

CON DIT IONS

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THIS ISSUE:

STRATEGY FOR EVOLUTION

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1ST ISSUE

DENMARK FOR ALL

In the last decades, Denmark has witnessed a phenomenal rise in the amount of summerhouses build around the coasts and natural areas. Once primitive retreats intimately linked to nature, these houses have now become mini-mansions filled with all modern day conveniences such as hot-tubs, bulthaup kitchens and home-cinemas. New summerhouse developments fail to address the crucial link to the Danish landscape and the new emerging living qualities. In attempt to overcome this situation, we have analysed the current paradox of Danish summerhouse areas and proposed an alternative model.

CHARLES BESSARD & NANNE DE RU



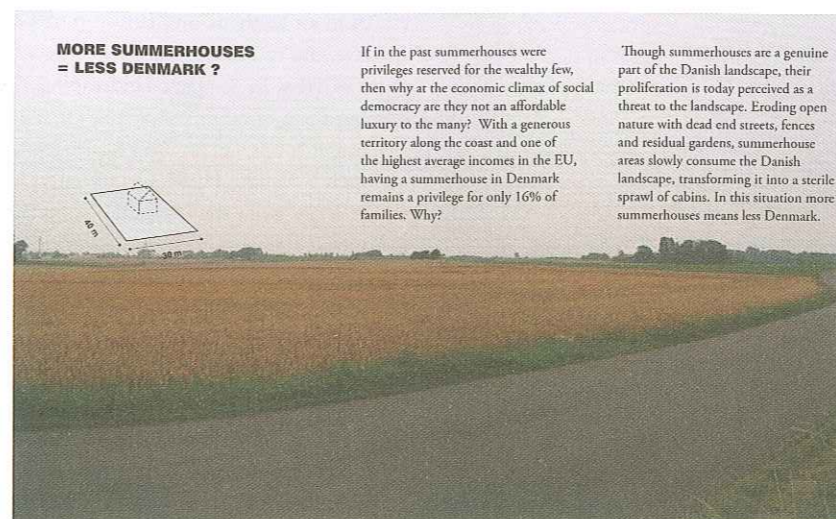
Powerhouse Company was founded in 2005 by architects Charles Bessard (1970, France) and Nanne de Ru (1976, The Netherlands). The office is specialized in architecture, urban design and urban research and is working on projects in The Netherlands, Denmark, France, Russia and Thailand. It is based in Rotterdam and Copenhagen.

www.powerhouse-company.com

The phenomenal development of summerhouses during the second half of the twentieth century in Denmark is intimately linked to the development of individual transport. The constant increase in car ownership since the seventies and the recent construction of the Storrebælt bridge and the Øresund bridge that link all Danish Islands together (as well as Denmark and Sweden) has increased dramatically the accessibility of the whole Danish territory. It is possible to cross Denmark East to West or North to South in about three hours, which is considered an acceptable distance to drive occasionally for a weekend break. An hour and a half drive is a comfortable drive for a "every weekend house" and it is said that no cities in Denmark are further than 50kms from the coast. Baring this in mind and the general fact that the coast is the Danes' favourite destination one can easily understand how high the pressure is on the open landscapes around the coasts. The risk of a rapid sprawl of summerhouses over the territory are evident and likewise the necessity of the authorities to regulate the development of these recreational areas.

Regulating mediocrity

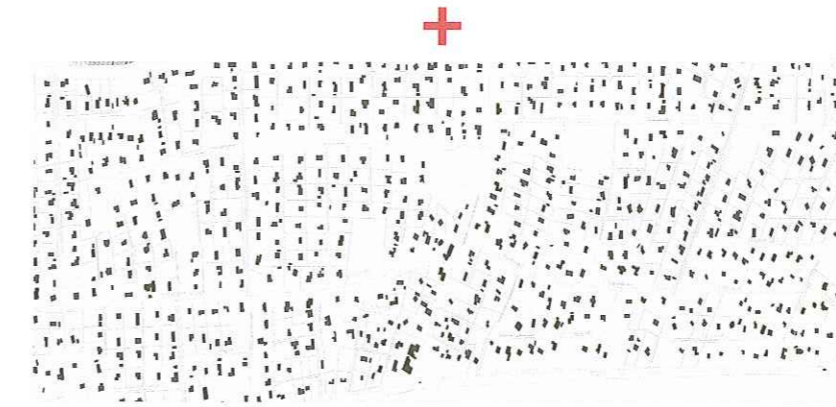
Yet the results so far are troubling. To hold this increasing pressure on the land, past governments have implemented a series of strong and even discriminative limitations, seen within the current process of integration in the European Union. Regulations for summerhouses include a limitations in the allowed time to use it (not more than x months and/or y weekends a year), a prohibition to use it as a first residence (except for pensionados who



MORE SUMMERHOUSES = LESS DENMARK ?

If in the past summerhouses were privileges reserved for the wealthy few, then why at the economic climax of social democracy are they not an affordable luxury to the many? With a generous territory along the coast and one of the highest average incomes in the EU, having a summerhouse in Denmark remains a privilege for only 16% of families. Why?

Though summerhouses are a genuine part of the Danish landscape, their proliferation is today perceived as a threat to the landscape. Eroding open nature with dead end streets, fences and residual gardens, summerhouse areas slowly consume the Danish landscape, transforming it into a sterile sprawl of cabins. In this situation more summerhouses means less Denmark.



Current state

Neighbours all around = less privacy



Gardens with no views



No more natural landscape



Excerpt from the project booklet.

have owned their summerhouse for more than fifteen years), high taxes that prevents to use summerhouses as a speculative asset, a limitation in the size (max 110m²) and very tight building code. One of the direct results of these regulations is an appalling uniformity of houses and a proliferation of 'dumb' catalogue houses that result in a decrease in architectural and landscape qualities.

Protectionist coast

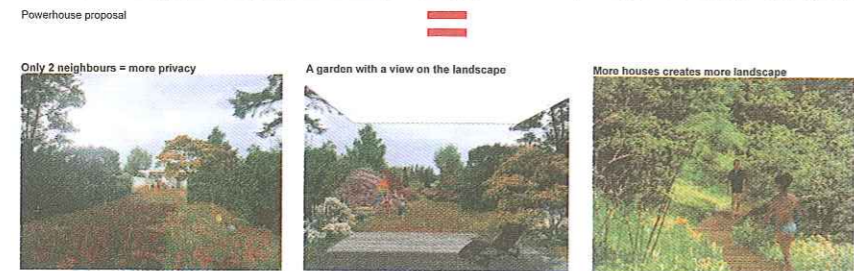
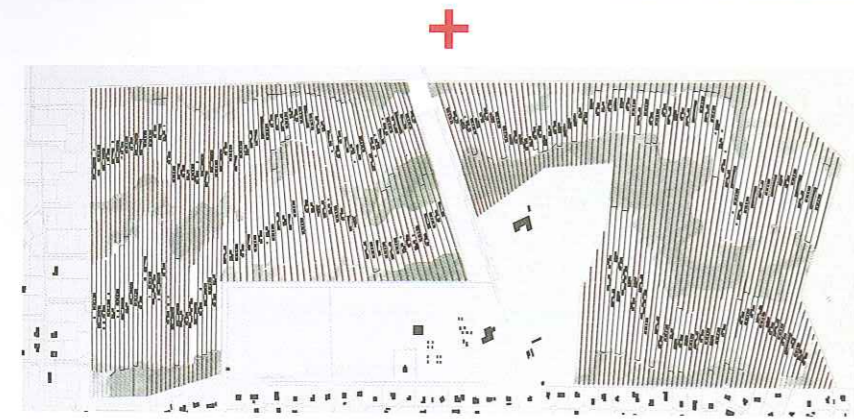
At the same time, Danes really keep the

Danish coast to themselves. One of the most controversial regulations on Danish summerhouse development is the prohibition for foreigners to buy a summerhouse in Denmark. Despite Shengen and EU agreements a non-Dane cannot buy a summerhouse unless he has lived for a minimum period of 4 years in Denmark. This is a rather polemical position within the framework of the European union since Scandinavians, living in the coldest region Europe, are since long massively acquiring

houses and speculating along the Mediterranean or Atlantic coast without any legal limitations. This protectionist and debatable measure points at one of the deepest changes in the current European landscape: the increasing pressure of leisure and tourism on particularly beautifully landscaped regions. One can find numbers of striking examples where the most attractive areas for leisure and tourism in Europe have been the subject of an accelerated urbanization and real estate speculations. As a direct result of the opening of the frontiers and the real estate markets in the past decades, many sleepy towns have boomed into tourists resorts, raising prices locally to unprecedented levels. This trend has far reaching consequences on the local life, the social structure and the economical sustainability of these areas. For example the sky rocketing prices in the valley of Chamonix Mont Blanc is gradually vacuuming the city of its local residents and exclude the younger generations who cannot afford a house anymore rapidly transforming what use to be a regional centre with a specific local life and culture into a seasonal resort losing identity and diversity.

Fear Sprawl

Denmark with its low density and its 7000kms of coast represents an Eldorado for numbers of large continental European countries with a very limited access to the sea such as Germany. If such trends has motivated the strong Danish protectionist attitude they do not justify the scarcity with which new summerhouses development are allowed within the domestic market. The reluctance of the authorities towards summerhouses is in fact motivated by another fear, namely the fear of 'Sprawl'. Since summerhouses are assimilated to single family houses, they are therefore suspected as potential vector for the development of Sprawl though they radically differ in their use and location. For a country like Denmark with a strong social-democratic tradition and an homogenous and cohesive society, Sprawl represents the negative image of an individualised and atomised society opposed to its traditional political values. However, opposed to single family houses in the periph-



Excerpt from the project booklet.

ery of cities, summerhouses do not intend to replace the city, they are not a new form of urban growth. Instead they can better be understood as a qualitative complement to Danish compact cities. One could argue that they even have a positive social role as they are often use as opportunity to invite family friends for a weekend, families also often loan, share or exchange their summerhouse for a holiday. As opposed to the suburban single family houses, summerhouses

are located at a great distance from cities. They also have a positive economical impact on certain rural regions which otherwise are being gradually deserted due to the continuous increase in farm sizes as well as the ongoing process of urbanisation.

Dwarfs and turf

If summerhouse areas are to be compared to urban sprawl, and therefore critiqued for its lack of quality, it can be done on two lev-

els: from an aesthetic and landscaping perspective, and second from an environmental point of view. In terms of landscaping, the existing form of summerhouse areas tends to develop poor landscape quality replacing open land with kilometres of fences directly issued from the local DIY shop (Do It Yourself), square kilometres of trimmed turf instead of a diversified landscape, gardens resembling more residual depository for all sorts of garden paving, mini fountains, dwarfs and light concrete sculptures then nature areas. Basically developments that result in a consumption of the collective landscape in order to satisfy individual and private interests. As a consequence, from an environmental point of view, the summerhouse areas are endangering biodiversity, let alone the impact of the infrastructure and energy consumption needed. At the same time, we have realized that all of these issues are design issues that require a new and appropriate approach, that addresses both the individual desire of a rural retreat as well as the importance of a collective landscape.

Project description

Question
In 2006 Realdania, launched an open competition to investigate new forms of summerhouse developments. This competition was organised as a preliminary study on several agricultural sites which were to be converted as summerhouse area. The brief emphasised the question of the diversity of architectonic qualities as response to the current uniformity. When we entered the competition and researched summerhouses urbanism we realised that the issue was perhaps less about the architectonic qualities than about the issue of the transformation of the Danish landscape. For us, the question was how to create summerhouse areas in such a way that they do not consume the landscape but, to the opposite, generate and develop a qualitative landscape both from an environmental, an aesthetic and a social point of view?

Observing Marienlyst

To address this question we choose possibly the most difficult site located in Marienlyst. It was a desperate site in the sense that it was of a very large size and therefore posed immediately the question of diversity: it was an open field with a monoculture and no existing landscape quality and its coastal edge which is the most attractive location for summerhouses. In many aspect it was a non-site a sort of agricultural tabula rasa and therefore was asking for fundamentally new approach. Where those poor qualities could be seen as difficulties we actually approached them as very interesting premises for a transformation. In this particular case the development of summerhouse areas could have the following positive impact:
- create an attractive summerhouse area away from the coast and therefore allowing for coastal conservation
- replacing the monotony of the recent extensive farming with the redevelopment of vegetal diversity
- replace social desertification with inhabitation
- and most of all create a landscape that could foster biodiversity rather than deplete it.
While researching existing summerhouse areas we made three observations:
The first one was that at the first gaze the market for summerhouse

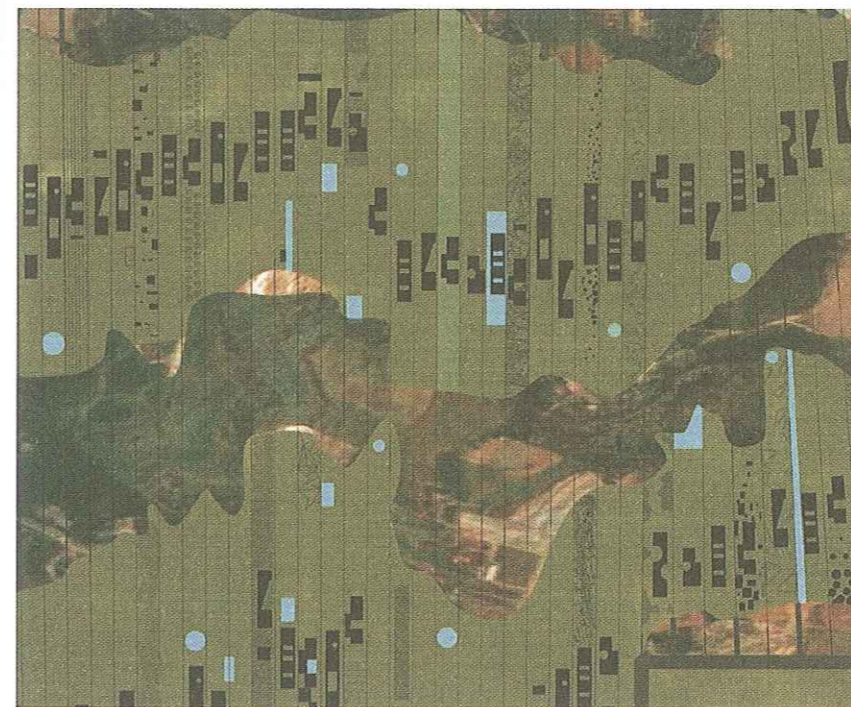


Isometric example of one plot

>>> More intimacy: Each house has only two direct neighbours enhancing the feeling of privacy as well as eliminating the need for fencing the plot along the entire perimeter. More nature: 'though wild and unused landscape requires minimal maintenance it remains a heavy financial burden for rural municipalities. Therefore in our model, each plot is crossed at its tips by a stripe of wild nature. It is a share of the landscape that in retribution must be conserved and maintained by the owners.



Typical Danish fauna + flora



Urban plan

Excerpt from the project booklet.

didn't look very dynamic but did reveal extreme and interesting contrasts in price. While coastal location, the proximity of the sea and the beach are essential assets in the value of a summerhouse it is amazing to see prices differences in the first hundred meters from the shore. A house on the first row with a view to the water costs approximately four times the price of a house on the second row only few decade of meters further from the sea but with no view. This fact reveals that view is crucial qualitative parameter for a summerhouse. The second observation was also related to the view but this time to the neighbours. Where there was no neighbour there was no fences. Within the classic plot division the fences transform the space between the house and the edge of the property into small scale and residual areas with no qualities and which are therefore used as dumping areas for unused garden furniture and building materials, camping vans and other undesirable objects for the view and the neighbours triggering further fencing. The last observation was the total absence of a qualitative public space. A summerhouse development basically exists out of roads and plots, and since most plots are fenced, due to the lack of view, its public space is a fenced road. Indeed a very poor environmental and landscape quality that excludes the summerhouse from what is

the most precious for it: large scale natural landscape. Instead, this experience is reduced to the few hundred square meters of a fenced private garden. Springing from those three observations we proposed a radical reconfiguration of the plots based on three strategies: one for enhancing privacy and intimacy one for enhancing views and public space qualities and one for the development of nature and biodiversity.

More intimacy and less waste

The traditional squarish plot of approximately 30x40m with the house placed in the middle is replaced by a long and narrow plot of 120x10m. This configuration reduces the number of immediate neighbours from three to two and opens two long distance views on the garden. The enlarged distance from the edge of the garden to the house creates more privacy and suppresses the necessity of visual fencing in the two longitudinal directions. The spaces between the house in the other direction are reduced in area and in depth. In the traditional 40x30m rectangle distance from edge to house are very homogenous and average creating neither contrast nor particular qualities. They are too small to create a sense of perspective and view and too big to create an intimate space secluded from views and

fences are limited in height at 1.8m. In the stripe configuration the small spaces between the house and the lateral fence can be integrated in the architecture as private pockets, terraces protected from the wind, patios or winter gardens. To fully trigger this possibility the height limit of the fence along the house is raised to 2.2m ensuring a better privacy along the house and allowing for maximum appropriation. The plot pattern over the site are designed an adapted radial configuration which utterly reduces "bad triangular" plots to its minimum. Narrower plots create more addresses and entrances along the street which allows to significantly reduce the need for road and infrastructure.

Only first row houses

We propose to instigate a new building code which split each plot in three zones. At the extremities of the plots a defined zone of minimum 15m deep is to be left uncultivated and wild. No fences are allowed along this zone creating a continuous landscape stripe along the access roads and paths. It creates more privacy by creating a buffer zone between the circulation accesses. Both ends of the plots are used for accesses, one for car access and the other exclusively for bike and pedestrian accesses. But in both cases the traditional alignment of prefabricated fences flanking the public accesses are replaced by a wild and lush stripe of vegetation where one can retrieve again the pleasure of a stroll and an immediate access to nature. Every house benefits of two opposite views on this continuous landscape stripe and benefit of the same advantages as the "first row" houses: a long distance view and direct access to the landscape. The next twenty meters section on the plots is dedicated to the pleasure of gardening. In this section fences only vegetal fences are allowed. Shielded from the public space by the wild stripe, the garden stripe becomes more intimate and allows to each owner to realise its own Arcadia. The central section of the plot is the only part where it is allowed to build forming a continuous urbanised stripe increasing density locally and reducing infrastructure such as cabling and ducting and reducing wind speed and cooling through convection.

More nature

The wild stripe will the subject of tighter regulation regarding fauna and flora. According to the specificity of each region and landscape a local code for plants and trees will be implemented. Within this zone one can only plant the vegetation specified by the commune. It will ensure the preservation and the development of the local natural identity as well as create a monolithic and continuous stripe of wilderness. The continuity of wild landscape as opposed to its fragmentation is essential for the development of biodiversity for both flora and fauna. The separation between car access and pedestrian and bicycle traffic generates a quiet and safe zone much more favourable for redevelopment of the fauna. This strategy do not only create more landscape but it is only more economically sustainable. Where intensive monoculture depleted biodiversity and polluted with fertilizers the wild stripe recreates continuous stripe of 'natural parks'. Though wild and natural landscape requires minimal maintenance it remains a heavy financial burden for rural municipalities. In this proposal the wild zone is conceived a share of the landscape that in retribution to the occupation of the land must be planted, conserved and maintained by the owners. In practice this will mean a shared maintenance program through the home-owner association. In this way the owners become contributors to the expansion of the regional landscape. By placing public paths in the 'wild zone', its diversity and wild life is offered to the gaze of the public. It recreates a synergy between private and public interests.

New standard house

Within this framework the traditional standardised summerhouse must be reconsidered. The thinner and elongated house plan allows for better use of natural lighting and sun exposure and thus independently of the orientation of the site. This new configuration will break the straightjacket of the traditional cabin typology and will challenge the use of traditional materials reopening the possibility to use the full array of contemporary materials and innovative architecture. The houses will be less exposed and allow for less conservative architectural rules, more creativity and more diversity without jeopardising the unity of the landscape. In any case the houses should be designed as no emission and sustainable architectures and if possible "off the grid". To rest the architectural potential of the plan we designed series of summerhouses prototype that could apply.

To each according to his needs

The moral as well as the environmental sustainability of summerhouse cannot be discussed independently of their location. The potential for a qualitative development highly depends on the existing conditions of the sites. Implementing summerhouses in existing natural and protected zones will never be a valid option especially within the current trends for more summerhouses. But this proposal suggest that with a new approach to planning and design and appropriated designated locations summerhouses could become a positive re-colonisation and improvement of large areas devastated by the expansion of extensive and subsidised agriculture. Exploiting the pro-pensionist laws this proposal could on the long run repopulate certain areas of the country currently being deserted and sustain a local economic development while creating more identity and more diversity. And perhaps could we not imagine it as an interesting alternative to single family housing areas, with families living in the city during the week and taking advantage of its services and social life while enjoying and supporting nature during the weekend?