

Grønningen-Bispeparken

Work methodology & social and ecological impact

Context

Grønningen-Bispeparken is located in Copenhagen's Nordvest district (the city's most socially and ethnically diverse) between two large 1940s social housing blocks. Originally conceived as a modernist green space by legendary Danish landscape architect C.Th. Sørensen, the area had over time lost its spatial, ecological, and social function.

The flat grass lawn was not designed to manage stormwater, leading to flooding in the area during heavy rainfall, while biodiversity was extremely limited due to monocultural planting and compacted soils.

Socially, the landscape had lost its function as a shared public park and was instead perceived as unsafe, uninviting, and unused, effectively acting as a dividing trench between housing blocks rather than a place of encounter. Residents held strong and often conflicting views about its future, reflecting broader social fragmentation, long-term mistrust, and a lack of shared ownership.

Despite these challenges, the site contained significant latent qualities: generous scale, historic sightlines towards Grundtvig's Church, and a strategic position within a dense urban neighbourhood in need of accessible, meaningful public space.





Methods

Grønningen-Bispeparken was developed through a five-year interdisciplinary and intertwined process involving landscape architects, engineers, artists, municipality, utility company, school children, and residents.

The park is shaped as 18 interconnected bioswales that manage more than 3,000 m³ of stormwater while doubling as highly flexible public spaces when dry (“from bioswales to socialswales”). Five spatial typologies – wet bio-oases, dry biotopes, common lawns, pocket squares, and reactivated bunker hills – create a diverse urban landscape supporting both biodiversity and social life.

Native planting, new trees, and dynamic maintenance strategies strengthen ecological resilience year-round. Reuse of materials such as granite and soil has reduced the carbon footprint.

Parallel to the design process was artist Kerstin Bergendal's long-term relational art project Concerning a Meadow. Through deep mappings, investigations, conversations, workshops, 1:1 mockups, and a ‘moving conversation table’, all involved stakeholders were able to meet in an extensive, informal eye-to-eye exchange of knowledge and experiences – meaning that all the residents' local knowledge and everyday concerns were integrated into the project from the outset.

Open sculptural wooden structures added to the park translate this dialogue into physical form, supporting play, gathering, and continuous reinterpretation.



1) Live 1:1 drawings on the park lawn to spatially allow citizens to feel how their new park might be outlined; 2) Workshop on social programming across the two social housing estates; 3) Filming of residents where they lived and worked; 4) The ‘moving conversation table’ rolling out to meet the residents who do not attend regular citizens engagement activities; 5) Residents drawing and discussing their new park together; 6) Dialogue between resident groups acted as a live education of active residents' democracy; 7) Design workshop crafting the foundational Shared Narrative that was to guide all future design decisions.



Outcomes & Impact

Grønningen-Bispeparken demonstrates how public space can respond to climate change while strengthening social cohesion and civic life. Architecturally and urbanistically, it transforms climate infrastructure into a high-quality, yet distinctly everyday public space for a very diverse community.

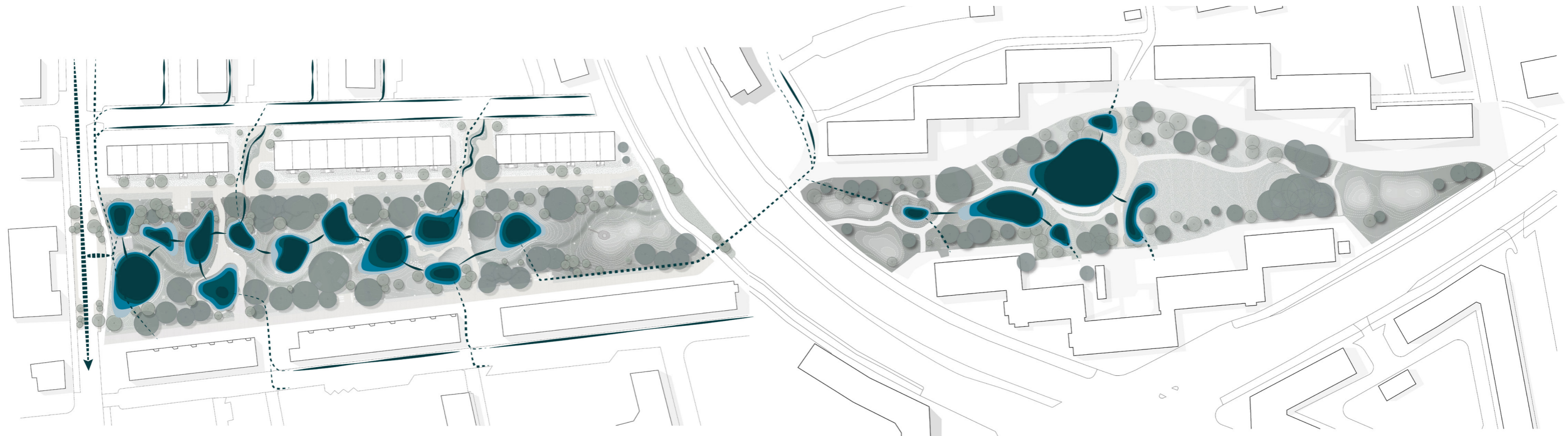
Ecologically, the park has added a host of new plants (120 new trees and more than 4m special plant seeds) and wildlife to the area.

Socially, the project has turned a divisive ‘trench’ into a shared common. With sledding on bunker hills in winter, outdoor dinners in summer, and everyday play year-round, the park supports daily life in all seasons.

The design process itself created new practices of listening, dialogue, and co-production. Through Bergendal’s art interventions, the park embeds memory of the past and of the participatory process itself, giving residents a sense of ownership and agency.

Today residents testify that the project has “matured us to listen to each other” and “given us a mirror into what kind of neighborhood we want to develop”.

Thus, Grønningen-Bispeparken is not only a new kind of place in the city. It is also a practice of neighborhood democracy and a prototype for a new, replicable way of planning and living together in the city.



Methodology & Social and Ecological Impact

Grønningen-Bispeparken

Art Integration & Interdisciplinary Collaboration

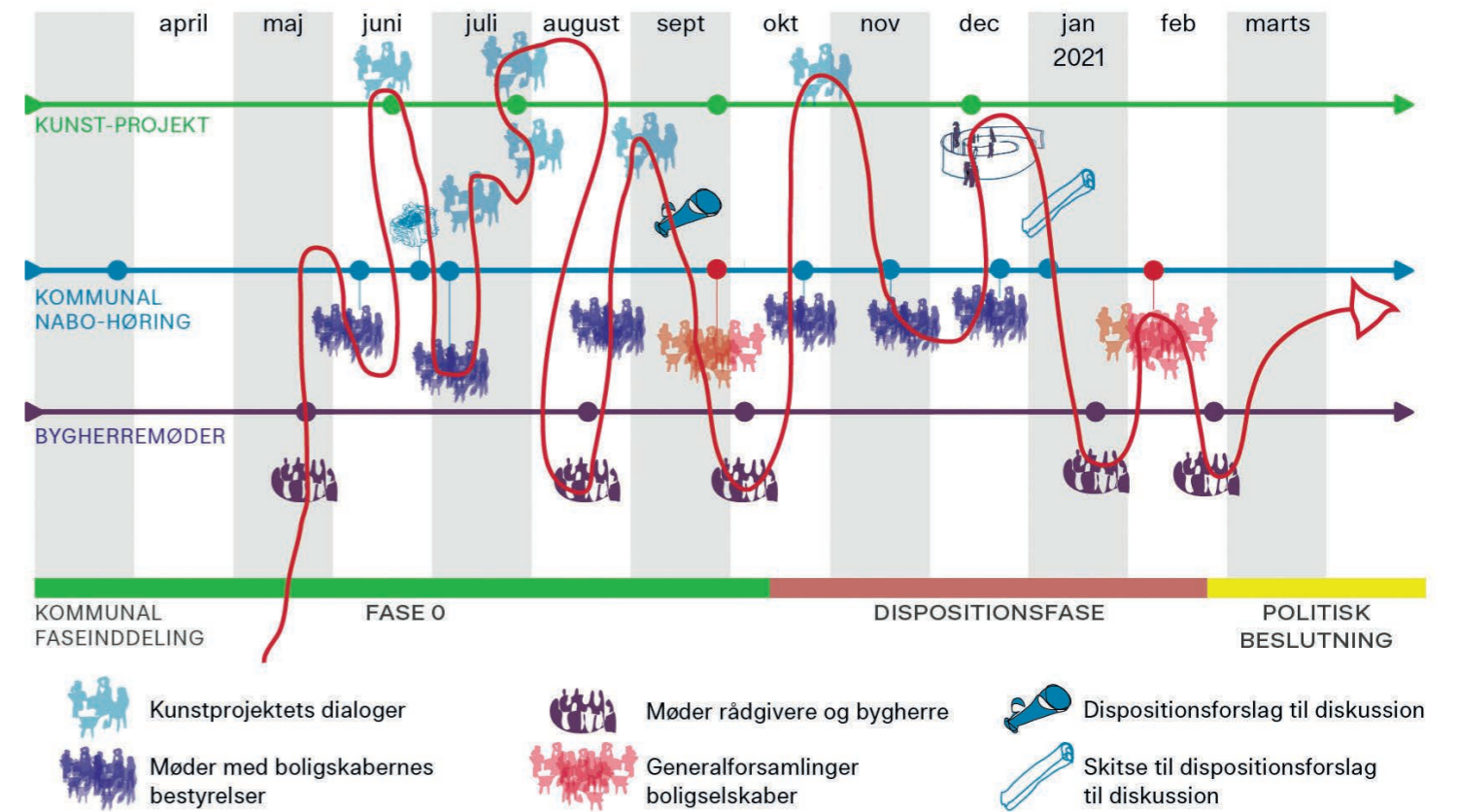
Parallel to the design process, the Danish Arts Foundation commissioned an artist to develop a long-term participatory art project, 'Concerning a Meadow'. Her work unfolded as a "meta-layer" to the official planning and design, inserting artistic and relational processes into the very heart of urban development.

Through filmed conversations, informal gatherings, and experimental "Seven Mile Boots" workshops, the artist created a parallel forum where residents, officials, and designers could meet on equal footing. Her work insisted on **ambiguity and openness**, ensuring that the park remained a co-owned and co-imagined space rather than a fixed top-down vision.

In collaboration with the design team, the artist later added a series of subtle wooden structures to the park. These are deliberately ambiguous forms – not playgrounds, not sculptures, not furniture, but all of them at once. They invite interpretation, appropriation, and reinvention. In this way, they carry the memory of the dialogic process into the physical landscape itself: a reminder that the park is never finished but always becoming.

This collaboration between landscape architects, engineers, artists, and residents was not always easy. It required **new roles and vocabularies**. At one point, the design lead of the team described his role to the city as "a sponge, just taking different stuff in" – a metaphor that resonated so strongly with stakeholders that it became shorthand for the interdisciplinary method (and also gave a new social meaning to the concept 'sponge city' in the process).

Indeed, Grønningen-Bispeparken became the foundational project in which the studio fully articulated and tested its interdisciplinary, citizen-driven approach.



The above diagram shows the artist's interdisciplinary process, integrating the artistic involvement process with the 'normal' communal citizens engagement activities, the standard design phases, as well as the project's key stakeholder meetings. The diagram clearly shows the very integrated and (for a communal construction project) very open-ended and non-linear process that allowed for the project's multiple voices and residents to be adequately heard. This artistic involvement process is without a doubt the most ambitious and comprehensive citizens engagement process ever to have been conducted by The City of Copenhagen.



Social Testament

If ecology was one pillar, **social transformation** was the other. Grønningen-Bispeparken directly addresses the spatial and social divides of a historically challenged housing estate.

The park today functions as:

- **A Meeting Ground:** Previously a trench dividing two blocks, it is now a shared commons where residents meet informally, across cultural and generational divides.
- **A Democratic Space:** The design process itself created new practices of listening, dialogue, and co-production. These practices continue as residents use and reinterpret the park together.
- **A Year-Round Resource:** With sledding on bunker hills in winter, outdoor dinners in summer, and everyday play year-round, the park supports daily life in all seasons.
- **A Cultural Layer:** Through Bergendal's art interventions, the park embeds memory of the participatory process itself, giving residents a sense of ownership and agency.

Residents testify that the process has **“matured us to listen to each other”** and **“given us a mirror into what kind of neighborhood we want to develop”**. The park is not only a place, but a **practice of community**.



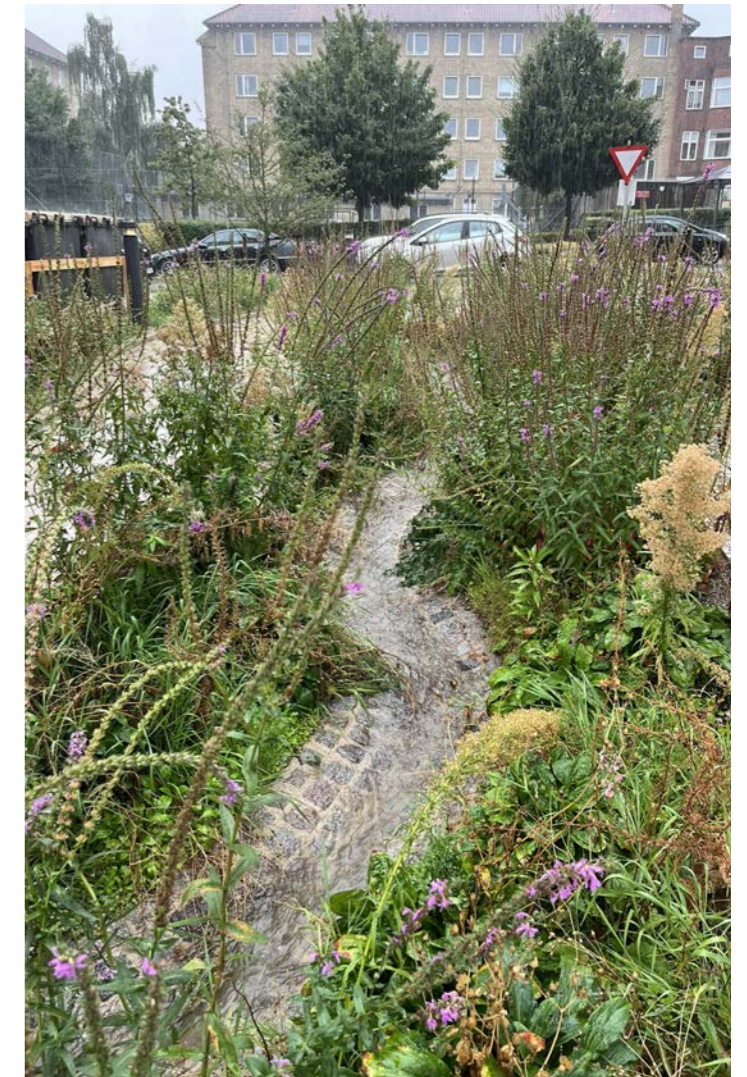


Design & Materiality

The material choices reinforce the ethos of nature and community:

- *Paths of Brick and Gravel: Referencing Grundtvig's Church, they meander, dissolve into grass, and reappear, drawing visitors into immersion with nature.*
- *Reused Materials: Surplus elements from the city's material banks were incorporated to reduce carbon footprint.*
- *Ambiguous Wooden Structures: By refusing fixed programming, they keep the park open-ended and inclusive.*

The park's design does not hide its technical functions. The rainwater basins, swales, and slopes are celebrated as features – proving that climate resilience can be joyful, social, and beautiful.



Conclusion: A Paradigm Shift in Copenhagen Urban Development

*Grønningen-Bispeparken is not a romantic promenade park. It is also not an architectural icon designed for the front page of Architectural Digest. Instead, it is a **paradigm shift** in everyday urban development, where form follows nature, and where architecture's foremost task is to create spaces for life – all life.*

It stands as a model of:

- *New Democratic Practices: where residents are not passive consultees, but co-authors.*
- *Interdisciplinary Collaboration: where art, science, engineering, and design are inseparable.*
- *Ecological Urbanism: where climate adaptation is not an add-on, but the very generator of form.*
- *Social Cohesion: where design processes heal divides as much as physical design does.*

The park was inaugurated on August 31, 2024. Five days later, a major thunderstorm flooded much of Copenhagen – but not Grønningen-Bispeparken. Instead, the rain only made the park more lush, more alive, and more social.

A fitting metaphor for a project that turns challenge into resource, division into cohesion, and necessity into beauty.





Watch an in-depth video on the artistic citizens involvement process as well as testimonials and interviews with a broad selection of residents and stakeholders on the artist's process website: www.aproposeneng.dk/en