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Paradoxical places, ambivalent emotions:

Suburban housing in cosmopolitan and metropolitan space

Introduction

During the last decade Danish housing sector has experienced a building boom, with new houses and housing areas being build in all parts of the country. In greater Copenhagen area where land has been scarce, housing developments has taken place either in parts of the city which has former been industrial or seen as unattractive, or it has taken place in peripheral areas on the outskirts of greater Copenhagen, in rural areas or villages areas which has previously been seen as less attractive. Much of this housing is aimed at families. In Copenhagen area there has been a concern with providing enough housing for the rising demand.

The new housing areas can be seen as part of a (new) urban governance where housing areas are developed to attract new middleclass residents. The development of new areas can be seen as part of the leisure economy, where housing areas are branded as spaces of recreation. In doing so, the areas affective qualities are stressed and enhanced, and put into focus. This focus is in line with a more general focus on emotions in the development of the city. More generally, the identity of a city, and how it feels, are increasingly being engineered as part of political and economic processes (Thrift 2004). This means that it is becoming increasingly important to understand the ways in which such areas appeal to residents, and particularly the emotional experiences that residents has in the place they live. This paper will explore the experiences of residents in two new selected housing areas in greater area, focusing on the experiences and feelings that these residents have. In doing so the paper complement the recent up surging interest in branding urban space, but with the perspective of residents rather than governance. In particular, the paper explore the experiences and emotions residents express and how they handle these, whether identify with the affective qualities, and whether the area actually is experienced as containing these.

This study looks at the suburban-like, middle-class housing area. As such it differs from mainstream sociological studies of housing areas that rarely look at the middleclass site (but see Chaney 1997; Karstens 2003, Longhurst & Savage 2000, Mazanti 2005, Ozaki 2005, Poolen 2006, Raahauge 2007). Instead they tend to look at the extreme cases such as marginalised housing areas with social problems, or dynamic city centres. In contrast, this article specifically focuses on suburban-like housing areas. The boom in house build and the increasing importance of these areas in political and economic process suggest that they should be of sociological interest.

The paper builds on qualitative data collected in two new housing areas situated at different distances from the city centre, one peripheral while the other is central. The areas contain housing aimed at young families, and are primarily owned housing. Both areas have nature qualities as well as good transport facilities and access to the city centre.

Before presenting and discussing the empirical study it is necessary to consider in more detail why a focus on the emotions is useful and relevant for understanding the sociology of new housing areas, as well as present the conceptual and methodological starting point.

Emotions and suburbia housing areas

Initially, it might seem contradictory to take up an emotional perspective in relation to housing areas. Many authors point to the homogenising and standardising effects of globalisation on urban space (Harvey 1990). Some authors suggest how urban processes are increasingly characterised by sprawl, leading to what some researchers call the borderless city (Albertsen et.al). In this context the boundaries between urban/rural and urban/suburban seems to be blurring and dissolving. Castells suggests that metropolitan settlements “ blur the distinction between cities and countryside, and between cities and suburbs” (2002: 374), and, one could add, distinctions between centre and periphery. Likewise, writers on urban change argue that these distinctions cease to matter in a late-modern world, suggesting that mobility, technology and changing lifestyles mean that it is no longer possible to make distinctions between rural/urban/suburban (for a new version of this argument, see Amin & Thrift 2002).

Suburbia housing areas in particular could be seen as examples of these processes of homogenisation and standardisation of space, as well as the blurring of spatial boundaries. Suburban housing and its associations with everyday life, the routine and the ordinary, seem to be a contrast to the more strong feelings associated with other spaces such as the urban or rural space. Instead they seem to be equated with not so intense types of emotion.

Nevertheless, reality is more complex. There seem to be increasing cultural interest in suburban housing areas. Indeed, new suburban areas are heavily developed and branded by public and private actors as attractive leisure spaces. Public planners and private developers are carefully designing housing areas to incorporate landscape elements such as lakes, green spaces, and urban art in order to allow for different experiences. There has been an increasing commercial and public branding of new housing areas, suggesting the need for creating specific identities and feelings of such areas. In the public and branding of these areas the affective qualities are stressed, allowing for special and intense experiences. These experiences are both related to nature experience in terms of relaxation, intimacy and rejuvenation, as well as urban experiences, such as diversity, excitement and difference. Löfgren (2000) suggest that Øresundsregionen is branded as

'green cosmopolitanism', where the local enters into an ingredient of the cosmopolitan diversity. Likewise, mass media and popular culture abounds with programmes about houses and living. Further, artists and writers are working with the suburbs as a theme, suggesting these areas as a locus for strong feelings. In doing so, the areas are presented as site for leisure and extra-ordinary experience in contrast to the everyday mundane. That these areas might be the locus for more feelings is also suggested by sociological authors. Longhurst and Savage (2004) suggest that residential place continues to matter since people feel some sense of 'being at home' in an increasing turbulent world. Likewise, it has been suggested that suburbs, serving global cities can be seen as an aesthetic retreat from the perceived impersonality of modern mass society (Duncan & Duncan 2001).

The increasing cultural significance and interest in suburban areas, suggest other emotions than the everyday and routine is at play, that the affective qualities of housing areas are not just about everyday and routine, but involves different heightened forms of emotion. There is a combination of both the routine, as well as other feelings such as excitement, pleasure, anxiety and dissatisfaction. Indeed, it suggests that the emotional configuration of suburban housing areas is more complex, and is in need of exploration.

An emotional perspective

This paper adopt an emotional perspective when studying residents relation to their housing areas. There is a long tradition in Nordic sociology and geography to use an everyday life perspective when studying and understanding housing areas. From this perspective emphasis has been put on local and situated practises and subjective experiences of residents in local areas and communities. The present focus on emotions can be seen as building on this tradition, a way of developing an account that takes a starting point in everyday and embodied practises. Emotional concepts, can, as Lupton suggest, be used to "give meaning and provide explanations for our lives, for why we respond to live events, other people, material artefacts and places in certain ways, why we might tend to follow patterns of behaviour throughout our lives " (Lupton 1998: 6).

One approach to understanding emotions see them as inner, subjective and mental state, but here I draw on the work of Davidson et.al. who suggest, "emotion can be seen as socio-spatial mediation and articulation" (2005). More specifically I space as embodied, where space is regarded as material that the body works with (Lupton 1998). This perspective builds on the work of authors such as Merleau-Ponty, Goffman and Bourdieu. Here the emotions are conceptualised as felt and sensed reactions that arise in the midst of corporeal exchange between self and world (Crossley 1993). While emotions can be seen as both a state of mind and a physical experience, encounters between world and self produce affective reactions, which are emergent rather than pre-given (Hubbard 2005). Simultaneously, managing these emotions is part of the process by which we construct sense of self,

with socio-cultural circumstances and context dictating what particular forms of emotional management are appropriate for different social groups.

There are no standard methods for researching peoples emotionally charged experiences of the city. There is a tradition for using in-depth qualitative interviews, as well as texts such as novels and films. One limitation of using interviews to explore people's experience of housing areas might be that given that emotions are embodied, language cannot adequately capture the way emotions are felt. Others argue that emotions arise from the inner unconscious self, and cannot be consciously articulated. Here I follow Hubbard who suggests that 'emotional talk' is a way of interrogating the emotional topography of the suburban housing areas (Hubbard 2005). The approach reject that emotions cannot be articulated because they dwell in the psyche. Instead emotions are seen as interpersonal phenomena, which arise in response to social circumstances. Further the public representation of emotional experience is not seen as secondary to private experience.

Suburban experiences

One of the assumptions of this project is that the ability of new suburban housing areas to appeal to residents can only be understood if the emotional experiences of these areas are understood. When the interviewed residents described their experiences with moving to the local area, they simultaneously described a diversity of practises that produced emotions. They both described negative emotions: discomfort, disgust, frustration and fear, as well as positive emotions: happiness, excitement, pleasure. What was common between residents in the different sites was that they both emphasised the importance of being close to the city, as to have city experiences. Simultaneously they stressed the importance of having nature experiences.

It is important to point out that, unlike feelings expressed in other context (such as national affiliations) that are expressed intensely; inhabitant's discussions are more playful. The desire to live close to the city as well as nature is framed more as a compromise than as being truly embarrassing. For example, one resident say,

Well now I am almost getting worked up and making it in to a problem, but it is not a problem in that way, I would like it was different, but is not something that means I have regretted moving here. (Klaus)

Nevertheless inhabitant's stories about settling in their area do point to some of the complex emotional response that inhabitants have regarding the implication of urban processes for their spatial affiliations.

The paper builds on qualitative data consisting of 20 interviews carried out with residents; some interviews were conducted with one partner, some with both. Both male and female are represented. They are aged between 25 and

40. All apart from one resident had small children. The residents came from different parts of Denmark, and have different educational background. However, they can all be said to be middle-class qua their house ownership. They therefore all talk from a privileged position in relation to the urban processes of spatial extension and gentrification.

Mixed emotions

Most of the respondents moved from flats in central Copenhagen in connection with having children. Residents at the two sites repeatedly stress that it is important for them to live so that they have easy access to the city as well as easy access to nature.

“It is not far to the centre of Copenhagen, and yet we live peacefully out here, you can call it, we live a bit in nature...it was close to other people, close to the city, the metro, that was what it said and this is what we would have...It is close to the centre of Copenhagen, and yet far enough away to feel you are a bit in nature” (SS).

“I like the environment here, it is a massive nature area, and I find it fun looking at the DR-city, it is full of contrasts, both new and old, nature and civilisation, it is a strange area, but also fascinating.”

”[We got to live] close to the city and the most beautiful sunset in the city as it said in the brochure”. (T)

”What was most important for us was that we could cycle to work in the city, the closeness, and the garden...There is a lot of lovely light and air, it is not build up around us and that is nice”. (L)

”We would like a house and a garden...if could get closer to town then we would like to live closer”. (J)

In this way most of the respondent frame the area they live in terms of easy access to the city, as well as a feeling of being close to or in nature. However, at the same time residents discuss their area in terms of the lacking qualities that it have. Some residents talk about the lack of close access to shops, particularly speciality shops, to cafés, people, ‘pulse’ and therefore the lack of urban qualities in the local area. Other resident’s talk about the negative aspects of living in the area in terms of the dullness, the dirt, the noise and the crime they experience. Residents’ accounts of their local area is therefore characterised by mixed feelings, on the one hand they frame it as the right place to live because of the right mix of urban and non-urban qualities, on the other hand they have negative experiences due to the lacking qualities of the area.

A way of approaching this complexity is to take a look at the historical figurations of the suburbs. Like the body, space is not a constant, but has a history (Vidler 1993: 31, cited in Davidson 2005: 22). Suburban or metropolitan space is wedged between the urban and the rural, and has always been defined in relation to these. Historically, negotiating the suburb has involved particular and different configurations of emotions. One place and time to begin could be the development of the Parisian metropolitan

spaces in the middle of the 19th century, which Green suggest involved particular sensations. As middle class city dwellers invaded the surrounding regions of Paris, these spaces turned to safe sites for leisure and recreation for city dwellers to visit. They brought with them particular ways of appreciating nature, having an individualised experience of nature as a refreshing and rejuvenating antidote to the city. Indeed, these areas were highlighted for their visual qualities:

“The language of views and panoramas prescribe a certain visual structure of the nature experience. The healthiness of the site was condensed with the actual process of looking at it, of absorbing it and moving round it with your eye. Environmental values were here articulated in relation to visual modes of consumption that enabled the visitor simultaneously to look at the picture and plunge into sensation.” (1990: 88)

As such, the development of the suburban areas can be seen as part of the romantic movement, where nature is seen as being a refreshing contrast to the city. This was at the same time an experience, which belonged to the middle classes.

During the 20th century suburban areas developed, as there was a massive rural-urban and urban-suburban migration. There has been a massive increase in suburban housing area and growth of cities, middle-class suburban housing areas now being the most common form of housing. However, as suburban areas developed these areas have become increasingly homogenised. This has meant that suburban housing areas became associated with other types of emotions. Culturally, the suburb has been described as anonymous and ordinary, as sites where people are pre-occupied with living up to the conformity in social conventions (Chaney 1997). In this analysis of the suburbs, they are a place for suppression of emotions and sensations, where nothing happens.

Finally, there is a third kind of figuration. The city has become an increasingly popular place to live, as evidenced by the increasing number of families choosing to stay rather than move to the suburbs. The city, the urban therefore gain new meaning and positive attraction that distinguishes it from the suburb. Here the city becomes a place for ‘a civilised array of pleasures’, it becomes a place for public life, for meeting others in the space of the urban centre, with window exhibitions, bars, museums and galleries (Rose 2000). It is the urban diversity and mix that has become increasingly popular.

These historical configurations of the city suggest that there is a variation of figurations of metropolitan space. The mixed feelings that the residents express about their area as something that is the right mix and give them

pleasure, but at the same time as not being right can be seen as the residents attempts at maintaining a clear and unique identity in a space where the borders between urban and suburban, centre and periphery are difficult to draw. The ambivalent feelings that the residents express can be seen as part of attempts at producing distinct identity. This means that residents has to navigate between these different figurations to produce spatial identities, and this in turn generate emotions when there is not necessarily a fit between residents desired identity and the place they live.

Also, the complexity can also be seen on the background of them only having lived a short period in the area, and not having any prior knowledge of the area. They are therefore busy making connections and forms of belonging to the area. In this, they use culturally available images of city, suburb and nature to symbolise what they feel. If we look closer at the respondents story a more complex picture emerge about how they navigate and what emotions is generated.

Urban intensities 1: not enough cities

While the residents are satisfied with their location of living, they also express a sense of uneasiness with regards to their local area, in fact they some express strong emotional feelings and reactions.

Søren explain that he miss Frederiksberg where he used to live. More things happened there, one lived a bit closer to everything, he explains, while here there is some distance to these environments. However, he says, living where they do have some other qualities.

”It is an advantage when you got a dog, there is not some many places you can walk with it without it being on a lead....Before we signed the papers I said that apart from Fælledén there is nothing in the area worthwhile. There was not any shops, and there is a psychiatric hospital...it was not the local area, one should move out here for, if one wanted life and cafes and small shops everywhere. But then we also agreed, that it was nice enough that it was so calm”

Martin also explain how they felt ‘fed up’ after the first few months:

”It is not very cosy when you go to the (main street)..it does not have any appeal, and we were a bit fed up after the first 6 months...The first month we could not get our arms down, it was hot, we could stay outside to barbecue, and I thought, this is nice, but the grill was quickly packed away because it was to cold..and then we did not see any people anymore, and the outdoor life died...We felt like living in a glass jar, not so cosy, could not walk down to the street and see a lot of people around us, and it is great fun that things are going on. You don’t have that feeling here, because there is 3 km to where things are happening...

Klaus also contrasts the area with their former location in the city. He says:

” One can feel, the area is a total social loser area. The bike man sniffs gas fumes all day, they do not have a shop, so they work right behind all day, stand in big thermos suits all winter, and you think this is not work condition one would allow...The same for the kiosk and the pizzeria, it is something, well...But perhaps we are a bit prejudiced from Frederiksberg, you could choose between 3 pizzerias, one was more delicate than the other, and the cheese man, sausage man, you can say now we have some stupid kiosk man, he has a newspaper and old milk...It was a desert (when we moved here). We lived opposite (a supermarket) (where we lived before) and we had loads of shops, clothes shops, everything, lots to look at when you were out with a pram. Specialities shops of any kind, cheese, Italian delicatessen and wine....

The only negative thing with this area is that there are no shops, because we are still, I more than you, city people, so it is still nice to have the shops close by. ... I don't think it is that big a contrast, it is a desert in the way that there are no good bakers in the morning; we have started to do our own bread. If we want pizza for lunch on Saturdays, we used to pop down after it, now it is too far.It is hurting my self-feeling or self-image of being a big-city-metropolitan who has to use these things and have access to these things.

He express a strong uneasiness about the lack of cosmopolitanism in the area – as he says it is not that big a problem, but does express a feeling of not being who he thinks he is.

“Rudi has lived there for 10 years, and I felt at home as well straight away when I moved there. It is a great place to live with the shopping life. It is another atmosphere than here. I felt it was very deserted here in comparison to Valby, in Valby I could take the pram for a walk and there would be people around me, here I could go to fields, if I wanted to have people around me, but I did not think it was the same atmosphere as in Valby. On the other side it is more bare, a place like Valby has the atmosphere, and if you like things happening, with shops and cafés, all these things closer by, that is what is missing out here. There is no such environment here, there is not. There are no shops, no vegetable shops, no cheese shops or kiosk. But then we got Fields....

These stories all comments on the lack of feeling right and fully content with living in the area. While the residents play the feeling down, at the same time they do repeatedly express their sense that the area is lacking.

They have different ways of handling this feeling, of managing this uneasiness. Some explain how they drive to the area of town closer to the city, to the good baker to get nice morning bread at weekends. Other explains how they have started baking themselves. In this way they seek to substitute the lack of good baker. One resident looks to the new relations he is making with the neighbours, and the relations his children are making with other children, which means it begins to feel a bit homely:

But now we have begun to talk to the neighbours..and we became really happy with it. Now it is home, it is not as if you feel you are entering a strange planet when you cycle home. It meant a lot to us that we got to know people here, I can feel it, we greet people, and speak to them, children play with each other, it is a gift...We have found that we know many people here, or know someone who knows them.”

Another resident explain how she is slowly discovering the local opportunities for shopping and activities there actually are in the area:

After we have moved here I think it is reasonable. ...We hear a bit about what traditions they have in the local main shopping street, we have tried to take part, and in Islands Brygge. There are some initiatives out here.”

Urban intensities 2: to much city

While many residents strongly express their sense of uneasiness with the area because of its lack cosmopolitan ness, other residents suggest a sense of uneasiness about it the area too urban. One woman talks about the crime and vandalism in the area, as well as how dirty it is and there are scooters driving up and down the cycle path outside her house, which makes her frightened.

To handle these feelings of uneasiness, she speculates, that they will move back to Jutland, but it also means that she will spend more time on controlling her children:

Perhaps we move back sometime...Sending the kids to school here does not attract me. I would like it, they can run out and play, and be many places without me needing to keep an eye on them all the time. (Tina)

Negotiating proximity and distance

Suburban, metropolitan space has been called borderless, and seen as almost endless extensions of the city. This means that boundaries between urban and rural, urban and suburban and centre and periphery are not so clearly defined. The following will closer at how residents make distinctions in

space, in particular at how material and social boundaries are drawn as ways of differentiating themselves from others and their environment.

Being urban or rural

One way that residents make sense of they live is in terms of 'what kind of person they are'. Klaus explain about their decision to live close to the city:

"Although she does not sound it, she is from the countryside, she is the one who is most urban, well we would like to live close to the city centre. ... I am not the big 'city-man'; I was probably the one feeling worst in Frederiksberg, in this big building complex sometimes. Well, I like the facilities, but for me 20 minutes on an S-train was also fine."

Here the relation to space is explained in terms of what kind of person they are, not in terms of being primordial, where they are born and bred, but what kind of person. What kind of person you are means something in relation to how you feel about living in a place, for example Klaus says that he felt 'worst' living in the big building complex. A bit later, he talks about how they feel about nature:

"We were very of the Fælled when we moved here, ...but it is not as exciting, the (next fælled) is more...but when the children gets older then perhaps we can explore more.... We are both nature people and like to get out. So you can say we are not city people. We like it all, as Lena said, she just want some lakes, forest and close to the city, but as we said we could not afford it.

While he was differentiating between himself and his wife in terms of being 'city-people' above, here he stresses that they are both nature people. This is the reason why they are not keen on the next-door nature area. They want he says, it all, both nature and city, as a way of reconciling being both nature-people and city people. Being a city person or a nature person is not something that defines you, but rather something you can have degrees of as well as containing both.

Age and the centre-periphery

When the inhabitants are looking for the right place to live, they not only look at the area, they also look at themselves and how they feel about themselves. One of the issues they brought up in interviews was age, and how their age influenced what they thought about the place they were going to live. Johnny explain:

"We decided to look for a house, we looked a bit around, ...We would like to live closer to the city, if we could have a garden and a house. We did not look out in the suburbs. It is to far away, we did not want anymore than 5-10 minutes to the centre. We are not that old. Some might think we are, but not mentally."(Rudi)

Here Rudi explain he does not want to live in the suburbs because he is not old enough, or as he says, at least not mentally. Here suburban space is equated with middle age as a mental state of mind, which he actively rejects. Instead living close to the city is a way of maintaining youthfulness. Klaus express a similar sentiment. He says:

“We looked at a parcel house further out on Amager, it could have been a lovely house if it was restored. But I had it like this, ok, sit out there, not being able to have children, I would really feel I had bought the cat in the bag. Whereas with this I could better, I had this garden I could sit in the sun, it would not matter so much. You invested so much in the house and it was still a great house. “
(Klaus)

While they had found a perfect house, he felt unease about its location further out, particularly if they had not had children. Living in a house in this suburban area without children would have felt wrong. These stories suggest that the residents are not able to uphold their urban self-image in a too suburban setting, which makes them reject moving further out.

Negotiating proximity and distance

One way of negotiating proximity in the metropolitan region is by drawing a boundary between Copenhagen and the rest of Denmark. Here the suburbs of Copenhagen are put on par with Jutland. One female resident explain:

“My opinion is that if I have to live in Copenhagen and be a Outlander, then I have to live in here, I do not want to move to Køge, then I much rather want to move to Jutland. If I have to move to the province, then I might as well live close to my family [in Jutland]”. (Rudi’s wife)

Another female resident explain:

We did not look in the suburbs, because then I said that we might as well live near our family in Jutland. It had to be close to Copenhagen, where we could continue our work, or in Jutland close to our family. So we looked for something close to the city...the furthest I wanted to move was Vanløse, and that is close. (Tina)

As the previous resident, Tina states that she needs to be close to the city, thereby drawing a boundary between Copenhagen city and both suburbs and Jutland. However, it is not just people who have families in Jutland that draw this boundary. Martin grew up in a suburb to Copenhagen, and he expresses a similar inclination as the two women. Initially he liked moving back to where he grew up because he liked it from his childhood. But his wife wanted to live close to the city, as she had always done. Also, as he says,

”Copenhagen life pulled more than I thought...and it is ok” ”I began to think more about distance to the things you need to use, well you don’t need to be more than 1 or 2 km from them otherwise you don’t use them – you might as well live in Jutland. I can see our friends, several moved north, and they are never in the city, only when they visit us, it is rarely that they use the city.” (Martin)

Martin relates use and closeness, commenting that while you may live near Copenhagen in the suburbs, in reality you do not use the city, and might as well live in the other end of Denmark, and compares the suburbs with the whole of the Danish provinces; they are alike.

However, when the two women has the city centre and closeness to their families as a way of contrasting where they want to live, at the same time they suggests that the boundary between Copenhagen City and Jutland dissolves. Birgitte suggests:

It was great, the month before we moved in we went to an open day to visit the houses, where all the ones who were to be out neighbours were there, and I began to look forward to it, I though then that it was cosy, because they were all like us, it was really cosy, they were all from Jutland, all with children the same age as ours.

Experiencing that other residents had similar background to herself, her distinction between Copenhagen and Jutland breaks down. It feels homely because she has shared roots in Jutland. Tina has a similar experience but in a different way. She says:

And this area was new and family friendly, light, air and open space, it gave me the right feeling in the stomach. That is the experience people from Jutland have, it is only for Jutland people out here,– a trip on the Jutland heath, that’s what it was like to get on to Amager Fælled, it was the Jutland Heath (Tina)

Here the similarity between the housing area and Jutland nature – the heath – are very similar, which means that Jutland people feel at home here. This suggests that the distinction between between the city and Jutland dissolves. In different ways the boundaries that these women drew between the city and Jutland breaks down, making them feel content and at home

Final Comments

In this paper I have sketched out a perspective on how residents emotional experiences in housing areas can be understood, as well as presented examples of how they are currently experienced. In particular, I demonstrate the mixed and contrasting experiences that residents have. Suburban, metropolitan spaces are places with complex and paradoxical identities, and I show how residents attempt to create clear and unique identities, as well as

the ambivalent feelings that these attempts produce. Residents navigate between different figurations of space to produce spatial identities, and this in turn generate emotion, when they have difficulty in drawing boundaries in the material and context they live in. In these stories, these housing areas emerge as a paradoxical space, contoured both by different intensities and proximities. Thus these housing areas becomes an emotional landscape where conflicting desires for urban pulse as well as nature are played out amongst metro lines, motorways, nature reserves, and artificial lakes.

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