



PhD. review of Anne Hedegaard Winther: Urban Compact Living - Making Home in the City

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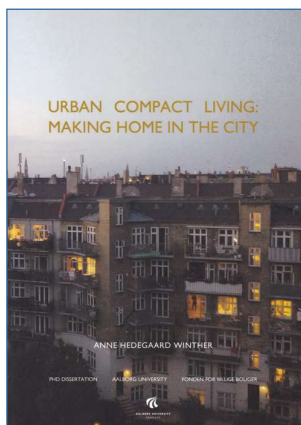
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PHD REVIEW: URBAN COMPACT LIVING: MAKING HOME IN THE CITY BY ANNE HEDEGAARD WINTHER (PHD STUDENT AALBORG UNIVERSITY)

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The recently defended dissertation at Aalborg University by Anne Hedegaard Winther, *Urban Compact Living: Making Home in the City*, explores the choice of living compactly in the city. The thesis is set within the context of an international trend of downsizing physical belongings and ideals of anti-consumption, voluntary simplicity and awareness of the need for a more sustainable lifestyle, evident from the emergence of people living in small dwellings around the world, in rural environments as well as in urbanized areas. These small dwellings are referred to as micro-housing, tiny living or small living.

The author, sociologist Anne Hedegaard Winther makes use of the key term *compact living*, referring to the phenomenon of middle-class households living within high-density, urban environments in much less space than is the convention for the type and size of households. The aim of the dissertation is to explore why middle-class households choose to live compactly in the city, and puts forth the following formulation of the research question to be addressed: *What is the motivation behind choosing compact living in the city, and how is urban compact living practiced and experienced?* The thesis comprises 236 pages and consists of nine chapters; introduction, theoretical framework, methodology, cases, initial analytical findings, three thematic papers and a concluding chapter. The main part of the thesis consists of the three

thematic papers in different stages of review and publication. The first paper, “Choosing urban compact living. A case study of an unconventional housing choice of families in contemporary Denmark” by Hedegaard Winther, was resubmitted and has been accepted by the *Journal for Housing and the Built Environment*. The second paper, “Entangled adversaries? Understanding the city through perceptions of suburbia” by Hedegaard Winther and Bech-Danielsen, is submitted and accepted by the *Nordic Journal of Architectural Research*. The third paper, “Making decent homes in compact living. Exploring ideals of the home in urban Danish compact living” by Hedegaard Winther, was submitted to an anthology in 2020, and accepted in 2021.

The dissertation focuses on cases in the two biggest cities in Denmark, Copenhagen and Aarhus, as well as one case study in a rural setting. These cases differ from a general trend of expansion of domestic living space where small living spaces are typically associated with marginal and vulnerable groups such as students or the elderly. Considered as a distinctive, singular case study, the presented research and resulting findings demonstrate the wide diversity of residential behavioural patterns and home making lifestyles in contemporary societies. The research provides valuable insights as to how market forces condition residents’ proactive and creative responses, adaptations, and appropriations towards existing residential, material structures. The thesis builds upon a situational analysis of six households’ motivations for the voluntary choice of substandard, reduced residential spatial consumption. The urban cases reflect the residents’ desire for qualities of everyday urban life; of being part of a diverse and lively place with rich opportunities in and beyond the intermediate residential space of the apartment. The rural case rather demonstrates a desire for being close to nature and experiencing freedom by limiting physical possessions in response to over-consumption.

A creative mix of cross-disciplinary methods

The dissertation consists of a unique and creative mixed-methods study that transcends social science and aesthetic disciplines by combining ethnographic methods and methods from architecture and design. Concretely, the dissertation is based on a rich selection of empirical material consisting of case studies that establishes the field. These are not only restricted to physical environmental arrangements in the apartment, but also include social or cultural dimensions as well as identification of common everyday household practices, or *choreographies*, induced by the physical limitations of the dwellings. Studying people in their homes using participant observation poses a methodological challenge but is approached in the construction of elaborate case studies with several kinds of components. These range from (1) photos taken by the interlocutors of their residents and neighbourhoods; (2) 7-day logbooks for interlocutors’ registration of activities, persons and places in their

homes; (3) interlocutors' own registrations of activities and movements in their neighbourhoods; (4) interviews based on interview guides combined with home visits to interlocutors; to (5) the researcher's own drawings and registrations of her interlocutors' homes used as an analytical device.

The conducted deep, semi-structured interviews are specifically focused on revealing the motives, desires and narratives related to the unusual housing choices made. Oral interchanges with residents are underpinned by figurative, empirical, spatial evidence such as plan layouts and sections of apartments, including positions of furniture and significant objects of profound affection, all collected and registered in unusual detail. The combination of methodologies from two research fields – architectural design research vis-à-vis social and cultural sciences – are employed as an attempt to consciously involve and to mix perspectives of inter-disciplinarity or cross-disciplinarity in elaborating research enquiries. The design and use of methods are both elaborate, innovative and impressive, allowing for analysis and shift in perspectives between residents, their practices in the physical environment and inside the dwellings, including the immediate, surrounding neighbourhood context and far beyond.

The number of enquiries effectuated and material collected during three years' work in total is impressive, as is the use of a cross-disciplinary approach of ethnographic methods as well as *figurative* methods from research on architecture and design, such as plans, drawings, maps and diagrams. Anne Hedegaard Winther uses this methodological approach in very fruitful and creative ways, contributing with a novel and interesting mixed methodological approach in which social scientific and aesthetic disciplines are transcended.

While the methodological framework is carefully designed to meet the challenges of studying people *in* their homes and *about* their relationships to their homes, the written dissertation could have reflected more on the question of how to do an ethnographic study of "home." Still, the thesis offers a valid and inspiring presentation on relevant, theoretical research orientations around the notion of *home*, considered as a dynamic object and a self-projection constantly re-examined and reinterpreted by residents.

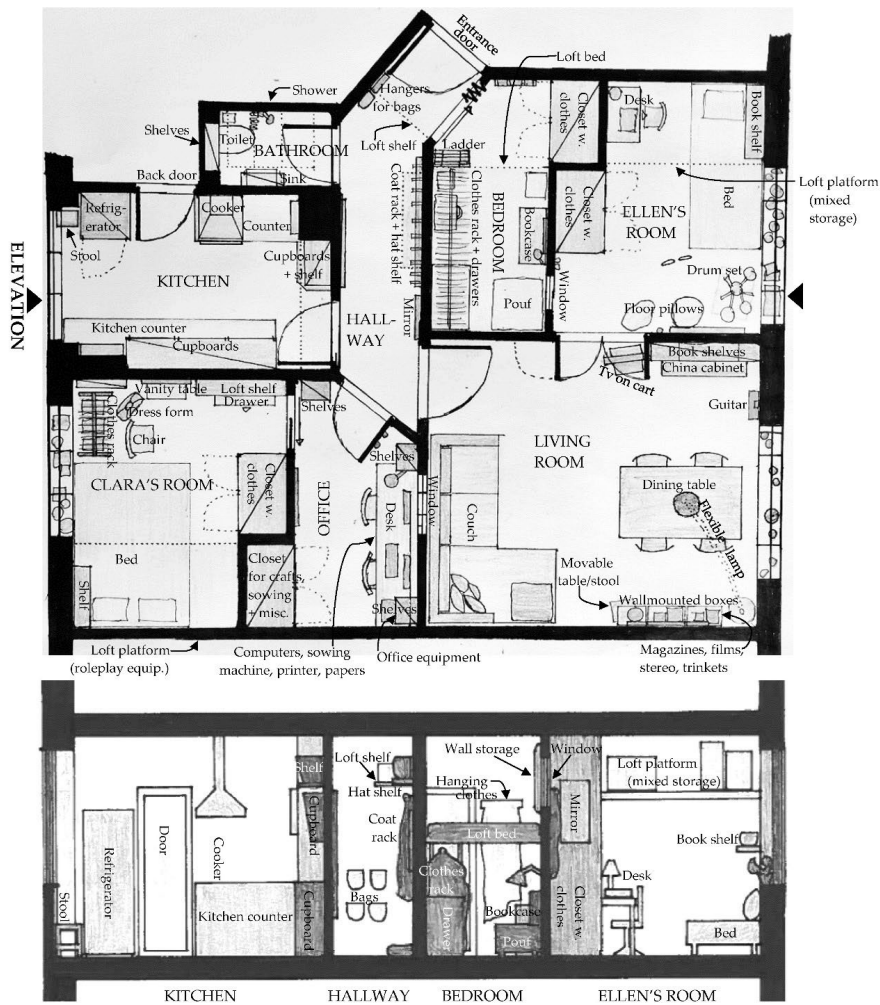
Theoretical framework

The given notions of urban "compact living" and "home" or "home making" constitute the two major, key theoretical, conceptual foci. This double-folded approach has oriented the chosen avenues of analytical assessment to open for ultimate critical interpretations. In the theoretical framework, Anne Hedegaard Winther points to the increasingly mixed

and complex dimensions of housing choices, and thus argues for an in-depth exploration of the contextually embedded and mutually influential dimensions at play in choosing urban compact living. She thus investigates motivations behind *residents' housing choices*, accounts for the *concept of home* and its various social, cultural, psychological, economic, political, aesthetic and atmospheric layers of meaning, as well as both physical and social dimensions related to the concept of *spaciousness*.

Spaciousness is furthermore an essential, complementary key concept of the dissertation, revolving around ideas and ideals of decency and normalcy important to compact living, in full awareness of contrasting and dominating conventional spatial ideals of the home. The discussion with residents on preserving or upholding proper *decency* and *normalcy*, in contrast to conventional prevalent spatial ideals of the home is striking, with a final conclusive, critical interpretation, which should inspire future research initiatives.

The urban cases of the thesis reveal and underline the general attraction to the city, and the residents' strong sense and desire to be part of city life as a driver for and motivation behind compact city living. In this regard, the perceptions and cultural representations of city and suburbia are paramount. The city dwellers form a narrative based on the city as spacious, diverse and liberating, whereas suburbia is imagined as claustrophobic, uniform and confined by social control. Although such narratives and imageries of opposites and identity through difference are generally attributed to residential choices, the dissertation contributes to the complex understanding of housing and residential choices as constructed in relation to other contexts. The residents attach values and attitudes towards their neighbourhoods, and prioritize area-related qualities over home-related qualities to such an extent that this outweighs the apparent physical inconveniences of overcrowded domestic compactness. In that way, the author contributes with a perspective on social spaciousness as an attractive, core characteristic of life in the city, and how living in the city is predominant in peoples' imagination and perception of what constitutes *a home* (See Figure 6).



New knowledge on the development of inexpensive housing?

The dissertation is an Industrial PhD financed by Fonden for Billige Boliger (*Foundation for Inexpensive Housing*), and the research has received considerable interest from professional developers. The setup of the research project implies that it aims to develop knowledge that may be applied to new solutions of inexpensive housing. However, the key focus on the concept of *compact living* appears to be taken too much for granted as introduced in the research design. No critical aspects are added nor are there any historical accounts of where and when it was introduced in business, among professional architects or in academia. This is a term that can be used to legitimize the selling of low-quality housing in relation to acknowledged standards of proper welfare spaciousness and apartment configurations in a deceitful and fashionable way. Or, as it has been largely used to promote a special branch of compatible furniture, like in the case of IKEA. This raises significant, moral is-

Figure 6
Plan and cross-section of dwelling in
Case #1.

ILLUSTRATION BY AUTHOR

sues concerning equal, social distribution of residential space, the right for all citizens to access desirable living and the simultaneity of different enriching life experiences, without having to compromise on the size of living spaces. Nevertheless, it will be interesting to see how the results of Anne Hedegaard Winther's work can be applied in designing and building future compact living, for example, how the insights about the concept of spaciousness is not only physical but also mental and emotional.

In conclusion, Anne Hedegaard Winther provides a significant cross-disciplinary contribution to the scientific communities of sociology and architectural residential design with interesting insights to different attributes of space and spaciousness. The main qualities of the dissertation, considered as a valid act of scientific exploration and discovery, are found in the impressively rich, empirical material resulting from the application of a mixed-methods approach that transcends social scientific and aesthetic figurative disciplines, along with the revelation and scrutiny of a residential phenomenon of predominantly self-imposed, reduced spatial consumption.