(CREDIT: NEWS ORESUND)

Even Copenhagen Makes Mistakes

Long touted as the model of modern urbanism, the city's biggest economic and environmental challenges are still ahead.

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"If someone comes up to you every day for eight years and says, 'My god — you're gorgeous!' it's going to affect you. You're going to start thinking you don't need to invest in new clothes."

So says Mikael Colville-Andersen about his hometown of Copenhagen, a place habitually swooned over as the international poster child for sustainable, thriving cities. We're sitting outside the offices of Colville-Andersen's urban design company, Copenhagenize, in the city's harbor, and I'm taking in the view. Graceful new bike bridges loom half-built over the waterfront, while a stunning modern opera house overlooks a warehouse filled with street food stalls and a shipping channel clean enough to farm

oysters in. We pick up coffees from a wood cabin owned by local avant-garde fashion designer Henrik Vibskov, looking across the dock at historic goods depots as large and grand as palaces. Cars are absent and everyone is on bikes, even people in full business get-up. Quiet but salubrious docklands stretch off into the distance, slated for a reinvention that should still maintain their gaggle of delightfully improbable old naval and port buildings. From all vantages, Copenhagen looks like a fantasy doodle of a forward-looking city. If, as Colville-Andersen suggests, the Danish capital can sometimes be a little smug and complacent, then it has its reasons.

It's no surprise, then, that international media invariably paints Copenhagen as the stuff of liberal fantasy. The capital of what is supposedly the happiest nation in the world, it's the most bike-friendly city on the planet, a place where cyclists enjoy a lane network put together with an ambition usually reserved for inter-city motor highways. Copenhagen has grand plans to become carbon neutral by 2025, and already hosts what was once the world's largest offshore wind farm. In 2014, it was crowned the world's most livable city and the greenest.

Meanwhile, over at City Hall its Lord Mayor (one of an unbroken line of Social Democrat incumbents since 1903) has a reputation as a confirmed urbanist and progressive, famous in Europe for banning city employees from flying on a non-union airline. The city's harbor waters sparkle clear, while the Øresund road and rail bridge is making history by gradually forging a single metro area with Sweden's third largest city, Malmo, just across the Øresund strait. North American cities beset by sprawl and congestion can hardly be blamed for looking toward Copenhagen as the European city on a hill.

Copenhagen Mayor Frank Jensen has a reputation for being a progressive urbanist. (Credit: News Oresund on flickr)

But look hard enough at any shiny object and likely, cracks will start to become visible. In Copenhagen, the fractures stem from developmental and environmental pressures similar to those faced by far less superlative cities. Right now, for example, Copenhagen is considering a new harbor tunnel that, if built, could end up flooding the city center with cars. Growth in housing demand is galloping ahead of home building, causing higher-than-ever housing costs. Some key housing schemes built so far have made some missteps and predominantly targeted the already well-served rich. A member of the extreme right Danish People's Party is now overseeing the city's culture department, while bearded, bike-riding Lord Mayor Frank Jensen's greatest legacy looks like it might actually be the approval of 4,000 parking spaces downtown. Meanwhile, some eye-catching city proposals — such as a plan to create an international metro system between Copenhagen and Malmo (which are already connected by very frequent, through-routed trains) — turn out on closer inspection to be mainly aimed at gaining headlines.

If left unresolved, these pressures could knock Copenhagen from its green pedestal. The urbanism movement's model city is not immune to the challenges of growth, climate change and increasing economic disparity.

But luckily, doomsday is a long way off and most the city's achievements have been won in the face of political opposition, indicating that Copenhagen knows how to weather a storm or two. So what is the recipe that has gotten this onetime fishing village to a place of international envy — and what does it need to do to keep the good times rolling?

A POLITICAL CULTURE THAT VALUES DATA – AND COMPROMISE

The answer arguably starts with government. At the foundation of Copenhagen's city nerd nirvana is a

political practice that has absolutely nothing to do with urban design: the act of compromise. Since the early 20th century, no single party in Denmark has ever maintained an absolute majority in parliament. Coalitions are the rule — and even Danish coalitions tend to be minority governments. This has forged a political culture that forces a degree of cooperation between political opponents. It means that government bills typically have to be wrung out and reshaped in the assembly chamber, and can flounder if their arguments aren't backed up by data.

Copenhagen was voted the most bike-friendly city on the planet. (Photo by Alex Berger on flickr)

This national pattern is repeated on a smaller scale in Copenhagen. The city has had a Social Democrat mayor since 1903, but the second party in City Hall typically wields a large amount of influence as well; political appointments are spread evenly across all political parties.

With a politically diverse set of subordinates, the mayor's role is typically more that of a unifying figurehead than a confrontational trailblazer. In fact, when I ask Colville-Andersen who is responsible for pushing the city's green agenda forward, he offers a confusing title and an internationally lesser-known name: Morten Kabell, Copenhagen's mayor for technical and environmental affairs. (The title of mayor is given to officials who in the United States would be called commissioners or deputy mayors.) Kabell belongs to the Enhedslisten (Unity List) political party, one of Copenhagen's largest parties, situated left of Jensen's Social Democrats.

"Scandinavian politics is an exercise in compromise," Colville-Andersen says. "The political parties in City Hall all work together, and it's the individual mayors who really wield influence."

All the talk of compromise may just sound like more fawning over the niceties of European bureaucracy, but it is fundamental to Copenhagen's empirically driven, can-do attitude. Constant compromise has sanded down the sharp edges of each faction's program and encouraged even the most tradition-minded politicians to accept new ways of doing things.

"There's no political party in Copenhagen who will vote against bicycle infrastructure. They all know it. The right wing must hate it but they accept it," Colville-Andersen says. "There's a pragmatic, rational approach here. There just isn't enough room for cars, so do the math.

WILLINGNESS TO TAKE RISKS INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OF

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Strong political instincts aren't confined to the lawmakers in Copenhagen's ornate City Hall. **Denmark has one of the highest voter turnout rates in the world** and its capital city, not surprisingly, is a stronghold of a public life. It's not unusual to find protestors filling a public square, advocating for anything from refugee rights to the freedom to breastfeed in public. In the last municipal activity, 54 percent of eligible voters cast a ballot — **a rate of participation virtually unheard of in the U.S.**, where no major city had a turnout of more than 45 percent in mayoral elections between 2008 and 2011.

Kabell attributes Copenhagen's progressive culture to these activists and voters, not politicians.

"I wouldn't say that we have a consensus in Copenhagen but I would say that the general idea of change is actually due to Copenhageners themselves," he says. "In the 1970s we had 150,000 people demonstrating in the City Hall Square asking for change. They wanted their city back. They wanted to be able to send their kids to school, to hang out in squares instead of having parking lots, so in many respects it was ordinary Copenhageners who initiated and managed change."

Jan Gehl was one of those ordinary Copenhageners when he began, in the late 1960s, to study public space and advocate for streets designed to prioritize pedestrians and cyclists, rather than cars. Today, the architect is a world-renowned figure whose **ideas for a "human-scaled city" have guided the revitalization of countless urban centers**. He says his hometown has managed to make progress through a willingness to experiment that he calls "stealth urbanism."

"For many years, Copenhagen had an excellent city engineer who said 'if you can't park, you don't drive.' Then he said 'I'll take 2 percent of the parking out of downtown every year, and I won't tell anybody so nobody will notice.' So every year, he reduced the amount of parking space and put in more tables, more chairs," Gehl recalled at a forum hosted by The Atlantic in October. "The place became nicer and nicer, and people changed their habits, taking their bikes or the bus or metro. Over a period of time, the pattern of behavior has changed. You could call it stealth urbanism."

A penchant for risk-taking — anathema in far too many city halls — can be seen during Copenhagen's slow summer when city planners take advantage of empty streets to pilot projects and test new ideas.

"There are three weeks in July when this city goes totally dead because people are on holiday, and they've tried some crazy stuff in that period," Colville-Andersen says. "They took away car parking, allowed cafes to expand into the space ... just testing and documenting stuff. Any positive data that feeds back from experiments like that strengthens the case."

But creating a greener city also requires taking risks too sizable — and too important — to be tested with a popup. That's where the city's ability to invest in green infrastructure comes in.

A LEGACY OF PUBLIC INVESTMENT

Developed on the edge of an island as a port city serving one of Europe's busier shipping channels, Copenhagen never had the luxury of ignoring its water infrastructure. Even so, maintaining a clean water supply has long been a challenge. Until the 1990s, storms would send sewage-polluted rainwater flowing straight into the city's harbor. In 1992, massive public investment turned the situation around — the city flushed its harbor clean by sinking 3 billion DK ($440 million U.S.) into rainwater reservoirs and conduits diverting storm overflow away from the quays. The city also built a new wastewater treatment system that succeeded in keeping the water so clear of pollutants that today people have no qualms about swimming in the harbor.

Such rapid turnaround is the stuff of fantasy in American cities, where it can take generations to raise the public money needed to support ambitious environmental

ıagen spent millions cleaning up its harbor terways in the 1990s. (Photo by Benson flickr)

money needed to support ambitious environmental cleanups. The key difference? Public attitudes about taxes. A multiyear public awareness campaign paved the way for lawmakers to establish water rates higher than anywhere else in Europe. Today, a cubic meter of Danish water costs €1.68 more than it does in Luxembourg, the European country with the second highest water rates. The high rate is intentional — the city levies a water tax high enough to ensure that it can afford to maintain the water infrastructure. A silver lining of the high tax is a citizenry accustomed to conserving the valuable resource flowing from their taps. One quirk of Danish homes is that bathtubs are very uncommon.

Substantial public investment is also behind Copenhagen's plans to become carbon neutral by 2025. This grand ambition has a number of key strands, including investment in electric and biofuel-powered vehicles, retrofitting buildings and a commitment to constantly developing cycling infrastructure. By far the largest projected carbon saving — 74 percent of the total — will come from changes in energy production. The city plans to phase out all coal-fired heating, by converting two major city power plants to biomass as well as constructing a geothermal plant, a heat storage tank, and a combined heat and power plant run on woodchips. Complemented by 100 new wind turbines, these plants will power another new efficiency-minded addition to the city's energy grid: a district heating infrastructure. The new system will enable neighborhoods to scrap individual boilers and instead, have hot water piped through one massive shared boiler, eliminating waste and reducing carbon emissions. These transformations will require substantial public funding, but also produce up to 35,000 new jobs in the city.

Jeff Risom is an urban designer with **Gehl Studio**, Jan Gehl's U.S. office. He says American mayors could learn a lot from Copenhagen's reliance on simple, data-backed solutions. "The city has said 'let's keep design simple and straightforward,' and that's led to a consistent, humanistic approach he says. "When you pay your taxes and see change happening it builds trust and the system keeps working."

It's not only the public sector that is driving the investment. Recent years have seen a groundswell of businesses that have sustainable practices as a central part of their mission. Line Bram Pedersen is one of the founders of the green business portal GoGreenCopenhagen. When Pedersen and her colleagues launched GoGreen in 2010, it had just 50 members. As of this year, there are 130, indicating that Copenhagen residents are following government's lead and investing green. "People who were pushing for a 'green change' might not have done it as their main job before," Pedersen says. "Now it's becoming more professionalized. Community projects such as urban gardens are exploring ways to sustain themselves, for example, as restaurants."

But with every new garden and restaurant, Copenhagen's appeal grows and along with it, new market pressures. **The city of half a million is expected to grow by another 100,000 over the next decade**. All of these new residents will need places to live and when it comes to creating new, affordable homes, Copenhagen faces challenges familiar in many other parts of the world. It's just that this time, it hasn't come up with much of a solution.

A RICH MAN'S GHETTO

Rents are rising fast in Copenhagen, and some estimates show a 40 percent average jump in property prices over the last three years. For a city that has long prided itself on its progressive values, the realization that teachers, social workers and skilled workers are being priced out of their neighborhoods has come as a burn.

With a political — and practical — crisis looming, Jensen announced a plan to build 2,000 new public housing units across the city last spring. In a nod to a widening wealth gap, he prioritized their location in wealthier areas where there are currently few options for lower-cost housing. But even if the mayor meets his ambitious goal, the new housing will feed only a fraction of the demand — Copenhagen will get 20,000 new inhabitants next year alone. One home for every 5.5 newcomers just won't cut it if Copenhagen wants to avoid the displacement seen in cities like Paris and San Francisco.

Like both of those cities, Copenhagen also has a space problem: Hemmed in by neighboring municipalities, it is running out of room to build. If Copenhagen is going to keep growing, it's going to have to densify.

But where? Copenhagen has a small belt of low-rise neighborhoods with single-family homes laid out among gardens, but much of the city's inner-core is already dense with five- to six-floor tenements. Any suggestion of building higher would face fierce resistance in a city with a beautiful skyline still dominated by historic towers and steeples. With no politically palatable option in mind downtown, planners are pointing toward Copenhagen's watery periphery, where harbors, wetlands and even open waters are ripe for reclamation.

The Mountain Dwellings apartment building in Ørestad was designed by Bjarke Ingels and JDS Architects. (Photo by Wojtek Gurak on flickr)

The first evidence of this approach is to be found at Ørestad, a new district designed to house 20,000 people on reclaimed wetlands off the island of Amager. With its first office buildings opened in 2001 and its first apartments ready for tenants in 2003, Ørestad is already a showcase for progressive Scandinavian design. It has a Jean Nouvel-designed concert hall, a main street dedicated to Arne Jacobsen, and a clutch of groundbreaking buildings, including the garden-capped 8 House, the VM Houses with its porcupine bristle of balconies, and a multifloored car garage overlaid with a half-ziggurat of sun-grabbing apartments. With much of the planned development still unbuilt, Ørestad already has a look-at-me leaning tower hotel, Scandinavia's largest mall and, crucially, a new branch of Copenhagen's modest metro running through its spine, connecting it to both Central Copenhagen and the airport.

What Ørestad doesn't yet have is affordability, or the vibrancy of Copenhagen's core. Crucially, the area lacks the density to create a sense of street life and design choices have aggravated the problem; the mall, for example, turns inward. The ample parklands around the new blocks remain vacant and windswept. There's a lack of basic amenities such as corner grocery stores, while selling office space along the new metro line has proved harder than expected. Overall, the area retains the feel of a costly exhibit: impressive but kept aridly pristine behind security ropes.

Planners are learning from some of the mistakes made at Ørestad. Just across the city's South Harbor is another new development, an archipelago of islands reclaimed from the harbor's waters called Sluseholmen. Construction began in 2004, just a year after the first tenants moved to Ørestad, but the housing is markedly different. Tightly packed around a network of canals, it's bright and lively while also gobbling up every spare scrap of land. But while this new neighborhood is a step in the right direction, it, like its predecessor, hasn't been much of a help with the city's affordability problem.

Now the city plans to reclaim another cluster of islands. The land — an ex-industrial site called Enghave Brygge — sits farther up the harbor toward Copenhagen's center.

The area in question is an obvious next step for redevelopment. Dominated by a power station, it abuts the Vesterbro neighborhood, a former red light district that's become the city's go-to spot for drinking expensive cocktails amid urban grit. Meanwhile, on the other side of Vesterbro, upscale housing and shops are replacing warehouses and workshops at a former Carlsberg Brewery. Few other sections of inner Copenhagen are likely to transform as fully.

The Ørestad metro station connects the neighborhood to Central Copenhagen and the airport. (Photo by Tim Adams on flickr)

With the area's gentrification proceeding briskly and little sign of progress on the affordable housing front, some have questioned why such a large swath of public water is being claimed for so-called "rich man's ghettoes."

"The city is about to tip," City Council Member Ayfer Baykal told Politiken, a local newspaper. "We can see this with the new construction at Islands Brygge, South Harbor [the location of the new islands] and the North Harbor. There is very little public housing for which people with ordinary incomes can pay."

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On this issue, it seems that Copenhagen could benefit from applying its usual pragmatic, solutions oriented approach. “The city has its head in the sand,” Risom says. “City officials say that our affordability crisis isn’t as bad as other places, but that isn’t saying much.”

CAN THE HUMAN-SCALED CITY SCALE UP?

A few days after my visit to Copenhagen’s downtown harbor, I arrange to meet another urban advocate at one of the city’s lesser-known green spaces: a cluster of tree-covered hillocks that rise over World War II air shelters bracketing the scenic Queen Louise’s Bridge. In 2012, the city threatened to level the hills to make way for development. After a dogged campaign by a group called Save the Urban Trees, the city abandoned its plans.

“They thought they could level the space and rent it out as a place for events or something,” fumes Sandra Høj, leader of Save the Urban Trees. “But there’s absolutely no good reason to destroy a beautiful spot like this. It was pure stupidity.”

This might seem a minor victory, but when you visit the site — a charming knot of grassy knolls shaded by chestnuts and filled with people lazing on sunny days — you see exactly why Copenhagen is ranked again and again as the world’s most livable city.

Høj takes me to another battleground in a corner of the Nørrebro neighborhood. In a scrappy but charming little park, seniors from an adjacent home for people with dementia are sunning themselves as children from next door’s kindergarten run around them. A tiny petting zoo houses chickens and rabbits — some housed in a hutch marked “Valhalla” — while teenagers pour out from a graffiti-covered building that looks like a nightclub. On closer inspection it turns out to be a high school — one, I learn, that lets its students tag and spray the walls once a week themselves. Venturing into the courtyard, we find more hooded, pierced students sipping beer in the school’s bar (prudently reserved for Fridays only) politely listening to a teenage quintet playing jazz brass.

Høj is fighting plans to tear out 15 trees and commandeer a chunk of the kindergarten’s grounds. The grand plan that entails this destruction? A public square with a recycling station.

It’s a first-world problem for sure but one that cuts to the heart of Copenhagen’s dilemma. Can the place that inspired an international movement toward “human-scale” cities comfortably scale up?

“We don’t want to become a victim of our success,” Risom says.

Copenhagen’s approach has served it well enough so far. But with all of the city’s achievements it becomes easy to forget the intense resistance many of these initiatives once faced. As an example, Copenhagen’s early role in fighting back against car dominance — it pedestrianized its main shopping street, Strøget, as early as 1962 — faced such intense opposition that Copenhagen’s mayor for transport at the time received death threats and required a police guard on Strøget’s opening day. Throughout these contested periods, it’s citizen activists who have forced politicians to hold true to promises. As environmental, economic and development pressures grow, it will be up to these same grassroots leaders to keep Copenhagen true to its reputation.

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