Lessons learned exploring urbanity and questioning approaches to redevelopment, through dialogue, public meetings and citizen participation, in Copenhagen's inner city and deprived suburbs.

Supertanker: in search of urbanity

Jens Brandt, Martin Frandsen and Jan Lilliendahl Larsen, Supertanker

'Urban life suggests meetings, the confrontation of differences, reciprocal knowledge and acknowledgement (including ideological and political confrontation), ways of living, "patterns", which coexist in the city.'[1]

Supertanker came into being in 2002 in Copenhagen harbour. A diverse group of people embarked on a journey that was driven by the wish for a more dynamic, open and unpredictable city. This article will describe a number of our activities and the lessons learned from exploring urbanity in a Copenhagen setting: how to act – while keeping a high level of integrity – in the power game between developers, planners, local residents and media; how to create new types of dialogue; how to be locally embedded and still challenge the local agenda and how to work in space and time to create a more porous architecture.

An urban experiment: *terrain vague* as a launch pad
One defining moment that led to the formation of Supertanker was a public meeting arranged by an organisation of people living mainly in houseboats in the harbour. The format was that of a classic public meeting with a panel that consisted of people in power: a leading politician, the director of the Port Authority of Copenhagen, the chief city architect, and one grassroots representative as an exception. The whole process and physical set-up of the public meeting produced a very simplified (but strong) reaction against the panel that prevented a constructive exchange of arguments between mutually recognised adversaries. Supertanker was formed after this meeting with the aim of working for a more constructive and creative dialogue regarding the harbour development. As such we placed ourselves from the beginning in a position that

1 The popular beach bar in the central harbour *terrain vague* area was an important part of the self-grown community that also gave room to Supertanker

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challenged simultaneously the positions of the local
citizens and the politicians, planners and developers.

Supertanker was, at the beginning, a symbol of the
constructive debate relating to the Harbour
development in Copenhagen and was received with
open arms – including investors, planning
authorities and citizens. Its primary aim was to
facilitate an open and worthwhile debate about the
development of the harbour.

Supertanker was closely connected to
'Luftkastellet' (the pipe dream) [1], which was a very
popular beach café in the sunny and central part of
Copenhagen harbour known as 'Krøyers Plads'.
Luftkastellet, and later Supertanker, was situated in
some old wooden warehouses, which had previously
been used to house goods waiting to be sent to
Greenland. As such, the land had been off limits until
the shipping activity was relocated, making it
possible for people with little money and good ideas
to move in on temporary leases.

This area was developed in many ways in response
to criticism that the harbour was turning into a
lifeless part of central Copenhagen reserved only for
big business and expensive housing. Apart from the
beach café and Supertanker, a number of other small
businesses settled in the old warehouses: clothes
designers, video production companies and so on. It
also became a popular place to stay for backpackers.
It was here that Supertanker first had the chance to
explore the validity of its hypotheses first-hand by
simultaneously practising what we preached.

From its spontaneous start Supertanker included
people from a great variety of backgrounds: small
entrepreneurs, academics (geographers, architects,
lawyers), designers, sailors and so on. Most of these
people were working voluntarily for the cause. The
positive response to our initiative meant that we

2 The space of
   Supertanker was a
   rough old warehouse
   that was ideal for
   public meetings,
   workshops,
   exhibitions, parties
   and … table tennis

3 'Nej' (no in Danish).
   As an illustration of
   the height of the
   proposed project by
   Erick van Egeraat, a
   sign saying 'no' was
   put high up in the air

received some limited financing from a developer,
the Port Authority and the city of Copenhagen,
combined with a grant from a large foundation. In
the process of applying for funds, Supertanker was
set up as a non-profit association. The money
enabled us to start experimenting with
interdisciplinary workshops for students, a range of
different types of public meetings [2], boat-rides,
exhibitions and concrete proposals for the area.

The diversity of our team, the locally embedded
workshop and exhibition space were all linked to the
idea of exploring urbanity as a creative force that can
emerge from a diversity of people living in the same
place. As implied in the introductory quote from
Henri Lefebvre, our version of urbanity embraces the
physical and social diversity, density and change
acknowledged in classical sociology, as well as the
ability to act in an 'urbane' way under these
conditions.[2] A central aspect of our take on urbanity
is therefore that it should embody an open, equal
and respectful form of interaction between people.
As we saw (and still do), the life of the city and its
ability to renew itself depends on new ideas,
networks and other entities that emerge from this
urban encounter between different people.

Polarisation: stereotypes in and urbanity out
The Supertanker area in Copenhagen Harbour was
also the focus of a popular movement against the
plans for a new and very expensive housing project,
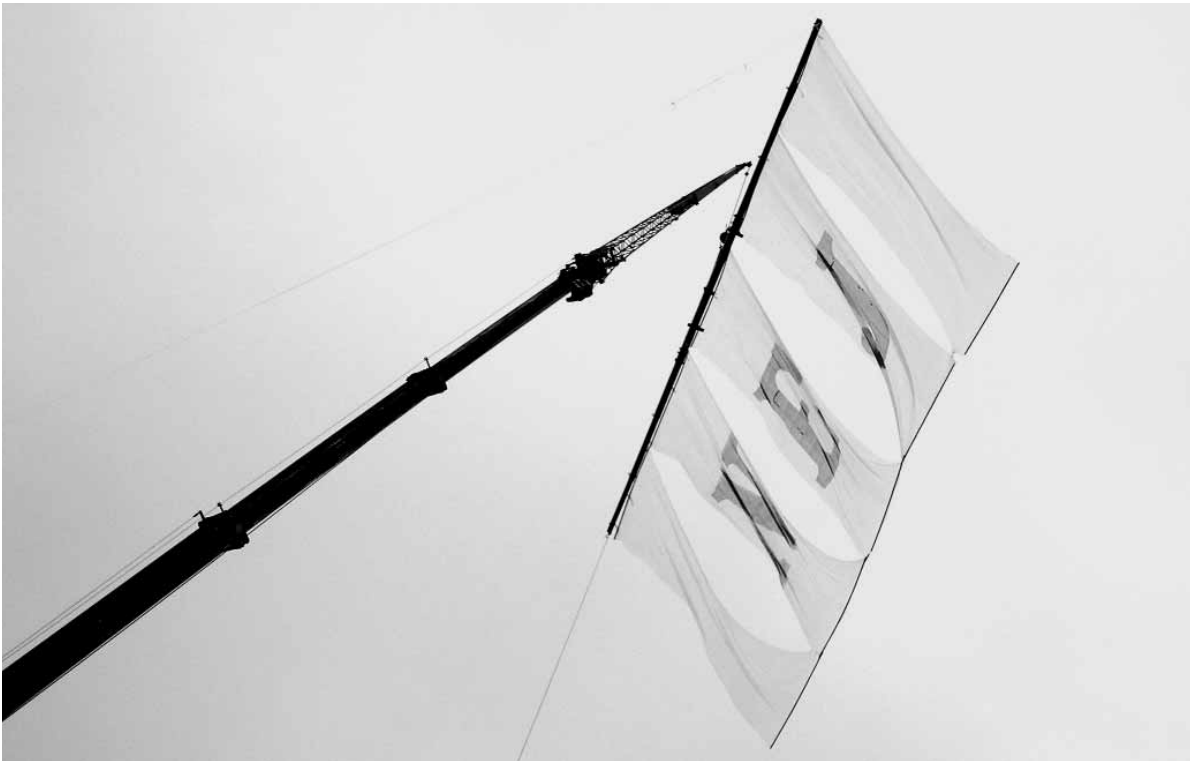
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Krøyers Plads, designed by the Dutch architect Erick van Egeraat. From the beginning, Supertanker's aim was to consult widely and hold public meetings that made sure that everybody's voice was heard. This meant that we had good contacts with both parties in the conflict that slowly emerged between grassroots opposition to the plans for the area and the developers as well as their backers in the municipal planning office.

In this polarised climate we nevertheless managed to involve not only opponents but also a range of local landowners, citizens, stakeholders and others in surprisingly positive and constructive discussions regarding the future of the site. This provided proof for us that it is possible to be constructive even in a situation like this, but only if you manage to set up an arena for discussion that is open to all parties in the conflict. Our dependence on a variety of different funding bodies meant that we were perceived to be impartial, a necessary prerequisite for successful dialogue and intervention.

In spite of our activities the public debate became more polarised – either the project was to be built or should be scrapped [3]. One very active group of critical citizens went ahead with their campaign against the project, exploiting the media's taste for situations of conflict to bolster its arguments, while, on the other hand, the municipal authorities supported the Egeraat project in a way that infuriated many citizens.[3]

The politicians eventually abandoned the plans for Krøyers Plads. Supertanker was put on the black list (by developers and planners), and held partly responsible for the biggest popular opposition to development plans in Copenhagen to date. By supporting Supertanker in the beginning, the planning authorities and developers had sent a signal that they desired an open dialogue. However, the following turn of events showed that this was only the case as long as the overall agenda was not challenged. This was a lesson learned and documented by Supertanker in Jan Larsen's PhD thesis.[4] It seemed that the formal, and in many ways correct, procedures of public consultation in planning almost inevitably lead to polarisation and force the people involved in the process into much more stereotypical positions than necessary. One of our conclusions was that it is necessary to engage in negotiations at an earlier stage, long before any conflict has developed, and long before the media has reduced the discussion to its lowest common denominators, in order to retain the urbanity, the open interaction between participants. We saw a need to devise new and inclusive ways in which to discuss the future of the city, leading us to develop the concept of the Free Trial for a discussion of the Christiania area of Copenhagen, which we organised in collaboration with the international student's association, PlaNet.

Free Trial: agonism, advocacy and animation
The idea of the Free Trial was to construct a public meeting combined with a workshop, allowing for the creation of a more nuanced picture of the different views in a potentially conflictual situation, thus avoiding the usual 'black and white' tactics. Christiania is an alternative community right in the centre of Copenhagen that has been a controversial part of the city since it was established more than thirty years ago. It now faces the threat of 'normalisation' (in particular the legalisation of self-built physical structures) by the present Danish government.

One of the basic ideas was to challenge the status

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quo in Christiania while simultaneously criticising the governmental approach to regeneration in the area. We decided to use a court case as a framework for the public meeting in order that both positions could be presented and discussed on an equal level. However, instead of lawyers, we chose to use journalists to represent two opposing positions – the position of the government and the position of Christiania. By picking some of the best Danish journalists we achieved a discussion that became both very precise and dynamic. They would each present their witnesses – experts that we had picked to ensure that a range of issues was discussed. And of course there would be cross-examinations, which ensured that many of the different angles of the argument were presented *[4]*.

After the two lawyers (journalists) presented their cases to the jury (the audience) the court case was followed by a workshop where all the arguments presented in the trial allowed the jury to form not a verdict, but a set of proposals for the future, the Christiania Charter. It is all the more remarkable that the Christiania Free Trial was such a success given the innate conservatism of many of its residents who were very determined to defend their existing and threatened way of life.

The underlying idea was linked to the combination of three concepts: agonism, advocacy and animation. By using the two lawyers (journalists) and their witnesses (experts and central actors) to present two very opposing views on the subject, the agonism was taken almost to the point of caricature. On the other hand, the defence lawyer in presenting the viewpoint of the less powerful party (typically citizens), combined advocacy with agonism. Most importantly, the theatricality and playfulness of the event gave both the audience and the participants on stage a certain critical distance, in this way enabling them to review their own tenaciously guarded opinions. A crucial factor in this success was the

three As of the court case format, which allowed the adversaries to loosen up and be relatively constructive with one another.

The versatility of the Free Trial was tested when we repeated the process with a different topic: the future of a former shipyard in Copenhagen harbour. For the 'Kroner og Kreativitet' (Cool Cash and Creativity) conference, members of the 'Building Society' – a network of some of the most established agents in Danish urban development – complemented students and residents, but again the aim of the court case was to challenge the position of the stakeholders of the established urban development in order to find openings and cracks where new ideas could take hold.[5] The following workshop showed that in many cases the developers and investors involved knew quite precisely how to apply more creative strategies to develop urban brownfields by minimising speculation and encouraging experiments. Again a Charter and a publication were produced.

Whereas the Christiania Court Case was a low cost (grassroots) arrangement with almost no budget, the Kroner og Kreativitet conference was financed mostly by members of the Building Society, meaning that our own position was not one of complete impartiality. However, this did not pose as much of a problem as it did later when we were asked to do a similar court case where the topic was a high-rise strategy for the city of Copenhagen. In this case we were commissioned directly by the city of Copenhagen, meaning that we became advisors to the city, our client. This proved especially problematic when it turned out that the mayor of

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Copenhagen (or her advisors) were very reluctant to allow challenges to the decision to have high-rises in Copenhagen, causing our impartiality and integrity to be jeopardised. As a result, we only now work in these traditional client/adviser relationships where we are given a guarantee that we can challenge the client's point of view.

South Harbour: Fingerspitzengefühl and integrity
Supertanker was invited by the Port Authority of Copenhagen to take part in an event marking the opening of a new development in the South Harbour of Copenhagen. Supertanker was not really aware of the commercial character of the event and even though the discussion that we arranged (the court case method described above) was supposed to be

impartial and critical we felt the consequences for a long time after. People began to see Supertanker as a consultant working for the Port of Copenhagen and one of our main assets – our integrity – was called into question.

Supertanker became a looser network and inside this network emerged Urban Task Force or UTF (also formally a non-profit organisation). This change in organisation and setting gave us a more academic profile (architect, geographer and social scientist) but also more precise work with methods of engaging with a local community. The aim was to see UTF as catalyst between the academic and the 'real' world, still arranging interdisciplinary workshops for students [5], and using their ideas and energy as a positive input in the local area. During this period

we had no funding, meaning that we had a lot of freedom, but our activities were confined to small pilot projects.

UTF chose to settle in the South Harbour of Copenhagen. The choice was based on a wish to work with an area without any immediate conflicts, but also on the fact that the area was planned to become a huge new part of a Copenhagen harbour development. The new area was to be a duplicate of Sjoerd Soeters' mid-'90s plan for the Java Island in Amsterdam harbour and was planned to accommodate approximately 25 000 citizens. It is a good example of an urban development where a strong social segregation is not only tolerated but actively promoted.[6] The new and attractive part of town is separated from existing and poor neighbourhoods physically, socially and culturally. One of our main concerns here was to work on methods to bridge the gap between the existing and the new part of the South Harbour.

The method here could be described as deep immersion or *fingerspitzengefühl*. Once we had moved into our office in the area, we began interviewing local citizens, stakeholders and holding public meetings *[6]* to build up a relationship of trust. We repeatedly had to reassure people that we were not a consultant working for the Port Authority, seen as a threat to many people living in the area.

The existing part of the South Harbour is statistically the poorest area of Copenhagen, but it also contains a lot of self-organised and self-built allotment areas. These have only just been given legal status and are, for this reason, sensitive to criticism. Nevertheless, in one interview, one local person from a self-build area near the harbour described his fellows as no less greedy (in the sense that they speculated about the price of their plot going up in value) than any other 'normal neighbourhood'. When asked why he had made such an observation he pointed out that if we had come from some authority – municipality, developer or the Port Authority – he would have given us a speech on the wonderful atmosphere and the good relationship between neighbours. Here we have a good illustration of the way in which our status gave us access to a more precise and nuanced picture of an area than that usually gained by other agencies such as municipal planning or its consultants.

Maintaining an organisation with a high degree of integrity is a delicate matter. The financing and the conditions of the financing play a key role in this issue. A major priority for UTF is that financing has to come from more than one source, making it 'multi dependent' meaning that no one organisation has direct control over our work, a situation that needs reinforcing through various 'firewalls', or conditions, in our contract with any given financing party.

Carlsberg: architecture and/or urbanity

Architecture is a highly visual discipline. Projects are often presented through seductive imagery that is easily accessible to a wide audience. The drawback with this is that because projects are so often presented in their final form, people are given very

limited opportunities to influence their eventual direction. People automatically feel excluded from the decision-making process if the project appears already to be complete. The challenge is to communicate ideas visually in a way that allows for an inclusive process.

Another and maybe less obvious quality of architecture – or perhaps to be more precise, of architects – is that they work very directly towards solving a given problem. This means that more sensitive analysis – especially that of the non-physical aspects of context – is sometimes overlooked. The challenge here is to make this problem-solving energy connect to the more reflexive character of other professions such as sociology and urban geography. Being an interdisciplinary organisation, Supertanker/ UTF provides a forum for exploring this issue.

The Supertanker mix was put to the test when we decided to participate in a more traditional urban planning competition for one of the largest brownfield developments in Copenhagen – the site of the Carlsberg Breweries. The area is very attractive, situated close to the centre of the city and some large areas of open space. As is typical of many brownfield sites it contained several old buildings, which could potentially be used for temporary activities. The property development division of Carlsberg stated, in the competition brief, that they had something very special in mind. They wanted to create something rather different from the recent urban developments in Copenhagen, something not dissimilar to Christiania, the self-organised and self-built part of Copenhagen.

We thought that this would be the perfect occasion to use our ideas about urbanity to formulate a 'plan' for the site. We began the process by walking around the area, doing mappings, workshops, brainstorms and so on. Here it quickly became apparent that the architects among us had already developed very specific tools and methods for contextual analysis. This led us to start working in 'fast forward' with little sensitivity to the very different approaches taken by other members of the group. We quickly learnt that interdisciplinary work takes a high degree of patience and a level of consideration that surprised us even though we had worked together for years. We were reminded of our idea of 'practise what you preach' since this high degree of patience and awareness of 'the other' in our interdisciplinary work is in many ways similar to the description of urban life in the quotation from Lefebvre at the beginning of this paper.

Our main goal was to make sure that the agenda for the Carlsberg area remained as open and inclusive as possible; and that all the little mutations and hybrids stemming from the positive and constructive meeting of people would be the lifeblood of the project. The process part of our project involved a mix of old and new methods. We used a lot of energy to define three overall goals: Playful Participation, referring to the Situationists (such playfulness is also central to the 'Free Trial' mentioned above); Inclusive Diversity, referring to Social Innovation; and finally Dynamic Porosity,

referring to a text by Walter Benjamin that we will intoduce later.

The project operated in four phases. The first two phases were 'On the ground', where we embedded ourselves in the area in order to get as close to the everyday life there, talking to old employees, neighbours and so on. By setting up office in the area, we gained a presence in a similar way as we did in South Harbour. In phase two 'Wild West' *[7]*, the area was opened up for appropriation, especially by what we call the 'Truffle Pigs' (in Berlin they are called Urban Pioneers).[7] These are people who come into a *terrain vague* and start to appropriate an area, thereby testing the ground for unseen possibilities.[8] These two phases can be seen as a social and cultural priming of the area in a way that parallels the manner in which the site for an urban development is prepared by putting in the necessary infrastructure – energy, roads and so on.

The underlying idea of urbanity tapping into the energy of this porous and unplanned appropriation of old buildings and open land made it impossible to predict what would come out of the two first phases, on which the next two (more formal/spatial) phases were to be based. The third phase involved the evolution of a set of rules for 'Urban Gameplay' through a series of public discussions. The idea of Gameplay comes from the film world, where it refers to a way of directing actors that lies between traditional direction (go there, say this and so on) and pure improvisation. Two examples of rules in the 'Urban Gameplay' are the level of the rent and the length of the leases. These rules could be used to make sure that informal tenants (artists, small start-up businesses and so on) are able to stay in the area. Then in the fourth phase 'Urban Gameplay' can be played out to create a flexible and dynamic alternative to the traditional masterplan that defines the physical aspects (and the architecture) of this new part of Copenhagen.

The dilemma was whether to resort to using diagrams to explain the process, or to use scenarios to illustrate how our project for the Carlsberg area might look in the future. The problem is that images can function as self-fulfilling prophecies and beautiful images produced by very skilled architects are in themselves a sign and a tool of power. Alternative agendas pushed forward by non 'visually skilled' citizens have none of their resonance.

Our experience from this process is that the architects in our 'mix' could have been more aware of the power games that are at work, especially on the large scale, when the architectural profession acts in a manner that is, albeit unknowingly and unintentionally, exclusive (as in the 'fast forward' mode of collaboration or the use of beautiful imagery mentioned above). An alternative approach beginning with new forms of organisation and using unfinished structures, instead of only visual and abstract modes of communication, is therefore necessary in order to create a more inclusive architecture that allows appropriation and a more open agenda, in a way that combines architecture and urbanity – we call it a porous architecture.

7 Wild West phase in our project for the Carlsberg area – opening up the area for appropriation by the 'Truffle Pigs'

8 The design team –
young local kids are
involved in both
demolishing and
designing our future
base in the Charlotte
quarter

Charlotte quarter: porosity in time and space

After years of insufficient funding, Supertanker's UTF
was, in 2007, given the green light for a five year
experimental and research-based social housing
project in the suburbs of Copenhagen with
approximately 2000 residents. The focus was on
social and preventive measures that could bring
about a positive change to the area. As such we
proposed to work with media, set up a local TV
station and work with school children to discover
their views on the green spaces in the
neighbourhood. Our project was not supposed to
fund any physical initiatives unless they had a social
aspect, for example enabling citizens to build their
own gardens. Yet we did have one building project in
the scheme design – our own base where we could
make a physical mark in order to be visible in the
neighbourhood.

'Local interaction', as the project was called, set out
to research the possibilities for 'design as a positive
catalyst in an everyday context'. We began by holding
workshops with local children, the focus of our
research, to find out what they wanted from the area.
As we might have expected, they wanted more places
to meet – small shops, markets, an outdoor cinema,
more sports facilities, and not least of all, a place for
girls to be on their own. These findings were then
taken into a more international context in a
workshop to which we invited architects and artists
from Denmark and all over Europe. The wishes of the
local children were then translated into three

alternative design solutions for our base, each of
which would allow it to be moved around the area to
attend or spark events, and be easily accessible for
people to drop by.

These three mobile scenarios were presented at an
annual street party where the residents could vote
between the different options. However, although
many people attended the party, and were happy to
take part in a drawing workshop for children and a
video workshop, almost nobody wanted to discuss
our carefully presented drawings for our future base.
With no real vote having taken place, we chose to go
ahead with a mobile structure anyway, and ended up
buying an old circus wagon that needed repair and
total interior refit before it could function as the
base for our activities.

When the circus wagon was initially placed in an
open area on the centre of the site it was broken into
on the first night. However, nothing was stolen or
ruined. Clearly the local youth were just checking
out the wagon. We immediately improvised by
inviting a group of local children (we don't know if
they themselves had anything to do with the break-
in) who wanted to create their own place in which to
repair bikes and mopeds. As the local planning
authority would not agree to such a thing we asked
these children to become the 'design team', working
on both the renovation and the final redesign, for
the circus wagon.

As a result of the design team's input the circus
wagon was refitted with a café at one end, enabling it
to function as the meeting place identified as a need
in the first workshop with local children. The rough
circus wagon facilitated interaction in a concrete
way, thus attracting this group of children who
preferred to work with their hands rather than take
part in a workshop. Instead of letting the base be
designed as a result of an abstract and traditional
consultation process we now used a concrete but
unfinished structure as a catalyst for involving a very
different group of people, a group who would be
unlikely to turn up to workshops and discussions.
At this point it is not only local children who are
involved in the wagon's development, local people –
electricians, welders and so on – have started to
assist with the building process and have helped
make connections with the local businesses who
have donated building materials, safety shoes and
other necessities to the people working on the
wagon.

In a normal result-oriented project with tight
timelines and benchmarks, this would never have
been possible. Our experience shows that an
unfinished and open structure lends itself to
appropriation and experiment. These spatial and
physical aspects of a porous architecture interacting
with, and being produced by, the social were
formulated well by Walter Benjamin when he
described his impressions of Naples in 1925:

*'At the base of the cliff itself, where it touches the shore,
caves have been hewn [...] As porous as this stone is the
architecture. Building and action interpenetrate in the
courtyards, arcades, and stairways. In everything they
preserve the scope to become a theatre of new, unforeseen*

constellations. The stamp of definitive is avoided. No situation appears intended forever, no figure asserts its "thus and not otherwise". This is how architecture, the most binding part of the communal rhythm, comes into being here [...]'⁹

Conclusion

Supertanker tries to see urbanity as a creator of new, hybrid and challenging agendas, especially those that grow out of the *terrain vague* and the cracks of the city where more formal kinds of urban development have not yet arrived. It is in these areas that a more inclusive type of coexistence is possible,

often helped by the structures of old industrial buildings (or in one case a circus wagon) that are open for new uses in the sense that rents are cheap, or free, and regulations are close to non-existent. In this spatial and socio-cultural condition that we call a porous condition, the urbanity starts to interact, mutate and create new types of urban life forms. From a traditional point of view (planners, investors) this is just a temporary state that comes and goes, but we see it as the task of Supertanker to tap into the energy and innovation that happens in these *terrain vague* areas, and use it proactively in a process of 'urban innovation'.

Notes

1. Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 75.
2. Jan Lilliendahl Larsen, Martin Frandsen and Jens Brandt, 'Urban Innovation' in *Planlægning i teori og praksis (Planning in Theory and Practice)* (Roskilde: Roskilde Universitetsforlag, 2007).
3. For example, the City Architect of Copenhagen claimed that the signatures (14 000 of them) on the petition against the project were collected in the local pubs.
4. Jan Lilliendahl Larsen, *Politisk Urbanitet (Political Urbanity)*, PhD thesis (Roskilde University, 2007).
5. Supertanker, *Hvidbog om kroner og kreativitet (Cool Cash and Creativity)* (Copenhagen: Supertanker, 2005).
6. See also Anders Lund Hansen, Eric Clark and Hans Thor Andersen, 'Creative Copenhagen' in *European Planning Studies*, 9.7 (2001).
7. Klaus Overmeyer, *Urban Pioneers, Temporary Use and Urban Development in Berlin* (Berlin: Jovis Verlag, 2007).
8. Willy Ørskov, 'Udkanter, Terrain Vague og simple organiseringer' in *Samlet* (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1999).
9. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 1* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 414–21.

Biography

Jens Brandt (architect), Martin Frandsen (sociologist) and Jan Lilliendahl Larsen (urban geographer) have been part of Supertanker since 2002 and have carried out a large number of urban projects involving new forms of dialogue, public meetings, citizen participation and so on. Many of these projects have been part of research done at Roskilde University Center.

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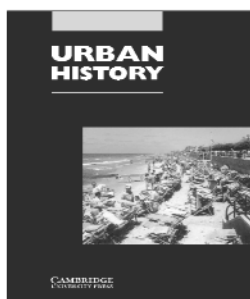
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