



# Instant Glamour

## A new urbanism - or how much Glamour do we need?

by *Martin Schwegmann*

Glamour is one of the most important currencies in a market, which mainly invests in place making concepts and the therefore needed celebrities and events. It is a central category within cultural production of consumption appeals and requests for identification. Does this urge for glamour, this urge for the extraordinary produce on the other hand a boredom of the exceptional, a rejection of the spectacular on an urban level?

New urbanism is a trend in urban development which could be seen as the mere antipode of glamour. New towns in old looks with strict design guidelines are the new thing for the middle classes of the western world, which are tired of the hassles of a modern city with its felt traffic-, crime- and ecological problems. Jakriborg is one of these. The town in southern Sweden, between Malmö and Lund, is an example of the European branch of this new urbanism. And in this case new doesn't imply modern: "The design of Jakriborg is inspired by old north German Hanseatic towns", Robin Manger, the main architect behind the project says. He actually rejects the connection to new urbanism and doesn't want to be stigmatized as a "medieval" architect. Nevertheless, Jakriborg has already become a prominent example of the movement.

The project was finally completed in 2007. It started in 1999 and was led by Jan and Kristor Berggren, two brothers who run and own Jakri AB, a building company located in Malmö. It is a new "town", a housing area of about 400 flats and 1200 inhabitants. Part of the village of Hjörup, a housing area from the 1960s, with about 4000 inhabitants, Jakriborg, located on the western side of the train tracks dividing the village, constitutes a new centre. The two brothers wanted to build a city that people simply want to live in. And Jakriborg is popular indeed. There was a waiting list for people to get in. They stopped taking names for the waiting list because it was simply too long. Ten percent of the population is Danish. Flats between 30 and 150m<sup>2</sup> are available for rent and are quite affordable. Their strategy was to invest nothing in advertisement and keep the rents low, in order to have people living there right away.

The town consists of the typical elements found in so-called "grown" European cities: a square in the centre, a curved main street, the Köpmannagatan, houses of different colours, windows and heights with steep gables and last not least a city wall. Jakriborg is a provoking place for to the architecturally educated observer. It is a place the latter would maybe comment on with the words "Oh, that is Disney...", meaning it is unreal, false, deceptive, corny, aseptic, slick.(1)

Arriving there caused a strange feeling. It was a small town, on the first look, surrounded by empty fields beside an "old" part from the 60s, with little inspiring housing. In contrast to the adjacent 1960s development it had a small-town urban feel to it at the very first sight. That is probably what Jan Berggren talks about when he says that "first and foremost it is cosy here."(2) This may to some extent fulfil a typical Scandinavian need – in Danish there is an active verb: to cosy - at hygge. This aspect modern architecture seems to have failed in: to create a pleasant environment for people to live in, to create a sense of place.

Developers often use marketing strategies to create a sense of place. In Berlin for example some new high priced developments are labelled with French or Italian names in order to project the Mediterranean grandeur these names seem to imply to the new buildings.

Jakriborg is only one of those new old towns across Europe like Brandevoort in the Netherlands or

Poundbury in England (3) which form a phenomenon that architects and planners have a hard time accepting: On the one hand being very non-academic, at the same time being amazingly popular. It is because things get mixed up easily here. If you look at Jakriborg as a suburb, it has strong spatial aspects which you do not find in the common monotone suburban blocks. There is a hierarchy of main and secondary streets and squares in a walkable distance and on a so-called human scale. "You can distinguish your own house" as Robin Manger says, even though they work as ordinary blocks of flats. Some of them are connected by bridges, which are from the inside perceived as corridors connecting apartments. But looking at Jakriborg as a town things become strange. All the land is privately owned - including the squares and the streets. On the yearly Christmas market no political party could have their stand. Last year one did anyhow without them noticing it. "No", Kristor says, "we cannot have that. Then the trouble starts." You couldn't make a demonstration or hold a speech on the main square - in fact nowhere in town. "We didn't think about it" replies Göran Berggren, the strategic planning manager of Stefanstorp commune honestly when asked about the importance of public space in Jakriborg. In the next phase of development some streets will be public, because some houses are meant to be privately owned. You cannot sell property if it has no public access.

It is interesting that the aesthetic aspect is enough for some people to see an accomplished urban environment which to a certain extent overcomes modernistic weaknesses. Even one of the founders of Christiania, the well known former hippie commune in Copenhagen, Jacob Ludvigsen says, that Jakriborg is a "cultural revolution". He thinks that the people have been under the dictatorship of the architects and the house owners for too long.

But in some ways, the dictatorship here is greater than in other developments. Everything belongs to one company, including streets and squares. No changes can be made by the tenants. Even though all the houses seem to be different they stem from one mind, are different variations of only a set of houses. Kristor Berggren doesn't look like a dictator though. With his winning smile, his tanned face and grey hair, he airs knowing serenity. He and his brother had a vision, no doubt. He said it wouldn't really pay off too well actually. He would like that the streets were public. It is expensive to maintain them. The village square cost as much as ten apartments would have. Kristor Berggren is actually a little disappointed that people don't form more groups, associations, mingle, create a local civic society. Yes, there is a tenants' association. But that is all. Maybe the number of inhabitants is still too low. Or people don't engage because they don't see how? They cannot change anything here. There is no space for interaction and articulation.

There is no community centre. "Why?" I ask Kristor Berggren. "Well, they can meet in the café. There is one at the square. Or they can use the church or the school." There is a private cultural school, which was built by Jakri, but is privately run. The commune gave a guarantee of payment. In fact there are already some shops in Jakriborg, the latest a little supermarket, which is currently run by Jakri AB until it becomes lucrative enough that they can hand it over to somebody else. But there are not enough people in town and there probably still won't be after the next phase of development. Kristor Berggren would like to get a big company running all the shops in Jakriborg. It is too difficult otherwise he says.

Just building an average housing area would have been much easier. When I ask Kristor what he would do



the next time he builds something like Jakriborg, he looks at me and says: "you don't do something like this twice." Jakriborg is a personal project by people who wanted to do something different. It is based on local trust. The community believes in the Jakri brothers, as Göran Berggren puts it. It is not a development like the new urbanism projects by Disney. It is local and in some respect also authentic.

Could Jakriborg work with a contemporary architectural language? Robin Manger says: "It would not be the same!" What would not be the same? We have to give people something to project themselves onto and to interact with. To connect to more than the mere private bliss and the nostalgia of a bygone past. What about a collective vision? Is it enough that you have townhouses which look as if they belong to an emancipated urban society? They don't belong to the merchant anymore. There is no merchant anymore. Today it is a multinational cooperation. Merely building a picture of a society doesn't mean you actually create it.

But then again nobody ever said that glamour is really more than skin deep. Apparently this new urbanism meets some needs for an ideal world, beyond fast changing trends and fashions. It gives you the glamour of living in an urban environment -- back to a good old way of living without its drawbacks. Yet it is artificial and flat. The new urban environment does not provide much for people to engage in. Will it in the end need a pinch of wickedness, grit and diversity - so it can "live" and can be re-invented?

#### NOTES:

- (1) "Mickymaus und Miesmacher" by Prof. Dr. Harald Bodenschatz in Deutsches Architekten Blatt 02/08, Release for Baden-Württemberg
- (2) „Flugt fra Funktionalismen“ in ARKFOKUS 8/2006, p. 16.
- (3) Brandevoort, in the Netherlands and Poundbury in England are both developments in which the Luxembourgish town planner Leon Krier was strongly involved in the planning.

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