

# How public libraries can help keep democracy alive

By Sara Bindeballe and Asmund Bertelsen

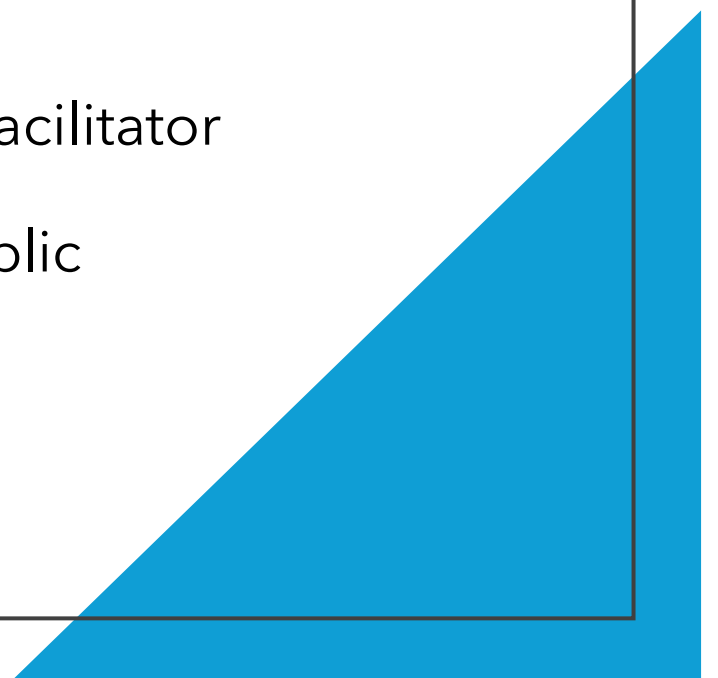
Aarhus Public Libraries

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# About us

**Asmund Bertelsen:** Project manager and democracy developer at Aarhus Public Libraries

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# Background

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Aarhus Public Libraries consists of 18 libraries - one main library located at Dokk1 and 17 local libraries.

Since 2020, Aarhus Public Libraries have had a strategic focus on how libraries can promote **democratic engagement**.



# Organisation of Aarhus Public Libraries' Democracy Initiative

## **A democracy working group consisting of:**

- A full-time *Democracy Developer* responsible for coordinating the democracy initiative across the organisation
- One staff member from each of the organisation's four library teams, contributing to the democracy initiative alongside their other duties - primarily within their own team

**In addition, ad hoc project groups are established for both smaller and larger projects as required.**



# Lov

om

statsunderstøttede Biblioteker.

Amalienborg, den 5te Marts 1920.



København.

Trykt hos J. H. Schultz A/S.

1920.

## It started over 100 years ago...

With the constitutional reform of 1915, women and servants without their own household gained the right to vote.

The first Library Act from 1920 stated in its purpose clause that libraries should *"spread knowledge and general enlightenment."*

Back then a library was also more than a collection of books. *It was about giving people the knowledge and skills they needed to take part in the new democracy - to be active citizens.*



# What is democracy?

## Democracy is a form of government



*Rights, e.g.*

- Right to vote
- Freedom of speech
- Freedom of association

*Procedure, e.g.*

- Free and regular elections
- Majority rule with minority protection
- Separation of powers

**Democracy is  
a conversation,  
a mindset,  
a way of life**



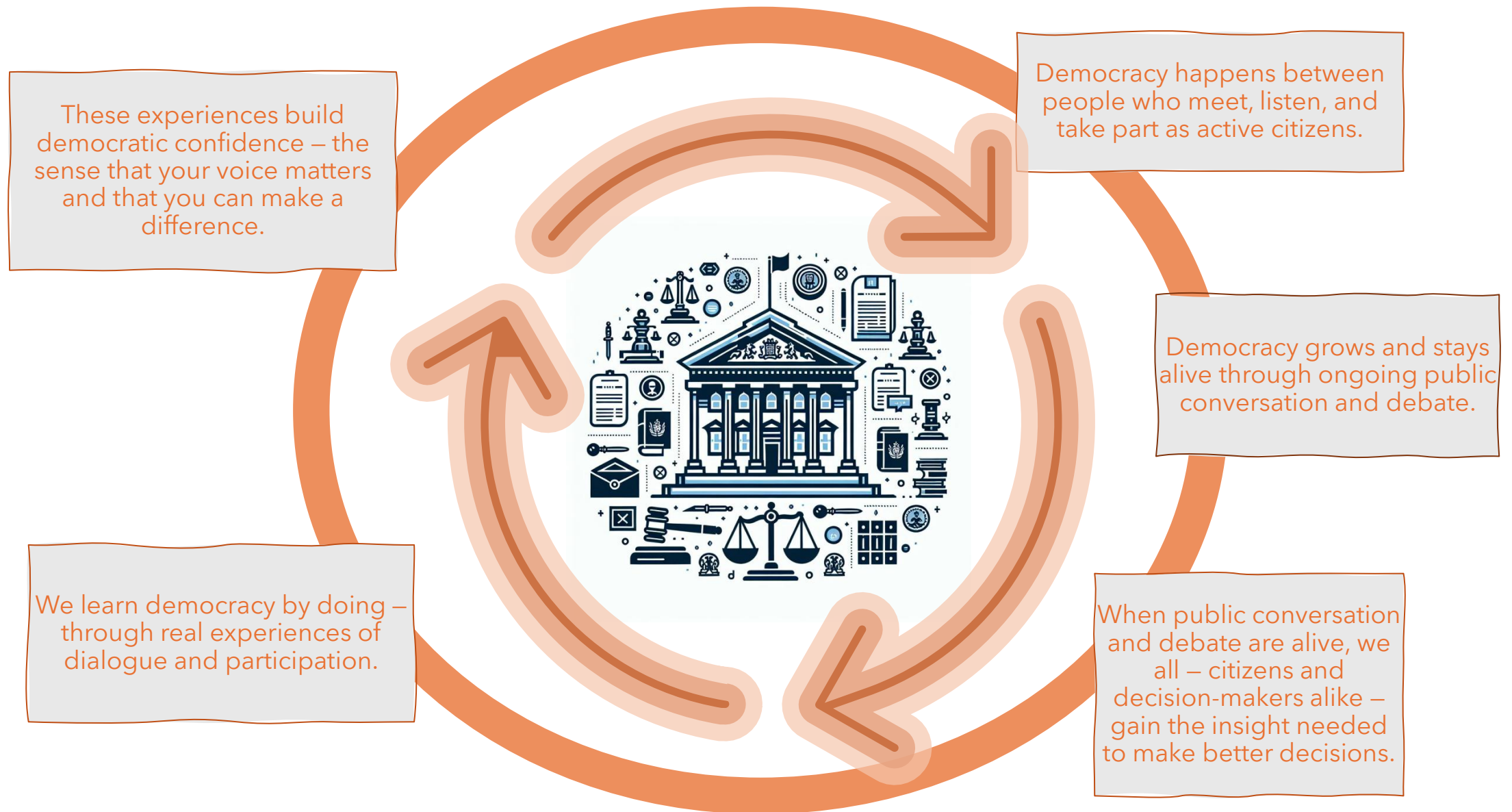
*"Democracy is not just a form of government. **Democracy is a conversation.** It is a way of acting and a way of interacting with other people, where respect for the individual, the community, the environment, and society is central. And where prejudices are challenged, and arguments change opinions."*

Koch, Hal: Hvad er demokrati? / What is democracy? (1945)

*"Democracy is not a victory that has been won, but a struggle that continues. It is not a result achieved once and for all, but a task that must be undertaken anew. Above all, it is not a doctrine that can simply be taught and quickly adopted. **It is a mindset, a way of life.**"*

Koch, Hal: Ordet eller sværdet? / The Word or the Sword? (1945)

# Our understanding of democracy



A strong democracy starts with people taking part

# Ways we see public libraries support participation in democracy



## **Free and equal access to knowledge and culture**

Enables us to participate in democracy



## **The library as a public space**

Sharing public space with strangers in itself strengthens social cohesion



## **The library as a community hub**

Strengthening the social fabric through activities that connect people



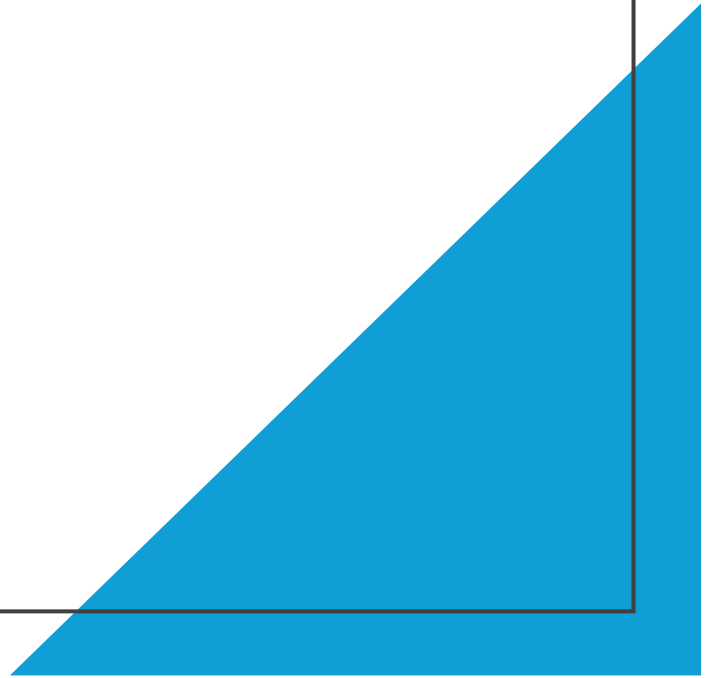
## **The library as a space for dialogue, debate, and disagreement**

Creating room to meet across differences and disagreements



The library as a space for dialogue,  
debate, and disagreement

1. Conversations  
- sharing thoughts



## Newspaper reading club





Let's talk about the new  
school in Gellerup





## Timeout Dialogues

More info:  
[timeoutdialogue.fi](http://timeoutdialogue.fi)



# Timeout

## 2. Debates

- with opposing viewpoints



Debate: Who's making your clothes  
- and how are they?





## Debate: Sexism in music journalism





Debate: What should we do with City Vest?  
[local shopping mall about to be torn down]



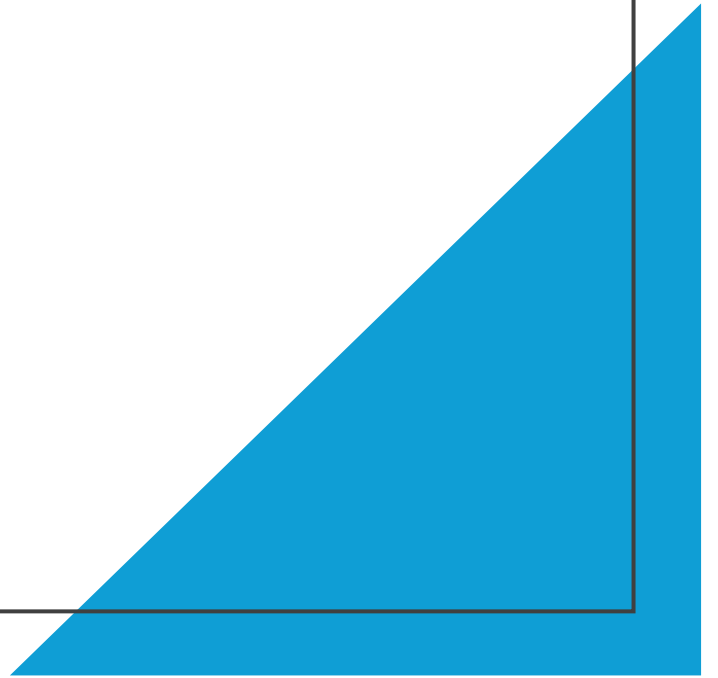


## Debate about assisted suicide





### 3. Meetings between citizens and politicians



# What do we dream about in Gellerup?





Water's coming!





# Debate: Should Denmark recognize Palestine as an independent state?





## Coffee and politics





# The Big Election Debate





*"Democracy is not a victory  
that has been won, but a struggle  
that continues."*

Koch, Hal: Ordet eller sværdet? / The Word or the Sword? (1945)



# Questions?

# **Thank you for listening!**

Feel free to write if you have questions, ideas,  
or anything else you want to address:

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