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Model village

Designed to meet all 17 of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, UN17 Village in Copenhagen is aiming to set the standard for sustainable living. **Adam Branson** asks whether it is measuring up to its promise

It is not often that an approach to development can genuinely be described as 'unique'. But in the case of UN17 Village in Denmark, the adjective is more than justified. Located on a site on the outskirts of Copenhagen, the project is being designed to meet all 17 of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (see box, p44).

The idea is to create a new community that is sustainable in the round, from its environmental performance and contribution to biodiversity to the health and wellbeing of its residents. Until recently, these aspirations were impressive but largely theoretical. Now, however, the first residents have moved on to the site. So, how is UN17 Village living up to backers' promises?

The origins of UN17 go back to 2018 when the City of Copenhagen and development corporation City & Port were working out what to do with the latter's last development site, which is located in the Ørestad neighbourhood 7km south of the city centre. Instead of seeking to maximise returns, they decided to produce an exemplar community that would provide a template for others around the world to follow.

As a result, City & Port effectively fixed the price of the development and went out to the market to find the best proposals. Developer NREP took that global ambition as its starting point and, working with a team of advisers, soon hit on the idea of creating a vision using the UN's 17 SDGs.

"Real estate plays a role in the global

agenda," says Martin Schultz Nielsen, head of investment at NREP. "It emits 40% of climate emissions and is where we sleep, where we live, where we work, where we play and where our kids grow up. We wanted to put our proposal into a global context and the link to the SDGs grew from there."

To that end, NREP divided up the SDGs into six core themes – water, energy, biodiversity, materials, community and health – while at the same time recognising that there would be overlaps between them. That led to a long list of around 300 initiatives, of which about 200 were ultimately selected for implementation. This was an immensely time-consuming process: Schultz Nielsen estimates it would ultimately have taken as long as the construction timetable.

Local input

The process also involved getting as much input from local people as possible. NREP had already developed several apartment blocks in the wider area and took the views of existing residents on board in the first instance, which informed the design of the five residential buildings on the Ørestad site.

However, NREP also wanted the project's finer details to be informed by its actual future residents. It started letting the first two buildings at the start of 2023 and once sufficient people had signed up, the developer's community manager began hosting meetings to start building a community months before residents moved in, as well as to inform aspects of the buildings such as shared amenities.



"[We wanted them to] get acquainted and start speaking about mutual interests and ideas for their communities, such as communal dining, how to share common rooms and how to cultivate mutual hobbies," says Schultz Nielsen. "We have experience from other co-living communities, and we've found that the process works when the tenants are included. Essentially, we create the framework and then we help the tenants fill it out."

Naturally, environmental sustainability was also designed into the development from the outset. According to Schultz Nielsen, UN17 Village is on track to deliver carbon emissions that are 31% below the recently updated – and relatively stringent – Danish building regulations.

In part, that is to be achieved by including some 18,300 sq ft of solar panels, creating the largest community-level energy facility in the country. More than a million litres of rainwater will be collected and recycled on the site each year. But UN17 Village is also pioneering new techniques. For instance, one of the completed buildings was constructed using timber and based on a new building system that had to undergo rigorous fire tests. According to Schultz Nielsen, this will inform future NREP developments.

Certification aspirations

It is hoped the village will achieve multiple certifications to add weight to its claims. NREP fully expects that it will obtain the DGNB 'Platinum' sustainable building standard, which would be a first for residential buildings in Denmark. It is also working on getting WELL and DGNB Heart certifications, which measure the health and wellbeing aspirations of the development. The inclusion of biodiverse courtyards and biodiverse roofs and vertical greening will help on that front.

Around 200 tenants have moved into the two completed buildings, but a further five buildings are planned in total, alongside a community centre, café and medical centre. The first building is a co-living development aimed at people aged 40 and over and without children living at home. It includes 66 apartments, as well as common areas such as kitchens, a library and creative spaces.

Rent levels vary from building to building, but a two-bedroom home can achieve 13,800 DKK (£1,580) a month.

According to Anne-Sophie Hansen, community manager at UN17 Village, so far at least everything seems to be going to plan. "Really quickly, they just adopted this entirely new way of living in this building," she



The tenants all share awareness of climate issues and taking care of the planet

Anne-Sophie Hansen, UN17 Village

The UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals

- ☒ No poverty
- ☒ Zero hunger
- ☒ Good health and wellbeing
- ☒ Quality education
- ☒ Gender equality
- ☒ Clean water and sanitation
- ☒ Affordable and clean energy
- ☒ Decent work and economic growth
- ☒ Industry, innovation and infrastructure
- ☒ Reduced inequalities
- ☒ Sustainable cities and communities
- ☒ Responsible consumption and production
- ☒ Climate action
- ☒ Life below water
- ☒ Life on land
- ☒ Peace, justice and strong institutions
- ☒ Partnerships for the goals

says. "They have been really curious about each other, very open and welcoming. And now it's almost like a little family, just within seven months. It's been quite intense, but in the best way."

Certainly, it seems that the residents have embraced the co-living concept. "They're very engaged in all sorts of activities," says Hansen. "That's everything from communal dinners, which they have one to two times a week, to board-game nights. They watch national football matches and handball matches together and

had a massive New Year's party. I could go on."

Encouragingly, the tenants are also taking their environmental responsibilities seriously. "They're really attentive to reminding each other about things like sorting their trash, but in a very good way," Hansen says. "They clean the communal areas automatically; they've really taken ownership of the spaces. They all share this awareness of climate issues and sustainability and taking care of the planet, and it shows in the way that they use the facilities."

She adds: "With something like waste sorting, we have such a specific system in Denmark and we do have quite a lot of international people living here who are getting used to our way of sorting, which is quite ambitious. Everyone has to be onboarded in the right way and learn all the systems correctly."

The experience so far bodes well for future waves of residents, who represent different demographics including young professionals and families. Plans are already afoot to get established tenants to help with the onboarding process. "My function is to act as an enabler," says Hansen.

"I want to help the tenants to be really active in their community. So, now we've established a sort of community council, which is planning the welcome programme for the next wave of tenants moving in. They've already come up with ideas on how they can be welcomed because they've been through it themselves, so we might as well use all their experiences."

Remarkably, all this is being achieved without strict vetting. The buildings are aimed at specific demographic groups, but it is not as though potential residents have to sit an exam in social cohesion or environmental awareness.

"In our marketing materials, it's been very clear from the start that we want to put emphasis on the fact that it is a little village, so we're counting on the people who want to rent these apartments to want to buy into a particular lifestyle," says Hansen.

Clearly, the success of UN17 Village can only really be judged in the long term, but Schultz Nielsen says that NREP is already learning lessons for the company's future developments and is happy to share those lessons with its competitors. "It's no joke or exaggeration when we say that we consider the UN17 Village our lab to test and develop solutions to increase sustainability," he says.

"We want to generate insight and learning for what we could migrate to our wider portfolio and the industry at large. It wasn't easy to give up the competitive edge, but we've found that our colleagues are sharing back, so it's been a terrific experience." ■