

# Father House vs. Youth House

David Rovics

2007

There are certain things that jump out at you as soon as you arrive in Denmark. One thing you'll notice, especially if you come from a place within that large mass of the world that is a bit closer to the equator, is that there is rarely anything you'd call direct sunlight.



It's twilight most of the time. In the summer, it's only really dark for an hour or so, but never completely light, either. In the winter, it's dark most of the time, often accompanied by a cold, light rain.

You quickly notice that there are far more people with blond hair and blue eyes per capita than just about anywhere else you're likely to have been, and at any given time, a vast number of them are riding bicycles. All the Danish cities feature elegant networks of bike paths and lots of pedestrian-only streets. The country is largely designed for use by bicycle, train and foot, and most people think this is as it should be. There is universal health care and higher education, and every Dane I've ever met thinks that this is self-evidently a good thing.

While Denmark may be an easy place to be a social democrat, it's different if you're an anarchist squatter. If you reject the notion of private property, you are outside of the social contract. If you think that when a building is abandoned and empty, people have the right to move in and make use of it regardless of what individual or corporate entity officially owns it, you are a pariah to be vilified, violently opposed, or bought off—whatever works.

It's early December, 2006, and along with the scant sunlight and the blonds on bicycles, another thing becomes quickly apparent. Some people have been hard at work with large posters and cans of wheat paste, and have blanketed Copenhagen with an image of a fist and the slogan, "Ungdomshuset—the Final Battle." Below that is more information—the Final Battle is taking place between December 13 and 17, and so on.

Tattooed on the fist are the numbers "69," for 69 Jagtvej, the address of Ungdomshuset. Ungdomshuset means Youth House—using really literal names like this is very common in Scandinavia.

The Final Battle may not make the news in most of the world, but in Denmark it will be material for headlines. Ungdomshuset is the last anarchist-run, squatted social center in Denmark outside of Christiania, and an institute of iconic significance throughout Scandinavia. I'm on a tour of Sweden, Norway and Denmark, and in every city I visit it's easy to find posters alerting people to the Final Battle, encouraging everybody to get on the buses that will be headed to Ungdomshuset from Oslo, Trondheim, and even as far away as Moscow, rumor has it.

The 1980s were the heyday of the autonomous movement in Denmark, Germany and elsewhere in Europe. Thousands of mostly young people squatted hundreds of abandoned buildings in dozens of urban centers, creating alternative societies that embraced community, art, music, and a culture of resistance that rejected consumerism and empire.

They opposed the domination of the world by multinational corporations and the governments that supported them, whether they are outright militarist states like the US, or watered-down NATO members like Denmark. They often defended their squats in pitched battles with police, and at the same time debated sexism within their movement while organizing protests in support of refugees and against nuclear power. The movement existed in a near-constant state of siege. Many squats were ultimately taken by force by the police, but others were legalized.

Not far from Ungdomshuset is Bumzen, one of the now-legal former squats, which still maintains the dynamic atmosphere of its previous status, with residents constantly making artistic and structural improvements to the five-story building in which they live. Most of the Bumzen residents are actively involved with day-to-day life in Ungdomshuset.

They run Ungdomshuset's infoshop, sell beer behind the bar, organize concerts in one of several performance spaces, use one of the many rooms on the upper floors as rehearsal spaces for bands or for holding workshops, meetings, film and screenings. They cook vegan meals for the community using the massive pots and pans found in the kitchen.

One of the first times I played a concert at Ungdomshuset, I was in the bar surrounded by black flags with skulls and crossbones, and people of all ages. The audience was mostly in their 20s, dressed in black, except for the glittering silver of nose rings, lip rings, eyebrow rings and other various facial piercings. There were probably a hundred people in the room, most of whom listened to a lot more punk rock than acoustic folk. It was a standing room-only situation, but when I started playing there was silence in the room, and everybody was listening to every word I sang.

## **Battles In and Out of Court**

Everybody in Denmark learns English in school from an early age, but there are still various levels of English fluency. Nearly all the anarchists of Copenhagen speak English extremely well, and often a couple other languages to boot. They are a highly educated, well-traveled bunch, as accustomed to discussing World Bank policy or the history of Spain as they are to defending themselves against marauding police. The peak moment of the autonomous movement in Denmark may be in the past, but to hang around Ungdomshuset, you get the distinct feeling you are in the center of a movement that is far from waning. Rather, you are in the midst of a force of nature, a militant but thoughtful phenomenon with a collective sense of itself.

I played that show years ago, and some of the folks from behind the bar took me to Bumzen, a few blocks away, where they put me up for several days. They showed me to my penthouse suite, a sort of attic space with a little porch overlooking much of the Norrebro neighborhood. Before I climbed the ladder leading to my little room, I was handed a clean duvet for my bed, a lamp, an alarm clock and a bag of pot. (They had ascertained I was a hippie and correctly surmised I would appreciate such a thing.). Looking around my attic apartment, on the little porch overlooking the street far below, lit up by the moon there was a large box full of empty bottles. Bumzen may be legal, but there was still the problem of the occasional marauding gang of Nazis, who don't like immigrants or anarchists, and it's important to be prepared.

Now, in the last month of 2006 and back at Ungdomshuset, I'm about to play another concert. The place is bustling even more than usual. Adam, a member of the collective, asks me if I want a tour of the place. I'm tired from hours of driving and not thinking clearly, and I ask him if anything's new since the last time I was there. "The barricade-builders have been hard at work," he replies.

Ah yes, it's the beginning of the month, and for some weeks now the community has been in high gear. The battles in and out of court have apparently been lost, and this squat that has been a flourishing social center for 25 years is facing its biggest challenge. In a bizarre twist, a rightwing Christian sect named Faderhuset (Father House) has bought the historic building with the intention of destroying it. The leadership of this sect seems as intent on leveling this well-known anarchist center as it is intent on making money in the real estate market.

## **Youth House Stays, Is the Rallying Cry.**

The five-story building that is now Ungdomshuset was built in 1897 by the Danish labor movement, and was for many decades known as Folkets Huset (People's House). V.I. Lenin spoke there before he launched the Russian Revolution. The Second International held an International Women's conference in 1910 at the house, where it declared March 8 to be International Women's Day.

The structure fell into disrepair by the late 70's. A supermarket chain bought it, intending to level it, and turn it into another supermarket. However, the city wouldn't allow the destruction of an historic building. When it was squatted by anarchist youth in 1982 and declared Ungdomshuset, the city eventually decided to let them keep it, but there has always been contention over who was the official owner of the building.

For the first time since it was squatted, a majority of the Copenhagen city council is in favor of the house remaining, but they say there's nothing that they can do; it's owned now by Faderhuset and property law is property law. Half the well-known bands in Denmark, it seems, are playing shows in the house during the first half of December, and lots of prominent artists and other public figures are speaking out in support of the Youth House.

"Ungdomshuset blir"—Youth House stays, has become the rallying cry. Anarchist youth have organized many protests in recent months, some that have been met with wanton police brutality, but the protests and brutality continue unabated.

Politicians have tried to negotiate with Faderhuset to sell the building to a leftwing foundation that would then give it to the youth, but there is no negotiating with this Christian sect. At the same time as the negotiations are happening, the government is preparing its armed assault on Ungdomshuset. Rumors are flying, and one of them is that the police force that will attack the house will be comprised entirely of volunteers—cops who really like the idea of beating up punk kids.

Inside Ungdomshuset, preparations for the defense of the building are making it look more like a medieval castle with each passing day. Two of the most talented barricade-builders were arrested at the last protest at the headquarters of Faderhuset, and are both facing deportation to North America. Massive beams of wood reinforced by steel are blocking doorways and windows, and if one defense is breached there is another beyond it. I'm reminded of other heavily-armored buildings I've been to, like when I had to go to the US embassy in London to get a new passport, or when I visited Sinn Fein's headquarters in Dublin.

In past assaults, the police have gone onto roofs, or, using cranes, through second-floor windows, rather than attempting to ram through formidable barricades on the ground floor. There are too many windows to turn the entire building into the kind of fortress the ground floor has become, but no effort is being spared to do just that.

The upper-story windows from which you could once look out at the neighborhood are now completely barricaded, and the only light that now shines within Ungdomshuset is artificial.

The most famous rock band in Danish history, Savage Rose, a leftwing group doing great music since the 60s, played at Ungdomshuset in mid-December. Over the following weekend, thousands of Danish supporters of the Youth House, along with thousands more from all over Scandinavia, Germany and elsewhere in Europe, took part in protests and other actions that the press described as the worst riots in Copenhagen since 1993 (during the battle over whether Denmark should join the European Union). That weekend had been set by the city as the day the youth had to vacate the premises. But with posters all over Scandinavia alerting all to the Final Battle, the city changed its mind, and is now saying that they will set a later date when the house must be vacated.

Later, after Youth House supporters have long since gone back to their countries of origin, probably at 4 o'clock on a Monday morning, after the previous evening's activities are long over, when the only people up are the few dedicated collective members on guard duty. Perhaps the barricades will hold off the police long enough for a call to go out to supporters across the city in time for them to watch the building get stormed by 300 heavily-armed riot police backed by battering rams, cranes and helicopters.

But history has not been written yet, last-minute compromises have been made in the past, and support for the Youth House within Danish society is steadily growing as the days go on. The unions have said that they will not work under conditions that call for police protection. Without them, Faderhuset would have to try to find sufficient scab labor to demolish the house and build something new in its place. No small feat in a country where the vast majority of workers are unionized.

## **All Was Quiet at 69 Jagtvej Street**

The Final Battle for Ungdomshuset will probably come in one form or another, but as I complete this article in late February, all is still quiet at 69 Jagtvej Street.

How the dance between the autonomous youth, the authorities, and civil society will play out is yet to be seen. Whatever happens, though, the Danish media will be covering it, and the international media will ignore it.

For the rest of the world, there is no Danish autonomous youth movement. For the rest of the world, Denmark will continue to be the mild-mannered social democracy with blonds on bicycles who all have cradle-to-grave health insurance, where it is always twilight. Not a country where state-sponsored vigilantes smash through the windows of community centers and systematically pulverize children with clubs.

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## **Cops Raid Anarchist Squat; Building Demolished**

All of the defense preparations detailed in this article came to naught on March 1 as Danish cops landed on the Youth House roof with helicopters and commandeered the historic building for its right-wing Christian owners.

Three nights of resistance followed with Copenhagen youth joined by anarchist comrades from all across Europe and some from the U.S. Authorities described it as the worst rioting in Denmark since 1993. Fires burned in the streets among overturned cars and shattered windows. Over 600 people were arrested.

As demolition crews began tearing down the graffiti-tagged building, soon to be replaced with modern condos, people swore and cried at the scene.

David Rovics wrote in [www.truthout.org](http://www.truthout.org), "The elements of the autonomous movement that made Ungdomshuset the center of its community will not disappear, with or without the house."

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