



# 'This is not a ghetto' Residents' resistance and re-negotiation of neighbourhood narratives

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## **Abstract**

**Rebecka Söderberg** holds a PhD from Malmö University. Her research is situated at the intersection of Migration Studies and Urban Studies and focuses on how processes of urban renewal are entangled with the governance of ethnic diversity.

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Over the past few decades, there has been a wave of urban renewal of multi-ethnic neighbourhoods across cities in the Global North, and movements for housing justice have emerged. The literature on housing struggles has mainly focused on collective acts of resistance, neglecting mundane and individual forms of resistance. Building on ethnographic fieldwork in Mjølnerparken—a multi-ethnic public housing neighbourhood in Copenhagen, Denmark, targeted by the 'ghetto legislation'—this article highlights residents' various forms of resistance. Combining the 'ABC of resistance' framework with conceptions of place as continuously becoming, the analysis shows how residents enact a homeplace and re-negotiate the hegemonic narrative of their neighbourhood as a 'ghetto'. Thus, the article contributes to the literature on housing struggles by broadening the understanding of resistance using ethnographic methods and an analytical framework from resistance studies. Simultaneously, it adds to the ABC framework by underscoring the place-making dimension of resistance.

## **Keywords**

Commodification, racialisation, place-making, discursive struggle, Denmark

## **Introduction**

'You are talking about mixed neighbourhoods. Look around. We *are* mixed.' This comment was made by a resident of Mjølnerparken, a multi-ethnic public housing neighbourhood affected by the Danish 'ghetto legislation'. The comment was directed at local politicians during a debate meeting in the neighbourhood on 1 April 2019. Four months earlier, the so-called ghetto legislation had been approved by a broad majority in the Danish

parliament; consequently, Mjølnerparken's residents are currently facing displacement as 60 per cent of the neighbourhood is being sold to a private investor. At the debate meeting, residents confronted the politicians with the discrepancies between the ghetto-policies' claims about multi-ethnic public housing neighbourhoods and the lived experiences of residents in these neighbourhoods. Furthermore, they criticised the ghetto legislation's use of statistics. For instance, an elderly man raised his hand and declared, 'The ghetto legislation is based on lies about here being a lot of problems, but the problems have actually been reduced since 2010. The development is already going in the right direction!' His statement was met by applause from the residents, and another resident filled in, 'We are actually happy about living here. There is no reason why this place should be sold. This development is rooted in an opposition to public housing!' (Participant observation, April 2019).

What I observed at this meeting was an example of how the residents of Mjølnerparken have been resisting commodification and racialisation through engaging in a discursive struggle and re-negotiating the neighbourhood narratives implied in the legitimisation of displacement and commodification. During my 18 months of fieldwork in Mjølnerparken, conducted as part of the data collection for my doctoral thesis (Söderberg, 2024a), I observed how this was one out of many forms of resistance. This article highlights residents' various acts of resistance and shows how resistance can have both productive and ambiguous effects.

Denmark and the neighbourhood of Mjølnerparken provide an interesting case of tenants' struggle because Danish neighbourhoods are targeted not only by renovations initiated by housing companies but also by direct state power: state-led territorial stigmatisation (Fabian & Lund Hansen, 2020) and state-led gentrification (Risager, 2023). As these processes take place within a context of the neoliberalisation of the housing sector, it forms a relevant case for exploring resistance in a context where power is multifaceted.

Bill L38, commonly known as the ghetto legislation, was adopted in 2018 and defines criteria for designating neighbourhoods as 'ghettos' (since 2021 called 'parallel societies'). It demands physical transformation of designated neighbourhoods, new rules enabling evictions of current tenants and restrictions of access for new tenants to the listed neighbourhoods (Folketinget, 2018). The discriminatory dimensions of the ghetto legislation, resulting in relocation of low-income and racialised residents and the demolition and sale of public housing, calls for research which documents these processes from residents' perspectives. This article seeks to contribute to the questioning of hegemonic narratives about neighbourhoods designated as 'ghettos' and about processes of urban renewal as being in everyone's best interest by highlighting residents' perspectives and their resistance.

Due to a crisis in affordable housing under neoliberal urbanism, housing struggles have emerged in cities worldwide. Reyes et al. (2020) identifies three overall perspectives in research on housing struggles: (1) the structural conditions behind the commodification of housing, (2) the organisation of housing struggles against displacement and dispossession, and (3) the enactment of alternative housing futures. Regarding structural conditions, recent studies show how gentrification, territorial stigmatisation, racialisation, and neoliberalism are entangled – using notions of racial capitalism (McElroy & Werth, 2019; Robinson, 2000), racial banishment (Roy, 2017), and racial neoliberalism (Lees & Hubbard, 2022; Risager,

2023). Racialisation is central in the production of territorial stigmatisation (Kadioğlu, 2022) and is used to legitimise neoliberal urban redevelopment policies for social mixing (Jensen, 2021; Jensen & Söderberg, 2022; Lees & Hubbard, 2022; Mele, 2019). The literature on the organisation of housing struggles mainly focuses on collective, visible and intentional resistance against evictions, renovictions and displacement (Casellas & Sala, 2017; Fabian & Lund Hansen, 2020; Gustavsson et al., 2019; Hamann & Türkmen, 2020; Kadioğlu, 2022; Lees & Hubbard, 2020; Martinez, 2018; Thörn, 2020). This literature highlights how new organisations and anti-displacement campaigns have emerged and used direct housing action, squatting and grassroots organising when fighting for the right to housing and dignity (Listerborn et al., 2020; Newman & Wyly, 2006). However, as the literature has focused on collective housing struggles with explicit political aims, more subtle forms of resistance have been neglected and have not been seen as political but solely as resilience. Research on ‘everyday resistance’ (Scott, 1985) within the field is scarce (Falloo & Birk, 2022), yet a few studies show how collective resistance is sometimes combined with individual acts of resistance (Bach, 2019; Polanska & Richard, 2018, 2021). Lancione (2019) argues for including mundane dwelling in the margins in the analysis of housing struggles: ‘When it comes to the housing question, rupture is both what organised movements do (through organised politics), and what individuals under precarious housing conditions do (through mundane propositions)’ (p. 279).

Based on empirical findings emerging through fieldwork, this article builds on to these studies and addresses a research gap by including individuals’ mundane acts of resistance in the analysis. This study is positioned at the intersection between the second and third perspective distinguished by Reyes et al. (2020), as it highlights the organisation of housing struggles *and* the enactment of alternatives in the same analysis. Analysing resistance as a place-making practice, it adds to previous research focusing on the enactment of alternatives, which emphasises how residents contest the ghetto stigma (Stender & Mechlenborg, 2022) and seek to generate pride, solidarity, and collaboration in transcending diversities (Fabian & Lund Hansen, 2020; Hamann & Türkmen, 2020).

While the urban social movements literature analyses broad social movements for housing justice and the right to the city (Martinez, 2018; Mayer, 2009), this article focuses on acts of resistance practiced by residents living in a neighbourhood subjected to racialisation and commodification. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, I answer the research question: How do residents in a Danish multi-ethnic public housing neighbourhood targeted by the ghetto legislation engage in acts of resistance? Using the ‘ABC of resistance’ framework (Baaz et al., 2021, 2023) combined with geographers’ conception of place as continuously becoming (Creswell, 2009; Massey, 2005), I analyse residents’ acts of resistance as *staying put*, *non-cooperating*, *voicing/visualising discontent*, *re-negotiating neighbourhood narratives*, and *enacting a homeplace*.

The structure of the article is as follows. The next section presents the analytical framework. Thereafter, two sections introduce the context, the methodology, and the empirical material. After this follows the analytical section, which has four subsections: the first three parts focus on the three forms of resistance in the ABC framework, analysing

Mjølnerparken residents' acts as avoidance, breaking and constructive resistance. The fourth part takes the analysis one step further and focuses on the doings of these acts of resistance, highlighting the ambiguous effects of power and resistance. Finally, a concluding discussion summarises the findings and contributions of this article.

### **Theorising resistance**

In this article, I make use of the ABC of resistance framework, standing for *avoidance*, *breaking* and *constructive resistance* (Baaz et al., 2021, 2023) to highlight how residents engage in various forms of resistance against displacement and commodification. This framework offers a broad understanding of resistance and enables me to analyse practices that are not part of formally organised resistance as acts of resistance. Furthermore, with this analytical approach, I highlight productive and ambiguous effects of resistance: how new discourses, (dis)alliances and places are enacted through residents' resistance.

By introducing the ABC of resistance framework, Baaz et al. (2021, 2023) bridge the divide between social movement studies of collective resistance and studies that focus on individual 'everyday resistance' (Scott, 1985) and give attention to the types of resistance that fall in between. The ABC framework builds on Foucauldian understandings of how power and resistance are always entangled and underscores how not only power but also resistance is productive. In line with De Certeau, this framework suggests focusing on acts of resistance regardless of their success or intent (Lilja, 2022); thus, it broadens the discussions on resistance to include acts that are not explicitly political yet still challenge hierarchical power relations. The concept of *avoidance resistance* embraces both individual and collective forms of resistance that are discreet and that seek to avoid repression. Hence, it builds on and transcends the existing conceptions of everyday resistance. The category *breaking resistance* covers forms of resistance that do not avoid but seek to challenge and break power relations through public refusal. While the literature on 'contentious politics' and social movements focuses on collective actions, the concept of breaking resistance broadens the analytical scope to include all acts of resistance that openly challenges power relations whether they are performed by individuals, small groups of individuals or collectives (Baaz et al., 2023). However, resistance can also be productive, building new identities, communities, discourses, truths and representations. The concept of *constructive resistance* captures dissent that not only constructs alternatives but simultaneously challenges power relations. Hence, it adds a dimension of resistance to the concept of 'prefigurative politics', which concerns the enactment of alternative worlds (ibid.).

Moreover, to understand the spatial aspects of residents' constructive resistance, I draw on insights from geographers, who emphasise how places are not static but an ongoing process and continuously negotiated (Massey, 2005) as places are constantly 'becoming' through being ascribed meanings (Creswell, 2009). This is in line with bell hooks' (1990) argument on how resistance is also about creating a homeplace, a site where one can restore dignity and heal wounds inflicted by racism. I make use of the concept of *homeplace* to analyse how Mjølnerparken is enacted as a space for organising and building alliances. These

perspectives facilitate my analysis of residents' resistance as place-making practices. In sum, this theoretical framework, combining perspectives from geography and resistance studies, has enabled me to analyse residents' various forms of resistance against commodification and racialisation. The following section provides a context for the analysis by introducing the ghetto legislation and its consequences for Mjølnerparken.

### **Contextualisation: Consequences of the ghetto legislation**

Across the Western world, public housing restructuring through social mix policies has become an increasingly popular strategy among urban planners. Social mix policies purportedly aim to deconcentrate poverty and create mixed-tenure and mixed-income neighbourhoods. In Denmark, urban and integration policies have expressed concerns over the resident composition in public housing<sup>1</sup> since the 1990s and several ghetto-policies have been launched. With the ghetto legislation of 2018, the 'ghetto list'<sup>2</sup> became a tool for state-led interventions for social mixing, aiming to improve 'safety' and 'integration', thus claiming to be in the best interest of residents. The Danish government have annually been publishing a so-called ghetto list since 2010. Accordingly, public housing neighbourhoods of more than 1,000 residents are measured according to criteria relating to residents' levels of income, unemployment, education and criminality. In 2018, neighbourhoods which met two of these four criteria were designated as 'marginalised housing areas' (*udsatte boligområder*). In addition, 'marginalised housing areas' where the share of 'non-Western immigrants and their descendants' was above 50 per cent were designated as 'ghettos' (*ghettoområder*).<sup>3</sup> Neighbourhoods that had appeared on the list of ghettos for five years in a row were designated as 'hard ghettos' (*hårde ghettoområder*). Due to the ghetto legislation, these neighbourhoods faced demands to reduce the share of public housing family units to 40 per cent by the year 2030 through demolition, sale, new construction or conversion of family units into senior or youth housing.

Thus, the concentration of so-called non-Western immigrants and their descendants became the determining criterion for designating a neighbourhood as a 'ghetto', a term which in itself is racialising, with connotations to black and Jewish enclaves. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) has criticised Denmark's use of ethnic origin as a criterion, referring to it as ethnic and racial discrimination leading to stigmatisation. Furthermore, the ghetto legislation is not only an expression of structural racism, as it results in displacement of racialised residents, but it is simultaneously an expression of racial neoliberalism; namely, it exemplifies how racialisation and neoliberalism

<sup>1</sup> Public housing in Denmark can be referred to as public, social and non-profit housing. It consists of non-profit housing organisations that are subsidised by the Danish state.

<sup>2</sup> Since 2021, the official name is 'list of parallel societies'.

<sup>3</sup> In 2021, 'ghettos' were relabeled 'parallel societies' (*parallelsamfund*), a change of words without change of content that primarily had the purpose of smoothing the implementation of the ghetto legislation (Risager, 2023). Furthermore, 'hard ghettos' were relabelled 'transformation areas' (*omdannelsesområder*), and a new category was added to the list: 'preventive areas' (*forebyggelsesområder*), listing areas where the concentration of 'non-Western immigrants' is above 30 per cent. In this article, I use the names of the categorisations used between 2018 and 2021, as these were the ones that my research participants explicitly made references to.

are in a co-constructive discursive and material relation, as the sale of public housing and displacement of residents are justified through racialising discourses (Risager, 2023).

Municipalities and housing organisations have become main actors in the implementation of ghetto-policies (Jensen, 2021), bearing the responsibility of formulating redevelopment plans. Housing organisations are legally obliged to reduce the share of public housing family units and rehouse the affected residents. However, they are only obliged to provide *one* offer of rehousing to tenants, and there is no guarantee for similar rent level or square metres.

Mjølnerparken has appeared on the ghetto list since 2010 and was designated as a 'hard ghetto' in 2018. In 2019, the housing organisation decided to sell 60 per cent of the apartments in Mjølnerparken as part of their redevelopment plan, which was approved by the municipality and the Ministry of Housing.<sup>4</sup> Although the resident-elected local board, supported by a substantial majority of the residents, suggested gradual conversion of family units as an alternative, the decision to sell was retained. In December 2021, the housing organisation announced a sales agreement with the private investor NREP requiring the relocation of residents in two housing blocks, comprising 260 apartments, before the sale is finalised. In addition to this sales process, the neighbourhood has been undergoing extensive renovation since 2021 in accordance with the Master Plan (*Helhedsplanen*) developed by the housing organisation and accepted by the residents in 2015. The Master Plan aims to improve safety and housing conditions, connect the neighbourhood to its surroundings, and attract businesses and new residents. Residents are being temporarily rehoused due to the renovations. However, due to the sale, the housing organisation has been encouraging residents to sign up for permanent 'voluntary relocation' and has offered practical and financial aid for those who accepted rehousing outside the neighbourhood. Nevertheless, the number of residents who have agreed to voluntarily move has not been sufficient, so from May to December 2022, the housing organisation handed out lease termination letters to residents in the housing blocks undergoing sale.<sup>5</sup>

Ever since the ghetto-policy was launched, Mjølnerparken residents have been struggling for their right to their homes. Their struggle is part of the grassroots movement Common Resistance (*Almen Modstand*), which organises residents in public housing across Denmark, demanding real resident democracy and an abolishment of the ghetto legislation and the ghetto list. Common Resistance organises demonstrations, meetings, citizens' proposals and events. It receives financing from the Open Society Foundation (OSF), which supports independent groups worldwide that work for human rights, justice and democracy. Furthermore, through the Open Society Justice Initiative (a programme of the OSF), Mjølnerparken residents have been receiving free legal aid from lawyers with expertise in human rights, enabling them to drive a court case against the Ministry of Housing. Common Resistance, the resident-elected local board, and the communal living (consisting of 18 flats for senior citizens) have played prominent roles in organising the resistance. Furthermore,

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<sup>4</sup> In 2019 titled the Ministry of Interior and Housing (Transport-, Bygnings- og Boligministeriet).

<sup>5</sup> The ghetto legislation established that tenants in ghetto-designated neighbourhoods can have their leases terminated before a sale is realised (Folketinget 2018: 5).

the residents' struggle has been supported by activist groups from the radical left as well as by NGOs.

### **Research context and methodology**

The empirical material for this study has been produced through fieldwork conducted in Mjølnerparken, which consists of four housing blocks located around four yards with trees, benches and playgrounds. Mjølnerparken is located in the gentrifying Nørrebro district in the Danish capital of Copenhagen. Over the past decades, Nørrebro has changed from being a working-class industrial area to being an attractive area for investors and the middle class (Hansen & Karpantschov, 2016). Simultaneously, Nørrebro is still a multi-ethnic and relatively low-income district with a strong history of housing struggles and squatting; it has been the heart of the radical left movement claiming 'the right to the city' since the 1970s (Ibid).

My fieldwork was primarily conducted from August 2021 to January 2023. It consisted of semi-structured interviews and walking conversations with 18 residents and participant observations at a variety of meetings, events and demonstrations. While most research participants were actively struggling against the ghetto legislation, a few of my research participants were not collectively organised, and one of them expressed positive attitudes towards the ghetto legislation. The interviews have been transcribed and thematically coded using NVivo software. My interview questions focused on residents' experiences of their neighbourhood and the interventions taking place, as well as on their resistance. While the residents' experiences of being deprived of their homes due to social mix interventions have been foregrounded in another article (Söderberg, 2024b), this article focuses on themes of resistance and residents' neighbourhood narratives.

The residents' eagerness to tell me, a researcher, about their positive experiences of Mjølnerparken must be understood in a political context where the political and media narrative of Mjølnerparken is overwhelmingly negative. Stories are never direct reflections of life as it is lived but are rather 'partial and selective versions of it' (Eastmond, 2007, p. 260), and I could sense a reluctance among some residents to say anything negative about their neighbourhood. Nevertheless, despite downplaying the negative aspects, many of the residents did not deny the existence of problems in the neighbourhood and expressed their thoughts on what could be improved. While the word 'ghetto' was consistently used within quotation marks by most research participants, a few of the interviewed residents, particularly those who were not actively engaged in the resistance, used the word 'ghetto' or 'parallel society' when talking about their neighbourhood to refer to police presence, 'immigrant density', or religious norms in the neighbourhood. However, rather than reproducing the political narrative, these residents nuanced the image of 'the ghetto' by also highlighting the positive aspects of their neighbourhood.

While historical studies of housing struggles teach us about the best collective action practices (Polanska et al., 2021), studies of ongoing struggles add complexities to the literature. For instance, they highlight the interplay between various forms of resistance

(Polanska & Richard, 2018, 2021), and they foreground residents' lived experiences of the racialised dimensions of urban renewal (Lees & Hubbard, 2022). The methodological approach of this study—exploring ongoing housing struggles through interviews and participant observation—captures acts of resistance that might not be thought of as resistance by the residents themselves and, hence, would probably not be recalled in retrospect. Focusing on an ongoing process has allowed me to acknowledge the productive, immediate and long-term aspects of resistance, regardless of the overall outcome of the struggle.

This study is inspired by feminist methodology and the acknowledgement that knowledge is never 'neutral' but always situated (Haraway, 1988). With a research agenda of social justice, I position my work in solidarity with the claims of my research participants. I am not an activist researcher directly involved in the residents' struggle, but I hope to contribute to their struggle through my research and that the findings can be of use for housing activists in future struggles for housing justice.

### **Analysing residents' resistance**

During the thematic analysis of my material, I could see how residents who were not part of the organised resistance still engaged in individual practices which challenged prejudices, or which disturbed the implementation of ghetto policies. The ABC framework provided me with a broad definition of resistance which enabled to include mundane practices in the analysis. Putting my material into dialogue with the ABC framework, I analysed residents' various acts of resistance as *staying put*, *non-cooperating*, *voicing/visualising discontent*, *re-negotiating neighbourhood narratives* and *enacting a homeplace*. The ABC framework enables me to show how these acts are different yet entangled forms of resistance.

The first analytical section highlights how residents' practices of 'staying put' and maintaining everyday routes and routines can be understood as avoidance resistance and how these acts of resistance, which are discreet and seek to avoid repression, challenge hierarchical power by disrupting the housing organisation's implementation of the ghetto legislation. This form of resistance provides the foundation for other forms of resistance. In the second section, I highlight how 'non-cooperation' and 'voicing and visualising discontent' are strategies of breaking resistance, which, as opposed to avoidance resistance, publicly challenge power. The analysis shows how these acts of resistance are practiced by individuals, by smaller groups and by collectives, and how they contest commodification directly as well as through opinion making. The third section shows how residents' resistance is constructive. It focuses on the productive aspects of resistance and shows how new discourses, alliances and places are enacted; namely, it highlights how neighbourhood narratives are re-negotiated and a homeplace is enacted through the resistance. Finally, the fourth section explains how residents' resistance simultaneously has ambiguous effects, showing how disunity emerges across time and scale.

### **Avoidance resistance: Staying put**

Although Mjølnerparken’s housing organisation has been encouraging voluntary relocation, many of the neighbourhood’s residents have remained in their apartments and maintained their daily life. In an interview, a man in his 60s stated, ‘From the very beginning, I – like many others – have said “I am not moving out. It is not going to happen!”’ (Interview with Lennart, March 2022).<sup>6</sup> Jenny, a woman in her 60s, declared, ‘I was going to stay here the rest of my life. I mean, I was supposed to be carried out of here, right. [...] I will not leave this place voluntarily. I really won’t’ (Interview, November 2021). I have thematised this type of statements and practices as *staying put* and understand this as a discreet act of resistance that tries to avoid repression. With the concept of avoidance resistance, these acts, which do not necessarily intentionally challenge power, are understood as acts of resistance (Lilja, 2022). Some residents simply wanted to continue their lives in their homes and did not necessarily wish to engage in a political struggle. Nonetheless, as the residents of Mjølnerparken are staying put, they make the task of rehousing people and implementing ghetto-policies more difficult for the housing organisation.

During the fieldwork, I witnessed a widespread fear among residents that protesting or voicing discontent towards the housing organisation could lead to negative consequences for their housing situation; however, by simply staying put, the residents avoid repression. This strategy is practiced even by individuals who are not actively engaged in the collective struggle. For example, during a walking conversation with Ivan, a man in his 70s, we met one of his neighbours, an elderly man from the Balkans, who (according to Ivan) never

#### **Figure 1**

Bent fence in Mjølnerparken,  
August 2022.  
Photo by author.



<sup>6</sup> The residents’ names in this article are pseudonyms, used to ensure the research participants’ anonymity. Danish quotes have been translated into English by the author.

attended meetings and demonstrations. Nevertheless, this neighbour stated promptly that he was not going to move out. This expresses avoidance resistance in two ways: avoiding repression but also avoiding active engagement with the topic, which has previously been conceptualised as ‘politics of disengagement’ (Polanska & Richard, 2021).

Although staying put is an individual act of resistance which avoids individual repression, its repercussions manifest collectively, as the housing organisation directs repression at the neighbourhood. For instance, it opposed the plan of renovating one yard at a time and has been conducting extensive construction work in all four yards simultaneously since spring 2022. Fences have been put up around the construction sites, creating an ever-changing maze in the yards. The playgrounds have been reduced or demolished, along with the community house, which was being used for neighbourhood café evenings, celebrations and meetings with lawyers. Water and electricity have been recurrently switched off, albeit temporarily, without residents receiving concrete information about when or for how long. During a walking conversation with Ahmed, a 24-year-old man who has lived in Mjølnerparken his whole life, he burst out, ‘Here you can see how they have literally vandalised the yard; they have destroyed it completely. [...] Suddenly, you have to walk around in a construction site’ (Interview, August 2022). The residents experience the implementation of the renovation as harassment and as a strategy of material destruction and inconvenience through which the housing organisation is trying to make them move out ‘voluntarily’.

While many residents have agreed to move out, other residents are staying put and maintaining their everyday routes and routines. As illustrated in Figure 1, some residents have moved or bent fences to maintain their daily routes, thus resisting the material expressions of power. Children have decorated temporary fences and planted herbs. As seen in Figure 2, residents continue to have their Sunday coffee in the yard, although their private gardens have been replaced by dirt and excavators. They have held on to their yearly routine

### **Figure 2**

Residents having Sunday coffee in the yard, July 2022.  
Photo by author.



**Figure 3**  
Yearly graduation-  
celebration in  
Mjølnerparken,  
June 2022.  
Photo by author.



of a collective graduation-celebration, as Figure 3 illustrates, despite their community house being demolished and the yards being filled with construction supplies, fences, and excavators. These acts of staying put and maintaining everyday routines suggest that ‘homing’ (Bocagni & Kusenbach, 2020) can be an act of resistance through which residents continue to make the neighbourhood their home and claim their right to do so (Söderberg, 2024b). According to Foucault (1990), ‘Where there is power, there is resistance’ (p. 95), and these mundane, everyday acts of resistance are enacted both individually and collectively, as decisions to (try to) stay put were often made in dialogue within social networks. Refusing to leave and maintaining everyday life is an important strategy for resistance that is bound to a specific place (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2015). Staying put enables residents to share common spaces and maintain daily interactions with neighbours, who are subjected to the same threat of displacement, thereby enabling them to build alliances and organise resistance. As seen in the Stay Put campaign in Barcelona, where tenants’ acts of staying put were the first step in an organised strategy against rent hikes and invisible evictions, staying put contains the potential of formalising and collectivising claims (González Guzmán 2024). However, my analysis underscores how staying put can also be a mundane and discreet act of avoidance resistance, which nevertheless constitutes the basis for other forms of resistance.

### ***Breaking resistance: Non-cooperation and voicing/visualising discontent***

In addition to the discreet acts of resistance, the residents of Mjølnerparken are publicly challenging power through arranging demonstrations, collecting signatures, filing lawsuits and writing debate articles, thus engaging in breaking resistance. Since the ghetto legislation is an example of power exercised through the legal system, commodifying housing and

displacing residents, the resistance has also taken legal action. Residents are refusing to cooperate with the housing organisation and the government's plans of privatisation and rehousing, thereby engaging in resistance through confrontative *non-cooperating*.

In May 2020, 12 residents from Mjølnerparken filed a lawsuit against the Ministry of Housing, claiming that the Ministry's approval of the redevelopment plan was unlawful since it would result in depriving residents of their homes (a human right) based on a discriminatory foundation. The lawsuit criticises the fact that residents' ethnic origin was the determining criterion for designating the neighbourhood as a 'ghetto'; thus, the lawsuit ultimately examines whether the redevelopment plan is discriminatory and unlawful under domestic law, EU law and the European Convention on Human Rights. Hence, its outcome will have implications beyond Mjølnerparken. Furthermore, several residents affected by the sale have objected the terminations of their leases, arguing that they are invalid because the housing organisation has circumvented its legal obligation to rehouse residents within the neighbourhood by terminating leases on the wrong legal grounds (based on the Master Plan instead of the redevelopment plan). However, due to the pace of legal proceedings and the Ministry's rejection to halt the sale awaiting the court's decision, a majority of the neighbourhood will be privatised and the residents will be displaced already before the court cases are settled.

Nevertheless, fighting for the right to stay put through the legal system is a crucial part of anti-displacement efforts. It can have concrete effects in reducing displacement while simultaneously rising awareness about housing injustices (Hartman & Robinson, 2003; Lees & Hubbard, 2020). Mjølnerparken's lawsuit has attracted national and international attention; it has gained support by two UN Special Rapporteurs and resulted in similar lawsuits being filed by tenants in other Danish neighbourhoods. Hence, residents' resistance has productive and potentially long-term effects, as it might hinder both ongoing and future displacement and commodification and brings attention to the racialising and discriminatory foundation of the ghetto legislation. Here, the concept of breaking resistance enables me to show how non-cooperating is an act of resistance which differ from the more mundane act of staying put, as residents are publicly questioning power relations and are loudly refusing to do what is expected of them.

Mjølnerparken residents have also been practicing direct forms of non-cooperating. Individual residents have been denying the housing organisation and representatives of the private investor access to their apartments. For instance, Vahid, a man who is not actively engaged in the collective resistance, recalled how the housing organisation had made a home visit to his mother one evening and asked her to sign some papers about rehousing, which she did not fully understand. On the phone, Vahid told them to leave and refused cooperation: 'You know what, we won't sign anything' (Interview, March 2022). Further, Ivan recalled how he had asked the representative of the private investor to stay on his doormat, denying them access to his apartment for inspection and only allowing the technician from the Rent Assessment Committee (*buslejenævnet*) to enter. With the ABC framework, these individual acts of non-cooperating are here analysed as a form of breaking

resistance, despite that residents did not always think of it as resistance or thought of themselves as part of the collective resistance.

Moreover, residents' resistance transcends analytical divides between individual and collective resistance, as individual and small group acts of non-cooperating are occasionally scaled up to collective acts of resistance. When the Minister of Housing commented on the lawsuit on Twitter and tried to make it look like it was only 12 residents who were objecting the sale, Mjølnerparken residents started a signature collection. They managed to collect signatures by 580 residents, stating how they were all against the sale and supported the lawsuit. Emma, a woman in her 40s, recalled,

When we were collecting signatures in the first yard, people were really nice and supportive; they were against the sale and everything. There was a lot of solidarity among the ones we talked to in the first yard. [...] But many people have their families in the other yards, or friends, so it affects everyone, and not only us who will have to move out. (Interview, October 2021)

Hence, through the signature collection, which was delivered to the Ministry of Housing through a protest event, residents could document and *voice discontent* of the many.

In addition, as Figure 4 illustrates, the residents have been hanging banners from balconies to draw attention to the injustice of their situation. During neighbourhood-café evenings in the community house, residents have painted protest slogans such as 'Our home, our right', 'No to forced relocations,' and 'Stop discrimination' on bed linen donated by other residents (Participant observation, October 2021). Through word of mouth and through

#### **Figure 4**

Banner with the text 'Homes for people not profit' hanging from a balcony in Mjølnerparken, November 2021.  
Photo by author.



Facebook groups, residents have been encouraged to pick up a banner and hang it from their balcony, thereby *visualising discontent*. These acts of resistance, which echo a strategy of visibility also seen in resistance against renoviction (Polanska & Richard, 2021), have resulted in a neighbourhood that is visibly protesting stigmatisation and displacement. According to Helen, a woman in her 30s,

It is a special place to live in because there are banners everywhere. Many residents have put up a banner, us included, and people come and watch, so you are very aware of living in a political combat zone in a way. (Interview, November 2021)

Voicing and visualising discontent are important acts of resistance to counter the narrative of the ghetto legislation being benevolent and in ‘the best interest of residents’. Through breaking resistance—non-cooperating and voicing/visualising discontent—the residents of Mjølnerparken have managed to bring national and international attention to the issue, highlighting how the ghetto legislation results in discrimination, displacement and human rights violations, as well as how there are economic incentives behind the interventions. Thus, the conceptual conflict between housing as the foundation for social citizenship and housing as a tool for making profit (Hartman & Robinson, 2003; Madden & Marcuse, 2016; Thörn, 2020) is emphasised through residents’ resistance, that challenges both state power and financial power.

Importantly, the residents’ collective acts of breaking resistance have created relations and place-based alliances. Consequently, these forms of breaking resistance are entangled with constructive resistance.

### ***Constructive resistance: Re-negotiating neighbourhood narratives and enacting a homeplace***

In addition to challenging hierarchical power, both publicly and discreetly, Mjølnerparken residents’ resistance is simultaneously productive and constructive: it creates new discourses, alliances and places.

When describing their neighbourhood, the residents used the same vocabulary as hegemonic discourses but ascribed new meanings to words such as ‘safety’ and ‘mixed’. During the interviews—but also when talking to their colleagues or when speaking at demonstrations—several residents described Mjølnerparken as a calm and safe place where people greet each other, know each other and help each other. Lennart said, ‘It’s so peaceful here. And sure, it would be nice with some more green spots, but come on, this is not a ghetto’ (Interview, March 2022). Many residents highlighted the diversity, claiming that Mjølnerparken was a mixed neighbourhood. In Foucault’s (1990) relational understanding of power and resistance, discourses are impossible to escape and approach from an ‘outside’ position. Instead, discursive resistance involves repeating words from a dominant discourse but ascribing these words a different meaning (Foucault, 1990; Butler, 1995). This rearticulation produces new truths and counter-narratives that challenge the hegemonic discourse through repeating it slightly ‘wrong’. While ghetto-policies have portrayed ‘ghettos’ as places of danger which threaten Danish society, referring to criminality *and* to a presumed immigrant culture (Grünenberg & Freiesleben, 2016; Olsen & Larsen, 2023), the residents

were clearly responding to these narratives when highlighting how their neighbourhood was safe and already mixed (see Figure 5). Asmaa, a woman with parents from the Middle East, stated,

They talk a lot about how it should be a mixed city and have room for everyone, and that's what it is now because, now, highly educated people live in Mjølnerparken, and people without education also live here, so it is very very broad. (Interview, February 2022)

While Asmaa highlighted her appreciation of the socioeconomic diversity, other residents highlighted the ethnic and cultural diversity. When asked about how she would describe her neighbourhood, Farida, a woman with a refugee background who has been living in Mjølnerparken for over 20 years, explained,

I think it is nice with lots of different types of people, diverse types of cultures, and it just makes it more rich, more colourful, more special. And it's something that I have chosen. No one has chosen it for me. It's where I really feel at home. (Interview, October 2021)

Jenny expressed a similar sentiment:

Well, since I have dark skin, I must say that this is the first place in Denmark—and I have lived many places—where I simply feel good, because there is no one who looks at whether you are brown or, and I don't want that, I don't want that again, I mean, now I am 60 years old, right. [...] It is that it is mixed here that I like. I feel like, puuuuha [exhales], here I can breathe. (Interview, November 2021)

The residents' descriptions emphasise the diversity within the neighbourhood as a positive quality of the neighbourhood, as what makes them feel at ease and at home. This is true especially, but not exclusively, for racialised residents. For them, the neighbourhood provides a safe and inclusive homeplace where diversity is normal and appreciated, in contrast to the surrounding society, in which migration-driven diversity is framed as a problem. Hence, the residents' descriptions challenge the social mix discourse and the figure of 'the non-Western' by highlighting how the population *within* this category is truly diverse in many aspects, including ethnic and socio-economic terms. Power and resistance are thus intertwined, as the residents' narratives are directly related to the dominant narratives: they redefine the meaning of 'safe' and 'mixed', thus *re-negotiate the neighbourhood narrative*: an act of constructive resistance that enacts new discourses and truths. Accordingly, discursive resistance is a productive counter-power that gradually challenges the discursive dimensions of power, namely, the securitising and racialising narratives that justify displacement and commodification of public housing. Constructive resistance thus produces alternatives while simultaneously undermining power (Baaz et al., 2023), as residents' alternative narratives

**Figure 5**

Poster on an entrance in Mjølnerparken, stating 'We are the mixed city', 'Stop the ghetto legislation', November 2021. Photo by author.



about their neighbourhood challenge the hegemonic narratives which legitimise the ghetto legislation and the social mix interventions.

Following geographers' understanding of places as relational, heterogenic, and in constant becoming through interactions (Massey, 2005) and through the meanings attached to them (Creswell, 2009), the residents' re-negotiation of neighbourhood narratives can be understood as place-making practices, through which they challenge the construction of Mjølnerparken as a problem-place and *enact it as a safe homeplace*. In particular, bell hooks (1990) has underscored how enacting a homeplace is a crucial act of resistance for subordinated groups, creating a safe space in the midst of oppression where one can heal and resist.

In Mjølnerparken, the homeplace is enacted not only through discursive struggle but also through the relations that emerge through various acts of resistance. Residents described how the ghetto legislation and the shared threat of being evicted have created 'a community of shared destiny' (*skæbnefællesskab*) (Interview with Nicolai, November 2021) and how there was solidarity within the neighbourhood. By highlighting the shared threat to their homes, residents are framing common interests, which 'is something that place based movements made up of highly heterogeneous participants have to do' (Briata et al., 2020, p. 457). Through the acts of resistance that I have earlier categorised as avoidance and breaking resistance, alliances between residents across differences are established. For example, Vera, a woman in her 70s, recalled,

When the ghetto legislation came, there was a demonstration [...] and we had many meetings about what could happen to us, and we began to talk more across different languages and cultures, I mean, backgrounds. (Interview, January 2023)

Emma expressed a similar sentiment: 'I've got to know people that I didn't know before. I actually think it has strengthened the neighbour relations' (Interview, October 2021). Jenny described how sharing information and expressing care have become a normal part of everyday life: 'We like each other and show interest and attention, and now we are in a tense

situation, so we should give an extra smile, and everyone does so' (Interview, November 2021).

Thus, the ethnographic material points to how constructive resistance does not only construct new discourses, but also new alliances, through which residents enact places differently. Since inhabitants' everyday practices are part of the production of space (Lefebvre, 1991), activism can be a place-making practice (Hansen, 2019). Following hooks (1990), the analysis shows that residents struggling together and affirming each other is a place-making practice through which they make home a 'community of resistance'. Through their acts of resistance, the residents have built place-based alliances and enacted Mjølnerparken as a homeplace—a site of resistance—from which they organise their resistance against the racism and commodification manifested through the ghetto legislation. Nevertheless, despite its productive aspects, the resistance also has ambiguous effects, as both unity and *dis*unity have emerged.

### ***Ambiguous effects of power and resistance***

After the ghetto legislation was introduced in 2018, there was a widespread interest among Mjølnerparken residents to stand up for their rights, and meetings and demonstrations were well attended. However, as housing insecurity became a long-lasting condition, the number of residents attending meetings declined and disunity emerged over time. The neighbourhood witnessed an out-migration of many (but not all) so-called resource-strong residents, who had the financial means to move away from the insecure housing situation. Empty apartments were allocated to residents on temporary contracts. Due to the temporality of their stay and their lack of rights, new residents tended not to engage much in their neighbourhood. This type of use of temporary contracts has been identified as a strategy of landlords in the governing of tenants, dividing collective demands (Polanska & Richard, 2021; Thörn, 2020). Furthermore, the extensive renovations, combined with the frequent occurrence of moving trucks, left residents with 'a feeling of dissolvemement', as Ivan described it. Seeing their neighbourhood be torn apart and friends and family members move out made some residents lose their motivation to stay and fight for their right to stay. Described as 'un-homing' and as 'slow violence', this gradual displacement affects residents already before the moment of out-migration and makes effective opposition difficult (Lees & Hubbard, 2022).

In addition to these difficulties in sustaining unity and engagement over time, disunity between scales emerged, specifically between individual coping and the collective struggle within the neighbourhood and between activists inside and outside the neighbourhood. While residents' shared condition of housing precarity and evictability has in many ways united them in a common struggle, it has simultaneously created disagreements. At annual tenants' meetings, some residents distanced themselves from a confrontative approach and advocated for more cooperation with the housing organisation (Participant observation, February 2022). Furthermore, residents recalled how a condemnatory attitude was initially adopted towards those who decided to leave the neighbourhood voluntarily: 'I felt like there

was generated this [attitude of] “Oh, so you have signed that list for voluntary relocation? So you want to move out? You just give up?!” (Interview with Asmaa, February 2022). While Asmaa also described how people had eventually calmed down and how the community had been strengthened through the resistance, other residents expressed frustration, arguing that not enough residents were actively involved in the collective struggle:

I must admit that I am very irritated [laughs]. I just think that our neighbours sit quietly and think ‘yes, but you fight for us and you are our voice’ or whatever it’s called. And that just provokes me. I mean, ‘You should also say something. Get up and say no!’ (Interview with Farida, October 2021)

These frustrations indicate that residents did not always recognise individual and mundane practices (such as staying put) as valuable acts of resistance. This internal disunity within the neighbourhood also suggests that the ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (Harvey, 2004) results in ambiguous processes of both collective resistance and individual coping with housing precarity. The housing organisation has been taking advantage of residents’ precarity, offering residents individual solutions to collective housing problems. As many residents feel forced to accept individual solutions of rehousing, collective claims are weakened.

Although much of the collaboration across scale (the local resistance in Mjølnerparken, the city-level resistance in collaboration with NGOs and left-wing housing activists, and the national resistance through Common Resistance) has been well-functioning and much appreciated by residents, disagreements occurred. Some residents emphasised the different spatial conditions, stressing that activists from outside of Mjølnerparken do not live and breathe the long-term housing insecurity but can opt out from the struggle (Informal conversation, January 2023). Other residents claimed that the ‘flat structure’ of Common Resistance sometimes meant that people could do whatever they pleased without consulting those who were actually affected. Ivan called for a more structured format, arguing that ‘the ones who have the conflict have to be the ones that decide how the conflict should develop’ (Interview, November 2021).

This emergence of disunity across time and scale reveals the ambiguous effects of power and resistance; how collective resistance is aggravated by the individualising effect of neoliberal power and how resistance generates both unity and disunity.

## **Concluding discussion**

Exploring how Mjølnerparken’s residents engage in resistance against commodification and racialisation, this article shows how residents’ resistance is individual and collective, discreet and confrontative, and material and discursive. Furthermore, the article highlights the productive and ambiguous *doings* of residents’ resistance; how places are enacted in new ways and how both unity and disunity emerge.

Based on fieldwork among residents in Mjølnerparken, I analyse residents’ acts of resistance as *staying put*, *non-cooperating*, *voicing/visualising discontent*, *re-negotiating neighbourhood narratives*, and *enacting a homeplace*. As commodification and displacement are justified through

the racialising and securitising discourse embedded in the ghetto legislation, residents' resistance addresses hegemonic discourses as well as concrete attempts of displacement. The analysis thus shows how different expressions of power (material, discursive, financial, state, and legal) generate various acts of resistance. My analytical findings thereby point to the need for an expanded understanding of resistance when studying housing struggles in a contemporary context of racial neoliberalism. Hence, although housing struggles are tied to specific national contexts and policies, the findings of this article could be relevant to other geographical contexts as well, since I highlight resistance to power structures which are not limited to the Danish context.

Making use of an analytical framework from resistance studies, the analysis contributes to the research field of housing struggles by underscoring the importance of mundane acts of resistance in struggles for housing justice. It argues for including not only collective acts of resistance but also individual resistance and resistance without an explicit political aim, showing how acts which could be seen as passive (staying put) are in fact acts of resistance that disrupt the exercise of hierarchical power and provide the basis for other forms of resistance. This highlighting of the entanglement of different forms of resistance could be useful for academics as well as for housing activists, as it encourages acknowledging the value and importance of mundane forms of resistance that emerge from despair in an extremely precarious housing situation marked by evictability and un-homing (Söderberg, 2024b).

The findings contribute to the development of the ABC of resistance framework by highlighting how constructive resistance not only constructs new discourses and alliances but also enacts places in new ways. Here it became clear how residents enact Mjølnerparken as a homeplace and as a site of resistance through relations generated through acts of resistance. Nonetheless, the enactment of Mjølnerparken as a site of resistance should be understood as a continuation of a broader and historical local struggle for housing justice, as movements claiming 'the right to the city' have been squatting, conducting legal proceedings, demonstrating, rioting and guerrilla gardening in the district of Nørrebro over the last five decades (Hansen & Karpantschof, 2016).

Exploring an ongoing struggle through ethnographic methods, this article makes a methodological contribution to research on tenants' struggles, which tends to be done in retrospect (Bradley, 2014; Poy, 2021; Rolf, 2021). This enables me to highlight *processes* of resistance. As discursive resistance constructs new truths and counter-narratives gradually, there can be a time-lag between narrating new truths and establishing them (Lilja, 2018). The article argues for the importance of acknowledging the immediate as well as the potential long-term productive doings of resistance. It suggests that regardless of the outcome of residents' material struggle for their right to stay put in Mjølnerparken, their ongoing discursive struggle contributes to slowly changing the narratives of the neighbourhood and challenges the legitimisation of the ghetto legislation. Making use of a broad variety of resistance forms appears to be crucial for struggles involving diverse groups (Briata et al., 2020), and according to Foucault (1990), the plurality of resistances is what gradually makes change possible.

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