

A Residential Practice of Architecture in Mjølnerparken

This story is set in the near future, in the neighborhood of Mjølnerparken, Copenhagen. It is a time in which construction has stopped. The site is left as it is today, and the Parallel Societies Law has been invalidated. The architect in this story hopes to practice architecture in non-violent, caring ways. She hopes to use her professional competencies and agency to interrupt the current violent translation of lines cutting through the fabric of the residents and community. It is a practice of weaving lines between existing violence and proposed care.

A friend of the architect crochets a set of handwarmers for her to use while drawing on site. The winter is cold. This gesture of kindness allows the architect to spend more time outside at Mjølnerparken, observing what is happening in the space, and documenting it in a slower, more careful way than photographs or aerial images.

The architect brings the handwarmers, along with warm boots and an umbrella, to sit outside as she draws. She uses the drawings as a base for paintings. She mixes watercolors with white acrylic paint, highlighting details of the site. She chooses different views each week; each view is in the site, of the site, and of the moment. Sometimes construction fences cross into view, rubble foregrounds the brick facades, and flowers emerge from the slats of wood. Later, she sits in her apartment to stitch lines through the drawings, using thread and needle. Lines of plant growth, shadows, movement, and materials weave through the drawings.

The architect wishes to be closer to the site—to the place, people, and interactions. She knows that she needs to be a part of the community if she wants to practice architecture in an ethical way that supports the residents of Mjølnerparken. The distance of architects' practices have contributed to their share of the violence from the Parallel Societies Law. On one of her site visits, she hears from a neighbor that one of the ground floor apartments will be open for rent soon. After discussing it with the residents' association, the architect applies, moves in, and begins to slowly shift her ways of living and working.

The work of the architect starts in small steps. Her footsteps are light and careful. She sets up a folding sign to take with her when she draws. It advertises that she is an architect, and that she is open to talk with anyone who passes by. Sometimes neighbors stop by to chat. Sometimes they watch her from their balconies, silently observing. She feels self-conscious but continues to sit outside, hoping to gain more trust over time.

Her routine is domestic at first, marked by rhythms of care. She makes breakfast, washes dishes, and brews tea. She takes walks through her building, Mjølnerparken, Mimersparken, and Nørrebro. She buys groceries, eats at a local cafe, and dances in the community center. She takes on the role of a caretaker for this area. She has time to give to the place.

The architect checks that the beams are still strong, the wood is not rotting. She waters the flowers, repaints the entryway, and turns the piles of compost. Residents ask her to repair broken furniture and mend cracks in walls. She checks the garden, the buildings, the pathways—circling, observing, and caring. For now, she keeps these tools in her basement storage room, but she hopes in the future to make a community storage area that all the residents could use.

The architect sits at the picnic tables to work. It is already designed to hold many people, rather than a desk hidden inside. Anyone can come sit across from her, whether to join in conversation, to share a cup of tea, or to draw together.

The architect's apartment is set up like the other apartments in Mjølnerparken. It has three rooms, a kitchen, and a bathroom. She uses the shared courtyards and laundry room. When she is waiting for her clothes or hanging them to dry, she builds relationships with her neighbors. She listens to them speak about their lives, and tries to understand what they feel could be improved about their homes. There's always loose drawing supplies in the laundry room, just in case an impromptu design meeting comes out of these conversations.

Communicating design ideas can be difficult, regardless of architectural training. The architect builds a model table in the courtyard of one of the buildings, using leftover wooden reels from the former construction site. She equips it with sand, rocks, and leaves, as well as paint and paper, that her neighbors can use to mock-up different ideas for the site.

One night, the architect and a few neighbors set up a projector on one of the blank facades of the block. They have a movie night showing short films some of the resident university and gymnasium students have made over the past few months. It's accompanied by an outdoor art exhibition that elevates and celebrates Mjølnerparken. These drawings have been made by architecture students who often visit the site, spending time to make something that celebrates the beauty of the area. Architects in Mjølnerparken can help facilitate events just as much as they facilitate concrete buildings.

The next week, activists show up to the courtyard to start painting a banner. The architect joins in. The residents have heard that city officials will visit the area tomorrow to display the area to potential developers. This is their chance to make their voices heard and seen across the space.

After some months of living in Mjølnerparken, it becomes easier for the architect to engage with residents and communicate about different designs and imaginations. The architect is able to invite residents into the world of design, as they invite her into their worlds. In the summertime, the architect offers to watch all of the kids for the day. She organizes a collective drawing exercise. They use a group of old, leftover, wooden reels. There's one pen, ten children, and the architect. The task is to draw together. They all form a chain, and hold hands with the person in front and behind them. On one end, a child sits and reaches with the pen in one hand, placing it at the center of the page. The others are ready to shape the drawing. Slowly, carefully, each member of the chain moves—pushing, pulling, dancing nearly—in order to move the pen in the hand of the last child. There is responsibility here—to respect and maintain the direction of one's peers, but also to input one's own ideas and movements. In the end, there is a drawing drawn by all of them, and by none of them.

Later in the day, they work in pairs to imagine different ideas for their homes. The kids keep drawing treehouses in the exercises. They seem to be a symbol of adventure, childhood, and a relation to nature that permeates the kids' imaginations. The kids work with the architect to figure out how to construct one. They find an abandoned library ladder and roll it up to one of the balconies. They fix it to the ground, and begin to plant trees around it. It's not quite a treehouse today, but they know it will become one overtime as the trees grow.

Occasionally the architect works in the evenings. She and a neighbor meet at one of the lampposts, and set up their drawings there. They learn from each other's observations about the place and people.

The architect resides in Mjølnerparken, and spends much of her time there. However, she still ventures out into the larger neighborhood of Nørrebro, Copenhagen, and Denmark. She and a neighbor visit friends' homes throughout the city to get inspired for renovation ideas. It's helpful to speak about how they feel about their homes, and how they impact their professional and personal lives.

Sometimes, the architect retreats to her apartment. She can be introverted, and often prefers to be alone for much of the day. This doesn't always help her become a member of the community. She needs to listen more to the voices of her neighbors.

The architect begins to install speaking tubes across Mjølnerparken. They are essentially playground equipment that allow for conversations between long distances, without electronic amplification. The first few go up in the playground area. They are fairly inconspicuous. Some are facing the slide, others towards the climbing equipment, others near the flower beds. However, one end of every tube stands in the architect's apartment, facing her drawing table. Later, they install more tubes at the balconies of apartments, so that residents can easily speak to the architect, to share anything they have on their mind.

It's not only neighbors who join the architect at the drawing table. She collaborates with people outside the community to improve equity within her practice and in the larger political/economic contexts. She co-writes an essay with activists in order to garner support for keeping the Parallel Societies Law on pause. Despite the law being invalidated by the international courts, there are constantly new political proposals that discriminate against and harm communities like hers. She and the activists work collaboratively to express arguments and perspectives of how architects have agency in their profession—that are complicit in both the harm and care affected by the lines they draw. At other times, she invites fellow architects to sit with her at the table. They discuss how their profession is changing, and how they can work in more equitable ways. Meeting these different perspectives helps the architect reflect and question her practices of design and representation.

The resident association votes to develop the gardens of Mjølnerparken. They want to grow more food and herbs in the area, and to sell them at the local markets. The architect notices the leftover waste chutes from the former construction site, that were used for contractors to easily drop waste material from a high story down into a trash container on the ground. These can be repurposed for the beginnings of the new gardens, nutrients, bugs, and plants move through these chutes of growth, filled with excavated soil. Around the seedlings, families meet to have dinner, smokers take breaks leaning against them in the winter, and games of chess are played in the fall. Children balance as they traverse these make-shift balance beams, imagining deep ravines and dragons—heightening the suspense of their adventures.

The architect cleans and bandages the knee of a child who fell during a football match with a friend. She takes phone calls with engineers while pacing back and forth through the rows of plants. She pulls some weeds from growing vegetables in the summer. She hosts a dinner party for her friends who are visiting from Aarhus. They join a neighbor's family, who is already grilling. The architect and neighbors meander through the gardens checking for water levels, new sprouts, and spotted leaves. Vegetables are harvested for communal dining. Flowers are used for dyes on the architectural drawings, and herbs are grown for tea and cooking.

Now that the garden is being developed, there are even more communal tools, and more residents who need access to those tools. The architect drafts a plan for a community tool shed. There are arguments, disagreements, and difficult engagement processes. People change their mind, and different residents want it to be located in different places. There are debates about it being locked or unlocked. The borrowing systems are highly contentious. The architect is patient and diplomatic in this process, helping to promote agonistic yet respectful conversations and debates.

Through this process of community engagement, it becomes clear that there is not a good place for these group conversations to occur. The gardens offer some gathering point in times of nice weather, but for most of the year, it is difficult to convene and debate at Mjølnerparken. Through some years of observation, the architect has noticed that food and cooking tend to open people up to difficult conversations and more empathy to share and listen. She and her neighbors begin to develop plans for a shared kitchen.

Afterwards, they establish community dinner meetings each Monday night to work with the neighbors on how to improve their area. Some residents think it's very important to improve the energy efficiency of the buildings, so they work together on deciding which insulation method works best for them. Other neighbors don't want any construction happening, so it requires navigation of the conflicts. Having shared space and common ground helps to respond to such conflicts. Some residents explain that construction inside their apartments would make it difficult to cook and to care for children, who might be impacted by the dust and debris. Other residents understand these concerns so work together with the architect to advocate for construction methods that are safest and cause the least air quality impacts.

The architect feels that by living and working in Mjølnerparken, she has ascertained a visceral understanding of the impact distance has on the lines that she drew in her past practices. When she is on the site, in the site, and with the site, she draws lines in different ways. She hasn't abandoned all conventions of representation, but has shifted them to accommodate and respond to the residents she works with today. The ground is not an abstract line to be easily erased, but the entangled composition of soil, compost, and insects that she witnesses in their garden. The apartments are not empty boxes, but compositions of unique memories, friends, and families. Her drawings contain this knowledge and perception of the place. She works in varied scales—from full scale chalk drawings on the ground to smaller drawings of how interventions impact the individual apartments and community spaces. There are no thick marker lines cutting through their homes.

She wants to share these findings with other architects, with the hope that they might reflect on the impacts of their drawing practices on the communities they work for. She holds drawing workshops for practicing architects and architecture students across the city and in Mjølnerparken. It attracts architects who often work on social housing projects, but who often feel trapped in how they work. They are searching for their sense of agency to make a difference in their work. They draw and reflect together, supporting each other in their efforts to improve their practices.

Even though she has lived in the area for some years now, the architect still remembers to take time to sit and observe her neighborhood. She still draws and paints once a week, always discovering new perspectives and changes in the space. As she becomes more familiar, neighbors invite her into their apartments to sketch them too. They develop friendships and meaningful relationships. The architect is connected to many different residents, and is able to navigate different social groups through these relationships of care and repair built up over the years. When the architect struggles with a task or project, she has a support network to turn to—she asks neighbors for advice, to share technical knowledge, and just for company. The neighbor relations are reciprocal.

However, sometimes the architect worries that she is not engaged enough, accessible enough, or present enough. She thinks she should be even more fully embedded in the site, that her responsibility to the place is much higher than is met by her current ways of working. She thinks that she should place herself in the midst of the "trouble," as Donna Haraway might say. The architect and her neighbors build a combined office-apartment in the middle of the neighborhood. It is made of painted, red wood, with diagonal slats, materials sourced primarily from the remaining debris. They have to travel to a recycling center to find some of the fixtures missing from site. The building includes a communal kitchen and office, which are open to all the residents. The architect has a private bedroom and bathroom in the back, but most of her day is otherwise public, or at least communal. She makes her breakfast among the early-rising bread makers, and draws drawings in the middle of neighborly banter.

This space in the middle feels different than how the architect worked in her past. She is really in her site. Neighbors watch her draw, they ignore her, talk to her, or add to the earth and walls she and her neighbors inhabit. The stories she writes and the drawings she draws begin to decenter the architect from the narratives. She is merely a supporter and a member of the community, a neighbor like all the others. They work, live, and draw together.

This office-apartment in the middle (and all the prior, smaller interventions) profoundly changes the way the architect and the community draw. After some decades, a few of the children who grew up in the area become architects themselves. They ask the architect if they could work in this office space instead. Couldn't they be the caretakers of their own homes? The architect steps back from the middle. She moves back into her apartment in Mjølnerparken, as the young architects inhabit the middle. They live and work as she once had, with changes of course. But she is forever connected to the space, woven into the community. Her future lines are entangled in this time spent at Mjølnerparken.

