The role and value of local welfare institutions in multicultural areas

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Abstract. This abstract addresses the role and value of welfare institutions as social structural elements of daily life, framing the informal - but important - meeting between residents in an urban fabric.

The discussion is contextualized through the demolition of the primary school Nordgårdsskolen, a local school serving the area of Gellerup, a social housing area back then framing the life of app. 7,000 people counting more than 80 nationalities in the western part of Aarhus, Denmark. Demographics vary from the rest of the city of Aarhus as 35% of tenants are under 18 years of age, meaning that a very high percentage of the local population has direct or indirect relations to schoolchildren and their institution (being parents, siblings, grandparents or other relatives).

Due to integration problems and political pressure, a close-down of two kindergartens and Nordgårdsskolen was decided on in 2007 and the demolition of the school itself took place in 2013 – 42 years after its initiation. This caused distribution of children to a large number of schools not only to the surrounding school districts but also to districts in other parts of the municipality.

In a Danish context the area of Gellerup was considered a highly modern “new town” at its initiation in 1968 – the architect Knud Blach Petersen unfolding international inspirations in terms of local welfare-, cultural- and sports facilities supporting the housing structure and the quality of life of the tenants.

New Towns have always been places characterized by migration: by definition, they have no ‘original’ inhabitants – every resident is a migrant. This situation makes it even more important to gather residents to promote integration.

The aim of the paper is to investigate and discuss the role and value of local welfare institutions not only as centers of service, but also as creators of cohesion, trust and identity.

In the specific case of Gellerup, the paper will unfold the social effects of demolishing Nordgårdsskolen as a physical place of informal meetings in a local multicultural community as Gellerup.

1. Background
Like in many other European countries housing needs in the cities of Denmark expanded in the post-war period. Along with increasing national ambitions related to welfare this led to a Scandinavian
interpretation of the international term New Town in Brabrand in the western part of Aarhus, the second biggest town in Denmark after the capital Copenhagen.

Gellerup was developed during the late sixties in a collaboration between the housing association Brabrand Boligforening and the architectural office of Knud Blach Pedersen. The masterplan unfolded comprehensive social and architectural ambitions of modern middle-class housing and additional welfare institutions, framing the lives and recreation of its app. 7000 inhabitants – segregated from work life as was the ambition of ideal modernistic housing. Also inspired by the garden city movement the masterplan layout of Gellerup consisted of 23 housing blocks of both four and eight levels centering a park-zone only crossed by pedestrian traffic. [1]

1.1 Welfare in the context of a Danish new town
Knud Blach Petersen himself visited France during the sixties and most likely found international inspirations in the collective housing of other modernist architects among others Le Corbusier. To understand the concept of Gellerup it makes sense to look into the conceptual ideas of the building structures of Le Corbusiers five versions of Unité d’habitations, (all realized between 1946-67) As it is well-known the first “prototype” in Marseille was later realized in three other French locations (Nantes en Reze, Briey, and Firminy) and in one location in Berlin, Germany. Based upon Le Corbusiers concept of “The house as a machine to live in” featured in “Verse un architecture” from 1923 [2] the building concept unfolded the vision of the “vertical garden city” [3]. In the Unites d’habitation, dwellings, residential services as well as collective facilities such as kindergarten and nursery school are all implemented into the building structure, leaving surrounding nature out of touch. Situated on the top floors, the school and kindergarten are only accessible through the structure, which makes its relations to the surrounding area of lesser importance underlining its belonging to the “living-machine”. One could say that in the Unités the institutions mainly served the families practical need of child-care to make modernist everyday life function.

1.2 Disassembling the living machine
Like the different versions of Unites d’habitations, the New Town of Gellerup also offered residential welfare services for its inhabitants; a library, a church, swimmingpools, shopping and sports facilities as well as school and kindergartens. Unlike in the layout of Corbusiers Unités however, the plan of Gellerup implements its welfare facilities into the surrounding landscape, connecting the various buildings by a system of footpaths through the landscape. One could say that in spite of strong references to Corbusiers concepts of living-machines Knud Blach Petersen in the case of Gellerup disassembles his “machine”, introducing a closer contact between man and (park-) nature.

2. Nordgårdskeolen
An important element of welfare in the masterplan was of course the 7.600 sqm. school buildings of Nordgårdskeolen, initiated in 1971 after severe attention in the local medias because of a financial overrun of more than a hundred pct. on the building costs. The building committee was criticized for having “thought more about the project than the economy” when applying for 31 mil. DKK. and not the 15 mil. DKK that was first assumed. [4]

With its offset one-level units in three levels, sloping slightly, like the landscape, towards south, the school and the park seemed interconnected. Situated in the western part of the area the school worked as a sort of hinge between the inner park and the surrounding suburb, being accessible by car from the west, but connected to the rest of the area by the system of footpaths that characterized the non-car area of the inner park.

On the eastern side of the school access to a sports hall and outdoor sports area was offered. Off-school hours the area, which was easy accessible, would also serve as overall sport facilities for the inhabitants of Gellerup [1].
2.1 The buildings
The school buildings divided facilities for first to tenth class into three units containing the infant-, junior-, and continuation-schools. The three minor units were centered around a joint building offering specialized classrooms for creativity, music, science as well as library, administration, dentist-, and medical facilities. The ambition of dividing the units into three mirroring different ages of schoolchildren was seen as untraditional and was by some inhabitants criticized because a lot of families in the new area of Gellerup were young and had small children, which created a severe pressure on the infant school [5].

Each building consisted of a number of long, parallel bays of 9.60 meters width, separated by 3.60 meters wide glass-roofed corridors [1].

2.2 The various outdoor spaces
The building offered various types of outdoor spaces as all classrooms had direct exit to a smaller courtyard that took in daylight and framed outdoor teaching and breaks. A larger outdoor area between the infant and the junior school would serve as meeting point and playground and of course the park on the eastern side of the school was accessible for sports activities and other events.

2.3 Supporting community and dialogue
The school was developed under the influence of Danish school policy and the pedagogical thinking in the late sixties and early seventies abandoning “industrial” school buildings with uniform classrooms in favor of a various scheme of teaching rooms – many of which were meant to support both formal and informal dialogue and community-thinking with the aim of supporting the upbringing of democratic citizens. Seemingly, the village was an architectural metaphor for the spacial organization of Nordgårdsskolen, working as its own little township in the larger plan of Gellerup. The buildings centered all classrooms around a common square in every unit. Streets connected the classrooms to the outdoor patios of the school, making the school accessible yet shielded from the surrounding world [1].

According to a former pupil, who attended Nordgårdsskolen between his first and fifth form in 1985-90, the most valuable place of the school however was the outdoor square between the infant- and the juniorschool. This particular place would gather children in play and talk also in their free time, as the schools open structure allowed inhabitants of the school district to use the school area all day long [6].
2.4 An untapped future flexibility
A consciousness of potential future changes in school policy as well as potential changes in the needs of society was implemented in the building from the beginning. The buildings of Nordgårds-skolen were assembled in precast concrete components; columns, beams and 1.20 metres wide wall units. All building elements were assembled by bolts which actually made it possible to dismantle, replace or reuse the elements in other contexts. Even the lavatory units could be removed and replaced elsewhere and below the floors were cat walks for inspection purposes. According to engineer Torben Sigurdsson, who was employed at Birch & Krogboe, the then engineers on the project, the buildings were designed to adapt to changed requirements and could actually be modified to suit completely different layouts [1][7].

3. From emerging democracy to demolition
From its inauguration in 1971 Nordgårds-skolen was an attractive district school for the people of Gellerup -in the year of 1973 the school had eight first forms at the same time mirroring the predominantly young families of Gellerup [8]. However through the seventies, not long after the estate of Gellerup and its welfare institutions were commissioned, it turned out that a lot of the middle class residents the 2000 rental units were addressing, rather wanted to buy their own houses as conditions for private loans were favorable. Gellerup, built and run by Brabrand Boligforening, one of many Danish Housing Associations that organizes rental housing built with public financial support, got through the seventies and eighties inhabited by people who were in need of affordable accommodation and by raising numbers of migrants, refugees and their descendants [9].

Mirroring the inhabitants of Gellerup the student body of Nordgårds-skolen in the mid-eighties counted twenty percent bilingual pupils and eighty percent ethnic Danes. According to a former pupil who started in first form in 1985, this was a perfect situation seen from an integration perspective, as language was learned quickly and the integration and the cultural exchange had good conditions [6]. By the end of the eighties and during the nineties a large percentage of inhabitants however, had no connection to the labour market, crime and violence rates were high, also causing a lot of children opting out of the local school to seek alternate possibilities.

In 2004 Nordgårds-skolen was the first school in Denmark to have a completely bilingual student body. Around the school smaller groups of young people caused vandalism on the school buildings and political focus on the social challenges of the area were servere, the main argument being on integration-issues [10].

The same year, in 2004, the Danish Government published their first strategy for disadvantaged housing areas and has every year since 2010 published so-called ghetto-lists placing the area of Gellerup in the cathegory of so-called hard ghettos. [11]

In spite of severe resistance from the locals the political decision of a close down of the school was taken in 2007 and in 2008 the 452 pupils left Nordgårds-skolen for the last time to continue schooling by commuting to 14 different schools around the Municipality of Aarhus – the longest distances causing two hours of commuting every day [12].

Between 2008 and the actual demolition in April 2013, the school buildings were used on and off, the joint building in the middle of the complex temporarily serving as a home for the manifold local associations (at the moment Gellerup is the home of 133 associations) [6]. It was decided not to demolish the unit of the infant school as the Municipality planned to use this as supplement for the new kindergarten buildings on the site of the school, but the junior school, the continuation school and the joint building were demolished as well as a lot of the trees and vegetation on the site were cut down.

As a result of the demolition the concrete elements were made into 20.000 tons of gravel. According to P. Olesen & Sons, the demolition company in charge of the task, to be recycled as land fil in road construction. Glass from windows was to be recycled as new glass or as filter sand. [13].
The demolition of the school was the very first part of a severe transformation process of Gellerup taking place in these years to unfold the ambition of creating a heterogeneous housing area and to accommodate the Danish Government vision of ghetto/non-ghetto. At present, 340 apartments have been demolished in order to add other types of housing with various ownerships to the area. The Housing association and the Municipality of Aarhus are at present debating whether to only demolish an additional 200 apartments or whether to demolish up to 600 apartments [14].
4. Methodologies
The methods of investigating the topic of this paper are various. Literature studies on modernist housing have been carried out and, furthermore, the newspaper articles from the initiation of Gellerup have brought knowledge into the work. Attention has also been paid to local networks on the internet exposing the views of and discussions between tenants. As less than 20 pct. of the former buildings of Nordgårds skolen, the subject of this paper, remaining, researching the school’s architectural qualities has been impeded. Hence the investigation relies on studies of drawing material, photos, literature and interviews with people involved in the building process. Studies of scientific literature on the field of sociology and the value of networks in housing areas have been studied. Studies on the field of commuting have also brought knowledge to the work.

5. The overall consequences
Human mobility may seem beneficial from an acute integration point of view, when aiming to dissolve social challenges in a local area. When the political decision of closing down Nordgårds skolen in Gellerup was taken Louise Gade, who was then councilman in the Municipality of Aarhus argued that “the close-down and following replacement of the children was meant as a very solid school - and integration policy effort” adding that the municipality offered free bustransportation and even support for moving expenses, if families chose to move closer to their new schools, the limit of transportation time being up to two hours a day [15].

According to an employee of Brabrand Boligforening there are no known cases of families that have moved away from Gellerup because they wanted to live closer to the schools their children were distributed to. As he puts it “no one would give up their community and their close relations in the area” [6].

The human consequences of commuting have been explored in recent years by, among others The University of Roskilde [16]. There are manifold signs of severe negative effects of commuting on personal, health and societal well-being. From a health point of view longer commutes are linked with increased rates of obesity, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, back and neck pain, divorce, depression and death.

At the societal level, people who commute more are less likely to vote. They are more likely to be absent from work, and they have kids who are more likely to have emotional problems. Speaking more abstractly, there is a huge pool of more or less untapped human potential locked up in long commutes [17].

6. The role and value of welfare institutions
The attitudes towards the outcome of dissolving the large group of schoolchildren from Nordgårds skolen, distributing them over a larger area are manifold – some see benefits, some see drawbacks for the pupils and the surrounding society. But what are the costs of losing welfare institutions in an area - institution that a lot of citizens have had a relationship to?

As a welfare institution a public school is by definition for everyone – democratic in the sense of being an open, free of charge and non-religious institution. In the first place schools are a necessity, framing the needs of society and of families to make everyday life work. Apart from framing children’s lives and learning in important years of childhood it also structures the daily lives of parents and siblings going back and forth – meeting other parents or maybe teachers informally. Furthermore a lot of Danish public schools also let local associations use their facilities for activities ranging from sports to all kinds of teaching, meetings and events. This means that the school building serves as a community center to a greater extent. Before the demolition of the school locals criticized the Municipality, pointing out the fact that the platform of the manifold associations of Gellerup would also be homeless [18].
6.1 Social capital - Bonding and Bridging – the strength of the weak ties

American political scientist Robert D. Putnam describes his theories of social capital in “Bowling Alone”, 2003. Furthermore, he creates the theories of “bonding and bridging” as different valuable ways of networking in society. [19].

Bonding, he argues, is when individuals take part in networks that amplifies homogeneity and identity by including people that have things in common – close family, ethnic minorities, Sunday schools or poker clubs. The positive aspect of "bonding" is mobilization of solidarity within the group providing social and mental support to its members, the negative aspects is that the groups can appear excluding to others.

6.2 The strength of the weak ties in the case of Gellerup

The other kind of network, according to Putnam, is bridging, describing networks that are open and including – for instance religious organizations or political groups. The ties between members in bridging networks are weaker, but very important in order to obtain information and possibilities of social mobility. Mark Granovetter, American sociologist, therefore describes “the strength of the weak tie”, arguing that the weak ties are important because they have potential in terms of social mobility, understanding and cultural exchange [20]. Bridging may hold potential for instance when talking of citizens in multicultural areas such as Gellerup, but also in every public school in every society, because the bridging effect creates contact between social classes, religious minorities, gender etc.

7. FINDINGS

Exploring the field has caused various findings, the most important ones are unfolded in the following.

7.1 Environmental findings

Investigating drawing material and interviewing engineer Torben Sigurdsson, in the late 1960es an employee at Birch & Krogboe, it becomes clear that Nordgårdsskolen unlike many other buildings of the time was actually designed for disassembly. This means that in this particular case there was an implemented but later untapped potential of either rebuilding the school for another function or reusing building elements for other purposes. In an environmental perspective both solutions would have had lower impact than the chosen demolition of 75% of the buildings in 2013. Demolishing 20,000 tons of concrete into gravel and transporting it to its destination as landfill in road construction has both economic and environmental costs that have to be taken into consideration when concluding on the decisions.

As mentioned above research show that commuters experience negative consequences in terms of health, their social lives and well-being. Furthermore, bus transportation of up to two hours a day instead of walking or biking to a local school can hardly be considered sustainable from an environmental point of view. In 2008 the spokesman Ib Bremshøj, Municipality of Aarhus, told the local newspaper Aarhus Stiftstidende that twenty new bus routes had been established to solve the needs of bus transportation from Gellerup [12]. Danish children go to school 200 days every year, meaning that the children with the longest commute have bus transportation of up to 400 hours a year. Needless to say that the impact on the environment over the years has been considerable.

7.2 Human and social findings

Schools are a social platform for more than teaching. In spite of the social problems Nordgårdsskolen may have had, in the perspective of Putnam the demolition leaves a larger wound than a whole in the ground. When dissolving the platform for bonding and especially bridging there is a lack of potential positive social capital, coherence and trust the area could need.

A report from Department of Learning and Philosophy at Aalborg University [21] made in 2014, explored the presence of local associations and voluntary work in depopulated villages on the west coast of Denmark. According to its conclusions there is a linearity between the volume of
voluntariness and cohesion in small societies – the voluntary work very often initiated and taking place in the local school. Also, it is concluded, the societies with many associations are more likely to have a vertical contact with the municipality or other authorities negotiating resources, which local areas usually benefits from.

7.3 Findings on the consequences of commuting
It has now been more than ten years since the school children started commuting from Gellerup to the fourteen schools in the municipality as a result of the close-down and following demolition. In an overall view it makes sense to look at what human, social and environmental consequences this has resulted in, and how we can conclude on the decision as a platform of an overall societal discussion. Long commutes have human consequences. In the case of Nordgårdsskolen we are, of course, dealing with schoolchildren aged between 6 and 15, not grown-ups on their way to work, which a lot of the research in the field is looking at. However, it is most likely that the effects of commutes for a school child are even more serious considering that young bodies and minds are under development, and also given the fact that, unlike adult commuters, the choice of commuting is completely out of their hands.

It is remarkable that the close-down and demolition of Nordgårdsskolen was carried out as a political ambition aimed at integration, among other things aiming to give children and society a wider range of possibilities, social mobility and future-chances and at the same time leaving the children in question with remarkably less time to socialize, make friends, exercise and do homework or read, all of which seems to lower life quality, future possibilities and happiness in other ways.

Also in relation to the human health the up to 400 hours of commuting -or 16,5 days- spent on a bus every year seemingly has severe consequences. Both the physical and the social wellbeing of the commuting children and young people ought to be in focus in further investigations.

According to an inhabitant, who is the parent of six, the commuting children have a hard time engaging in activities of the local community especially after a Danish school reform in 2014 dictated fairly longer schooldays [6].

7.4 Findings of common memory connected to places
Literature studies and interviews show a common memory of the school as a place of special qualities. Some former pupils describe their lives as being enriched by their Gellerup upbringing and remembers their teachers as involved and engaged, however it has sometimes been connected with prejudices from the outside world to have been a pupil there because of the later social problems and vandalism. [22] A Danish-Palestinian man, still residing in Gellerup, describes how he is still in contact with his former teachers and classmates and how the school served as a social landmark for the children in the neighborhood, even after he left the school to go to another school in his fifth grade. He also describes how he always tells his daughter, who goes to one of the new kindergartens built on the site of Nordgårdsskolen, where his favorite spot in the school was and how happy the place used to make him, underlining how sad he feels that a few groups of youngsters caused social problems and vandalism.

A former teacher describes Nordgårdsskolen as a “tough place to be” in the last functioning years, however, it also had a certain team spirit and feeling of coherence between teachers, pupils and parents [23]. Seemingly, the now torn down place accumulates rather strong feelings of affiliation and of a cultural-historical memory of community that is present although it is now physically absent and cannot be visited anymore.

8. Discussion
When discussing the political act of solving the social problems of an area by demolishing its school buildings there are various perspectives to unfold, some of which includes severe paradoxes. Looking into the UN Sustainable Goals [24], as a background for the discussion, the focus is -among other things- on sustainable cities and communities as well as on good health and well-being.
On a national level it is interesting that the Danish Government presented an ambitious and humanistic architecture policy [25] under the headline “People in the center” in February 2014, less than half a year after the actual demolition took place. Among other things it is stated that:

“It is important that renovations are made with an eye for user needs, including the need for accessibility, cultural-historical preservation values, potentials for architectural lifting and energy improvements, and therefore the government will develop methods and examples of how this is best done in practice.” [25]

Whether looking at the UN goals or at Danish architecture policy there seems to be a lack of correspondence between the ambitions described and the fact that a large group of children from Gellerup are commuting with all the known disadvantages this entails. Furthermore their local community does not have the advantages, comfort and social potential of a local school. Seemingly, the ambition of sustainable communities, good health and well-being is downsized in order to reach a local political goal in the name of integration. Further research ought to look into the children’s well-being in terms of health and social well-being and integration parameters. To some extent the aim of “user needs, accessibility and cultural-historical preservation” as argued in the Architecture Policy contradicts the consequences of the demolition described in this paper.

The recent masterplan of Gellerup in fact – apart from massive architectural and infrastructural transformations – also involves plans for a new school in the area. Paradoxically, the argumentation is that to attract citizens to the area it will have to offer local school facilities, because no families would like to do without a local school - contradicting what the locals of Gellerup was offered back in 2007 when decisions on the school closing were taken. [26]

Also, the perspectives of cultural-historic value and common memory when transforming and demolishing housing areas and places of social value, seems under-researched. The process of commissioning and identifying oneself with urban fabrics of former, existing and new structures is of great importance when consolidating transformed areas.

9. Conclusion
This paper attempts to highlight and discuss the role and value of public welfare institutions as more than the framework of pragmatic functions.

The aim has been to explore accessible sources of knowledge to explore the situation before and after the demolition of the local school in a multiethnic- and cultural area in Denmark.

It seems however that an important perspective is - whether in the context of a depopulated village on the West Coast of Denmark or, as in this case a multicultural area with more than 80 nationalities, a school close-down has severe consequences not only for the children involved but also for local associations, existing and potential cohesion and the resulting trust in the local community.

Taking the scale of Gellerup into account and also considering that recent demographics show a local population of 35 pct. inhabitants under 18 years of age (a deviation from national average of approx. 20 %) logics would call for a local school no matter the nationality of the children [27] [28].

Therefore, the conclusion of this paper must be that if we consider welfare institutions like local schools to be more than “buildings of service”, but also places of local human exchanges and voluntary activities, they are platforms of potential coherence and trust and must be seen as important social landmarks when planning or reestablishing housing areas.

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