

## **Dude, where did that bong go?**

*Ethan Gilsdorf*

Copenhagen's Christiania is trying hard to reinvent itself as a normal district. That's not all bad, Ethan Gilsdorf writes.

The former hash-laden Pusher Street now offers one-stop alternative shopping.

Rap and reggae blast from massive speakers. Vendors sell hippie bric-a-brac like knit hats and candles against a backdrop of psychedelic murals. Pierced neo-punks linger on stoops and sit at ramshackle cafes. It looks like party time on Christiania's main thoroughfare, Pusher Street.

But whoa, where are the stalls touting "Silverhaze Superskunk" pot? The baskets of magic mushrooms? The slabs of hashish stacked up like bricks?

Dude, you won't see any drug pushing on Pusher Street anymore. Christiania – the Copenhagen commune infamous for its in-your-face drug culture – has finally gone legit.

"Just Say No" obviously wasn't this Danish capital district's original slogan. Squatters first took over the site of an abandoned military barracks in 1971 and quickly founded a self-governed "free state" only a Hacky Sack's kick from downtown. Ever since, its 1000 residents have lived cheaply in a lawless zone ruled by consensus, their way of life alternately tolerated and hassled by the Danish authorities.

But the ruling Liberal-Conservative coalition began a hard-line crackdown back in 2003. Enticed by the US\$33 million (\$45 million) market value of this prime chunk of canal-side real estate, and using drugs as a pretext to invade, the government sent in police to demolish hashish stalls and detain suspected dealers. One plan was to raze the entire 32-hectare parcel and erect gentrified, waterfront apartment blocks, throwing the squatters out with the bong water.

The threats were a wake-up call to the community. In a last-ditch PR effort, Christiania decided to stop all drug sales. The government granted a temporary stay of execution. For the past two years, the squatters have stayed. But a law recently passed by the Danish parliament, L205, brings new threats. L205 will force the community to abide by normal market rules: Christianites will have to register, then buy their own apartments and houses, and will be free to sell to outsiders, thus ending the principle of collective property once and for all.

"The main issue in the law is to 'normalise' Christiania," says a community spokesperson who identified herself as Hannah. Hannah says L205 can be enforced with either a "soft glove" or a "hard glove", backed by continued police action.

"We fear it [could] blow up into an incalculable situation."

Meanwhile, crackdowns have continued. As recently as this fall, the government has begun to intervene in ways more aggressive than ever before. On September 7, about 200 police officers arrested more than 100 residents who live in trailers. The intent is for the trailers to be razed so that new development can take their place.

"We hope to be able to make them consider just once more," says Hannah. "If the law is forced through, there will be no more Christiania."

So don't wait to visit. Travellers should see this east Copenhagen neighbourhood before the "free state" ceases to exist at all.

The warehouses are still the home to wood-turners, iron-welders, bicycle workshops and restaurants. But the community survives largely on the laurels of its past reputation. The former hash-laden Pusher Street now offers one-stop alternative shopping and informal cafe culture.

As an example of organic urban planning, Christiania's design remains fascinating. It's very much worth wandering by foot, or bicycle, deeper into the bucolic residential neighbourhoods, where you'll pass Free Tibet exhibits and community gardens behind twig fences.

The ingenious dwellings range from streamline post-and-beam cabins with sod roofs to works-in-progress fashioned from scrap doors and greenhouse windows. Like in Venice, cars are banned. To get around the enchanting labyrinth of lanes, residents pedal three-wheeled bicycle carts full of groceries, or children. A leafy path traces worn 17th-century earthen ramparts beside the defensive moat, where stilt homes lean over the reedy water.

The overall scene is so calming, so otherworldly, one half-expects Bilbo Baggins of the Shire to invite you in for a puff of Middle-earth's finest pipe weed. But Christiania's hobbits have departed, along with their mushrooms (and nightmares of nasty spiders). If you do long for a mind-altering experience as you leave Christiania for the European Union and the clamour of Copenhagen, you may get lucky: it is said nefarious folk still linger by the gate, discreetly whispering "hash?", "grass?" Or try climbing the nearby Vor Frelsers Kirke (Church of our Saviour). Its golden spire is wrapped by a vertiginous exterior staircase guaranteed to induce hallucinations.

It will be a sad day indeed if the "social experiment" must end. But if there's a silver lining to be found, it may be this: While the fate of Christiania remains in doubt, the community is no longer clouded by pot smoke. Christiania going clean and legit at least lets us see its real achievements – a little sanctuary of idealism, hope and romanticism – by the clear light of day.

***Geographic area:***

*Netherlands*