... dressed for the future?

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...dressed for the Future?

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The picture of the Danish suburbs is visually strongly expressed in the housing areas of the 60s and beginning of the 70s, characterized as “modern fashion”. The international modern movement had significantly influenced the building sector from 1960 until the first oil-crisis in 1973. A typical low income house of the welfare society is the social block counting more than half a million dwellings in total – here illustrated by the Sydjyllandsplan, which counts 136.000 dwellings, designed as standardized blocks by the architects Alice and Børge Kjær. The spatial functionality was developed in collaboration with the new State Building Institute. The Sydjyllandsplan was primarily built in the different towns of Jutland, and the history of the development is in the following text used as a characteristic example of the changes of the welfare buildings of the modern movement.

The architectural heritages of the housing blocks of this period are clear and precise articulated. But the buildings are also weathered in a very poor manner. The material itself is concrete reinforced by iron, which surfaces due to time and weather, and as a result of an imprecise and thin covering layer of concrete, are demolished with frost damages and visible rusted reinforcement. The degree of insulation is very low and gives a poor indoor climate with cold bridges and cold indoor surfaces, humidity and mold – unhealthy to live in! The assembly of the panels gives noise problems between dwellings. But the plans of the dwellings are well organized, and the flexibility of the building system makes it possible to change the indoor functionality to nice and modern dwellings of today.

The WRAPPING methodology is a very effective technical solution to solve the obvious issues with the surfaces, the poor insulation and the indoor climate challenges. But to wrap these houses also demands a reflected attitude to the architectural heritage of our suburbs. These two points of view might occur as contradictions.

When le Corbusier described his future ideals in his five points of modernity, he included the potentials of the free façade: a wish to give the possibility for the façade to elaborate freely and with no boundaries, the transitions of the inside to the outside, even relate to and celebrate the view and the beautiful sight. These demands for the modern building resulted in Denmark in a structural system for the panels, where the entire loadbearing system is established indoor as either columns or as here in the Sydjyllandsplan as transvers walls perpendicular to the facades: in this case the whole facade is free to be renewed to a modern standard. The only obstacle is the responsibility to the architectural heritage: it is within this “design space” that the current architects have to find their answers to transformation.

Already in the 90s we saw the first renovation of the facades and glass covering of the balconies in order to cover the “diseases” of the poor building techniques: the cold bridges were not eliminated, but weakened by a thin layer of insulation on the facades and also by the glass cladding to the south or west balconies.
The style of the covering was often influenced by the postmodern movement expressed by decoration and bright colors, yellow, blue and green.

The picture of the current second generation of renovations is very broad and can briefly be characterized by the following three attitudes:

- repetition of the story of the panel house, showing the elements and the nudges - although it is obvious that the story is false!
- choosing a more safe and Danish solution of masonry, might even call the solution picturesque, in order to use long lasting materials with a very good weathering, but often with a very poor and cheap detailing.
- choosing the new industrial system delivery, airtightness, superinsulation and delivery and montage “just in time” from the production place; in that way expression show an honest and fully functional energy façade in lightweight materials. The construction is true to the new building technology and the wrapping terminology.

But whatever the architects do, one can still recognize the long lasting strong structure and the modern thinking behind the surface!

However the architectural discussion mentioned above will be continued: To future-proof the suburbs and ensure a sustainable transformation is one of the largest challenges and changes we will see within the architectural field for the coming years. And then it is up to a radical approach to ensure that the buildings do not need at third renovation within the next 20 years.