Fixed typology, fluid functions, continuous narrative

Narratives forming a transformation network of actors

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Introduction

Since deindustrialisation a loss of industrial heritage and narratives can be experienced in cities, a loss, in many cases, related to a focus on the monumental and original of the architecture – described as the value-based approach to heritage by Joks Jansen and Ioannis Poulios. An approach fostering the unique and the special, but losing the ordinary, the societal and the social - the cohesiveness and the mixture.

The loss of the ordinary heritage and the cohesiveness of the city can be experienced many places in the city, from the historic city centres to former industrial- and port areas. In this text, I focus on the loss of heritage in the urban typology of the classic working-class neighbourhood. Areas of low scale, former industry, affordable housing and an almost self-destructive humility. A neighbourhood for the worker and the manager, a neighbourhood with green courtyards, businesses in the backyard, shops on the ground floor and streets laid out as public common areas - in short; a classic example of the social and functional mixed city. When transforming these neighbourhoods with the value-based approach, we often experiences demolition and/or gentrification of the heritage, as the stories, functionality, atmosphere, narratives, social and its diversity is not valued – focus is towards the architecture and the physical. When experiencing a gentrification of an existing neighbourhood through a pure focus of the physical, on the architecture, the social and the narrative are lost.

In this text, I present some of my research on sustaining urbane heritage and on how to reactivate heritage in the development of the city by the tools of urban planning, through the perspective of actor-network theory. Focusing on urban heritage as constructed by actors and there by on the creation of the social.

Urban heritage, a network-based approach to heritage

The description of the value-based approach to heritage, by Jansen and Poulios is described through the changes in the perception on heritage, from the material-based to the value-based to the recent perception; living-based heritage. The living-based approach departs in an understanding of heritage as constructed through the social and its actions. Starting from this description, I investigated how to incorporate the living-based approach into the use of urban planning. I did this by understanding the living as the social. Understanding heritage as a social construction, a network, which I through this paper describes as Urban Heritage.
I base the concept of Urban Heritage on the living-based approach of perceiving heritage as not objectified but a social matter, described by, as many others, Professor Laurajane Smith and scholar Graham Fairclough. They describe heritage as living, processual and as the action of heritage itself. Smith describes it as the administration, identification, definition and designation of what we call heritage as heritage and Fairclough describes it as the action itself – to heritage. This action and procedural understanding of heritage can be embedded in the actor-network theory (ANT) and its beliefs in the influences networks has on a given situation and not solely the specific object, human or non-human.

Professor Albena Yaneva describes the goal in ANT as a desire to find a problematic constellation of actors that opens a new understanding of of reality, how different actors influence social behaviour, traditions, values and structures. Yaneva explains it like this; “It examines how objects with their scripts and incorporated programs of action compel and rearticulate new social ties, how the way they are shaped and designed is related to specific ways of enacting the social”.

Through ANT, the intention is to introduce the concept of urban heritage as an action in the creation of a more site-specific transformation. Ensuring not only the original and monumental, but also the narrative, the social, the atmospheric and the structural of the heritage. In short, the cohesiveness and continuity of the city, as well as the social and functional mixed neighbourhood. With this approach, I see a potential in reactivating heritage as a strong asset in future urban developments - as both driver and goal for a given transformation.

In the following, I describe the process of qualifying and activating the heritage in a former working-class district in Denmark - Spinderikvarteret (The spinning mill district) in Vejle - as a network and a transformative concept. Aim of the process was to introduce the concept of Urban Heritage in the planning process.

**Spinderikvarteret – design research of an urban transformation**

*Spinderikvarteret* is from the years 1890 - 1930 and built in connection with the construction of a larger cotton-spinning mill. With the establishment of the cotton-spinning mill, Vejle developed significantly and got the nickname, Denmark's Manchester due to the massive urban development based on cotton spinning. The neighbourhood is today experienced as intact; its original social structure is still valid and the neighbourhood grasped as a continuum.
Planning in the area has until now primarily, as in all other cultural environments in Denmark, focused on the architecture through current value-based tools and an isolated view of the neighbourhood as a collection of buildings. Resulting in a slow development, a municipality without options and building owners who have neglected their buildings in the hope of possible demolition and thereby new construction. This has resulted in a dilapidated neighbourhood, but also a neighbourhood were the socially mixed city still exist due to low apartment prices and small apartments – a fragile and easily changeable situation due to massive pressure from the market.

If this social dynamic in Spinderikvarteret, existing for more than 100 years, changes, I will argue that the urban heritage will be lost. This I support by the methodological studies in the neighbourhood described later. In addition to the risk of losing the urban heritage, the municipality has pointed the neighbourhood as a pilot project for maintaining social dynamics and resilience, why they initiated a process to ensure a continued role of the neighbourhood in the city.

On this, I initiated, together with the Municipality of Vejle, a 1:1 research project testing the understanding of the heritage as an action, an actor-network. We conducted a planning and research process aiming for an understanding of the concept of urban heritage in the area as a new approach of working with this in a planning process.

Design research – a focus on the transformation process and its networks

I explored the planning process in Spinderikvarteret methodically through methods of action research. In the planning process, various initiatives were initiated to activate heritage experts, local citizens, administration, politicians, building owners, the local museum and other relevant stakeholders questioning the heritage of the
neighbourhood. I activated various interests and groups through workshops, meetings and dialogue walks to both qualify and activate the heritage in the neighbourhood by investigations in the structures, the architecture, stories, histories, narratives, atmospheres and in the future perspectives – into the concept of Urban Heritage.

In this text, focus is on the observations made through the concepts of dialogue walks. Observations focusing on a qualification of the Urban Heritage through the residents, on the action of doing heritage and connecting the different residents in a common understanding. We conducted six walks in the neighbourhood and throughout each walk, we discussed and observed how the residents described and experienced the heritage of the urban neighbourhood. During the walks, we asked participants to take two Polaroid photos of what they felt captured the essence of heritage of the neighbourhood, at two selected locations. This created an awareness of the detail, the narratives of the neighbourhood and an empirical data set for further dialogue with other residents, the administration and similar stakeholders. We conducted the dialogue walks as unstructured qualitative interviews, as informal and personal dialogues - it was not about what they valued in the area but why. Each walk consisted of different residents in groups of five to seven to gain different perspectives, securing the informal and personal dialogue as well as the opportunity to create new connections across the residents.

We quickly got an insight into how differently the residents perceived the heritage; some pointed to the courtyards, others to the diversity, some the industrial reminiscences and a fourth something different. In addition to the different perspectives, which were not surprising, we observed that the two main common denominators for the different choices was timeliness and the social interaction with a given object. Participants highlighted places emphasising a timeliness, particular the timeliness shown as narratives clarified through social relations or interaction.

The observations thus indicated that the residents did not perceive the heritage of Spinderikvarteret as bound in the architecture but in the continuous narratives connecting and emphasising the experienced heritage – the Urban Heritage.

Each dialogue walk ran along the same planned route and here we observed that places where the participants experienced the place through social relationship - a
continuation of the narrative - were perceived as an important part of the urban heritage of the neighbourhood. Whereas places merely represented through physical traces of the heritage but no social relation, the participants perceived as run-down and dilapidated. The participants perceived a worn backyard (figure 2) as important heritage, as the residents had occupied it and contributed to the story of the backyards in the neighbourhood. At the same location, participants could see a former garage (figure 2) and commercial facility that they perceived worn and unsafe. Here, the participants did not experience a narrative or social interaction. Through the walks, we thus observed a clearly connection to the heritage, when this was perceived as an interaction between the object and the social. When it emerged as a network of social relations, objects and narratives – as Urban Heritage. In the dialogue with the participants, this network was strengthen, with which the neighbourhood’s urban heritage was strengthen and clarified through the action. The action created a continuation of the story and thus a strengthening of the urban heritage.

Urban heritage as an actor-network, a social construction

These observations supported the understanding of the concept of Urban Heritage as a relevant driver for and of the social. Bruno Latour says that, instead of pointing to the action or controversy, it is better to focus on connections between elements creating the action, in order to ensure a best possible understanding. The narrative created in the context between the actors is the interesting and must emerge in urban planning in order to ensure the urban heritage and not the sub-elements. 6

The urban heritage is thus a site-specific construction developed over time in the interplay between various actors, experienced as the interplay between the different actors. Heritage becomes fundamental in the creation of our own understanding and an understanding of a place.

This network-based approach emphasises the understanding of Urban Heritage as an approach of gathering a network of actors through narratives for a future transformation, a practice where close analyses are made of why different objects, humans, ideas, values, rules, et cetera in a specific context look like they do. The heritage is an act of creating a context-based identity – the social - interpreted by residents, administrative and political institutions and in the general context of society.

Latour describes this identity, as existing between people, objects and non-human (such as stories and plans) actors. He point that if various are changed or removed, such as the people in a given area, it erases the social – or in this case the Urban Heritage. This points that the Urban Heritage in Spinderikvarteret will disappear if the narratives significantly transforms or if the people disappears through a gentrification. He describes it as; If a dancer stops dancing, the dance is finished. 7

He thus points out that a continuity, a continuum of actions or places, can never occur human-to-human or object-to-object, but will take place across the various relations between humans, objects and non-humans. This underscores the importance of grasping heritage as a continuity – as narratives - and the necessity of transformation
instead of development. It is through continuity we focus not only on the built-up area but also on the lived world. Which creates a focus on creating vibrant urban neighbourhoods rather than empty shells telling a specific cultural-historical narrative. The urban heritage is the physical space, the natural environment, the social and economic dimensions as well as the narratives.

By this understanding, I believe we can begin to understand how to transform an urban neighbourhood by starting from the concept of Urban Heritage. How we through this transformation can secure the heritage in a continuation of the given site. Experiencing heritage as not just an object open for valuation, but as a network and a mediator for an urban transformation – it is both the baseline and the goal for the transformation.

**Conclusion**

Analysis and observations presented in this text and conducted through dialogue walks illustrate the potential of introducing the concept of Urban Heritage understood through actor-network theory, which creates an acceptance of heritage as socially constructed, processual and active. It supports the understanding that the valuable urban structures exist in a rewriting or activation of the social dynamics and narratives, which is why a transformation of a given urban neighbourhood must include the social dimension as well as the physical in order to become sustainable. The concept of Urban Heritage understood through the perspective of the actor-work theory expands the understanding of heritage to something other than physical and thus as a transformation concept - a planning tool - and dismisses the role of heritage as a concept of preservation. It creates a concept capable of securing the social relations and the site-specific identity of an urban transformation.

This approach and observations underline the importance of narratives such as the connections between actors in the Urban Heritage network. The concept of Urban Heritage becomes continuous narratives unpacking the meaning of the specific typology, its fluid functions and how these connections between these three elements both support and secure the social. Through my action research-based method of dialogue walks, I observed the understanding of narratives as an important mediator in both the creation and understanding of the Urban Heritage and as a mediator to create a common ground. An approach of securing the layers of the city and the narratives of the past. Ensuring a future understanding of the past and ourselves while creating cohesive and mixed neighbourhoods.

**Endnotes**


5. Albena Yaneva, ‘Making the Social Hold: Towards an Actor-Network Theory of Design’, Design and Culture 1, no. 3 (1 November 2009): 277,


Complementary Bibliograph
Laurajane Smith, Uses of Heritage (London: Routledge, 2006).