

AGNIESZKA SKORUPKA

Life and conflict between buildings

On the rhythms and spatiality of Sankt Hans Torv in Copenhagen

T E O R I A

Introduction

This article is a rythmanalysis of Sankt Hans Torv (Saint Hans Square) in Copenhagen. Henri Lefebvres concept of rythmanalysis is used to investigate this particular public square in Copenhagen. Specifically, I put Sankt Hans Torv in one of Lefebvre's spatial triads, the physical space being restructured by the political, has influenced the social spatiality of Nørrebro and Sankt Hans Torv, in particular in an effort to analyze the existing rhythms of everyday life that take place at the square. I also draw on the work of Jan Gehl – a Danish architect and the director Center for Public Space Research in Copenhagen, who has been a major role in reshaping the public spaces of the Danish capital. As an additional framework for this article, I also use some of Michael Sorkin's work on public spaces.

The choice of site

I chose this particular place for my investigation for a number of reasons.

First, Copenhagen, the capital city of Denmark, is an example of a city with successful public spaces¹. It has been awarded the title of European City of the Year 2005 by Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) for its public spaces and public life qualities.

Last year, I was fortunate enough to live in Copenhagen for over two months. The apartment I stayed in was located in a building right at the edge of Sankt Hans Torv. As I was living and working in Copenhagen, I was very often, in Lefebvre's terms, "grasped"

¹ Project for Public Spaces for instance, uses Copenhagen as an example.

Agnieszka Skorupka, gdynianka, absolwentka Wydziału Psychologii i Ośrodka Studiów Amerykanistycznych UW. Studiowała w JFK Institute, FU w Berlinie. Obecnie stypendystka Fundacji Fulbrighta, doktoryzuje się z psychologii środowiskowej na City University of New York. Jej główne zainteresowania badawcze skupiają się na orientacji przestrzennej, programowaniu architektonicznym oraz projektowaniu opartym na wiedzy. Współpracuje z Children Environments Research Group oraz Rockwell Design Group. Od niedawna prowadzi firmę konsultingową LIFESPACE oraz blog naukowy www.lifespace.wordpress.com.

by the city's rhythms: "In order to grasp and analyze rhythms, it is necessary to get outside them, but not completely [...]. It is necessary to situate oneself simultaneously inside and outside" (2004, p. 27).

Being an outsider and an insider while living and working in Copenhagen for that short period of time allowed me to situate myself both inside and outside of the city rhythms. I have witnessed and participated in a number of everyday rhythms of the city that I describe below. I would, for example, bike to work everyday, just like most Danes do. Being an outsider, however, coming from a place where people usually take a subway or bus to work, I consistently saw biking, as part of the everyday life in the specific place of Copenhagen – a rhythm that does not necessarily reproduce in other locations.

Outline

I first present a short history of transformation of the public spaces in Copenhagen, to illustrate the historio-political context for rhythms taking place on the city. I then proceed to describe in more detail the context for the particular site of Skt. Hans Torv. The second and the main part of the article focuses on the rhythms. I first attempt to present Lefebvre understanding of rhythm to then illustrate the patterns taking place and conduct a more thorough rhythm analysis of Sankt Hans Torv. The rhythm analysis consists of two sections – one that embarks upon everyday rhythms, that I have experienced while living at right at the square for two months. The second section deals with extra-everyday rhythms of protest in Copenhagen, for which Sankt Hans Torv has become a main public arena. Contrary to the previous section, here, I use secondary data and information gathered mostly from Danish and international news reports. The article closes with conclusions I draw from the two rhythm analysis sections.

Background for the rhythms

The public spaces of the city are pre-eminently the spaces of circulation and exchange, overwhelmingly streets and sidewalks. We judge the good city by the quality of its public life and hence its public space.

Micheal Sorkin in *Giving Ground* (1999)

Before I proceed to a closer analysis of the contemporary rhythms of Sankt Hans Torv I would like to investigate the transformations of public spaces on the city level throughout the past decades and offer a description of the square and the city as it is today. Public spaces of Copenhagen are actually often pointed to as exemplary for developing better public life. A number of other city councils try to follow the Copenhagen model, and in particular its pro bicycle approach. Professor Jan Gehl, who has been a key figure in transforming the city's public spaces over the past decades, has been hired as a consultant in different parts of the world in order to transform their public life and public spaces².

Lefebvre, compares rhythms to the music of the city (p. 36). Jan Gehl uses the same metaphor when talking about the contemporary Copenhagen and takes it a step further. The city, Gehl says, became like a good party: people don't want to leave early³. However, it has not always been this way in Copenhagen. In the 1960s the traffic was overwhelming and cars were taking over the city. Instead of building new roads and widening the existing ones, the city – more precisely Københavns Kommune, which is the city council – decided to close off streets to car traffic. The first street to be closed was Strøget. The public opposed this initial decision to some extent. It was argued that using public space is not within the Scandinavian “mentality” and that weather conditions inhibit the use of public spaces. “We are Danes, and not Italians”, a local newspaper wrote. The city officials decided to proceed with the experiment regardless. Jan Gehl investigated the effects of this transformation and published his findings along with further recommendations for the city in his work *Life Between Buildings*.⁴ These recommendations included gradual transformations of public space: closing streets off for traffic, reducing parking and introducing more attractive landscaping, and seating and different tools for wintertime public space such as outside gas heaters for cafes. Copenhagen officials closely followed the recommendations, reducing central area parking by 3% each year. By the year 1996, car free space increased over six times. Parking lots were “reclaimed” and turned into public squares and plazas. Each year the city pedestrianised more and more streets, starting with those adjacent to Strøget. These strategies, parallel Michael Sorkin's (1999) idea of planting a tree in an intersection as a minimal intervention and, as such, led to anticipated consequences. Space devoted to cars was reduced and street life has intensified. In fact, over the past 40 years the social and recreational activity has tripled in the city's major streets (Gehl and Gemzøe, 1996).

The efforts of closing streets for traffic were accompanied by a city-wide plan for development of public transportation and encouraging bicycling. A so-called “finger plan” was implemented. It aimed at developing the greater Copenhagen region based on the configuration of five rail lines (the “fingers”) and the city center (the “palm”).⁵ To promote such development a recent government's directive states that new development should occur within one kilometer of a transit station.⁶ The curbside parking spaces were

2 These include among others: Melbourne, Zurich, London and Stockholm, For more details see: <http://www.gehlarchitects.dk/>

3 Gehl, J. (9 May 2007). Public spaces – public life in the 21st century. (podcast from City talk – building better cities, retrieved from <http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/podcasts>).

4 This topic was further explored, with particular focus on the changes in Copenhagen, in his later publication *Public Spaces Public Life* (1996) with Lars Gemzøe.

5 For more on the Five Finger Plan, see Copenhagen Capacity at <http://www.copcap.com/composite-8109.htm>

6 O'Mearashehan, p. 4.

converted to bicycle lanes and the network of bicycle lanes was expanded from 180 km in 1950 to 307 km in 2000.

These bicycle lanes are enhanced through feedback from a bi-yearly public survey that is conducted regarding bicycle networks in Copenhagen. For example, it was decided not to dramatically expand bike lanes on the off main traffic/shopping corridors as bicyclists responded in the survey that they would rather prefer to make use of the paths where “life is happening” i.e. where there are other pedestrians and commercial and cultural events. The city continuously improves cycling conditions; in 2002, for example, a third of the city’s budget for road construction was allocated for the improvement of cycling conditions (Bicycle Account, 2004). A free of charge bicycle rental system was introduced.

Furthermore, the public strategies are complemented by the commercial ones – there is a bicycle shop on every almost corner and a variety of available bikes is surprising. If, as Gehl says, the city is like a party, it is important to have a ride back home late at night. In Copenhagen every cab driver is required by law to have a bicycle rack on the back of their vehicle and to take a bike for no extra charge. All of these strategies seem to be working favorably – in 2003, 34% of the population cycled to work, 27% drove, 33% used public transport and 5% walked (Bicycle Account, 2004).

Sankt Hans Torv

Saint Hans Square, the site I chose, is located in Nørrebro. As the official Copenhagen municipality’s website claims, *in the 1700’s, Nørrebro was countryside. The areas outside the city walls were barely built up at all. From around 1880, the Nørrebro quarter grew into the form we know today, changing from a sparsely populated area to a workers tenement area full of small apartments.*⁷ Once a working class neighborhood, today is a significantly gentrified area, with young population of various, ethnic backgrounds. It is now the neighborhood, with a lot of hip bars, clubs and restaurants as well as second-hand and designer shops (see for example an article in NYT, *Oasis of Energy in Copenhagen*, May 15, 2005).

Sankt Hans Torv was actually the first public area in the Nørrebro neighborhood to become revitalized. But since the revitalization program in the city had first focused the city center, other neighborhoods were not included in these efforts until the early nineties. At that time Sankt Hans Torv could hardly be called a square, rather it was a large intersection dominated by automobile traffic. In 1993, a number of changes were introduced as part of the city’s revitalization program. The car traffic in the area was rerouted around the perimeter surrounding what used to be an intersection.

As a result, the square emerged bounded by buildings on the southeast side and the rerouted auto traffic and bike paths on the other three. The surface of the new square was redesigned; the ground was given soft slopes. The whole square was made into a “sitting landscape” (for more on this concept see: Gehl, p. 167). Also a piece of public

⁷ <http://copenhagen.exposed.net/sankt-hans-torv>

art – a sculpture/fountain was put in the square: *Huset der regner* (The house where it rains) by Jørgen Sørensen allows people that use the square to interact with it. As it is an open fountain without any barriers, anyone can approach it and play with the water as people often do. Public space experts claim that the reconstruction of the square has had positive economic effects on the area (Gehl, 2007). Because the square became an attractive place it has attracted a flow of people and thus affected the adjacent streets and the surrounding area.

I will now put the above-described process in one of Lefebvre's rhythm analysis and his spatial triads, the physical space being restructured by the political, has influenced the social spatiality of Nørrebro and Sankt Hans Torv in particular.

The rhythms

Lefebvre's concept of rhythm analysis involves rhythms within and around space. His main interest lies in using the rhythms as a tool for the analysis, and less in defining a rhythm as an object of the analysis; yet, the concept emerges through his writing, understood as a phenomenon with a repetition component. Lefebvre points out that no absolute repetition exists as every instance takes place in different time-space, already "marked" by the instances preceding. Thus a rhythm can be looked at as such non-absolute repetition, that happens "everywhere where there is an interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy".

I witnessed a number of rhythms that took place in the square and this led me to connect Lefebvre's writing with my observations. Due to the limited time I could spend at my window and at the square, I could only see the daily and weekly patterns of these interactions. Therefore I have not witnessed annual patterns personally, and those that I have not experienced myself but know about I will be describing based on second-hand narratives and news reports.

Everyday rhythms of public space use

At Sank Hans Torv, the daily flow patterns were particularly visible. Each morning there was a significant flow of bike traffic outside and through the square (either towards the city or away from the city). I was a part of that stream. The diversity of the people that use bicycles to commute is rather remarkable. Almost everyone, regardless of their class, status and age, uses a bike in Copenhagen. Most of the bicycles are city and not mountain bikes; indeed there was almost a fashion in the anti-fashion.

Being used to the NYC's standards of work and usually leaving my office at the Pedagogiske Universitet at 4 PM as the last person, coming back from work I rarely caught a flow of bicycle traffic on my way back home. By that time the square and the backyards' sheds were usually already packed with parked bicycles. In the afternoon, the small restaurants on the adjacent streets (such as the newly opened Laundromat on Elmegade) or the two cafes on the square would fill up with people dining. If the weather allowed, tables outside would fill out first. Perhaps due to the shorter working hours the Danish

“middag” comes earlier than the American dinner hour, and the cafes and restaurants would start filling out at around 5 PM. These outside sittings allowed for watching the square, whatever is taking place there, as well as the other people that are on the square. Another popular venue, the local Paradis Ice cream shop, would always be accompanied by a long queue of eager customers waiting to get a scoop of fresh homemade ice-cream. The shop does not provide any seating arrangements, their customers would simply just cross the street and sit at the square.

Remarkably, the square would fill out with people on evenings (both on the weekdays and weekends). Even though there are two restaurants right at Hans Torv, the square and people’s interactions with it are not all fully “commercialized” and controlled by the private venues. On the contrary, very often people would just simply sit on the ground either on the square or at the lawn by the Johannes Kirke right across from the square. Very often some kind of performance – spontaneous or planned – would take place here. These spaces were used for what in Denmark is called *forspill*, which can be translated as a foreplay and/or before party in English. As it is legal in Denmark to drink alcohol in public, and with alcohol being quite expensive in bars and restaurants, people very often drink store-bought alcohol outside. On numerous nights I witnessed that the square was so crowded with people sitting and hanging out, drinking and lounging, that there was hardly any room for passersby.

Undoubtedly all of these rhythms are heavily influenced by the weather. Of these perhaps bicycle traffic was the least influenced. True, some would then use their cars, but mostly you could simply see a people in colorful rain boots and raincoats riding their bikes. Very often it was possible for people to stay outside despite the rain or cold, as restaurants would provide umbrellas, outside heaters and blankets for their customers.

The picture that emerges from the brief description of patterns that one can experience on Sankt Hans Torv in the summer months is almost an idyllic one. Both Sorkin and Gehl argue that good public spaces, such as Sankt Hans Torv, are crucial for democracy. As Sorkin (1999, p. 6) writes: *A democracy needs space where fellow citizens of all groups and ethnicities can meet each other, rub shoulders, talk to each other, and see what their society is made up of. Such public space, in other words, allows for direct observation of the sites of constraint, conflict [...] and other negotiations.*⁸

The next part of the article looks at the conflict rhythms present in the public spaces of Copenhagen, and in the Sankt Hans Torv in particular as a space of democracy.

Extra-everyday rhythms of riots

The square has on numerous occasions been an arena for various conflicts. Due to limited access and time for observation I will only focus here on the conflict and its

⁸Jan Gehl, after streetblog.com, retrieved from: www.streetsblog.org/2006/09/29/blogging-from-copenhagen

rhythms as has been reported by both national and international news. In particular, I will be looking at the rhythm of demonstrations and riots that has been taking place in Nørrebro. The conflict that I will be looking at here takes place between the Copenhagen City Council and the urban youth movement. Partly, this movement embraces squatters⁹, very often however, other young people who share similar political views and ideas about self-organization and direct action join the demonstrations. Therefore, I take the Mikkelsen and Karpantschof¹⁰ stance, and regard this movement as a political one and not as marginal cultural phenomena of a counter movement.

The beginnings of the conflict can be traced back to 60s when the local authorities started the slum clearance and redevelopment of city. The renewal resulted the removal in almost 50% of all housing units and relocating a number of people. Although the aim of the legislation was to raise the housing standards for the working classes, the newly built houses were too expensive for previous residents to live in them. With a large number of people relocated from the city center to the outskirts, a social frustration arose followed by protests and the formation of a social movement. As Vagnby and Jensen put it, the background for this movement *was found in the student protest movement of 1968, which started a slide in the well-established pattern of society with a more critical, less individualistic, more community oriented and broader view of the dwelling being a supplement to the common facilities – not vice versa.*¹¹

The Slum Storm Movement (Urban Squatter Movement) constituted another important fraction of the broader social movement. It began in the mid-sixties when a group of youths establishing housing communities in empty building in Christianshavn (historic part of Copenhagen). The squatter-movement in Nørrebro emerged in 1981¹² with the formation of “initiativ-gruppen for et ungdomshus” (the initiative group for a youth house). The group was initially negotiating with the city council, asking for a building that would be available for the youth in the form of their own cultural center. The city council disapproved. As a result, the group squatted two former factories in Nørrebro.

The forceful eviction ordered by the city council marks the turning point for the squatter movement in Copenhagen starting violent confrontations between the squatters and police. Violent confrontations and city riots have since been a part of the urban landscape of Copenhagen and Nørrebro has been more often than not the main stage for these conflicts. Different reasons triggered the battles and riots in the city – frequently the explicit reason was a squat eviction (such as in the battle of Ryesgade in October 1986).

⁹ The squatter movement is called in Denmark “BZ” which is a phoneme for this term in Danish.

¹⁰ Mikkelsen, F.; Karpantschoff, R. (2001).

¹¹ Vagnby, B., Jense, O.B. (2002), p7.

¹² See: Scolardt M. (September 03, 2006). “A Short History of the Copenhagen Squatters Movement”. <http://www.indymedia.ie/article/78192>

However, more often riots were a result of other political tensions. In May of 1993 Anti Fascist Action organized a demonstration on Sankt Hans Torv to oppose the Maastricht Treaty that was narrowly approved in a Danish referendum. The anti-EU protest broke out into riots and the police fired live ammunition into crowds of protestors at the square. Eleven people were seriously wounded. In May of 2000, in the same area, over a thousand people demonstrated on the international Day of Action Against Capitalism against the neo-liberal exploitation. In a short confrontation in Nørrebro, six demonstrators were arrested. In 2005 another anti-capitalist confrontation took place on Sankt Hans Torv, with the main slogan of “Death to Bush” during which a doll of the American president was set on fire.

In recent years however, the reoccurring riots in Nørrebro were often initiated because of longstanding conflict between the authorities and the squatters. The conflict escalated as Ungdomshuset (an underground venue and a squat) a building that was once given to the squatters’ movement by the municipality Copenhagen in 1982, was later sold to *Faderhuset*, a Danish evangelical Christian cult in 2001. It caused the conflict to build up and partly move from the streets to the courts. Not entirely though. As the court was issuing numerous rulings, the activists were demonstrating in Nørrebro, and on Sankt Hans Torv in particular. The final court decision was made in the end of August 2006 and the house ordered to be evicted by January 2007. The court decision triggered a number of confrontations that took place on the streets of Nørrebro.

In September of 2006 Ungdomshuset supporters organized a “Reclaim the streets”¹³ party on Sankt Hans Torv. Over 500 people showed up at what was planned as a peaceful party to express the support for the squat, but later on turned into violent protest. Over two hundred people were arrested. On December 12th, 2006 over 2000 people demonstrated on the streets of Copenhagen (again mainly in Nørrebro) in support of Ungdomshuset. It is worth underlying that, even though a lot of demonstrators were the actual squatters and/or left oriented activists either from Copenhagen or other parts of the country as well as other European countries, eye-witnesses point to the large presence of “regular”, non-activist Danes taking part in the protest. Again, what started as a peaceful demonstration ended up being one of the worst riots in Denmark in many years. The police used teargas and arrested circa 300 people.

Demonstrations took place again in the beginning of March 2007, as the house was evicted on the 1st of March. The riots broke out once more, this time lasting for a few days. Sankt Hans Torv was yet again the main stage for these events. In solidarity with the

13 Reclaim the Streets (RTS) is an international movement aiming at reclaiming the community ownership of public spaces, opposing the car as a dominant mode of transport. RTS organizes non-violent direct action such as “invasion” of a major road, highway or freeway to stage a party. RTS [...] “can be also characterized as a resistance movement opposed to the dominance of corporate forces in globalization”. Source : Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reclaim_the_Streets

Ungdomshuset thousands of people took part in the demonstrations – of which 750 were arrested, including circa 140 foreigners.

Further analysis and conclusion

Space has been shaped and molded from historical and natural elements, but this has been a political process. Space is political and ideological. It is a product literally filled with ideology. (Lefebvre 1976, 31)

I have now described the rhythms of Sankt Hans Torv – presented some of the historical background for the format of the public space as well as some of the political context. The above account however does not step out much beyond description. To follow Lefebvre's method we should try to overcome, what Edward Soja (1999) called illusion of transparency of space and look closely at the political processes that have been shaping the rhythms of the square. The question that follows then, again, is how is Sankt Hans Torv political?

As pointed out in the beginning of the article, the changes in public spaces of the city were an effect of what Gehl called “taking back” the streets. That slogan does not differ much from “reclaiming the streets” motto that has been used by the demonstrators in Copenhagen – both respond to the prevailing presence of cars in the city and call for regaining the public space for people. The modes of achieving their goals however, differs diametrically. Jan Gehl succeeded in implementing his recommendation for the city by getting København Kommune to progressively introduce a policy that would lessen automobile traffic in the city. For decades, when the policies were being introduced, the local as well as national government was led by the social democrats, who were supportive of the changes. In other words, for all these years it was the state that was producing the spatiality of public space in Copenhagen through the implementing of policies. In this sense the spatiality of public spaces has been a product. A simple example could be the phenomena of Friday night drinking and lounging on the square – which would not take place if not for the nation wide policy allowing drinking alcoholic beverages in public places. But this spatiality as a product has also been a spatiality as a producer – a producer of new social relations. Not only, because on the flip-side of some of the revitalization policies were the urban renewal policies, that led the relocated working class to oppose the state. This was a salient outcome of drastic renewal decisions. The other less salient outcome was the formation of social relations that followed the changes gradually introduced in public spaces of Copenhagen. As there were more public spaces devoted to pedestrian and less to cars, people started spending more time outside, engaging in social activities in the public realm. One could say that Danes started letting their inner Italians out. But one could also argue that as the spaces afforded more public use, more direct contact and observation, forming more democratic society, they also allowed the citizens to feel more confident in expressing tensions and possible conflict. The ground given by the state was now being used by the youth to express their dissatisfaction with it.

How has this spatiality been used by the different political actors and the State? For decades, when Social Democrats were the leading political party in Denmark, the riots were tolerated. The spatiality of Nørrebro was being renegotiated between the youth and the authorities every time, when the København Kommune sent the police to confront the protestors. But recently things have changed. Denmark is no longer lead by the Social Democrats. In 2001, for the first time since 1924, the Social Democrats were defeated by Venstre (*Venstre* translates as *left*, the party however, once founded with a basis on free market Liberalism is now a right-of-centre party). Venstre's Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen, currently governs in coalition with other right wing parties: the Conservative People's Party and the Danish People's Party. The city is still run by a Social Democrat mayor, but what happens on the streets of Nørrebro is now often renegotiated more by the State than the city itself. The Supreme Danish Court took the final decision concerning the Ungdomhuset. To squash the demonstrations following this decision, the police from the whole of Denmark (as well as some additional resources from Sweden and Germany) were brought to Copenhagen.

The emerging image is clear. The conflict between the youth movement and the right wing State escalates and the State is using all its power to restructure the spatiality (and social relations) of Nørrebro. Sending hundreds of police officers, helicopters and anti-terrorists units to secure the demolition of the Ungdomhuset building is the more evident and visible way of controlling and altering the existing spatiality of Nørrebro. But there also less evident ways of the state control. Professor Rob Adams, a Director City Design at the City of Melbourne, who was visiting the Center for Public Space Research in Copenhagen in 2006, gives an account of it on his website:¹⁴

Within two months of Gehl's departure the future of the entire team at the centre was at risk. Staff contract extensions were threatened and the research program previously agreed between the Academy and the funding Foundation was compromised. This left the team with no option but to resign. Future funding for the centre was withdrawn by the Foundation, effectively closing down the centre in all but name.

By describing the processes forming the public space and its use in Nørrebro in Copenhagen, I aimed at showing that the interaction between the public and the space comes in the form of different rhythms. These rhythms, even though they are not openly political (such as having a beer on a square), are formed through political and ideological processes. The rhythms described are also dynamic phenomena – not only because they are inscribed in certain temporality, but also because they change throughout the history. The change comes as the spatiality changes:

¹⁴ http://www.udf.org.au/archives/2007/03/wrong_way_go_ba.php

The production of capitalist spatiality [...] is not once-and-for-all event. It must be reinforced and restructured when necessary. That is spatiality must be socially reproduced and this production process presents a continuing source of struggle, conflict contradiction. (Soja 1999, 97)

Lefebvre recommends conducting a rhythmanalysis by comparing the rhythms between different locations. Even though the article does not directly look at any other places, the specific (for Copenhagen and Nørrebro) political and social processes described, explain that the difference in rhythms cannot be solely assigned to a cultural difference. The public space in Nørrebro is used differently than in Warsaw. The reason for that however, is not only that Danes know how to let their inner Italians out, and Poles just don't. What has happened in Copenhagen's public places has been Københavns Kommune's conscious political decision.

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