

# THE RIGHT SIDE OF THE TRACKS

A long way from the glitzy developments underway in central Aarhus, Denmark, is the sight of Tetris-esque collection of stacked containers in an abandoned freight station. It's become a magnet for creatives but the area is under threat.

Bordered by swathes of forest, farmland and the sea, Aarhus has all the hallmarks of Denmark's renowned quality of life; its burgeoning food, art and music scenes are just a few reasons why residents dismiss remarks of being Copenhagen's 'little brother' – claiming they're in no way under the capital's shadow.

Cranes dot the skyline as a wave of projects reach completion ahead of Aarhus's coronation as Europe's capital of culture next year. From the angular new Dokk1 library and gallery to the introduction of a citywide tram and a flashy harbour redevelopment, the city is evolving rapidly. But for all these high-profile schemes, it's an under-the-radar project that best showcases the city's richest creative talent – yet one that's also at risk of being cannibalised by new development.

Home to a major architecture school and two of the world's largest architecture firms, Aarhus can lay claim to a young and highly creative population. Yet beyond these formal institutions, the city's inventive spirit manifests itself best in a disused railway depot that now houses a heady mix of successful startups, communal art projects and a self-sufficient population that includes some of the city's brightest talents. And it evolved largely by accident.



Detours' project manager, much of that character remains. 'It wasn't intentional, it just happened,' says Christian Juul Wendell (pictured, left) on Institut for X's growth. 'This area has a history of untamed people – the area was renowned for addicts and homelessness and now houses architects and designers.'

## FIRE IN THEIR EYES

To keep the project's creativity fizzing, Wendell has a unique way of sorting through applicants. 'We do it on motivation; we're looking for people with fire in their eyes,' he says. 'You don't necessarily need a clear vision or project, we're looking more for motivation and passion; it's a "do-oracry".'

A non-profit organisation, Institut for X generates a yearly turnover of £27,000, which is reinvested into the platform and public space, including roads and landscaping, water outlets, tools, power and electrical installation. A sliding rent scale (between £12 to £130 per sq m)

these places in life,' says Vedel.

'So many people in Denmark are lonely – they go from A to B and back; they sit and watch TV and get depressed – we need to encourage them out of their houses.'

Since the financial crisis, Vedel says there has been a greater emphasis on encouraging startups. 'Young people are now trying to be their own boss,' he says. 'Some succeed and some don't but people are at least trying. In Denmark, if you fail, you feel like a failure and that's always been in our psyche but hopefully that's changing.'

mean that regardless of size or ambition, startups and individuals have a chance of gaining access to the site. 'We have schemes to differentiate between "hobby-in-the-basement" and established startups,' says Wendell. 'We like projects that display a bit of ego and are accepting of people who don't fit in. This is a space to get started and have room.'

With its name stemming from the diversity of its tenants ('incomers add the so-called 'X' to the project,' says Wendell), Institut for X has proved far more than just a kooky community of outsiders, with a range of businesses graduating onto bigger things.

## SUCCESS STORY

'Being surrounded by entrepreneurs was lucrative,' says Jonas Højgaard, founder of design firm Nordic Tales. 'Institut for X provided a natural advisory board on product development and I feel we avoided making the mistakes of many small companies that fail to evaluate decisions by discussing them with more than just a few people.'

A poster boy for Institut for X's potential, Nordic Tales started as a masters project, made Institut for X its base for a number of years before moving on to a prime site in the heart of the Latin Quarter and is now a multi-million turnover business. 'Institute for X is a creative bubble, which is perfect for testing out new ideas,' he says on Nordic Tales' growth. 'But moving out definitely meant that we were considered an actual company and not just a startup.'



## FROM RENEGADES TO RECOGNITION

Perhaps the key reason that Institut for X has been allowed to flourish has been the permissiveness of the Aarhus authorities to date. For the first six years there was no written contract. 'A few people in the department were willing to meet and agree to do this properly,' says Wendell. 'The verbal agreements went along the lines of being given the keys, promising to do it properly and agreeing to leave when they needed the land back.'

Comparisons are often made with Copenhagen's Freetown Christiania – the autonomous 'hippie' district with a reputation for lawlessness – but Wendell says that drugs aren't supported at Institut for X. Parties were a way to finance the platform in the early days and although they still play a part, people now have businesses that fund it, too.

Clearly an agreement with plenty of faith on both sides, Wendell claims that civil servants use the project as a testing lab for topics such as active citizenship and sustainability, with government employees – including the mayor of Aarhus – heading over for a coffee, a walk and a talk

to immerse themselves in the project. Companies including Airbus and Renault are among recent corporate visitors and the Bureau Detours team consults across Europe based on the success of the project.

## ROAD TO LEGITIMISATION

In 2012, the opening of the Godsbanen complex in the adjacent freight yard had drawn further attention to Institut for X's existence. A government-endorsed cultural space, Godsbanen offers subsidised workshops, studios and gallery spaces as well as hosting markets, gigs, festivals and a recent graffiti conference. Allowing a wider range of people access to facilities – including 3D-printing, bookbinding and textile printing tools – Godsbanen represents a more mainstream version of the Institut's untamed tendencies. 'Us being here saw authorities decide to place Godsbanen here,' says Wendell. 'We're now a part of their meetings and they've even said that Institut for X is everything they dream of becoming.'

Which makes it all the stranger that it might be coming to an end.

## END OF AN ERA?

Despite many architecture students using the project's facilities, developing new business models and being hired by Aarhus's big firms – which often recruit from and collaborate with Institut for X – the project now finds itself at the heart of a controversial land battle. The Aarhus School of Architecture is currently in consultation over plans to bulldoze the site to make way for a sleek new school that will increase its size and enhance its global appeal.

It was always known that the land would be returned to the authorities when they wanted it back but the loss of this key creative hub is sure to come at some cost and the lack of consultation worries Wendell. 'Everybody says they're interested in keeping Institut for X and its "creative DNA" but in the plans they never mention the project by name and haven't engaged with any cultural mapping,' he says. 'Before creating a really bad story by strangling this platform, maybe it'd be a good idea to look into what people are using the platform for.'

With change on the horizon, Wendell's mission is not to preserve Institut for X but to allow it to leave the best creative footprint on the city. 'The bigger agenda is finding a strategy for managing creative spaces,' he says. 'We're in a golden age in Aarhus as we've been allowed to use empty spaces. 'But like Venice you're not always aware that you're in a golden age. We're trying to work out how to extend this current golden age.'

## LASTING LEGACY

This summer its fate should be known, with many predicting the end of an era, meaning the various residents of Institut for X will have to relocate. 'If it splits up it won't be the same,' says Wendell, pointing to the project's sum-of-all-parts appeal. 'There are misconceptions about what the project is: the rabbits, the vikings, the honey bees? Or the designers, the architects and it as a whole?'

Ahead of the city's capital of culture crown arriving next year, the fate of the Institut for X remains in limbo but it has already proven itself as a workable template for transforming our cities' raw urban spaces.

# THE FREELANCE HOT HOUSE

Pairing workspaces with a gallery, cafe and design shop, Lynfabrikken is playing a part in galvanising Aarhus's freelance community.

One of Aarhus's best-known workspaces, Lynfabrikken launched in 2002 and according to its founder, was one of the first places in Aarhus that allowed freelancers to escape the house. 'Back then it wasn't normal to go out with your laptop,' says Jeppe Vedel. 'We wanted to make people network without knowing it. In Danish

schools, a lot of people are trained to be employees rather than going for their own dreams.'

The cafe is central to his vision, giving a space to 'drink coffee and make business', with its tenants a blend of designers, architects and digital experts (including a YouTube star famous for eating very strong chilli). 'It's important that we have

these places in life,' says Vedel.

'So many people in Denmark are lonely – they go from A to B and back; they sit and watch TV and get depressed – we need to encourage them out of their houses.'

Since the financial crisis, Vedel says there has been a greater emphasis on encouraging startups. 'Young people are now trying to be their own boss,' he says. 'Some succeed and some don't but people are at least trying. In Denmark, if you fail, you feel like a failure and that's always been in our psyche but hopefully that's changing.'

# THE NEXT GENERATION

One of Institut for X's rapidly rising projects is architecture firm Spant Studio, founded by Troels Thorbjørnson and Kasper Baarup Holmboe in 2013. Here, Thorbjørnson outlines what locating here has given their enterprise.

## What do you do from here?

We launched Spant Studio while still at architecture school. We began with furniture. We've since moved onto art installations in the city and by doing that we've come into bigger budget projects, including an exhibition at the prestigious Skagens Art Museum and an installation at Milan Design Week last year.

## What made you decide to locate at Institut for X?

Before coming here we only had a little office below my bedroom and decided that it was better to move in here.

## How have you altered the space since moving in?

At first it was just a box and didn't have any windows. Since moving in we've expanded with a door that comes up through the floor and Kasper actually lives upstairs. He's working all the time – he has to!

## How does it compare to the other options that exist in the city?

If we didn't have this place things would be hard: the rent would be much higher but there's also the strength of the network that you get from being based here, which includes designers, architects and model makers. This means we collaborate a lot. If we were to rent a little studio somewhere we'd be sitting there, lonely, in another part of town and fewer people would know about us.

## What makes Aarhus a good city to be based in?

Aarhus is the most dense city in the world when it comes to architects per capita – that's a fun fact! The School of Architecture is a relatively new school with a concentrated population of students and it does both national and international projects.

## How does it compare to Copenhagen?

Copenhagen is known for its grand buildings and Aarhus is very much a city for the underdogs. But with the new Dokk1 development we're



Spant Studio

now moving into a new era. Aarhus is a bit more informal in its architecture and where people meet and interact. But I don't see any point in moving to Copenhagen – we've got everything we need and we have a great space to be in here.

# FREDERIKSBJERG

## SOUTH AARHUS



Over the train tracks to the south of Aarhus's compact centre and Arne Jacobsen's modernist town hall lies Frederiksbjerg. Often referred to as Aarhus's 'pantry', Frederiksbjerg exemplifies Denmark's concept of *hygge*—living well and simply—through its array of delis, cafes and design stores dotted around Jægergårdsvej at the heart of the city's newly buzzy food scene.

Last year the Michelin Guide evaluated the city for the first time, awarding it three stars and two Bib Gourmand distinctions—a considerable achievement for such a small city. Nowhere is Aarhus's open-looking attitude to food more evident than at Nordisk Spisehus, which magpies dishes from the world's best restaurants—with permission—and reinvents them with Nordic style and

ingredients. 'It's in part down to the success of Noma and what they started there,' says head chef Kasper Pelle Christensen on how the Danish food scene has led the way with foraged seasonal and local ingredients. 'Many people now know that we do very good food here in Scandinavia—that reputation has spread.' With Michelin stars now on the agenda, the city's tastebuds have

evolved, too. 'People have realised that the quality of ingredients is crucial,' says Christensen. 'The seasons are so distinct here—after the cold winters you get so many herbs and flowers in spring. Jutland has many good producers and you have the forest and the sea surrounding the city. The forests on the edge of Aarhus are a rich source of ingredients—if you know where to pick them.'

## Forlæns & Baglæns

Located on a central spot on the lively Jægergårdsvej, Lisbeth Andersen's Forlæns & Baglæns has quickly become a local favourite. The head chef is former art director Tomas Frost, who cooks up tapas-style dishes with a local spin and in the evening the space turns into a cocktail bar serving some of the city's best mojitos.



## Formuleret

There's a number of ceramic stores that double up as makers' studios across Frederiksbjerg. One of the best is that of Danish-born, Camberwell-trained Ninna Gøtzsche. She specialises in integrating local materials into her work and creating highly textured surfaces.

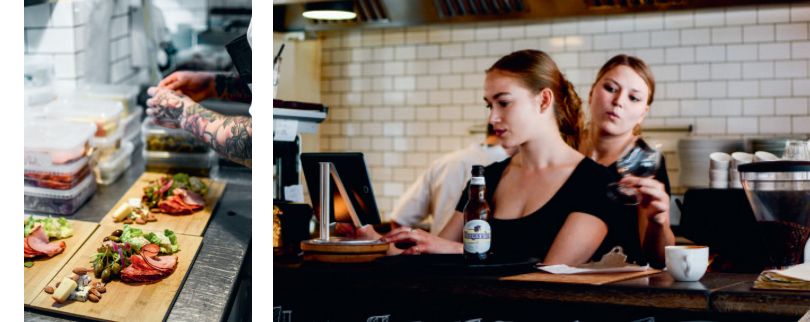


## Nordisk Spisehus

Served up amid low-lighting and mismatched, midcentury fixtures and fittings, Nordisk Spisehus's novel take on global cuisine, borrows and reinterprets Michelin-level dishes from the world's best restaurants including, most recently, Stockholm's Esperanto and Sao Paulo's Tuju.

## St Paul's Apothek

One of the best cocktail bars in Denmark, St Paul's Apothek showcases an inventive drinks menu designed in-house by owner Hasse Bank Johansen and his team of expert mixers. There's also a small food menu and an old-school smoking and cigar room.



## Juliette

Brunch is a big deal in Denmark and Juliette is one of the best spots in the area to head for. But the small local eatery opened by Juliette Itchner is also a day-long favourite and fully booked most evenings. The food is French with a Pacific twist, a nod to Itchner's Tahitian heritage.



## Mikkeller

The Danish answer to BrewDog, Mikkeller opened its first bar in Aarhus only this year, previously skipping the country's second city for San Francisco and Bangkok. It's quickly become the most bustling bar in the area, offering a diverse, rotating roster of Mikkeller and guest beers.



## Blomst Design

Blomst Design is a houseplant and cactus shop covered in unusual, sculpture-like greenery that would not usually grow in Scandinavia. It was opened a year ago by Marianne Nielsen as an alternative to the city's traditional local florists.

