

House&Home

Prime property | A former docklands has become one of Copenhagen's most desirable neighbourhoods, thanks to hard-won local lessons. By *Mary Holland*

Few areas in Scandinavia could be compared to Miami. But on a sunny day in Copenhagen's Nordhavn, it certainly looks and feels like Florida. Below a modernist building with glass-fronted apartments and white steel balconies, people sit in cafés eating the local favourite of buns and cheese, and sipping beers. Nearby, sunbathers lounge on wide wooden decks. Every now and then there's a splash – someone diving into the water that, with its blue and green swirls, looks tropical. "It's kind of a Scandinavian Copacabana. When you go to the supermarket, you meet people in bikinis," says Dan Stubbergaard, founder of Cobe architects, the firm tasked with redesigning this harbour-side neighbourhood.

Fifteen years ago, the sight of someone waltzing around in a swimsuit to do their shopping would have been unthinkable. Back then, these docklands – about 200 hectares, just north of the city centre – were an industrial port. Identified by the City of Copenhagen and the Danish national government as a site for urban development to address the city's housing shortage, construction began in 2009. Five years later, it was an area in transformation, littered with giant cranes piecing together the bones of buildings, gusts of wind blowing construction dust about. Today, it is one of Denmark's most desirable post codes.

But it was not an inevitable trajectory. The capital has a mixed record of developing new sites, and the master planners behind Nordhavn have been canny in taking on board lessons from across the city.

Real estate agent Henrik Bengtson remembers standing in a vacant lot in Nordhavn in 2013 trying to sell 93 unbuilt apartments to a Danish pension fund investor. "He was anxious," says Bengtson. With no shops, restaurants or even parks and playgrounds to see, it was a hard sell. More than a decade later, all those off-plan apartments have been built and sold. "It took two or three years for people to realise that

[Nordhavn] could be something," says Bengtson. What was once an empty dock now has about 6,000 residents in its first developed quarter, Århusgade. By 2060, the number for the whole area is projected to reach 40,000, as more of the surrounding docklands (about 360 hectares) are developed.

The time is ripe. Central Copenhagen's population grew 10 per cent more than expected this year – to 667,100; housing pressure on the city is mounting. As is demand for larger apartments. City targets are for 40,000 new homes by 2036. And Nordhavn is a significant part of the plan. "We need new flats [that] can meet the needs of Copenhageners in the years to come – a [big] family cannot live in a one-bedroom," says Anne Skovbro, chief executive of By & Havn, the government-owned city and port authority, which owns and manages Nordhavn.

Though around 25 per cent of all accommodation here is being developed as affordable housing, for the most part, the apartments are for the city's upper echelons. The average price per sq m – between Dkr400,000 (£4,665) and Dkr470,000 (£5,485) – is slightly below central Copenhagen, but over the past year Bengtson has seen prices rising. "In the past three or four months, [prices] have risen around 15 per cent – apartments [that] we sold for Dkr6.4mn (£752,000) eight months ago now go for Dkr7.7mn (£902,500)."

Real estate agent and owner of Real Mæglerne Nicklas Kastbjerg agrees. At the end of 2023 he sold a two-bedroom 83 sq m apartment to a young couple for Dkr5.2mn which was recently listed for Dkr7.5mn. He is confident of selling it "in the next two to three weeks". Another penthouse apartment he listed in the desirable Silo building is going for almost Dkr5.4mn.

With a number of accomplished architects and urban strategists involved in the project, the area seemed – on paper at least – tied up for success. But when the plans were being drawn, there was nevertheless nervousness. Other new neighbourhoods, such as



Above: the Nordhavn harbourfront; the former industrial port now has some 6,000 residents. Right: Århusgade, an area of Nordhavn, embraces architectural diversity

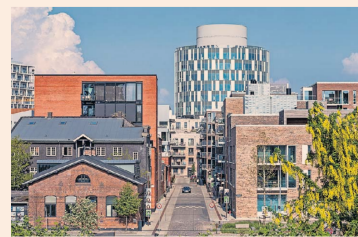
Illustration: Peter Thomsen. Photo: Kasper Rasmussen/Agfent

It's kind of a Scandinavian Copacabana. When you go to the shops, you meet people in bikinis'

Ørsted, an area created on the island of Amager in the 1990s, have struggled. The master plan anticipated 20,000 inhabitants at completion in 2025, but the population is currently estimated at 11,500. Copenhageners have complained that the area feels sterile – far from the city centre, with wide, empty boulevards and a lack of independent restaurants and shops.

"Ørsted lacks the comprehensive master plan that has guided Nordhavn," says Jonas Bjerre-Poulsen, architect and partner at Copenhagen-based Norm Architects, which has designed projects in Nordhavn. "The scale of streets and buildings prioritises visual order and infrastructure over the experience of people." There's not enough greenery there, he believes, "and limited diversity in housing and functions. The result is a district that feels alienating, overly futuristic, windy and empty."

He also mentions Kalvebod Brygge, a development along the waterfront area in the Vesterbro district. "Built as a tall wall of banks, offices and private enterprises along the water, it created an impressive but alienating facade that cuts central Copenhagen off



from its harbour instead of drawing the city towards it."

In 2008, when Cobe's Stubbergaard presented Nordhavn's bustling master plan to By & Havn, he was met with scepticism. "Many [said]: it's never going to happen," says Stubbergaard of his vision for a lively residential hub. Now, you have to weave through a throng of people to take an ocean dip.

Designed as a "five-minute city" – partly possible because of its size – the intention was for residents to be able to access everything (schools, playgrounds, shops and harbour baths) within five minutes. A 15-minute city is the more commonly recognised ideal, but this takes things up a notch. There are numerous bike lanes as well as a new metro line with direct access to the

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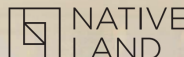
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Clockwise from above: the harbour baths is a popular spot to swim year round; design in this 'five-minute city' prioritises residents coming together; a focus on community has attracted a range of local businesses, such as Andersen & Maillard bakery – Valdemar Rasmussen (Copenhagen)

centre of Copenhagen. And despite the shiny glass-fronted apartment blocks that look worlds away from the colourful, low-rise prewar homes in the nearby Østerbro area, Skovbro argues that it still feels like a Copenhagen neighbourhood – "just newer".

"It's its own little city," says Frank Svård Pedersen, who moved to Nordhavn from Østerbro and rents

a three-bedroom waterfront apartment with his wife Camilla Svård Basse. The rent, he says, is less than in central Copenhagen and the couple love the community, which he says is safe and friendly.

Indeed, there has been a strong emphasis on community. "The high street has local shops," says Skovbro, and emphasises that By & Havn created

a subsidiary company to retain control over the ground-floor spaces to prevent big chain stores. Design and urban strategy agency BRIQ and real-estate investor NREP handpicked local shops, cafés and bars. BRIQ followed the lead from the success of its urban project in Copenhagen's Nørrebro neighbourhood, where the pedestrian street has a string of local bars and restaurants.

"[By & Havn] asked if we [could recreate this] on a larger scale – to create a vision for how people's lives should unfold in the urban fabric," says Peter Bur Andersen, partner and co-creative director at BRIQ. A range of trusted local brands, drawn by affordable rents and space for production, began moving in: Andersen & Maillard bakery, Sanchez cantina and Original Coffee café. "It needed to be vibrant, [so there's] something going on at eight o'clock in the morning, but also at eight o'clock at night," says Thomas Riise-Jakobsen, head of NREP Denmark.

One early adopter was Danish design brand Audio, which took occupancy of an old merchant's house in 2019. Audio's brand and design director Joachim Kornbek Engell-Hansen was initially



wary. Although he saw the area's undeniable benefits – "It's close to the city [and] right by the sea; it had all the ingredients to make something incredible" – he had seen other new neighbourhoods flounder. He wanted to veer away from anything too commercial and with no personality. But "very early on [BRIQ and NREP] were keen on making it super cool," says Engell-Hansen.

His cue was New York City's Ace Hotel, vintage meets industrial, with a buzzy lobby that mixes café, shops and reception. Liked the idea of Copenhageners drifting in, attending various events. For it to "be something for both the local community and us as a brand". The space available also meant Audio could expand its footprint. Beyond the HQ, there's now a shop, restaurant and a hotel with 10 suites. Engell-Hansen has seen first-hand how this area has transformed. "There's so much energy."

Recently, more Copenhagen-born brands have arrived, such as Atelier September, a cult café from local restaurateur Frederik Bille-Bræbe. An

Handpicked local shops, cafés and bars follow the lead of Nørrebro: 'It needed to be vibrant'

international school means many foreigners have found their way here, too – they make up 29 per cent of residents. Signe Birkving Bertelsen, a partner at BRIQ, moved here from nearby Østerbro – she says that though most of her neighbours are European, some are from the US and Canada. At first she thought she'd miss the cosy, old apartments in her former neighbourhood,

but now she loves the diversity of architecture in Nordhavn and that she can swim every day – something she used to manage only once a week.

Even though Bertelsen had witnessed the master plan from day one, she decided to buy here only three years ago. "It would have been intense five or six years ago," she says – before the metro line was added and construction was still under way. "Copenhageneers weren't convinced of the area until a year ago," she adds – when people really started to move in and enjoy the space.

Sure, she has heard some locals moan about the sheer numbers of people that flock here to use the harbour baths, but she isn't bothered. "Copenhagen is a democratic city," she says. What better use for a harbour?

Nordhavn isn't without its shortcomings, of course. While Bjerre-Poulsen of Norm considers the area to be "one of the most successful urban developments in Copenhagen in recent decades", he adds that "there is also a paradox in that the density that has made Nordhavn thrive. It contributes to a lively, metropolitan character, but can [also] verge on the claustrophobic." He also cautions that beyond Århusgade, there's still a danger that "the newer parts fall into the familiar traps of contemporary urban planning." He cautions against large, square building plots favouring efficiency rather than experience, and broad streets, designed to accommodate cars, that can feel like wind tunnels.

But for By & Havn, an influx of people is a good problem to have. With multiple islets still in need of development and thousands of homes yet to be built, Skovbro is aware that the work is far from over. "I'm very happy that we've had a good start," she says. But "we've only just begun".

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