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A very Nordic set of concerns?

Visionary circumspection and theoretical conversations with the rest of the world

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Abstract
This article identifies visionary circumspection as a conceptual vector running through Nordic urban research – a diverse enterprise with robust empirical outputs, but relatively little premium placed on the generation of urban theory. To foster new cross-regional conversations that can bolster the theoretical fecundity of Nordic urban studies, the author overviews key themes in the region's urban research portfolio – well-being, diversification and socio-spatial transformations, governance and development models, and sustainable futures – and then delineates sites in other world regions that are grappling with related topics but sometimes with different approaches or conceptualizations. By situating Nordic urban research vis-à-vis these disparate sites and theoretical repertoires, the article aims to leverage Nordic self-regard and open up discussions that could enable more ambitious theoretical engagements between the region's cities and the rest of the world.

Keywords
conceptual vectors, cross-regional conversations, Nordic models, self-regard, urban theory

Introduction: Regional self-regard, self-doubt & urbanism

I approach this task of writing about Nordic urban theory from an oblique angle: most plainly, I am not a Nordic specialist. I am a scholar mostly focused on studying urban worlds in the global South, especially in Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa. I am also someone who comes from a different region of the world, sometimes called "Cascadia," straddling the US-Canadian border along the Pacific Ocean (see Brunet-Jailly, 2008a; Celnik, 2017; Harvey, 1996). And for some years now, my professional base has been in the British university setting, with its various debates and priorities that have shaped my own intellectual allergies and inclinations.[1] From this motley set of locations, I also come to this endeavor as a scholar very much dedicated to the importance of place – how it shapes our senses, our particular perception of problems and possibilities, as well as the knowledge we generate. This is not about radical localism, but about paying attention to context while also knowing the importance of travel, of relations, and, therefore, sense of place as connected to the rest of the world.

1. I should also hasten to add, with humility, that despite my usual insistence on polyglot engagement with the regions where I typically do research, I come to this Nordic project with the significant handicap of being limited to the research literature available in English, which presents its own substantial circumscriptions (see Kong & Qian, 2017; Müller, forthcoming).

So, what is the task before me? To consider Nordic urban research in relation to urban theory more globally. I suggest we can gain some leverage on this by putting the Nordic region into conversation with other places, and by considering frames or themes of urban research that have not necessarily been treated as theory per se, but that could be the bases for more generative conversations toward theorization. "Theory" itself can have quite different meanings; rather than restrict this to quests for generalizable frameworks, I draw on an understanding of theory as concepts that articulate the worlds we inhabit, "producing both discursive and material effects, and possessing social, cultural, and political lives of their own" (Zeiderman, 2018: 1123). There is a broader project of thinking about the locatedness as well as the transposability of concepts, that is, their geographies (Lawhon et al, 2016; Robinson, 2016a; Roy, 2009), which I think is worth connecting to Nordic cities – an endeavor that I believe has not yet been attempted. But this requires situating the Nordic urban context.

As is fairly well known, the Nordic countries are relatively quite wealthy. If we look at GDP per capita, as measured by purchasing-power parity in 2021 estimates, all the Nordic countries rank among the world's top 20, out of more than 180 documented cases (International Monetary Fund, 2020). Norway, always highest among its Nordic peers, had a per capita GDP of roughly US$69,000 in 2021 – more than all 31 lowest-ranking countries combined. Needless to say, these Nordic settings concentrate enormous economic privilege, at least at the national level.

Beyond wealth, the region's location within Europe deserves consideration. A leading critique in debates on urban theory, circulating for nearly 20 years now, points out that our concepts and frameworks are disproportionately skewed toward experiences of European and North American, or what some have called "North Atlantic" or "Euro-American," cities (Robinson, 2002; Roy, 2009). Certain cities have become "paradigmatic" cases for urban theorization at different points in time: this has included Berlin, Chicago, Paris, and Los Angeles, which have seen lively "schools" developed around the particularities of their urban configurations and dynamics at various junctures (e.g., Dear, 2002).

But "where" are Nordic cities in relation to these maps of Europe-skewed urban theory? There is an important paradox here in that the Nordic region is often held up as a model in writings about robust welfare states, healthy living practices, and environmental sustainability (Brandal et al, 2013; Hilson, 2008; Knutsen, 2017; Partanen, 2017; Ryner, 2007; Tin et al, 2019; Witoszek & Midttun, 2018) – even while some countercurrents underline rather more monstrous features (Booth, 2014; Christophers, 2013; Pred, 2000). Overall, there is some amount of preoccupation over whether a Nordic model actually exists in various fields and, if so, whether it can survive. This all suggests a certain sense of self in the Nordic region, perhaps even some sense of pride, but certainly no claim to perfection. Yet, in that line of critique around urban theory about how our way of knowing the world of cities is based on European or North Atlantic cases, are there any urban-theoretical writings, some construal of a paradigmatic case, where there has been a particular Nordic city as inspiration or example? Quite simply, no. And perhaps that is a good thing.

Some of the work related to expanding geographies of urban theory has actually come from sites within Europe – not the Nordic countries, as far as I found – but from areas often figured as "peripheral" regions: eastern Europe (e.g., Ferenčuhová & Gentile, 2016; Trubina et al, 2020), and some areas of southern Europe (e.g., Baptista, 2013), pointing to how these are plainly European places, but their urban contexts do not fit the history or circumstances of cities in France, Germany, the UK, and a few other places that have dominated European urban scholarship, and especially the creation of urban-theoretical frameworks. The east-

ern-European critique argues that its cities constitute different kinds of social formations because of discrepant histories, including less wealth and more authoritarianism, and that these particularities can also be a platform for urban theory with a difference, rather than theory as an enterprise aiming at generality (Robinson, 2016b). The irony is that this also applies for the Nordic region – despite being known for its stability, democracy, high quality of life, and, of course, substantial wealth. While Nordic cities are praised along these lines, they essentially never figure in our maps of urban theory. I suggest some of this is the result of how the Nordic region sees itself. To draw on an idea from one of the foremost voices among those critics promoting a shift in the geographies of urban theory, Ananya Roy (2016: 205) underlines the utility of paying attention to the stories that cities tell themselves about themselves. And in a sense, this gets to the issue of self-regard.

At its most basic, "self-regard" can refer to how one looks at oneself, to one's self-assessment or self-evaluation. The late African American novelist, Toni Morrison (2019: 304-321), wrote about the importance of self-regard as prizing what we see in ourselves, as a kind of self-appreciation, having some sense of one's own importance, goodness, and strengths – in order to understand oneself and to achieve one's goals, or perhaps to exceed them. It can be tricky to treat this notion collectively, yet it is rather clear that many cities, countries, and collections of countries – as regions – have some sense of self-regard, which can range from pompous to defeatist. Nordic self-regard has a touch of that Morrisonian emphasis on self-praise, but it also tends, as I will show below, to be rather circumspect. At the same time, it is particularly visionary; that is, there is simultaneous concern with where Nordic cities and societies are in the present and where they are, potentially, going. Visionary circumspection, I suggest, is a fundamental feature of how Nordic cities are conceptualized, researched, and acted upon.

Geographies of urban theory: Where in the world are Nordic cities?

Running through the social-science work I reviewed about Nordic cities for this article, a key feature stood out as visionary circumspection, no matter what the thematic or topical focus. I do not think this is true for most regions of the world, and thus there is something here worth exploring. While there is a broad undercurrent suggesting that Nordic uniqueness does have some positive or even superior features to it, there is also recognition that it has always been imperfect, somehow potentially precarious, and thus constantly in need of either maintenance or reinvention. One way to get some grip on this idea of visionary circumspection is to think through how Nordic cities relate to elsewhere in the world in the various themes around which Nordic urban research has tended to cluster over recent years.

I will do this through a series of comparative operations, looking at similarities and contrasts with urbanist work on other regions of the world – which are really provocations for further conversations between the Nordic region and elsewhere, to think through shared concepts, divergent conceptualizations, and the possibility of productive commonplaces. To draw further on Roy's (2009) work, I argue that we can do this by looking at the "conceptual vectors" that have defined the urban-theoretical register in a variety of world areas. Ernstson et al (2014: 1564) position such vectors as "rooted in particularities that come together in place, and additionally may hold relevance for other contexts," enabling regionally rooted theorization to "travel outside its original context to be shaped, challenged, and reformulated across space."

Roy (2009) sets out to bring more attention to places beyond the North Atlantic in terms of urban theory, and to think about how the urban has been framed and studied in different

regions of the global South. She is clear that her coverage is schematic rather than comprehensive, but she presents us with depictions of the main theoretical underpinnings of urban scholarship in the regions of Latin America, South Asia, East Asia, Africa and the Middle East. As locations for a new geography of theory, it can be assumed that, in contrast, those places that are not highlighted here are considered to be the "heartland" (Roy, 2009: 820) of urban theory: that certainly includes North America and Europe, and the assumption is the Antipodes as well. But this also means Europe at its most broadly defined. This makes sense strategically, but in practical terms it is very difficult to consider, for example, Canada or Australia as being at the heart of urban theory.[2] Similarly, it is virtually impossible to imagine Sweden or Iceland as located firmly within this urban-theoretical "heartland."

I want to suggest, then, that while Stockholm, Copenhagen, Oslo, Helsinki, Aarhus, Malmö, Reykjavík, and so forth, may be somewhat more recognizable via paradigmatic-urban lenses coming out of Paris or Chicago than if we were studying Luanda or Tegucigalpa, there are still enormous chasms here between Chicago and Oslo. And not just because they look or feel different, but because they have emerged from quite distinct histories and face some substantially discrepant challenges in the present.

This returns us to some of those eastern and southern European critiques suggesting that these places, although European, are not core locations – neither economically nor intellectually. Even though the Nordic region has been held up as sometimes exemplary (Hilson, 2008; Marklund, 2017; Witoszek & Midttun, 2018), and certainly as wealthy overall and undeniably European,[3] the area's cities have similarly not been at the intellectual core (Häusserman & Haila, 2005; Hermelin, 2011). While there is an important stream of intellectual production coming out of, or highlighting, Nordic contexts, there has not been a priority placed on Nordic theory. This journal will surely advance such prospects, but to embark on that task now, it is useful to consider how can we characterize the region's urban scholarship both in terms of empirical findings, and what it suggests conceptually, in terms of our understandings of Nordic cities.

Surveying Nordic urban scholarship available in English, over roughly the last generation, reveals almost no work casting itself primarily as "urban theory" or scholarship that uses a Nordic city as the basis for generating concepts that aim at applicability elsewhere. There are certainly engagements with existing theory and astute conceptual interventions (e.g., Bäcklund & Mäntysalo, 2010; Clark, 2018; Lilliendahl Larsen & Brandt, 2018; Pløger, 2010), plus plenty of exercises in classification, trying to ascertain whether there is a Nordic model worthy of being sustained – but even this work has mostly not had a specifically urban tenor (e.g., Knutsen, 2017; Ryner, 2007). Again, it strikes me that this existential doubt is an important part of visionary circumspection. If we consider that to be a broad conceptual vector, it connects then to what I have identified as four thematic areas of focus across Nordic urban research: (1) centering urban well-being, (2) grappling with urban diversification, (3) evaluating models for metropolitan governance and development, and (4) engaging urban futures – particularly in terms of sustainability questions. While my coverage is not exhaustive, and there are certainly other possible ways of parsing the breadth of urban

2. Indeed, Roy would suggest in later work that even some "heartland" locations are difficult to relate to our most central theoretical conceits, and thus might need to be theorized differently. She specifically mentions the "strange urbanity of the Canadian interior" (Roy, 2016: 200-201), referring to Calgary and Edmonton, in Alberta, as being as out of sync with traditional urban theories as her own native Kolkata.
3. The Nordic region's status as 'European' is entirely aside from membership in the European Union, which of course does not include Iceland or Norway.

research across the region, in the rest of this article I survey Nordic works in each of these topical streams in turn, adding some comparative insight on related though different thematic frames from other world regions. This is useful for distinguishing Nordic approaches from elsewhere but also for identifying possible paths for either cross-regional collaboration, further introspection, or opportunities for theory-building. I then conclude by considering the usefulness of visionary circumspection beyond Nordic cases.

Centering well-being

Nordic considerations of urban well-being broadly encompass physical and mental features, and include questions of dignity and rights to space. Most work in this vein has explored how to create "livable" urban environments (Isenhour, 2011; Lundberg et al, 2019; Tunström, 2019). There has been a particular emphasis here on compact-city strategies (Mouratidis 2018a; 2018b; 2018c; 2019; 2020), and other spatial determinants of urban well-being (Ala-Mantila et al, 2018; Hansen, 2015), from Oslo to Helsinki. Several Nordic authors also explore the urban experience of social reproduction as spatialized and connected to senses of well-being (Lilius, 2016; Poikolainen & Honkanen, 2020; Wessel & Bjørnson Lunke, 2021), including the role of outdoor recreation and healthier city lifestyles (Pries & Qviström, forthcoming; Tin et al, 2019). Against these emphases on the benefits of dense urban inhabitation, Skrede & Andersen (forthcoming) show how some Norwegian developers attempt to draw residents to greenfield, low-density, suburban locations by conjuring up "dreamscapes" that specifically counterpose centrally located, compact Nordic urban quarters.

Equally distant from such suburban "dreams," Listerborn et al (2020) forefront the spatial dimension of dignified urban living with their focus on housing justice struggles in Sweden, whereas Jaakkola et al (2018) and Laruelle (2019) offer useful overviews of urban dispossession, related in part to climate-change dynamics, in the smaller cities and towns of the Nordic countries' Arctic latitudes. In the realm of urban education, Beach (2017) examines the injustices of racialized exclusion that contribute to undermined well-being in Nordic cities, especially for poor and minority populations. Sturup et al (2020) offer a compelling study of armed violence in Swedish cities over the last decade, showing how its spatial patterning overlaps with gradients of neighborhood deprivation. Together, these scholars are clear in showing the steep challenges that disadvantaged – and frequently racialized – urban dwellers face in attaining some version of well-being.

Another part of the world has particularly focused on the concept of well-being or, more specifically, "living well." The discourse of *buen vivir* [good living] has emerged in several Andean countries of Latin America, especially Ecuador (Gudynas, 2011), as a notion derived in part from indigenous inspiration (Altmann, 2017; Cubillo-Guevara et al, 2014; Radcliffe, 2012) – although there are indigenous contestations asserting *sumak kawsay*, a Quechuan term that translates as *buen vivir*, is fundamentally different and essentially untranslatable (see Manosalvas, 2014: 113). This is meant to give us a more multidimensional sense of what is entailed in creating the good life or the possibilities for living well, beyond economic accumulation yet simultaneously enabling development (Altmann, 2020; de Munter et al, 2017), including access to healthcare, education, recreation, and satisfaction broadly, but also access to nature, and indeed the right of nature to exist, as part of "good living" in harmony with the environment (Lalander, 2016). There have been extensive critiques of these models in terms of their need to engage more with the rights of women (e.g., Radcliffe, 2018; Varea and Zaragocin, 2017) and to center rather than merely gesturing at upholding indigenous peoples and "ecocentrism" (e.g., Burman, 2020; Stefanoni, 2012; Vanhulst, 2015). Despite

criticisms, it could thus be useful to consider how Nordic research emphases on well-being contrast with what we see coming out of Andean South America.

Two other world regions, often considered in some ways similar to Nordic countries, are unmissable in the priorities they exhibit, ostensibly, on urban well-being. Cascadia – the transborder region encompassing Portland, Seattle, and Vancouver – as well as cities in Aotearoa/New Zealand, from Auckland to Dunedin, are among places that frequently score highly in global rankings of urban livability, notwithstanding the questionable utility of these metrics (Conger, 2015). In the US case, Portland and Seattle (sometimes also Honolulu) are often the only places in the country that rank at all among the world's most livable cities. Impressive access to nature is part of what elevates livability in the cities of Cascadia, New Zealand, and Scandinavia – both in surrounding environments and the heart of their urban areas (Affolderbach et al, 2019; Brunet-Jailly, 2008b; Hutton, 2011; Insch, 2018; McClintock, 2018; Nesbitt & Meitner, 2016; Ramiller, 2019; Sullivan et al, 2009). Nature is integrated into, and considered to be part of, what makes for well-being in these places (see Beatley, 2017), but there is also a need to consider indigenous and other environmental-justice perspectives in the unequal distribution of urban well-being as related to nature and its accessibility (Baloy, 2016; Baur et al, 2013; Cardinal, 2006; Goodling et al, 2015; Holden & Scerri, 2013; Jones et al, 2020; Kawharu, 2004; Livesey, 2019; Nazari Adli et al, 2019; Walker et al, 2019). This is, at least hypothetically, also part of the formulation of *buen vivir* in the Andean region – the importance and indeed the rights of nature. But just as Caracas, La Paz, and Quito have tremendous environmental inequalities across their populaces, so too do Portland, Auckland, and Helsinki. Taking unequal access to nature into account can be useful in understanding how, and in whom, these places see themselves, and define what makes for well-being.

Grappling with diversification and socio-spatial transformation

Insofar as there is a concern over urban diversity in Nordic research, this is not necessarily because it means a decrease in the relative homogeneity that has long defined individual countries ethnically. Rather, with demographic transformations, especially via immigration, the region's cities are undergoing compositional shifts. This track of work scrutinizes the extent and nature of segregation that has emerged, and the differentiations – again, often racialized – of urban experience that have attended these transformations. In a sense, this work attempts to gauge how much Nordic models extend to the entire urban populace. This is, without a doubt, where I find the greatest concentration of Nordic urban research.

The scholarship on diversifying Nordic neighborhoods analyzes residential patterns related to ethnic and socio-economic composition, as well as policies that have further affected community development within them. Looming over this work is the legacy of the Nordic welfare state and its robust social protections (see Stephens, 1996; Pedersen & Kuhnle, 2017); while certainly never utopian, and too nuanced to dissect fully here, Nordic welfare states in the mid-20th century gained a broad reputation as simultaneously affirming citizen equality and enabling socio-economic mobility. The fact of some population groups (i.e., immigrants and refugees, mostly from non-Nordic countries) facing categorical, persistent disadvantage – and living in spatial concentrations of deprivation – deeply troubles the Nordic welfare-state ideal. Several scholars have illuminated patterns of ethnic segregation across the largest Nordic cities (Tunström et al, 2016; Wessel et al, 2018), bringing focus to how housing markets shape this dynamic (Andersen et al, 2016; Andersson & Magnusson Warner, 2014; Hedin et al, 2012; Wimark et al, 2020), the prevalence of discrimination against minority-ethnic populations (Galster & Turner, 2019; Malmberg & Clark,

forthcoming; Müller et al, 2018; Skifter Andersen, 2017; Skovgaard Nielsen & Hedegaard Winther, 2020; VandenBerg, 2014; Wessel & Nordvik, 2019), the vicissitudes of immigrant residential integration (Kadarik, 2020; Pries, 2020; Wessel et al, 2017; Wessel & Bjørnson Lunke, 2021), and conditions of collective deprivation in minority-ethnic neighborhoods (Hylland Eriksen, 2020; Mouratidis, 2020). Denmark has singular notoriety among Nordic countries in terms of policy toward minority-ethnic neighborhoods due to its creation of a "ghetto list" in 2010 (see Oliveira e Costa & Tunström, 2020: 56-57), labeling and targeting areas of social housing with high levels of socio-economic deprivation as "parallel societies" that the Danish state needed to "dissolve." Widely criticized as the codification of ethnic stigmatization (Bakkær Simonsen, 2016) and an affront to social citizenship (Seeman, forthcoming), scholars also reveal the ineffectiveness of this policy in overcoming patterns and practices of ethnic segregation (Mechlenborg, 2019).

Against this backdrop of urban fragmentation, recent work also interrogates the possibilities for urban conviviality. Gressgård and Jensen (2016) examine Nordic urban planning to support ethnic pluralism, while various scholars explore particular settings that either facilitate cross-ethnic cohesion or highlight inter-ethnic friction, from parks and other public spaces (Jacob & Hellström, 2010; Kuurne & Gómez, 2019; Lapiņa, 2016; Mouratidis & Poortinga, 2020; Pries & Jönsson, 2019; Simonsen et al, 2017; Stanfield & van Riemsdijk, 2019; Thörn, 2012; Trandberg Jensen & Jensen, forthcoming), to schools (Sernhede, 2018), to friendship networks and moments of urban mobilization (Andersen, 2019; Hansen, 2020; Keskinen et al, 2019; Merrill & Pries, 2019). One particular district of Copenhagen has received extensive scholarly attention: the "freetown" of Christiania was established in the 1970s by activists seeking a space "autonomous" from overweening state regulation, but has been subjected over the last 20 years to various attempts at "normalization", which have been studied for their impacts on equity, surveillance, and integration (Amouroux, 2009; Coppola & Vanolo, 2015; Jarvis, 2013; Ntounis & Kanellopoulou, 2017; Rannila & Repo, 2018; Winter, 2016). Even among pronounced discourses of integration in Denmark and much of the Nordic region, researchers show stigmatized differences shaping differentiated urban experiences for socio-economically, ethnically, and spatially marginalized populations (e.g., Qvotrup Jensen et al, forthcoming).

There has been some tendency to position Nordic conditions vis-à-vis racialized urban segregation and uneven development in the postindustrial constellations of massive metropolises such as Chicago and Paris (Abu-Lughod, 1999; Dikeç, 2011; Wacquant, 2008), and the sprawling, quasi-informal settlements of Rio de Janeiro (Perlman, 2010). Schultz Larsen (2018) particularly contrasts the pattern of "advanced marginality" in French neighborhoods of deprivation with Denmark, finding fundamental differences in the nature of disadvantage across national contexts, whether called "ghettoes" or not. This comparative work echoes other initiatives, mostly without Nordic cases, studying urban marginality across sites as "the same but not the same" (Glasze et al, 2012; see also Maloutas & Fujita, 2012). When researchers contrast Nordic settings to these French, American, or Brazilian extremes, of course they find differences. First, there are distinct trajectories of neoliberal restructuring across these cases, which has shaped the availability of work and wage levels; there are also fundamentally disparate histories of social housing. Moreover, while we should certainly consider the afterlives of Swedish or Danish colonization, for example, in shaping urban conditions today, these cannot compare to the world-spanning reach of the French – or British – empire, nor the deeply racialized histories of development that underpin American and Brazilian urban patterns of diversity and inequality. Some of these contrasting cases, and their conceptual foci, are precisely in the North Atlantic "heartland" of urban theory

that Roy (2009) demarcates. But instead of pondering whether there is some kind of convergence afoot between Nordic neighborhoods and these extreme cases, it could be more productive to follow some of the nuance that Schultz Larsen (2018) brings to his analysis: considering how concepts can travel and be recalibrated for different contexts. This might lead, for example, to recalibrating Brenner's (2004; 2019) analysis of "new state spaces" to understand how Nordic welfare states are shaping and reshaping minority-ethnic neighborhoods through social housing and other public-sector interventions that mark the terms and potentials for more inclusive social citizenship in urban terrain.

The concern with racialized urban deterioration in Nordic research is paired, to a much lesser extent, with growing attention to concentrated urban improvement – in physical and economic terms – and whether this constitutes gentrification. There is little consensus around the nature, or even the existence, of gentrification across Nordic cities; again, this is partly due to the legacy of the welfare state, understood to have a socio-economic levelling effect that blunts the inequalities typically driving gentrification elsewhere in the world. Nonetheless, from Denmark (Gutzon Larsen & Lund Hansen, 2008; Krähmer, forthcoming), to Norway (Holgersen, 2020), to Sweden (Andersson & Magnusson Turner, 2014; Hedin et al, 2012), to Finland (Sorainen, 2016), the region's scholars identify features of unevenly spatialized urban enrichment and its social exclusions that resemble gentrifying dynamics visible in London and New York. The relatively slim coverage of Nordic gentrification does not necessarily mean that it is empirically rare or meager,[4] but it does suggest that it is different in some key ways – worth exploring further – from the phenomenon that has been a mainstay of North Atlantic urban research for some 40 years (see Lees et al, 2008). Furthermore, it is curious that the two largest compendia of gentrification studies, addressing diverse swaths of the globe, both lack specific coverage of Nordic cases (Atkinson & Bridge, 2004; Lees et al, 2015).[5] Wyly (2019), while also not broaching Nordic circumstances, revisits and updates some of the core features of gentrification theory, providing a refreshed toolkit of modular elements that could be useful for thinking through the particularities of uneven urban improvement from Reykjavík to Bergen to Turku.

Contrasting models for governance and (re)development

Broader than gentrification, a concern with plans for, and outcomes of, urban-economic growth and related governance is at the heart of this cluster of research. Nordic scholars have explored how processes of urban development, including redevelopment, unfold in the region's cities, with a concern to contrast these models with those in other regions. The collaborative, comparative work of late Finnish urbanist Anne Haila can be seen running across more than twenty years of research, from her work on evolving metropolitan-level governance in Helsinki (Haila & Le Galès, 2005) to entrepreneurial land-management strategies across Finland (Hyötyläinen & Haila, 2018). More broadly, this Nordic vein of work has had a clear comparative impulse, even when primarily focusing on a single national context (e.g., Sørensen & Torfing, 2019), whereas some scholars embrace more explicit comparisons between regions (e.g., Bruns-Berentelg et al, 2020). Specifically focusing on spatial devel-

4. Indeed, Clark and Pissin (forthcoming) advocate for understanding gentrification-like dynamics reaching well beyond the remaking of cities, to grasp how they inflect cultures of rentierist development more generally.
5. Although Clark's (2004: 268) contribution makes mention of Malmö, it does not center the southern Swedish city – or any others – in formulating his intervention.

opment, Haila (2008), Holgersen (2015), and Hermelin and Jonsson (forthcoming) address the comparative political economy of megaprojects across Nordic cities and the uneven socioeconomic impacts they create. In a different register, several scholars have also tackled city or neighborhood branding as a (re)development strategy that attempts to harness state capacities in favor of highly particularized visions for future development paths (Andersen & Røe, 2017; Andersen & Skrede, 2017; Andersen et al, 2020; Borén & Young, forthcoming; Jansson & Power, 2006; Listerborn, 2017; Raento et al, forthcoming; Skrede, 2016).

In terms of further, cross-regional conversations that could be fruitful for this line of work, some of this was already begun in Haila's (2015) treatment of Singapore and the model of land-rent management and provident development that it has actively exported, which she treats as a cautionary tale for Nordic and other cases that have shown interest in the city-state's trajectory. Such work is essentially about developmental states – partly reminiscent of landmark studies by Evans (1989) and others (see Woo-Cumings, 1999) – but with an explicitly urban purview, aiming to promote territorial development. To the extent that Nordic development strategies emulate this engaged state stance in the urban realm, it is worth dissecting what kinds of economic growth are advanced, and at what social and environmental costs. Moreover, it could be illuminating to consider other cases that have more actively adopted the Singaporean framework, such as Rwandan efforts to chart an aggressive course of entrepreneurial development (Behuria, 2018; Esmail Hudani, 2020; Goodfellow, 2017) – quite distinct from Nordic circumstances, but still useful for a cross-regional dialogue on the dynamics of such models.

For the scholarship dealing expressly with metropolitan governance formulations and reorganization, it could also be enlightening to contrast Nordic experiences with work on Canadian experiments, particularly around the nature of relations between differently scaled jurisdictions in terms of decision-making, budgeting, and service delivery. Such scholarship on innovation in municipal agglomeration and dynamics of contestation/cooperation have particularly flourished in the province of Québec (Boudreau et al, 2007; Collin & Robertson, 2005; Hamel & Keil, 2020; Tomàs, 2012), but also across the country's major cities (Le Blanc, 2006; Lucas, 2017; Taylor, 2019). Various similarities between Canadian and Nordic contexts – already noted by Scandinavian policymakers (e.g., Lotz, 2012) – could make for an especially productive set of mutual lessons among urbanists interested in governance design.

Engaging the future

This final theme engages the multidimensional nature of sustainability in cities and how Nordic researchers have positioned this critically as a normative goal for ensuring viable urban futures. Significant focus goes to strategies of urban "greening" in expanding parks and other quasi-natural spaces in Nordic cities (Aguiar Borges et al, 2017; 2018; Blok, 2012; Holgersen & Malm, 2015; Uggla, 2012), as well as the promotion of cycling as a sustainable mode of transport (Jensen, 2013; Gössling, 2013; Pánek & Benediktsson, 2017), including how interventions in the name of ecological improvement can potentially lead to exclusionary dynamics along socio-economic lines (e.g., Blok, 2020; Holgersen & Hult, forthcoming; Krähmer, forthcoming; Winter, 2019). Efforts to prevent urban sprawl and institute broader trajectories for urban sustainable development have also been a major focus (Gressgård, 2015; Næss et al, 2011). Other scholars have taken up aspects of the "gig economy" or "platform urbanism" as they manifest in Nordic centers of urban tourism, scrutinizing the socio-economic and spatial impacts of Airbnb from Helsinki (Jokela & Minoia, 2020) to

Reykjavík (Söderström & Mermet, 2020) in critical-empirical counterpoints to the blithe narrative that such technologies somehow lead to more sustainable urban practices. Taking a look at state-based interventions in reshaping city space for sustainable futures, as noted in previous sections, Mouratidis (2018c; 2019; Mouratidis & Hassan, 2020) has led a prolific research agenda on urban "compacting" strategies; his work shows varying outcomes in terms of residents' satisfaction with compact urban life, as well as differing environmental upshots, which call into question how much such efforts actually contribute to urban sustainability. The findings across all four of these areas point to the need for further, comparative investigation in more Nordic cases, as well as potentially productive cross-regional conversations on different tactics and trajectories for sustainable urban futures.

Another strand of emergent work shifts away from the largest Nordic cities to focus on the region's northernmost urban areas and the dilemmas of sustainability in polar climes. According to Schaffner (2020: 24) there are 17 cities across Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and Finland situated north of or very near the Arctic Circle, yielding a total Nordic-Arctic urban population of 1,060,619 people. Nyseth (2017) historically contextualizes Arctic urbanization processes within Scandinavia, while several scholars focus on contemporary social and cultural challenges in Arctic urban settings related to environmental change (Jaakola et al, 2018; Laruelle, 2019). Recognizing the circumpolar commonalities among Arctic settlements across the Nordic region, as well as Russia, Greenland, Canada, and the US state of Alaska, several scholars have tackled the similar challenges as well as the vast differences in governance and development priorities separating these national contexts that shape the possibilities for sustainable urban-Arctic futures (see Berman & Orttung, 2020; Raspotnik et al, 2020). Despite highlighting these key differences, such scholars signal the importance of taking seriously the scope for urban futures in the remotest reaches of the planet.

This rich, varied Nordic work points to several potentially interesting conversations with other world regions. First, Cascadia and New Zealand – already mentioned above – have manifested similar visions for securing the urban future through sustainability-related initiatives, prioritizing environmental concerns. But these places, including many Nordic cities, also struggle with the everyday affordability aspect of ecological "livability" for urban residents (Cramer-Greenbaum, 2021). There could be fruitful discussions about comparative strategies for stewardship and access to nature, crossed with questions of equity on the socio-economic front.

There are other, very differently situated cities set on engaging the future with quite contrasting priorities. The last decade has seen growing scholarship, often critical, related to bold city visioning efforts in Africa (Bhan, 2014; Côté-Roy & Moser, 2019; Myers, 2015; van Noorloos & Kloosterboer, 2018; Watson, 2014) and parts of Asia – from Saudi Arabia to India (e.g., Datta, 2015; Moser et al, 2015) – where dream visions have been assembled in master-planned, rapidly built cities, often within the frame of "smart urbanism." Sustainability sometimes enters these development frames, but with questionable execution (e.g., Günel, 2019), and rarely the same kinds of concerns to foster access to nature or the active greening of urban space that runs through the Pacific and Nordic cases.

Despite major differences across all these regions' cities, it is worth thinking through their contrasting visions for, and practices aimed at reaching, urban "futures." In the Asian and African cases, for example, we certainly see major visions for future urban development, but this is radically different from the circumspection that I have tried to highlight as pervading the Nordic urban research. Overall, work in this vein on Nordic cities tends to be rather critical, but also humble, in terms of approaching questions such as: how do we arrive at a vision for the urban future? And what aspects should we be cautious about as these visions

are construed and enacted? These interrogatives, while central in engaging urban futures in the Nordic context, are also characteristics of the overall stance I have called visionary circumspection.

Conclusion: The usefulness of visionary circumspection

The apparent contradiction between being hesitant or cautious – that is, circumspection – while simultaneously having the boldness to articulate a larger vision is at the crux of urban work from and about the Nordic region. This is, fundamentally, a stance about the "location" of Nordic cities in the present, but in relation to their pasts as well as their aimed futures. And this brings me back to thinking about "where" in the world are Nordic cities – not in that basic cartographic sense, but where are Nordic cities in relation to several other regions of cities, and what kind of bases for urban theory do we have, or could we generate, in Nordic urban research from this conceptual vector of visionary circumspection. We can see there is quite a clear sense of unease about how Nordic cities are situated in relation to the rest of Europe, but this is perhaps not the most useful point of reference. I think that visionary circumspection could be the basis of much more fruitful dialogues and contrasts with a range of other sites – both wealthy and long-developed, as well as poorer settings of so-called emergent development. Generally, Nordic researchers are not attempting to shoehorn the region's cities into models from elsewhere. Instead, there tends to be a diagnostic effort to gauge how well Nordic cities are faring in terms of various challenges, including whether Nordic cities are losing some of their exceptional status as relatively wealthy, well-served, life-affirming places. But those perspectives also inform questions about where Nordic cities are going. Obviously, there is no clear answer here, but there is some coherence around the idea that there is something special about Nordic cities, that despite their variations they have come from a unique set of histories, and even amid changing social formations in the present, there is this overarching effort to create visions for livable futures, but with caution and care. In this regard, visionary circumspection is particularly useful, first, in giving an account of oneself – i.e., as the stories that these cities are telling themselves about themselves, past, present and future – but also in rendering a kind of vivid self-awareness in Nordic urban research.

Such circumspection does not hamper visions for constantly trying to make the region's cities into better places. In that sense, this visionary circumspection is useful for urban practitioners and governments in thinking through what challenges are facing our cities. But this is also crucial for urban theory: while some, mostly non-academic, commentators might cast Nordic cities as some of the "best" in the world, rather than tout anything like that, there is an effort, again, to think about where Nordic cities are, and where they could be going. This is informed by a deep, localized sense of self, or self-regard, at the heart of urban research on the Nordic region, which is worth exploring further. Combined with thoroughgoing circumspection, this may be why we do not – yet – see significant urban theory emerging out of the Nordic region. But we could learn some lessons on being visionary, and simultaneously circumspect, with a very clear sense of regional self-regard, and thinking about how this factors into making Nordic cities, well, *Nordic*. This involves engaging the future, one of those four themes highlighted above, but doing so in a way that is open to self-reflection and consideration of the sorts of contrasts that situate Nordic cities in divergent or convergent ways with other parts of the world grappling with similar discourses and phenomena. Through the kind of theoretical operations, or opening up of cross-regional conversations, that I have overviewed in this piece, we can think about what is unique as well as

what is commonplace between Nordic cities and a variety of urban settings from Portland to Montréal to Quito to Kigali to Singapore to Auckland. With these generative, conceptually oriented contrasts, we can learn just how visionary Nordic cities themselves, as well as research on Nordic cities, have been, at the same time as appreciating the tendency toward circumspection – and why being circumspect should continue even in the effort to forge new urban theories. Frankly, I would like that circumspection to diffuse more broadly, beyond Nordic cities, so that we could practice a bit more humility and honesty when assessing how our cities are doing, and thinking carefully about where our cities are going.

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