CHANGING GELLERUP PARK: POLITICAL INTERVENTIONS AND AESTHETIC ENGAGEMENT IN AN EXPOSED SOCIAL HOUSING AREA IN DENMARK

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ABSTRACT:
Some low-income social housing neighborhoods are undergoing radical transformations in Denmark. Classified as "ghettos" and "parallel societies," and marked by area-specific legislation, we identify a triple exposure in these neighborhoods. The residents are exposed to inequality, stigmatization, and discriminatory interventions. Parallel to this, cultural policies and programs have approached these same neighborhoods based on the assumption that they can be "elevated" through art. Drawing upon a broader research in art project in four social housing areas (Eriksson, Nielsen, Sørensen and Yates, 2022), this article focuses on Gellerup Park in Aarhus and considers how two site-specific art platforms address the site and time-specific conditions of the area, offering alternative relations and forms of engagement.

KEYWORDS:
Social housing areas, Danish ghetto act, art and cultural policies, public art projects, betterment agenda, political timing specific art.

INTRODUCTION

In Denmark, some of the country's social housing areas are undergoing radical transformations. Some of these areas have been classified as "ghettos" and "parallel societies" by the Danish government, which since 2010 has published a yearly "List of ghetto areas".[1] These lists have paved the way for a legislation[2] of 2018 that radically has changed the areas in question through various means, including the demolition of blocks and privatization.

Parallel to this development, cultural policies and programs have approached these same neighborhoods with a variety of publicly funded projects in arts and culture. These projects are part of a general strategy to reach new user groups by transcending the formal art institutions. But they are also part of a more specific betterment agenda based on the assumptions that the most exposed social housing areas and their inhabitants

can be "elevated" through art,[3] and that engagement in cultural projects can prevent the formation of "parallel societies."[4]

Based on a broader research project on four low-income social housing areas this article zooms in on the area that has so far been most affected by the current 'ghetto'[5] policy—Gellerup Park in Aarhus. More specifically, we explore how two site-specific, independent, and collaborative art platforms in Gellerup, *Sigrid's Living Room* [*Sigrids Stue*] and *Andromeda 8220*,[6] contribute to and negotiate the site and identity of the neighborhood. Since the art projects of these two platforms find part of their meaning in the local and national political situation, we begin by introducing Gellerup and the Danish 'ghetto' policy. We argue that parts of the social housing areas are subject to three main problems: inequality, stigmatization, and discriminatory interventions. Secondly, we consider how the two art platforms engage with these three issues. Informed by sociological and aesthetic theories, and drawing on a qualitative, empirical study in the area, we analyze how the two artistic platforms address the site and political situation of Gellerup, and how they pragmatically, diagnostically, and pre-figuratively resist inequality and stigmatization and offer alternative relations and forms of engagement.

EMOTIONAL AND POLITICAL GEOGRAPHIES

When Gellerup was constructed in 1968-72 it was one of many non-profit social housing areas constructed in the periphery of the bigger cities in Denmark. Characterized by modernist concrete architecture, Gellerup (including neighboring Toveshøj) is one of the largest non-profit social housing areas in Denmark, with around 5000 tenants (down from more than 7000 in 2010). While it was constructed as a visionary architectural and functional unit with modern apartments and local institutions, a shopping center, and green spaces between the blocks, it soon became part of a discursive and emotional battle.[7] In the 1970s, the core of the battle was the impact of modernist concrete architecture on social well-being and dysfunctional youth. While residents defended the areas, mainstream media often presented these concrete blocks as symbolizing social problems and crime. In addition, urban planners criticized the functionalist social housing areas for their lack of jobs, businesses, and varied social life. In the 1980s, the by then established polarization of the "emotional geography"[8] was reinforced by demographic changes, and the negative portrayals of the areas increasingly became linked to the growing number of residents with minority-ethnic backgrounds.[9] Simultaneously,

several social housing areas were included in social programs and other area-based governmental initiatives.

Since 2000, some of the social housing areas have been a key concern of national and local politicians. Various prime ministers have linked such social problems as unemployment, crime, and a lack of education to immigration and ethnicity. In 2018 the PM talked about "parallel societies" that do not share our "Danish values," and even "holes in the map of Denmark."[10] These harsh rhetorical demarcations have paved the way for radical political interventions and, most importantly, the strategic plan "One Denmark without parallel societies—no ghettos in 2030,"[11] and the 'ghetto legislation' following on its heels.

This legislation was based on an official so-called "List of ghetto areas" published yearly by the Danish government 2010-20, and the subsequent "List of parallel societies" introduced in 2021. The criteria for being included in the lists have been modified several times, but now comprise the following five factors: lower than average levels of education, employment, and income; higher than average crime rate; and—what is particularly controversial—a population consisting of over 50% "non-western immigrants or descendants." Based on these criteria, the list distinguishes between "deprived social housing areas," "ghettos," and "tough ghettos" (and from 2021 "deprived housing areas," "parallel societies," and "transformation areas").[12]

On the list of 2020, Gellerup Park was one of 13 "tough ghettos," defined as social housing areas that have been listed as "ghettos" for at least four years in a row (by meeting the ethnicity criterion plus two of the others). For the residents of the "tough ghettos" the legislation includes double penalties for crimes committed in the areas, collective eviction of entire families if one member commits crimes, and mandatory day-care for preschool children in kindergartens with a maximum migrant intake of 30%. The "tough ghettos" are further obliged to reduce the amount of public family apartments to 40% of the available housing. These measures have led to the demolition of entire blocks, the sale of properties for private housing projects, and large-scale evictions of tenants.[13]

CHANGING THE 'GHETTO' IN GELLERUP

Despite national and international critiques and lawsuits against discrimination, a broad alliance in the Danish parliament supports the policy, arguing that it is necessary to avoid 'ghettoization', provide mixed neighborhoods, and ensure social coherence.

Various critics object that the 'ghetto' discourse and legislation reinforce rather than solve the problems when they present an opposition between two internally homogeneous groups: us Danes versus a dangerous them.[14] Following sociologist Loïc Wacquant,[15] one may argue that some of the social housing areas in the urban periphery are inhabited by many different ethnic groups and constitute a new poverty regime, which is initiated by a general precarization of working life, a neoliberal policy that creates increased social inequality and a territorial stigma.

Gellerup, which has been on the list every year since 2010, meets all the criteria for being a "tough ghetto." In 2010, it was also the first residential area in Denmark to become subject to a municipal master plan with the ambition

> [...] through radical physical changes, to transform the area from an exposed housing area to an attractive district. A thriving urban life, a diverse mix of residents, an eventful architecture, and a safe environment must characterize the district.[16]

Already implemented elements of the plan include wide roads, a large office building with municipal workplaces, café and restaurant, a city park, a *Sports and Culture Campus*, start-up businesses, and extensive private housing developments. The master plan has provided greater diversity in housing, buildings, and facilities, but also led to demolitions, the closure of a school and day care centers, and the rehousing of hundreds of residents. By 2020, 345 homes had already been demolished,[17] and a second master plan (approved by the municipality in 2021) schedules a demolition of another 408 family homes, while 240 others will be transformed into smaller flats.

With the second master plan, the area's residents are facing several years of forced relocations, demolitions, and building clutter—as well as even more profound physical and residential changes. Many residents feel betrayed by the municipality, and though they formally can vote against the plan, the legislation's demand to reduce public family housing to 40% minimizes their democratic influence. Our study as well as other ones have shown how some of the residents were already hit by a "demolition blues"[18] during the first master plan. The transformations of the district were not as they had imagined; places associated with important memories were destroyed; the new roads were too wide and impersonal, and the social life disappeared. As AbdiNasir,

a former chairperson of the residents, said: "I miss parties and colors. I miss the smells of food and other things. I miss those joint activities that we used to have" (interview February 11, 2021).[19]

OUR STUDY

The present article is based on research carried out in the project *Citizen-near art in exposed social housing areas* (2019–22) by Anne Scott Sørensen, Mia Falch Yates, and the authors. The project was part of an overall research program on *Art and social communities* [Kunst og sociale fællesskaber], funded by The Danish Arts Foundation and Arts Council Norway.[20] We studied art projects in four Danish social housing areas, asking what kind of socio-aesthetic relations the projects were able to establish in the political context of the 'ghetto legislation', and whether and how they reacted to the stigmatization of the neighborhoods and offered alternative models of change.[21] Methodologically, the project was a comparative case study based on qualitative methods, including the analysis of documents, participant observation, and interviews with artists, residents, and social workers in the areas.

The present article's analysis of projects in Gellerup Park is based on an analysis of relevant documents (national and local policy papers, artist websites, SoMe and more) and periodic fieldwork in 2019-21. During the fieldwork, which was carried out in a period affected by Covid19, we made participant observations of as many different activities as possible given the circumstances. These activities included film screenings, artists' talks, exhibitions, meetings, a guided tour, performances, and a festival organized by *Sigrid's Living Room*, *Andromeda 8220* and other cultural actors in Gellerup.

The fieldwork also included interviews with 1) Grete Aagaard and Aysha Amin, the daily leaders of, respectively, *Sigrid's Living Room* and *Andromeda 8220*, 2) an organizer of municipal art projects in Gellerup, and 3) seven people who live in and/or have close connections to Gellerup (for instance, former residents or residents of a nearby public housing area who have work and/or children in an institution in Gellerup). In the selection of interviewees, our main criterion was to achieve sufficient diversity with regard to 1) residents, artists, and other cultural and social actors; 2) gender and ethnicity; and 3) frequent users of *Sigrid's Living Room* and *Andromeda*, as well as locals who, having little interest in art, could offer insight into Gellerup's (cultural) life from other perspectives. Among our interviewees were a football coach, a social worker, a former chairperson of the residents, a mother of

seven, and two members of, respectively, a Somali cultural association and *Public Resistance* [Almen Modstand], a resident-led movement for non-profit housing and against discrimination and eviction. All interviews were semi-structured and conducted either in Gellerup or online (because of Covid19-restrictions). All interviews were in Danish and have been translated by the authors.

Our observations and interviews focused on how socially engaged art projects unfold, interact, and are experienced by residents as well as artists and social workers in a specific site and a specific political situation. Together with the analysis of documents, these interviews and observations enabled us to uncover how political dilemmas and challenges of art projects arise in the context of the 'ghetto legislation' and ongoing transformations of the neighborhood.

A TRIPLE EXPOSURE

In Gellerup (and the other areas covered by our broader study), the emotional geographies linked to modernist concrete blocks, to poverty and social problems, and to ethnicity and migration together form a territorial stigma that has paved the way for on-going radical political interventions and extensive social engineering. This is the reason we use the term 'exposed' rather than 'deprived' in referring to these housing areas. We have identified a triple exposure. The areas and residents are, firstly, exposed to *socio-economic inequality*. Compared to the population as such, they have lower levels of education, employment, and income, as well as a higher frequency of social problems. Since one of the aims of the non-profit housing sector is to secure housing for disadvantaged people, this is hardly surprising. However, this aim of the sector is often ignored in policy discourses, which address social problems as though they were unrelated to socio-economic inequality, presenting them instead as something that can be eliminated through urban development. The absence of reflection on where poor citizens are actually going to live is striking. Particularly, this is the case for those citizens who are both poor and have a migrant background since they will not, in general, be welcome in other social housing areas labelled as "ghettos," "parallel societies" or "prevention areas."

Secondly, the areas in question here are exposed to a *discursive stigmatization* that includes an emotional polarization of 'them' versus 'us.' According to Wacquant, internalization of stigma inevitably leads the residents to dis-identify with their neighborhoods, which counteracts collective mobilization and solidarity.[22]

In a Danish context, the stigmatization may have particularly severe consequences since it is continuously repeated by prime ministers, other politicians, and in public discourse. As sociologist Richard Jenkins has argued, the categorization of a specific group by a more powerful Other is not only a matter of classification but also an intervention in the world of the less powerful—an intervention that will change the very experience of living in this group.[23] When the Danish prime minister categorized young males of migrant background as a threat in an opening speech in the parliament,[24] she further contributed to an emotional mobilization and legitimized initiatives against feelings of insecurity. Following Judith Butler, one could argue that she, by evoking an imagined threat to the general population, paved the way for measures to eliminate this.[25]

Such measures add to the third type of exposure, which is exposure to *political, material, demographic, and legal interventions*, which also happens when the residents in the areas experience higher penalties for crimes, specific rules for children of migrant background in kindergartens or schools, demolition of blocks, mass eviction, sale into private housing and more.

This triple exposure affects the areas in question and influences how they are experienced from both within and without, and what kind of agency they enable. While Wacquant regards internalization as inevitable, Jenkins leaves some room for the residents' own agency. In a Danish context, this room is confirmed by *Public Resistance*. It is further confirmed in research that documents how residents regard the stigma as a major problem, but may react to it in different ways, ranging from internalization and resignation to radical passivity and direct protest.[26] How they react is influenced by various factors, including artistic and cultural initiatives that try to reshape, rethink, and renegotiate communal life in the neighborhoods.

ART AND CULTURE IN EXPOSED SOCIAL HOUSING AREAS

Parallel to the interventions described above, cultural policies and programs have increasingly approached the same neighborhoods by means of a variety of projects, often funded by *Art in deprived housing areas* (Danish Arts Foundation 2018-21), and *Art and culture in deprived social housing areas* (Danish Agency for Culture and Palaces 2019-22). None of these programs uses the word 'ghetto', but their link to the policy and interventions described above was made explicit in 2019 when The Danish Arts Foundation stated how art can be "a lever" for these housing

areas,[27] and when the Minister of Culture argued that engagement in arts and culture can prevent the formation of unwanted "parallel societies."[28]

The two Danish programs are part of what artist and art theorist Anthony Schrag has named a "betterment strategy" where art is used to enhance welfare and the quality of life.[29] The programs are based on two interconnected assumptions. The first is that the residents of the exposed housing areas do not sufficiently participate in publicly supported cultural life. This is the "deficit model," widespread both in cultural institutions and policy discourses.[30] It assumes that certain groups lack something needed to participate in the publicly supported and recognized arts and culture. The other assumption is that art projects can act as a kind of lever in relation to social problems in the housing areas. Here, the deficit model takes a different turn, since the idea is not necessarily (or not only) that the residents lack knowledge or skills, but also that art can contribute to the development of the *areas*. While the people-based approach focuses on developing the residents' ability to enjoy and benefit from arts and culture, the place-based approach assumes that they have assets and involves them in the development of the area.[31]

The difference between these approaches is important for art projects in exposed areas. In Sweden, researchers have analyzed the project *Art Happens,* which was anchored in a people-based deficit model and implemented in housing areas with low turnout at national elections, the assumption being that art projects could help reduce a democratic deficit. However, many residents saw place-based deficits, such as insufficient lighting, rather than low voter turnouts as the primary problem in the areas,[32] and some also found the decision-making behind these projects to be un-democratic.[33] Both aspects challenge the democratizing assumptions of the program.

In the UK, the program *Creative People and Places* (2013-16) supported art projects in districts where, according to national surveys, cultural participation was low—thereby hoping to counter this deficit. Interestingly, the programs *Big Local* (2011-26) and *Creative Civic Change* (2019-22) chose another criterion, namely whether districts have been disadvantaged in the distribution of cultural and lottery funds. These districts then received funds that the residents themselves could use "on the projects they judge to be most important to them"[34] in *Big Local*, and with the aim of supporting "communities to lead arts and creative projects that realize their own visions for their areas"[35] in *Creative Civic*

Change. These programs have thus chosen a place-based approach, in which the areas are understood as being exposed to inequality, and the residents are involved, the assumption being that they are the ones who know the deficits of their area best.

Distinguishing between these different approaches and assumptions is important because they influence, firstly, *who* defines the social challenge or deficit; secondly, *what kind* of social change the art projects are expected to provide, and thirdly, *who* gets the chance to contribute to this "betterment." Programs wanting to strengthen the residents' cultural participation are in all three respects radically different from programs that want to enable the residents to define and solve problems in the area. This is a difference in local agency, which is closely related to the questions about representations, external categorizations, and self-identifications of stigmatized minorities raised by Wacquant and Jenkins. This is also a difference that puts artists in a dilemma.

In what follows we take a closer look at how two site-specific, independent, and collaborative art platforms in Gellerup, *Sigrid's Living Room* and *Andromeda 8220*, respectively, approach the area and involve its residents. While both art platforms are defined by their long-term engagement in Gellerup, by their ability to establish local, national, and international networks, and by their ability to combine these networks in their artistic strategies and practices, their ways of contributing to and negotiating the site and identity of the neighborhood differ. We explore how they negotiate deficits and change and discuss whether and how their different interventions and engagements can offer alternatives to the triple exposure of the neighborhood. To understand the socio-aesthetic strategies used by these art platforms we follow art theorist Grant Kester, who provisionally identifies seven forms of change that socially engaged art can generate. Each of these forms (including transformation in individual consciousness, in cultural and symbolic discourse, and in public policy) unfold in a spatial and temporal continuum, where encounters can provoke new insights and modes of practice, which can become foundations for further actions and insights:

> In this sense they can be simultaneously pragmatic (involving processes of concrete problem solving), diagnostic (revealing new cognitive and institutional blockages and openings) and prefigurative (disclosing new modes of contestation that might be scalable or replicable in the future as well as new insights into the process of social change more generally).[36]

While the forms are often somewhat entangled, Kester's typology makes it possible to differentiate between the various socio-aesthetic strategies at play in *Sigrid's Living Room* and *Andromeda 8220*.

SIGRID'S LIVING ROOM: INHABITING RADICAL AND ON-GOING TRANSFORMATIONS

Sigrid's Living Room was initiated in 2011 as a temporary satellite of a local contemporary art space in Aarhus, and was later developed by artist and project leader, Grete Aagaard, into an independent "art project and platform for contemporary art based in Gellerup, Aarhus, Denmark."[37] Its activities include art residencies for national and international artists focusing on collaborative and dialogue-based art works as well as arts-based, creative workshops mainly for the local residents of Gellerup. Physically the platform is based in an apartment in one of the housing blocks; and in the case of *Sigrid's Outdoor Living Room* [*Sigrids UdeStue*], a construction-site pavilion located centrally on one of the new boulevards in Gellerup.

Currently the platform involves a more permanent team of artists, anthropologists, and students engaged in ongoing art-based projects and workshops in Gellerup as well as temporary collaborations with national and international artists around different art projects in the area. Thus, it is defined both by site-specific *and* translocal qualities. From the platform's beginning in 2011 until now the formation of local spaces like the apartment of *Sigrid's Living Room* and the pavilion and garden area of *Sigrid's Outdoor Living Room* as well as a spread-out networks of locally based, national and international artists, cultural institutions and social agents, has permitted a continuous, but highly dynamic presence in the neighborhood. Not only has it been separated from its institutional origin (in 2015), it has also moved physically between a number of different locations in Gellerup. Initially located at a now-closed community center in a former school building at Sigridsvej 46 (from which the platform took its name), it moved to an empty apartment in one of the blocks at Jettesvej 13 in 2013. When this block was demolished as a consequence of the first master plan, the platform moved in 2014 to its current location in another apartment at Dortesvej 3—a block scheduled for demolition in the second master plan. In addition to the apartment, which is used by artists in residence and for events and workshops, *Sigrid's Outdoor Living Room* opened in 2016. This part consists of a mobile, two-story pavilion, similar to the

ones used by workers in construction sites, as well as a shack, and most recently, a container. Its first location was turned into a construction site for the upcoming *Sports and Culture Campus* in 2020 and it relocated to its current location along Gellerup's new main street, Blixens Boulevard.

The long sequence of relocations as well as the explicit construction site references of the mobile pavilions reflect the enforced temporality of the area. Stretched out between ongoing demolitions and constructions, *Sigrid's Living Room* inhabits the radical and on-going transformations that the residents are living through in their private homes and communal, public spaces, thereby making the precarious conditions in Gellerup public and accessible to outsiders. However, *Sigrid's Living Room* not only insists on inhabiting the area, but also on ongoing and temporary consolidations around what philosopher and anthropologist Bruno Latour defines as new "matters of concern." [38] An example is the creation of *Sigrid's Outdoor Living Room*. Demarcated by homemade benches, flagpoles, planters, a mobile coffee cart and other creative interventions made by both children in the urban workshop and artists, the platform has created a new space next to the construction sites. Part of this demarcation of the site was realized in the summer of 2020 when the artist Camilla Nørgaard built the work *Stone, path, dike* [*Sten, sti, dige*] together with residents, who collected stones and construction materials from the area and produced artificial concrete stones in various shapes, colors, and sizes (participant observation June 24, 2020). The dike now gates *Sigrid's Outdoor Living Room*—not to keep the residents out, but to keep it public. In Nørgaard's own words, she attempted to break with the "aggressive" boulders that lie everywhere where you are not allowed to enter: "We have made some concrete stones, some fake stones, as we call them. This is to show that concrete is something that one can work with and change the place where one lives."[39]

Another example is the *Plant Sanatorium*, where one of the permanent team members, Lars Henningsen, has collected and received various discarded plants and trees from the area. These are now in plant boxes at *Sigrid's Outdoor Living Room*, where they are looked after and equipped with info signs with their names and stories. Here, for example, is a spruce that stood a little too close to a burning scooter, and a purchased olive tree attracting the attention and memories of older residents who pass by.

An additional example by the team itself is the project *Garden Value* [HaveVærdi] An element in this project is the guided tours

to the small utility gardens, which for 50 years have been located between the apartment blocks in Gellerup but will disappear with the next round of demolition. On one of the tours, Grete Aagaard shared the history of the utility garden association and how the gardens have been a meeting place for the residents in the area since the early 1970s (participant observation November 12, 2020). She also told about spending time in the utility garden, where she draws the plants and identifies foreign plant names with the elderly residents, primarily women who intensively grow vegetables on the small plots of land. Based on this she is preparing a *Flora Gellerup*. At the same tour, a couple of consultants from the municipality shared that they had never heard of the gardens, despite working in relation to the current master plan that will put an end to them.

RECOGNIZING, RE-EVALUATING, AND PERFORMING SOLIDARITY WITH THE ALREADY EXISTING

Thus, while all these art projects, workshops, and public events are anchored in and exposed to the transformations of the area, they also actively engage in the antagonistic struggle about the right to decide the development of the area. Sometimes this is achieved through temporary activities, and at other times through more long-lasting or even permanent interventions. Following Kester's typology, we can understand the socio-aesthetic strategies used by *Sigrid's Living Room* in Gellerup as a combination of diagnostic, pragmatic, and pre-figurative engagements. In the example of *Garden Value, Sigrid's Living Room* integrates a mix of all three strategies. Firstly, the platform employs diagnostic strategies when organizing guided tours to point out the contradiction between an official discourse of urban sustainability, community engagement, and local foods, on the one hand, and on the other, indifference to (and ignorance of the existence of) the utility gardens. Secondly, it intervenes pragmatically in the area when responding to a citizen consultation with an objection to the second master plan, which will remove Gellerup's utility gardens (among other things).[40] Thirdly, it involves prefigurative modelling strategies by showing care for what is otherwise discarded, e.g. at the tour, when Aagaard highlighted how they integrate recycled materials by pointing out an old bed frame used as a fence between two gardens, thereby changing our perception of the slightly decayed gardens. It is through this dynamic mix of strategies involved in *Garden Value* that *Sigrid's Living Room* succeeds in negotiating and transgressing the deficit assumptions

behind the betterment agenda that often defines what kind of social change art projects are expected to provide.

The dynamic mix of strategies is vitalized through the platform's ability to create an open and responsive space around art, creative engagement, and new matters of concern at a time where many of the residents volunteering in different associations in Gellerup experience a lack of recognition and a scarcity of space. Here are the words of Najma, who is engaged in *GoBaad*, a local Somali cultural association:

> I also think they [*Sigrid's Living Room* and two other projects] are very open to voluntary associations. "Come join. Take part. Come and hear: What are we doing? How can you use us in your context or with your target audience?" There is room for that. I think they show that there is space and spaciousness (interview, February 8, 2021).

When Najma emphasizes the openness of *Sigrid's Living Room* by referring to the platform's contribution of "space and spaciousness," she points to its ability to perform solidarity with the already existing spheres in Gellerup. This is not only a site-specific gesture, but also a time-specific confrontation of the long sequence of interventions and transformations here expressed by another resident, Elsebeth, who has lived in Gellerup for many years and is engaged in *Public Resistance*:

> They have a plan for 2030. That everything will be fine in 2030, but it is eight more years, right. I can see from my window that they are building the *Sports and Culture Campus* and that is probably also good but... There are far too many from the outside who want to do all sorts of things in the area, that I don't really think is necessary (interview, February 16, 2021).

Facing another eight years before the 2030 master plan is implemented and 11 years after the first master plan was initiated in 2010, Elsebeth shares her concern that the interventions have gone too far. She expresses not only a wish to put the externally driven transformations of the area on hold, but also to re-evaluate the qualities of the area. While the construction sites that for years have occupied and will occupy a great part of the private and public spaces in Gellerup are anchored in the deficit-approach, as emphasized by Elsebeth, *Sigrid's Living Room* instead proposes an asset-based engagement. It is an engagement, which in an act

of sustainability, equality, and recognition turns to some of the materials, things and issues we easily overlook and discard.

ANDROMEDA 8220—VOICES AND IMAGES FROM WITHIN

The second platform, *Andromeda 8220*, was initiated in 2017 by a group of young people in Gellerup. *Andromeda* is physically located in a small gallery in Gellerup but works also on various media platforms and in different sites outside Gellerup, where the members of the group organize and contribute to art works and cultural activities. One of its initiators, Aysha Amin, who was born and raised in Gellerup, tells how she as a teenager started to hang out a lot in *Sigrid's Living Room* and became generally involved in all the creative projects that came to the area in connection with the first master plan. She participated, volunteered, and assisted in several projects that meant a lot to her. But she also "missed something" and did not understand, "why no one from the area owned the projects" or had the big positions and overall responsibility, and she expressed grievances "that you constantly had to go to someone, who had to leave at 4pm" (interview, January 18, 2021).

Andromeda 8220, which is run collectively with Aysha Amin as the most prominent figure, grew out of this need for ownership and agency. On the website and on SoMe, *Andromeda* defines itself as an independent platform working collaboratively, critically, and curiously in the intersection between art, culture, and architecture. Compared to *Sigrid's Living Room*, the platform takes a more direct political approach and explicitly situates their work within the context of the 'ghetto' policies. On Facebook they describe their aim as:

> Practicing empathy and care, creating open spaces that offer truer representations, nuances and images that are whole, inspiring young generations to follow. The latter are invited to recognize, reflect and re-imagine themselves in a plethora of voices, faces and forms. *Andromeda 8220* thus uses the arts, education and culture to reclaim the reality of Gellerup and Aarhus, connecting the communities, experiences and conversations within the ghetto-list galaxy.[41]

The quote emphasizes how *Andromeda 8220* speaks from a position inside Gellerup. Several of our interviewees confirm this and highlight Aysha Amin's local knowledge and network as key in an area where external betterment projects are often

conceptualized without knowing what is already going on. Contrary to these, Aysha Amin: "is from here, and she knows what to play with. […]. I like that it's one of us […] it means a lot" (Najma, interview February 8, 2021).

Andromeda's ambition of offering truer and more nuanced representations, and to reclaim "the reality of Gellerup" and the other housing areas on the 'ghetto' list is also in line with the needs of our interviewees. They told stories of colleagues and school friends who are afraid to visit and described it as imperative to counteract the stigma by disseminating various voices, images, and stories of Gellerup. Across all our interviews, as well as in other research, prejudices and fears of Gellerup are considered the most serious problem in the neighborhood.[42] However, this problem is also something that art and culture can help to remedy both by creating alternative expressions and by attracting and gathering people around "a common third" as two of our interviewees called it (Ali, interview February 12, 2021; and Mona, interview February 1, 2021).

The problem, or deficit, that *Andromeda* as well as our interviewees articulate is thus not located in the area or with its residents but originates in the territorial stigma linked to modernist concrete blocks, to poverty and social problems, and to ethnicity and migration. The imperative to counteract these stigmatizing representations and categorizations is also emphasized in the name *Andromeda*, which is a galaxy parallel to 'our' Milky Way, and thus a name which implicitly reinterprets the notion of parallel societies as places with alternative potentials.

The platform uses various socio-aesthetic strategies to engage in and promote these potentials. One such strategy is to engage in the assets of the residents in Gellerup. These initiatives include for instance *Decolonize your tastebuds*,[43] a workshop and event with cooking, eating, and a production of a Somali-Danish recipe book in collaboration with *Gobaad*, a local Somali Cultural Association. Recent activities include a zine workshop, where one can use "the creative, tangible and community-creating craft" to "communicate thoughts, experiences, or whatever you like."[44] These activities are also open to people outside of Gellerup, but—as in the quote above—clearly invite locals "to recognize, reflect and re-imagine themselves" in new ways.

Another strategy is used in *Andromeda*'s *Demolition Tours*, which like the *Garden Value* tours in *Sigrids' Living Room*, try to generate alternative and more nuanced representations of and conversations about Gellerup. *Demolition Tours* is a deliberate

alternative to the official tours organized by the municipality that focus on the wished-for transformation into a mixed and balanced creative city. Contrary to this, *Demolition Tours* offers tours with residents as guides to tell local stories and demonstrate how the neighborhood has disintegrated in the wake of the strategic development plans. Addressing the consequences of the master plans and reenacting the traditional tourist tour, *Demolition Tours* makes local voices and experiences heard and enables dialogue between residents and visitors.

A third and more pragmatic strategy is used in *We communi-create our city* [Vi fællesskaber vores by].[45] This long-term project has a creative and educational focus on architecture and urban development. It is made for local teenagers but also has the ambition of stimulating interactions across social, cultural, and age differences in and around Gellerup. The project involves workshops, seminars, and annual exhibitions that are disseminated locally and nationally in collaboration with Aarhus and Copenhagen Architecture Festivals.[46]

A fourth strategy focuses on object-based artworks. This includes the short film *Decolonizing Aarhus: A sonic walk from Aarhus C to Gellerup: Poetry, Music, and Conversation* (2020), where *Andromeda* offers an artistic alternative to the dominant representation of Gellerup. This is to a certain extent also the case in the short film *Collective Amnesia: Update within the Crisis* (2020), a montage of images, music, and conversations from Gellerup and elsewhere.

THE GLOBAL MAJORITY FROM THE BLOCK

Andromeda 8220 defines itself as site-specific and includes Gellerup's postal code in the name. All the above projects and most of the platform's initiatives are definitely site-specific. However, they are not only site-specific but also examples of what Cuban artist Tania Bruguera calls 'Political Timing Specific Art'. In a thoughtful in-depth conversation with art critic Claire Bishop (2020) Bruguera unfolds the term. Using a number of her own artworks she explains how the meaning of the work is defined by the political situation, not in the sense of the artwork as an a posteriori comment to a specific political moment, but as a direct intervention into it. Bruguera underlines two important aspects of Political Timing Specific Art as an intervening and confrontational gesture. First, it has no stable meaning, but depends on the tensions, frictions, and disruptions unfolding between the work and the political moment.[47] Secondly, it requires an anticipation

of a potential future for the artist to enter into that specific moment where the situation is not yet fixed, implemented, or accepted, but in the making.[48]

On *Andromeda*'s Facebook profile and website, this specific political situation is defined by the 'ghetto legislation' and the municipal master plans, which on the front page of the website is a "social experiment and urban development based on the government's racist and class-discriminatory criteria." This is the political context for the platform's own practice, which:

> mixes locally, nationally, and internationally, based on local-global realities of society. *Andromeda* is site specific and focuses on individuals as being able to do things by themselves, based on the potential and network you have as a 'non-Western immigrant' aka global majority from the block.[49]

By insisting on the quality of mixing the local, national, and global, and more specifically by combining individual empowerment and global networks and connections, *Andromeda* resists the hegemonic national framing of Gellerup. In particular, they resist the hegemonic discourses' categorizations and deficit-approaches by questioning the assumed normality of Westerns and ethnic Danes and redefining the local residents, not as an isolated and disadvantaged "non-Western minority" as in the 'ghetto' criteria, but as a networked part of a "global majority."

The local-global network is manifest in *Andromeda*'s practice. An example of this is when the platform organized a *Pimp your banner and sign bootcamp* before a public demonstration against the demolitions in September 2018. They did this in collaboration with the NY-based arts community space Flux Factory, and the bootcamp took place at ARoS, Aarhus' art museum, where Flux Factory were visiting artists at the time. Through an international network, they linked one of Denmark's most popular art museums with a political demonstration against national policy.

The local-global network is also manifest when *Andromeda* not only make their own films about and around Gellerup but simultaneously organize screenings of contemporary Syrian documentary films in Gellerup (*West of Paradise* [Vest for Paradis], participant observations December 2019), introduce videos on their *Sunday blog* on Facebook that was based on urban development in Ukraine, and elsewhere praise concrete as a "simple, honest and artistic material."[50] These global films are defined by a political situation that is unfolding, calling for solidarity with the

refugees in Syria and suggesting a revaluation of the modernist, concrete architecture that is currently being demolished.

A final example on how a local-global network is used and generated is *Andromeda*'s organization of *Her Selection*, a DJ-workshop and outdoor concert with established and upcoming "female, femme-identifying and nonbinary DJs."[51] Here, an intersectional approach linked ethnic and gender minorities in a combination of empowerment and party and opened an agonistic[52] space in which conventional distributions of skills, identities, and power could be questioned.

When *Andromeda* engages in a local-global network with an intersectional approach, it may be challenging. Najma, who lives in Gellerup, says:

> There is a bit of a challenge in what she [Aysha Amin] shows and tells about. […] A movie I would never see by myself, but I am watching it in Andromeda and discussing with extremely different people. It is exciting. In a way, it creates … a new way of thinking (Najma, interview February 8, 2021).

However, new ways of thinking may be exactly what is needed in the current situation. In continuation of Bruguera's argument about Political Timing Specific Art, we understand *Andromeda*'s global-local engagement and intersectional approach as a sign that being local and site-specific is not enough in the current political situation. *Andromeda* is based in 8220 and emphasizes this fact, but instead of letting itself be limited by this locality, it engages in an exceptional variety of local, national, and global collaborations: from the local residents and associations (e.g. with *Demolition Tours* and *Decolonize your tastebuds*), to established Danish institutions for art and architecture (e.g. with *Pimp your banner* and *We Communi-create our city*), decolonial and intersectional alliances with other minorities (e.g. with *West of Paradise* and *Her selection*) and the international art world (e.g. with the videos in the *Sunday blog* and *Collective Amnesia*, exhibited at the Berlin Biennale in 2020).

If we use Kester's distinction between diagnostic, pragmatic, and prefigurative strategies in socially engaged arts, *Andromeda* (like *Sigrid's Living Room*) engages in all three. Kester further differentiates between various potentials of socio-political transformations in the arts. These range from potentials of affecting the individual viewer's consciousness (as in Najma's "new way of thinking") to potentials of influencing public policy (as aimed for

in *Pimp your Banner*) and political regimes. Most of *Andromeda*'s projects are situated in between these two poles and primarily have the potential of transforming cultural or symbolic discourses (as in *Demolition Tours*) and maybe that of reshaping spatial boundaries (as in *We communi-create our city*). But as described above, the artistic projects are up against a powerful triple exposure, which manifests itself as stigmatizing discourses, as an internalization in the individual consciousness, and as a spatial and political re-shaping of the homes and neighborhoods of exposed minorities. In this context, the ability to realize these potentials may first and foremost require not self-identifying as an isolated minority in a parallel society, but diagnostically and pre-figuratively subverting the usual distribution of minorities/majorities, and more pragmatically engaging in all the conversations, connections, and collaborations that together—as in the quote above—may contribute to "a new way of thinking".

SITE AND THE POLITICAL TIMING SPECIFIC

In the above analysis we have shown how the artistic strategies and practices of the art platforms *Sigrid's Living Room* and *Andromeda 8220* are defined by their long-term involvement in Gellerup and by their ability to strengthen the neighborhood through a multitude of local, national, and international connections. At the same time, we have argued that their site-specific engagements intentionally intervene in a specific political situation, where the Danish 'ghetto legislation' and local master plans radically transform social housing areas all over Denmark. Drawing on Bruguera's reflections on the concept of Political Timing Specific Art we have argued that both art platforms acquire (part of) their meaning from this engagement in the current political situation. We have shown how this approach demands a comprehensive understanding of the current political situation and its implications, not only from the artists engaged, but also from art critics such as ourselves.

Thus, to understand the various socio-aesthetic strategies at play in Gellerup, it is necessary to have in mind how the area, like other social housing areas, has been subject to a *triple* exposure involving inequality, stigmatization, and discriminatory interventions. This triple exposure has powerful implications for the areas in question and has in many aspects been defining for contemporary cultural programs targeting these areas. Far less harsh in their discourse, publicly funded art projects in these areas nevertheless tend to be anchored in a betterment agenda

based on the assumption that art can be a "lever" for both areas and residents. We have argued that this agenda is tied to a deficit approach that highly influences not only who has the right to define the social challenges of the areas, but also what kind of social change the art projects are expected to provide, and who gets the chance to contribute to the "betterment."

Facing the current political situation, we asked whether and how *Sigrid's Living Room* and *Andromeda 8220* are political timing specific works. Through which artistic means do they try to resist the triple exposure? And how and to which extent are they able to negotiate the deficits dominating the policy discourses, and to offer alternative relations and forms of engagement? We suggested understanding the wide range of socio-aesthetic interventions in the area in terms of Kester's typology of diagnostic, pragmatic, and pre-figurative strategies of change. In the case of *Sigrid's Living Room*, this result does not happen through loud or explicit dissent, but through a low-key but persistent presence and effort—or as Grete Aagaard says: "Empathic, visual activism, you might call it."[53] *Andromeda 8220* is also deeply anchored in local knowledge and networks, but emphasizes—by adding the name of a parallel galaxy to the local postal code—how Gellerup is not an isolated, local site, but a networked part of a "global majority." Engaging with the different political interventions through a local-global network, *Andromeda 8220* challenges and re-shapes both the symbolic discourses and the spatial boundaries that the triple exposure imposes on the area.

Andromeda 8220 and *Sigrid's Living Room* differ through their long-term presence in Gellerup from most other art projects in exposed social housing areas—at least in Denmark (Eriksson and Sørensen 2021; Eriksson, Nielsen, Sørensen and Yates, 2022). Many betterment projects are implemented without prior networks and without solid knowledge of the assets as well as the precariousness in the areas. In our analysis of the artistic projects of *Andromeda 8220* and *Sigrid's Living Room* and our interviews with local users of both platforms, it has become clear that their long-term presence in Gellerup enables them to work in ways that resist the triple exposure, negotiate the deficits dominating the policy discourses, and offer alternative relations and forms of engagement. Our analysis suggests that long-term, socio-aesthetic engagements combining site-specific practice with political timing specific acts are key if such projects are to offer alternative models of change. To realize these would imply not only a betterment of the area(s) as promoted in cultural policy

discourses and initiatives but also a radical change and thereby betterment of the current relationship between the area(s) and the socio-political context.

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3 Statens Kunstfond, *Kunst som løftestang: inspiration til udvikling i udsatte by- og boligområder*, accessed June 1, 2021, https://issuu.com/kunststyrelsen/docs/kunstsomloeftestang_statenskunstfond_2019. All translations from Danish are by the authors.
4 Kulturministeriet, "Kultur kan modvirke parallelsamfund," press release March 29, 2019, https://kum.dk/aktuelt/nyheder/kultur-kan-modvirke-parallelsamfund
5 In Denmark, the terms 'parallel society' and 'ghetto' (and associated terms like 'ghetto list,' 'ghetto legislation' and 'ghettoization') are frequently used both by policymakers and in the media. We therefore also use them in this article when refering to Danish policy and debates, but as we will argue below, we find the terms both misleading and stigmatizing and therefore write them with single quotation marks.
6 When we translate names of platforms, projects and artworks from Danish, we add the Danish name in []. When no Danish name is added, the name is originally in English.
7 Mikkel Høghøj and Silke Holmquist, "Da betonen blev belastende. Den emotionelle kamp om Gellerupplanen i 1960'erne og 1970'erne," *Temp*, no. 16 (2018).
8 Høghøj and Holmquist, "Da betonen blev belastende."
9 Mikkel Høghøj, "Hvad kan vi lære af 'betonjunglens' historie? Del 1," *Eftertryk*, September 9, 2019, https://www.eftertrykket.dk/2019/09/13/hvad-kan-vi-laere-af-betonjunglens-historie-1-del/
10 Hansen, "9 nedslag."
11 Regeringen, Ét Danmark uden parallelsamfund.
12 Transportministeriet, *Liste over ghettoområder pr. 1. december 2020*, https://www.trm.dk/publikationer/2020/liste-over-'ghetto'omraader-pr-1-december-2020/
13 When the government in 2021 renamed the list and substituted the two categories "ghettos" and "tough ghettos" with "parallel societies and "areas of transformation," it maintained the criteria behind them. It further introduced a new category, "prevention areas" in which the housing associations are obliged to regulate newcomers in order to keep residents with "non-Western" backgrounds below 30% (Indenrigs- og boligministeriet, Blandede boligområder–næste skridt i kampen mod parallelsamfund, March 2021, https://im.dk/Media/8/4/Pjece_Blandede%20boligomr%C3%A5der.pdf). The new category reinforces the discursive stigmatization of these residents and makes it more difficult for them to settle in the public sector. Since our research was carried out before the renaming of the list, we in the following use the categories of the "List of ghetto areas."
14 See Laura Gilliam et al., 'Den nye tryghedspakke vil skade mere end gavne', *Politiken*, November 8, 2021; *Public Resistance* website, accessed August 27, 2021, http://almenmodstand.dk/; and UNHumanRights, Twitter (July 3, 2018). https://twitter.com/UNHumanRights/status/1014224267439943680
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