SUPPORT CHRISTIANIA

One of Europe's most exciting experiments in self build and non planning is about to be destroyed by the Danish government. Nick Wates reports.

There is no private land in Christiania. There are no planning regulations or building codes and if you want to build an extension to the dwelling you occupy, or even build a new one, you simply go ahead and do it. There are no landlords, estate managers or building societies to object, and the only form of control (apart from your own imagination, energy and resources) is a bi-weekly meeting of local inhabitants who may disapprove, but have no powers of enforcement or punishment. It would seem that the only two inviolate customs are that no cars are allowed and, more recently, that no new buildings should be built on the wooded shores of the river.

Christiania is an area of 22 hectares less than one kilometre from the centre of Copenhagen in Denmark. At the south-west end stand solidly built four to six storey military barracks and factories, and as one walks towards the north-west it becomes increasingly rural with small clusters of farm-like buildings and caravans surrounded by trees. A reed-lined river, crossed only by a wooden footbridge, traverses the site.

The military used the place as a camp and munitions factory from the middle of the nineteenth century until 1970 when they moved elsewhere and boarded the site up. It was to be handed over to the Ministry of Culture for educational and cultural institutions, but, being a prime site, the land value was high and the city authorities wanted it for housing, new roads, sports facilities and more lucrative uses.

While the authorities procrastinated a few hundred young people invaded the area in 1971 and took over the vacant buildings. And the Free Town of Christiania was declared.

Largest squat in Europe

In the ensuing years the population has grown to around 800 with many more during the summer months. It is the largest squat in Europe. Every kind of lifestyle can be found: hermit-like solitude in self-built huts, family living in small wooden houses and caravans, and collective communal living in converted factories and munitions stores.

Most people are in their late teens, 20s or early 30s, but there are a scattering of older people and some 100 children, many of whom were born there. They come from a variety of social backgrounds and include professionals as well as some 150 people who would normally be termed deviants: alcoholics, drug addicts, runaway children and so on. Many of them might otherwise be in social institutions or jails but in Christiania they are tolerated.

Tolerance

Indeed tolerance of the strange, the unusual and the provocative is one of the most striking

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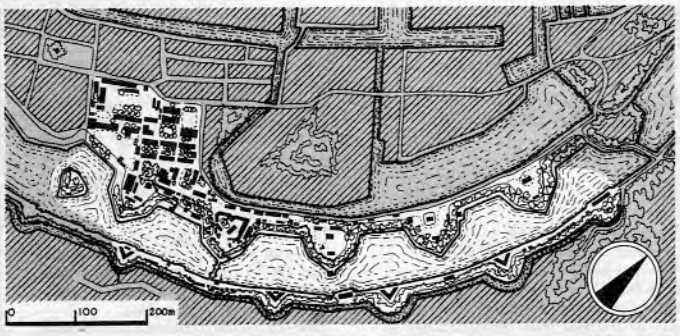
1 *Christiania from the west.*
2 *Murals are very popular.*
3, 4, 5 *One man who initially lived in a small caravan,* **3**, *spent last summer building (mostly in the nude) a pyramid house from discarded timber beams*
4, 5. *Nudity is considered natural when it is warm.*
6 *Many interesting forms of transport have developed with the banning of cars.*

Site plan. The old city ramparts border the river.



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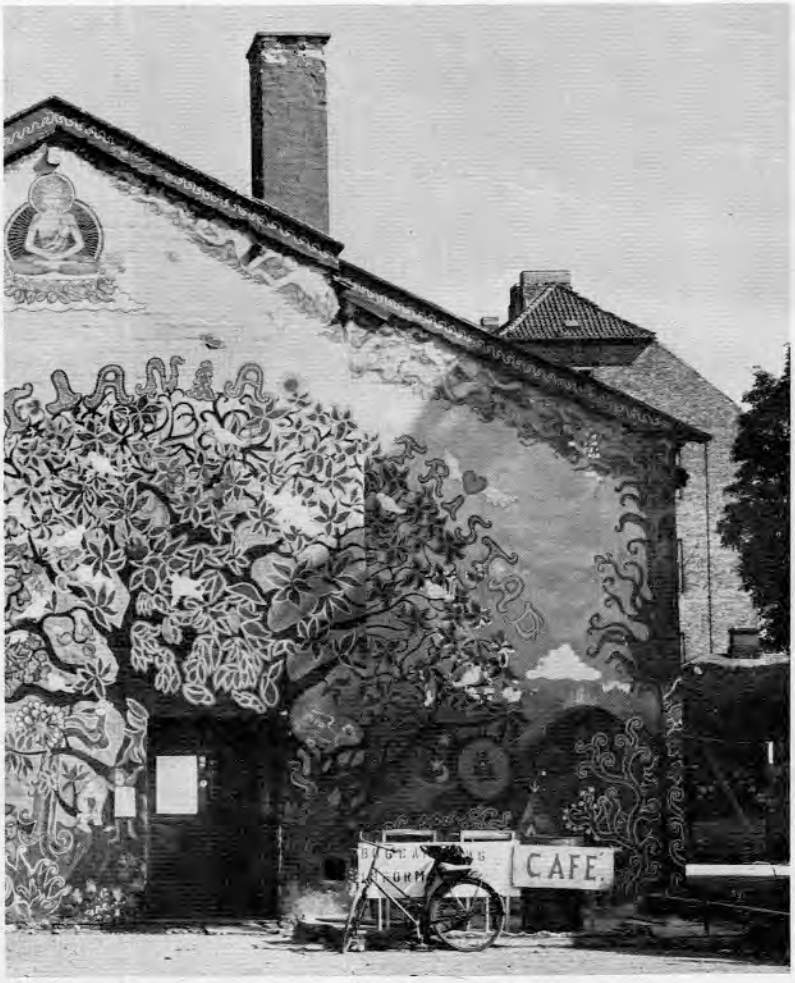

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characteristics of the place. Sociologists and psychologists put this down to the fact that people there are generally happy and contented.
People come to Christiania because they are not willing or able to adapt to the ordinary demands imposed by society, and find there a refuge where they can be accepted and function in a 'non-institutional fellowship' as some call it.
While some have moved from a hopeless social or personal situation, others come from a positive desire to develop alternative ways of living.
Instead of institutional rules, order and control, they want to create a society based on acceptance of everyone without asking about the past, upon non-intervention, low standards of material consumption, re-use of materials, bio-dynamic food and so on.
Some 100 people have full-time employment outside the area and a further 200 have part-time work outside. But the majority have created jobs for themselves inside the community.

The growth of a town
A variety of small enterprises have grown up: restaurants, bars, shops, bakeries and workshops making everything from boots to bicycles. Two of the larger buildings have been converted into a cinema and a theatre for over 1000 people.

'Christiania is a public demand for greater freedom to make one's own arrangements. The society outside is overadministered and about to deprive its members of the last remnant of self-determination.'

Drama, art and theatre groups flourish. The town has its own post office, kindergarten, yoga centre and health clinic which is devoted mainly to herbal and homeopathic medicine.
Many people now earn their living from selling crafts, trinkets and hashish to the increasing number of tourists who come to enjoy, or merely gawp at, the outlandish nature of the town. And yet most jobs are ill-defined with many people building and repairing their own houses, playing music, growing vegetables, helping out in the shops, restaurants and small enterprises, and a number of other things as well.

Open organisation
Christiania has a decentralised structure with 11 districts, each of which settles both problems and conflicts at fortnightly meetings. Open meetings of the whole community are also held fortnightly or more frequently in times of crisis. Various working groups exist to deal with particular aspects of community life like information, publicity, external negotiations, cleaning up, tree planting, health, fire protection, festival organisation. These groups are not accountable in the normal sense but are run by those interested, although people may receive (low) wages for the more menial tasks, out of the communal funds. All those who feel able pay 50 kr (£4·50) per month towards this fund, part of which goes to pay the authorities for electricity and other services. All profit making enterprises are expected to pay 10 per cent of their takings too.

Slums but luxurious
Measured in the traditional way living conditions are poor. Many people inhabit what would normally be considered slums. Water may have to be carried from communal taps and toilets are frequently in separate buildings. While some people have installed their own plumbing systems, many do not have hot water or baths.
To cope with this, a communal bath house with no segregation of the sexes has been constructed containing baths, showers, laundry and sauna.
Some of the outlying dwellings do not have electricity.
Heating is mainly by wood stoves, constructed in a welding workshop out of oil drums and old water tanks; each one is unique. Refuse collectors in the city bring all discarded timber to Christiania rather than taking it further out to the city dump. Glass wool insulation is practically free too since someone discovered where the manufacturers dump reject rolls, and many buildings have been thoroughly insulated.
So while lacking running hot water and central heating, the quality of life is luxurious in many ways. All the food is of the best quality. Your home is entirely what you've made it. You are surrounded by a rich social and cultural life. You choose your own work roles and for many people it is the first opportunity to be responsible for themselves. Still heavily dependent on outside society,

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7 *House constructed from boat hulls.*
8 *New concept in mobile living.*
9 *Hedges have been planted on what were formerly roads.*
10, 11 *Self build house on the river.*
12 *A decorated timber balcony.*
13 *Rural street scene.*
14 *Self build dome house.*
15 *A roof terrace built with discarded timber.*
16 *Communal living in the attic of a converted munitions factory.*

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the community cannot be said to be self-sufficient—yet it has moved further along the road of low consumption, anti-materialistic (and yet profoundly modern) lifestyle than anywhere else in Europe.
All this is only possible because of the scale of the place. Unlike the scattered and isolated bastions of the counter culture in this country, Christiania is big enough to contain most of the elements necessary to sustain life within it.

Anti-planning
From a physical planning point of view Christiania is a sort of spontaneously started anti-planning, totally based on the practice and ingenuity of users.

'What they are afraid of is that we are creating a better place than theirs.'

With many of society's social and physical restraints removed, individuals and groups are free to shape their spaces, buildings and furniture to suit their own needs. In purely visual terms the environment thus created might appear messy to the casual outside observer but it is infinitely more stimulating than a similar sized chunk of suburbia of the same density. Every house, room, table, stove is different because of the different requirements of its users and makers. People have been able to build windmills, a home-sized pyramid, a mini medieval castle as well as larger projects such as an opera house and an open-air amphitheatre.
Inside some people live in apparent squalor, while many interiors would not look out of place in *House and Garden*. The curious buildings, originally built for such different uses as gas mask factories and munitions depots, have been modified and decorated by their new inhabitants. Balconies, rooftop platforms and greenhouses have been added using timber from demolition sites. Other people have built complete houses from scratch.
There are no defined architects or other professionals, but people share the skills they have and learn others they need.
The absence of private land means that while the density is low (average of 40 persons per hectare) the apparent density is even lower as everyone is free to use virtually the whole 22 hectare site.
Different areas of Christiania have developed different characteristics and different atmospheres. There is a 'downtown' where a conglomeration of bars and small stalls gives the place the appearance of a wild west town where alcoholics and dope dealers line the street. There are small encampments of caravans which resemble gypsy settlements. There are rows of solid barracks with industries in the ground floors, and there are small rural settlements where it is hard to believe that the centre of Denmark's capital city is only one kilometre away. There is a quiet bathing area by the river, small patches of cultivation, a future forest where trees have been planted and a large 'lawn' where open air concerts are held.

Opposition
Inevitably the authorities have tried to crush Christiania because it is seen as a threat to the established order and traditional values.
When the initial occupation occurred in 1970 the Government considered it impracticable to evict the inhabitants immediately as there were no ready plans for the site. In exchange for a minimal sum per month per inhabitant, water closets and fire extinguishing materials were provided.
In 1973 it was agreed to allow the situation to continue as a 'social experiment' for three years. But the city authorities required that building conditions be brought up to standard and the Ministry of Defence, as legal owner, was asked to ensure that this be done. The Ministry of Defence calculated that this would cost 19 million kr (£1¾m) and, as this money was not forthcoming, first cut off water and electricity supplies and then tried to demolish a number of the buildings in the worst condition. Both moves were defeated by legal action.
When the agreement came to an end in 1976, the authorities decided to terminate Christiania but were met with tremendous opposition both from the Christianites themselves and from a wide section of the public.

'People have an interest in it because *they* built it.'

On the day that the agreement ended, 30 000 people demonstrated in the centre of the city. Faced with this, parliament retracted the rigid deadline and decided instead that the evacuation should 'proceed without unnecessary delay'.
The opposition comes both from the right wing on a law and order ticket and the communist party who consider it to be a slum. Opinion polls in 1976 showed that approximately half the population were in favour of it closing down. The unions have been rather reserved in putting forward any views but have refused to take part in a forced clearance of the site.
Supporters are found among liberals, social democrats, socialists and anarchists. Most supporters argue that Christiania is a valuable human and social experiment in alternative forms of living. Some, including the League of the Academy of Fine Arts, the Danish Architects' Association, and the Association of Town Planning, have defended continued existence on the grounds that it will secure the conservation of beautiful landscape and many buildings worthy of preservation. A cost benefit analysis published by the Danish Technical High School shows that even in economic terms it would be much cheaper to leave it as it is, and the authorities have still not produced a detailed alternative plan for the area.
Eviction has not been possible until now because the Christianites have appealed to the Supreme Court claiming that such an action would be illegal. A final decision is due in a few days time but nobody expects it to be in favour of Christiania. Its fate therefore lies in the political arena.
Despite the lack of a plan, right wing members of parliament are demanding that the Free Town be closed down immediately but the Government has not so far committed itself, no doubt daunted by the prospect of a virtual military operation against people who have substantial support throughout Denmark and abroad.
The Christianites continue to build, change and live in their town, determined to fight it out to the end. Some people are busy preparing for the municipal elections in March. A theatre group is performing a show on 'the eternal suppression of minorities' in the streets of the city, and another group dressed up as animals are 'moving round Copenhagen cleaning up and removing pollution sources. It is the animals of Noah's ark trying to tell their human colleagues how bad life conditions are.'
In the event of a physical eviction attempt, church bells will be rung all over the city, flare rockets will be launched, traffic will be disrupted, pirate radio stations will intervene on local broadcasting stations, and thousands of people will converge on the site in non-violent protest.
Messages of support to: Support Christiania, Dronningensgade 14, DK 1420, Copenhagen.