

Good HEALTH

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 Writer — Stella Roos

What do we need to live well? Over lunch, we invited a group of experts to look at the junction where medicine, wellbeing and the built environment intersect.



ON THE HISTORY OF HEALTH

Stella Roos: Welcome everyone. Clearly the only appropriate way to kick off a conversation about wellbeing and happiness is with a glass of champagne. *Skål*. A reason why we chose the Kurhotel Skodsborg in Denmark as our venue is that this used to be the largest sanatorium in the Nordics. It was founded in the late 1800s and pioneered alternative approaches to health. Malthe, can you set the scene?

Malthe Kouassi Bjerregaard: There were two parallel movements going on at the turn of the 20th century. On the one hand, scientific knowledge was exploding. We discovered that bacteria could cause illness, which was mind-blowing – to suddenly be able to see what made people sick. At the same time, there was a push against it because it felt too scientific. There was a movement to bring in natural treatments alongside, or maybe against, these discoveries. The sanatoria straddled that gap. There was an escapism in these places. It was cutting the connection to the modern world, which was seen as a stressful place.

Stella Roos: This idea of “the cure”, of escaping for months at a time, was a common practice all over Europe – for those who could afford it. It was the heyday of the grand spas. Would you say that Skodsborg was Denmark’s answer to Baden-Baden or Vichy or Marienbad?

Malthe Kouassi Bjerregaard: Yes, because Skodsborg didn’t accept tuberculosis patients. Most sanatoria in the 20th century were first and foremost for treating tuberculosis. Since they didn’t have any antibiotics, all they could do was give patients fresh air and a regime of bathing. Here, it was more luxurious. You came to get away from modern life.

Stella Roos: The founder of Kurhotel Skodsborg, Carl Ottosen, wrote a book that advised people to avoid smoking, be vegetarian, exercise. Those were unorthodox, radical ideas at the time. He also promoted alternative therapies: there were more than 100 different types of hydrotherapy on offer. The decline of the great spas had a lot to do with the advent of modern medicine, including the development of antibiotics, and realising that you don’t cure tuberculosis by wrapping yourself in a blanket and looking at the sea.

Camilla van Deurs: But you might cure something else.

ON A HOLISTIC APPROACH

Stella Roos: Let’s bring this closer to the present day. Ida, when you went to medical school, how were you taught to think about what wellness is?



Mette Skaerbaek
 The beauty founder

I’m the founder of Karmameju Skincare, a Copenhagen-based natural beauty brand. Next year the company will celebrate its 25th anniversary.



Malthe Kouassi Bjerregaard
 The historian

I’m a historian and a curator at Medicinsk Museion, a museum and research institute dedicated to the history of health, and which is part of the University of Copenhagen.



Camilla van Deurs
 The architect

I have been the city architect of Copenhagen for nearly five years. Before that, I was a partner in a private practice with offices in Copenhagen, New York and San Francisco.



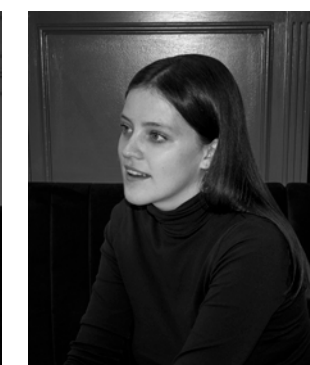
Ida Holme
 The doctor

I’m a medical doctor with more than 20 years of experience. I work at pharmaceutical company Novo Nordisk as head of risk-based quality management.



Chiara Barla
 The food entrepreneur

I’m a chef and run the café Apotek 57 in Copenhagen. I’m originally from Italy and have lived in Denmark for six years.



Stella Roos
 The host

I am a contributing writer for *Konfekt* and the design correspondent of *Monocle*. I am originally from Finland.

“In Copenhagen everywhere can be reached by bike. Everything seems designed for people and not just for productivity. It makes it easy to be well”



Ida Holme: It's not a word that was used in that sense. Everybody knows that whatever takes over in the mind will affect the body in some manner. The moment a chemical is in your body, it has some kind of effect. But medical school was focused on diseases, drugs and surgeries. A holistic approach was not – and I would say is still not – part of it.

Stella Roos: Have you seen the approach evolve over your career?

Ida Holme: It has grown and changed a lot. Now we have discussions about natural medication and all kinds of treatments, whether it's physiotherapy, cryotherapy or surgery. To me, medical treatment is a supplement to the totality of the human being. You may need some kind of surgery or medication in order to overcome a hurdle and get to your new normal. For example, if you have a crick in the neck, you're going to need some painkillers and medication to be able to move your muscles. But you also need to do some exercises to make sure it doesn't happen again.

Stella Roos: How about the rise of the wellness industry: has it changed the way we think about our own wellbeing? The word wellness wasn't invented before the 1950s.

Malthe Kouassi Bjerregaard: We have a tendency to lean towards what we believe. Both the medical industry and the wellness industry lay on the throttle in terms of saying that the other one is the villain.

Mette Skaerbaek: Very little has changed about what it is that does us good: it's sleep, rest, food, hydration, movement, relationships. Lately I've been interested in a big study on human development that was done at Harvard. For people's happiness, relationships are much more important than social status, IQ or genes. It's nothing extreme, nothing surprising. What makes us happy is still the same as it was many years ago. What I love is that in Denmark, most of it is free: fresh air, clean water to drink, nature, movement. It's not a high-society thing.

ON DESIGNING FOR HEALTH

Stella Roos: Camilla, in your day-to-day work as city architect of Copenhagen, how do you think about wellbeing? How do you integrate it into what you do?

Camilla van Deurs: The most important approach is providing the framework to be a healthy citizen, structuring it around everyday life. That's everything from ensuring that everyone has access to good, local produce, as well as opportunities to walk, to cycle, access to nature. We've developed new policies in the past few years for higher biodiversity and plant coverage. That's affecting everything because to have more green space, you can't build as much.

We heal faster if we look at a tree and learn better if we have good light – all these things we know instinctively are good. But they take up space, and space is the most valuable resource in the city. Navigating that balance is really what my job is all about.

Stella Roos: What would you say have been the great successes of Copenhagen's urban planning?

Camilla van Deurs: To me, the harbour baths are emblematic of the change in Copenhagen over the past 30 years: cleaning up the harbour and creating an environment where you can swim in the water, which took an investment of more than DKK2bn (€268m). It's become a symbol of a recreational lifestyle, being close to nature. It's really important for the city.

Stella Roos: The rest of you all live in Copenhagen or nearby. What's your verdict? How does the city affect your wellness?

Chiara Barla: The balance between life and work is something that is peculiar to Denmark. This means taking care of your free time and enjoying it. I come from Italy, which is completely different. We have the sun, we have good food, but everything is taken for granted. Here, when we have it, we need to enjoy it as much as possible. I also appreciate the fact that everywhere can be reached by bike. Everything seems designed for people and not just for productivity. I feel it makes it easy for me to be well. A lot of people that I know who come for a weekend are so surprised. It really is like going to Mars.

Stella Roos: You also run a place that encapsulates this Danish philosophy. At your café, Apotek 57, your job title is not chef but curator.

Chiara Barla: You need to take the holistic approach that we were talking about earlier, even for food. It's not just about the taste, but it's the way the food looks, the way the place looks, how the people who are serving the food talk to you and smile at you. The food is the main vehicle but there are so many things around it. I really like Apotek because the kitchen is in front of the guests. The person who is making the food, the ingredients – everything is in front of you.

Malthe Kouassi Bjerregaard: For my part, it's been really nice to rediscover Copenhagen with a two-year-old because now it feels like every space falls into two categories: perilous for a child or something akin to a nice playground. Thankfully, Copenhagen has mostly the latter.

ON MENTAL HEALTH

Stella Roos: That brings me to the next question. If you have children, how has that changed how you think about health?

Camilla van Deurs: We have teenagers, so health is them not eating McDonald's the whole time.

Mette Skaerbaek: My main focus is actually on their mental health. I think that's what is by far the most important focus at this point. We eat so much better than in many places in the world but for children to navigate through social media and the way the whole world is loaded with information, that is really on my mind.

Stella Roos: We've gone from worrying about the telegraph to being worried about our phones. Today we don't go to a spa to cure ourselves of some actual medical ailment but for a more spiritual reason, related to dealing with new technology. Have we come full circle?

Malthe Kouassi Bjerregaard: It's the same worries in new packages, for sure. Think back on when this building was created and the ideas it came from. The inspiration came from John Harvey Kellogg, who

had founded a sanatorium in the US. He developed a theory called auto-intoxication, which was that we are self-inflicting poison on our gut and that a clean gut was a good gut. That's why he invented Kellogg's cornflakes to be the blandest, most uninspiring breakfast. And this idea reflects very much on what we're seeing today: that we are self-harming with our phones. There is always a push and pull between how much we isolate ourselves from the modern world and how impossible that is in practice.

Chiara Barla: Pleasure is also important. You need an awareness. Maybe a glass of wine gives me pleasure; two bottles makes me very drunk. From my own point of view, I wouldn't say the food I serve is dangerous or unhealthy but it is quite heavy. I cook with butter, for example. But I use nice products and I believe that moment of joy is part of wellness. If I want to indulge myself, I'll do it, and what I taste is something that makes me happy for that moment. But then it's about balance.

Malthe Kouassi Bjerregaard: Cheers everyone!

Camilla van Deurs: We just renovated the gardens at Bispebjerg Hospital, Copenhagen's only functioning hospital in a listed building. The gardens are from 1913 and are so beautiful. Now they're being used for treatments, as originally intended. It's an example of thinking holistically. I don't think that modern hospitals go into that level of detail. Finding the money to use landscapes actively is difficult.

Ida Holme: It's about using all the senses that we have: seeing, tasting, smelling, feeling on the skin. It's all about biochemicals in essence, right? Hitting the right place at the right time. There have been great advances in personalised medicine, tailoring treatments to the individual genome. This approach targets the dosage of medication for each person, taking into consideration the benefits and the side effects. That's a huge change in how we approach treatment.

“Even 20 years ago, when I was working as a general practitioner, if I had patients who wanted to try acupuncture, I said ‘If it's good for you, go do it’”

Mette Skaerbaek: In skincare we're starting to talk a lot now about neuro-cosmetics. Just like you can apply a painkiller locally on your skin, in skincare we're working with aromatherapy, for example, on products that can trigger happiness.

ON THE WELLNESS INDUSTRY

Stella Roos: Of course, there is no question that a pharmacological approach is the cornerstone of modern medicine and fundamental to curing disease. It's interesting, however, that many treatments that for a long time were considered natural healing practices, have now been proven to have scientific grounds. Ida, over your career, how have you squared your medical education with more alternative treatments?

Ida Holme: The achievements of modern medicine are incredible – that's why I work with what I do. Development of a new medicine follows a very high scientific standard and when patients put their trust in clinicians at the hospital, it has to

be backed by science. But even 20 years ago, when I was working as a general practitioner, if I had patients who wanted to try natural healing or acupuncture, I said, “If it's good for you, go do it.” You might absolutely need medicine but you may also need something else.

Stella Roos: It goes without saying that wellness is a trillion-dollar industry and one that's well known for preying on our insecurities. How do you recognise something that's not a real, long-term fix?

Mette Skaerbaek: In the 1990s, when I was working as a model in the fashion industry, it was the Fit for Life plan, then it was the Atkins diet – there was always something new. I don't believe in any of those. I don't believe that there is one type of diet that is good for everybody.

Malthe Kouassi Bjerregaard: It's something that keeps repeating. My favourite example is the great yoghurt craze of 1904. There was a very famous researcher who had

studied Bulgarian shepherds because they live longer than average. What he observed was that they ate a lot of yoghurt. Then he went back to Paris and presented his findings: maybe the shepherds' rich diet, combined with exercise might affect the microbiome and make them live longer. The front pages of the newspapers read, “If you want to live to 100 years, eat yoghurt”. From the UK to America, it just went viral and high-street pharmacies turned into yoghurt saloons.

Ida Holme: It's true: we've always wanted to live longer and look good for the rest of our lives.

Stella Roos: Maybe the surprising thing is that we haven't understood by now that there are no simple fixes.

Chiara Barla: We are always looking for something, right? We're always looking for the solution to our bad thoughts or unhappiness. Some people find it in religion. Others have turned to, “this





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new diet will make me beautiful, this new cream will solve my skin problem”. This kind of belief is something that we need.

Malthe Kouassi Bjerregaard: One of the fascinating things that scientists are looking into at the moment is epigenetics, which is the layer on top of DNA. The principle behind this is about how much is out of your control, actually. There are so many things that clash with the wellness narrative that you can take charge of your own health. Time and time again, it comes back to factors that were determined before you were even born.

ON DENMARK’S PROVISIONS FOR HAPPINESS

Stella Roos: The Nordic countries have a reputation of quite successfully levelling that playing field to ensure that everyone has the same starting point. Has Denmark succeeded in that?

Camilla van Deurs: We’re not picture perfect but that doesn’t mean we give up. We’re constantly trying to build better places. We do a lot of urban regeneration and we always do that in co-operation with the police, with the school system, with the health system, with jobs and education. It’s not just urban planning; it’s all of these fields together. You can’t look at one thing and expect that to raise the quality of life.

Malthe Kouassi Bjerregaard: One thing you hope would also emerge in the health industry is that you can’t have just one expert. The challenges that we face today include so many layers in terms of looking at standards of living and health issues, and education, that you can’t just listen to one expert and hope to unlock everything. It’s rather like this lunch: it’s about bringing different voices together.

Stella Roos: Now that dessert is served, maybe we’re ready to tackle the question of Denmark being one of the happiest countries in the world – though now it’s a competition, since you’ve been toppled by my home country, Finland. An outsider’s view of Denmark is still that it’s the happiest country in the world, and it’s all about *hygge* or cosiness. Would you complicate this picture?

Malthe Kouassi Bjerregaard: I’ve become more and more happy during this meal! But, as I understand it, the World Happiness

Report doesn’t ask about happiness; it asks about contentment. It’s really not the same thing.

Chiara Barla: I always say that I see more happy people in Italy than in Denmark but the thing is that here, life is easy. It’s not a problem if you lose your job; it is not a problem to access healthcare.

Malthe Kouassi Bjerregaard: Over the past five years, we’ve seen the flip side of that *hygge* “we are the happiest nation in the world” story, which is that people who immigrate are made to feel they should be very grateful if they can come to Denmark and stay. This is the weird version of us being the best country in the world because then we impose that on people who want to come and live here.

Camilla van Deurs: And they have to be like us, because we’re the happiest people.

Mette Skaerbaek: I completely agree. But this is typically Danish as well, that we’re a whole table trying to talk ourselves down. From a completely personal level, I lived abroad for 10 years. Why did I move back to Denmark? I absolutely love that the ocean is all around us. It calms me. I feel connected with nature, I feel connected to the water. I have fresh air, I have light. What if we really are the happiest people in the world? I have never found a place where the grass was greener. ——— K

The venue

The Kurhotel Skodsborg, which is 20km up the coast from Copenhagen, has been drawing visitors seeking a reset from all around Scandinavia for the past 125 years. Founded by wellness pioneer Carl Ottosen, the sanatorium introduced many alternative, holistic treatments to Denmark and was the largest in the Nordics in its 1920s heyday. Back then, the offering was weeks- or months-long escapism, regimented by a vegetarian diet, outdoor exercise in the nude and more than 100 different types of hydrotherapy. With its spa, sea-view suites and dock for invigorating dips in the Øresund, today the Kurhotel Skodsborg remains a favourite for Copenhageners in need of a weekend retreat. At Brasserie Carl, the restaurant overlooking the garden, the menu has relaxed since Ottosen’s days and now serves flavourful, French-inflected fare featuring regional meat and produce.

The menu

Citrus-marinated whole flounder, watercress
—
Veal tenderloin from Himmerland, glazed young asparagus and carrots, new potatoes with chives, chicken fumé
—
Pavlova, mint cream, strawberries, white chocolate ice cream

Wine

Michel Gonet champagne
La Tunella Pinot Grigio
Gabriel d’Ardhuy Bourgogne Pinot Noir
Brachetto