

Photo essay



‘We are like butterflies’: Children’s lived experiences of evictability and (un)homing

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Issue: Evictability- Displacement as a systemic condition and an everyday lived experience

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This photo essay highlights the perspectives of children in Mjølnerparken, a public housing neighbourhood targeted by interventions for social mix by the Danish state. Due to the ‘ghetto legislation’ of 2018, 60 percent of the residents will be relocated as their apartments are renovated and sold to a private investor. Drawing on the concepts of evictability (van Baar 2016), homing (Boccagni & Kusenbach 2020), and un-homing (Atkinson 2015), this essay illustrates how children use their neighbourhood and how their everyday life is affected by renovation and sale.

The photos in this photo essay are taken by five children, aged between 8–14, who are residents of Mjølnerparken^[1]. The photos were taken as part of a summer activity arranged in cooperation with the resident-elected local board in 2022. The children were given disposable cameras and were encouraged to take photos or make drawings of places that mattered to them in their everyday life; places they liked, often used, or felt at home in. The photos were used to start a conversation about how the children perceived their neighbourhood, which is undergoing extensive renovation and sale. In this essay, the photos are accompanied by quotes in which the children describe why and how the places in their photos matter to them^[2].

Mjølnerparken is a multi-ethnic public housing neighbourhood that was built in the 1980’s and is located in Nørrebro, a district in the Danish capital of Copenhagen. It consists of four red brick housing blocks with 560 apartments. Each housing block has a yard with a playground and a walking path that connects the four yards. Next to Mjølnerparken is a large public park, Mimersparken, that has green spaces, benches, football grounds, and a playground with educational staff.

On 1 March 2018, the common house in Mjølnerparken was used by the Danish liberal-conservative government for launching their new ‘ghetto’-policy called ‘One Denmark without parallel societies – no ghettos in 2030’ (*Ét Danmark uden parallelsamfund – ingen ghettoer i 2030*). The aim of this policy was to create a more ‘mixed resident composition’ and thereby improve ‘safety’ and ‘integration’ (Regeringen 2018). The policy led to parliamentary approval of a set of special laws; the so called ‘ghetto legislation’ (*ghettoloven*). This was the culmination of three decades of policy problematisation of public housing neighbourhoods and their residents, which has increasingly been targeting multi-ethnic neighbourhoods and problematising ‘non-western immigrants’ (Jensen & Söderberg 2022). ‘Ghetto’ policies have produced a generic ‘ghetto place’, resulted in state-led territorial stigmatisation, and generated spatialisation that legitimises extraordinary measures for social mix, such as demolition, forced relocation, and privatisation of public housing (Olsen & Larsen 2022).

According to the ‘ghetto legislation’ of 2018, the housing organisation is responsible for reducing the share of public housing family units in Mjølnerparken to 40 percent of the existing housing stock by the year 2030. Without first consulting residents, the housing organisation decided to sell 60 percent of the apartments – the two housing blocks in the middle – to a private investor, and to relocate current residents. Furthermore, the neighbourhood is undergoing extensive renovation and architectural changes with construction work being undertaken in all four yards simultaneously. As a result,

residents face temporary or permanent relocation.

Hence, residents in Mjølnerparken live under a condition of evictability, defined as, ‘the possibility of being removed from a sheltering place’ (van Baar 2016). With this concept, van Baar (2016) highlights how de-territorialised bordering practices affect not only migrants, but also minoritised and low-income groups within European nation-states. Securitisation, racialisation, and neoliberalisation produce a condition of evictability for those who are seen as a threat to security and prosperity. In Denmark, ‘ghetto’ policies target ‘non-western immigrants’ and low-income households, who are depicted as a societal threat and are deprived of their right to their homes. Yet, as Atkinson (2015) stresses, a person can experience displacement without having moved a metre. The notion of un-homing includes physical and psychological displacement (Elliott-Cooper et al. 2020), occurring when a material and social transformation of a neighbourhood deprives people of their sense of home and belonging.

This photo essay illustrates how home-places stretch beyond the apartment. The children’s photos and descriptions indicate that their home includes the four yards of Mjølnerparken, as well as the nearby playground in Mimersparken. Thus, children are subjected to the violence of un-homing due to the renovation and sale. They are deprived of their home-place, not only through relocation, but also before moving out (Söderberg, forthcoming). The children’s photos and quotes reveal how their favourite places are either removed or made (too) difficult to access due to the renovation and architectural transformation of the neighbourhood. The photos of fences and construction sites illustrate how children’s everyday lives are affected by renovations. Their everyday routes and routines; the everyday acts through which we make a place our home, are disturbed (Boccagni & Kusenbach 2020). Furthermore, the pictures of places where they feel at home and quotes about how they – and their friends – will have to move out, show children’s experiences of living under a condition of evictability. However, they also demonstrate the children’s resilience and their acts of homing. They highlight how children decorate fences around construction sites, plant and care for herbs and maintain their everyday life in the midst of intrusive construction work and ongoing relocations. This photo essay thereby illustrates children’s lived experiences of evictability, homing and un-homing.



Figure 1- Climbing frame designed as a spider in yard 3, Mjølnerparken. In the background, there are bicycles and fences around construction sites. Malika^[3], a 13 year old girl said: “There used to be a large slide, and it was a spider, but they have removed it, and there was just this small one, so I thought it reminded a bit [of the slide]. [...] We used to play crocodile there.”

Parveen, an 11 year old girl said: “There was a large spider slide, it was the best!”

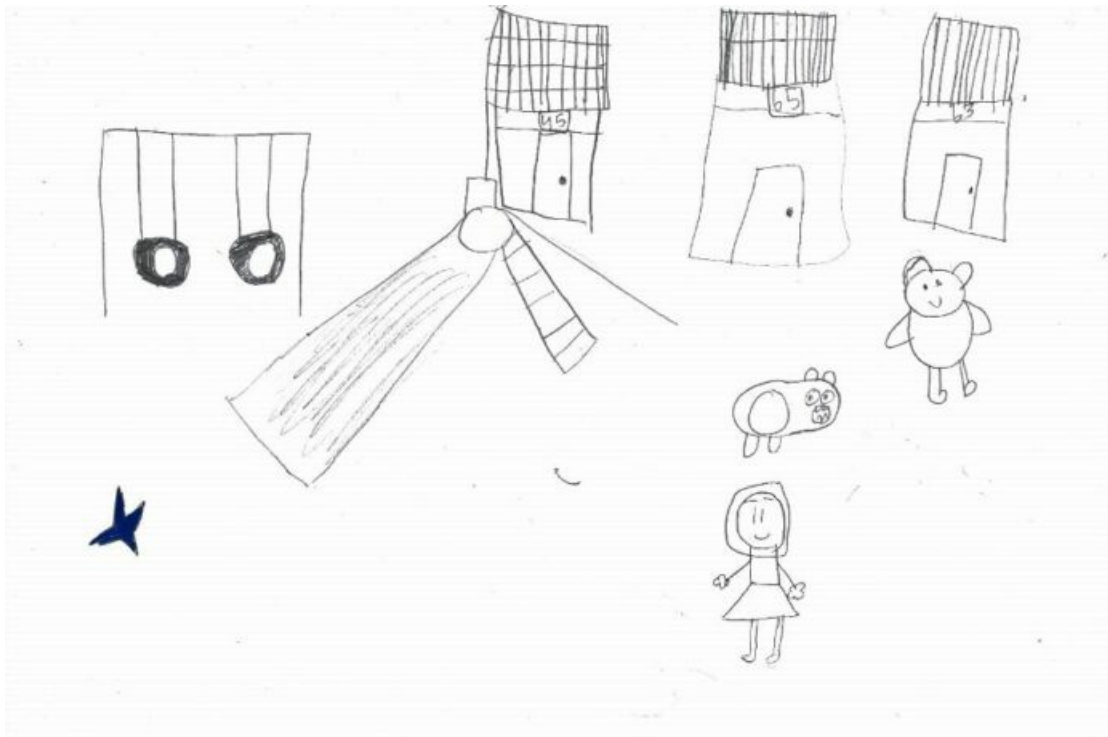


Figure 2- A drawing of the playground and entrances in yard 3, Mjølnerparken. Farah, an 11 year old girl who made the drawing said: “This is our slide that we used to have, but it broke. [...] And the swing and me. [...] I live here and my friend lives here. [...] Actually, she

lives very close by. [...] Many people will move out soon. My friend, or my two friends, they will move to the 4th yard.”



Figure 3- Climbing frame designed as a ship, surrounded by fences in yard 2, Mjølnerparken. Malika said: “On this ship, which is connected to the slide, we sometimes imagined that we were neighbours. You could divide it because there was this line, or pole right there, so we divided it and there was this blue something, which we pretended was a pool. [...] I don’t use this anymore. I can’t use it, because of the fence.”



Figure 4- Kitchen table with some plates and jars. Parveen said: “This is our kitchen. [...] I love to eat food.”

Tahira, a 14 year old girl said: "I think the kitchen is always family-friendly, there are a lot of good memories there. You can just sit and talk to your mother while she cooks and play with your little sister."



Figure 5- Piles of construction material between the entrances and the playground in yard 2, Mjølnerparken. Malika said: "There used to be a bench there, and me and my friends, we loved that bench, because it was in the shadow side. [...] I am not in Mjølnerparken that much anymore [...] because they have removed almost all the benches [...] and it is very difficult to get around, so you just want to go away. That's easiest."



Figure 6- View over a construction site between two yards in Mjølnerparken. Rabia, an 8

year old girl said: “It’s the whole space. I took it from the balcony.” Tahira said: “All of this was the football ground.”



Figure 7- The playground in Mimersparken, with climbing frames, a swing, a slide, a sandbox and a raised bed with flowers. In the background, there is a crane on the other side of a temporary wooden fence. Rabia said: “I like being in Mimers! And in 4th yard and 2nd yard.”

Parveen said: “Because we almost always go there and play. [...] Sometimes we make necklaces and bracelets out of pearls, sometimes we make bead plates and different things, sometimes we play outdoors and sometimes there are activities.”



Figure 8- Building where the educational staff at the playground in Mimersparken provide indoor activities for children. Tahira said: “We’ve always been there, every day, since we were small kids, and have a lot of good memories there. [...] We won’t always live here, and I wanted a picture, so I won’t forget what it looks like. [...] I mean, Mimersparken, it has just been our home for the most of our lives. [...] The only things we don’t do there is to sleep, go to school and do our homework. Sometimes we also do our homework there. Because it is really nice to be there, there are a lot of people and it is very cosy, we always laugh, the atmosphere is really nice, to just be there.”



Figure 9- Raised bed with flowers in Mimersparken. Farah said: “I think these were very beautiful, these plants.”

Tahira said: “The residents here and the educational staff there, we have planted tomatoes, onion, mint, apples, parsley, oregano and many herbs, so when we cook, we can pick from our plants and put them in our food. [...] We take good care of them, but it is difficult sometimes. We are not always there, and the educational staff don’t work 24 hours a day, so sometimes, some people come and pick it without permission, and step on it.”



Figure 10- Graffiti on a temporary wooden fence around a construction site in Mimersparken. Farah said: "This is some graffiti we have made, where it says: 'We are all top nice'. [...] Because it looked very dull, and then it is nice to do something with it."



Figure 11- Picture of a broken hand net and a butterfly at the facade of a building in Mjølnerparken. Tahira said: "This is a photo of the picture here on the building. When we were younger, it was very fascinating that there was a small butterfly and a hole in the net. When I was younger, I never understood the meaning of it, but as you get older, you go through many things, so you understand the meaning a bit. [...] I think that butterflies, they are very difficult to catch. So, I'm thinking, there is nothing in this world you cannot do. No one can stop you from what you want, and we are like butterflies in a way. And the

broken net is just that when you are in there, you will see that you cannot get out, but one day you will find that you are far away from where you were and from where you were stuck.”

NOTES:

^[1] Photos are reproduced with the permission of the photographers. Informed consent was obtained from children and their parents.

^[2] All quotes have been translated from Danish to English by the author.

^[3] I use pseudonyms in order to ensure the research participants’ anonymity.

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Rebecka Söderberg is a PhD student in IMER at Malmö University. She holds a MA degree in European Ethnology from the University of Copenhagen. Her doctoral thesis explores how urban diverse neighbourhoods are problematised in Danish and Swedish urban and integration policies. Furthermore, based on ethnographic fieldwork, it explores how residents in a multi-ethnic public housing neighbourhood in Copenhagen, Denmark, experience their neighbourhood and interventions for social mix, which are taking place as a result of the 'ghetto legislation'. Combining perspectives from critical migration studies and critical urban studies, the thesis highlights social and spatial injustices and mechanisms of exclusion.