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URBAN LIVING · HEALTH & CITY

## Refshaleøen named Europe's healthiest neighbourhood

*Thirty years after a TU Delft thesis proposed transforming a forgotten industrial waterfront into a health-promoting district, Copenhagen's boldest urban experiment has been validated by a generation of residents who simply call it home.*

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By Kristine Holm · City Hall correspondent

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#### CULTURE

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By Maja Christoffersen · Arts & Culture

#### LIFESTYLE

##### **'I haven't opened a fitness app in three years' - residents on life after the algorithm**

*On Refshaleøen, the city's most health-conscious neighbourhood, the question of how to stay well has a refreshingly simple answer: go outside. We spent a week with four residents to find out what that actually looks like.*

By Sofie Lund · Weekend Magazine

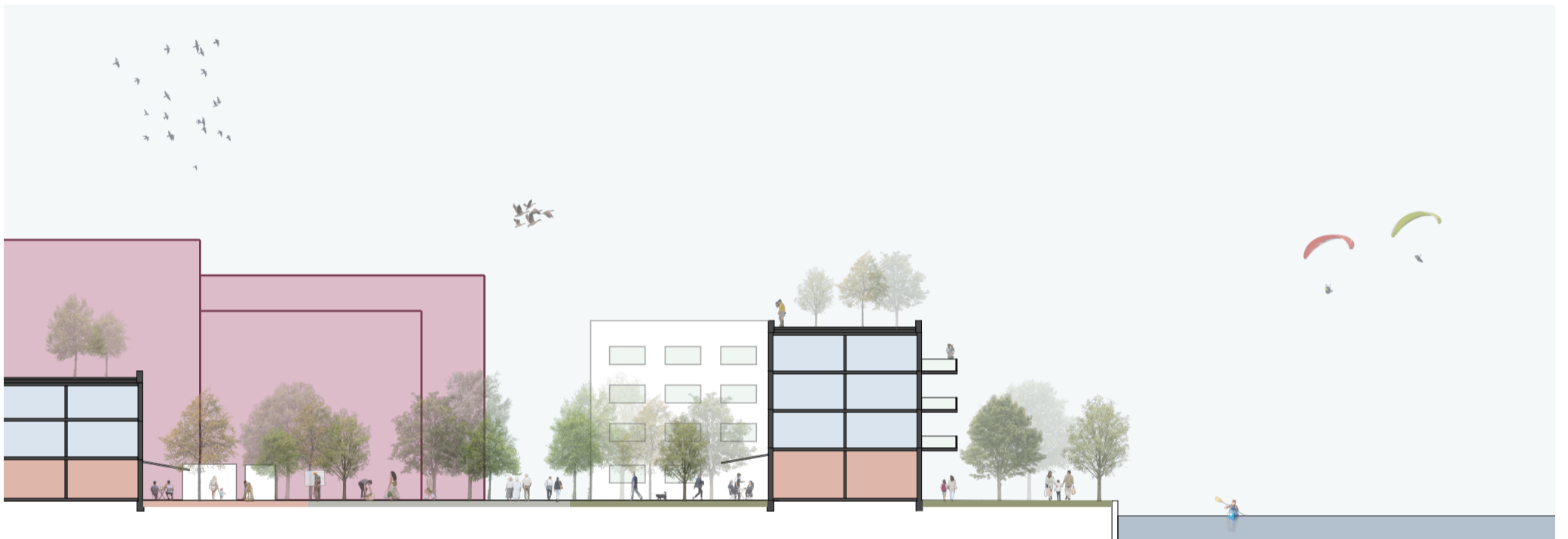
##### **Screen time down 34% among Refshaleøen children, new study finds**

*The data is striking. Parents say the explanation is simpler than the researchers make it sound: there is just too much else to do.*

# Refshaleøen named Europe's healthiest neighbourhood

*Thirty years after a TU Delft thesis proposed transforming a forgotten industrial waterfront into a health-promoting district, Copenhagen's boldest urban experiment has been validated by a generation of residents who simply call it home.*

By Anders Møller, Urban Affairs Correspondent | Photography: Sofie Lund | June 16, 2025



**I**t is a Tuesday morning in June, and Laura is running. Not on a treadmill, not through traffic - but along the Gate to Calmness, the kilometre-long pedestrian and cycling route that winds through the eastern green structure of Refshaleøen toward Lynetteholm, where the harbour opens wide and the city seems, briefly, very far away.

Afterwards, she swims. The bathing area at the southern waterfront edge has been here since 2041, and on warm mornings like this one it draws a quiet crowd - elderly residents, young parents, teenagers who have nowhere better to be.

„I don't think about it as a health choice,“ Laura says, towelling off. „I think about it as just - what you do here. The neighbourhood makes it easy. It almost makes it inevitable.“

**T**hat ease: that sense of health-supporting daily life as something unremarkable, ambient, built-in - is precisely what a 24-year-old urban design student named Linda Peled set out to design when she submitted her master's thesis at TU Delft in the summer of 2026.

The thesis, titled „From Pixels to Parklands“, proposed a neighbourhood-scale masterplan for Refshaleøen structured around a single question: in an era defined by screens, sedentary work, and digital overload, can the design of a neighbourhood actively counteract the health consequences of the way we live?

The answer, thirty years on, appears to be yes.

**„The neighbourhood makes it easy. It almost makes it inevitable.“**

**L**ast month, the European Urban Health Institute published its annual ranking of the continent's most liveable and health-supportive neighbourhoods. Refshaleøen came first - ahead of districts in Vienna, Amsterdam, and Helsinki - scoring highest in the categories of mental well-being, daily physical activity, access to restorative green space, and social cohesion.

The ranking was widely celebrated in Copenhagen. But for those who know the history of the site - and of the thesis that first articulated its potential - the result carries a particular weight.

„When I read that result,“ Linda said by telephone from Berlin, where she now leads an urban health consultancy, „I thought about the six personas I invented in 2026. Jonas and Mia, Felix, Maria, Martin, and George. I wondered whether they would recognise the place. I think they would.“



Open AI (2026)

The pedestrian and cycling route was completed in 2043 as part of the Transformation Phase of the masterplan. It now draws an estimated 4,200 daily users.

The transformation of Refshaleøen from an industrial brownfield to what the Institute called „a benchmark for twenty-first century health-conscious urbanism“ did not happen quickly. The site’s contaminated soils, the lengthy relocation of the Biofos wastewater facility to a neighbouring island, and the complexity of coordinating development across four distinct residential quarters meant that the neighbourhood Linda envisioned in 2026 only reached completion in the early 2050s.

But the spatial logic she proposed - a clear street grid oriented to Copenhagen’s existing urban structure, a heritage part anchored by retained industrial buildings and two new landmarks, a layered green-blue network running from intimate courtyard gardens to expansive nature areas - survived the decades of planning, politics, and construction largely intact.

„The framework was robust,“ says Mads Kjær, the city architect who oversaw the final construction phase. „It had internal logic. Every layer supported every other layer. You couldn’t remove one piece without weakening the whole - and that meant it was very hard to compromise away.“

**„There is something about a place that has physical beauty and proximity to nature that makes the phone feel less urgent. When I’m walking here I genuinely don’t think about it. The environment gives you enough to engage with that the device becomes irrelevant for a while.“**

Ole, 2026

2026



Non-accessible waterfront

2043



Gate to Calmness



BY THE NUMBERS

32,400

residents (2055)

83%

cycle or walk to work daily

5.2 km

of new waterfront accessible to public

38%

of total area is green or blue

#1

European urban health ranking, 2055

The neighbourhood’s mental health outcomes are tracked annually by the University of Copenhagen’s Department of Public Health. Residents report significantly lower rates of anxiety and burnout than the Copenhagen average - a gap that has widened consistently since 2047.

„We see it in the data and we see it in the street,“ says Prof. Anne Thorvaldsen, who leads the study. „People here spend more time outside, more time with neighbours, and less time on screens than residents of comparable Copenhagen districts. The neighbourhood does something to them.“



**T**he thesis that started it all is now taught in urban planning programmes across northern Europe. Its central argument - that digitally driven sedentary lifestyles create measurable public health deficits, and that neighbourhood-scale spatial design can actively counteract them - has moved from provocative hypothesis to mainstream planning doctrine in the three decades since it was written.

„In 2026, people thought it was an interesting idea,“ Linda recalls. „Nobody was quite sure whether it was urban design or public health or landscape architecture. Now I think that confusion feels dated. Of course it is all three. That was always the point.“

**T**he fourteen spatial criteria Linda developed in her thesis - among them Buffered Zones that Relieve Urban Pressure, Restorative Pockets that Invite Recovery, and Distributed Green that Embeds Nature Daily - have since been adopted, in modified form, by Copenhagen’s municipal planning guidelines and by the Danish Building Research Institute as a standard evaluation framework for new residential development.

In Refshaleøen itself, the criteria are visible everywhere. Green streets permit only walking and cycling, leading always toward a larger nature area. Canal networks draw water into the residential fabric. The heritage part hums with cultural life while the deep nature areas to the north and east remain, deliberately, unprogrammed.

**B**ack on the waterfront, Laura has finished her swim. Her children - both born on the island - are at school five minutes away on foot. Her husband cycles past on his way to the co-working spaces in the heritage quarter, where the old industrial facades still carry the marks of what this place once was.

„My kids have never known it any other way,“ she says. „For them, this is just - a neighbourhood. They don’t know that someone had to imagine it first.“

Somewhere in Berlin, a woman who once stood on this same patch of ground with nothing but drawings and a question is probably smiling.

- A.M.