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Account of Urban Design from the Perspective of the Practitioner

Contemporary urban planning is a highly complex process, often spanning many years and involving many different types of stakeholders. Western countries and cities are increasingly conducting construction and involvement processes along the same lines. However, there continue to be significant cultural and geographical differences in how designers, planners, developers, and citizens understand those concepts. This paper aims to give a practitioner's perspective on how the design and planning process works in a Danish context. It does so by contextualizing Danish planning and elaborating on the tricky choices faced by designers and planners, elaborating on the specific philosophy of SLA.

It then finishes by going through some of the projects that SLA designed to give the reader an understanding of the involvement process, design, and learnings.

1   Carola van Eijk and Mila Gasco, "Unravelling the Co-Producers: Who are They and What Motivations Do They Have?" in *Co-Production and Co-Creation: Engaging Citizens in Public Services*, ed. Taco Brandsen et al. (New York: Routledge, 2018), 63–76; Elke Loeffler and Tony Bovaird, "Assessing the Effect of Co-Production," in *CoProduction and Co-Creation: Engaging Citizens in Public Services*, ed., Taco Brandsen et al. (New York: Routledge, 2018), 269–280.

2   Annika Agger and Dorthe Hedensted Lund, "Collaborative Innovation in the Public Sector: New Perspectives on the Role of Citizens?" *Scandinavian Journal of Public Administration*, vol. 21, no. 3 (September 2017), 17–38.

3   Sanna Tuurnas, Jari Stenvall and Pasi-Heikki Rannisto, "The impact of co-production on frontline accountability: the case of the conciliation service," *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, vol. 82, no. 1 (March 2016): 131–149; Carmen Sirianni, *Investing in Democracy: Engaging Citizens in Collaborative Governance* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Inst Press, 2019).
Chris Ansell and Alison Gash, "Stewards, Mediators, and Catalysts: Toward a Model of Collaborative Leadership," *The Innovation Journal*, vol. 17, no. 1 (2012): 1–21.

Urban Development and User Involvement in Denmark

Danish planning law ensures citizens' rights to involvement in general and to have their say before plans are approved. The law, however, is formulated as a series of minimum requirements securing some general requirements relating to process, time, and possibilities for objecting. In practice, the municipalities are responsible for carrying out the involvement process, and scope and method are therefore highly influenced by the individual municipality's interpretation of the "greatest possible extent."

The process and the tools are by no means perfect, and there will always be projects where the minimum requirements for involvement are not respected, to the great dismay of citizens. In this article, however, we will focus on projects with a high degree of citizen involvement.

Since the 1990s, the largest municipalities have become the main drivers of innovative urban planning, with Danish architectural studios providing design expertise. Citizens are increasingly viewed as co-creators of public governance and are invited to participate in defining the problems at hand and designing and implementing new and bold solutions. There is now broad recognition amongst municipalities and developers that citizen involvement is an essential democratic aspect of urban planning and design and provides valuable insights and perspectives. When well executed, an involvement process can provide insights into local values, challenges, and needs and thus help describe, frame, and create project ownership. Municipalities are always searching for new ways to engage with citizens in co-creation and support these processes, and citizen involvement is now an integral part of municipal tenders. To win a project, design studios must prove that they can conduct an involvement process in a persuasive, innovative, and democratic manner.

While scholarly literature points out how the relationship between public professionals and citizens is vital for the degree of co-production, there is remarkably little scientific focus on the practitioner's perspective. Part of the scholarly literature focuses on the role of citizens in co-production, emphasizing how public professionals often play a dominant role in these relations and that many public professionals tend to grant citizens a passive role as clients, providing public services "for" instead of "with" affected citizens.[1] Consequently, many citizens feel "overruled" and/or services do not "reach their target," as citizen input is often not addressed to tailor public services.[2] Other scholars point out how co-production as a governance arrangement changes the working culture of public service professionals, which must take on a more "enabling" or "catalysing" role to mobilize and integrate citizen resources to develop public policies or services.[3]

Too much of a good thing?

Traditionally, research has typically been understood as the process of generating accurate and unbiased knowledge following a scientific method.

4 Mats Alvesson and Kaj Sköldberg, *Reflexive methodology: New vistas for qualitative research* (London: Sage, 2009), 1–16.

5 Hilary Bradbury, "Introduction: How to situate and define action research," in *The SAGE handbook of action research* (London: Sage, 2015), 1–9.

By examining information presented as data and facts, which are precise representations of "reality," researchers can establish a reasonably solid foundation for drawing empirical conclusions and, subsequently, for developing generalizations and constructing theories.[4] Productive involvement in urban planning and design requires recognizing that all actors' expertise should have a place in the knowledge generation process. While citizens have valuable contributions to offer, it is unrealistic to expect them to solve the technical, functional, financial, and aesthetic requirements of urban planning and design projects. These responsibilities fall to planning and design professionals, who play a critical role. By acknowledging and utilizing the unique expertise of each actor involved, urban planning and design projects can create more holistic and practical solutions that benefit the entire community.

As practitioners, we believe that conventional inquiry methods have not kept pace with our changing world because, with some exceptions, they are losing relevance for the larger public and, too often, reinforce the status quo. Our response is adjacent to the dynamic action research approach which is a democratic and participative research method. It combines action and reflection, theory and practice, to pursue practical solutions to pressing concerns. Action research is a pragmatic co-creation of knowledge with people, not just about people.[5]

When we design new landscapes, we aim to behave actionably by positively impacting a range of factors, from enhancing biodiversity to strengthening social sustainability. We understand that partnerships and participation are central to the success of our work and that it is essential to take a reflexive and critical stance on what limits and enables our and others' participation.

Action researchers, who orient with a different set of assumptions, bring a more participative, democratic, and practical response to the issues of our time. We do this not to be nice or politically correct but because the nature of life, power, structural exclusion, and inter-generational injustice demands it. Our design approach informs how we work with user involvement and how the input is translated into knowledge and design. Engagement, identity, and ownership are keywords in our work to create meaningful value and change. Through engaging co-creation processes and innovative hands-on pilot projects, we strive to create permanent change and development in collaboration with the end-users. To achieve this goal, the process, format, and scope of participation must be adapted to each project and collaborator.

The focus on the importance of democratic urban development over the last few decades has, in many places, resulted in a "the more, the better" approach to citizen engagement, the idea being that you can never really have too much involvement. This approach creates a risk of involvement becoming an end in and of itself, thereby diminishing the focus on making user involvement matter for the overall quality of the final

project. The lack of meaningful change and unmet expectations often leads to "participation fatigue," wherein you lose the engagement of the citizens when they absent themselves from partaking.

This is especially true of socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods, which are often subject to several different revitalization and renovation projects simultaneously or in close succession. People are willing to participate when it feels relevant but get frustrated when the process is bureaucratic or irrelevant or if the goal and output need to be clarified. In our experience, focusing on quality over quantity is crucial. Who should be involved in what should be considered carefully—it is not necessary for everyone to participate simultaneously or in all phases of a design process. On the contrary, some people, such as children or socially marginalized people, need special attention and methods to be involved. In contrast, others may only be interested in contributing to specific parts of the project.

Transforming the places where people live can create feelings of insecurity, distrust, and resistance. Therefore, communication is vital. From the beginning, provide residents with a clear overview of the project (goals, expected outputs, project owners) and the process (what will happen when, how long will it take). Let residents know when and where to get more information and when they can be heard or involved. Moreover, make it clear from the beginning what they can and cannot influence. People will more often get frustrated about broken promises and expectations than about limitations on the extent of their influence. Throughout the process, let residents know how their inputs will be and have been used in the overall project. Have feedback meetings where design choices and their background are presented and explained.

Between a Rock and a Hard Place—the Role of the Urban Planner

Responsibility for the success of a public space project always falls on the municipality. To successfully balance the needs of stakeholders, urban planners must engage in a transparent and inclusive planning process that involves all relevant stakeholders, including citizens, community organizations, and elected officials. This can help ensure that all voices are heard and that diverse perspectives are considered in the planning process.

At the same time, they must be willing to make difficult decisions and trade-offs to move forward with a plan or design that meets the broader community's needs. This can involve making choices that may not be popular with some stakeholders but are necessary to achieve the project's overall goals.

This approach emphasizes collaboration and participation and recognizes the value of incorporating multiple perspectives and inputs into the design process. It also helps foster more creativity and innovation in the design process, as different stakeholders can bring new ideas and insights

to the table and help develop designs that are more responsive to the needs and desires of future users and the broader community.

To help move forward with a plan or design that is economical, functional, and reflective of the community's needs and values, urban planners need to acquire the role of facilitator of collaborative and inclusive planning processes and navigators of difficult decisions. In addition to balancing the needs and interests of various stakeholders, urban planners and designers also play a crucial role in the political decision-making process. This involves working with elected officials and other government leaders to develop plans and designs that align with the community's vision and priorities and are feasible and sustainable from a financial and logistical perspective.

Urban planners must also be aware of the political context in which they operate and be prepared to navigate complex political dynamics to advance their plans and designs. This can involve building relationships and coalitions with key decision makers and advocating for their plans and designs to the broader public to build project support and momentum.

With everything at stake for the municipal project managers, they must get all the help they can get. They need a design collaborator who can act as a partner and conveyor of difficult decisions —a human lightning rod.

When Everyone Is an Expert—What Is the Role of the Designer?

Residents are increasingly recognized as experts in their own right, making them an invaluable source of knowledge in urban development and design processes —they are experts on their neighbourhood, the life lived there, and the qualities and challenges. But, as they are not technical experts, residents are not responsible for creating viable design solutions. Laypeople's spontaneous design choices often express a deeper-lying need or wish rather than an opinion of appropriate design solutions or aesthetics.

In a quantity-driven approach to participation, project owners often want to give the citizens as much decision-making power as possible, both in terms of programming and physical solutions—and in this situation, the term "professional" almost becomes a dirty word. While this might work in small-scale, hyper-local projects, it is hard to transfer to the complexity of modern urban development, where it would be doing citizens a disservice to place responsibility for what are essentially technical solutions in their hands.

Participation and co-creation are collaborative processes where citizens have an equal seat at the table alongside technicians, designers, authorities, and other stakeholders. Their input should be taken seriously, if not literally. This places particular demands on the planning and design process in which professionals must carefully create the proper framework for citizens to give meaningful input. When discussing design with end-users, designers should provide expertise, know-how, and consultation

to ensure that the result meets the community's needs. Involvement should create formats that encourage knowledge-sharing between designers and residents/users—and it should be about content rather than form.

In this sense, the designer becomes a facilitator who ensures citizens can contribute meaningfully to the discussion. The designer also becomes an interpreter, as a large part of the design process is interpreting the underlying needs and translating this into designs that are both meaningful to citizens and aesthetic and performative urban landscapes.

SLA in Practice

Our design philosophy shapes how we approach co-creation and view the citizens' role. Participation and user involvement are essential parts of our working method and a prerequisite for a successful project and a good process. We work with three primary goals for our involvement process: understanding of place, understanding the project, and strengthening local ownership—and we use different methods to achieve each of the three sub-goals.

While vague and ambiguous goals prevent effective stakeholder involvement, precise and well-defined objectives are the first step towards a successful project with the citizens. At SLA, we have an anthropological approach to studying human welfare and well-being in the city. We work analytically and qualitatively and are attentive to the users' wishes and needs before and during a project and after it is complete. Architecture and urban planning are about increasing the quality of life for people. Therefore, it is at least as important to seek insight into people's social and cultural lives as into materials and scale before the drawing work begins.

Understanding of Place

In human geography, "place" refers to a specific location distinguished by its physical and human characteristics. These characteristics include natural features such as climate, landscape, vegetation, and human elements such as culture, language, and social organization. Places are not just physical locations but also have a symbolic and emotional significance to individuals and communities. People attach meanings and values to places based on their experiences, memories, and relationships. Therefore, the concept of place in human geography is not just about physical space but also about the social and cultural practices within that space.

At our studio, we put great effort into understanding the unique character of the places we work with and recognizing their intrinsic social, architectural, and economic value. Socially, gaining a deep insight into local traditions, communities, and perspectives is crucial for creating viable and acceptable solutions that reflect the needs and desires of the people who will use and inhabit these spaces. Architecturally, new insights can help break habitual thinking and lead to innovative, site-specific, functional, and aesthetically pleasing solutions. Economically, we recognize that a robust

foundation helps minimize mistakes and create well-thought-out, attractive projects that add value to the surrounding area.

Traditionally, site analyses have relied heavily on quantitative methods, which involve counting, measuring, and weighing various aspects of urban life, movement, and users. While this approach provides valuable data, it fails to capture the subjective experiences and social exchanges integral to understanding a place. At SLA, we rely on a qualitative method that involves interacting with people and learning from their experiences to gain a more nuanced understanding of the site. This approach allows us to uncover each place's unique qualities, characteristics, and people. By creating architecture deeply rooted in the local context, we can create functional and beautiful spaces and help preserve and strengthen each place's identity and potential. This is especially important in a globalized world where local characteristics are at risk of being overshadowed by international trends and standards.

Understanding the Project

The collaboration between design experts and citizens who are experts in their everyday lives poses the question of how best to merge the two pools of knowledge. An essential part of a citizen involvement process is communicating the project, its possibilities, and its limitations in a way that makes the form, purpose, and scope completely clear to the citizens. The citizens do not have to be responsible for solving every task or challenge; instead, their knowledge must be interpreted and incorporated by the design professionals to create a tailored solution. By clearly communicating the purpose and success criteria of each task and ensuring that the involvement takes place at the right time, the involvement can contribute to new knowledge, perspectives, and insights into the site and the project, which we as designers could not have found ourselves.

By involving citizens in the design process, we can learn more about the social, cultural, and environmental factors that impact the site and the surrounding community. This information can help us develop a more comprehensive and sustainable design solution that meets the needs of all stakeholders, including the citizens themselves.

Ownership

User ownership and inclusion are crucial in creating meaningful change and value in urban design. This can be achieved by engaging in continuous co-creation processes and experimenting with innovative, hands-on pilot projects that involve residents and future users at every stage of the design process.

Pilot projects allow us to test and explore ideas in a physical context, considering how they can enhance the existing environment and strengthen the city's life. Through this process, we can foster a sense of local commitment and ownership, leading to quicker and more immediate

development. Moreover, these projects are often low-cost and require minimal bureaucracy, making them a practical and effective way to create value from day one.

At the heart of our approach is a qualitative development process emphasizing continuous dialogue and co-creation with local citizens, project stakeholders, and city development authorities. Unlike more standardized participatory processes confined to the initial idea phase, our co-creation method aims to make the participatory process a permanent fixture throughout the project's life cycle. By involving the community, we can reimagine how we design and evolve our cities, creating shared spaces that reflect each place's unique identity and cultural cohesion.

Urban development is not a closed process that starts and ends with architects and planners. Instead, it is an ongoing and highly social process that must evolve long after the design team has completed their work. By collaborating closely with all stakeholders and encouraging co-creation, we create the right conditions for continuous dialogue between clients and users long after the project handover. That way, we hope to foster vibrant, inclusive cities that reflect the needs and aspirations of the people who live there.

Project as Process

The idea that co-creation is permanent means that involvement is not limited to the initial design phase but impacts the design to enable citizens to continually engage in their city, neighbourhood, and social context. The following is a simplified graphic representation of the steps that lead to a successful project and subsequent dissemination and internalization of learnings from that project:

fig. 1   SLA, project as process, 2016 (author's illustration).

1 Design: activities related to the design phase.
2 Realization: activities related to the construction phase. For example, helping to cultivate the land, sow the seeds, and plant the trees.
3 Maintenance: active involvement in the maintenance of the project. Care of the plantings and biodiversity, e.g., spreading of seeds, spreading of dead wood, and weeding of unwanted species.

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4   Learning: use the project to increase citizens' awareness of natural processes. Learning about nature, nature types, the interaction of man and nature, and a deeper understanding of why nature is essential to people—rationally and aesthetically.

5   Sharing: "share" the project visually to increase its reach and, for example, sharing experiences on social media, sharing experiences with other urban areas or cities, and sharing seeds and plants.

All projects go through a process that reflects the context in which the project is located, with many factors such as financial and political framework, history of a place or neighbourhood and much more. In the next chapter, we will present a handful of cases that can help explain our practitioner's point of view.

The first is from the city of Aarhus, where, for the last fifteen years, the municipality has worked intently on developing a new neighbourhood on the harbour in what used to be a heavily industrialized area. For more than five years, SLA has been engaged in the landscaping and analysis of the harbour area, and the experience from this will shed light on the use of pilot projects as a design and engagement tool.

Next is the Gellerup Urban Park, also in Aarhus, and is the largest landscape transformation in a socially challenged neighbourhood in Denmark. The project has followed a more stringent process design compared to the Forest Bath, with a clear scope for the area, finances, political backing and demands for the inclusion of varying groups of citizens at various times.

Finally, we will present the case of Hans Tavsens Park, which is part of the portfolio of the local area renewal project in the neighbourhood of Nørrebro. We include this project because it presents interesting perspectives on the intense citizen involvement and its possibilities and challenges.

The Forest Bath

The Forest Bath is an example of how a pilot project can help shape the narrative for an entire neighbourhood and help citizens put images on their wishes for the future. It is also an example of how a first iteration can inform subsequent iterations. While this first iteration had no user involvement, user input played a significant role in subsequent phases and iterations.

During the Aarhus Festival 2018, SLA made several landscape projects of very short temporality. In the case of the Forest Bath, six hundred trees were moved to Aarhus Ø to create a green, temporary urban space right by the unused part of the harbour front. This installation transformed the industrial infrastructure and harbour area into a six-hundred-metre-long green public space, showing the opportunities for a nature-based urban development of Aarhus' new neighbourhood, Aarhus Ø. Water atomizers between the tree trunks were used for irrigation of the trees and to create an ever-changing atmosphere of mist, temperature, and humidity.

We carefully selected the different types of trees according to their ability to clean the pollution from cars, reduce CO_2, and create a pleasant microclimate on the wind-swept boulevard by the water. The stimulating urban space maximized the effects of nature on human health, adding stress-reducing qualities and strengthening social and community-shaping effects, thus improving both environmental and social sustainability. After the Aarhus Festival, the six hundred trees were moved to the Gellerup district in Aarhus, where they were replanted in the SLA-designed city park as a part of the large-scale physical transformation of the neighbourhood.

With the Forest Bath, we show how to use nature to solve various urban challenges while increasing people's quality of life and mental and physical health. The project builds upon the Japanese term "Shinrin Yoku," which translates to "forest bathing." The Forest Bath shows how an equal balance between the built and the grown environment can create a whole city with a quality of life, meaning, good health, and well-being for all citizens.

The Aarhus Festival is part of a cultural strategy of the municipality of Aarhus. As it coincided with the municipality's efforts to develop, densify, and revamp the old industrial harbour, it was a common--sense move to bring part of the festival to Aarhus Ø in 2018 to help

fig. 2   SLA, the Forest Bath, Aarhus, September 2018, the temporary urban installation of 600 trees at Aarhus Ø (Tina Stephansen).
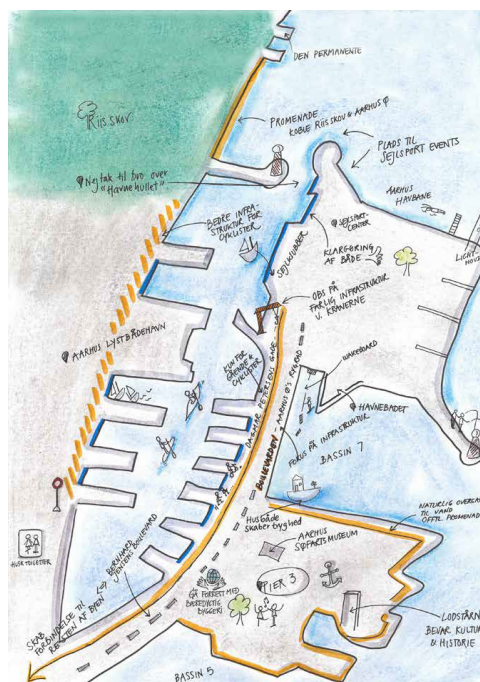
fig. 3   Aarhus municipality, compilation of citizen
          involvement, 2023 (retrieved from
          https://aarhus.dk/nyt/teknik-og-miljoe/2023/
          marts-2023/opsamling-paa-borger-og-
          brugerinddragelse-paa-aarhus-oe).

fig. 4   SLA, the Forest Bath, Aarhus, August 2018.
          The Forest Bath makes the harbour area
          accessible with community-generating
          urban life activities and art interventions
          (Tina Stephansen).

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activate the area before new inhabitants moved in. In 2023, SLA was invited to contribute to this high-level process by creating a vision for Aarhus Ø. The vision rested on a comprehensive gathering of inputs by citizens that had taken place over several years. The process generated several compilations of data amounting to more than two hundred pages of input, summaries, drawings, and interviews that the municipality had conducted with citizens of all ages and genders.

In the summer of 2023, SLA handed in the site analysis and the vision for the whole of Aarhus Ø. Due to this delivery, and the fact that so many citizens had mentioned the Forest Bath and its natural qualities in the

fig. 5   SLA, visions for Aarhus Ø, Aarhus, August 2023. The new streetscape inspired be the first iteration Forest Bath and new citizen input (author's photo).

fig. 6   SLA, visions for Aarhus Ø, Aarhus, August 2023, the border of the new streetscape (author's photo).

6   Karin Peters, Birgit Elands and Arjen Buijs,
     "Social interactions in urban parks: Stimulating
     social cohesion?" *Urban Forestry & Urban
     Greening*, Vol.9, no.2 (2010): 93–100; Danielle
     F. Shanahan et al., "Health Benefits from Nature
     Experiences Depend on Dose," *Scientific Reports*
     6 (2016): n.p.
     Christine Milligan et al., "Cultivating health:
     therapeutic landscapes and older people in
     northern England," *Social science & medicine*,
     vol. 58, no. 9 (2004): 1781–93; Byoung-Suk
     Kweon, William C. Sullivan, and Angela R.
     Wiley, "Green Common Spaces and the Social
     Integration of Inner-City Older Adults,"
     Environment and Behavior, vol. 30, no. 6 (1998):
     832–858.
7   Sandra Gentin, "Outdoor recreation and
     ethnicity in Europe - a review," *Urban Forestry
     & Urban Greening*, vol. 10 (2011): 153–161.
8   Kate Mary Bennett, "Low level social
     engagement as a precursor of mortality among
     people in later life," *Age Ageing,* vol. 31, no. 3
     (May 2002): 165–8.

compilation of citizen involvement, the city council asked SLA to establish a new and more permanent streetscape based on the design of the original Forest Bath. There were two significant constraints, one being that the new landscape should be able to stand for four years (long permanence), and the other, that the budget would be the same as the original. After some dialogue, it was agreed that the result would be fifty metres of robust landscape that handled many of the challenges and wishes described by the citizens in the compilation.

Gellerup Urban Park

Over the years, the Gellerup neighbourhood in Aarhus has struggled with a bad reputation and negative media attention. It is a socio-economically disadvantaged social housing neighbourhood that over the course of the last four decades, has experienced a concentration of low-income inhabitants, a significantly higher degree of people without education, low employment rates and higher crime rates. This, coupled with the very large planning scale, the physical isolation of the neighbourhood from the rest of Aarhus and consecutive years of low safety ratings, has made this a priority for the housing company, the municipality of Aarhus, and the Danish government. Together, they have initiated a range of social and infrastructural interventions to mitigate the challenges, from refurbishing the housing blocks to relocating part of the municipality to Gellerup to foster more social coherence with the broader city.

The revitalization of Gellerup is a precedent for the development of socially disadvantaged residential areas in Denmark. The project does away with the stringent functionality of modernism, typical of the country's social housing developments, and softens the rough, built-up design language. It has long been recognized that green spaces and elements such as parks, community gardens, trees and fountains promote social interaction and bring people together in cities.[6] Ethnic minorities, for example, use parks as social meeting places to a greater extent than ethnic Danes.[7] Also, for older people, parks and other recreational areas have particular significance as places where they can meet others and new people. For many older people, especially women, loneliness is a significant problem. Perhaps they have lost their spouse and closest friends, and perhaps their next of kin live far away or lack time to visit them. The result is a circular problem because the elderly lack someone to accompany them. They either end up going out less or not meeting other people they might be able to socialize with. This, in turn, means they do not overcome their loneliness or get the natural experiences and exercise that could help increase their quality of life.[8]

As part of the overall transformation, SLA created a park for residents and visitors alike. The overall goal was to create value for residents, whose knowledge of the area and wishes for the future have been the framework for design. Understanding local life, cherished places,

activities and traditions, challenges, insecurities, and hopes for the future is crucial to creating a successful design. In the chapter below, we will describe how residents were involved early on to give designers a solid basis to work with and how, throughout the process, resident groups provided feedback on the design.

With the help of carefully selected plantings that complement the park's existing green structures, a diverse and safe park is created with lots of urban nature and experiences. The new city park provides space for diversity, immersion, and physical activity. A path runs through the park, connecting the many new functions, making it the area's unifying meeting place, ensuring that walking here never gets dull or unsafe. At the same time, the path forms an essential link to the surrounding areas and invites exercisers and nature lovers from the entire Aarhus area into the park.

The revitalization of Gellerup has resulted in an urban park design that addresses the issues of insecurity and safety. Due to its design and incorporation of input from citizens, municipalities, and housing organizations, it creates a space less prone to vandalism. Another positive outcome of engaging with the citizens is that it gives local users a stronger feeling of ownership of the area since they have been part of the design process from the beginning.

fig. 7   SLA, Gellerup New Nature Park, Brabrand, June 2019. Across the new park are climate proof solutions that provides space for diversity, immersion, and physical activity. Here, the lake as it looks in the new landscaped (Rasmus Hjortshøj).

Furthermore, the city park is designed to improve and strengthen the biodiversity in the area. It acts as a missing link in (re)connecting Gellerup with the two dominant landscape areas in the immediate vicinity: Skjoldhøjkilen, which is a 3.5-kilometre-long recreational area, and the low-lying valley with streams called Brabrand Ådal. The connectivity with these green infrastructures and the variety of plant species in the area make it possible for many animals to find a habitat in the park. After establishing the park, SLA revisited the site and undertook vegetation surveys in 2019, 2020 and 2023 during the summer months. Between 2019 and 2023, the species richness of plants increased from 188 to 203 species, with sixty-eight native plant species colonizing the area through natural dispersal.

The Process

In any Danish housing association, there is always a board of residents that take decisions on important topics. Following submitting the proposals for Gellerup and Toveshøj, SLA and the municipality drew up a meeting plan to look in depth at specific topics in the urban park. This included meeting with the boards of the two housing associations, with a separate working group called the "Park Committee," focus groups with kids, and

fig. 8   Gellerup New Nature Park, Brabrand, June 2022. Gellerup Urban Park is designed with residents to improve and strengthen biodiversity in the area (Gamma Film).

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fig. 9   SLA, walkthrough with residents in Gellerup,
          Brabrand, April 2015. Residents in Gellerup
          were involved early on to give designers
          a solid basis to work with (author's photo).

fig. 10 SLA, model of Fossen in Gellerup New
          Nature Park, Brabrand, 2015. The water
          retention features were changed to include
          resident inputs. For example, the residents
          emphasized the detours up through the
          ramp (author's photo).
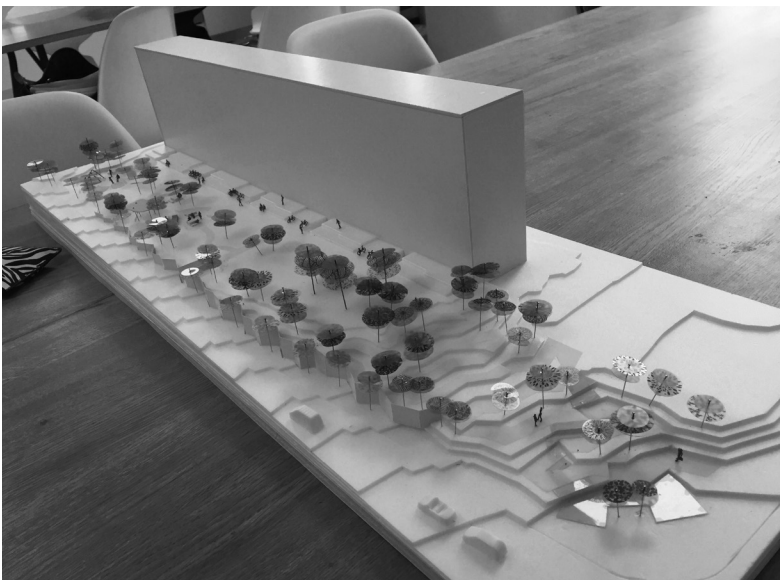
the gardening association "Verdenshaverne." A total of eight groups were formed and coordinated with the housing association, the board, and local civic organizations. Eventually, all designs and plans had to be presented and approved in the general assembly, where all residents were invited.

The idea was that the park design should be conceived in three parts: 1) through an extensive citizens engagement process where the overall programming of the city nature was determined; 2) through the architectural/artistic design of the park's architectural elements such as paths, lighting, pavilions, etc.; and 3) the creation of new nature in collaboration with citizens, maintenance staff, gardeners and biologists to create a city nature where the grown environment supports and strengthens the desired social change. Three rounds of meetings were planned, with three meetings for each topic.

1 Users and SLA present ideas and thoughts on the focus area.
2 SLA presents a reworked proposal, and users comment on the project; SLA then incorporates comments into the proposal.
3 A project proposal is submitted and approved/evaluated by users.

During the focus meetings, each point was communicated to the residents through presentations handed out to stakeholders and residents. Each presentation discussed a particular design issue and presented ways of addressing residents' concerns. The presentations primarily included illustrations of a particular place in the park and its programme, alongside references to what might inspire the next iteration. The following are images taken from such presentations:

fig. 11 SLA, Fossen in Gellerup New Nature Park, Brabrand, September 2017 (author's photo).

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fig. 12   SLA, illustrations from the citizen engagement
          material, 2015 (author's illustration).

fig. 13   SLA, Gellerup New Nature Park, Brabrand,
          2015, new retention lakes as part of the new
          landscape (author's visualization).

          [opposite page]

fig. 14   Traditional retention solutions, Denmark, 2014
          (author's photo).

fig. 15   Møller og Grønborg Landskab, sØnæs,
          Viborg, 2015, example of more accessible
          retention solution to inspire the discussion
          (author's photo).

Architectural Design as a Co-Creation Process

The learnings from this project are considerable. We have acquired new knowledge about the social housing sector and its inner workings and participated in a project where the municipality's ambitions have matched our own ambitions for social sustainability. We were allowed to be meticulous in the involvement of many participants, including the maintenance crews for whom we produced a maintenance guide for New Nature.

Hans Tavsens Park, Copenhagen

Rainwater management has become a crucial issue for urban planning and policy, and cities worldwide invest heavily in finding and facilitating rainwater solutions. In Copenhagen, cloudbursts have caused severe material and economic damage, with the largest in 2011 resulting in five to seven billion euros in damage and near catastrophic situations for hospitals and emergency services. This led the city to focus on developing

fig. 16   SLA, rendering of the cloudburst management park in Nørrebro, Copenhagen, May 2016 (Beauty and the Bit).

more innovative solutions for managing and using the increasing amounts of water, and a "Cloudburst Management Plan" was formulated in 2012. Hans Tavsens Park and Korsgade play a crucial role in the city's plan: The park is to collect rainwater from nearby areas, which should then be directed through Hans Tavsensgade and Korsgade into Peblinge Lake. Innovative climate adaptation solutions are needed to implement this part of the plan smartly and sustainably meet local needs.

Neighbourhood, Culture, and Site

Due to the density of the city, rainwater or climate adaption solutions for the site must foster more intelligent utilization of the urban space. Citizens have expressed concerns that high-speed car traffic in Korsgade is a source of insecurity, as pupils from Blågårds School travel the street to get to after-school activities by the Peblinge Lake.

This calls for a combination of safer traffic solutions, measures to improve visibility in the street, and the implementation of rainwater solutions. Hans Tavsens Park is quite popular and well-functioning. Redesigning it should foster a more prosperous cultural life and more vital local ownership. Furthermore, rethinking the connection between Hans Tavsens Park and Blågård Schools offers a chance to create synergies between the park and school areas and a new multifunctional street design.

The site is located in the Nørrebro district, a dense city area close to Copenhagen city centre. The area is known as a multicultural and diverse area with engaged and activist citizen groups. Narrow streets connect classic five-storey housing blocks from the early 1900s with prefabricated social housing from the 1980s.

As part of the cloudburst management plan, the park must be able to collect 7,000 m³ of rainwater. This means extensive terrain changes must be made in the park. The water to be retained comes primarily from the park itself, Assistens Cemetery, and neighbouring homes and must be retained to avoid damage to nearby properties.

The location of the park's cloudburst basins (valleys) is based on a desire to preserve as many large trees as possible. However, the work on the terrain changes means that around sixty trees will be felled. At the same time, 217 new trees will be planted in Hans Tavsens Park and fifty-one in the public space known as Mellemrummet. Copenhagen municipality has budgeted 55 million DKK for the entire project.

Approach

Today, entire generations now live their lives mainly in the city. Many grow up in the city and are born, live, love, work, and die in Copenhagen. At the same time, more people are moving in, so city dwellers live closer together (but even further from nature). While pollution is getting thicker, temperatures are getting warmer. The downpours are heavier and more frequent. This places great demands on the city's design and urban spaces

fig. 17   SLA, renderings of Korsgade in the dense
          city area of Nørrebro, May 2016 (Beauty
          and the Bit).

and affects the quality of our everyday life in the city. And that is why both Copenhagen and its inhabitants need urban nature.

City nature is not just nature in the city. City nature is a concept that gives life in the city a whole new meaning and makes the city function better in practice while at the same time allowing city dwellers to feel the aesthetic sense of nature that we humans lost touch with when we moved from the countryside to the city.

City nature allows us to survive in the city and makes life in the city worth living. City nature has several valuable properties. It can solve many of the problems our cities face today by utilizing its fantastic ability to adapt.

Rising temperatures are causing urban overheating, pollution makes us sick, and climate change is causing torrential rain, flooding our roads, and destroying natural habitats for insects and birds. These are all problems that we will only see more of in the future—and problems that we endeavour to address in all our work with city nature.

As if that were not enough, nature also has an unrivalled aesthetic value. Nature can solve the practical problems of cities and enhance the quality of life by creating sensory experiences, smells, sounds, and variety that colour our everyday lives and moods. Nature makes us happier and more relaxed, enhancing our senses and desire to create. We call these qualities the amenity value of city nature.

Process

Hans Tavsens Park is just one of many urban renewal projects set in municipalities all over Denmark. Funded partially by municipalities and the state, they aim to enhance a neighbourhood physically, socially, and culturally. The work starts by formulating a five-year programme, a collaboration between citizens and planners from the municipality.

The purpose of the Nørrebro renewal programme was to make living, working, and staying in Inner Nørrebro more attractive by creating visible physical improvements, climate adaptation, stronger ties across actors and residents, and promoting new partnerships.

Nørrebro has always been a neighbourhood with a vibrant civil society and countless community projects, initiatives, organizations, and associations. The challenge was that many of these initiatives were not collaborating on a common strategy or goal for the neighbourhood. Therefore, the renewal programme entered the area with a unifying and facilitating role to set the neighbourhood on a more collaborative course. They conducted a wide array of involvement processes, such as children's workshops to inform the development of new playgrounds and global workshops for all citizens inside local schools and in the public space, to name just a few.

The original purpose of Hans Tavsens Park was to open the landscape to the school and create a common green space in the large park — especially for children and their families. Therefore, the focus has been co-creating with the school and parents from here. The project's collaboration with the school was challenging, and the project quickly grew together with the renovation of Korsgade and a larger cloudburst plan for the area. The overall project won the Nordic Built Cities Challenge in 2016, and work continued from the winning project sketch in co-creation with the residents and stakeholders involved.

The result of the entire involvement process under the renewal programme was used as the basis for the tender process. Since handing in the winning project sketch, SLA has continued collaborating and co-creating with the involved residents and stakeholders. Whenever there

Architectural Design as a Co-Creation Process

fig. 18 SLA, eastern part of the Hans Tavsens Park, Copenhagen, 2016. The playground on the right is based on input from kids from the school (author's visualization).

fig. 19 SLA, western part of Hans Tavsens Park, Copenhagen, 2016. Notice the how the school yard is opened up. The additions to the park support the schools' activities and are used by the public whenever the kids are not there (author's visualization).
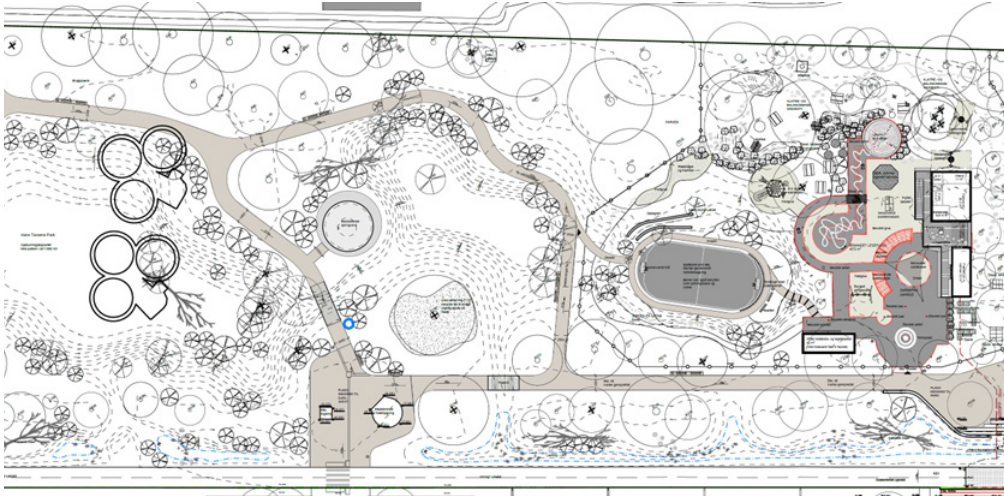
was a community event, SLA and the municipal planners from the renewal programme would be there with giant posters of the park and descriptions of the process so that people could gather around and interact with it even after the event. As part of the renewal programme, series of meetings were organized with the citizens and the group of fast responders was tasked with making fast decisions to help ease an otherwise heavily bureaucratic process. They also arranged separate workshops with students from the adjacent school, focusing solely on playground design, as well as an open playground day, where anyone could pass by and meet the planners and playground experts.

Conclusion

Urban planning and the design of public space is a complicated business. With this paper, we have attempted to draw a simplified picture of how we work, the context, and the requirements this puts on us as practitioners.

fig. 20   SLA, rendering of Hans Tavsens Park as seen from the west, May 2016 (Beauty and the Bit).

Architectural Design as a Co-Creation Process

Being an interdisciplinary studio, SLA strives to develop solutions where design, biology, anthropology, and many other disciplines go hand in hand. From our perspective, this is the only way to solve the many wicked problems we face today. We do not pretend to know all the answers to the future of urban planning and design. Nor do we think that our way of working is the only way. However, we hope that the cases and the descriptions in this paper will shed some light on some of the practical realities of working in urban planning and design.

All three cases strive to involve citizens to the broadest possible extent, but they do so very differently from each other. In Aarhus, inputs from citizens are used in an iterative process that started several years ago using different temporary measures to strengthen a narrative about a place. In Gellerup, citizen engagement is engrained in the institutional setup of the housing association with the municipality as a major actor, and in the case of Hans Tavsens Park, a meticulous process of involvement and iterative design exercises has been conducted as part of the renewal project (under the municipality), inspiring discussions and design input.

SLA has had varying roles in the different projects, but we have never been the sole responsible for the planning and execution of the involvement process. However, it has been expected of us that we would be able participate in the process, to embody the knowledge gained, and to transform it into iterative thinking and designs that were recognizable to the people involved. We believe that the interdisciplinary method is the way forward if we want to solve the multiple challenges that modern projects pose.