From Walled Town to Modern Capital: Why Copenhagen Abandoned its Old Fortifications in the 1850s and How Wider 19th-Century Changes Shaped the City

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Introduction

In the mid-nineteenth century Copenhagen made a decisive break with its past: the medieval and early modern walls that had long enclosed the city were given up in the 1850s. This choice coincided with far-reaching political, technological, economic, and demographic shifts that collectively pushed Copenhagen from a fortress-bound town toward a modern capital. This paper (1) explains why and how the city was fortified in earlier centuries; (2) analyzes why the old fortifications were abandoned in the 1850s; and (3) discusses the broader developments in the same period that shaped modern Copenhagen. The argument advanced here is that the decision to abandon the old walls was not an isolated military update but a paradigmatic urban and political transition: military obsolescence and urban pressure converged with constitutional change, industrial-era technologies, and rapid population growth to produce a different kind of city—one that could expand, circulate, and modernize while relocating defence to an outer perimeter.[1]

[1]For the long chronology of fortifications and their nineteenth-century reconfiguration, see *The Fortifications of Copenhagen: A Guide to 900 Years of Fortifications History* (course reading). For political background, see Jespersen, *A History of Denmark*, ch. "Civil War and Revolution," and Bregnsbo & Jensen, *The Rise and Fall of the Danish Empire*, ch. 11. For urban-technological change after the walls, see Emanuel, "Making a Bicycle City."

Why and How Copenhagen Was Fortified (c. 1100–1600)

Copenhagen's original fortification logic combined security, trade, and prestige. Archaeology indicates the settlement began as a seasonal herring market in the late eleventh century. Within about a century, a defensive moat and wall enclosed a compact market area between today's Rådhuspladsen and Gammeltorv–Nytorv. These early works belong to the context of twelfth-century dynastic conflict (the royal wars of the 1140s–50s) and maritime insecurity in the Øresund.[2]

In 1167–1171, Bishop Absalon strengthened the site by erecting a circular stone-walled castle on Slotsholmen to deter Wendish piracy and to provide a secure episcopal court—an early signal that Copenhagen would become a center of rule.[3] Through the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the city's defences were rebuilt and extended as Copenhagen became a full merchant town with parish churches and monasteries. Rampart, moat, and gates (West, North, East) were joined by stretches of brick wall and towers; flanking towers appeared as techniques spread from crusader fortifications. The topography of water was integral: engineered lakes and channels (e.g. Damhussøen, the Ladegårdså) fed the moat system, demonstrating that defence and hydraulic management were inseparable in medieval Copenhagen.[4]

Repeated shocks tested these works: the Lübeckers sacked the town in 1249; Prince Jaromar breached the line at the later-named *Jarmers Gab* in 1259; Hanseatic pressure and Swedish wars recurred.[5] Royal policy amplified the city's strategic value. From the fifteenth century, Copenhagen sat within a fortified Øresund system (Krogen/Kronborg, Malmöhus, Landskrona), linked to the Sound Dues (1425), which monetized transit through the strait.[6] By the sixteenth century, brick towers, city gates, and bastioned works were repeatedly repaired—but the arms revolution (gunpowder artillery, later high-calibre guns) slowly undermined the defensive logic of close-in urban walls.

From Bastions to Bottleneck: Why the Old Walls Were Abandoned in the 1850s

Two intertwined pressures pushed Copenhagen to abandon the old walls: military obsolescence and urban modernization.

[2] *Fortifications of Copenhagen: A Guide to 900 Years of Fortifications History* (excerpt on 1100–1600).
[3] Ibid.
[4] *Fortifications of Copenhagen: A Guide to 900 Years of Fortifications History* (1100–1600 excerpt).
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.

Military obsolescence

The British bombardment of 1807 demonstrated that traditional bastioned walls could not protect a dense city against modern naval and artillery attack.[7] By mid-century, military engineering had moved toward detached forts, earthen coverings, and long-range coastal batteries, often in concrete and earth rather than exposed masonry. Danish engineers proposed in 1853 a comprehensive re-fortification, and Parliament adopted in 1858 a seawards act to modernize outer defences with new sea forts and batteries.[8] The crucial point for urban life is that the *new* defences would be set well away from the urban core, no longer enfolding the population within walls.

Urban pressure and the needs of a modern city

By the 1850s, close-in ramparts were not only militarily weak; they also throttled the city's ability to grow. Walls, ditches, and the associated servitudes restricted building and circulation; customs control at few tightly policed gates created daily traffic bottlenecks. Demographic growth and industrial activities needed land and movement. Removing the old fortifications cleared the way for new neighbourhoods (the *brokvarterer*) and modern infrastructures.[9] In short, abandoning the walls was urban reform as much as military reform.

What Replaced the Walls: The Outer Defence System (1858–1918)

Abandoning the old walls did *not* mean abandoning defence. It meant relocating and reconfiguring it in a way compatible with an expanding metropolis.

Phase I: Coastal modernisation (1858–1868)

Following the 1858 act, Denmark modernised and built coastal works to command channels and approaches: Trekroner, Lynetten, Strickers (rebuilt), and new positions like Mellem Fort and Prøvestenen, often in concrete and earth after comparative firing tests.[10] The shift to concrete/earth signalled an embrace of contemporary fortification science.

[7] *Fortifications of Copenhagen: A Guide to 900 Years of Fortifications History* (1858–1998 excerpt).
[8] Ibid.
[9] Emanuel, "Making a Bicycle City: Infrastructure and Cycling in Copenhagen since 1880'.
[10] *Fortifications of Copenhagen: A Guide to 900 Years of Fortifications History* (1858–1998 excerpt).

Phase II: Land forts, Vestvolden, and civic mobilisation (1886–1894)

Amid contentious politics—including recourse to provisional finance—the state built a landward arc roughly 11 km from the city center: the West Wall (*Vestvolden*), land forts (e.g. Gladsaxe, Bagsværd, Lyngby, Garderhøj, Fortun) and batteries (Tinghøj, Buddinge, Vangede, Gentofte, Bernstorff), plus coastal positions (Hvidøre, Charlottenlund, Middelgrunden, Kastrup, Avedøre).[11] Notably, the Fatherland's Defence Association (*Frivillig Selvbeskatning til Forsvarets Fremme*) financed and donated sites and works (e.g. Garderhøj Fort), reflecting an unusual fusion of civic subscription and national defence.[12] Critically, this ring *did not strangle* the city: it created a defensive belt while leaving the urban core free to spread.

Phase III: Completing the seaward arc and wartime field works (1910–1918)

Defence acts in 1909 prompted further seaward extensions—Taarbæk Fort, Flak Fort, Saltholm Battery, Dragør Fort, Kongelunds Battery, Mosede Battery—partly closing earlier gaps (the "hole in the north front") and deepening Amager's defence.[13] In the First World War, Denmark mined Baltic exits and ringed Copenhagen with extensive field entrenchments and wire, effectively sealing the metropolitan area—even though no attack came.[14] Ironically, advances in heavy artillery (e.g. 42 cm howitzers) now outranged older forts, prompting a forward field line (*Tunestillingen*) c. 18 km ahead of Vestvolden. After 1920 many works were decommissioned, yet a surprising number survive as heritage landscapes.

Other Developments Shaping Modern Copenhagen (c. 1848–1918)

The mid-century abandonment of the walls converged with several transformations that together produced the modern city.

Political change and the re-scaling of the state

Denmark's 1848 revolution and the 1849 constitution ended absolutism and inaugurated restricted monarchy with parliamentary law-making and ministerial responsibility.[15] The

[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Jespersen, *A History of Denmark*, "Civil War and Revolution."

Schleswig-Holstein question and the London Protocol (1852) framed fraught national borders and identities; following the catastrophe of 1864, Denmark turned inward: "what is lost outwards must be gained inwards."[16] That inward turn favoured investments in the core realm rather than imperial outposts and made the capital's urban modernisation a national project. Later, in the constitutional struggle of the 1870s–90s, defence policy (including Copenhagen's fortifications) became a domestic political instrument: Jacob B. S. Estrup governed via provisional budgets and, with them, pushed through extensive defensive works around the capital—works that the opposition ultimately accepted in the 1894 compromise.[17] In 1922, the National Defence Act formally closed the old fortress era, which underlines the arc from fortress-city to modern polity.

Technological change: artillery, materials, mobility

Technological change operated at two scales. First, military technology (high-calibre artillery, concrete-and-earth construction, dispersed forts, minefields, searchlights) rendered close-in walls obsolete and justified the outer system.[18] Second, civil technologies—tramways, rail, and, importantly, cycling—reshaped everyday mobility. As the city expanded beyond its old boundary, bicycle infrastructure and later mass transport connected new districts to the core, embedding movement into the city's identity.[19]

Economic shifts

The old fortress belt had made customs control and gatekeeping part of urban life. With its removal, circulation of goods and labour accelerated. More broadly, nineteenth-century industrialisation and capital formation reoriented Copenhagen toward manufacturing and services rather than tolls and dues, even as coastal defences continued to guard shipping channels.[20]

Demographic growth and urban form

Population increase filled the *brokvarterer*—Nørrebro, Vesterbro, Østerbro, Amagerbro—laid out on land liberated by the abandonment of the inner fortifications. The absence of a strangling *zone of servitude* enabled a street network, services, and later cycling lanes to spread into these districts.[21] In effect, the city's morphology inverted: defence moved out;

[16] Bregnsbo & Jensen, *The Rise and Fall of the Danish Empire*, ch. 11.

[17] Jespersen, *A History of Denmark*, sections on the constitutional struggle and defence politics.

[18] *Fortifications of Copenhagen: A Guide to 900 Years of Fortifications History* (1858–1998 excerpt).

[19] Emanuel, "Making a Bicycle City."

[20] See Bregnsbo & Jensen for the broader economic logic of the post-imperial turn; the Fortifications Guide for the move from gate customs to outer coastal control.

[21] *Fortifications of Copenhagen: A Guide to 900 Years of Fortifications History* (1858–1998 excerpt); Emanuel, "Making a Bicycle City."

everyday life moved across a growing, connected urban field.

Conclusion

Copenhagen's decision in the 1850s to give up its old fortifications marked a structural threshold. Historically, walls had embodied a composite logic of defence, trade protection, and princely prestige, with water and masonry binding the city's edge. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, those same works had become both militarily ineffective and civically constraining. The answer was not to forgo security but to *relocate* it: outer sea and land forts, built in modern materials and deployed at metropolitan scale, protected approaches without caging the city.

This shift was synchronous with wider transformations: constitutional change and an inward-looking nation-state after 1864; new military and civil technologies; industrial and commercial reorientation; and rapid demographic expansion into newly available quarters. In short, the giving up of the old walls both symbolised and enabled the making of modern Copenhagen: a city no longer defined by enclosure, but by circulation, expansion, and the strategic separation of urban life from military lines.

Works Cited

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