

# Overcoming Residents Opportunity Apathy in Danish Social Housing Democracy

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**Abstract.** In this paper, I discuss how various technologies can support democratic collaboration in the social housing sector in Denmark, and help overcome opportunity apathy. I exemplify the discussion with an ongoing process of strategy development, in a Danish housing organization.

## Introduction

In Denmark, social housing is organized around a democratic structure giving residents in the housing departments control over their budget etc. This democratic structure constitutes a possibility for saying no, and to modify administrative actions, but it also constitutes an opportunity space for inventing new common goods and dreams. This opportunity space, however, is very often not utilized by residents. It is common knowledge within the social housing democracy that residents turn up at the annual residents meetings if the rent is about to be increased or if a renewal project is being planned, whereas they tend to stay at home in most other cases. This is expectable and in line with thoughts by Dewey (“the public and its problems”), who indicates that engagement of the public is always rooted in issues. In this paper, I discuss this tension between opportunity apathy and issue based engagement as related to structural conditions

in and around the social housing democracy. In particular I look into the how the logic of meetings tends to bind any debate to predefined proposals or themes that can be put to vote, and I look into how collaborative technologies may be utilized to open spaces for open, creative collaboration to evolve new possibilities for life in the housing department.

## Housing democracy

The social housing sector in Denmark is built on the principle of local democracy and decision-making. The basic unit is the housing department, which can comprise from a couple to close to two thousand apartments, most often in co-located buildings of same type. Housing departments are joined in housing organizations, which are independent and self-governing. New departments are established by the housing organization through a system of municipal support, urban planning, national support, etc. Housing departments remain owned by the organization, but decisions about budget, renewal, and local rules are made by the residents in the department at the annual residents meeting. A local board, elected by the residents meeting, oversees the implementation of decisions taken by the residents meeting, local representatives for the general assembly of the organization are also elected. The housing organization employs administrative and technical staff to operate the units. Administrative staff supports residents' democracy and help ensure sanity and legality.

## Opportunity apathy

It is a challenge for the social housing democracy that a majority of residents, despite legal possibilities, do not participate. Some residents do not know the possibilities, some don't think they are welcome or that they will be able to have a say if they participate. Some have experienced that the annual residents meeting is run by a clique of very experienced "residents democrats", and others just don't feel they can spend the necessary time. Accounts on this situation can be found in (Lund-Andersen, 2003, Jensen et al. 1999). Jensen et al. (1999, p51) reports that 40 percent of the respondents did not like to speak at big meetings, and that 41 percent almost never would speak at the annual residents meeting. These numbers show that the annual residents meeting is not the ideal format for all residents.

The opportunity apathy can to some extent be attributed to the typical form of meetings in housing democracy; the tyranny of the vote theme focused meetings. The process leading to a proposal at an annual residents meeting is often closed, involving only staff and the local board up to the point of taking a formal

decision. Many residents have ideas and opinions, but these are most often not included in forming a proposal. Collaborative creativity in defining the future for a housing department is rare. Most debate is undertaken at formalized meeting where focus is on avoiding specific decisions or having other specific decisions approved. Ultimately, decisions are taken through voting for or against a proposal, and thereby any contribution that cannot be put to a vote is regarded irrelevant. In other words, the proposal centered meeting logic seems to be a problem. There is a need for new fora where discussions can be made freely without the pressure of formal decisions, thereby avoiding exaggerated focus on conflicts and creative collaboration becomes possible.

While it seems trivially true that the format of typical meetings is a hindrance for active involvement, it seems clear also that it is not enough merely to reduce these structures of exclusion. It seems to be a general problem that most people are much more likely to activate themselves in relation to threats, issues and problems, and less likely to engage in filling out opportunity spaces. This is not only experienced in the social housing democracy, but also in general public planning as when the city of Aarhus called all citizens to contribute ideas for the detailed spending of a large part of its budget in a new library project on the harbor front. Virtually no one turned up to the meeting to pose interesting ideas. No one came to secure space and resources for their hobbies, etc.

I will call this lack of drive to fill out and utilize common resources and opportunities opportunity apathy.

## Examples of opportunity realization

The opposite of opportunity apathy could be called opportunity realization. In social housing departments one area where residents have engaged in opportunity realization is the creation of playgrounds. In Department 1, a department of a social housing organization in Aarhus, a group of young families thought that their children would benefit from the establishment of a playground. Some years earlier it had been decided to cancel the existing playground and have grass instead, both because it was expensive to renovate and also because the local board thought that there would be no children in the department. The group of young families started to make plans for a new playground and then they approached the local board. The local board rejected the plan, but was later replaced at the annual residents meeting.

Later, approximately the same group of younger residents organized joint dinners for all who wanted to participate. Again with some skepticism from oldtimers, who believed that this way of using the department meeting rooms was too anarchist.

An example of a more organized effort to enable opportunity realization and broader engagement has been the initiation of regular sub-department meetings for one stairway or for one house (of several stairways). At these meetings no formal decisions can be taken because the meetings have no formal status. Therefore, it is legal to ask questions and to air new ideas regardless of realism, downsides, etc.

## IT based support for collaborative opportunity realization

Below I point to examples of how IT is being used, or has been experimented with in engaging residents in the democratic life of a housing department.

### Experiences with using Facebook

Many social housing departments have experimented with utilizing Facebook as a channel for informal debate and interaction among residents. The obvious advantage in this context is that Facebook is not suited for making formally legitimate decisions. Thereby, it is ensured that only free debate can take place, no one is held responsible for the implementation of their ideas, because decisions are made elsewhere. The general experience is, however, that the debate there most often is reactive towards threats and not seeking to explore possibilities. Thus, the lack of responsibility more often leads to irresponsible quarreling than to free development of ideas. While Facebook seems to provide a way to attract people, it does not break the opportunity apathy. In short, platforms like Facebook, as well as more dedicated debate platforms seem to lack direct support for open, creative, collaborative opportunity realization.

### Beboermødeportalen – breaking the meeting logic, keeping the meeting

Heath (2010) developed a prototype, Beboermødeportalen, based on the idea that democratic life in a social housing department evolves in a one-year cycle with the annual residents meeting as the point of reference. Decisions are taken at the meeting, but the local board prepares the meetings and undertakes the implementation of decisions made. Heath's prototype aimed to make transparent the work done by the local board before and after the annual meeting, and to open a space for broad democratic debate. The prototype gave an opportunity to participate asynchronously when it was convenient for the individual resident, eliminating the feeling of not having time to attend the meeting and giving

residents a chance to learn if and how participating in the meeting could be relevant. This also provided an opportunity to participate for people who are not confident with talking at meeting. Maybe most prominently, the portal provided an opportunity for all residents to follow the work done by the local board, possibly reducing the inbred character resident democracy some times has. By introducing the possibilities for asynchronous debate, and broader involvement of residents in the preparation of the annual meeting, the logic of the meeting is being broken up.

### Beboermening – breaking the space

Kjeldsen (2014), in his thesis, explored ideas developed by Korn (2013), and colleagues, of localizing debate about planning issues by utilizing QR codes on situated issues posters. For instance, Kjeldsens system was used for posting a poster in the cycle parking basement raising the question of good conduct and usage of space in the bicycle area. The idea was to enable the residents to engage with issues and opportunities when they are in the relevant location carrying out relevant activities, thereby, tying democratic debate closer to actual life in the department.

A hypothetical, but realistic, example could be from Department 18 where the shared laundry facilities for 48 apartments include an ironer. The ironer is a relatively expensive piece of equipment to replace and while it seems like something that traditionally has been important, it is also evident that less people today iron their linen. Debate about the replacement of the ironer at the annual residents meeting tends to get heated and be more about the universal rights of having access to an ironer rather than about how the existing one is actually used and which alternatives there could be. A debate localized in the laundry, near the ironer, would help people remember and formulate aspects of their own use. E.g. “I am using the Ironer today because it is here and that it is much easier to iron my big table cloth, that I am only using for Christmas with the ironer that it would be to use an iron. I think, though, that it would be more important to have better ventilation of the drying room than to use resources for the ironer”. Another example could be “I am ironing my bed linen today. I am always doing that because it maintains cleanliness for a longer time. If the ironer broke down and wasn’t replaced I would probably have to get a small ironer for myself, but that would be expensive and take space in my apartment”. Based on such comments it could become clear that it would make more sense to get a smaller ironer and place that in a locked room where people who have a need and know how to operate a non-industrial ironer without breaking it could get a key. And then the rest of the money could be used for improved ventilation of the drying room. However, the prototypes presented by Korn (2013) and Kjeldsen (2014) did not provide structural support for idea development. A platform, that in a more

structured way incorporates elements from e.g. future workshops, could be useful. To do so the difference between localized and non-localized should be further explored.

## The case of the future housing quality in BK

BK is a Social Housing organization with more than 5000 apartments in a large town in Denmark. BK is currently in the process of ensuring the future quality of its housing departments. The challenge is to meet future requirements for energy consumption, housing comfort, facilities as well as the general age of buildings, and find ways to ensure the needed economic funds in the departments. This is a process that, in the Danish housing democracy, is conducted in cooperation with residents, organization's administration, municipality etc. BK wants to ensure that residents take a leading role in developing visions for the future life in the departments.

The process followed in BK is somewhat traditional. The central board of the organization has developed a strategy in collaboration with the administrative staff. This strategy has been discussed with the general assembly and finally approved as a working principle. Then the situation, including the need for extra funds in the future budgets, has been laid out for each department. Now each local board is responsible for formulating the local strategy for quality of future housing, and to ensure the needed anchoring among the residents of the department. The central board wishes that all residents get to influence the process. It is evident, however, that just understanding the concepts of the strategic plan is a challenge for the local boards. Therefore, the involvement of all residents in a creative co-creative process seems to them like a lot to undertake. Therefore, involvement is in danger of degenerating into a process where ordinary residents are only asked to vote for the strategic plan.

What we see here is a double challenge related to opportunity apathy. In the first instance it is hard for the local boards to get involved with the space of possibilities at hand because of the complexity when they look ahead 20 years into challenges, like raising energy prices, that they have just begun to understand the impacts of. And foreseeing what they, or the future residents, would want for their homes in 20 years time, and to understand how basic features of the department may accommodate that, is even harder. In the second instance, involving the ordinary residents is a challenge in itself. They are even unsure about what the whole exercise is about, and they may be feeling even strange to open opportunities.

## Three challenges

The above elicits three main challenges for democratic strategy development.

### Involving people

Many residents do not attend residents meetings. It seems hard for them to justify the effort, even if it is just a matter of attending a meeting for an hour, and for many it also seems impossible to break the code of the established democracy, and thereby motivation to attend drops even further.

As pointed out above, Facebook seems to have potentials for engaging people because many already use Facebook, but it fails by not providing structures for democratic engagement, in particular there is no support for the maintenance of a friendly debate climate, and for idea development.

### Opening the process

The discourse of social housing democracy is hard to penetrate for many residents; on top of that, local boards seem to be anxious about possible unrealistic, unhealthy, or other proposals from ordinary residents that do not conform to established standards and values of social housing.

Beboermødeportalen was an attempt to opening the process in a safe way, to let all residents learn about the discourse, enabling them to contribute in a way that is understandable for the local board, and avoid the stress when proposals can only be discussed and possibly accepted within the very short time of the annual meeting. In relation to the strategy process in BK, Beboermødeportalen did not provide support for generation and development of new ideas.

### Providing views into the possible practical futures

Residents, as most other people, think about the future in terms of the existing world and possibly very specific proposals they are faced with. This inability to see and understand the unknown was addressed in early PD methods such as organizational games, mock-ups, prototypes etc

Beboermøning can be seen as an attempt to help idea development by providing a way for residents to link the discourse about future possibilities and changes to actual practice with current arrangements. The weakness is, however, that current practice may be taken too much for granted. If a resident is asked about alternatives to the ironer just when he is about to use it, he may only focus on the non-ironer situation as a complication.

To see into possible practical futures we need alternatives to reflect current life in. Provocations, wild ideas, more advanced practices, or just other arrangements to compare current situation with.

# IT support for strategy development in BK

## Asynchronous Future Workshop

Challenges, such as energy prices, or the changing demographics in the department, could be posted as a starting point and then a limited number of days could be allocated for each of the phases, critique, fantasy and realization. In the critique phase administrative staff and the local board would provide knowledge about the challenge, in the fantasy phase the task for the local board would be to show that any idea is legal, avoiding criticism of others ideas may be better done by third parties. In the realization phase the local board, or a third party, would help reaching a joint understanding of the ideas and administrative staff would help in assessing and assuring realism. Several challenges or issues could be run in parallel with non-overlapping phases. The weakness of this idea is that it requires residents to involve themselves in a longer process.

### 6.2.2 Treasure Hunts or Debate Tours

In a treasure hunt like setup based on geocaching., individuals or smaller groups, residents would be taken on a guided tour around the department. To complete the tour they would have to engage in debate, and suggest solutions to issues, at a number of locations. Locations could be inside or outside residents' own apartments, and could be in places that have issues (e.g. this outside wall emits this amount of energy per year the standards are this, what could we do?), or in places with opportunities or unused resources (e.g. the lawn is never used, suggest facilities that would make you use it). Posts (or locations) could contain links to existing solutions in other housing organizations or other means of inspiration. Such treasure hunts could last for less than an hour and up to several days (with breaks), and the debate inputs could be made while at the location or somewhere else. Technically, the treasure hunt could be based on GPS and location specific web pages or a specific app. It could also be derived from the Beboermening prototype (op.cit).

### Co-development of extreme character and scenarios

Within the approaches loosely labeled as critical design, systematic work with extremes has proved to support innovation well (e.g. Djajadiningrat 2000). In the development of future strategies for the departments of BK the development of housing for extreme scenarios and extreme characters could be a vehicle idea generation. Extreme scenarios could be related to environmental challenges. E.g. "In twenty years it will rain 200 days per year and there will be many storms, but average temperatures will be 10 degrees higher. What are the challenges and opportunities, and how can we deal with them?". Or, "In the future most families



will be brought together with children from prior marriages. Typically, two adults, their 1-2 shared children, as well as four children that live part time in another place. How can we provide the best conditions for such families?”. Extreme characters could be “the mercenary”, “the thief”, “the promiscuous single mother of six”, “the model railway enthusiast”, “the flamboyant gay couple” or more extreme. And the question could be how would the ideal apartment in our department be for each of these?

Development with this kind of extremes could well take place in a physical workshop, but since attendance to physical meetings seems to be limited, a web-based approach makes sense. One format would be that extremes would be suggested by process facilitators as well as by the broad range of residents. Within a short period of days, all residents could supply stories, descriptions, drawings etc. A follow up phase could comprise elements of the asynchronous future workshop, and could be summed up and related to the more realistic task at hand.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have outlined challenges to the involvement of social housing residents in strategic planning for future housing quality. I have pointed to the specific problem of opportunity apathy, and how it can be addressed through computerized support for collaborative ideation. In the coming year I will aim to make experiments along these lines with BK.

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