

We need to talk about neighbourhoods

– It is as if we are having a hard time, nowadays, building and planning for communities at neighbourhood level. We need to do something about that, says Christian Pagh, director and chief curator for the Oslo Architecture Triennale.

Why do you see neighbourhoods as an urgent theme right now?

– The word «neighbourhood» implies both social and physical dimension of something we share. The Covid-19 pandemic made many of us more aware of the importance of good neighbourhoods. It also made it more obvious how some neighbourhoods are more fortunate than others and what consequences this has for the health and quality of life of its inhabitants. An intense debate on housing quality and housing access is taking place in Oslo, and internationally. There's a growing demand for improvement and for friendly, human-scaled environments that add benefit beyond sleeping, shopping and a fast commute to the city. There is something hopeful in the term itself: in a good neighbourhood, we experience a sense of community and of sharing our everyday lives with others. It's inherent in the very word, that you must consider your neighbour. In our time, it is as if we're having a hard time building and planning for the community at neighbourhood level. That's something we consider urgent to address in the time to come.

Could quality of neighbourhoods contribute to a more sustainable city development?

– If we create better everyday environments, which invite us to share more, it's good for the environment for a number of reasons. We've got immense amounts of space that's used very little. We could live a bit closer and share more with our neighbours, and thus, reduce the building mass and prolong its time of usage. Quite simply, there is a massive opportunity for sustainable transformation on neighbourhood level. But it requires awareness and empathy to make it happen. The focus of the Triennale is this ability to shape for the community, weave together the movements and functions of urban everyday life in.

Previously, you've made a claim for the Triennale to give us power of action to do things differently and better tomorrow. How, in practice, will the Triennale help to accomplish that?

The exciting thing about working on a neighbourhood scale, is the field of tension between social and physical space, and local and strategic considerations. We will examine the concrete architecture of neighbourhoods - like the street corners, edge zones and building typology, but also processes, economical frameworks and governance culture, that in many ways defines the possibilities of development. And we want to look at design and the political framework as a whole. Often, those dimensions are treated as two separate worlds, and our ambition is to acknowledge their coherence. And all conclusions should result in recommendations for future action within them both.

The Triennale will be an open laboratory in the months to come. What does it mean?

– It means that we will have to actively investigate. We will unite the practical contractors, academics, architects and other professionals, and committed citizens, in discussions and explorations of the thinking, initiatives, projects and methods which contribute to better neighbourhoods. We are embarking on a survey for facts and asking questions, and then, gradually, we'll focus, select and curate. "To curate" originates from the Latin "curates," as does the English "care for". And that is what we will do: We will take care of the best and most important, and showcase it at the Triennale. In collaboration with universities, architecture schools, municipalities, private contractors, architect offices and many more, we are now about to develop the visionary projects of the Triennale. We are genuinely open to suggestions, so please, do contact us!

What will the public experience at the Triennial, next fall?

– We are going into the field to experience actual, functioning neighbourhoods, the good, as well as the ones less so. We'll hold up our city as a mirror image of ourselves to examine thoroughly. And then our ambition is to create new images of the prospects of urbanization. We'll present exhibitions on neighbourhoods through various lenses: historically, as a catalogue of possibilities of imagining neighbourhoods differently: What will a future Oslo neighbourhood be like? And then, of course, there will be debate sessions in various formats. After a year of Covid lockdown, most people are tired of attending webinars from home, so we are going to work intently on the sensory, tangible and physical experience of neighbourhood and architecture. To that end, of course, we are going to plan towards a proper festival in a spirit of celebration and having fun together.

What will happen when the Triennale is over?

- The explorations and collaborations, the open announcements, everything we set afloat during the Triennale, will conclude in a toolbox: an extensive knowhow archive of inspirational examples, recommendations and input for neighbourhood making and transformation. It's all about creating and testing a more adequate terminology for the potential of abundance within the neighbourhoods and everyday culture – and strengthening the ability to plan and design on its behalf! Meanwhile, we expect that the places in Oslo, which will be explored during the Triennale and through activity from our collaborators, will be considered as more fair, homely and inspiring, than if we hadn't had this chance. Definitely, we hope the urban development of Oslo will improve with the activities of this Triennale.

Christian Pagh (1975) has been Director and Chief curator of the Oslo Architecture Triennale since January 1st, 2021. Before, Christian was partner and cultural director in the design office Urgent.Agency. He has headed a succession of projects within urban planning, strategic design, architecture and cultural development. He is an external lecturer in Design Thinking at Copenhagen Business School's Department of Management, Politics and Philosophy, and has taught Cultural Theory and Creative Production at Malmö University. In recent years he has written about urban development and place making with a focus on its social and cultural aspects. Christian holds a master's degree in Modern culture and Philosophy from Copenhagen University.