

# History in the Street

*by Poul Sverrild MA, archivist*

With a population of almost 50,000, Hvidovre, a suburb of Copenhagen, is among Denmark's twenty most populous municipalities. Hvidovre began its process of suburbanisation around the year 1900, and was fully developed by about 1980.

Most of this urbanisation happened during a period in which no great degree of planning took place. Regard for existing values did not affect the process of urban development either, since there was no room within the socio-economic and educational profile for aesthetic or cultural-historical considerations.

Moreover, when town planning came to Hvidovre in the 1970s, planning politics involved the conscious rejection of the past. It is hardly surprising, then, that communicating the suburb's historical preconditions and its developmental context, and relating the stories of the locality are not among its greatest strengths.

The suburb's explosive development left Hvidovre with a physical appearance that was clearly marked by its function as a housing reservoir for a narrow section of the urban population. Hvidovre was created as a suburb for manual and clerical workers whose places of employment were spread throughout the cityscape.

The physical structure determines the creation of a local sense of identity that builds upon inner - invisible - values. But even if this sense of identity is very strong in a section of the population, it does not fill the need for a more widespread local identity built upon common values.

History, the story of the locality, can provide one such common value, which is the background for Hvidovre Council's investment in the educational project History in the Street - a project that turns the history of the locality into common property, and attempts to make the suburb comprehensible to its citizens.

## **The role and meaning of history in the suburb**

Tourists in a city are never in doubt of the value of its history being immanent, visible and legible. History - the particular history of the locality - is one of the main reasons why tourists choose to visit in the first place.

History plays a central role in the way a place is experienced. This might seem a trivial observation when one thinks of cities like Rome, Paris or London, but seems much less obvious when applied to suburbs - the place where the largest group of the industrialised world's inhabitants lives. Here, it feels as though history is partially absent.

With a few exceptions, there are not many historic or urban qualities that attract tourists to the suburbs. There may be some particular, individual examples of architectural town planning projects that create interest or - more frequently - places of historical interest dating from the pre-suburban period. But the average suburb (if such a thing exists) does not display the historical qualities that attract tourists. That might lead tourists - who are probably suburban dwellers themselves - to assume that the suburb is totally lacking in qualities of a historical nature.



*The suburban school of the 1920s was still in recognisable material and form. The building is an example of the immediately understandable architecture: It resembles the city schools from the preceding decades, the artwork in the fronton shows children learning, and the name of the institution is written on the facade. No one needs to wonder, what he is facing.  
(Photo: Poul Sverrild)*

## **The presence of history in the older suburbs**

The experience of history is so intense in the city because history is a function of human activity. The concentration of people in the city has deposited layer upon layer of visible cultural traces on the urban landscape.

But the suburb is hardly less populous, and it has almost as many functions. Even if its history is much shorter than that of the city centre, it ought to be visibly present.

There is a long list of reasons why the suburb is nonetheless usually regarded as lacking in a historical dimension, and thus of no interest. In the following, I will give an account of how the suburb came into being, the manner in which migration has taken place, and the suburb's physical appearance.

Until the middle of this century, urban growth in Denmark usually took place without any particular overall control. Towns grew according to the balance between supply and demand, regulated by external economic trends. This resulted in a growth that, even when it was at its height, resembled precisely that: a growth. Something that grew on the surface of, and in close association with, something else, an organic structure that, in general, possessed a size and shape that everyone could understand.

The building materials were familiar, and the outer form of the buildings altered only gradually from the forms that had become familiar during the town's first period of growth in the previous

century. It was a form of growth that, for all its lack of planning, possessed the quality that it could be decoded by those who already lived in the city.

Just as the development of the form of houses was based on the transfer of experience, so the development of the town's periphery, the suburb, took place at a rate that was slow and harmonious enough to enable it to be understood. What one encountered was merely an extension of the city in a more modern idiom. The residential neighbourhoods of the inter-war years had their roots in the upper-middle class residential neighbourhoods of the nineteenth century, and the square and, later, oblong blocks of urban apartments were rooted, as regards form, in the urban buildings of the previous decades. Innovation in form was sufficiently related to existing styles to permit these developments to be experienced and understood without the aid of a mediator.



*The post-war brutally suburb covered the original landscape, and left only very few elements untouched, developing new slightly absurd landscapes in the process. Here the old creek has been turned into a sewer, and left is only an old bridge placed in the middle of a lawn in a social housing-plan of the 1950s. (Photo: Poul Sverrild)*

## **The absence of history in the new industrialised town**

This was not the case with the large housing schemes of the 1960s and 1970s. Industrialisation and modern planning techniques made it possible for urban buildings to be erected without any organic connection with the existing town - physically separated, and executed in a radically new idiom.

Thus, the experience of lack of history emerged and came to affect the whole popular image of the suburb.

The large scale of the projects made the migration of entire population groups possible, with thousands of residences becoming populated at a stroke, and people coming from all over Denmark, as well as from the far corners of Europe and from exotic Third World nations. Historical roots were efficiently severed here, as far as a large section of the Danish population was concerned. They came to live in the giant planning solutions of industrial housing construction, where the locality was new and foreign, the materials were new and foreign, the layout of the town was new and foreign, and even one's neighbours were new and foreign.

A new image of the city was created in the planned suburb; one which may have had a physical existence and a comprehensible size in the minds of planners and other professionals, but which still, even after a couple of decades, has failed to become a mental reality for its inhabitants.

How does one behave in the new suburb, a town which is no one's birthplace, and where the local community is just beginning to establish an identity and to create norms for social intercourse?

The apparent absence of history, in the sense of the residents' lack of the necessary knowledge and tools to understand why they are there and why things look and function as they do, is a fundamental problem. It must be solved before we can expect modern suburbs to function sociologically as fully integrated parts of the urban landscape.

When the history of a place - in the form of its original inhabitants and their building culture - is removed, when the original landscape and its function is completely altered, when the architecture is executed using a technology and a scale that is inorganic, and when the new population has its roots everywhere else but there, it is difficult to recreate the experience of historical change. The large, industrialised housing plans are difficult to alter without introducing new large-scale changes, that again serve to conceal the earlier conditions. When the plan's major technical problems require renovation, then we get 2,000 new balconies at once, new facades on every block, and so on, thereby concealing the history of the building process itself. Annual growth rings are seldom formed on such construction projects.

## **Historical name sorcery**

From the earliest days of the suburb, the residents' need for local roots has found expression in the names that were given to the new urban landscape. In Denmark, it has been common practice to use original local place names for roads, estates and institutions. The names of the former land divisions and their owners were appropriated, and maps of the 18th-century enclosures were consulted for old field names. Only when they were really stuck with no ideas for street names on housing estates, did they resort to varieties of trees or to Danish place names from further afield.

When the largest planned industrialised housing projects were built, innovation was also attempted for assigning place names. In the 1960s-planned town project of Albertslund, with its experimental low-density housing, the earliest days of European town planning were recalled in the use of the term "quarter" for individual residential areas (or was it an unconscious expression of the less humane character of these projects that caused planners to select a term with military connotations?).

The plan for the area of Køge Bight, which included a number of the satellite towns of the 1960s, was a refinement of the famous 1940s "finger plan" for the urban development of the

greater metropolitan area of Copenhagen. The western part of Hvidovre's municipal area, Avedøre, was incorporated into the Køge Bight plan.

In the 1970s, this overall plan created an entirely new urban area, Avedøre Stationsby. In the town, an attempt was made to soften the effect of the totally-planned, industrialised concrete construction by having all of the road names refer to old, almost extinct handicrafts: Bødkerporten (Cooper Gate), Rebslagerporten (Ropemaker Gate), Gørtlerporten (Brazier Gate)! These are trades bearing not the slightest relevance to the place or its past, or to the residents' past or present. The superficially historical sound of the names was intended to dilute the contrast between the rural surroundings of yesterday and the industrialised town of today. This is a false but unfortunately commonplace device; an attempt to create a historical identity for something new. The presence of the counterfeit does not make it any easier to market that which is genuine.

## **Inequality of expression in the new town**

Suburban housing projects have been in existence for long enough to have accumulated their own history behind their prefabricated facades. But with historical expression absent from the outer forms, these planned areas offer few opportunities for residents to make their history visible.

How can one see from the great plan of Avedøre Stationsby that Chilean refugees lived here for a couple of decades? What traces remain of the Turkish grandfather who managed to spend a quarter of a century in the industrialised suburb before his body was flown home?

Industrialised, mass-produced rented property demonstrates enormous poverty of expression in the face of the passage of time - history.

When decay must be repaired in the industrialised town, it takes place on the same grand scale as the original construction process. When the roofs need changing, all of them are changed. If the balconies are changed, everyone gets a new balcony. The concrete construction is incapable of passing through the process of ageing and at the same time creating chronological diversity in its expression.

By way of contrast, we can examine the slightly older residential areas of the suburb. A residential area built in the 1920s possesses a visible history today, no matter how boring it may appear at first glance to the stranger.

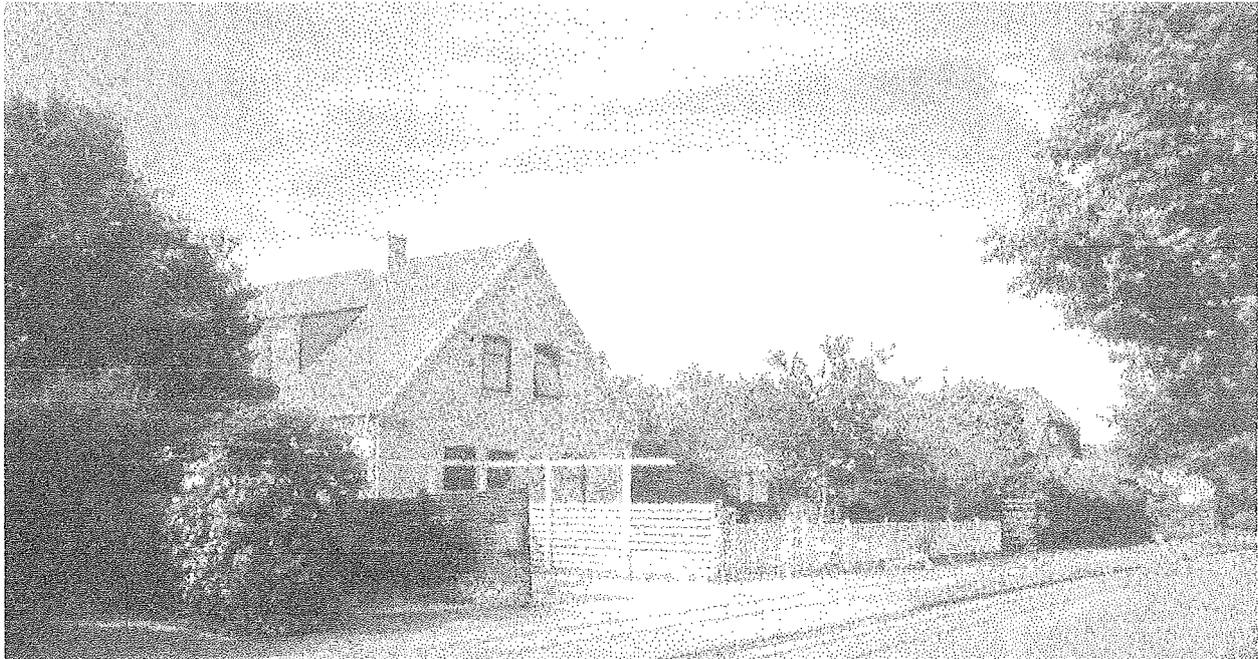
You are presented with a developmental history - a process - when you walk down the road in such an area. There are houses from the entire period since the land was first sold. You do not have to be a professional to understand the main points of the story that are told here. Much of the architectural language can be read, and the physical forms are on the whole familiar and recognisable. Even if everyone is not aware of the same story, there are clear stories here that are completely absent in the big, industrialised housing projects.

The owner-occupied house, besides offering direct access to the earth, which Danes seem to prefer, provides many opportunities for leaving one's traces behind. You can build the house yourself, or you can build on to the one you have bought. You have the choice, within your economic limits, to build or to extend the house according to your own taste.

By contrast, when you take over a flat in a large housing complex, the usual desire is to see to it that all signs of the previous occupants have been removed - a process for which we pay a great deal of money when moving in or out.

In the garden, the house owner can plant hedges, bushes and trees, and is thereby in complete control of the form of his/her immediate surroundings. The house owner builds extensions or covers up the expressions of the previous owner, visibly putting his/her stamp upon his/her world, so that the new additions come to form an extension of what was there before. There will usually be small or large traces of all the previous owners of the property - traces that tell a story, that provide the building with evidence of chronological depth and that make local roots possible.

In the industrialised housing schemes, those who are sensitive react to the absence of opportunities for expression by writing their autographs - tags - on any surfaces that seem to invite it. "My name is here, therefore I am."



*In the middle of the residential area from the 1920s lie the remnants of the farm that cultivated the landscape for centuries until the land was sold. The residential area tends to communicate its chronological diversity well with its individual buildings.  
(Photo: Poul Sverrild)*

## **Should we demand history of the new town?**

Since the large housing plans seem to be so obviously lacking in history, it might be tempting to turn that absence into a dogma. The town that possesses no history might more easily permit new cultural norms that are more in tune with modernity.

This would accord with the expectations held by planners during the inter-war years and in the 1950s, when it was a common assumption that the inhabitants of the New Town would be less attached to the local area than the inhabitants of other kinds of dwellings, and that this would actually be a point to their advantage.

However, since we already possess several decades of experience in the functioning, strengths and weaknesses of large housing schemes, it seems obvious to me that the inhabitants of these large, industrial housing developments are unable to understand or to react positively to such possibilities.

In the light of my many years of contact with suburban dwellers, it is my impression that their expectations with regard to having a legible and comprehensible history in their surroundings

do not accord with the apparent lack of history in these same surroundings. The residents are by and large unaware of the fact that they have been placed in the multiple absence of history which is what the new suburban town has to offer.

The residents of the New Town have the right to a local history and to have local stories made visible. This can help them understand their own background and development, as well as that of their surroundings.

## History in the Street

If the New Town seems so anti-historical, presenting few possibilities for those manifestations of individuality that help to make history visible and strengthen the sense of local identity, then there is something lacking in the town.



*In the suburbs as elsewhere lie buildings with a history of no meaning to the residents of today. The estranging surroundings of the suburb stress the absence of communication in the buildings. Tell their history and they will turn into pillars of local identity! Here the wooden hangar on Avedøre Airstrip from 1917.*

*(Photo: Poul Sverrild)*

This can be rectified firstly by a conscious effort to make some of the suburb's invisible or forgotten stories visible. The presentation of local stories in the New Town can form part of the foundation on which the future humanisation of the town will come to depend.

By making both the history of the locality and the stories of the residents themselves visible, both come to assume character. The New Town must accept that it is situated in a place which already has layers of previous history, and it must learn to make room for the expression of its own residents' stories in ways other than through graffiti.

In the year 2000, Hvidovre Municipality, which as a suburb contains both residential areas of unplanned structures of the inter-war years, as well as totally-planned residential areas of the last decades, will be launching the project *Historien i Gaden* (History in the Street). Its purpose is to make some of the suburb's hidden stories visible. As a decentralised museum in the public arena - or rather as a decentralised curiosity shop - History in the Street should make it possible for people to relate to the local history and the local stories that the New Town itself is so poor at telling.

Here, the architecture and plans must be brought out and made comprehensible; the few surviving special features of the local cultural landscape must be explained; the place names must be made relevant and comprehensible; the current and former residents made visible; significant and dramatic events be remembered; positive experiences be related; and, first and foremost, the innate history of the locality should strengthen the individual's sense of living in a place rather than a plan.

Via a series of dips into local history, History in the Street will attempt to make up for the suburb's poor ability to transfer experience and its weak collective memory. It is our expectation that the revelation of that which was there before will provide the basis for an increased sense of belonging, which again can help bring about a positive influence on the development of the New Town as a habitat for human beings.

History in the Street encompasses comprehensive work on the formation of the historical statements that residents will encounter in the public arena. Projects range from traditional notice-boards to artistically formed statements, i.e. curiosity-arousers.

The project, which initially will run for a two-year period, is also expected to strengthen a sense of identity through popular identification, via a process that will provide plenty of opportunities for telling the stories that we do not yet know.

It will be a cultural investment, one which will put to the test the ability of history to create solidarity and to give meaning to a town that apparently lacks any history.

Such an investment in history - while we wait for the New Town itself to find ways of telling its stories - will hopefully turn out to be one of the ways in which the New Town may be humanised.