

Overlapping Spheres: Environmental Humanities and the Built Environment

Nature-Thinking: Technocratic Landscapes of Modernist Planning in Denmark and Sweden

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In the face of dystopian climate futures, contemporary planning models often promote “sustainability” or “greening.” In the Nordic countries, however, neighborhood designs predicated on symbioses between architecture and nature have a much longer history: architects, landscape architects, and planners have detailed intimate relations between residents and green space since at least the mid-20th century. I label this utopian approach to Nordic planning “nature-thinking.” This concept highlights designers’ merging of spatial, social, and environmental aims and understands their designs as “nature-cultures” (Jensen and Morita 2019) – where “nature” is embedded in cultural concerns, even during this highly technocratic period. Nature-thinking is thus understood as a design ideal: of “mak[ing]-with - becom[ing]-with, compos[ing]with - the earth-bound” (Haraway 2015). Linking this to Italo Calvino’s ideas about multiplicity, this talk takes a long view of nature-thinking in two mid-20th century Nordic, welfare-state neighborhoods: Tingbjerg (1950-1972, Denmark) and Norsborg (1971-1974, Sweden), where architects explicitly integrated residential and community buildings with green spaces and imagined human-plant relations as controllable but complementary. Reading the projects from their construction into the present as an “open encyclopedia” (Calvino 1985), I understand their nature-thinking not as a closed (modernist) system but as “potential, conjectural, and manifold.”

Danish and Swedish suburbs of the mid- and late 20th century united the political, economic, and social goals of welfare states, addressing problems like overcrowding and sanitation through the vehicle of modernism. Designers envisioned green spaces aligned with prevailing Nordic cultural ideas about the importance of human contact with the natural world: 1. designed parks, courtyards, and playgrounds (inside the neighborhoods) and 2. existing landscapes like nearby forests, streams, and fields (just beyond them). Nature-thinking in Tingbjerg emphasized contemplative environments fostering social progress. There, Carl Theodor Sørensen authored landscape designs around Steen Eiler Rasmussen’s buildings, while also promoting connections with existing wildlife and adjacent greenery. In Norsborg, Swedish nature-thinking of the 1970s articulated ideal design dimensions for outdoor spaces. The neighborhood’s modular parks, template playgrounds, and “rationalized” town center complemented adjoining woodlands, where boosters described “a tree for every child.” In Denmark and Sweden, in other words, New Towns and their landscapes – both planned and existing – were synergetic “nature-cultures.”

Over time, new residents and unplanned organic matter arriving to both Tingbjerg and Norsborg have revealed how this technocratic nature-thinking was actually embedded in both geopolitics and adjacent ecosystems and actually comprised – following Italo Calvino – a “system of systems.” The embeddedness of these projects and their “multiplicity” have revealed architecture’s continuous relationality. In response to these changes, however, 21st- century planners have often turned away from the natural-cultural worlds created by their predecessors, focusing instead on how to align modernist suburbs with the aims of current, anxious political logics: what Calvino might describe as the drive toward “mathematical exactitude.” Today, Tingbjerg has been added to the infamous Danish “ghetto list,” subjecting it to radical demolitions and privatization as part of a “package” of supposed

solutions to its social problems. Norsborg is on the Swedish Police's list of "especially vulnerable areas," with major renovations emphasizing landscapes of security and surveillance, sometimes enacted through the flattening of the ground or densification. I present "disturbance histories" (Tsing 2017:5) of these suburbs, highlighting an intergenerational sensitivity to the accomplishments of late 20th century designers while emplacing their works within dynamic and continuing social and ecological processes. Here, Nordic nature-thinking proceeds from its own "inability to find an ending" (Calvino), here read as plans for changing and indiscrete environments.