Single-family detached Housing: a branch of paradise or a problem? Part II

Single-family detached housing – two Danish case studies

Note: Draft not for quotation, comments is welcome

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Abstract

This paper is an essay on the development and position of single-family housing on the Danish housing market. Homeownership in the form of single-family suburban housing has generally been in high demand at the same time as it has been a source of worry and discussion. The paper outlines the background for single-family housing and how the position of this type of housing has been evaluated in the housing policy debate in recent decades. Important themes are the position of the single-family housing stock first built in the 1960s and the 1970s, how stated housing preferences changes with economic trends, how to look at possible future housing preferences. On this background two case studies on suburban areas are presented. The concluding discussion concerns the need to question the future position of the suburban owner-occupied single-family house and to reconceptualise the single-family house in a future perspective as well as the challenges housing and urban policy needs to address.

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Introduction

This paper addresses the issue of suburban neighbourhoods with single-family detached housing. The aim is to refocus on and illustrate the policy and planning challenges presented in my previous article “Single-family detached housing - A branch of paradise or a problem?” in (Doling & Elsinga, 2006).

In the last decades popular and policy discussions on owner-occupied single-family housing has been going from one extreme to the other. Today important issues are: Does everyone prefer to live in a single-family house with a garden in the ever expanding suburbs? Or, is the popularity and media hype on housing and especially single-family housing a temporary phenomenon? And just ten years ago the upcoming issue was: Do we have to worry about the future demand for housing in the large suburban areas with standard single-family housing built in the 1960s and the 1970s?

What kind of housing qualities are people looking for and what is really important in housing? Is the single-family house the answer to present housing needs? In a Danish context these questions can be illustrated and discussed from several angles. Here are two – a positive one and a negative one:

The single-family house in the positive version is a concept including the ideal home. It is the home fit for a family with children, whether the children have arrived or not. Also they might already have left the parental home to live on their own. But then they might visit with their partners and children - the grandchildren. This is a world of sun, summer and barbeque in the light Nordic summer nights or snow, winter, homemade cookies and snowmen in the garden. It is the house for long summer vacations and a Christmas lasting until Easter. The ideal home is free from any trace of work, as work takes place somewhere else. The home world concerns the family and ends by the garden gate. A vision of paradise, a glorified picture of the home or a dream about the nuclear family!

The single-family house in the negative version is a concept including an ideal home without any connection to real life. First of all, today more than 70 per cent of all Danish households are made up of one or two persons. Only 16 per cent of all households consist of two parents with two children. The period with children has become a later and more passing stage in life. Owner-occupied single-family housing is an insecure setting for families with children. Even though the house is purchased with the intention of raising a planned family, it will often be abandoned due to economic difficulties in connection with divorce or relationship breakdown. Also the immense suburban neighbourhoods with single-family housing ruin the environment and destroy the countryside. They are dull and without life and community. Children are in day-care, while parents commute to distant places of work in order to pay the mortgage on the house, the car and the day-care. This type of housing is not sustainable. It is without possibilities for individual development, community building or protection of the environment!

Nevertheless suburbia is here since long ago. In Denmark the large housing areas with owner-occupied single-family detached houses are to a large degree built in the 60s until the middle of the 70s. This development took place parallel with the development of large housing estates with rented dwellings. These residential areas were built to make up for a persisting housing shortage. Rents had been frozen, investments had been regulated and people were migrating from rural to urban areas. Housing had become a pillar under the welfare state. The goal was good housing for all. The baby boomers, those who had been born immediately after World War II, raised their families in the new suburbs. Some moved in directly as newly weds. Others started their housing career in a rented flat and moved shortly after to their own detached house in the new and fast growing suburbs. Today these residents are well on their way to retiring. They love their house and might probably stay on living there until they are carried out. Are we talking about a branch of paradise or a problem? It depends on who you ask and when you pose the question. In a booming market as the one that has gained momentum in Denmark since 1993, none except grouchy economists and odd architects and planners seem to worry (see e.g. Lunde, 2005).

Definitions

A single-family house is a detached house with a garden used for permanent residence. The house type or the type of building can be a villa, a bungalow or a standard house. In the official Danish statistics (Statistics Denmark) farm houses are also included in detached single-family housing. So are the common older one-storeyed cottages and houses in the countryside and in the villages and the smaller towns. The clusters of small houses originally built by self-help housing association in the towns and cities are counted as single-family houses too. Terraced houses and semi-detached houses are houses joined with each other by a wall. Chain houses are detached but connected by garden walls or garages.
Table 1 Housing stock by type of building and type of tenure (as of 1 January 2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of building</th>
<th>Rented housing</th>
<th>Owner-occupied housing</th>
<th>Not stated</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td></td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmhouse</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>116,727</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single-family detached house</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>1,013,555</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terraced, semi and chain house</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>339,815</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-storey building</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>948,443</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>69,370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total housing stock</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>2,487,910</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Statistics Denmark, StatBank Denmark

In the statistics terraced, semi-detached and chain houses are counted as a separate type of building. In total there are 2.5 million dwellings in Denmark. 46 per cent of all dwellings are single-family housing (detached and farm houses). If we include terraced, semi-detached and chain houses 60 per cent of all housing in can be counted as single-family housing. About 9 out of 10 single-family detached houses are occupied by the owner. And close to 4 out of 10 terraced, semi-detached and chain houses are occupied by the owner (see Table 1). Owner-occupation has increased until 1980 to around 50 % of the total housing stock. For more than 20 years it has been stable between 51 and 53 % of the stock, despite growth or recession in the general economy.

Background – housing market trends and urban change

Around 1990 the idea of the single-family house becoming the future slum house came up (Jørgensen, 1995). The market for owner occupation was in a recession with a downward tendency for house prices, a low level of maintenance and an increasing number of repossessions. This prompted a worry for the large amount of single-family houses built in the suburbs of major Danish cities between 1960 and 1975. At that time prefabricated or modular standard houses became dominant and about 50 % of all single-family housing was built in that period. It was feared that it would be impossible to sell these houses and that the neighbourhoods would no longer be sufficiently attractive. Architects and planners talked and wrote about detached slum, the fear of empty houses and "ghost towns". Architects criticism of single-family housing was not new. This was also a theme of discussion 60 years ago (Buhl, 1948 see also Lind & Møller, 1996),
where the issue was how and what to build for the future. In addition to the individual owners becoming debtors in connection with a forced sale, lenders – mortgage institutes and banks – would also run into losses if they could not sell the houses. In this period many detached houses were empty and even creditors started to let instead of selling the reposessed property. Lenders organised architectural competitions on the future of single-family housing areas and on how to change and rebuild existing standard houses and residential areas (Nue Møller, 1996). An extensive book on the history and the development of single-family housing with the title Bag hækken: Det danske parcelhus i lyt og nød [Behind the Hedge: The Danish detached house for better and for worse] (Lind & Møller, 1996) was published. The intention was to demonstrate and give ideas on how the individual houses and areas could be changed and redeveloped in order to fit future residents and become more environmental sustainable. The expectation was a future population with more elderly people needing smaller dwellings and more common facilities and services and a general need to save energy. Architectural competitions and exhibitions showed directions on how to change single-family houses into smaller units and join the gardens to give room for common greens and playgrounds (Dirckinck-Holmfeld, 1998; Lund, 1999). The costs of realising the project were prohibitive, though, and the final results were some demonstration projects showing the possibilities.

In the meantime the market for owner-occupied housing had changed and until the end of 2006 there have not been any difficulties in selling single-family housing in the major urban areas in Denmark. The Copenhagen Region and the growth areas in East Jutland have experienced increased house prises and extensive rebuilding and renovation of the existing stock (Statens Byggeforskningsinstitut & Amternes og Kommunernes Forskningsinstitut 2001). Since 1993 when the market turned and interest rates went down, a string of new credit and financing possibilities has been introduced; refinancing existing loans, longer loans, loans free of amortization, loans with flexible interest rates and equity loans are some of them. Cheaper financing have increased housing prices. Home owners have used equity to finance not only modernisation and refurbishment but also to finance other consumption and investments. New house building also of single-family housing has been taken up. In economic pressure areas a lack of building lots have directed the activity to the existing housing stock and increased commuting. All talk about redeveloping the single-family suburban areas has more or less died away. Until the beginning of 2006 the main worry was the lack of supply of housing for sale, a high price level that kept new and young households from becoming homeowners, and the lack of building lots where needed, e.g. especially in the Copenhagen Region. In order to alleviate this situation a new town complying with the Figerplan for Copenhagen is planned (Vestergaard & Ærø, 2006), but the realisation of the plan has been delayed due to lack of public resources and a current structural reform. Simultaneously there is a lack of rented housing in the same area. Households not being able to enter the market for owner-occupation have to queue in front of rented housing.

The preconditions for and demands on Copenhagen and its urban region have changed profoundly and very rapidly during the last 20 years. Until 1993 Copenhagen was loosing population and jobs. Since then, the new economy has expanded in the area. Knowledge intensive or knowledge based enterprises have become more important. Desurbanization have turned into urbanization. The region, including the whole of Zealand and part of Southern Sweden, is being transformed into an integrated job market with people commuting longer and longer distances.

The urban housing markets in Denmark are characterised by demand pressure and a highly regulated rented housing sector. In spite of official densification strategies, new housing is often in the form of suburban developments of detached dwellings for single-family households. These new areas need to be planned with particular attention to the quality of residential buildings in relation to urban public contexts like basic infrastructure as well as sufficient connections to major traffic systems. The public discourse regarding urban living environments and lifestyles thus seems not to have affected fundamental attitudes towards single-family housing in urban areas and patterns of development. This can become a serious threat to more sustainable housing and urban development, both in terms of environmental and economic sustainability and, not least, urban life quality.

Housing policy debate

There is a long tradition for calculating and discussing whether tenants or owner-occupiers are favoured in relation to the resources spent on housing like direct subsidies (e.g. rent allowances and housing benefits for pensioners) and indirect subsidies (e.g. low property tax, low evaluation of the taxable value of living in an owner-occupied house, the value of living in/having a rental contract on a dwelling subject to rent regulation) (DOR 1970 og 2001; OECD 2006). It is questioned whether it is suitable that everyone
more or less pays to one another in relation to housing consumption. The distributional effects are not transparent and the precondition for sustaining the system is a high level of labour taxes.

Nevertheless it has not been possible to reach a political agreement on a housing policy change. The benefits of a change will be long term and in the first round favour young and new households. Open access to rented housing instead of depending on the present queuing system and personal networks will benefit only a minority of newcomers to the housing market. A majority of well-established households and among them many owner-occupiers will lose present privileges (Vestergaard, 2001a and 2004). The course of events in relation to the last three elections for the Danish parliament (1998, 2001 and 2005) shows that political parties with ambitions to have a seat in the government do not challenge a privileged majority or point to any insecurity concerning the possibility of becoming homeowners. It can only be judged in the long term whether being a homeowner is a privilege also in the sense of being able to make a profit. The economic part of this privilege is probably far overvalued in a period of prosperity like the one Denmark has experienced since 1993 until the end of 2006. All the same here it must be acknowledged that single-family housing has been the preferred housing form since the middle of the 20th century. It seems that compact urban housing estates lack those qualities that would make them acceptable as permanent alternatives for broad groups of households, and single-family housing still has a high cultural value.

**Housing preferences – past and future!**

A survey on housing preferences in 2001 showed that more than 70% of the Danes wanted to be or to become owner-occupiers within five years if they had a free choice (Vestergaard, 2001b). Those with preferences for owner-occupation further wanted a detached house, were predominantly below 50 years of age, were living with a partner and were planning to move house. Compared to a similar survey in 1986 more tenants preferred owner-occupation and less respondents were undecided about their preferred future tenure.

So when preparing interviews focus groups in 2005 to map the interest for housing in the above mentioned new town being planned south of Frederikssund in the Copenhagen region a working hypothesis was that people predominantly preferred single-family detached housing. But the results turned out very differently when conducting interviews with the target groups for the new town.

**Fig. 2 Copenhagen's Fingerplan and the location of the new town on the middle finger**

It is expected that the future town will attract especially younger families moving out of the city of Copenhagen and senior citizens looking for housing fit for the third age. Young people are the most mobile and there is no reason to assume that this pattern will change. In order to get to know the preferences of the future residents, research examined into what was behind the preferences of potential or 'identical' residents - realising that the young newcomers in 2017 will be around 8 years old today.
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(Vestergaard, Ærø & Lyduch 2006). The following four groups or types were used as stand-ins for potential residents:

1. Knowledge workers: Younger persons with a degree and a job in a science park outside the City of Copenhagen
2. City people: Younger persons living in the City of Copenhagen
3. Newcomers to Trekroner: Persons living a new residential neighbourhood next to the University of Roskilde. This neighbourhood is located close by the site of a new town and it is to some degree similar to the vision of the town concerning a common target group of people with preference for developing a new community
4. Newcomers to Frederikssund: Persons having moved to the Municipality of Frederikssund within the last two years with fresh experience from the local housing market.

The 'knowledge workers' with a creative lifestyle focus on their professional careers. Their residence is in the wider region. After some years in the City of Copenhagen many move to larger dwellings in the same type of neighbourhoods that they grew up in, often in the areas north of Copenhagen. They especially express preferences for access to open green areas, having privacy in their own dwelling and for housing of a very high technical and esthetical standard. They would consider going to live in the new town if they could have good architecture as well as buildings of a high technical standard without defects here.

'City people' are mostly younger persons enjoying the free and often anonymous life in the big city. They focus on instant events and like to be able to step out from their small apartments into lively streets in the city. To be able to have fun and to meet friends without having to plan in advance is important. Transport is preferable 15 minutes on a bike and commuting time to Copenhagen and friends in the city could turn them off from moving to the new town. Access to nature and fascinating houses could attract them. At the moment they do not have time to be involved in creating the new town.

'Newcomers to Trekroner' have a social lifestyle and they prefer a town with a mix of all kinds of people. They like to spend time with family and neighbours and to be active in the neighbourhood. Many have lived in small communities set up in large flats or houses in the city before they embarked on a building or a co-housing project with likeminded people. Ecology and community are important factors and they want them in their everyday life. The possibility of becoming pioneers in the new town and to be able to build and live in a co-housing community can attract this group of people to the new town.

'Newcomers to Frederikssund' are looking for a stable family life and being able to send their children to a local school with kids from similar families. They want their own single-family detached house, where they can raise a family with children. Many look for the freedom provided by having your own garden, to be able to build or rebuild and having a private zone around your own house. They are not attracted to modern architecture and building styles with high-rise or densely built-up areas. They are interested in the new town as local residents in the same municipality.

Actually only one group, group 4 'Newcomers to Frederikssund' confirm the assumption that most people tend to prefer single-family detached housing. The three other groups were not adverse to densely built-up high-rise housing in the context of the new town. These groups had very high demands on quality and emphasized architecture, commuting and transport possibilities, landscaping and access to nature as important factors. None of the participants in the first three focus groups - knowledge workers, city people and newcomers to Trekroner - discussed questions like layout or interior decoration. Their interest was more generally about the kind of life one could have, the neighbourhood, type of contact with others, what to look at, green spaces, access to nature and the outdoors, possibility to jog or go for a ride on a bicycle, to see your children in a safe and attractive setting, to be able to have privacy etc.

Housing preferences need to be considered in an economic, geographical, and regional context. There is obviously a need to know more about the motivations behind the housing preferences current and future residents express. There is a need to frame a theory on factors influencing housing preferences that goes beneath the surface.

The status of the 1960s and 1970s neighbourhoods - Two case studies

As mentioned above there has been professional debates on the large residential areas with single-family detached housing since around 1990. Questions were if these rather uniform suburban areas could be developed and transformed into more densely built-up urban areas. The idea is to offer a more varied or differentiated housing supply as well as community facilities and services.
So far there are no Danish examples of such transformations of residential areas from the 1960s and the 1970s. In the meantime the residents have grown older. Some are on early retirement – paid out of the general tax-based welfare system – others will retire soon. Investigations from the most influential lobby organisation for the elderly in DK (DaneAge Association) point out that the 60+ residents prefer to live in a more manageable dwelling with less private outdoor space and preferably with more community (spirit) and shared living (bofællesskab) (Kähler, 2004). Investigations also show that the 60+ like to remain in the neighbourhood where they have often lived for a major part of their lives. The motive they have for moving to shared living is more to get a manageable dwelling suitable for elderly persons than interest in community (Hansen & Gottschalk, 2006). At the same time there is a demand pressure for new detached housing and housing in the larger urban areas in particular in the Copenhagen Region.

Development and transformation is expected to give new vitality and life to the uniform neighbourhoods and increase the supply of dwellings fit for the elderly as well other groups. Higher density, a more varied or differentiated housing supply as well as community facilities and services is seen as the solution to meet the increasing housing demand and to avoid green-field developments in the existing urban areas. However, it is uncertain what the character of the need for development and transformation is. Also it is not clear which players are capable of and willing to take initiatives. In principle the players could be:

- Residents/owner-occupiers
- House-owners association
- NGOs
- Municipality
- Business
- Interest organisations
- State

As private initiative has not been active in this area so far, it is of interest to research the following questions:

- What obstacles prevent residents – the owner-occupiers – from engaging in developing and transforming their neighbourhood?
- What are the interests of the municipalities and which initiatives have municipalities already taken?
- How do municipalities consider large residential areas with single-family detached housing built 1960-75?
- What measures have municipalities already implemented or plan to implement in areas with single-family detached housing built 1960-75?

In June 2006 these questions were brought forward in two municipalities, Kolding in East Jutland and Greve south of Copenhagen. In each municipality a town planner in the municipal physical planning department was interviewed and a short field visit was made to residential neighbourhoods.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case studies</th>
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<tr>
<td>Municipality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date of visit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighbourhoods visited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types of interviews:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structured</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unstructured</td>
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Both municipalities have a relatively large stock of dwellings in single-family detached houses built in the period 1960-75. In Greve 56% of the single-family detached houses are from that period. For Kolding the figure is 34%. The average for the whole country including rural areas is 30%.

In Greve a development or pilot project on transforming one of their residential neighbourhoods built in the 60s failed in 2004. It was quite short-lived as the involved residents left the project. But there is a lesson to be learnt and the local planners intend to take up the idea in the future. Kolding is also interested in the issue but has not taken any steps so far. The municipality has recent experience from improving a rather mixed residential neighbourhood from the 1950s.
Greve was originally developed and planned in the 1960s as one of the suburbs south of Copenhagen. It is now populated with an aging population and will have to re-plan and consider the future of the residential areas. Kolding is one of the old provincial cities in Jutland having an urban core surrounded by suburban single-family housing developments. Both municipalities are a product of the merging of a number of smaller municipalities at the structural reform in 1970 when 1350 municipalities were merged into 275. And the structural reform being implemented by the end of 2006 will set a new framework for redeveloping the residential neighbourhoods. Here 270 municipalities are merged to 98 new and larger municipalities. In 1970 Greve was a merger of rural municipalities where farmers had started to sell plots at the barn gates in the 1960s. Greve is not to be merged with any of the neighbouring municipalities in the current structural reform. This means that the municipality will be faced with a decreasing tax base unless it can attract residents active on the labour market. In 1970 Kolding, an old provincial town, merged with its surrounding rural municipalities where suburban areas with single-family districts were already being developed. Kolding will be merged with yet a new ring of municipalities in the current structural reform and also get a larger population and an increasing tax base.

Three hypotheses for the research were guiding the interviews with the planners and the course of discussion with the local residents and informers:

1. Residents/owner-occupiers in detached houses are not interested in participating in developing and transforming their neighbourhood. They concentrate on their own individual houses and cannot cope with issues at the neighbourhood level.
2. Municipalities are in principle interested in developing and transforming their residential neighbourhoods with detached houses from the 1960s and the 1970s. But they lack knowledge of what factors that can influence and advance the process.
3. There are potential societal benefits connected with developing and transforming older neighbourhoods with single-family detached houses. – These benefits are a more differentiated population and age structure, less waste of resources e.g. in relation to construction and management, a reduced need of land for green field developments, the elderly can remain in their neighbourhood.

The residents

Both the planners and the residents/owner-occupiers in the detached houses explain that the residential neighbourhoods are very popular. Most people have stayed on once they moved in. Many of the present residents have built the house themselves or were the first to move in. They are not interested in participating in developing and transforming their neighbourhood as they see no need for it. They like to have a big house and to live in the neighbourhood that they have known most of their grown-up life even if they have no children living at home. They have contact to neighbours, know their life histories and keep up the seasonal events they have build up together. The residents with a long seniority can point out the few houses with newcomers on their street or cul-de-sack. They have house pride and concentrate on keeping their own individual houses up-to-date. They have also rebuilt and extended their house. Currently they see no issues needing to be handled at the neighbourhood level. Either the municipality takes care of the streets and the pavements (Brynet, Kolding) or the owners association (Hundigegård, Greve) are organising how to handle this. The contractor taking care of streets and verges as well as common greenery for the owners association in Greve also experienced a very high demand from the individual owners for gardening services and landscaping. They did not consider the costs:

These people feel they have a lot of money!

Local landscape contractor

The municipalities

The municipalities are interested in developing and transforming their residential neighbourhoods with detached houses dating from the 1960s and the 1970s. They see a future need for it.

In Kolding the issue is not in the planning. At present residents would not want any interference. The experience is that any kind of group action or community initiative is difficult to handle, especially if it originates from the municipal level. Urban renewal initiatives have been taken in older urban areas. Here the individual town houses from the first part of the 20th century are having a renaissance. The later more uniform single-family residential areas from the later part of the 20th century have so far not been in need of major technical initiatives. But in the future it might be necessary to delegate major maintenance of the
common infrastructure to the owners and the neighbourhood level. This has already been done in a
neighbouring municipality, as there is no budget to renew the sewer systems, pavements and roads.

In Greve a pilot project was started in 2004 with the support of funds from the Ministry of
Economic and Business Affairs (Helberg, 2004). Residents in a small area in the neighbourhood
Eriksminde, first built in the 1960s, had been approached. Ideas on possibilities of joining some of
the lots, rebuilding and adding to existing houses in order to make more and smaller housing units had been
presented. Unfortunately some of the local residents became confused about and dissatisfied with the
initiative and started to campaign against the idea. The project was closed down in order not to disturb the
local peace and open up for mistrustfulness. Politically there was no support to continue. However the
issue of housing for the elderly is still on the local agenda. Some new developments especially aimed at the
older local citizens had been built recently; but the older citizens stayed in their large houses and young
families with small children bought the new housing. Currently a development with a very good and
attractive location between the local Centre and the seaside is offered the older residents.

In both municipalities they lack knowledge on what factors that can influence and advance the
process of renewing the neighbourhoods. In Kolding they are not in any kind of a hurry. Kolding is
located in a mixed-growth region and is more concerned about the development in the rural areas and the
villages that will be part of a new and much larger municipality from January 2007. Greve is in a different
situation. It is not going to join up with any of the neighbouring municipalities. It has very few areas left
for new green field house building. Future development will have to be restricted to already built up areas.
At the same time the local population is aging and the local tax base is diminishing. In this way future
development will depend on how they can manage to get new active residents with a job. The challenge is
to attract part of the demand for housing in the Copenhagen region. And currently it is difficult to offer
housing for families, as the single-family detached housing areas have a very modest turnover of property.
Just 20 years ago the norm was a family with children and two incomes in each house. Today these
neighbourhoods are more sparsely filled. One or two retired persons with a modest mortgage or none
have become the norm. Thus the income-tax base is falling at the same time as a general tax stop
undermines the property tax revenue.

Potential societal benefits

It is an open question whether there are potential societal benefits connected with developing and
transforming older neighbourhoods with single-family detached houses that can justify public subsidies.
As it can be argued that the potential benefits will be realised anyway. These benefits are e.g. a more
differentiated population and age structure, less waste of resources e.g. in relation to construction and
management, a reduced need of land for green-field developments, the elderly can remain in their
neighbourhood at the same time as families can move in. The experience from the last 20 years seems to
be that the restructuring of these neighbourhoods follows the business cycle.

Concluding discussion and future research

Today the suburbs with single-family detached housing built in the period 1960-75 are usually located at a
convenient commuting distance and connected to public transport systems. You find them encircling all
the major urban centres. In particular in the Copenhagen Region there are a number of municipalities
where this type of housing is dominant. In smaller towns and villages there are also developments from
this period. Investments were booming until 1974, but not much was built in the Copenhagen Region
after the recession gained momentum after the mid 1970s. Growth moved to the western part of
Denmark until the mid 1990s. Since then the tide has turned. People are moving to the eastern part of the
country, business has taken up in the Copenhagen Region. House prices have increased since 1993, but
building and planning sectors was very slow to react especially in the Copenhagen Region and in
Copenhagen. Young families are claimed to be pressed out of the region by unreasonable house price
increases. Dwellings in the new densely built-up low-rise housing developments for the 60+ are sold to
young families e.g. in Greve. The 60+ continue to stay on in their houses.

The future position of the suburban owner-occupied single-family house will be influenced by
housing market trends and infrastructure and resource management and thus housing policy. The high
level of flexibility and adaptability of this house and the fact that it is individually owned have so far
secured its marketability over the business cycle. In falling markets individual households have carried the
capital losses.

This house has qualities like privacy, and adaptability making it highly preferred. It is qualities that
have to do with having ones own space that is not interfered with, a quality that is often lacking in
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traditional urban residential housing blocks. This can make the present single-family housing stock keep its relative value.

But there is a need to reconceptualise the single-family house in a future perspective in order to bring the qualities to new house building and to preserve them in the already built up single-family housing areas when they are adapted and rebuilt by future owners.

Currently a group of researchers are preparing a programme for re-conceptualised research on the past, the present and the future of owner-occupied single-family housing patterns in larger urban and suburban areas covering a number of European countries. This group has formulated the need research focus as:

This kind of research has been largely neglected as a priority for some time for different reasons. Profoundly changing housing preferences, lifestyle transformations and symbolic life-world projections are potentially most clearly observed in single-family residences. The knowledge of these strongly emerging preferences are also most valid for application on collective housing, often transformed to or imitated within this context, as they are reflecting appraised ways of residing. On the household level, the acquisition of a single-family residence may represent a once-in-a-lifetime investment with severe consequences in low life quality experience and economic terms if misguided. On the societal and municipal level, unfit or badly designed structures and patterns of single-family residential areas represent huge potential economic responsibilities, infrastructure investments and loss of long-term sustainability in social and cultural terms. Therefore it seems crucial in the long run to devise new and succinct strategies, based on multilayered interdisciplinary research, for guiding future residential urban developments (edited extract from Gromark et al, 2006).

References
(Under revision)


DaneAge Association: http://www.aeldresagen.dk/


2 Sten Gromark (S), Eli Støa (N), Hedvig Vestergaard (DK), Eric Pollock (SF), Jón Rúnar Sveinsson (IS), Katrin Paadam (EE), Natalija Lepkova (LT), Berit Nordahl (N), Mervi Ilmonen (SF), Ola Nylander (S), Roode Liias (EE), Kath J. Scanlon (UK). I owe to credit this group and especially Sten Gromark and Katrin Paadam for the above formulation of the research need.


Statistics Denmark, StatBank Denmark: http://www.statistikbanken.dk/


