

Blurring boundaries

The role of multifunctional social infrastructure in enhancing social and physical cohesion relieving parallel society problems

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Key words

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Problem statement

Haraldsgade: A parallel society

When analysing the Haraldsgade district, it becomes clear that the area is socially and physically disintegrating. The residential area is classified as a parallel society, there is a lack of education beyond primary schools and lower incomes relative to the regional average (Københavns Kommune, 2021, p. 9).

The term 'parallel society' replaces the earlier word 'ghetto', which is perceived as denigrating because of its negative connotations (THE LOCAL dk, 2019). It refers to vulnerable residential neighbourhoods where low incomes, unemployment, high criminal activity and the lack of education are the major community problems. The idea of living alongside each other, or not understanding each other, is often reinforced by the large composition of non-Western immigrants. The classification of Haraldsgade as a parallel society indicates a large gap between this area and the broader community, while mutual misunderstanding also causes also problems within the district itself. The parallel society is a problem of social and physical segregation, a situation in which people are considered equal but living separate lives. They may therefore develop separate cultural norms and social structures, leading to a lack of shared identity or understanding.

Context

Social cohesion can be achieved when individuals feel a sense of physical and social connection. Accessibility is a crucial concept, both in terms of findability or the connective role of a place, as well as ensuring accessibility for all people across

society, regardless of age, race, class or gender (Latham & Layton, 2019, p. 8). As highlighted in the social life of small urban spaces by Whyte in 1980, accessibility in urban spaces reduces barriers that might otherwise prevent people from participating in public life, these could include mobility challenges or economic limitations. Infrastructure is not merely a tool for achieving goals, it possesses its own intrinsic value in shaping environments and communities. It increases the overall quality of life and is a gateway to opportunity.

Bringing different social groups together promotes understanding and breaks down stereotypes (McLeod, 2023), but unified communities can also pool resources and share skills which is benefiting the economy and increasing opportunities for the individual. Unification in an urban sense, where people share resources, public infrastructure, and communal spaces, can strengthen community resilience by fostering a sense of shared ownership, which in turn enhances happiness and connection to the city (Parra, 2022).

Economic disparities and social isolation

Research shows that there is a clustering of the lowest average incomes in Copenhagen within the Haraldsgade district (Riveiro & Nowak, 2022, p.10). According to the data from the Statistics Bank of Copenhagen, the average disposable income in Haraldsgade district is about 18.7% lower than the city's overall average (Københavns Kommune, 2022). The area contrast sharply with surrounding district causing an unintended sense of isolation. The economic inequality is compounded by the living conditions of Haraldsgade residents, who often live in larger families with less space per household. This situation makes the community more dependent on local public services and infrastructure. However, these essential facilities and services are notably lacking in the neighbourhood, leaving residents with few opportunities to meet other community members or to foster reintegration through interaction with residents from surrounding areas. For the parallel community, disconnection has a potentially repetitive long-term effect due to lack of awareness, absence of role models and limited access to information. Because the area has not enough possibility for different communities to gather, less opportunities of individual and collective growth can be achieved.

Barriers to community engagement

Socially, residents of different backgrounds and ages live largely alongside each other, without a common space for low-threshold interaction or functions that allow interaction between them and surrounding neighbourhoods. Physically, large, closed building blocks and wide infrastructure create a fragmented spatial structure, leading to an uninviting and impersonal living environment. This isolation may cause people to experience division, ultimately leading to societal problems. There is a lack of a multifunctional meeting space where residents can meet informally, without specific

goals or obligations. A place that encourages spontaneous interaction, does not necessarily involve costs, allowing residents to engage with their neighbourhood or community and participate in various activities or receive support for a variety of needs.

In the current situation, there is little incentive for residents of surrounding neighbourhoods to visit the district, which limits opportunities for reintegration. The existing (public) infrastructure is unattractive. There is little attention to cyclists and pedestrians, the absence of pleasant routes, public squares, green spaces and public buildings creates poor appeal. Additionally, there is a lack of places interconnecting functions that encourage diverse people from different social classes to interact with each other. Social tensions, crime, and insecurity are results of parallel societies, not only affecting the area but all residents.

Research questions

The question rises how a new initiative or impulse could help unify and enhance the area, both at the city and neighbourhood level. There is need for a design that goes beyond being just a cultural hub. It must integrate into a larger network, connecting with its surroundings in terms of location, infrastructure, and its role in fulfilling social needs.

Main question: How might we design social infrastructure to blur physical and social boundaries for Haraldsgade residents and adjacent neighbourhoods, in order to improve integration and unification in a parallel society?

The question focuses on creating an incentive that can relieve the identified problems in the area by developing a multifunctional social infrastructure that promotes the physical and social integration of Haraldsgade in the urban context.

Sub question: How can the building be part of a connective public infrastructure that increases accessibility and adds value in the neighbourhood?

This question is about designing a thoughtful relationship between public infrastructure and building, focusses on a connective space creating a multifunctional environment that fosters integration and interaction for different communities. It involves examining poor connections that result in physical and psychological barriers, leading to inaccessibility. It focuses on how infrastructure, such as footpaths, cycling routes, car traffic and public transport, can increase the social value, promote connectivity and informal interaction. It also looks at how plazas and public green spaces make the environment less hostile and more attractive, creating a more seamless transition between different residential areas, public spaces and buildings.

Sub question: What functional needs can be effectively combined to attract diverse target groups, including residents with varying income levels and backgrounds?

The question focuses on understanding the functional needs of various resident groups within different communities, with the aim of understanding what might motivate them to visit a space or building. It also explores how these needs can be integrated in a multifunctional way to encourage social interaction, engagement and mutual understanding.

aim/objective

The research aims to explore how architectural design can serve as a catalyst for change in a parallel society, in a neighbourhood that is physically and socially divided. The research will focus on exploring and developing design concepts, principles and guidelines, challenging the multifunctionality of space and building, encouraging interaction through physical connection and meeting social needs.

By reactivating the area through a social infrastructure, the project aims to fight the gather and mobility challenges which prevent participation in public life. The infrastructure element in its essence serves as a foundation for natural social interaction, distinct from functions that might link social devices, which don't guarantee consistent use. It is about a possible everyday experience, establishing long term common ground and encouraging low threshold interaction and casual use

The goal is to develop principles on engaging space that supports the local community while making the neighbourhood more attractive to nearby residents in terms of culture, activities, knowledge and education. New *functions* and *connections* will question the idea of being *separate but equal*, aligned with the concept of the parallel society. Considering an ethnically diverse and multi-generational resident composition, the aim is to create motivation or opportunities for people to understand each other and interact in an open environment.

Relevance

Architecture can play a major role in segregation through imposed policies, physical design choices and access to facilities. Divisions can occur because of social tensions but can also occur due to gentrification. Upgrading a neighbourhood with good intention can have undesirable results which makes it crucial to investigate how buildings, designs or projects, through its multifunctional need satisfaction and connecting role in the context, can have disruptive effect on parallel society problems.

This research is relevant because it focuses on designing healthy urban environments, which works in two directions. In the physical sense, it concerns restoring isolated urban areas and creating a building and place that connects both isolated areas and people. The essence is to lower the threshold for visiting and using

the place. In the social sense, it is about promoting a socially inclusive and equal community. It allows me to explore how architecture can not only shape physical spaces and connections but also influence human interactions, social health and equity. In the broader perspective of architecture, this is relevant because this area can serve as a case study for other similarly neglected or disintegrated areas in Europe, facing the same problems of clustering low-income earners and densely populated areas with disadvantaged people. The shift towards multifunctional spaces reflects the change in urban lifestyle and the evolving urban needs. The image of a post-industrial area with human-unfriendly infrastructure, rundown factory halls and closed building blocks is recognizable for many western countries. It is important to explore how infrastructure and derelict industrial sites can be exploited to reactivate its surroundings and bring fragmented neighbourhoods and communities back together.

Definitions of theoretical framework

Multifunctional space: The concept of multifunctionality serves as a framework to explore opportunities in design strategies that fuse or combine various *functions*, potentially merging, combining or clustering specific spaces or apply principles that allow spaces to function without a specific purpose. Multifunctionality can also transcend façades or roofs, blurring boundaries, bridging *public* and *private* spaces, blending *indoor* and *outdoor* environments, and *maximizing usage* throughout the *day*. In this concept, multifunctionality means fewer boundaries and less exclusive space, creating social infrastructure that promotes a more connected city and relieve the challenges of parallel societies.

Blurring boundaries: To increase accessibility in this respect, it seeks to create an informal and natural transition between public infrastructure, space and building. It focusses on a multifunctional environment, creating a more personal and cultural place which is not only centred around specific activities or the involvement of money. Boundaries encapsulate the idea of barriers that prevent interaction which exist socially and physically, encouraging considering potential ways to reconnect for parallel societies.

Low-threshold: Low-thresholdness can serve as a means of strengthening connections. This can be challenged by considering physical connections in public space and infrastructure, accessibility, location and orientation. Likewise, it can be socially explored by creating function mixing that provides low intensity contact and interaction.

Methodology

The methods will focus on developing ideas, guidelines, and concepts, informed by literature and case studies, to address the issue of parallel societies in the area, while

also making them appealing to people from surrounding neighbourhoods. The insights and concepts emerging from this research can be further explored in my own design work. These will address approaches to meeting programmatic needs, variations in spatial layout and concepts of how the building engages mobility or pedestrians, ultimately developing ideas of multifunctionality that can guide the form, circulation and functions of the building.

One method is to use literature to further explore links between public space, spontaneous interaction and enhanced social cohesion across diverse groups, looking for relations to multi-purpose in programming and layout or the consideration of the pedestrian landscape. This transcends façades or buildings. *Social infrastructure and the public life of cities* by Latham and Layton is important because of its specific focus on the aspects of social infrastructure. Other literature like '*The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*' by William H. Whyte, and '*The Death and Life of Great American Cities*' by Jane Jacobs will contribute to develop a vision on the use of public green space, plaza and infrastructure and its potential in physically and socially connecting environments and communities.

The exploration also focusses on how to make the building accessible and a connecting factor in the area by analysing existing infrastructure and opportunities to transform barriers into connective nodes. This includes the mapping existing networks or larger networks of slow traffic routes, public transport, greenery and other important infrastructure in the scale of adjacent districts or Copenhagen. Case studies of buildings which incorporate human-oriented infrastructure like bicycle and pedestrian traffic will be analyzed to identify knowledge and opportunity. Projects like *New High-Speed Station by Estudio Herreros*, *The Block by is-architects* or *Ewha Womans University* are interesting as social infrastructures that engage public circulation with programmatic need

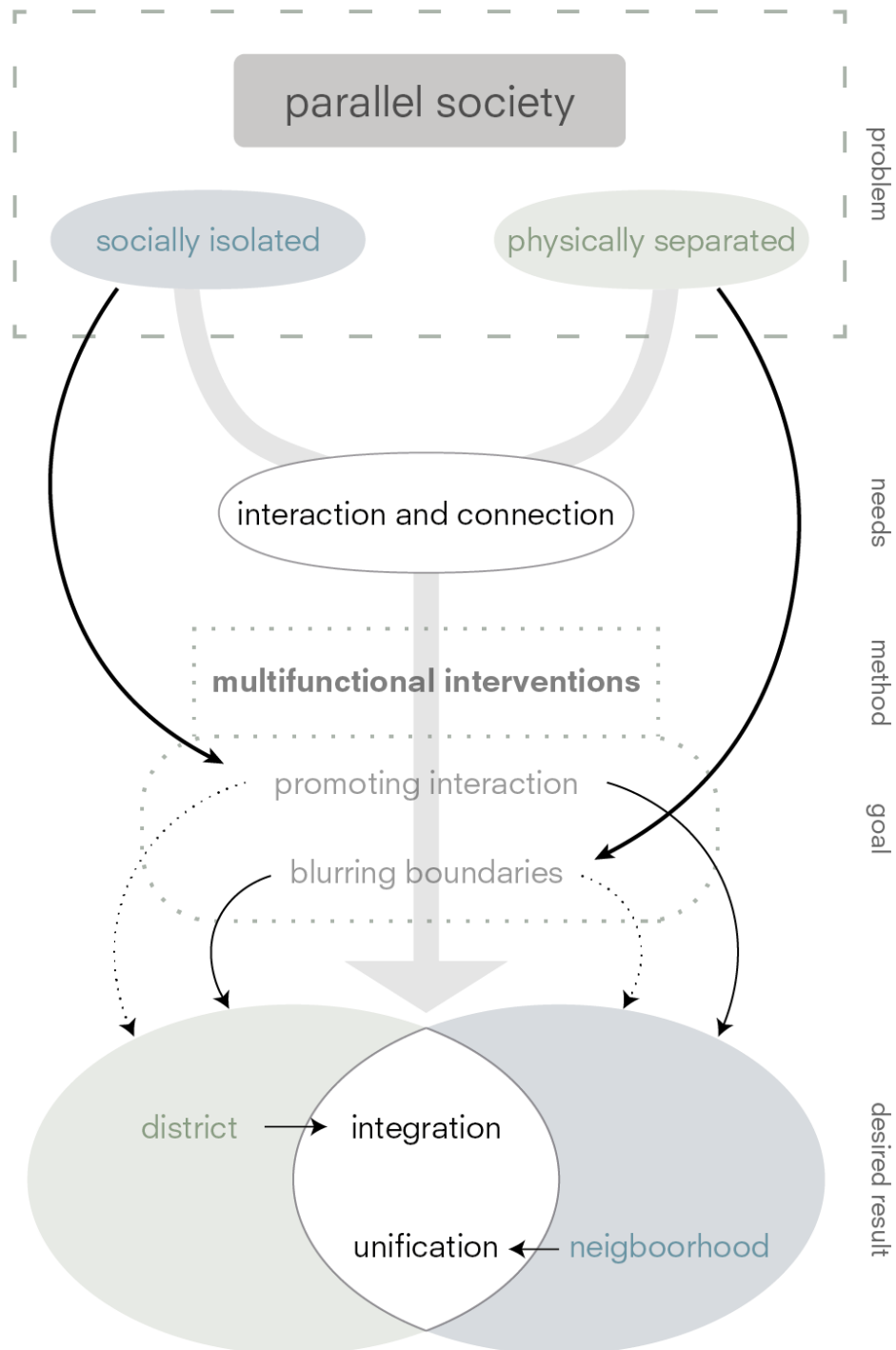
The Contact Theory, developed by social psychologist Gordon Allport in the 1950s will be used to explore the conditions for successful contact between members of different groups. It can be helpful in identify common themes and specific needs among different groups.

For a better understanding of addressing social inequality through neighbourhood engagement, the study '*Promoting Social Equity and Building Resilience through Value-Inclusive Design*' by Harris et al. provides valuable insights on how architecture can be used to address inequality and increase opportunity.

In addition to this, Case studies will be used to analyse successful projects that have bridged such socio-economic devices or projects that have utilized multifunctionality to strengthen social cohesion. The method will focus on programmatic elements that are common through different classes, or events and occasions that could bring different communities together. Spaces that create motivation or opportunity for people from

different backgrounds and social classes to interact and understand each other. This includes research on layout and combinations or fusion of functions that encourage low-threshold social interaction. For this, books can be used that evaluate or analyse a collection of such buildings, like '*This is hybrid*' and '*50 Hybrid Buildings*' by A+T research group or '*Community By Design*' by Porterfield. Individual projects in different contexts will also be analysed like *Multifunctional Center Doelum*, *NDSM Werf*, *Forssa Multipurpose Centre Akvarelli* and *dot.ateliers* to examine how physical layouts, programmatic combinations and architectural features can facilitate connections between people.

Diagram



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