, the cultural logography in Gellerup that represents the cultural diversity by simultaneously mixing and differing from existing alphabets. It shares some characteristics with the other examples of permanent installations but is created via a bottom-up process and through a locally situated art platform. And it expresses the post migrant history of the locality and the actual experiences of hope and longing as well as loss and displacement of the residents.

The projects that aim to remake the neighbourhood, at least temporarily, such as Let's Make Pizza and Discover your city in Værebro Park and Next Stop Stengårdsvæj aspire to establish new encounters and positive socio-aesthetic relations. These projects can enhance the residents’ sense of and engagement in their neighbourhood. However, our cases also demonstrate how such projects can fail, when they are inserted from above and based on an understanding of the area and the residents as being in a deficit—as when it is taken for granted that participants want to vision their neighbourhood otherwise, when in reality they tend to like it as it is. Another risk in this type of projects is that the residents grow tired of the many temporary projects. As described, they are targeted by a variety of programs and pools that support single and temporary projects, and participation in these may appear more like a demand than an offer—making the residents’ refusal or passivity a sign of agency. Particularly if the projects ignore the socio-political context, they contra intentionally risk contributing to the exposure that they ignore. As an alternative, the Demolition Tours organized by the independent platform Andromeda in Gellerup and conducted by local volunteers, exemplify how it is possible to at one and the same time strengthen local identity and counteract the exposure to external interventions.

Along the same lines, projects that aim at expanding creative skills and agency among not least children and youth balance on the edge of empowerment and unknowingly reinforcing exposure and stigmatization. This seems to happen when the reality of the everyday
lives and conditions of the participants are not considered, as in our case, where pupils from different backgrounds and neighbourhoods were brought together. Contrary to ideals of socio-aesthetic interactions between diverse groups of citizens and between parts of the city, such projects risk reinforcing rather than eliminating inequality and difference. Like the temporary remaking’s that do not address the overall transformations of the neighbourhoods, one may here ask whether it is possible to reduce inequality by ignoring it or whether it requires taking it into account. Based on our study it seems unfruitful to put too much faith in the Kantian idea of art and aesthetics as the societal realm where we can meet as equals. Exactly because of this, however, it does make sense to offer creative skills and communities to people in their own neighbourhood. We see this happening in a variety of informal, creative workshops and our examples reveal how identities and roles may be distributed in new and more equal ways. In Stengårdsvej, the children in the music workshop reclaimed an agency not foreseen in the project. And in Gellerup Andromeda explicitly frames creative skills and communities to resist conventional distributions of identities and power. While this includes a variety of media, a risk may be that many residents will feel uncomfortable or even excluded with the intersectional mix of artistic and activist formats.

Our fourth and last type is based on long-term physical co-inhabitation with and socio-artistic engagements in the local communities. This type is rare. A reason for this is no doubt that this type falls outside the categories of public funding, which normally fits specific and temporary projects. Another reason may be that internalization of stigmatization hinders projects that grow from below, start from within and focus on the lived experiences and needs of the residents. Based on our findings, we suggest that this type of long-term engagements should get more attention from the public funding bodies, which—in line with the project regime identified by Boltanski and Chiapello—prioritize new and temporary projects. Among our cases, we have located this type most clearly in Gellerup with Sigrids Stue and Andromeda, with each their history and way of funding. Andromeda presents itself as an independent platform for art and knowledge exchange to support the local community, its diversity and agency vis-a-vis the city planning. Compared to Sigrids Stue, Andromeda has a more activist profile, which resonates with Mouffe’s notion of strategic dissensus. It is unfolded in a spectrum of activities and activist happenings directed at the community but also by establishing relations and communities between Gellerup and a decolonial and post migrant globality, thereby challenging the national framing and stigmatization. Maybe because Andromeda is initiated from within (with daily leader Aysia Amin born and raised in Gellerup) it can with more ease reach out from the local community to the “global majority”. However, a challenge to this type of platform is that some of the residents may feel excluded from an intersectional artistic and activist approach that might be more attractive to a woke city public.

A challenge in all types of art projects, mentioned here, is that they risk contributing to a gentrification of the areas. This is an inherent element of the recent development plans, and in Gellerup, which is ahead in terms of implementation of the transformations entailing the “ghetto act”, it is already happening. Gentrification can very well turn into a fourth form of exposure that will force even more residents to move, and with the prospect of making the underlying inequalities and conflicts less conspicuous than is the case in the stigmatization, demolitions of blocks, and eviction of tenants. This is a new challenge to art projects in the housing areas—and a challenge that makes it even more important to address critically the potential conflicts between artistic projects and local lives, and the unequal distributions of resources, identities and agency.

Finally, a postmigrant perspective urges policymakers, cultural entrepreneurs, artists and researchers alike to critically address and consider the implications of the structural inequality in the distribution of power and resources in the projects themselves in terms of ethnicity and colour. Almost all policymakers and artists involved are white and “ethnic Danes”, almost none of the policymakers or artists live in the concerned neighbourhoods, and there is a huge gap in funding and public engagement between the (bigger) art projects initiated from above and outside, and the (minor) ones initiated from below and within. Even if a platform like Andromeda in Gellerup attracts attention from an external public and from funding bodies at state level, the platform still makes the unique exception. Meanwhile, a multiple platform like Respect in Vollsmose struggles to keep up some local and NGO support but often fails since they do not easily fit into the boxes of funding agencies, policy areas and programs. To change this picture is the prerequisite for real transformation understood as a changed dynamic of the emotional geography embedded in the very phrasing of “Art in deprived social housing areas”.

Note
1. Exactly how many tenants will be evicted is contested. In late 2019, calculations indicated 11,000 at national level (Reiermann and Andersen 2019). But the numbers are subject to change since they depend on rehousing, on the socio-economic and ethnic background of new tenants admitted into available apartments, on tenants that leave voluntarily, and of course on political initiatives at local and national level. In
December 2021, the government has renamed the “ghetto-list”, replacing “ghettos” and “hard ghettos” with “parallel society areas” and “transformation areas” (while keeping the criteria). It has further introduced a new category, “prevention areas”, with the aim of having no housing areas with more than 30% “non-Western” residents within the next 10 years (Danish Radio 2021, Ministry of the Interior and Housing 2021). The consequences of these changes for the areas, for stigmatization, and for people in need of affordable housing are highly contested.

2. In fact, the neon signs are not permanent since they are placed on blocks that will be demolished. Thereby Yayali avoids contributing to any naïve beautification of a gentrified area. But the project also includes stencils of the entire logography, which have been distributed to the participants.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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