

SUPERKILEN: PARTICIPATORY PARK EXTREME!

Brett Bloom

Heralded as a brave new vision for Copenhagen's city spaces, *Superkilen*, a "Participatory Park Extreme," officially opened in June 2012, though parts of the park are not finished or require repair work on a regular basis. Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG), the starchitect firm that headed the park's design, coined this aggressively descriptive subtitle for *Superkilen*. So, what is a Participatory Park Extreme? The park is comprised of three distinct areas: The Black Market, Green Zone, and Red Square. Each area is dominated by the color in its name. The park is populated with public furniture, signs, exercise equipment, and plants from all over the world. There are, among many other things, trashcans from the United Kingdom, a large sign from Russia, and replica of a playground in the shape of an octopus from Japan, which is one of the most loved parts of the park by its youngest visitors.

When I first moved to Denmark I found it quaint how often the superlative "super" was used in names of things—Superflex, Superkilen, Superbrugsen, Super Best, Supertanker, super... et cetera. Ours is a time of diminished revenue for public works; "super" private entities are stepping in to fill funding gaps. With this change comes a radical shift in the meaning of public space and one's agency in the making of a city. This is a major focus of mine in the following pages in relation to *Superkilen* and its funders Realdania.

Realdania, a philanthropic business, financed the park's design and construction. Realdania is a private fund with nearly 2.1 billion Euros in assets. It describes itself as democratically run and requires its members to be property owners. They are behind Olafur Eliasson's *Your Rainbow Panorama* on top of the ARoS museum in Århus, Urban Media Space Århus in that city's harbor, The Blue Planet, a new aquarium in Amager in Copenhagen, besides the *Superkilen* park development.

The park presents itself as an "integration" project. I interpret "integration" to mean a process by which foreign-born people are convinced to give up many of their cultural attributes and distinctions to adapt more Danish ways of speaking and behaving. This essay focuses on the spatial battles of Nørrebro, its highly capable and independent citizenry, and what this tells us in lieu of the elaborate efforts made by the City to make it look like *Superkilen* was democratically created. Citizens from the area were selected to help choose the park's designers through a closed competition.

First, a quick overview of the park. A big part of understanding *Superkilen* comes from online narratives and branding, or by using a smart phone to decipher hidden park stories. There is no official sign stating that you have arrived in Superkilen or what it is about. You can download an app onto your smart phone (if you have one) with a map, explanations, and videos of the design process, to find out where you are and what is going on. But lacking a

smart phone, you are left to navigate the Red Square, Green Zone, and Black Market's confusing landscape on your own. Some visitors to the park have aided in the confusion by removing what little park signage there is for souvenir purposes. Opened officially in July 2012, the park is located in the Nørrebro [Northern Bridge] neighborhood of Copenhagen, and marks a wedge-shaped path, nearly 800 m long, through a mixed residential and commercial district. Despite the "park" ideal of greenery and open space, Superkilen stunningly disregards ecological concerns in a city that faces dramatic challenges in the face of global climate change. Why would anyone completely pave over an open space in a city? Troels Glismann, the chair of the community organization responsible for selecting the designs for Superkilen, offers us a view into the thinking behind the extreme pavement. He told me of a confrontation between the citizens and BIG. The citizens wanted more green space. BIG looked down on this implying it was a cliché. They said that urban spaces are paved and therefore they were going to pave this park.¹



Sign in Superkilen warning about the dangerous surface of the Red Square

SCRIPTING DEMOCRACY AND DIFFERENCE

Recently, official signs appeared in and around the Superkilen park advising users that the red painted concrete was slippery when wet. At the corner of each sign, just like signs all around Copenhagen announcing trash pick up or playground open hours, was the city's slogan "Sammen Om Byen" [Copenhagen Together].

Copenhagen wants to brand itself as a place where the government and its people go hand in hand in making the city. However, it is important to consider how branding shapes our experience of public space. The slogan *Sammen Om Byen* is surrounded by highlighting boxes, jutting out behind the text like the shadows of buildings, or speech bubbles giving voice to the city.² The different colors used refer to the materials of the city: "bricks, neon, the sky, water, grass, concrete, asphalt, wood, etc."³ The ideas behind the design of the branding identity are simple and elegant. Thor Ringgaard Wilkens, a spokesperson for the City, said:

"Copenhagen Together" was developed when the Technical and Environmental Department (Teknik- og Miljøforvaltningen, TMF) was established in 2007 (two departments were merged). At that time, TMF had its vision and mission updated and new values: Openness, trust and a comprehensive view. Values, that were important to support as 7 independent departments with their own director and minimal contact, were put together in one department.⁴

This well-executed campaign comes with good intentions, but in one expensive and very public instance, *Superkilen*, it hides the true story of what happened. Namely, instead of the people and the city building a park that reflected a community's desires, the financial might of private finance trumped democratic process.

City signage is used to convey a sense of control and honesty. The sign pictured above tells us, "The area is slippery when wet." When the surface in the Red Square gets wet or snowy it is dangerous for bikers. What the sign does not tell about is the poor decision making process that created the situation. Just as BIG insisted on paving the park, the firm also convinced the city that materials originally intended for indoor use could be applied to the outdoor section of *Superkilen's* Red Square. Hubris like this has caused the city numerous headaches—financial and otherwise—in relation to this park. Not only did the original colors on the surface fade—BIG insisted they would not—it is hard to clean because it is very fragile and the City was afraid to use normal heavy machinery for cleaning it. The surface is being completely redone in 2013 and it is unclear who will have to pay for it. The city says the responsibility is BIG's, but this is still unresolved.⁵

There are more things than just signs shaping our experience of public spaces in our city. Margaret Kohn writes in her book *Radical Space*:

Particular places orchestrate social behavior by providing scripts for encounters and assembly. The built environment shapes individual's actions and identities by reinforcing relatively stable cues about correct behavior.⁶

Kohn's examination of space provides an intelligent frame for understanding the densely scripted experience that is *Superkilen*. On the surface the park appears uncomplicated and fun, a colorful mirage in the grey urban confines of outer Nørrebro. But like any city space, convoluted and ideological processes have shaped it, as well as our experiences of the space before we even enter it. Kohn says:

Space affects how individuals and groups perceive their place in the order of things. Spatial configurations naturalize social relations by transforming contingent forms into a permanent landscape that appears as immutable rather than open to contestation. By providing a shared background, spatial forms serve the function of integrating individuals into a shared conception of reality.⁷

We are socially conditioned to experience space in ways that cover every possible behavior we could have. As we grow up we begin to understand that there are certain behaviors that are appropriate depending on the situation—a nightclub is different than a cathedral, for example. Every space we pass through and temporarily inhabit has a metaphoric register that is immediately recognizable and to which we adjust our behavior without thinking. A classroom is set up to facilitate certain power relations and knowledge production that is distinct from the friendly informational signs you use to navigate a busy train station. In every space you enter, you know that if you engage in certain behavior that has been deemed unlawful, you will face consequences. These layers of symbolic coding are established as a way to control your behavior and encourage you to act in manageable ways, to literally reproduce the ideological power that the space is founded on. Breaches of the codes of these spaces will bring punishment or scorn from others. Counter ideologies that manifest themselves in these spaces, as we will see below, can bring extremely violent repression from the authority that never needs to explicitly present itself in these spaces except when there is more than a symbolic threat to its control.

Public space uses physical and visual guides to produce desired behaviors. We perform all kinds of internalized rules on ourselves. We assess a situation and act in discreet accordance on pre-arranged terms. We enter into a ballet of mutual self-regulation and self-expression with others we encounter. French philosopher Michel Foucault developed the theory of governmentality, or the “art of governing.” It is the authority a power uses to exert control over its population on all scales. This term has since come to mean the

internalization of the rules of authority, resulting in self-policing out of a vague fear of punishment. We perform governmentality when we do something as simple as take a walk to our local park.

Superkilen seems to playfully upend our expectations of how we usually behave in public. It feels more like a video game than a public park. The heavy circulation of idealized images of this park on the Internet and in design magazines, shows the park from a bird's eye view, giving a unified sense of the space that is nearly impossible to experience from the ground. Many people will have already experienced the park via these online images or with an app on their phones, before they enter the park.

When we enter the park we know that something is very different. It has a singular visual coherence and streamlined appearance that is not like other parks in the city. This visual coherence, however, is at the expense of other concerns. The park's arrangement of benches, signs, trees, and other furniture mimics that of a museum with a lot of space between objects. A museum maintains space around an artwork to boost its importance. The visual coherence of the park leads to a very disorienting spatial experience. This disorientation is exacerbated by the fact that objects are from very different cultures, imbued with the specificities that make those cultures distinct from one another—such as religion, history of material use, access to natural resources, and thousands of other nuanced influences. They do not sit comfortably together in the same space. Some objects in the park, like the large bull from Spain, seem grossly outsized. Various things seem diminished or entirely irrelevant, like bike stands from France, next to spaces where people do not congregate and therefore do not bring their bikes. The city signs telling you to pick up after your dog, or that surfaces are dangerous when wet, are small (sized for Denmark). The objects on display do not gel to make a coherent whole outside of the conceptual idea that brought them to Denmark, which, rather than creating a cohesive park experience, produces an uncomfortable sense that you are walking through a warehouse of recycled urbanity.

Observing *Superkilen* on a nearly daily basis gives one the sense how controlled this park is. Graffiti is erased nearly as quickly as it appears. A private firm, Center for Renhold [Center for Cleaning], has been contracted to remove graffiti within 24 hours of its appearance in *Superkilen*. If you cross Nørrebrogade into the park in the direction of Hillerødegade—mere steps away—you will see graffiti that has been in place for years. Just outside the intense image management zone surrounding *Superkilen* the City seems to stop caring.

In many ways this park is an ongoing exercise in damage control and the City has to continually apologize for it. Park elements break constantly because they were not designed for Nørrebro's public space. Jon Pape, the Director of the Center for Parks and Nature, gave the impression that the city let down its guard for the sake of the park's purported "innovations."⁸



A common sight in Superkilen: missing signage taken by visitors to the park

The City invited a citizens' advisory board to select the winning design for the park. The selection of this group came from people who had been working with the city for several years in the city-sponsored redevelopment of the area. The citizen group is supposed to both represent the area and represent a democratic process. This group is not representative of the larger community that lives near to or uses the park because it is not elected or otherwise chosen in a democratic fashion. Nor, as we will see, did democracy come in to the design selection for *Superkilen*. The process could have been opened up to more people in the area and the selection of the park design made in public meetings.



Palm trees from China are a really sad site with bags over their leaves—for many months of the year—and look like Guantanamo Bay prisoners as if they are being held captive in Denmark.

This project would have to become a vehicle for integration, rather than an aesthetic exercise in Danish design. We decided to approach this project as an exercise in extreme public participation. Rather than a public outreach process towards the lowest common denominator or a politically correct post rationalization of preconceived ideas navigated around any potential resistance—we proposed public participation as the driving force of the design leading towards the maximum freedom of expression.⁹

The City and *Superkilen*'s designers use distorted forms of representation to present diversity and integration as a part of the park's mission. This is imposed on the people of the area. But there is a serious problem if a project like *Superkilen* can be passed off as one that is celebrating diversity in Denmark. It absolutely does not do this, as I will explain.

The funders and designers of *Superkilen* make much ado about the diversity of culture in Nørrebro, particularly in the houses directly adjacent to the park. Diversity is the reason they give for having to do something other than an "aesthetic exercise in Danish design" for this park. The *Superkilen* app states that over 50 cultures are represented in surrounding area; BIG says there are 60. Realdania, the park's corporate sponsor, tells us about diversity in their narrative of the project. Prominent blogs and magazines outside of Denmark traffic an idealized version of the story. They embellish what they perceive from only seeing the happy images and reading official accounts from the funders and designers telling us about the projected "hopes of revitalizing the area and bringing more people together."¹⁰

What does it mean that a bunch of white people are making representations of “diversity” without really including the people they are “representing,” except in perfunctory roles? Does it work by getting “the diverse people” to identify with inanimate objects from around the world, many of which were broken shortly after being put out? Will someone equate her rich heritage with a trashcan from some other city? What this park does is pander to difference. It wants to take credit for pointing out diversity and equate this recognition with supporting it. But there are no actions that actually empower different kinds of people. Superkilen and its enablers are paternalistic about democracy, difference, and making city spaces.

Superkilen’s most distinctive design feature, besides the bright red, yet dysfunctional paint of the Red Square, is the patchwork of park objects from around the world. How did manhole covers from China, trash cans from Great Britain, and a giant Donut sign from the United States get to Denmark and do they accurately reflect the “more than 50 cultures” living in the area surrounding the auspicious park? Why are all the signs for the things in the park in only in two languages, Danish and the language of the home country of the thing demarcated? Why isn’t each sign in all of the languages used in the area if this park is really about diversity? Do ethnically Danish people get newly found respect for someone from China because they see a Chinese manhole cover? A truly diverse community and a diverse park require a more open process in its design and construction. Superkilen can be seen as a public way for the status quo power structure to process demographic shifts through a charade of multiculturalism.



Poster for the 30-year anniversary of Ungdomshuset depicts a ghostly version of the building in its former location at Jagtvej 69, a vacant lot that is still empty and a deeply contested space. Estimates put the private and public expense of the City's eviction of Ungdomshuset, in 2007, between 100 and 144 million Danish kroner (around 19 million euros) nearly the same amount it cost to build Superkilen and Mimersparken.

BATTLES OVER CITY SPACE IN NØRREBRO

In Nørrebro, it is business as usual – traditional workers live side by side with students, left wing activists, and immigrant families from all over the world. The famous hood is as always a diverse mix of styles and atmospheres, but in the years to come one of the neighbourhoods on the edge of Nørrebro will be transformed into three remarkable and attractive zones with brand new possibilities for active city life.

– Realdania¹¹

Gentrification is the erasure of the stories a neighborhood tells itself. A neighborhood only has a memory if its people speak it and remind others of what was there before, of the struggles, victories, losses, improvements, and more. Stories like how the owner of Nørrebro's Café Viking, Jane Petersen, stood up to organized criminals trying to extort her bar and other bars in the area. She refused to pay the gangsters protection money. The windows of her bar were smashed as punishment. This had the opposite of the intended effect and mobilized the entire community to come out and support "Mamma Jane." She won the battle without the help of authorities. Stories like this fill a neighborhood as much as the people themselves do.

Stories that need to be told again and again are the ones like that of Byggeren. Citizens of Nørrebro built a massive playground and public space in an empty lot where derelict housing had been torn down near the corners of Korsgade and Stengade. Their park stayed in place from 1973-1980 until the city came to enforce its plans for redevelopment. The people of Nørrebro blockaded several streets and access to Byggeren. The city used extreme violence to clear the park and to claim the neighborhood back from the people living, building and dreaming there. The book *Kampen om Byggeren* (1980) documents this struggle in vivid detail with many photographs showing extreme police brutality against the people of the neighborhood for building a park—FOR BUILDING A PARK!—and defending their desire to keep it. This reveals an enormous amount of contempt by authorities for their citizens.

Another story is of the epic nearly two-year struggle around Ungdomshuset [The Youth House]. The Ungdomshuset story reveals an enormous amount about the risks and ideological violence the City of Copenhagen is capable of enacting against its citizens. For the price of a park like *Superkilen*, the city took aggressive actions against people who were actively imagining a different way to be in the city. It forced people out of a historically important building that had deep connections to international struggles for women's rights, economic equality, and more, prior to being Ungdomshuset. They ultimately failed as the Ungdomshuset community was unrelenting in their defiance and partially got what they wanted, namely, a new building to call home.

To this day, battles—though not on as large scale—continue over public and private spaces in the neighborhood. One very interesting and ongoing effort is playing out in inner Nørrebro near Blågårdsgade. A diverse group of residents are rejecting the gentrification that is creeping into the area—in the form of rising housing prices, chain coffee shops and developers wanting to open up avenues of investment and takeover. Artist, activist, and outspoken critic of the neoliberalization and gentrification of Nørrebro, Jakob Jakobsen states:

The campaign against the Strecker cafe - called 'Cafe Nørrebro' - was an 'organic' action where many people and diverse groups were reacting against a new cafe placed on the corner of Blågårdsgade and Nørrebrogade. It became like the local punching bag against gentrification

where people coming by offloaded whatever through the windows and sabotaged the exterior and interior over 6 months from about the New Year of 2010 until the cafe closed during the Summer 2010. It was not really a chain cafe, but it was owned and placed there by some property developers earning their money from opening and running cafes and restaurants mainly in the inner city. They believed that they could expand their empire to Nørrebro and especially to this iconic address without any problems or consultations with the local community.

The campaign continued against 'Joe and the Juice' on the corner of Nørrebrogade and Ravnsborggade—a real chain cafe and this campaign has so far not pushed the cafe out but no one but tourists are using the cafe that has had to hide behind shutters, surveillance and reinforced steel.¹²

One last story needs telling—though there are many more in Nørrebro. It is a lesser-known story because it lacks dramatic street battles or brand name designers. For several years, The Initiative Group, an umbrella over a group of self-organized Nørrebro residents, produced plans for the large empty lot, now Mimersparken, owned by DSB, the train company. They worked to articulate a city they wanted to live in—one built from the position of the neighborhood and its inhabitants. Among other things, they campaigned to renovate the old privately owned freight halls, at the corner of Mimersgade and Borgmestervangen, near *Superkilen*, and turned over to the community.

The Initiative Group applied for funding, wrote letters to the city, organized symposiums, lead actions calling people's attention to the potential of the freight halls, produced tours of the grounds with visitors and neighbors speculating about what could be done with the area, published several 'zines and books about their efforts, and connected their struggle to effect change in their neighborhood with struggles in other cities. They put an enormous amount of work into trying to get the city to reply and honor the direct desires of locally based citizens. They were met with non-democratic silence from the City.

The Initiative Group's project was a precursor to the democratic charade that produced *Superkilen*. Initiative Group worked with neighbors and friends living in Nørrebro to create volumes of documentation about what people would like to see in their neighborhood. The City of Copenhagen ignored this grassroots process, but would reproduce the same discussion, albeit in a canned formed that was less about real democratic process and more about the look of democracy, when they polled Nørrebro neighbors on what they would want in a public park. The answers were already available in the work done around the Initiative Group's reimagining of the formerly empty DSB lot. Copenhagen squandered a great opportunity to engage this group of people committed to the area and to rethink the city beyond neoliberalism.

It is hard to imagine a city government with a documented history of either ignoring in the case of the vocal Initiative Group, or brutally repressing, in the case of Ungdomshuset, as all that interested in democracy. Nørrebro has a long history of battles over defining the city. Thinking about a space like *Superkilen* in this context, opens avenues of thought about how a truly democratic, inclusive process could have been created with this tremendously capable neighborhood.



City signs for the new transit hub show a very youthful city, with no elderly or infirm. Only ethnic Danes are pictured with the diverse variety of inhabitants erased from city life. No one is selling *Hus Forbi* [a paper by and for homeless persons] or scavenging for cans and bottles from the neat trashcans. What is pictured is a sterile city space—everything is cool here. Who designed this city? Whom does it represent?

PLACE MAKING VS. PLACE MARKETING

“Dette er rigtig meget om PLACEMAKING!” [This is very much about PLACE MAKING!]

-Tina Saaby¹³

Visionary urban thinker, Jane Jacobs, thought cities should be for the people who live in them, not shaped by commercial interests, or urban planners who did not take the city’s users into account. “Place making” originates in the theories of Jacobs and others. We know that “place making” is in the hands of a neoliberal city planner when people are allowed to show up and decorate a place with their bodies and activities, whether it is using a kickboxing arena or playing on an elephant-shaped slide, but when they actively want something other than what private funders or complicit city officials want, they get strong armed into acquiescing to parks like *Superkilen*.

Realdania came to Københavns Kommune [The City of Copenhagen] and said, “We want to do an experiment. We want to see if we can change the social behavior or standard, the perception of the area by making a new city room.” To us it was a bit like an UFO landing because it was a top-down approach. [...] On every level, or every meeting, we had with Realdania we sort of tried to make sure that we had influence. Because [the power structure] wasn’t obvious. It was obvious that we had to fight for every inch.¹⁴

One way we can recognize that we are living in a neoliberal society is when corporations, high finance, and non-elected organizations and individuals start having an outsized role in shaping public life. They start intervening in processes that were once the domain of a democratic process and elected persons. This expanding role that private organizations and businesses have, ultimately, gives them a great deal of power in shaping culture beyond the things they fund. They start producing new images of society that are very attractive, in addition to making money and seeing their values get constant reinforcement.

Realdania wields an enormous amount of power in Danish public life. Documented criticism, legal action, and public outcries, have done little to slow the push of this exclusionary and undemocratic organization. There are a large number of architects who have an adverse feeling about the influence of Realdania. The magazine Arkitektur conducted a survey and over 50% of 600 architects said that they felt Realdania had too much influence. Of Realdania, the editor Keld Vindum told Politiken:

“They have the potential and power to do so much stuff that they challenge the State and regional planning,” says Keld Vindum executive editor of the trade journal Arkitekt. He calls Realdania a ‘parallel structure’.¹

Realdania uses its money to institutionalize its power in unsavory ways, for example, by trading funding to an organization, specifically the House of Music in Aalborg, in exchange for members of its business joining the funded organization’s board. The article that mentions this practice describes Realdania as “philanthropists operating at bent-arms length.”¹⁵

There are multiple public allegations of Realdania threatening to withdraw support from projects if they did not get their way. Troels Glismann states that Realdania made no threats to him or anyone on the selection committee, but it was the City that threatened that there would be no park at all if the BIG plans were not accepted.¹⁶ This is strange behavior from a city government wanting desperately to give the appearance of democracy and people power.

The funding of these projects, at a time when cities are running low on money, and we are enduring a prolonged economic crisis, offers us a clear look at a

privatizing welfare state with rising corporate influence on how city spaces are shaped and articulated. This influence and corrosion of the public sphere will continue to grow if unchecked.

Accompanying the development of projects like *Superkilen* is the use of the language of “participation.” The use of this term signals and implies that the spaces engender some agency in the public beyond just playing with things. What these spaces are ends up being little more than containers filled by the public who perform in the ways that they are supposed to. Unscripted actions or direct challenges to the narrative are not allowed.

What does it actually mean to participate in *Superkilen* by engaging a piece of park equipment that is funky, ironically out of place, and lives in a jazzed-up environment? Just because you make a bunch of things people can participate in, doesn’t mean that they will use them; it is meaningful if they do use them beyond simply using them; that it is in any way liberating, empowering, or otherwise transcendent to use them. How does this make us users of the city in ways we were not already? How is participation in this park any different than in another park? Do the designers and the City really believe they have transformed the public discourse and the public space so much that they have constituted new subjectivities in the people who use the park? You somehow are supposed to expect great things from how this particular place is set up. If you believe in it, then it works; if you do not believe in it, then it does not.

For those unfamiliar with the term, “participation” is a buzzword that has permeated international art discourse for a number of years now, with an ever-increasing pile of books, magazine articles, PhD dissertations, and exhibitions celebrating its rise in prominence. This word implies that an artwork establishes a situation where participants complete or help realize an artwork. There is a belief that a certain amount of agency is given to participants in participatory works. The reality is that the artist is typically the only real beneficiary of the process; others are basically registered as only those in “the act of participating.” A clear hierarchy is at work unless a process of liberation is articulated from the beginning. We only appear as subjects in *Superkilen*. None of us gets credit for using the park. It is deemed not as important as designing it. We cannot alter the space, just play according to its rules and pre-established guidelines.

One way we know participatory art works, buildings, or parks are not interested in democracy is that they never lead to a surplus of empowerment. They never foment a democratic necessity, which effaces them though they imply that it is this spirit that informs them. This comes from a transposition of the origins of “participatory art” in its more radical forms onto those who have softened its edges and made it attractive to monied interests. Making art inclusive, egalitarian, and participatory began as a way of challenging the commodity forms of art making and the landed power that guided the discourse around art. Before its absorption into mainstream discourse, this

type of work was called “socially engaged art,” implying a direct engagement with social formations to challenge dominant culture power structures. The City of Copenhagen shut down any participative (read real democratic) capacity that the community organization had in selecting the design for what is now *Superkilen*, by threatening to take away the money if they did not get their way. This is an indicator that Superkilen is not about participation that matters, only about making everyone with power look good.

Artists have been incredibly easy to instrumentalize in developing spaces like *Superkilen* in contexts around the world. They are being put into these roles as a friendly interface between city planners, urban designers, architects, and the people of a city. Artists provide this alchemical, magical substance, that planners and architects don't have, that lends authenticity, creativity, and meaning to a work. They do so by putting a face on the power behind the works and by making them seem open, democratic, and as if citizens actually have a say in how things develop. This is how we should understand the role of Superflex, a group known for pirated guarana energy drinks and making copies of corporate luxury toilets, among other things. The group was responsible for selecting five of the items that populate Superkilen, though, without the app and time to watch everything, you have to do a lot of work to figure out which ones they are. There is a strange alchemical transference of the story of collaboration with local residents in these five cases onto all of the objects in the park. I am unable to find credits for anyone other than the five projects realized by Superflex. Troels Glismann insists that only a small number of the items were chosen by anyone from the area and that mainly it was BIG who did the selection. The five projects by Superflex were funded by the state and the community organization was just told that they would be done. The organization had no say in the process at all.¹⁷

The word “creativity” or “creative city” is also at play in the language and understanding of a space like *Superkilen*. In Denmark, the rhetoric coming from Tina Saaby, city architect, is of “temporary use,”¹⁸ a particularly German iteration of the concept, primarily developed in Berlin as official city planning rhetoric for revitalizing parts of the city that were abandoned and devastated economically after the collapse of East Germany. Artists were given temporary use of storefronts and abandoned lots with little oversight or regulation, illegal bars and nightclubs were tolerated as they were sometimes the only economic activity in an area. Once more “legitimate” economic activities and revitalization projects started, the artists were pushed out. One can easily trace this as an adoption of Richard Florida's ideas into a northern European context in how artists are used in Copenhagen. Florida is responsible for the spread of the idea of the creative class, the engine of the neoliberal city to rebuild after sending manufacturing jobs to places where labor is cheapest.

When you spend time in Superkilen, you are not simply enjoying a public park when you stroll, play a game of chess, or watch your children frolic, you are “being creative” and you are “being integrated.” You are participating,

(extremely) in a magic machine for producing individual and collective subjectivities.

It is really odd to call on people to be creative and to participate in a park when they were actively excluded in having a say in how it was realized from the beginning. Equally strange are the claims of integration. When you are integrating, are you participating too? Are you being creative? Or is Realdania trying to make you into their idea of a “real Dane”?

Other Models of Enacting the City

I see *Superkilen* as a tremendous missed opportunity for real visionary city space building. The ideas below, or ones similar to them that posit an active, politically healthy, ecologically aware, and liberated citizenry, could have been integrated into development of the space that now endures *Superkilen*. It takes an informed population and artists and designers who seek to empower people to shift the conversation from the status quo.

Park Fiction

For the last 14 years I have managed a nearly yearly visit to Park Fiction, a public park in the St. Pauli quarter of Hamburg.¹⁹ It is an excellent example of how artists and activists can work with an informed local population to develop an exciting and innovative city space without top down city planning or star studded designers. In the late 90s, one of the last remaining vacant lots on the Elbe River was slated for development into a luxury high rise. Park Fiction initiated a process to activate neighbors to resist the slated development and began their own highly innovative and energetic parallel planning process.

Park Fiction used several strategies for confronting the city: protests, occupying the vacant lot with their own park designs, making signs and various actions. They made movies and organized debates. One of the most interesting things they did was organize design workshops where people were encouraged to envision their desires unleashed on city spaces. They worked with a diverse range of people in the area seeking as many perspectives and ideas as possible. This included working with the users of a queer teen club, children of immigrants, local artists and activists, pensioners, members of a church that sits on one edge of the park, and more. They accumulated all of the material generated in these workshops into a massive archive that has been made public with plans to design a permanent place for the archive in the park.

Residents of St. Pauli designed a giant lawn in the form of an undulating flying carpet. Right next to it sits a tea island with a little hill and metal palm trees. Both spaces get an incredible amount of use and are popular with residents. In the middle of the park is the Poodle Club—an iconic music venue and place

that was critical in realizing the park—which is surrounded by an outdoor amphitheater and is fully integrated into Park Fiction.

Park Fiction was realized in a way that is the mirror opposite of *Superkilen*. Instead of pretending democracy, the park embodies it. Corporate culture had no role in the design of the park and it in part remains a spatial argument against the gentrification that is creeping close in the form of million euro apartments. The city was forced to do what the citizens and activists wanted.

Kenneth Balfelt & Superusers

We do not need to look abroad for examples of people who are leading city design in new directions that empower citizens and create paths out of political and ideological stalemates. We already have someone in Denmark who is making empowering, humanized public spaces. We need to pay more attention to his work, innovations, and embodied democratic process that is at the core of what he enables. The soft spoken, highly patient and insightful, Kenneth Balfelt is making some of the most interesting city space experiments that I have seen.

It was not until I learned of the work of artist Kenneth Balfelt that I encountered an extremely simple, but powerful term that upends traditional notions of artists working in public with the people who use its spaces. This term is “superuser”. An example of what Balfelt means can be seen in the work he is doing with public drinkers in Enghaveplads, in the Vesterbro neighborhood of Copenhagen, to develop their own park. He identifies them as “superusers”—people who are experts in their own conditions. They are a population struggling with mental illness, drug and alcohol addiction, and who also need a welcoming place in public to spend their time. Who better to have a role in designing a city space to meet their needs? These folks are knowledgeable in city space use in ways that the most learned city planner, architect, or social practices artist can never be. Public drinkers spend incredible amounts of time in city parks and know which designs and furniture will work, which trees and natural features will survive, because they are the ones, as one of Balfelt’s collaborators Mikkel told me, that are abusing these spaces every day.

Balfelt’s approach and his identification of the people he works with as “superusers” is not empty rhetoric used to mask the intentions and desires behind an opaque process. We experience firsthand the results of these things in an embodied, empowering manner. Proof comes in the ways people and stories in the space of the park embody these notions. They are physically located in the park with the people who helped realize it. Here is an account I wrote for a forthcoming book on Balfelt’s work:

I was walking with a friend late at night to the park eager to show him the public drinkers pavilion. After entering the park, I had only a couple of

minutes to talk to my friend before a man sitting at a bench [...] immediately started informing us about the park without our asking. What was telling was the perspective he gave. It was one of complete ownership of the project in the sense that he saw himself, and his peers, as the ones doing the project. They were developing the park. They were making decisions. They were trying to keep it friendly for all comers. The language he chose was direct and forceful and not a set of talking points or empty jargon. It was clearly an important and meaningful experience for him and he was a collaborator on giving the park its interesting life.²⁰

In contrast, *Superkilen* simulates this type of experience for us with, among other things, an app for our phones, assuming you have one and want to stand in the park relating the videos to the objects in a one to one relationship. So far, I have not seen a single person doing this. The simulacrum is created with several videos showing us how people traveled and discovered items to be copied or brought back to Copenhagen. We have to believe the videos are important to our experience of the park, and trust that they are indeed connected to the space, as we cannot have this experience with people or the objects in the space itself. These videos leave us with a disembodied sense of the artifacts that populate *Superkilen*. This scripting of the authenticity of the process of making the park has the opposite effect and makes them seem even more remote. Once you have had the experience of encountering people who have been empowered to make something in public and take a pride, ownership and responsibility in it that you can feel, you just cannot accept anything less. This is a high standard that Balfelt has achieved and we must strive to make city spaces that enable and embody this.

Balfelt upends the role of the specialized designer. Rather than accepting the cult of power that is the norm, Balfelt uses his training, aesthetic awareness, and a set of skills honed over many years, in a process that is open and continuously changes the ideas he is helping to facilitate. Balfelt is deeply accountable and not standing over others.



A competing design for the park by GBH, and what the community advisory group wanted instead, would have directly addressed the need for green spaces, rain water absorption and reduced noise.²¹

AN ECOLOGICAL NIGHTMARE OF HARD SURFACES, LOUD NOISES, SICK TREES, AND CONSUMER CULTURE

"In Copenhagen, we have to resort to the heavy rains we expect in the future," says city architect Tina Saaby. "The projects in climate neighborhood shows how we at once can create beautiful, green streets and public spaces and in the same place, the establishment of an effective technical solution that rainwater in our streets to the harbor - instead of down in our basements. It is architecture that integrates technology and aesthetics in a new and exciting way," says Tina Saaby, city architect in Copenhagen.²²

The torrential rainstorms that blasted Copenhagen and flooded basements around the city in the summer of 2011 might have been mitigated by fewer hard surfaces in Copenhagen's city plan. Tina Saaby, city architect demonstrates how unprepared the city is to deal with these kind of freak weather scenarios. We need fewer impermeable surfaces in general to facilitate an urban watershed that can help absorb large amounts of precipitation and clean the pollutants out of the water that are brought to the ground with the rain. The technology is ancient and does not need a "climate quarter" as a proving ground. We need a city that is ready in every quarter for

the challenges that are ahead: more super storms, flooding, rising sea levels, higher temperatures, declining habitat for animals and plants, and more. We need a city that does not make parks that have large paved surfaces. Green space is needed for people, animals, and for a healthy city in an increasingly climate adverse world.



Sound system shut down because of the noise problems it creates

Cities are loud places and parks can help reduce noise, particularly non-human made things like grasses, hills, trees, bushes, ponds and other surfaces that do not warp, amplify, twist, and reflect sound, but do the opposite, catching the sound and muting it. Particularly in the Red Square, you can hear the buses on Nørrebrogade from 65 m away as if they were right next to you. It is really no surprise that the sound system (pictured above with sign announcing it has been turned off), copied from one in Jamaica that you can play music via your phone's Bluetooth capabilities, was shut down. Sound travels quickly and easily in this space. Noise abatement seems to have not been given any consideration. *Superkilen* makes the already loud city louder. The siting of the sound system is poor as it has meters and meters of uninterrupted hard surface between it and the surrounding houses.



Indoor surface put outdoors, color fading, slippery when wet, frequently covered in grime

On top of the harsh noise pollution, The Red Square has made its own light pollution, a problem especially to the immediate neighbors who talk about being harassed by red light being reflected into their houses.²³ Whenever I visit the Red Square I get an odd sensation that it is a new-old park, simultaneously both—a remarkable achievement as I have never seen anything like this before; so many things are broken, worn out, repaired once but in need of repair again, its surfaces glazed with a sheen of urine-beer-vomit-liquefied-pulverized-paper-who-knows-what, garbage is strewn and blown into its nooks and crannies. Graffiti has already been painted over many times and walls are chipping and crumbling from this process.

I am not alone in my perception of the Red Square. Camilla Berner, an artist who works in public spaces with art, wild plants, and who helped me

understand how badly many of the trees have been planted in the park, took a walk with me through Superkilen. She had this same awkward intuitive understanding of the place being newly-old independent of my own experience and reflections.



Bark peeling—because of disease, but helped by people—and fungus growing on the trunk of the tree due to poor planting of red maples in the Red Square

A MOUNUMENT TO GLOBALIZATION AND CONSUMER CULTURE

Superkilen is an ecological disaster physically and symbolically; the way that the park and natural, living elements function within it demonstrate this. Trees in the Red Square, red maples, are suffering from being planted in a way that favors aesthetics, but not their health. Their bark is peeling and mold is growing up their trunks. Inger Kærgaard, a biologist, assured me that they would not survive for more than a couple of years. The colorized fused rock bases are not made in a way that facilitates drainage of water from the hard surfaces to the root systems. It is this lack of concern for nature and its processes that has guided us into our current situation with global climate change. We need art and design that does not repeat this stupidity and presents us with an aware, careful, respectful and environmentally serious approach to making city spaces.

In one part of the park, where the Black Market meets the Green Zone on top of the highest point, there is a plaque telling us that soil from the Gaza strip is there. We can even watch several short videos on our phones via the *Superkilen* app to get the full story. This poetic and thoughtful gesture belies what is actually in the park—what you see now—is soil that has been trampled, is poorly demarcated, is slowly eroding and is ecologically

irresponsible. Soils are living, breathing, dynamic organisms that need to be located where they are. They are full of bacteria, insects, microorganisms, plants, fungi, and so on that have developed in the places where soil is. To upend soil, to rip it from its home is a violent act. Enough soil is being stolen from the Palestinians by Israel as it is. To transport soil from Palestine and put it on a hill in Nørrebro is confusing. It disregards the health of the local soil. Are we to equate what we find on this hill with Palestinians? It tells us nothing of their plight. It tells even less about how they are coping with living in a society that does not want them, that does not really want any immigrants or non-natives. I have no doubt that this was a powerful experience for those who got to realize it, but what about the rest of us?

Many of the items brought to Denmark have not held up very well as they were made for other spaces, climates, cultures, ideas of public space. The City, says Jon Pape, is also very concerned about the difficulties and expenses they might face with repairing, replacing or fabricating items that are damaged or stolen.²⁴ The jet-setting it took to realize the park speaks volumes about the waste and disconnections it creates. The enormous amount of traveling and shipping things to Denmark needs our scrutiny. This short-sighted thinking, more than anything, demonstrates an approach that is a wasteful consumptive one: consuming difference, in this example, exotic objects from other places, as ideas or signs of public space rather than as things that are appropriate for a park in Nørrebro. *Superkilen* is a monument to globalization, petroleum, and neoliberal city making. It is not ecologically, socially or environmentally, appropriate to its climate. It has failed to integrate.

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¹ Troels Glismann, interview, December 19, 2012, Copenhagen

² Thor Ringgard, Technical and Environmental Department, The City of Copenhagen, email to the author, December 19, 2012

³ IBID

⁴ IBID

⁵ Troels Glismann

⁶ "Introduction," by Margaret Kohn, *Radical Space: Building the House of the People*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, p. 3

⁷ IBID, pp. 3-4

⁸ Jon Pape, Director of the Center for Parks and Nature, The City of Copenhagen, telephone interview, November 19, 2012

⁹ BIG, from their statement on Superkilen, www.big.dk

¹⁰ “BIG’s Quirky Kilometer Long Superkilen Park Celebrates Diversity in Copenhagen,” By Bridgette Meinhold, 10/23/12, <http://inhabitat.com/bigs-quirky-kilometer-long-superkilen-park-celebrates-diversity-in-copenhagen/>

¹¹ www.realdania.dk/English/Grants/Superkilen.aspx

¹² Jakob Jakobsen, email to the author, November 14, 2012

¹³ Tina Saaby, City Planner for the City of Copenhagen, from *Urban renewal as Green Laboratory*, published by the City of Copenhagen, 23/10/12

¹⁴ Troels Glismann

¹⁵ “Arkitekter- Pengetank er for magtfuld”, by Jens Lens Lenler and Torben Benner, Politiken, July 9, 2010. The title of the article translates to “Architects – Money bin is too powerful.”

¹⁶ Troels Glismann

¹⁷ IBID

¹⁸ Saaby has advocated for fostering more temporary use in Copenhagen’s city spaces. For an articulation of this idea see: *Urban Catalyst: Strategies for Temporary Use*, edited by Phillip Oswalt, Actar, 2012. Urban Catalyst is a group based in Berlin that has researched and articulated the notion of “temporary use” as a corrective to new demands on urban planning.

¹⁹ In 2004, I co-edited a book *Belltown Paradise/Making Their Own Plans*, WhiteWalls, Chicago, 128 pages, which has a chapter on Park Fiction written by Christoph Schäfer.

²⁰ “You’re So Vain. You Probably Think the Art is About You. Don’t you?”, by Brett Bloom, *Art as Social Practice*, Edited by Mathias Borello, summer 2013.

²¹ Image courtesy GBH. Their project proposal can be found here: <http://www.ghb-landskab.dk/projekter/superkilen-noerrewood>

²² Here is the original:

<http://www.dac.dk/da/service-sider/nyheder/2012/august/aabning-af-koebenhavns-groenneste-brokvarter/>

²³ Troels Glismann

²⁴ Jon Pape