

Superkilen – A Playground for Pluralism

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Do you remember the first time you ate food from another culture? At first, it might have seemed strange, but the more you were exposed to it – the more you explored the menu – the more you developed a taste for it. Similar to our cultural adjustment to a foreign cuisine, a walk through Copenhagen’s kilometre-long Superkilen park allows visitors to experience something new by encountering fragments of other cultures. Seeing and using alien objects on a daily basis gradually transforms perceptions, turning an ‘exotic’ culture into a culture that is part of everyday life.

A joint effort of three teams – the architectural office BIG – Bjarke Ingels Group), landscape architects Topotek 1 and the artist group Superflex – Superkilen deploys a bold and innovative design to provide an enjoyable space for a multicultural context. More than that, it points to new ways in which architecture can shape the convergence between peoples, countering narratives of cultural misrepresentation with an argument in favour of diversity.

The discussion around architecture and pluralism in relation to Islam is still predominantly framed in terms of religious space. And certainly, the proliferation of mosques and Islamic cemeteries in Europe, with their culturally hybrid designs, bears witness to the positive dynamics of cultural and religious diversification, signalling that many Muslims feel at home in the region. Yet this programmatic focus is problematic for two reasons. First, religious architecture cannot sufficiently account for the various cultural and secular needs of the very heterogeneous Muslim communities in Europe. Second, the concern for the advancement of pluralism in Europe is larger than the concern for the representation of Islam. Europe’s demographic landscape is changing due to the movement of many other migrant groups. In this context the scope of our architectural explorations needs to be broadened to find ways of giving these groups better access to public space and, with this, greater visibility in the cities which we all share. This is what Superkilen achieves in Nørrebro, the most culturally diverse and socially challenged neighbourhood of Copenhagen.

Today more than half the residents of Nørrebro, that is some 10,745 people, come from countries with a Muslim majority, such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Turkey, Somalia, Morocco, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan and Syria. This cultural diversity is historically deeply rooted in the neighbourhood, as is its other defining characteristic – its capacity for unrest triggered by social and cultural friction. A succession of protests and riots over the past 150 years created a negative image of Nørrebro, reinforced more

recently by problems related to violent crime, gang activity and a lack of cultural integration – a disconnect mirrored in the area’s lack of linkages with the infrastructure of the city as a whole. In the background to the project’s inception we also find the so-called cartoons controversy that broke out in 2005 after the *Jyllands-Posten* newspaper published 12 caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad. The cartoons provoked protests worldwide but in Nørrebro, specifically, they gave rise to vandalism, flag-burning and violent clashes between the police and frustrated youths.

Issues of integration and the coexistence of different cultures were near the top, then, of the list of priorities for the project for the regeneration of Nørrebro initiated and developed by the Municipality of Copenhagen and RealDania, a private philanthropic association. As part of this larger project, Superkilen was designed for a number of different functions. First, it connects Nørrebro to the surrounding neighbourhoods, facilitating safe and transparent pedestrian and cyclist transit with paths designed specifically for this purpose. Second, as a public park, it provides for a variety of outdoor activities such as cultural events, leisure and sport. Third, it functions as an exhibition of the neighbourhood’s cultural diversity. All three dimensions have made Superkilen one of the most popular and best-functioning public spaces in the city of Copenhagen.

Among its many qualities, four aspects of the project may be highlighted for their contribution to the discourse on the architecture of pluralism in Europe: inclusive design, cultural mobility, branding and play.

Inclusive Design

Superkilen’s extraordinary aesthetic is defined by the creation of three formally distinct zones – the Red Square, the Black Market and Green Park – furnished with a diverse array of urban objects ‘sampled’ from all over the world. Local inhabitants were invited to propose specific city objects – benches, playground equipment, lamps, bins, trees, etc – from another country, which could either be their own homeland, or a place they had travelled to. The collecting of objects was intended to reflect the culturally diverse landscape of Nørrebro while also promoting a sense of ownership. The arrangement of selected objects was curated by the project architects and artists, resulting in an exhibition of ‘best-practice’ urban furniture. A special app was developed to give visitors more detailed information about the objects.

The design of Superkilen is site-specific, yet the core approach is certainly applicable to the making of other public spaces. Rather than attempting to determine every component of the design, the architects and artists tapped into local intelligence, recognising and validating the expertise of the residents as specialists in their own culture and identity. Repeatedly, through an outreach exercise involving a wide array of communication channels, residents were invited to articulate their needs, with the designers taking on the role of curators, mediators and motivators in a collective effort of creating public space. While the majority of Nørrebro's residents have an Islamic and/or Middle Eastern background, the design does not favour a single religious or ethnic group. Rather, cultural representation in the park promotes the notion of diversity through self-representation.

An inventive aspect of the design process was the so-called 'Participation Extreme' approach developed by Superflex as a way of including the less vocal and less dominant members of the community. The artists asked groups of youths and elderly people, 'If you could choose anything from anywhere you wanted, what would you like to see in the park?', and then travelled with residents to five of the proposed sites – Thailand, Spain, Palestine, USA and Jamaica – to find these objects. In this way, they gave voice to the needs and desires of those who are usually left out of participatory planning processes.

Cultural Mobility

Alongside its inclusive design, Superkilen gives form to pluralism by integrating the notion of migration into the design and implementation process. The trees in the park, for example, symbolise the various aspects of migration through their transplantation and acculturation to local climatic and soil conditions. Just like the migrants in Nørrebro, Superkilen's trees come from different parts of the world. Species from the Islamic world – the Cedars native to Lebanon or to the Atlas Mountains of Algeria and Morocco – are planted side by side with species such as the European Larch, native to central Europe; *Nothofagus antarctica*, a variety of Beech native to Andean regions; or the Ginko, native to China. Yet the notion of the trees' origins is not that clear-cut: although native to different parts of the world, most of the specimens were transplanted from nurseries in Northern Germany or Denmark. In this way, the concept probes the defining parameters of cultural or national origins.

The concept of a mini world's fair of urban furniture and vegetation also points to the global flows of culture, as well as the many forms of translations

to a local context. The objects installed in the park were either purchased from catalogues or reproduced from photographs – though in many cases the photos did not reveal much detail about the objects' size or composition and the construction schemes had to be invented. Elsewhere, the design of the park's furniture had to be modified to conform to Danish safety standards. There were also instances of things getting 'lost in translation', as in the case of the Octopus built by local workers in tandem with the Japanese craftsmen who spent a month in Copenhagen, building the creature on site. As inspirations are imported from one context to another, this process revealed the creative dimensions of cultural mobility: the construction of objects was not so much a replication as an invention of new cultural forms.

In the realisation of some of the Participation Extreme projects, the notion of cultural mobility took on a highly symbolic dimension. 'Soil from Palestine', for example, is just that: soil brought mostly from the occupied Golan Heights but also from East Jerusalem, from Ramallah, from the West Bank. This symbolically charged proposal came from two teenage girls, Hiba and Alaa, residents of Nørrebro. While they had never been to Palestine and only knew about their homeland through stories, both of them identified as Palestinian. The Participation Extreme project made it possible for them to visit Palestine and to bring back Palestinian soil. When the imported red soil was first distributed on top of the little hill on the Black Market, it stood in high contrast to the local sandy brown earth. Over time, however, the two soils have merged with one another – a symbolic reference to the process of migration, cultural integration and the blending of identities. In its mixing and blending of different soils, this project reflects the fears of losing one's own cultural identity, but also the possibility of belonging to more than one place and culture.

Branding

From the aesthetic perspective, colour and materials play an important role in articulating the formal and symbolic qualities of the park. The red of the Red Square, for example, can be interpreted at a variety of scales – from a domestic rug with furniture, to a Danish flag with the red symbolising Denmark's multinational soil that unifies inhabitants of various backgrounds. In formal terms, however, perhaps the most visually striking part of the park is the Black Market, with its black asphalt and its white stripes which direct the movement of people around the site. This aspect of the design was inspired by the Lars von Trier film *Dogville* (2003), which uses a minimal stage-like set with white lines on black ground to demarcate scenes. In a

similar way, the Black Market also reads like a stage on which residents can publicly enact their identities.

Initially resisted by a portion of the residents who were hoping for a more traditional park design, the bold colours and unusual materials were important tools in the rebranding of the neighbourhood, helping to establish a once notorious area as a regular feature in lists of the ‘top ten attractions to visit in Copenhagen’. Today, the red, black and green have become important markers of identity for Nørrebro as a whole, as attested by a recent discussion regarding the replacement of surfaces on the Red Square, when the majority of residents made it clear that the new surfaces had also to be red. In turn, the black and white stripes of the Black Market have appeared as the backdrop to numerous fashion and advertising campaigns. The popularity of the branding is such that you can even get an iPhone case featuring a photograph of a skater over the stripes.

Play

The fourth dimension of Superkilen’s important contribution to the architecture of pluralism relates to the way in which its aesthetic and programmatic components work together in the service of cultural representation. The landscaping of Superkilen constitutes a contemporary urban hybrid of two historical themes in landscape architecture – the universal garden and the amusement park. Purposefully using exoticism to embrace symbols of various identities, the park makes everyone feel both a bit alien and a bit at home. The programme, a kind of ‘playground for adults’, provides infrastructure for people of various cultural backgrounds and age groups to come together without any sense of forced integration. For example, two of the most visited and used objects in the park, the Swing Bench from Baghdad and the Octopus from Tokyo, bring Muslims and non-Muslims into close proximity. While the children are playing, their parents interact, striking up conversations.

The project is also courageous and unique in the way it simultaneously embraces and disarms cultural stereotypes. The Neon Sign from Doha, Qatar, for example, seemingly flags the Black Market with an Islamic symbol – that of the crescent and a star. But a closer look reveals that the star is not quite what it seems: in fact, this sign was copied from a dental clinic in Doha, where a local dentist enterprisingly replaced the star with the shape of a molar tooth as a way of advertising his business. This humorous take on a potent religious and cultural symbol within the context of an Islamic country at once challenges stereotypes and opens up possibilities for play.

The notion of play was also utilised to counter crime. Superkilen acknowledges the need to recognise groups that might be prone to violence and to give them space and visibility, for example, in the Thai Boxing Ring or the curved surfaces attractive to skaters, which channel young men’s energies into sport and competition. Such an approach is not about an attempt to control or avoid conflict. The principle here is that violence can be more dangerous when it is hidden in a dark park than when it is staged and exposed in a specially designated space, such as the boxing ring. While public space needs to accommodate social and cultural tension to a certain degree, a successful design also needs to articulate a balance between the dangerous and the constructive aspects of this tension – something that Superkilen achieves through both aesthetic and programmatic means.

Born out of an intense engagement with its users, Superkilen has introduced new aesthetic and critical dimensions to participatory design, setting new standards for the creation of public space. The notion of inclusive design is also reflected in the very constellation of the project team. Combining humour with respect and cultural sensitivity, Superkilen demonstrates the agency of architecture, art and landscape design in maintaining a healthy public space – a space where one can encounter things that one either does not know about, or agree with. The contribution of the park towards promoting an inclusive and heterogeneous society is of particular importance at a time when European society is becoming increasingly conservative and unfortunately more hostile towards its Muslim minorities and migrant groups. Perhaps the best summary of the larger lesson to be taken from Superkilen lies in the calligraphic inscriptions on the park benches from Iran: ‘A good city can not be found, you have to build it!’