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**“Transformation of abandonment, a new critical practice”**

**Introduction**

While the major cities in Denmark experience growth in population, as well as in economy, the surrounding rural areas face abandoned villages and an increasing stage of decay.

This research focuses on the abandoned houses, seeking an alternative to today's EU and state funded demolition programmes<sup>1</sup>. These programmes are carried out en masse without questioning the consequences of loss of material and immaterial values<sup>2</sup> such as cultural heritage, building density and local narratives. On the contrary, this research seeks to establish a new critical practice based on a series of full-scale transformations of abandoned buildings. Nine transformations have already been carried out in order to distil and disclose embedded material and immaterial hidden values in interaction with local communities, hereby preserving the identity of the area. More actions will take place in future and the practice is already growing.

While previous studies mainly focussed on economic development in rural areas, this research addresses the question: Can transformed abandoned buildings contribute to the development of rural areas without growth as primary objective?

**Method**

The research is embedded in the tradition and on-going development of the “Research by Design” paradigm where an experimental core through implementing projects and the reflection and evaluation hereof, is the foundation of the research<sup>3</sup>. In this research, the experimental core consists of physical transformations of existing buildings in authentic environments. Accordingly the project connects to architectural practice and the findings will aim at its own field of investigation. Thus the research is approaching the mechanisms of “Action Research” by creating impacts and reflecting upon those afterwards and at the same time developing and establishing a new critical practice<sup>4</sup>.

**Actions**

The research consists of a series of full-scale interventions, hereinafter referred to as actions, each of which involves the transformation of an abandoned building. The transformations themselves have been executed as full-scale interventions including interaction with local people in the different communities in Thisted Municipality, Denmark. On the basis of the on-site impact, local focus groups have been established in order to enable continuity in the on-going evaluation of the transformed buildings during the research period.

The actions vary in contents as well as in their timeframe. The aspect of time is ubiquitous in the migration mechanisms leading to the abandonment of the houses. Therefore, time is a vital issue in the transformation of abandoned houses. Consequently the duration of the transformation period of the actions varies in order to enrich the discussion. Moreover, this will facilitate building up a knowledge base about transformation strategies.

The aim of the actions is to develop and test full-scale transformation prototypes in an authentic environment. Interaction with local people and their response to the actions can be seen as real life peer reviewing and is considered an important impact indicator and supplement to the physical transformations. Gained experience will be inherited from action to action in order to refine the framework. Future actions will benefit from this experience and will be implemented.

The geographical area for the actions is Thisted Municipality, ideal due to its many identified small communities in varied stages of depopulation and the experience from the previous cooperation. In

addition the Thisted Municipality has agreed in facilitating the transformation workshops and supply the project with abandoned houses. So far, nine abandoned buildings have been transformed into a range from vernacular farmhouses to a public school. In this abstract we focus on the latest transformation named Action D<sup>5</sup>.



Fig. 1: Action D3 - Transformed abandoned house in Thisted Municipality, 2014.

Action D, executed in March 2014, is testing the transformation of three single-family houses into controlled ruins in different village environments. The transformation of these buildings has been performed as examples of possible prototypes for transformed abandoned houses in different contexts regarding density. Two of the transformations (D1 and D2) have already been demolished, whereas the last one (D3) remains for the at least six years (fig. 1). The execution of D3 enables the possibility of regular registrations during the coming period, hereby testing and comparing the different stages of decay in the remaining transformation. In addition, D3 is the pilot project of long-term transformation. For this reason it makes sense to refine and repeat this type of transformation after a year in a similar environment. Thisted Municipality supplies the research project with a vernacular farmhouse from 1780 to fulfil this purpose.

Future actions are being developed. Action E tests a partial transformation, which is based on implementation of a new public programme in a part of an abandoned city house in cooperation with locals and Thisted Municipality. Action F is an event based short-term transformation of two or three houses as a theatre installation, focusing on the entire period of the process, thus from the time of loss of function to the completion of the demolition. The action will be executed in cooperation with Theatre Nordkraft (Aalborg), locals and the Municipality.

## Results

Contrary to common practise, the present research began with full-scale transformations of abandoned buildings and engaging with local inhabitants as a feedback mechanism. Later on it extended into the strategic planning level.

In the fulfilling of the nine actions, we experienced an overwhelming interest from local communities, news media<sup>6</sup> and Municipality, caused by the transformation process itself. Interaction with local people revealed possible ways of disclosing hidden material and immaterial values and contributed hereby to the future establishment of a new practice<sup>7</sup>. This practice is considered as a critical alternative to today's demolition programmes and growth-orientated efforts in the field<sup>8</sup>.

At the Creative Practice Research Conference we intend to present: Nine examples of transformed buildings, reactions and discussions with the local people, students, politicians and municipality and feedback from the local press, hereby broadening the understanding of the local feeling and atmospheres in the community. The presentation will report on the established practice as well as reflect on its future potentials for rural planning policy.

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<sup>1</sup> The project relates to international efforts in the field - Shrinking cities: The complete works 1, Aachen 2006.

<sup>2</sup> I Capello, Caragliu, Nijkamp: *Territorial Capital and Regional Growth: Increasing Returns in Cognitive Knowledge Use*, Tinbergen Institute Discussion Paper, TI 2009-059/3 on: <http://www.tinbergen.nl/discussionpapers/09059.pdf> (assessed on 01.05.2012).

<sup>3</sup> Ilpo Koskinen, John Zimmerman, Thomas Binder, Johan Redström, Stephan Wensveen: "Design Research Through Practice", Waltham 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Donald A. Schön: *Den reflekterende praktiker*, 1983.

<sup>5</sup> The letter "D" refers to the generation of the action. In this case: 4th generation.

<sup>6</sup> [http://aarch.dk/fileadmin/filer/webmaster/PDF/pdf\\_fra\\_05\\_marts\\_2014/ThistedDagblad\\_7.\\_marts\\_2014.pdf](http://aarch.dk/fileadmin/filer/webmaster/PDF/pdf_fra_05_marts_2014/ThistedDagblad_7._marts_2014.pdf)  
<http://pages-tdm.au.dk/tdm/arkitektskolen-aarhus-bruger-tvaersnit-til-direkte-laering/>

<sup>7</sup> Tim Jackson: "Prosperity without Growth", New York 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Rural-Urban Partnerships, OECD, 2013.