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Revisiting the green geographies of welfare planning: an introduction

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ABSTRACT

The history and legacy of green planning of the welfare era have largely been overlooked within research, or critiqued due to its limited urban qualities and poor design. This omission has left its role in the development of the Welfare society largely unexplored. Therefore, this special issue revisits the green geographies of welfare planning, to reveal its importance as a matter of welfare and as a set of geographies that goes beyond the contemporary norm of the compact city. The revisits take two forms: historical studies to elucidate the original ideas and geographies of the planning, and revisits to sites currently challenged by new urban or planning ideals. This introduction presents the papers, reflects on previous research, and concludes with a few comments on the need for further studies on green planning and the landscape legacy of the welfare era.

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Green space; leisure; neoliberal planning; planning history; spatial justice; welfare landscape

Revisiting the critique of welfare planning

Taking stock of welfare planning during the post-war period in this moment of rampant inequality, some aspects offer more prospects for the present than others. For instance, the post-war era's planned production of housing created a world markedly different from our modern-day neoliberal housing market. Human geographers have, often in this very journal, tracked the undoing of the post-war construction of the home as a right, by studying economic pressures, political battles, policy shifts, as well as the devastating human effects of the financialization of housing in terms of crowding, displacement and segregation (Clark 1988; Larsen and Lund Hansen 2015; Baeten and Listerborn 2015). The legacies of the, broadly speaking, social democratic ambitions of the postwar planners thus seem to provide, at least in part, some sliver of hope that the urgent predicaments of the present might be addressed when it comes to housing provision.

However, other aspects of welfare planning have received scant attention within human geography and related fields. One example is the green geographies of welfare planning which we in this special issue delve into. In this introduction we suggest that this issue's contributions might begin to amend the limited scope of studies within human geography of the green spaces made by welfarist planning. Furthermore, we argue for continued research on these kinds of green geographies beyond a conventional urban framework and a focus on design and propose a few themes for future research.

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While the green geographies of welfare planning have been studied and debated, the premises of these debates have often been early critiques of modernist architecture. In New York, Jane Jacobs (1961) famously accused, following an analysis of parks and their hinterland of potential visitors, planners of being too generous with green space provision and leaving the city dotted with 'under-used parks' which 'exaggerated the dullness, the danger, the emptiness' of modern life (111). In his (1972) book *Defensible space*, Oscar Newman extended Jacob's critical sensibility in a lament of how post-war typologies disrupted the public-private distinctions which allowed 'respectable' residents to 'territorialize' urban spaces and keep undesirables out. Meanwhile, in Copenhagen Jan Gehl (1971) pleaded with Scandinavian planners to think of the 'life between the buildings', but almost invariably also found these spaces to be too generous and too far from the crowded street life he, much like Jacobs, upheld as a lost ideal. This echoed Christopher Alexander's devastating critique of the urban morphology of modernist planning, arguing that it could not support a lively city (Alexander 2015, originally published 1965). Thus, while Edward Relph coined the concept *placelessness*, he was far from alone in his harsh critique of the modern city (Relph 1976).

These geographers and architectural critics were eventually canonized by both the 'new urbanist' and the 'place-making' literatures. Through the proponents of these forms of academic critique, and the cures they suggest for the malaise diagnosed in the open spaces left by welfarist planning, these arguments have had a huge impact. The limits and blind spots of these half-century-old critiques have, through this canonization, become taken-for-granted premises of the human geographies of modern cities. Green geographies thus tend to be judged in relation to 'traditional' urban morphologies as the given normative ideal, even though this distinction between open, public areas and enclosed private dwellings was what many planners of the welfare era often sought to move beyond. Furthermore, the critiques focus on the design of particular objects and sites, rather than the attempt to shape space to have effects across society by, for instance, creating a more equal distribution of spatial amenities and access to landscapes. Thus, the materialization of welfarist *politics* of planning through space has been displaced by a discussion primarily focused on modernist architecture as a mode of green space *design*.

The predominant role of townscapes and their public places as a planning and design ideal have tended to relegate issues which do not fit with these perspectives to the margins, which has created significant blind spots in the literature on the welfare landscapes produced by post-war planning. This mismatch between tools of geographical analysis and the welfare planners' landscapes has been hinted at in a range of scholarly articles, from studies of how heritage preservation schemes of postwar areas are warped by lack of critical understanding of their spatial form (Stenbro and Riesto 2014), to the out-of-hand dismissal of the sense of place such sites supposedly inhibit (Mack 2021) or the fragmentation of communities as their public spaces are mercilessly given over to developers (Kärrholm and Wirdelöv 2019). Indeed, the blindspots of heavy-handed 'densification' projects are, as Zalar and Pries (2022) recently suggested, not random occurrences, but the product of a 'compact city epistemology' which essentially 'unmap green space' as a feature even worth taking note of in the redevelopment of post-war areas. With this special issue, we hope to contribute to these debates where the green geographies of welfare planning are understood as more than the absence of urban places needing to be remade by neo-traditionalist architectural redevelopment.

Green geographies far beyond the buildings

To shift away from models which focus on the green geographies of welfare planning as insufficiently urban and placeless to, instead, capture the geographical complexities of this post-war planning is not an easy task. Yet, we believe that the following six contributions speak to some of the ambitions, typologies, processes, actors, imaginaries and power relations at work in the welfarist spatial production. These analyses, we hope, might be contributions to both theoretical and methodological conversations on the lasting legacies of this kind of planning in at least three ways. First, the magnitude of the planning is perhaps most striking. The papers by Valzania (2022), Høghøj (2022a) and Hautamäki and Donner (2022) capture different green elements related to housing provision, with plans operating at a scale that is foreign to contemporary planning both in their 'new town' imaginaries and in the spaciousness of greenery. As these papers make clear, and as Steiner (2021) previously has suggested, these vast green spaces did not stand in opposition to the city. Instead, the ambitious scale played a key role for the conceptualization of a modern city, most clearly exemplified in the Finnish forest towns which Hautamäki and Donner analyse where nature and urbanity are assembled in ways radically different to today's plans for urban environments.

The importance of shifting scale becomes even more apparent in the case of the analyses in Høghøj's paper, where green planning becomes indistinguishable from regional planning by the embedding of a band of new towns in a massive reengineering of the Danish coastline. As Høghøj (2022a) shows, a vast urban nature was produced in a complex sociotechnical project extending the welfare project far beyond the green yards of housing provision or even Copenhagen Municipality itself. This vast welfare planning does not require us only to look for life beyond Gehl's spaces 'between the buildings'. These examples all point to spatialities which cannot be reduced to the sum of the urban places they contain, a fact that also becomes painfully clear in Valzania's account of redevelopment plans which appear to be unable to fathom green space as more than a backdrop for urban housing projects.

Secondly, as we, with Csepely-Knorr's (2022) study, enter the countryside, the geography we encounter is starkly different to the recreational landscapes provided by the experiments in mass housing provision studied by Hautamäki and Donner, Valzania or Høghøj. Csepely-Knorr shows how carefully the relational geographies of coal-fired power stations, supplying urban centres with energy, were also designed with the experience of, and everyday life in, the industrial landscape in mind. The individual projects and design proposals examined are thus, by their very function in the electrical power grid, examples of the kinds of relational places which geographers have been grappling with since Doreen Massey's (1993) pioneering work, making these sites curiously connected with both the urban communities their electricity output powers and rural landscapes designed to be visually appealing leisure spaces for outdoor recreation. This fascinating story is further complicated by the often-overlooked, yet prominent, role of planners at national authorities in the direct shaping of the landscape of electricity production and distribution.

The study of power stations captures a planning which indeed goes far beyond Gehl's life between the buildings, suggesting how the industrial hinterland of cities too were landscaped with a logic marked by welfarist politics. Csepely-Knorr in this regard echoes Høghøj's attention to planning also outside the urban fringe and landscapes both intensely linked to urban planning and reshaped by a fragile assemblage of technicians, planners, architects, land and urban communities. Csepely-Knorr's study suggests the vital role of a relational approach to trace the full register of welfarist green space – a point also developed elsewhere by Qviström (2013).

Thirdly, the contributions by Qviström (2022) and Pries (2022) shift attention away from discussion on specific cases to capture the intricate models, modes of expertise and spatial imagines that permeated post-war planning, highlighting how abstract space allowed ample room for local adaptions even as it distributed potential uses according to a pattern deeply shaped by post-war socialdemocratic politics. The result is a greenery which is today often taken for granted, the kind of surplus of access to a multitude of green geographies which indeed seemingly is omnipresent in, for instance, Swedish neighbourhoods of the post-war era. While the designs of these sites might at times merit the criticism they have faced, the multiscalar distribution of a very broad range of green spaces with the aim of sustaining a range of possible uses again points to patterns that elude an analysis of these landscapes as urban places. The green legacy left by this planning must thus be evaluated using different criteria, such as the ubiquitous access to a full range of green amenities, rather than the narrow gaze associated with the transformation of one site or another in line with the new urbanist place-making playbook.

Welfare and landscape

To move beyond urban planning and design as the frameworks for interpreting modernist green space, an alternative conceptual approach is necessary. One such alternative is to instead draw on landscape geography, and the notion of landscape indeed runs as a red thread through all the contributions of this special issue. Interpreting green planning as a landscape speaks further to the already emerging productive exchange between debates in landscape architecture, urban design, and spatial planning about the world made by mid-twentieth century social democracy and its various forms of welfarist policy.

Another reason for a landscape approach is its emphasis on the interplay between land and life; landscape brings to the fore the importance of the greenery *for* welfare and as an imprint of welfare planning. This dual role of the landscape was already noted by Michael Jones in 1985, discussing welfare as a 'landscape determinant' and landscape as a 'welfare component'. Leaning on the language of welfare planners of the time, Jones argued that:

The cultural landscape can ... be regarded as a manifestation of type and degree of need satisfaction in a given socio-economic context. In this sense welfare is a landscape determinant. (Jones 1985, 227)

Furthermore, Jones identifies material and immaterial needs of importance for welfare that the landscape can support. In this sense, landscape is a welfare component, which, he argues, is still to be acknowledged within landscape planning:

In landscape planning, the tendency is to regard the landscape in amenity or esthetical terms without a strongly explicit welfare term of reference. ... Little consideration has been given to the wider implications of landscape as an expression of welfare – landscapes of equality and inequality – or the significance of landscape in general for welfare. (Jones 1985, 225)

Jones argued the necessity (and fruitfulness) of combining landscape geography and welfare geography to explore the interplay between welfare and landscape. Unfortunately, the response to this call seems to have been very limited at the time. Instead, the turn to 'the new cultural geography' came to dominate debates in landscape geography and analysis of the increasingly troubled welfare planners tended to instead be found outside the discipline. However, with dramatic changes now remaking the landscape legacies of welfarist planning through heavy-handed renovations and densification projects, it seems apt to again approach welfare as a question of landscape geography.

Partly, Jones' open-ended elaboration on the interplay between welfare and landscape has been replaced by new combinations drawing more explicitly on landscape architecture, notably the idea of 'welfare landscape' (Braae et al. 2021). As many of the contributions to this special issue suggest, it seems fruitful to approach the present via the historical geographies of the period when the welfare state stood at its strongest as welfare landscapes. Yet, in the spirit of self-critical reflection we would like to raise two concerns with this emerging body of research to which we also have contributed. As critical scholarship reassesses these often neglected and dismissed spaces in ways more sensitive to the conditions of their making, it is crucial to avoid both romanticizing their past and falling pray for 'epochalist' (Savage 2009) generalizations which miss the range of political desires and spatial designs of this period.

Jones' comments on landscape as (and for) welfare can be interpreted as a critical intervention pointing to the contradictory way welfare and landscape were deployed by planners. The conflicts between the materialized discourses of a progressive welfare society (e.g. new highways, suburban development or rational and industrial farming) and the landscape amenities as a welfare resource had been debated in the 1970s (e.g. Nordström 2018; Qviström in this issue). This mode of critique merits recognition, to be used alongside and against the critics canonized in the new urbanist and place-making literatures.

This point in turn speaks to how generalized clichés about the welfare state and its landscapes risks closing down important avenues of research. The complex and changing interplay between welfare and landscape is too important to be black boxed or displaced from the present as a passive remnant of a lost world. Instead, we suggest focusing on the *different* ways that landscape was organized by welfarist planning in order to chart the complex and shifting geographies it produced and track its internal tensions and limitations. This attention to different logics articulated as welfare should also encompass, we must stress, the darker sides of recreational and leisure planning, such as the biopolitical top-down attention to 'problematic' populations (see Ericsson and Brink Pinto 2018) or, for that matter, the misplaced enthusiasm for constructing transport infrastructure for the private car among many planners (Lundin 2008). If we are to be able to identify how these landscapes today offer us something more than non-urban placelessness requiring the tough love of redevelopment, it is all the more important to map the full range of politics, uses, functions, relations and ideals embedded in these green geographies in order to evaluate their implicit politics and potential uses.

Underpinning our attempt to bring the human geographer's analytic tool kit to bear on the green spaces of welfare planning is a more general argument about the complex and multiple spatial imaginaries and practices of the post-war planners. As we have argued elsewhere (Pries and Qviström 2021), even tracking post-war planning of a small municipality requires charting the changing set of actors engaged in the process and their shifting visions and ambitions, the elusive geographies of how different policies were temporarily borrowed from a range of other planning contexts and the intermittent scalar shifts in planners' attention. The landscape these planners created over several decades thus tends to have more of a patchwork character rather than being a snapshot of any grand architectural vision frozen in time. These green geographies of welfare planning cannot be reduced to leftover spaces in the big story of housing provision or non-urban non-places; instead, they must be grasped as the product of multiple, and at times even competing, ways space is produced requiring multiple modes of inquiry. As the range of cases in this issue suggest, a constant push and pull between different articulations of welfare combined with other political, economic and social forces to create a landscape much more varied than one might expect. There was certainly a good dose of naïve universalist abstractions in this mode of planning (see Pries, this issue), but this universalism was only one logic in the complex assemblages of actual welfarist landscapes materialized as space.

Much like the assemblage character we suggest characterizes the green geographies of welfare planning, the papers in this special issue grapple with a particular set of spatial formations, and experiment with novel approaches to make sense of their particular case. Rather than offering a new concept or an image of a typical green welfare geography, we see our approach as part of a larger transdisciplinary conversation happening in urban history (Cupers 2014; Avermaete 2018; Høghøj 2022b), landscape architecture (van Haeren 2021; Steiner 2021; van Hellemondt 2021), planning scholarship (Nordström 2018; Mack 2019; Kärrholm and Wirdelöv 2019; Pries and Qviström 2021; Høghøj 2020), architectural theory (Stenbro and Riesto 2014; Mack 2021; Braae 2021), public health debates (Qviström 2013; Gosseye and Heynen 2018) and among practitioners and grassroots activists studying these sites today (Risager 2022; Gustafsson 2021; Pull and Richard 2021; Skrede and Andersen 2022; Ågren and Yigit Turan 2022). Thus, this special issue does not offer a single criterion or ideal-typical spatial form to benchmark post-war planning of green space or which of its features merits conservation in the face of renewal pressures. Rather, we hope these contributions will support and inspire more complex and complete approaches to the green geographies of welfare planning by grappling with sites and cases that can be placed within the already-developing debate.

Looking ahead, the economic and socio-cultural renewal pressures bearing down on so many of the green spaces left by welfarist planning suggest that there is much urgent work to be done, both inside and outside the confines of the university. Geography, and perhaps landscape geography in particular, might play a key role in this work. Yet, it will have to be a kind of landscape geography willing to go beyond some of its own comfort zones, to engage with multiple other forms of scholarly knowledge, to reassess taken-for-granted and forgotten modes of critique, to dispense with some of its own nostalgic attachments to idealized green space and to reach out to directly affected 190 (J. PRIES AND M. QVISTRÖM

people beyond the university in new ways. Doing so might not only provide us with a more nuanced understanding of the green spaces of welfarist planning. Perhaps this work might also shake up and revitalize landscape geography and endow it with a new sense of urgency, as it responds to the increasingly urgent questions posed by the so often unforgiving redevelopment of the green legacies of welfare planning.

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