Public Spaces in Copenhagen

A guide to the public spaces in Copenhagen...
The City

Copenhagen is Denmark’s capital with a population of 1.8 million in the Greater Copenhagen region. The city was founded around 1100 and gradually grew from a small fishing village protected by a castle to a lively trading port. The name Copenhagen means “merchants’ harbour.”

In terms of structure, Copenhagen is a typical European city, which grew within shifting fortifications surrounding its harbour. Large segments of the moats and ramparts of the 1600s and 1700s are still intact and serve as some of the city’s parks. Although major fires in the 18th century erased almost all traces of the buildings of the Middle Ages, the inner city, which comprises about 1 x 1 kilometres, has largely maintained its medieval street pattern.

The buildings in the inner city are primarily four- to five-storey buildings with relatively short facades, which give the streets of the city an interesting and varied rhythm. Although shifting periods left their mark on the buildings, large areas have maintained the simple neo-classic style that dominated the beginning of the 1800s, where most of the buildings were erected.

Many of the buildings in inner Copenhagen still have shops on the ground floor, offices in the middle storeys and residences in the top storeys. A total of 6,800 people live in the inner city, which is a relatively high number by European standards. The city core also contains many offices as well as cultural institutions, large segments of the university, and other institutions of higher learning with a total of 14,000 students. Thus given its scale and versatility, the city core has many of the basic elements needed to develop a good urban environment.

A pedestrian network
After the Second World War more and more streets and squares of the city centre were used intensively for car traffic and parking.

Pedestrianisation began with the city’s main street, Strøget, which was converted in 1962 as an experiment. The conversion of the 1.1-kilometre Copenhagen main street into a pedestrian street gave rise to much public debate “No cars means no customers and no customers means no business,” said tradesmen. Other voices claimed “we are Danes, not Italians”, “there is no tradition for outdoor public life in Scandinavia.”

However, in no time at all, Strøget proved to be a huge success as a pedestrian street, in both popular and commercial terms. More conversions of streets and squares followed in subsequent years. Gradually a cohesive network of pedestrian streets was developed, offering a truly coherent network for people on foot. It is easy to walk around in Copenhagen from one end of the city to the other, and today foot traffic represents about 80% of the movements in the inner city.

Removal of parking
Starting in 1962, parking has been removed from a total of 18 squares to give space to more city life as a consequence of the improvements. Today the city has about 3,000 parking spaces, two-thirds of them at kerbside in the streets. In fact, the city operates just fine with far fewer parking spaces in the city centre than in the other Scandinavian capitals. Stockholm has 8,000 parking spaces in the city centre and Oslo has 4,800.

The gradual expansion of the system of car-free and almost car-free spaces in the city has had three obvious advantages.

City residents have had time to develop a completely new city culture, to discover and develop new opportunities.
First pedestrian promenade in 1962: 15,800 m².

By 1973, the network of pedestrian streets connected the most important locations in the city centre: 49,200 m².

The network of car-free streets and squares in 2005: 99,770 m².

From 1962 and onwards, streets and squares were converted to pedestrian areas, which give attractive conditions for walking and recreation.

Correspondingly, car owners have had time to get accustomed to the idea that it has become more difficult to drive to and park in the city centre, but much easier to bicycle or use public transport. Thus people have had time to change their traffic habits and patterns.

Public space policy
– many small steps toward a better city

Finally it has become easier for the city’s politicians to take the many small step-wise decisions on the basis of previously successful measures. These many small decisions have led to an unusually attractive city centre, a relatively modest number of cars, and a profusion of public life quite extraordinary by Scandinavian standards.

All in all a development that must be attributed to a strategy of many small steps.
Copenhagen as bicycle city
Over the years, gradual investments have been made in bicycle infrastructure. The investments have paid off in an increase in the number of bicyclists as shown on the graphs. Since the 1970’s these curves have gone up steadily.

New initiatives are to maintain and improve the numbers. Green bikeways are established these years - for bicycles only and in a green environment throughout the city. Green waves are established on main bicycle routes with traffic lights timed in favor of bicyclists going an average 20 km per hour.

The success of the bicycles create new challenges such as increased congestion on the bicycle paths. This is addressed these years by widening lanes and tracks, which also makes more space for cargo bikes. Cargo bikes are owned by 6% of all Copenhagen households in 2008 and are used for transporting goods and children. 25% of all families in Copenhagen with two children own a cargo bike. (Copenhagen Bicycle Account 2008).

The goal of the city of Copenhagen is that in the year 2015, 50% will bike to and from work or school.

Projects in the inner city and surrounding residential areas
The City Architect of Copenhagen has described the architectural concept underlying the design of the public spaces in the core of the city as “pearls on a string”. The individual squares along the city’s main streets have their own design and are connected by simple surfacing of the streets between them.

In more recent years, work has been ongoing to renovate the squares and streets in a number of the adjacent residential areas.

From shopping streets to public forum
Almost all cities have systematic methods of gathering data and information about car traffic. However, it is extremely rare for cities to gather data on the development of pedestrian traffic and public life. Copenhagen occupies a special position in this area. Since 1968, researchers from the Centre for Public Space Research at the School of Architecture in Copenhagen have regularly recorded how public space is utilised and what changes and developments have occurred with respect to life in public spaces. A number

37% bike to and from work or school (City of Copenhagen, Bicycle Account 2008). 70% continue in the winter time.
of comprehensive studies of urban life throughout central Copenhagen in 1968, 1986, 1995 and 2005, supplemented with many smaller studies of individual locations, have made it possible to follow the development of urban life in step with the many improvements made since 1962. These findings have been documented in the books “Public Spaces - Public Life, Copenhagen 1996” and New City Life (2006).

The city-wide surveys shows that over time, there has been heavy growth especially in the recreational activities of the city.

Pedestrian activities have been notably constant since the heavy growth that occurred immediately after the main streets were converted to walking streets in the 1960s. What has changed dramatically is the extent of non-walking activities.

In the almost 40 years in which the development of public life has been followed, the number of people who engage in recreational activities on the streets and squares of the city centre on a summer day has increased by 3.5 times. In this connection it is interesting to note that the extent of the city’s car-free area has also increased 3.5 times from 1968 to the corresponding study in 1995. Every time the city has expanded the pedestrian area by 14 square metres, another Copenhagener has turned up and set himself down to enjoy what the city has to offer.

A walking tour through central Copenhagen on a summer day shows a level and variety of activity and that was simply unthinkable 30 or 40 years ago. A new city culture has risen from the new city spaces, disproving the sceptics who said that Danes would never use public space.

As Copenhageners have come to enjoy life in city spaces, the outdoor season has been extended and now stretches almost all year. The gradual transformation of the city centre from car culture to pedestrian culture has made possible a gradual development of city life and city culture. Copenhageners have grown accustomed to the new possibilities and have had the time and the opportunity to develop the versatile public life that is now characteristic of Copenhagen.

Municipal boundary. Peak-hour traffic towards the city centre in the peak hour. Cycle traffic in and out of the city centre has almost doubled since the 1970s.

Number of café chairs throughout the inner city study area 1986-2005

The number of café chairs rose by 61% from 1986-1995. The number increased by another 47% from 1995-2005.

Right: Green bicycle lane. 2,500 city bikes were introduced in 2004 and can be borrowed for a small deposit.
The walking tour

*This selection of inner city squares can give an idea of the different characteristics of the squares in inner Copenhagen and a sense for the coherence of the city’s pedestrian network.*

1. Square ‘Axeltorv’
2. Town Hall square ‘Rådhuspladsen’
3. Main pedestrian street ‘Strøget’
4. Two squares ‘Nytørv’ & ‘Gammeltorv’
5. Square ‘Gråbrødre Torv’
6. Square ‘Amagertorv’
7. Pedestrian street ‘Strædet’
8. Square ‘Gammel Strand’
9. Square ‘Bertel Thorvaldsens Plads’
10. Square / military training ‘Christiansborg Ridebane’
11. Square ‘Christiansborg Slotsplads’
12. Square / garden ‘Bibliotekshaven’
13. Square ‘Søren Kierkegaards Plads’
14. Square ‘Kongens Nytorv’
15. Recreational street ‘Nyhavn’
16. Square ‘Amalienborg Slotsplads’
AXEL SQUARE

2 Axeltorv / 1991

ARCHITECT: MOGENS BREYEN
ARTIST: MOGENS MØLLER

Axeltorv is part of a pedestrian axis that connects Tivoli Gardens with several other recreational options northwest of Copenhagen’s famous amusement park.

The square is based on very few but precisely articulated materials and furnishing elements, with emphasis on artistic decoration using the sun and planets as its theme. Although the square is an open public space, the owners of the surrounding buildings paid for renovation.

The square has been designed with a character of simplicity. The large precisely laid stone floor dominates as it promenades between the buildings lining two sides of the square. The stone floor is made of blocks of light grey Bornholm granite, supplemented by darker granite bands and chaussé stone along the facades. The stone floor slopes slightly towards the northeast. The solar system is the decorative motif, with the sun represented by the large circular reflecting pool of dark granite inlaid with a golden stone mosaic. The nine planets in the solar system are symbolised by nine bronze vases lined in a row on a darker band along the west side of the square. The vases are decorated with symbols related to the planets, and the distance between them represents the distances between the planets in the solar system. There are nozzles in the tops of the nine vases that emit steam and flames occasionally, adding a dynamic dimension to the square.
COPENHAGEN CITY HALL SQUARE

At the end of the nineteenth century, Copenhagen’s population grew so dramatically that the city felt this should be expressed by a new city hall. Nyrop proposal was chosen through a competition, marking both a renewal of Danish architecture and a manifestation of his personal design idiom.

The building complex is formed as a city block with two courtyards. The one nearest the city hall square has a glass roof. Surrounding the spacious city hall main room lie the ceremonial functions such as the assembly hall, the city council meeting hall and the wedding chamber. The offices lie around the open courtyard and next to the imposing, panoptic hall near the rear southeast entrance.

A square for both big and intimate events.
STØGET, WALKING STREETS AND SIDE STREETS

The area was designated as a pedestrian street in the early sixties, and squares at Magasin Torv, Nikolaj Church and Gråbrødre Torv were the first squares to be renovated. In the 1990’s, the neighboring parallel Kompagnistræde street was designated as a “pedestrian priority street”, and Vimmelskaftet, Amagertorv, Gammel Torv and Nytorv, Højbro Plads and Rådhuspladsen were renovated.

The square, Amagertorv, is well defined by the surrounding, fine buildings, and has an interesting fixed point, the “Stork Fountain”. On Amagertorv, sculptor Bjørn Nørgaard created a new paving with an exuberant pattern of granite pentagons in five different colours: rose, yellow, black and two shades of grey.

Bjørn Nørgaard was inspired by the early Christian, Coptic patterns that reminded him of Danish village churches. He was fascinated by “this tradition that had wandered from the world’s first Christian lands, from hand to hand and eye to eye, up through Europe to Denmark where it has bloomed since the twelfth century”.

5 Gammeltorv & Nytorv / 1991 - 92

ARCHITECT: STADSARKITEKTENS DIREKTORAT, WITH ARCHITECTS SANNE MAJ ANDERSEN AND LEIF DUPONT LAURSEN

Gammeltorv/Nytorv is an example of the subtle renovation of an urban space in which buildings play the leading role and surfaces provide unity. The history of the square is told in the details of the pavement.

Gammeltorv is Copenhagen’s oldest square, and served as the town hall square from about the year 1479 until 1905. With the increase of car traffic after the Second World War, Gammel-torv/Nytorv was used for parking. However, in 1962 the space near the fountain at the old end of the square was incorporated into part of the pedestrian area when the city’s main artery, Strøget, was pedestrianised.

The starting point for the redesign of the squares was to create a quiet background for the buildings, so that the space would stand out clearly. The chaussé stone floor unites the space across the terrain that drops about four metres from north to south. The history of the site is told in the details of the stone floor. The site of the former town halls that originally separated the old and new squares is marked by a rectangular horizontal plane that creates a few steps in the sloping terrain. The outline of the most recent town hall is shown in the floor. The new square contains the outline of the old scaffold indicated by a little plinth raised to seat height.

Over time both squares have been used for many purposes, from the jousting tournaments of mounted knights to public executions and bustling markets.

Jazz is played at the squares at the annual jazz festival
5 Gråbrødretorv / 1962

Gråbrødretorv was the first of the many remoter city squares to be converted to pedestrian use. In 1968, the square was cleared of parked cars and the air-raid shelters hastily erected during World War II.

Dominated by a beautiful, solitary plane tree, this square with its restored cobblestone pavement and new fountain by sculptor Søren Georg Jensen has soon become one of the finest, most popular squares in the city. The tranquil and elegant square is somewhat removed from the bustling streets and is almost elusive.

As many of the other squares, Gråbrødre Torv used to be filled up with parked cars.

The old plane tree is almost synonymous with Gråbrødre Torv
Strædet marked the introduction of a new type of pedestrian priority street. Despite only 8-11 meters of width, it carried heavy traffic. In 1989, it was experimentally reclassified as a pedestrian priority street.

The experiment of pedestrian priority worked well, and in 1992, the street was repaved and the sidewalks eliminated.

The mixture of pedestrians, bicycles and cars now share the street space. In general, the arrangement has led to few traffic problems, and most people express satisfaction with this type of street.

Strædet runs parallel to Strøget, but has a decidedly different character. The street is lined by small, specialized shops selling antiques, handicrafts and similar items.

Strædet has a high percentage of people staying on the street. Thus it can be concluded that the street has more qualities than just being a street for transport by foot.
Gammel Strand Plaza was renewed in 1990, and together with the Ved Stranden area forms a long perspective with a fine curved course and unique boundaries. Along Ved Stranden it was possible to reestablish contact with the canal by creating promenade which is boarded by newly planted linden trees. The small, sunny foreplaza is accented with two large plane trees, which are surrounded by two circular benches. The area forms a background for the seating and outdoor cafes that are sheltered along the sunlit facades. All the streets in this area meet opposite Højbro Plads in a traffic circle paved with worn, blue Rønne granite. This assures a moderate development of traffic, and has allowed the removal of traffic light.

Thorvaldsens Museum at Bertel Thorvaldsen’s Plads was transformed from a rural lawn with crooked acacias into a bare, uniform cobblestone surface on which the museum and manège stand quite distinctively. The paving does not, however, continue as envisioned right to the canal quay. Jørn Larsen later won a closed competition with a design for a circular reflecting pool. The shallow water holds a geometric zigzag pattern of granite bands whose upper edge almost reaches to the cobblestone surface.
Christiansborg Palace on Slotsholmen in Copenhagen was built for the country’s three supreme powers: the royal power, the legislative power, and the judicial power. The premises of the Royal Family, mainly The Royal Reception Rooms, make up only a small part of the palace complex. The Danish Parliament has the majority of the palace’s rooms at its disposal, while the Prime Minister’s Office and the Supreme Court are also found within the palace. Along with the Reception Rooms in the palace’s north wing, the Chapel and the bulk of the Riding Ground Complex are available to the Royal Family.

As a result of two serious fires in 1794 and 1884, the palace complex bears testimony to three eras of Danish architecture: The main palace built in 1928, has an historicist Neo-baroque style and is the third Christiansborg on the site; The Chapel dates back to the second Christiansborg from the neoclassical period of the 1800s; and the Showgrounds survive from the first, luxurious baroque palace of the 1700s. In the Riding Ground Complex, you can visit the Theatre Museum and The Royal Stables.
Søren Kierkegård Square is off the beaten track and bisected by a heavily trafficked road. When the library is closed this large open space is left empty and deserted.

The Royal Library represents a break away from the traditional library structure by housing a wide variety of cultural facilities. Such innovative thinking was behind the design directive of movement versus stringent form; symmetry versus asymmetry for the 1993 European architectural competition which was won by Schmidt, Hammer. While the Holm building sits on the ground, the Diamond floats on a ribbon of raised glass. The ribbon of glass offers views into the foyer from the exterior and panoramic views of the entire waterfront from within. The building has seven stories plus a basement. Its twisted shape and inclined facades are dynamic features clearly distinguished from the traditional square angles of the original library building.

The foyer is the new central space with cultural facilities open to the public. The new main entrance to the library overlooks the square, Søren Kierkegaards Plads, which is perpendicular to the north/south axis. The overhang, as well as the height of the foyer floor, is compressed to induce a forward motion towards the spacious Atrium. In contrast with the exterior of the Diamond, the Atrium is the organic interior of the building.
Kongens Nytorv was established more than 300 years ago. After the embankments were removed in 1640, the area was used as a marketplace. In 1670 during the reign of Christian V, the square was straightened and paved with cobblestones. Since then it has had a rather unsettled existence with a variety of functions, furnishings and landscaping. In 1906, the center of the square was firmed up, and the garden complex with the Christian V equestrian statue was laid out as a parterre. In 1916, the oval was established with two rows of trimmed trees as it appears today.

As an urban space, Kongens Nytorv is somewhat diffused and irregular. The surrounding facades that delinate the square are both open and shut, with protrusions and indentations, wide and narrow street ends, and short and long vistas.

In 1989, the city council agreed to remove parking from the square and in 1991 funds were appropriated for the first stage of renewal which concentrated on the oval center area including the tree rows. The goal was to recreate the sense of a large, composed urban space where an appreciation of its qualities could be reinforced by subtraction instead of addition. Due to an elm tree sickness, all the old trees have been cut down and replaced with new ones.
Nyhavn was built in 1671 as a canal from the harbour to Kongens Nytorv. In the course of the 18th century people working and doing business in the harbour started building their houses along the canal. As Copenhagen became more crowded many of the houses were built higher and timber framed annexes and back-buildings appeared. You can still see many of them in the back yards and many are beautifully restored.

Nyhavn has always been one of Copenhagen’s merry corners, but there is a great difference between the two sides. On the south side, the so-called “decent side”, there is Charlottenborg and many other nice buildings. The street to the north, however, is known as the “naughty side” - others prefer to call it the “sunny side”.

In the beginning of the 1980s the north side was made into a pedestrian street and the canal was opened for old sailing ships.

Nyhavn is sparkling with life, especially in the summer, when food and drinks are served outside along the street and people are sitting on the quay enjoying the sun.
Amalienborg is comprised of four externally uniform (but internally different) palaces encircling an octagonal courtyard in the middle of which has been erected an equestrian statue of Frederik V – the founder of the Amalienborg Palace complex and the Frederiksstad.

Amalienborg was originally conceived as town mansions for families of the nobility at the beginning of the 1750s. In 1794, after the fire at Christiansborg Castle, the mansions came into the possession of the Royal Family. They were built on land formerly occupied by the Sophie Amalienborg Palace that had burnt down.

Today, the public can visit two of Amalienborg’s palaces (mansions): Christian VIII’s Palace, which has been partly turned into a museum of the Glücksburg dynasty; and Christian VII’s Palace, which is used by the Queen to receive and entertain guests, and is occasionally open for guided tours or special exhibitions.

The changing of the guard.

Amalienborg, the royal couple’s winter residence, is a major architectural work and probably the most outstanding piece of Rococo architecture in Denmark.