

# A DISTRICT OF COMPLEXITY

**Jan Bille**

*According to Jan Bille, Chief Planner for the Municipality of Roskilde, the contemporary focus on good architecture and visual experiences tends to overshadow discussions on the actual lives that will be lived in future districts. Using examples from the Trekroner development, he, in the course of this article expresses the opinion that planning frameworks create better opportunities for quality living the more complex and the less controlling they are.*

## **The Necessity of Independent Initiative**

How is it possible to measure whether planners have been successful in the establishment of a new urban area?

The planners form part of a team that brings experience and creativity to a process that aims to provide future residents with the ability to resolve conflicts and live their lives on their own terms, and to continually improve their own surroundings with new values, new meanings and new functions. Therefore the success of planners can be measured in terms of the extent to which the process they have initiated can survive and evolve.

Certainly it is a primary goal that the people who “populate the plans” are happy and satisfied with the space in which they live. But that is not enough. If planning is to be sustainable in the long term, the ambition must be to have the urban area involved encourage use in a way that generates developmental momentum and conflict resolution based on resident initiative. For this reason it is crucial that the residents are able to form social networks through meeting both formally and informally, discussing common issues and planning new projects. But for these processes to emerge and gain a foothold in the community, complexity is key.

How do planners create complexity and space for creativity, and how do they support resident networks? I will describe four examples of how we have approached this issue in the planning of Trekroner: a varied landscape, mixed forms of ownership, resident participation, and art as an additional layer of significance.

*[IMAGE 1:] Cows in the grass. Photo: Jan Bille*

*[IMAGE 2:] The rosa and blue collegium in Trekroner. Photo: Jan Bille*

## **The Importance of the Forest Belts**

The master plan for Trekroner, its physical parameters, was established by planners and politicians on the basis of a vision to make the area robust, complex, and changeable, and to promote a sense of resident affiliation with the area – the “place identity”.

The landscape plan is an example of this. It consists, among other spaces, of 40-meter-wide forest belts that physically divide the area into smaller units while forming a unified green structure. The role of the forest belts is twofold – both to connect the individual buildings and allow space for individual architecture as well as to separate them. The forest belts also serve an independent function as recreational areas for the residents. And over the long term, the forest belts

ensure that the new district always contains passages where public life can take place. We, the planners, believe that the informal meetings among residents and the unstructured leisure activities encouraged by the green structure do much to support the formation of social networks. Once residents have greeted each other on the bridge, it is much easier to come to a joint understanding during a meeting at the homeowners' association or to gather at a local cooperative meeting. Both of these group types are vital elements in social network formation.

The forest belts alter in character over time and thus generate a certain degree of variability. They begin life as a dense thicket of young trees and perhaps end up becoming an open park dotted with individual, mature oak trees. During these stages the forest belts are likely to be used in very different ways depending on the needs of the local residents. To begin with, they will be used for 'fort building' by children and the study of small animals and birds, and later for climbing, hide and seek, role playing games and romantic walks, and perhaps later still they will be used for picnics, family walks, and exercise activities. All of these activities likewise support social network formation and contribute to the overall complexity of the area.

At the same time, the forest belts have become an important part of the identity of the entire Trekroner district: "green areas" and "nature experiences" as they are referred to in real estate advertising for Trekroner.

*[IMAGE 3:] Housing area by the lake in Trekroner. Photo: Jan Bille*

### **Diversity in Housing and Local Service**

To consider a housing area complex, it is important that it offers variation in terms of content. For this reason, the Municipality of Roskilde has also used its influence in the project to prepare the ground for, and support, diversity.

The residential housing in Trekroner was constructed predominantly in small, well-planned stages of 20 – 30 developments that reflect major architectural variation and enable smaller residents' groups to become established. These relatively small developments feature mixed forms of ownership comprising owner-occupied dwellings, rented dwellings, co-ops, youth and senior housing, and the housing types include single-family detached homes, blocks of flats and low-dense housing. These different housing types are often inhabited by varied family types and different income groups, and thus the Trekroner area is home to a relatively diffuse resident composition.

Efforts were also made to achieve the greatest possible variation in local services: Trekroner has a public school, three day-care centres, a club and a private school, a hospice, a Muslim cemetery (under construction), group homes for the disabled, a special nursery school for the multi-handicapped, and a forest nursery school. In addition to the shopping centre at the train station, a café and 24-hour shop have been established in the residential area, and space has been set aside for the construction of a church. It is expected that a structure to house approx. 4,000 workplaces will be erected on a site near the train station in the near future.

By creating diversity and variation of content in these ways, the housing and local services in Trekroner add to the complexity of the area.

*[IMAGE 4:] Room for each and everyone. Photo: Jan Bille*

### **Between Management and Complete Freedom**

As mentioned, the overall physical parameters in Trekroner do more than just connect – they also separate. For example, the green structure divides the area into pockets, each of which reflects an individual identity. Similarly, the development structure was not intended to create traditional urban density. This option was dismissed early in the planning process as the Municipality felt that strict management of the development was incompatible with complexity in cases where the evolution of a district must occur in a limited period of time. Therefore the artificial complexity in which planners, for instance, determine a colour scheme or a deliberate change of materials to signify variety and choice has been rejected.

When planning Trekroner, we have instead invited residents to create their own urban area within set limits. In addition to the green structure, these limits consist of decisions concerning the maintenance of the area's natural and historical characteristics such as the physical shape of the landscape, ponds, buildings, and vegetation, established path and road systems, and the breadth and height of the building development. Thus we have relinquished the management of some areas but maintained it in others in order to ensure that creativity does not destroy the whole.

This is, of course, the Municipality's estimation, and therefore the concept of total freedom was rejected because we find total freedom problematic when inexperienced resident groups plan their own housing environments. The Roskilde City Council has not compromised on architectural quality, but has had to choose between the available offers. But the residents, who have managed the construction of their own homes and, to a large degree, decided the shape and layout of their homes, have brought a powerful dynamic to the area and made a significant contribution to the creation of its identity.

Results are now evident which indicate that the path we have taken to build the district neighbourhoods has led to quality architectural solutions as well as the establishment of a highly functional and active network. In addition to the layout of their homes, residents have adopted an active approach to important issues such as ensuring safe conditions for their children, tolerance of other residents, cooperation on household duties, and, not least, the organisation of the community. A pro-active approach to these issues in Trekroner has encouraged the appearance of a contemporary version of low-dense housing as well.

The residents are the area's best representatives and conscientious participants in its further development.

*[IMAGE 5:] In harmony with nature. Photo: Jan Bille*

### **Art as an Additional Layer of Significance**

A fourth theme utilised to support the development of an identity for Trekroner is its public art plan.

As a result of different projects of temporary or permanent character, public art has played a role in telling the story of Trekroner. In contrast to the robust physical and social structures of the area, art has provided a perspective into life in Trekroner that disassociates itself from the practical and sensible, creating a sense of wonder that can transcend a grey, windy day and provide the onlooker with a sense of belonging to a place that is unlike any other. As is often the case with art, the public art present in Trekroner has generated joy, surprise, frustration, and anger in local residents. But first and foremost it has created the stories that can be told in and about Trekroner, and which are unique to the area. For example, a steel forest that can be utilised as a children's playground led to feelings of anger among the residents, while a community footbridge has aroused positive response as a new and highly popular meeting place.

By these means, art serves to fortify the other initiatives and applies an additional layer of significance which may first reveal its impact only many years or decades later, when the present residents look back on what was most interesting or meaningful about the Trekroneer of their childhood years.

*[IMAGE 6:] Art has many faces in Trekroneer. Photo: Jan Bille*

### **A Forecast on Life Undergoing Transformation**

The effect of the different layers, of which I have provided four examples, cannot be defined unequivocally. However, as planners we have hypothesised that the likelihood of life thriving and developing in the Trekroneer district increases in proportion to its complexity.

This complexity provides more opportunities for residents to view themselves as part of the district and the community it represents. This in turn engenders the wish to influence and create change, as well as to contribute to promoting a sense of belonging and security. The complexity can be described as a sort of kaleidoscope in which just a tiny, incremental turn can create entirely new views. As planners we expect that Trekroneer, even with the small changes effected by the residents, has the potential to change character and adapt to the times and the residents who populate the area.

These are basically the same qualities evident in old districts that have developed organically. For Trekroneer, this development is still embryonic and whether it will take this direction, only time will tell. It will be exciting to see whether our theories about complexity, network formation, and diversity will prove correct, or whether entirely different forces and development trends of which we are not currently aware will become apparent during this ongoing process.