URBAN AND RURAL TERRITORIES - THE ROLE OF CULTURAL PRACTICE TO IMAGINE NEW FORMS OF COMPLEMENTARITY

Lone Leth Larsen
International cultural adviser
ECoC Aarhus 2017
In Denmark villages are being torn down and closed down! at the same time the bigger towns as Copenhagen, Århus and Odense experiences a boost of inhabitants and a steep rise in house prices. The towns are sucking up the rural population offering both wellpaid jobs, knowledge communities and a bustling nightlife.

This is a global tendency. In 2006 the balance tipped. Before 2006 most people lived in rural areas, after 2006 most people lives in towns and cities, and the movement into towns and cities is happening in a frightful pace as young people today stay in the towns after they have graduated and raise their families here. In former times they went back to the smaller towns or villages to raise a family, this means that smaller towns and villages are emptying quicker than ever.

The past eu chairmanship of the Netherlands focussed on urbanism. They developed the idea to perceive the entire country from the point of view of urbanism.

The EU agenda is also concerning itself with urbanism, stating that the big cities today have the answers to the challenges of the climate-change, employment and further societal development.

The situation of the village is devastating not being able to offer what modern young people need. This creates a quick downward spiral for the villages.

The farms today are operated by one person instead of a whole village being involved in the agricultural life, and there is more to come, the small farms are bought by big farms, and many people move away because of lack of the traditional rural work.

In Denmark e.i. for the moment we have 3500 farms with milkproduction. Over the next 30 years this will dimish to 1000.

Because of this development the school disappeared, the shop disappeared, the bus stopped and the last person died.

This is quite a gloomy picture of the situation in many places in the countryside in Denmark.

We have known it for years, but now it is really a reality. People have to move from the villages in order to have a job possibilities for the leisure time and for their children.

In Idom Råsted, at the north west coast of Jutland, the Landsbylaboratoriet has been developped. (the village lab) Inhabitants of Idom Råsted are keen to develop their village, and are doing so through culture. The centre of the whole movement is their cultural house/centre Plexus. This summer the Idom-Råsted Biennale took place with a giant theatre festival and a theatre build up by straw bales. Everybody in the village participated, one farmer provided the straw bales, another the tractor, others again were good at computer, designing the invitations, etc.

this project together with other similar projects in the village has created a strong social reality between the different groups of people living in the village. both those who lived their whole life here and the new ones, who have chosen to move to Idom-Råsted to live.

where one could imagine a cultural clash between two cultures, the opposite is the case

this social cohesion that has developed over the years also has developed a strong identity and the village today is so popular, that people are eager to move to the village to live.

To understand these two situations of villages - the village dying and the urge to keep the village alive we need to go back in history.

We are looking at the end of a glorious era of a rich farmers culture in the countryside.

In Denmark in the 19th century the Danish farmers were the initiators of a whole new movement that was going to get a paramount influence on the national culture of the country. So strong that it today is considered the basis of the Danish cultural identity.
The Danish agricultural life and farming tradition underwent many changes at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th, and this gave cause to creating a new culture and a new identity and pride for the Danish peasant and rural population.

In the wake of the movement toward democracy the Danish priest and philosopher N.F.S. Grundtvig inspired people to become more educated, to gather and share knowledge. This was formalized in both the folkhighschools, starting in 1844 in Askov, and later in the gather places in the villages, the forerunners of the cultural centres. Both the creating of the folkhighschools and the building of the gathering places (forsamlingshuse) were initiatives by the rural population.

The Folkhighschools provided education for the adult farmer daughters and sons. They needed new knowledge of agricultural technologies but they also were craving for more general knowledge. Philosophy, history and religion were taught in a very informal way. They used the winther-time when they were not needed in the fields to be in the Folkhighschools. This also led to a more general urge for knowledge and they build the first forsamlingshuse, houses where they could gather, and hear and learn about new ideas from the outside world.

With this movement grew the thought about smarter farming, and they started their cooperatives. The first one started in 1866, where peasants and working people started the first coop shop. Soon after the farmers (1875-83) at Fyn started the first dairy as a cooperative.

This example is just to show how strong, once the culture in the countryside was. That the new ideas and the new identities were shaped in the country side and so strong, that still today the Danish society is build on the principles developed at that time.

Today the picture is different. Due to the same development, agriculture has been through quite an amazing development, today totally automatized using the newest technologies. Which means that the agricultural enterprises are very cost -benefit streamlined, and the old-fashioned ways of running farms are almost dead or is dying out with the oldest farmers.

With the consequence that the character and function of the village is changing. The houses in the villages, has been taken over by people not having any connection to the former countryside culture, working in the cities, and only being in their village houses at night and in the weekends.

This is one aspect. the culture in the villages is changing quickly with the new type of dwellers. actually- one must be honest and say that the movement from village to town has been in different tempi. the first one was with industrialization at the end of the 19th century beginning of the 20th.

a second one was in the 70ties, but here we saw a double movement. the countryside became popular amongst hippies, and many young people preferred to live in the countryside because of a sort of nostalgia, being close to nature and sustaining yourself.

No though, the situation is more desperate. because of the big move to the towns and big cities, the situation also has an economical impact. The houses are cheap, nobody wants to buy them. This may mean that people without many means are tempted to buy houses in the countryside, or even to rent houses in the countryside, and this can be a very good thing, but as the Lolland-falster municipality of southeast Denmark complains, it also give another challenge, because IF it is ONLY poor people settling in the villages, it creates social challenges. A livable village is of course best with a variety of social classes and ressources.

More of the same note: the other trend we see is that it is impossible to sell you house, because the banks do not want to refinance the mortgage, and we have seen examples of how young families, who really want to establish themselves cannot buy a house in a chosen village.

The paradox is that the cities are getting more crammed, and expensive, and people have problems with finding place to be. At the same time, towns and cities need to think more about solving climate, environment and infrastructural problems. New projects in town pop up like roof farming, urban gardening, and the Aarhus 2017 project of Hidden Places tries to locate interesting places for people in the town to be able to broaden their space.
for a while coming back to the villages to look at the less gloomy side of the problem. Villages dwellers have ressources, and many village dwellers want to do something about the situation.

They see/know the qualities of living in the countryside and you see in many places how the they do quite an amazing job to enhance the livability in the villages. They fight for the school threatened by closure, in many places you see how villages go together and take over the school, now being run by the parents, take over the closing shop, now being run by the village, and help each other with the infrastructural problems going to and fro work in the city or town.

The village of Selde is a very good example of this movement. but there are many villages doing the same.

These processes do create a fantastic social coherence and social network, people help each other and have something to fight for.

Before I give you some examples of how people are working with their villages I do have to stress that what we have experienced throughout many years is that it HAS to be initiatives coming from villagers themselves, everytime. We see that people from the outside world -big organisations, municipalities or from Region or State with their good hearted intentions start project, but it will not succeed, people feels imposed on, if the initiatives does not take a starting point in the local wishes or ideas.

Therefore the examples, I am about to give you all are either initiatives wished for by villagers, or created together with in a co-creation with artists or cultural people.

I must remind you though, that there are many many good examples in the whole of Denmark, but due to the year of the Cultural Capital Aarhus 2017 where the cultural projects in rural and urban areas have got a boost I am going to focus on those in the Region of Central Denmark.

This actual European cultural Capital is rather unique in its kind, because though it is called Aarhus 2017, Aarhus being the big city, it is actually a cooperation between Aarhus, the second largest city in Denmark and REALLY urban the Region of Central Denmark and the 19 municipalities of the Region. In the bidding process already this cooperation was established. Region and all municipalities signed agreements of joint cooperation both in the cultural development, but also in economical terms. This means that in 2017 the focus of the European Cultural capital is on culture as a driver for both urban and rural development. This has also meant that a new kind of cooperation across the Region has occurred, both between the 19 municipalities but also between Århus the big city and e.g. Selde the small village.

Let me introduce you to some examples of how working with art in rural areas have made a difference.

“Art on the move”, was initiated by a cultural centre Remisen in Brande by Birgit Vinge and the artist Sten Rasmussen. The project took place across the region in different villages, being funded, both by the state, the region and other funds.

Their methodology was quite simple: they approached possible villages, and asked if they wanted to host the project.

To be able to do so, the village had to map their own ressources: i.e. did they have a meeting place (a cultural centre or a school or something else), did they have people who would be able to help building the pieces of art, who were able to cook a meal, to host the artists, in other words did they have the resources to actually accommodate an art project like art on the move. When this turned out to the positive, a group of artists from all over the world turned up, staid in the village for 10 days, build pieces of art, where some of these pieces would stay in the village as a token from the artist but also as a testimony of the event. The workshop ended by an exhibition and a big party where both city dwellers - the municipality to which they belonged and the artists were invited, and had a big celebration of the event. Some 15 villages across the region have been part of this project, and I daresay that the project has been very successful in also showing the villagers what they are able to do!
Other projects are similar to this but still different. In Selde a village in the north west corner of Region Central Denmark, two artist Lene Noer and Birgitte Ejdrup Kristensen have been working for years with the village initiated by the village itself,

The projects they created have been so successful, that other villages in the neighborhood have started similar projects.

Due to the European capital of Culture Aarhus 2017, the artists applied to be part of the cultural year, and succeeded and with this plus extra funds from the State, they had the basis of an interesting project. Coming back to the village dwellers they discovered that the needs of the dwellers were quite different! they wanted a new wood. The artists of course had to tell the, ok for a wood, but we have to do something with art, that is the money for. This was an interesting process, where the solution was the idea from Birgit Ejdrup to seek her inspiration in Joseph Beuys and the Kassel Biennale many years ago, and are now - together with the villagers working on a homage a Beuys planting a tree with a granite stele next to it. This is proving be a vehicle for extra funding, as people can buy a tree and a granite stele, and the villagers are getting their wood and a piece of art.

Taking a totally other approach but a very very interesting one is Rethink the village.

This project is unique in many ways. It started with municipalities across the Region, most of them being mainly rural and wondering how culture could be a driver for their development as high art was not really a normal topic for them.

The municipalities - as so many others have the challenge of villages dying out, and decided to see if they could rethink the villages. Now being municipal and coming to villages to impose something never was a good idea, and the good people behind the project knew this.

Therefore they used another methodology: they started by inviting different people from different villages for dinner. During the dinner there was no fixed frame, not fixed themes, they just wanted people to talk with each other. They invited the same people, together with others to coffee-tables/parties, and even though it seems quite chaotic to begin with eventually different ideas came up based on the needs of the different villages.

First of all, - today a very important instrument - a village fair once a years established. In this fair the villagers from the different villages participating meet and change ideas and discuss projects and developments.

Secondly the villages decided on three different themes to be worked on: 1. Bundling villages into themes they want to work on, i.e. a music festival, new infrastructure for children or something else. 2. working with participatory budgetting, where villages are able to decide for themselves what the municipal budget covering their village should be used for, and 3 : sustainability, where villages are looking into how their villages can be environmental and socially sustainable.

These 3 tracks are now the responsibility of 3 different municipalities. which means they are secretariat for the tracks. The people in the villages are responsible for the implementation of exactly what they wanted to work with. Without much interference from the municipalities, who are only having the role as facilitators.

This project and it very bottom-up methodology has proven a succes. People and organizations with an urge to structure, framework and a set agenda were horrified (and may still be so) about the chose path and methodology, but the knowledge of the municipalities of their own people, and and their villages has proven that this was the right way to go. The different secretariats and the whole project has a coordinator housed by the Favrskov municipality. They have seed money for the different projects, and they have application rounds for projects.

The project has proven succesful in another way as well. Being part of the prestigious project Aarhus 2017 has done something to their pride. it has given them the possibility to create international
networks, where they can share their experiences and get new impulses and ideas.

Moreover the villages in the municipalities are now better known by the politicians, who are even allocating more funds for the development of the projects.

These few examples of rural areas where the social sustainability of the villages are at the core are just a few amongst many. A big organisation the DGI (the leisure time sports organisation) and a big national fund Real Dania are working along the same lines: to strengthen the ability of been socially sustainable based on the needs and wishes of people themselves, and based on that they do the job themselves.

Of course this is just a Danish example, in the Netherlands, some 20 years ago a movement started of building Kulturhuse. Based on the idea of Grundtvig and the Danish example of the 19th century they build community centres called the Danish name Kulturhus, embracing the school, the library, maybe the GP, the postoffice or other private actors in order to finance the building. They have tried, and in many places succeeded to create with the process of building the kulturhus to create a movement also involving people, them being more involved themselves in the development of their place, it being rural or urban. Some good examples in the east of the Netherlands are Borne, and Delden.

In more recent time Henk de Keizer worked with villages making in situ theatre in the Netherlands. In a very slow process gaining the confidence of the villages through working together with them listening to their needs and actually following much the same path as already described he has managed to create some wonderful theatre performances in the countryside, even being the example for Idom-Råstedt in using the hay-bales as part of the building of the theatre.

Henk de Keizer has done another thing. He has developed the concept of Rural routes with the Rural Forum as a focus point. At this Rural Forum (the last one taking place in Amsterdam) experts are coming together: farmers, scientists, sociologists etc to discuss on a meta level the situation and the possibilities of the development of the villages in the context of the ever growing and developing urbanisme.

We see that the same methodologies are used in an urban context.

In the context of Aarhus 2017 I present for you two projects that are quite similar but also different.

In the town of Odder, just south of Århus, artists are working with locals on an international project SAGN (meaning myth/legend) They engage with artists from different places in Europe with different disciplines (dance, music, film literature, opera) who go into a co-creation process with the inhabitants of the given place: in Denmark this is Odder, but as it is a European project also takes place in other European places. They want with the inhabitants to discover the story, the narrative of a given place in Odder. This will end up in a performance for the inhabitants, based on their stories.

Similarly is a project in the west of Denmark called Meetings: Meetings between artists from Denmark and Europe and the local people from different villages. Different performance and videartists are invited in residence for longer or shorter periods to be able to together with the inhabitants to get a new view of the narrative of this particular spot.

The interesting thing is that similar methodologies travel from town to village or from village to town and are used to create coherence and pride in a local society.

Another example is the Gjellerupparken project in Århus. Gjellerup being an area of the town with high houses from the 70es and with a population that has big social issues – even racial issues. Here Aarhus municipality is now using the same methodology as used in the villages with artists with architecture but taking the starting point in the wishes and needs of the people, creating ownership to the process and to the area, and the people living in Gjellerup are now creating a new social coherence by working with artists and culture in projects that they won, and that they care for.

I am not saying that the countryside came up with the methodologies, I think that these participative methodologies has been developped over the last many years maybe 20 or more, in a sort of interaction between project in the countryside and in urban areas.

What we see happening now is that – like in the Netherlands and in other places, especially where the density of population is very high, everything is seen as a urban development. Even the rural areas.
To be able to be complementary – the rural areas and the urban areas, I do think that this may be the best approach.

I also see the European Capital of culture working along the same lines. The case of Arhus 2017 is really to create a connection between the urban Aarhus and the rural Region respecting the different needs and the cultural differences but drawing on the experiences of culture to develop the complementarity.

In Leeuwarden 2018 the same is the case. They try to create a connection between the rural villages and Leeuwarden as the the big city with their projects.

And the methodology is participative creation, or co-creation. No-one ever dares today to impose a city culture in the rural area or vice versa. It develops along the needs of people, being in towns or in villages.

And the result we see – in very tiny measures we have to admit - young people actually start to settle again in the countryside, even though they work in the city.

My take is, we need the balance between the urban areas and the countryside – as human beings, as society. My take is also that this is a political decision. Do the politicians provide with the means for the countryside to be able to operate: infrastructure like transport, roads, internet are vital. If this is provided, the choice to live in the rural area may no be so difficult.

It is not about the life in the city is better or the life in the countryside is better, because both ways are good. It is about having a choice

Lone Leth Larsen
ECoC Aarhus 2017, International cultural adviser