

The Depolarizer

A Public Condenser to fight polarization

Keywords

Depolarization, Affective polarization, Widening political views, Public building, Denmark

Research Introduction

The global rise of political polarization is bringing up concerns about its destructive effects on our societies. All over the world we see increasing polarization, established according to religious, ethnic, social-economic status and political preference or because of actual societal issues like climate change, covid vaccinations and armed conflicts (McCoy et al., 2022). "Polarization" in this proposal refers to the growing fragmentation of society into antagonistic collectives, perceived as opponents in existential questions over the future of society (Karacsony, 2019).

Problem Statement

Polarization destabilizes our societies. It disrupts social cohesion, it increases we versus them thinking and it threatens citizens' willingness to compromise (Iyengar et al., 2019; Karacsony, 2019). It harms our democracies by deepening political divides, and diminishing trust in institutions (Kish Bar-On et al., 2024). It intensifies emotional biases, reinforces segregated identities, skews perceptions, modifies social behaviours and as a result it leaves our societies paralyzed and unable to deal with their issues (McCoy, 2019).

As in most places in Europe, polarization is increasing in Denmark (Boxell et al., 2024). From the classical political topics, economic distribution, immigration, the environment, and the European Union, in Denmark specifically, the issue of immigration has shown to become an important polarizing issue (Christiansen et al., 2020; Dennison & Vrânceanu, 2022; McManus & Falkenbach, 2022). Polarization in Denmark, increases the amount of hate crimes against minority groups (Mohamed, 2020). Polarization in Danish schools leads to radicalization (Singh, 2021). And similar to global trends it increases political violence, from which the attack this summer on the Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen in Copenhagen Square, is an illustrative example (Zhang Xin, 2024). In the neighbourhood of Bispebjerg in Copenhagen, we see several tendencies that could lead to polarization. The neighbourhood has a high percentage of immigrants which could make the national issue a local one; it is an upcoming neighbourhood which risks gentrification and therefore hostilities between groups, and lastly it is a very segregated neighbourhood, through physical boundaries and user groups that do not interact.

Important to note, is that besides a risk being seen through visible signs, the development of polarization, could emerge exponentially from a phase that is barely noticeable to a phase that consists of escalation and public incidents. As Verloove writes in her study towards polarization, polarization is a process of four phases. It starts with the "resting" phase (nothing happens, but there are indications of the development of polarization), from which it develops rapidly to the "discomfort" phase (The atmosphere gets unfriendly, discomfort towards each other, misconceptions and alienation), the "Subdued tensions" phase (Irritations, negative imagining,

increasing we vs them thinking, groups avoid each other) and finally into a phase of “open incidents and escalations”. Therefore societies should address this issue as early as possible (Verloove et al., 2020).

Addressing polarization is discussed in politics, management, social media design, however within architecture this debate has barely started. At the 17th International Architecture Exhibition in Venice, Hashim Sarkis, main curator of the event, introduced the topic of widening political views in the debate. He calls on architects to imagine spaces in which we can live together while having this context of widening political views (Sarkis, 2021). Even more recently we see the question rise about the importance of Architecture in ‘fighting’ the issue of polarization. Ryan Anderson writes about the importance of workplaces amidst political division. He points out the role of the workspace, as the middle ground, which functions as one of the only remaining places where people of opposing political views meet and set their divisions aside, simply because they have to collaborate in order to gain income. Anderson introduces the possible importance of a physical place in fighting the issue of polarization (Anderson, 2024).

Research Questions

Understanding the severity of the issue and imagining the possible role architecture can play in fighting polarization, has resulted in the following research question:

How can architecture contribute to the depolarization of society?

In order to answer the main question, the research will elaborate on the following sub questions: What role can a public condenser play in fighting the polarization of Denmark’s society?; How does polarization characterize itself within individuals and within the collective?; How does space foster positive interaction between groups of people? And how could architecture create a common identity, but at the same time celebrate the differences within this common identity?

Research Aims

Most importantly missing in the debate is a sufficient presence of architectural case studies that address this issue. Therefore this research will produce a prototype of a public condenser that can decrease polarization. By adding a prototype, as a starting point to the discourse, this research aims to trigger the debate. Aiming for a prototype means, that the research is going to search for universal concepts, that can be replicated and applied to the design of public condensers in different contexts, with only minor modifications. Within the process of designing a public condenser, research should first create a framework of design implementations that could be used in universal designs for public buildings that depolarize, the prototype. In second place this framework will be implemented and tested in the design for a Public Condenser in the site area of Bispebjerg in Copenhagen.

Methodology

In order to answer the research questions, I will look at different disciplines that do discuss or study the topic of (de)polarization. Since the topic is quite undiscovered within architecture, this research will make use of mostly qualitative research methods. I will analyze theories on decreasing polarization, to explore potentially useful concepts from reports that help municipalities, governments, or other institutions fight polarization; I will analyze case studies to explore useful design solutions from design examples that aim on fighting polarization, within architecture or in other disciplines; I will interview experts on polarization, with open ended questions, to create more understanding of the issue and come up with possible solutions together; Lastly I want to make use of a more quantitative method which is analyzing historical examples of countries, cities, places, that were dealing with polarization and managed to decrease it, in order to evaluate the effectiveness of certain interventions.

As stated in the research aim, the design that follows the research will be a prototype, which means that it should be validated/tested. Since the scope of the thesis will unlikely be able to construct the prototype and even then will hardly be able to gather data on whether it is successful or not, the approach for the validation of this prototype is by academic debate.

Finally, by using these methods I understand that the research will be affected by my biases, so I aim to mitigate this influence as much as possible by a constant discussion and reflection of my findings with peers, tutors and experts.

Outcome

The Depolarizer should be able to fight the issue of polarization on different levels. The individual, interpersonal and collective. On the individual level, the Depolarizer should target beliefs, views and perceptions. It should make people aware of prejudices, create mutual understanding of each other's differences and decrease feelings of fear and loss. On the interpersonal level, it should affect interactions between people and their groups. It should create social cohesion, foster positive interactions and encourage constructive discussion. On the collective level, it should focus on rethinking the governmental institutions, social media influences and public discourse norms. It should make the users resilient towards the pushers of polarization, protect them from influences that increase polarization and create understanding of how differences can be something positive and even necessary.

The Depolarizer will be a public condenser that consists of a program that brings together neighbourhood residents and students from the NEXT vocational education institution, into a space in which they will interact and work together on individual and communal projects that are apolitical and ignore any prejudices or political opinions. A discovered opportunity is to extend the existing vocational education program for students into a community workshop/makerspace for everyone. The public condenser will be an extension of the dense urban home; it will be a shared suburban garage that offers approachable facilities that the house doesn't offer.

The building should aim for transforming the existing boundaries into a safe open system through which the segregated neighbourhood could connect. The Depolarizer will most likely be located in an existing building at the intersection of three important segregated groups in the area, the NEXT vocational education institute, the Emaljehaven park and the rest of the neighbourhood being connected over the Frederiksborgvej. Within the building, circulation will play an important role to encourage encounters and interaction between users.

The public condenser will create a new shared identity through program, form and materiality. It will create a feeling of belonging and community. It will be an identity rooted in the combinations of heritage and backgrounds already visible in the neighbourhood, but combined and morphed into a fresh new identity. Simultaneously it will celebrate individual identity and the differences between individuals and groups using the space.

The outcome for this thesis will develop over time within the framework presented above. In the diagram included underneath I would like to show how this research will translate knowledge into concepts and finally into design interventions.

How can architecture contribute to the depolarization of society?

- What role can a public condenser play in fighting the polarization of Denmark's society?
- How does polarization characterize itself within individuals and within the collective?
- How does space foster positive interaction between groups of people?
- How could architecture create a common identity, and simultaneously show the difference within this common identity?

How?

Fight issue

History

Activities, that ignore, differences, but brings people together.

Apolitical activities

Circulation

Different scales of circulation, ability to separate circulation but keep it open. Building functions as a connector between separated areas.

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