

# Small and medium-sized towns and their town centres – typologies, functions and planning

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Presentation at AESOP TG Small towns webinar,  
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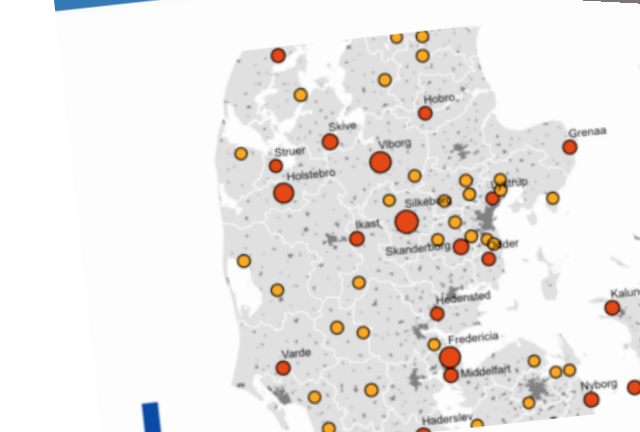
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- A. Which **types of towns and town centres** are there in Denmark (4000-50000 inh.)?
- B. Which are the **town centres' desired and actual role** and function?
- C. **Conditions and effects of instruments** for developing town centres (housing, densification, urban life and livability, urban design...)

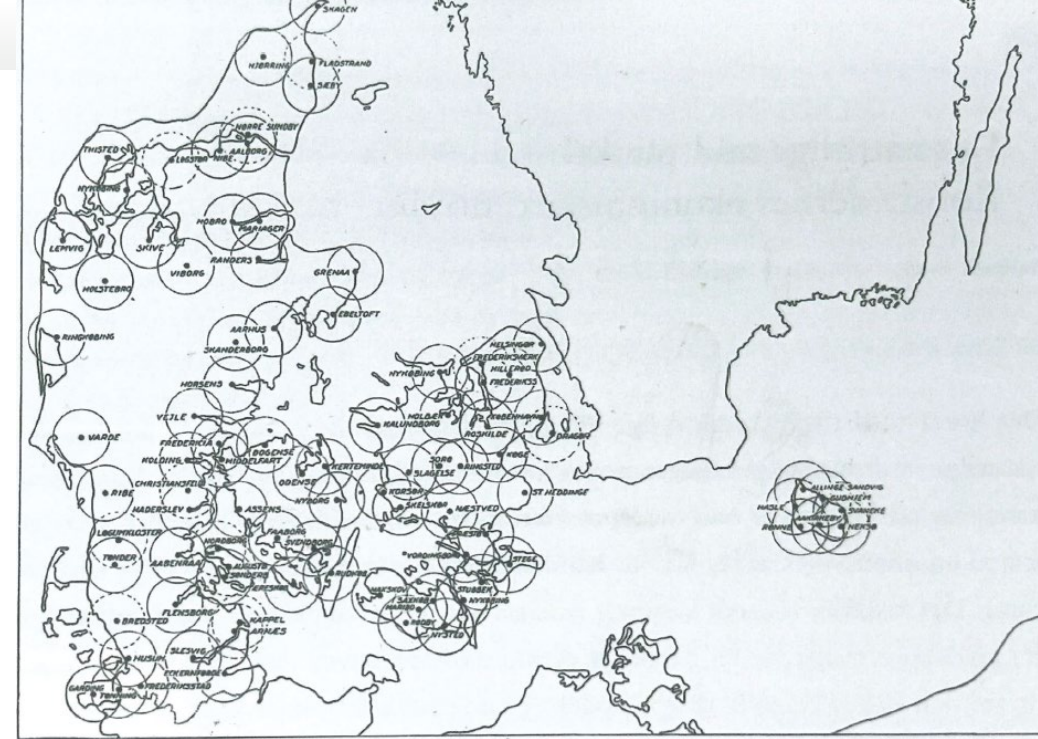
Research building on ESPON TOWN DK project,  
national projects on urban densification and teaching  
and student work (previous and ongoing).



# Changing conditions for towns

(Nielsen, 2023)

- Municipal reform 1970 – difference between urban and rural municipalities dissolved (from 1098 to 277 municipalities)
- Municipal reform 2007 – new municipalities with 'bigger' towns as 'capital' (from 271 to 98 municipalities) many smaller towns lost their status as municipal centre
- Urbanisation, competition, metropolitanisation
- Transformation of the built environment of towns
  - Industrial areas, suburban areas, living at the harbour, housing in the landscape, commercial areas at major roads, more traffic, high rise



"Town houses on speed and gasoline, moving street life into houses and on roofs." (s. 232)



"Chasing development, tax payers and customers resulted in town environments which, within a few decades, have changed dramatically." (s. 220)



# Town centres as objects for planning

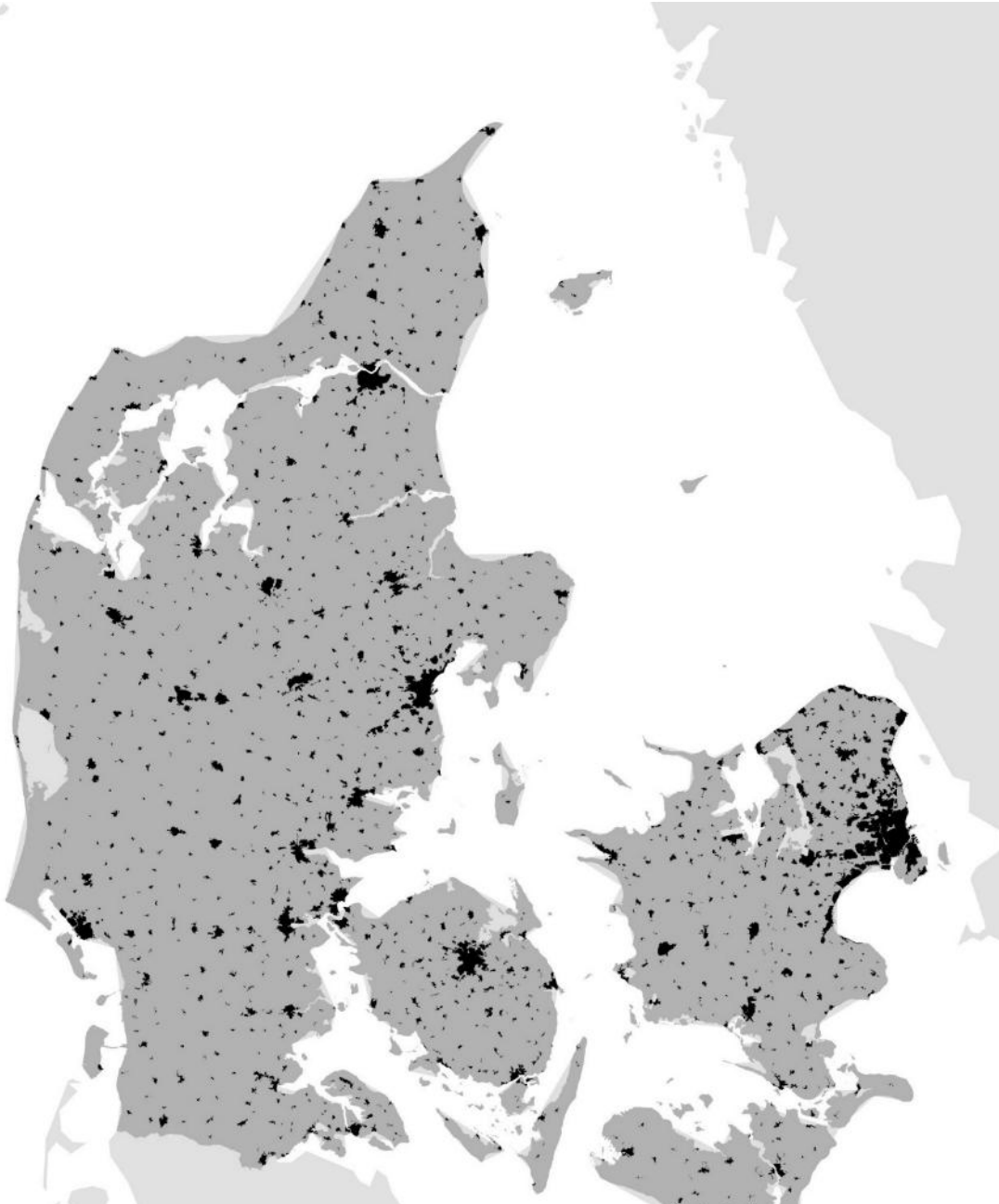
From centre structure to integrated planning

- 1973 'Centre structure'
- 1992 'Central urban areas'
- 1997 'Areas for retail shall be designated in the central part of a town' with the aim to support varied retail in small and medium-sized towns
- 2007 Town centres as multifunctional, cultural centre in the city, still with focus on retail
- 2024 Strategic planning for town centres – culture and public services
- Next? Focus on housing in town centres



# Towns in Denmark

(Jan 2024)



	No.	Population	% 2014-2024	Jobs	% 2014-2024
Copenhagen	1	1.378.649	10,6%	836.099	19,0%
over 50.000	11	1.079.958	10,1%	642.821	11,6%
<b>over 20.000</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>741.491</b>	<b>6,9%</b>	<b>389.347</b>	<b>13,3%</b>
<b>over 4.000</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>982.096</b>	<b>6,5%</b>	<b>436.707</b>	<b>15,6%</b>
over 250	1065	1.052.449	2,4%	303.730	11,9%
All urban areas	1.223	5.234.643	7,5%	2.608.704	14,8%
Rural areas		675.319	-5,3%	332.810	-1,4%
Denmark		5.909.962	5,8%	2.941.514	12,7%

## Track A

# Which types of towns and town centres are there in Denmark?

### Variables on town level

- Population, demographics, households
- Commuting
- Jobs, sectors & education
- Construction, service functions, administrative function, spatial context, regional

### Variables on town centre level

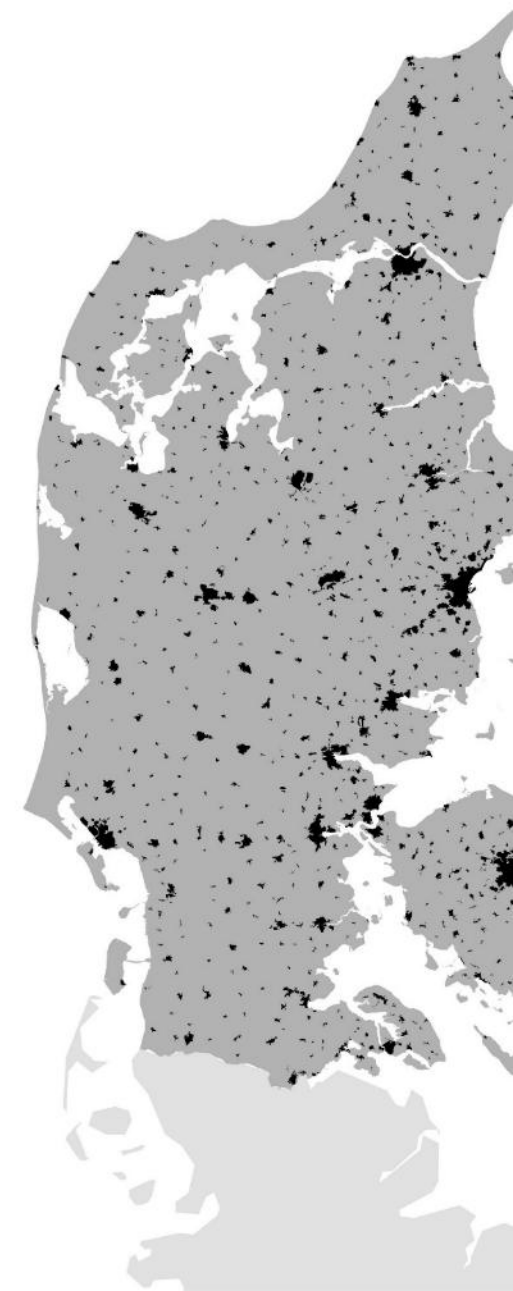
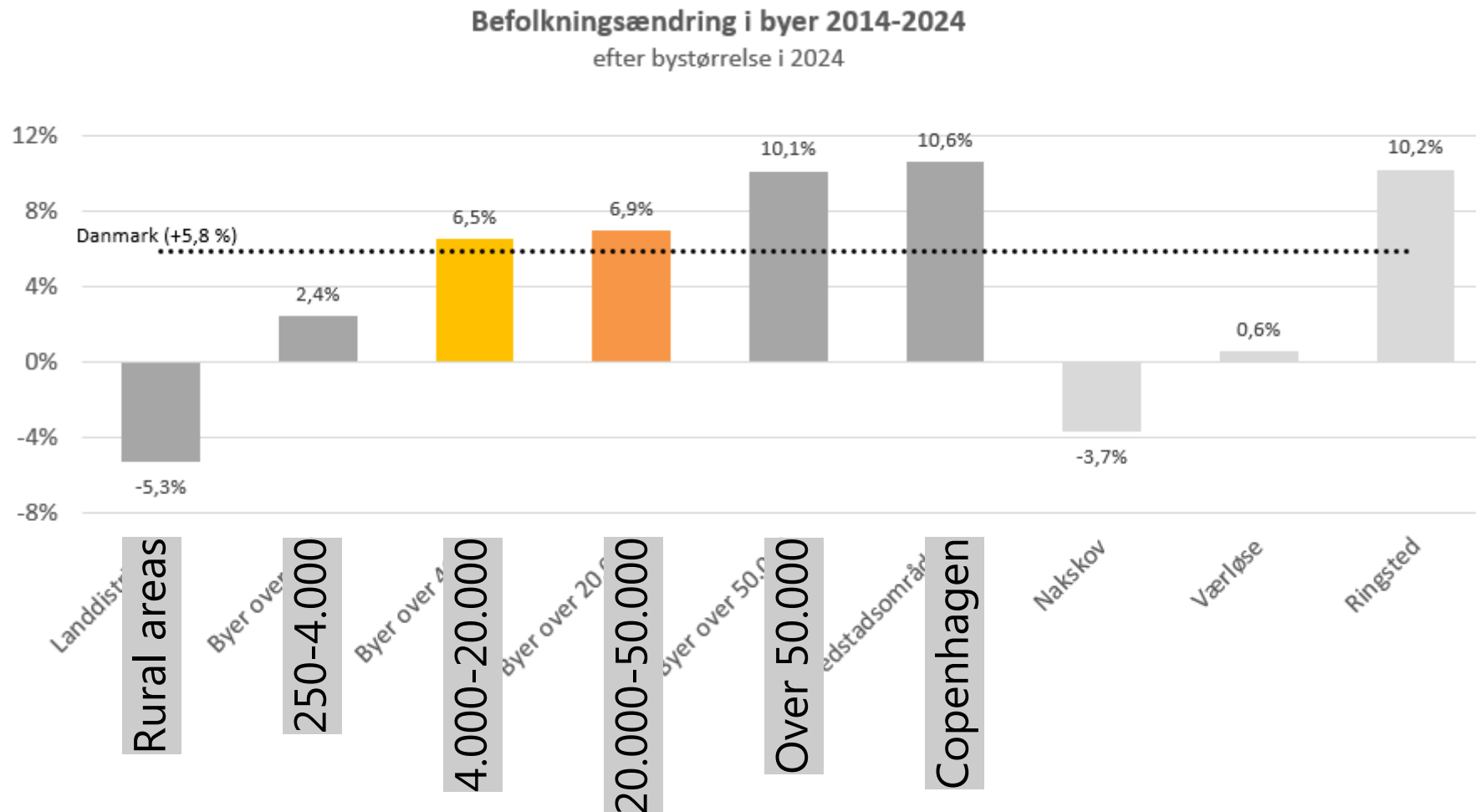
Town centre as defined by municipal plans

- Population
- (Housing)construction
- Functions, e.g. educations, health, public services, retail...
- Spatial context (size, location, density...)

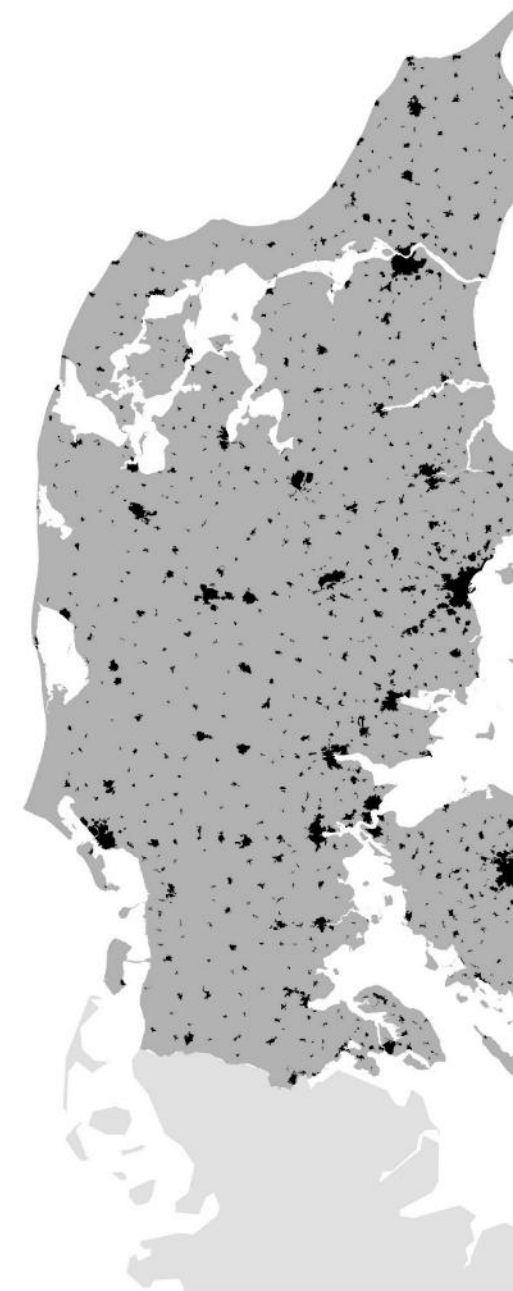
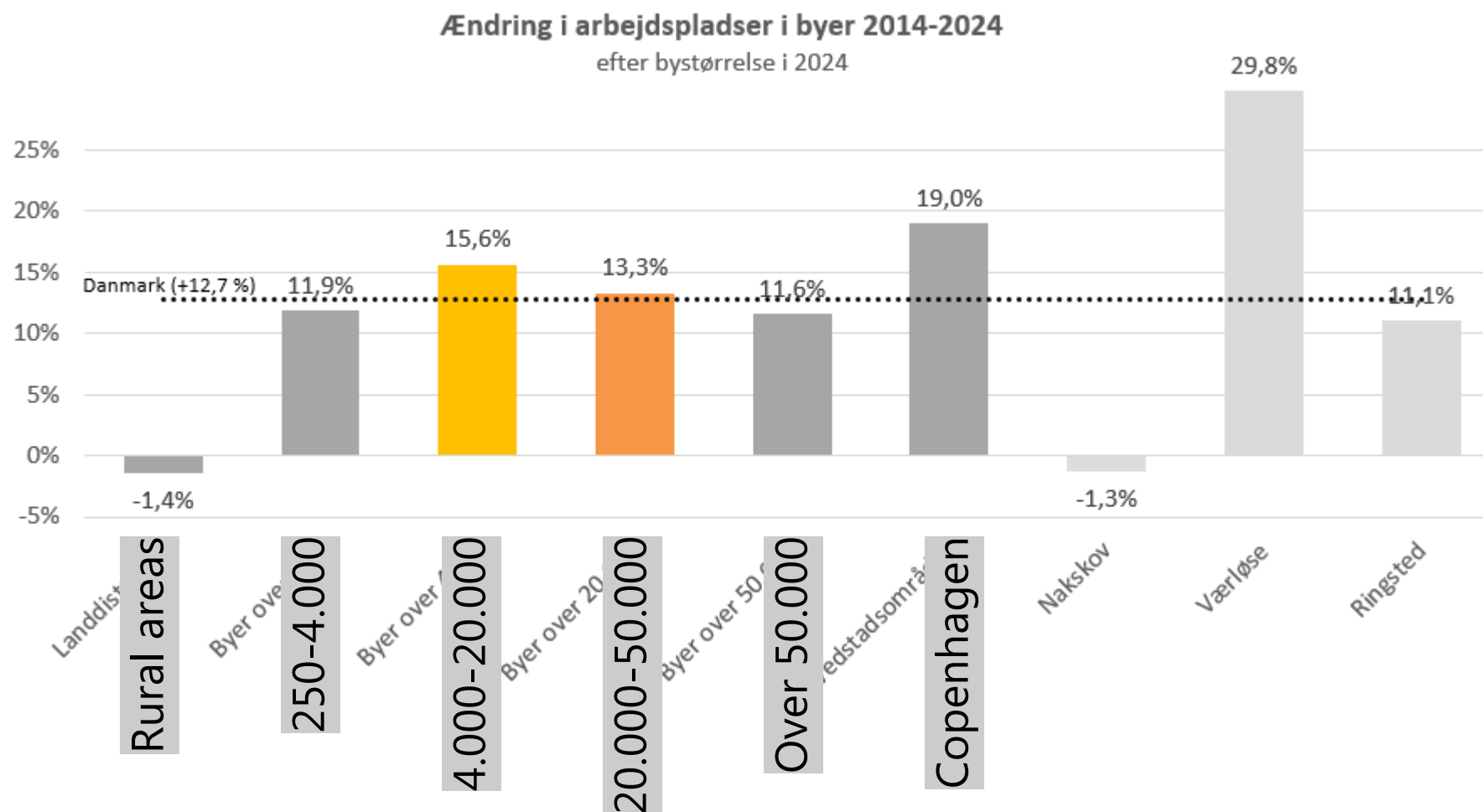
➔ Which types of towns correlate with certain types of town centres? Which relevance has town size, density, growth, jobs and functions, commuting, housing prices, and regional structure region for town and town centre?



# Population change in towns, 2014-2024



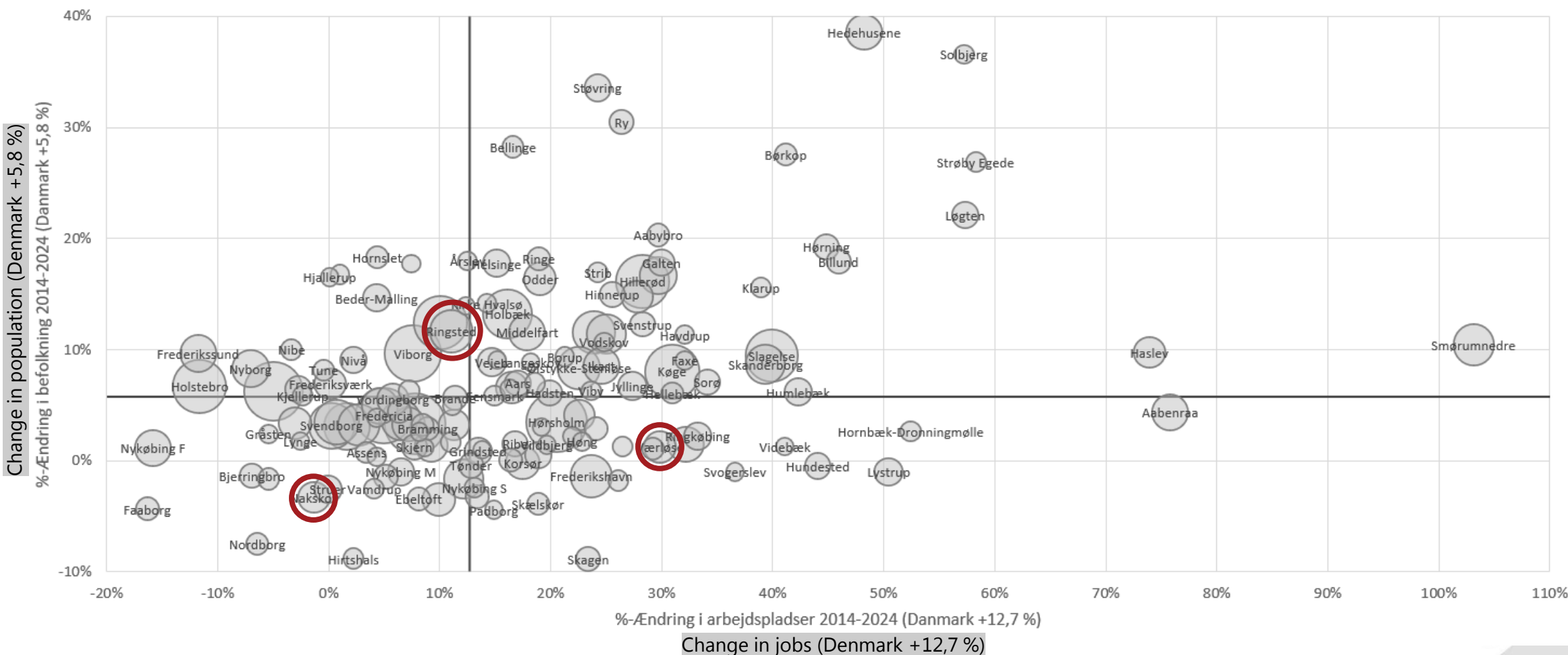
# Job growth in towns, 2014-2024





# Typology of small and medium-sized towns – more than centre/periphery

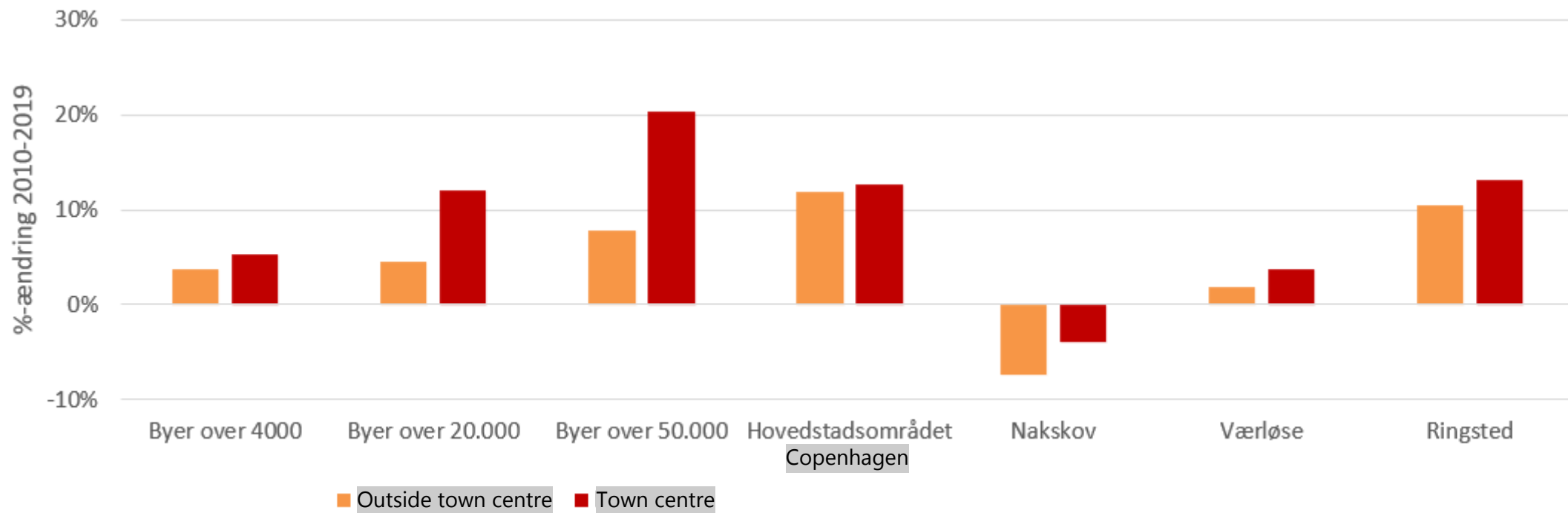
Update of ESPON TOWNS DK typology (2022)



# Population change in and outside centres

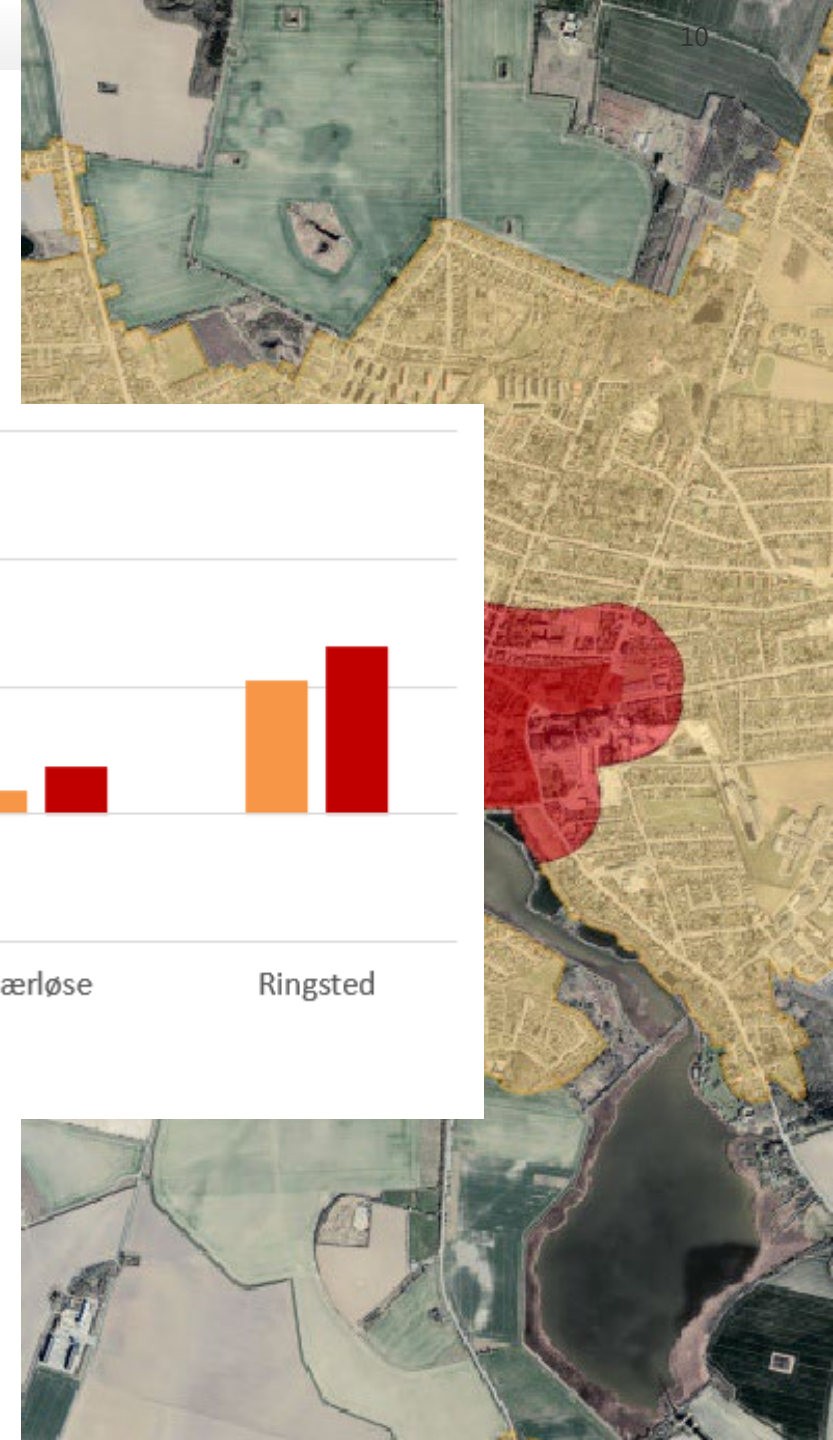
Town centres in effective municipal plans by august 2025, incl. 200 m buffer (ca. 2 min walk)

Outside town centres: Statistics Denmark Urban areas, Jan 2025



**25 %** of all urban population **lives in town centres** in 2019 (24 % i 2010)

**13 %** of the area of towns is within town centres



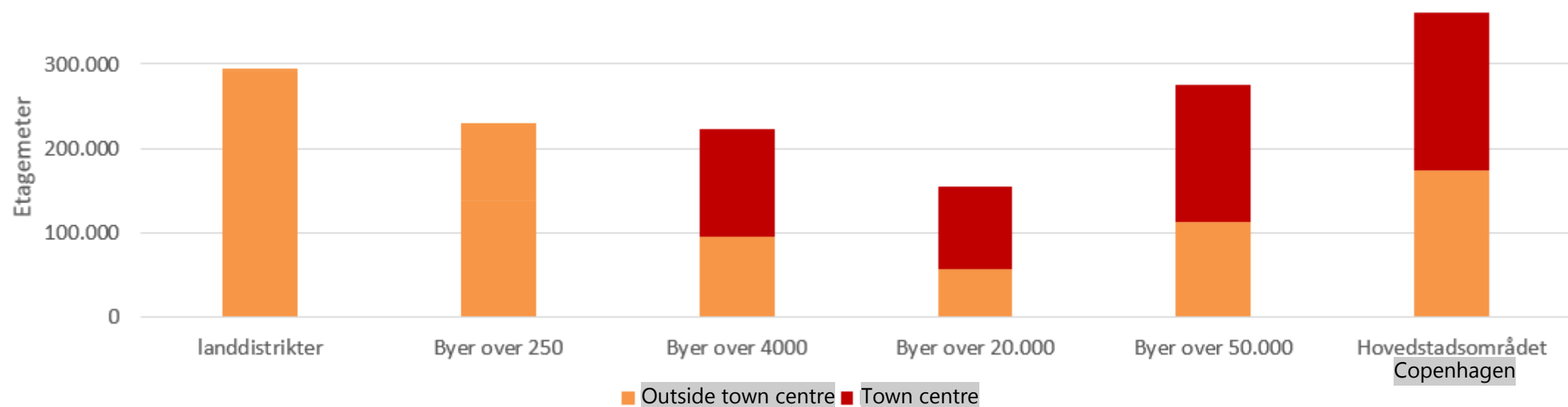




Work in progress, numbers to be verified

# Transformation from industry/commercial to residential 2017-2025

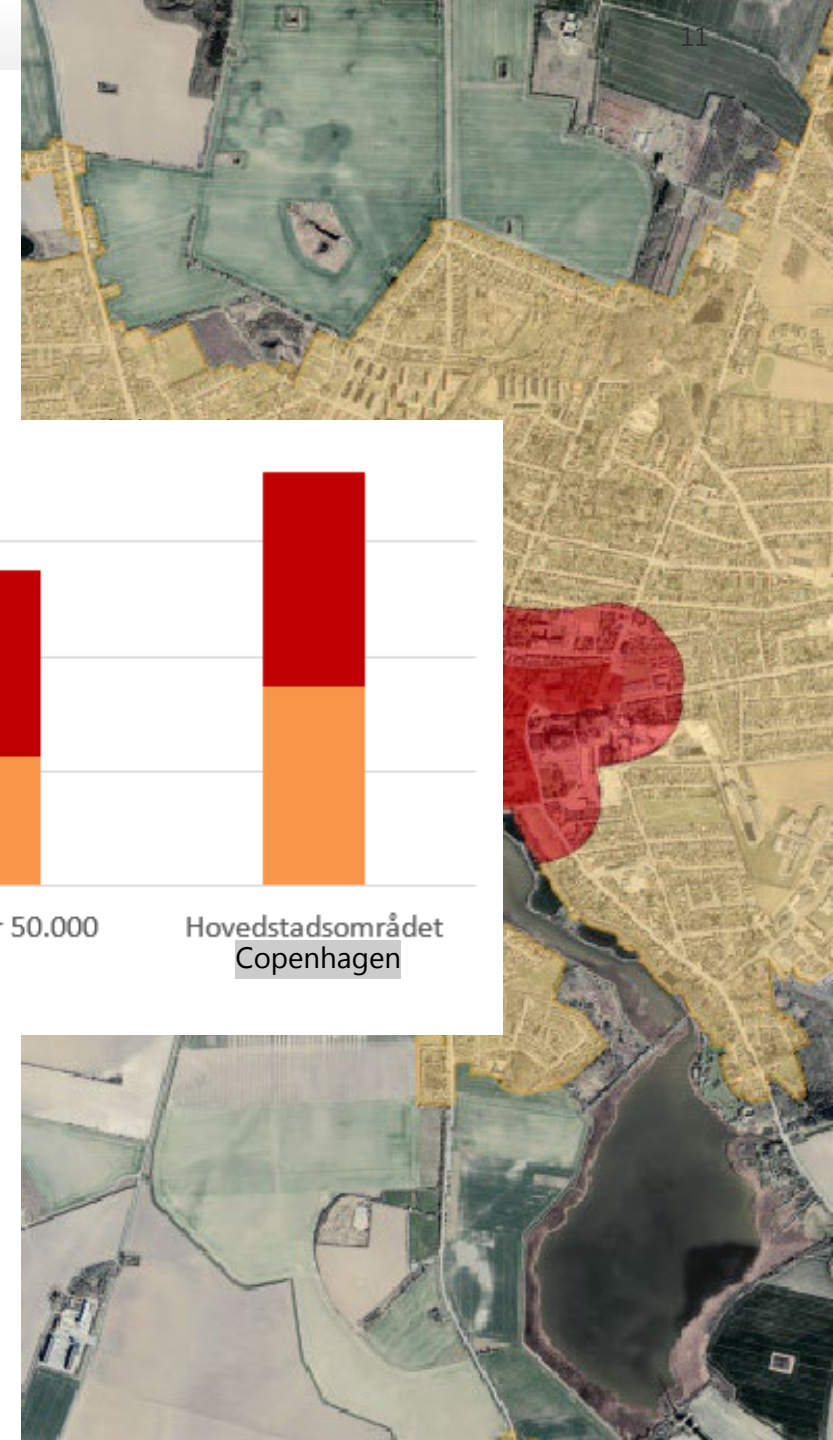
Per building: min. 100 m<sup>2</sup> floor area reduced commercial, min. 100 m<sup>2</sup> increase in residential



In **5800 buildings**, commercial m<sup>2</sup> were reduced while residential m<sup>2</sup> increased (+1,5M m<sup>2</sup>)

37 % located in town centres.

(at the same time 23.5M m<sup>2</sup> residential floor area were newly built, 3M m<sup>2</sup> demolished)

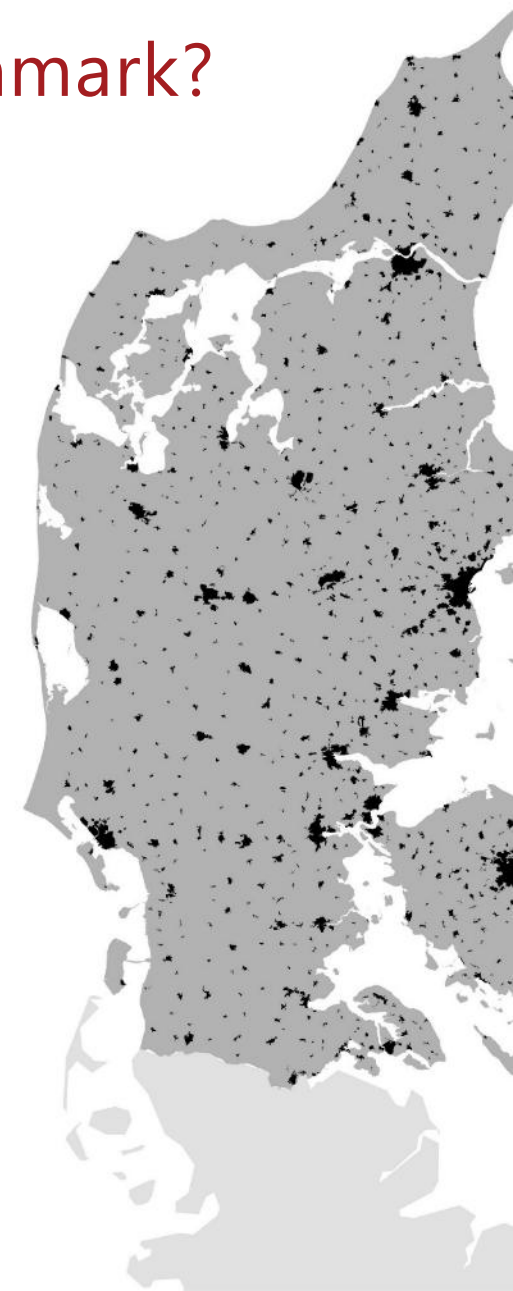


## Track A

# Which types of towns and town centres are there in Denmark?

Small and medium-sized towns hold a stable share in Denmark's population. Differences between towns dependent on regional position, but also...?

- Which relevance has town size, density, growth, jobs and functions, commuting, housing prices, and regional structure region for town and town centre?
- Which towns show different development trajectories than their region (e.g. municipality) and why?
- Town centres are attractive for residence and an important part of small towns' urban structure. How do town centres' functions relate to its town's general development (and which types can we identify)?





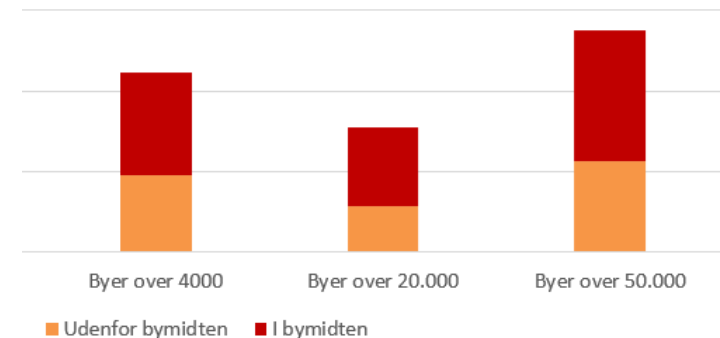
Track B & C:

## Town centres as housing areas!

- New construction and renovation of housing in town centres is ongoing
- More people live in town centres
- And more are wanted – but who wants to live here and why?

Survey: Who, why moved in, what is their experience, how do they use the town centres, what is appreciated/what is challenging?

- Which urban qualities can you work with to attract more citizens?
- What does that mean for a town's identity when housing is in focus?



# New housing in Haslev centre

(12 000 pop)





# New housing in Frederiksværk

(13 000 pop)





# New housing in Helsingør

(8 000 pop)





# New housing in Stenløse

(20 000 pop)





# New housing in Frederikssund

(17 000 pop)





# New housing in Viborg

(41 000 pop)





# New high rise housing in Silkeborg

(50 000 pop)





Helsingør





# Antal fodgængere pr. time

## No. of persons walking per hour

**Assens**  
Gehl Architects





Gilleleje Culture Harbour  
Culture house, supermarket, cinema





# Densification in town centres

- Urban life
- Housing rotation
- Sustainability
- Quality of the urban environment
- Parking
- Urban growth despite densification



*When talking densification, we do not only talk about housing. We densify with urban life, that's our idea.  
(Silkeborg Kommune)*





Spor B & C:

## Preliminary findings from meetings and workshops with case towns

- Retail cannot save functionally drained town centres
- The downturn in shops is mostly seen in the fringes of the town centres as a strip of unattractive streets.
- Can 'semi-shops' – reuse, art, small workshops – contribute positively?
- Town centres are characterized by many parking lots – a double-edged sword. Take up a lot of space, but are perceived by citizens and politicians as a necessity in the competition of the town centre with decentralized shopping options.
- Weak connection between the town centre and the surrounding town. Parking spaces, dull streets, and unsettling passageways mean that the town centre is a destination, not an integrated part of the city.
- For historical reasons, town centres lack a continuous green structure. There are nice parks and trees along the streets, but the potential for a coherent green structure that also utilizes parking lots and open courtyards is rarely exploited.
- Economy and investments for renovation and development are a general problem.







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