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## **Immaterial preservation of The Abandoned Society; a critical practice**

### **Abstract**

*At present, the western world is experiencing severe demographic changes. The population in the rural areas are leaving their home villages and moving into the cities. In Denmark the major cities experience population and economic growth, whereas the villages in surrounding rural areas face abandonment and decay.*

*Despite the good intentions, today's widespread state-funded strategic demolition projects, undertaken in the Danish rural villages, generally emphasize the fast eradication of local identity. Therefore, there is urgent reason to enable the public discourse with a nuanced view on the abandoned rural houses of everyday life and in particular, on their bearing on the community cohesion.*

*The paper reports on a practice-based research project that has emerged as a counter-practice of radical preservation of the rural built environment in Denmark, as an alternative to strategic demolition. This has involved a long cooperation with rural municipalities and residents. So far, the counter-practice manifested itself through six generations of fulfilled building transformations prototyped at full scale in various rural villages in Denmark. Interaction with, and engagement of, local residents and were actively utilized. Some of the prototyped transformations included an integrated ruination process and age-long timespan, whereas others were event-based and terminated with full demolition.*

*All of the undertaken transformations had in common the use of the physical section as method to simultaneously reveal several historic material layers of the involved building to unleash the entirety of the buildings' private history. The private past becoming public triggered a local discussion on the merits of the building and the people who used to live there.*

*The aim was to constitute temporary catalysts of a local exchange of personal memories of place. Thus, the buildings were sought preserved as part of the collective memory prior to their absence regardless whether this absence was caused by decay or demolition.*

## **Introduction**

At the moment the Danish rural population are abandoning their home villages and moving into the cities. In Denmark, this migration has increased since the 1950s. In the Danish context, as well as in other western European countries, such social migration is caused by a decline in employment in farming and subsequently in the attached industries. Thus, the mean age of the Danish rural population is increasing as younger people tend to seek educational opportunities in the cities. Consequently, the economic and social inequality between the urban and rural populations is increasing; a tendency also apparent in the market value of the property. The implications for rural villages are conspicuous and exemplified by a rapidly increasing number of decaying abandoned buildings. Thus, the physical appearance, as well as the identity of the Danish rural villages, will undergo fundamental changes in the coming years. Meanwhile, the actual Danish debate is still permeated by an unrealistic desire for strategies intending to create economic growth locally in the depopulating villages<sup>1</sup>.

Today, the Danish government attempts to address the problematic presence of ruins in the rural village-scape, through large-scale state funded demolition projects. Despite good intentions, these demolition efforts emphasize the fast eradication of cultural values under the guise of state-authorized clean-up projects. However, the local village communities in the affected areas often welcome the demolition efforts. This is because the incipient and rapid stages of decay that follow in the aftermath of abandonment pose a potential risk of contagion<sup>2</sup>. The question remains whether something is irrevocably lost when buildings are demolished overnight and replaced with lawns<sup>3</sup>.

## **Intrinsic qualities embedded in the abandoned buildings**

The research outlined in the subsequent investigates the potential threat to material and intrinsic immaterial cultural values embedded in the abandoned buildings, as well as how the threat to these values influences the local identity and may damage community cohesion. The aim is to develop and test different strategies to identify and preserve these values. Material and intrinsic immaterial values in this context are subdivided into three categories: 1) aspects of cultural heritage; 2) density and structure of the rural village; and finally 3) memories of the building and the place. The first two categories represent material and tangible values. Many buildings that exemplify aspects of Danish cultural heritage have already been demolished as a consequence of abandonment or obsolescence followed by a period of decay. Some of these buildings were listed or categorized worthy of preservation. Likewise, the demolition efforts have impacted negatively on the structural village-scape on a planning scale, as the demolitions are producing dispersed rural villages that lack centers.

Such village centers are particularly valuable, as they often contain semi-public and public institutions such as grocery stores, schools, and dairies that are typically vulnerable to loss of function.

In contrast to these material and tangible values, hidden memories of the building and the place represent aspects of intrinsic immaterial values. These include memories of the building and the place, the people who lived there, and their affiliation to the village nerve, contributing to or being “local identity.” Such values are less tangible and hence difficult to grasp and register; their paramount importance is thus easily neglected in large-scale top-down planning strategies<sup>4</sup>.

In the succeeding the focus remains on the intrinsic immaterial values and mainly preservation of memory<sup>5</sup>.

### **A counter-practice of radical preservation**

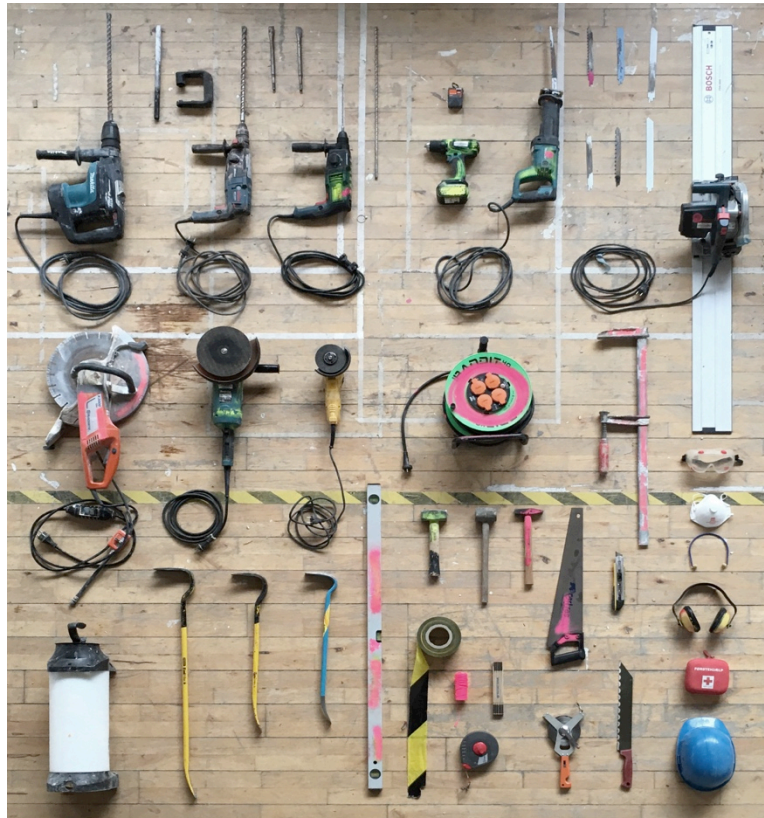
The research has been conducted as a counter-practice of radical preservation opposed to both contemporary heritage practices as well as current Danish rural planning policies. It seeks to reveal and activate the endangered intrinsic values through implementing a series of transformations of abandoned buildings prototyped at full scale in various rural village settings<sup>6</sup>. Each of the transformations represents a pre-stage of a prototype testing a radical preservation strategy based on a subtractive architectural approach and aiming at a temporary preservation of the intrinsic qualities of condemned buildings. More specifically, the aim is to trigger latent personal memories of the building and the place among the local residents to create a catalyst for an exchange of these memories into the collective memory. The immaterial building preservation itself is comprised of a strengthened position in the collective memory<sup>7</sup>.

Compounding this, the residents’ responses are considered a significant impact indicator, supplementary to the physical transformations themselves. As such, the local responses affect the counter-practice in its future direction. The responses of the local people are valuable markers in navigating and maneuvering the practice towards refined future generations of prototypes as well as adjusting the already existing ones. So far 12 buildings have been transformed.

To summarize, the research practice applies physical transformations of abandoned buildings into prototypes of radical preservation strategies, to reveal and preserve material and immaterial values. These values are considered vital to the local identity and the local community’s sense of self, and hope to contribute to a future perspective on rurality based on values other than economic growth.

### The Section used as Method

It may seem self-contradictory to utilise the section as a method when preserving buildings, as the section per se is destructive and most often lead to a subtractive architecture that is not compatible with a building in function.



**Figure 1.** Tools utilized to perform section-based transformations (photograph by author)

Despite its obviously brutal and destructive nature, the section as method has the ability to reveal several historic material layers simultaneously to unleash a multifaceted interpretation of the entirety of the buildings' private history. Thus, the section reveals the encapsulated chronology of a buildings private history through material stratification (Figure 2). The former private or encapsulated spheres are reversed and exposed to the public. In other words, the physical section emerges as a spatial-material x-ray of the encapsulated particular past of the involved building in similar fashion as a ruin [Hill]. The overall aim is to trigger latent personal memories of the building and the place among the local residents to create a catalyst for an exchange of these memories into the collective memory.

All of the prototyped transformations outlined in the subsequent are considered interpretations, as they in similar manner as conventional building restoration or conservation are manifestations of curated choices based on a contemporary reading of the involved buildings. In other words, the abandoned buildings are preserved as contemporary interpretations of the past brought into the present<sup>8</sup>.



**Figure 2.** Section collage revealing the built chronology of a 150y townhouse (photograph by author).

### **Actions and field lab**

The transformations exemplified in the subsequent are the three most recent. The transformations of the counter-practice are named Actions due to the methodological approach. This approach begins with the implementation of the Action, including interaction with the local community. Subsequent reflection leads to preparation and development of future Actions and therefore shows certain similarities to the methods of Action Research<sup>9</sup>.

All transformations were prototyped in Denmark's Thisted Municipality, in cooperation with local authorities, contractors and residents. Hence, Thisted Municipality is considered the field lab of the research. The Actions vary in their timeframe, and in their achievement. For instance, the long-term strategy *The controlled ruin* was allowing spared remnants to decay subsequent for an agelong period. Conversely, *Theatre installation* produced an example of an event-based short-term strategy. The outcome of the prototyped strategies *The controlled ruin* and *The Re-encoded Remnant* was radical preservation based on partial demolition, leaving physical remains of the transformed buildings. The spared remains were considered material triggers of latent memories on the longer term and hence, agelong catalysts of exchange of personal memories into collective memory.

In contrast, *Theatre installation* constituted an attempt to provoke an exchange of personal memories of place as a entirely immaterial preservation of local identity. This exchange was catalyzed by a radical event-based boost of the transformed building before its complete demolition.

### **Actions exemplified**

*The controlled ruin* was implemented March 2014 as a horizontal split-level section in the former sexton's residence, next to the medieval church in the smalltown Snedsted. A precisely defined and curated partial demolition transformed the abandoned building into a controlled ruin without a predetermined programme. Spared remnants were allowed to decay naturally.

A blue bathtub was previously one of the most private spheres of the house. Now however, it was completely exposed to the public and visible almost from a kilometre away. The reverse of private and public portrayed the blue bathtub as a focal point in the new interpretation of the former sexton's house (Figure 3-4). The private past becoming public also prompted a discussion on the merits of privacy among the local residents.

A year after the implementation *The controlled ruin* faced the consequences of its first Danish winter. The effects of frost erosions scarred the prototype, thus significantly softening the previously rigorous modernistic designed edges of walls (Figure 5-6). This was expected, as well as the immediate reaction from the local community. To obviate increasing criticisms, a parish evening was organized to equip the local community with a forum to address their questions and criticisms. The parish evening convinced the local community that they themselves were allowed to take action. In spring 2015, the sexton affiliated to the neighbouring cemetery cleaned up *The controlled ruin*, and added green plants and two sets of tables and benches. The remnants of the original sexton's house were now re-vitalized as a recreational addition to the cemetery, not unlike a romantic ruin (Figure 7). This locally facilitated revitalization did not prevent an exchange of memories of the building and the place. Conversely, it increased the number of visitors. The local community's attitude towards *The controlled ruin* changed in a positive direction, as the criticisms, according to the sexton, diminished following the local community-driven revitalization<sup>10</sup>.



**Figure 3.** The sexton's residence prior to the transformation, January 2014  
(photograph by author).



**Figure 4.** *The controlled ruin*, April 2014  
(photograph by author).



**Figure 5.** The blue bathtub, April 2014  
(photograph by author).



**Figure 6.** The blue bathtub, March 2015  
(photograph by author).



**Figure 7.** The blue bathtub re-inhabited, August 2016  
(photograph by author).

The Re-encoded Remnant, implemented spring 2015, was based on the physical importation of a predetermined public program into the remains of an abandoned house situated at the main street in the second largest city in the municipality. The neighbouring building was a busy soup kitchen managed by a group of passionate community volunteers, who obtained funding to buy and replace the abandoned house with a new extension to the soup kitchen. The new program featured an introvert multifunctional space devoted to communions, celebrations and to serve as a greenhouse on a daily basis.

Remnants of the abandoned house were kept present in both the exterior and interior. The reduced walls of the original back house, now containing an outdoor kitchen, and the original corner, facing the main street, encased the new additional building. The new facility itself appeared introvert as a black brick box (Figure 8). Inside the building, the preserved imprint of the original gable dominated the interior as it revealed colours and materiality of decades. The presence of the remnants in the newly built context had a compound impact on the atmosphere in both the exterior and the interior. This intense presence of the past triggered a broader discussion among the users, the volunteers and the community in general.

Since the building was taken into use in June 2016, it has been an environment for lively discussion among the volunteers and the users of the soup kitchen. Opinions regarding the presence of the remnants differ. In particular, the imprint of the gable seems to offend some people (Figure 9). However, a large group of people involved in the soup kitchen have become aware of the qualities of the transformed soup kitchen and how the present remnants can provide ambiance and more importantly, trigger latent memories.



**Figure 8.** *The re-encoded remnant*, January 2017  
(photograph by author).



**Figure 9.** *The re-encoded remnant*, November 2016  
(photograph by author).

*Theatre installation*, implemented spring 2016, was entirely aiming at setting an example of immaterial building preservation. An abandoned confectionery was chosen, as it played a major role in the past, as a gathering point for the local community (Figure 10). Despite condemned to demolition, it still held a central position in the middle of the pedestrian street of the second largest town in the municipality. *Theatre installation* was undertaken in cooperation with an experimental theatre, residents and Thisted Municipality.

The concept was to generate attention to the confectionery before it vanished through a two month re-opening during summer 2016. Cyclical lighting and audio tracks orchestrated physical interventions (Figure 11). The local community itself managed and maintained the installation entirely independently during the daily opening hours. The reopening as a temporary boost of the exposed memories of both the building and the place, proved strikingly appealing to the local community.

The confectionary remained open for almost two-months during the same opening hours as the other shops on the pedestrian street. Every Sunday during the summer, coffee and Danish pastries were served in the courtyard of the confectionary. The courtyard was furnished for this purpose, using a refectory table and benches placed underneath an old elder. The idea was to encourage the visitors to gather around the refectory table, providing an informal setting for dialogue and encouraging an exchange of memories of the place. It was from the soup kitchen in *The Re-encoded Remnant* that this concept of creating an informal setting for dialogue was derived.

The boost of the waning confectionary, before its inevitable absence, proved to instil a greater awareness of the communal identity among the local residents that they themselves form part of<sup>11</sup>.



**Figure 10.** *Theatre installation:* The unaltered confectionary, November 2016  
(photograph by author).



**Figure 11.** *Theatre installation:* A cut through three stages of privacy; the bakery shop, the confectioner couple's private kitchen, and the bakery, July 2016 (photograph by author).

## **Discussion**

The counter-practice of radical preservation evidenced that physical transformations of abandoned buildings could act as a catalyst in the process of provoking an exchange of memories of buildings and places among the residents in rural villages. Thus, physical Actions have, throughout their implementations, been utilized to develop and test preservation strategies through transformations prototyped at full scale in various rural village environments.

The investigations of immaterial values, understood as memories of place, have particularly exposed unawareness within the Danish society of the role that abandoned buildings still play in the communities' understanding of self.

Today's state authorized funds for demolition projects, if redirected, could easily contribute to the on-going rural transformation through integration into radical preservation strategies. Instead of posing a threat to the local identity of rural villages, their density and cultural heritage, as instruments of rapid eradication of history, they could be utilized to contribute to community cohesion. The Actions exemplify that it is only a question of how these demolitions are undertaken. Be it as partial demolitions or even as prolonged complete demolitions, the demolition as a deliberate preservation tool is capable of revealing a broad range of intrinsic values. Today's strategic demolition projects still pose a particular danger, because the immaterial values they eradicate are neither visible nor tangible and hence, not easily to pinpoint as lost. Despite the physical distance between the abandoned buildings, the Actions indicated that these buildings form part an interwoven mesh of personal relations, narratives, and local history. An interwoven mesh that goes far beyond the physical delimitations of the buildings themselves. In other words, the abandoned buildings serve as anchorage points of the collective memory. New rural identities may benefit from emerging from rural identities of the past.

An anxiety towards ruins permeates the Danish debate on rural transformation, however the counter-practice indicates that this anxiety may not be legitimate. Time, when stretched in a ruination process or prolonged demolition, acts similarly to a mourning process, thus creating an exchange of memories of what is lost.

## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> Nils Thorsen, Mette Løvschal, and Tim Flohr Sørensen, *Er vi Danskere Bange for Ruiner?* (Politiken, August 30, sec. 2, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Egedal, *Landsbyer Har Udsigt Til Endnu Flere Spørgelsesboliger I Fremtiden* (Momentum. KL., 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Pieter Versteegh, *Alter Rurality: Exploring Representations and "Repeasantations"* (Arena, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, and Lewis A. Coser, *On Collective Memory* (The Heritage of Sociology. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Johan Verbeke, *Research by Design Is up and Running* (Architecture & Education Journal, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Dylan Trigg, *The Memory of Place: A Phenomenology of the Uncanny* (2013).

<sup>8</sup> XXX (Routledge, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Andy Townsend, *Action Research: The Challenges of Understanding and Researching Practice* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> XXX (Univ of Minnesota Press, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> XXX (2017).