Editorial

(Not) My Green City? Green Spaces in Times of Urbanization

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Starting from joint discussions at the 8th Nordic Geographers' Meeting on "Sustainable Geography – Geographies of Sustainability"[1], this special issue adds to the debate on green spaces in times of urbanization as pinpointed in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). By setting the provision of "safe, inclusive and accessible green and public space" as one objective, SDG 11 "sustainable cities and communities" points to the crucial role of green areas for environmental and socio-spatial justice in cities working towards sustainability (UN.org 2020). Against the backdrop of an accelerating global urbanization, with the percentage of people living in cities expected to rise to 70% by 2050 (UN.org 2018), nature-based solutions to ecological, climatic and social challenges have become ever more important – globally and locally. Post-modernist urban planning principles oscillating around the "human scale" (Gehl 2010) in particular guide our attention to the benefits of green spaces for the city environment, the creation of social ties and as enablers of public health. At the same time, despite these widely known benefits (e.g. WHO 2016) and the trend in self-portrayal as "sustainable" or "green cities" (Berglund and Julier 2020; Davidson 2010; Lindholst et al. 2016; Wolch et al. 2010), urban green spaces are under threat: heavy densification in city centres, which often puts housing and green space provision in competition with one another (Benjamin 2020; Schmelzkopf 2002); urban sprawl at the cost of surrounding green spaces (Sharma-Wallace 2016), and neoliberal urbanism fuelling real-estate development, green space privatization and commercialization (Smith 2018), as well as the problem of "green gentrification" (Rigolon and Németh 2018; Votsi 2017) – to name only a few. As a result, green space provision at high quality and usability is often not only insufficient but its accessibility is also very unevenly spread among different districts and urban residential groups (Rigolon 2016; De Silva Sousa 2018).

Considering the tension between green space benefits and the limited and unequal access, it is crucial to develop a deeper understanding of the contemporary usage practices and planning principles of urban green spaces. Who uses urban green spaces for what purposes, and even more importantly, who does not (Boyd et al. 2018; Hitchings 2013)?

[1]   Thematic panel entitled "(Not) My Green City? The Role of Green Spaces in Times of Urbanization", hosted by Helen Sooväli-Sepping and Bianka Plüschke-Altof, 16–19 June 2019, Trondheim (Norway)

In what ways do planning approaches enable and disable green space uses by considering, for example, the needs of specific social groups (Kabisch et al. 2017; Krenichyn 2006; Lipsanen 2017; Sang et al. 2016), different green space uses (Grabalov and Nordh 2020; Noori and Benson 2016), the environmental qualities valued by green space users (Skärbäck et al. 2014), as well as inclusive and participative planning processes (Blanco 2015; Bonow et al. 2020; Elwood 2006)? Finding answers to these questions goes far beyond an improved experience of urban green spaces, but relates to issues of democratic access to public space (see for example Sooväli-Sepping 2020) and environmental justice during increasing environmental degradation (De Silva Sousa 2018; Walker 2012; Wolch et al. 2010).

This special issue gives insights into the challenges of green space provision and accessibility as experienced in four different studies: the implementation of urban gardening in Stockholm, Sweden (Bonow et al. 2020), the juxtaposition of housing and green space provision in Paris, France (Benjamin 2020), the paradoxes between green images and – arguably – not so green realities in the city of Helsinki, Finland, a city that is seen as a forerunner of sustainability (Berglund and Julier 2020) and, last but not least, the search for creative solutions to challenges of green space provision in the case of recreational cemetery use in Oslo, Norway and Copenhagen, Denmark (Grabalov and Nordh 2020).

With this focus on examples of practice from Northern and Central Europe, the guest editors aim to offer alternative insights to the often Northern American (or US) centred green space research (Kabisch et al. 2017; McCormack et al. 2010; van Hecke et al. 2018). By applying qualitative methods, ranging from in-depth interviews with experts and users over participant and 'in situ' observation to long-term anthropological and activist research, the case studies also go beyond the dominance of quantitative methodologies in green space research (McCormack et al. 2010). The thematic issue therefore follows the call to take seriously the contextuality of climate, socio-cultural and planning traditions, assuming that these are highly influential for the provision of, access to and (non-)use of green areas by certain groups – sometimes even running counter to statistical trends (see for example Haaland and van der Bosch 2015; Sang et al. 2016). Moreover, it is only by diving into the local contexts that we can start to understand how people and communities make sense of their environments as well as of the discourses, daily routines, practices, and socio-spatial structures influencing these relationships (see for example Bell et al. 2015; Brantz 2017; Gehl 2010; Lertzman 2015; Lebowitz and Trudeau 2017; Lipsanen 2017). The focus of the special issue thus lies on the planning, implementation and use of urban greenery rather than on the very crucial but extensively researched benefits of green space provision (for example Kaźmierczak 2013; Kondo et al. 2018; McCormack et al. 2010; van Hecke et al. 2018; Wolch et al. 2010), which connect urban greenery to health and well-being, mitigation of climate change and environmental degradation, strengthening of the community, and the opportunity for urbanites to directly engage with nature and develop more sustainable environmental behaviour. Especially the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic crisis has conveyed the importance of (nearby) green space by, for example, providing opportunities to socialise in times of social distancing (in particular for elderly people, who are most vulnerable to isolation; see Samuelsson et al. 2020; National Academies of Sciences Engineering and Medicine 2020).

In this vein, the first contribution written by *Eeva Berglund* and *Guy Julier* from the Department of Design at Aalto University in Finland is an essay that critically scrutinizes green urban politics. The authors question the green images proliferated in the ecomodernist approach to city planning based on two examples from Helsinki, which as a North European city is often seen as a forerunner of urban sustainability. Drawing on Harvey Molotch's idea of "the city as growth machine", they brush growth ideology, even in its green shade, against the grain, thereby uncovering it as Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich and Democratic (WEIRD). The paper thus relates the issue of green space provision to questions of green gentrification and green washing, urging the reader to look beyond widely proliferated green city images.

The second paper by *Pavel Grabalov* and *Helena Nordh* from the Norwegian University of Life Sciences takes us to Norway and Denmark, focusing on a very specific aspect of green space planning: cemeteries. The authors investigate the strategies of cemetery planning and management in both cities by providing inspiring examples of how cities try to meet the increasing demand for green spaces in times of urbanization and urban densification. By outlining the contextual factors that help elaborate these strategies – ranging from green space specific argumentations to changed burial practices – they give insights into the enabling and disabling aspects of such creative green space uses, which opens up room for discussion on the transferability of such new forms of urban greenery planning to other spatial and socio-cultural contexts.

The last two papers focus on an increasingly popular use of urban green spaces in the form of community gardens in different socio-spatial contexts, which allows us to make parallels and compare. *Carrie Ann Benjamin*, Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at the University of Warwick, tackles community gardening through the prism of participatory urbanism in the case of a densely populated working-class neighbourhood in Paris, France. By carefully elaborating the development of a nomadic garden community and the motivations, struggles and hopes of its users, the author shows how social housing and the need for green space as "a place to breathe" are juxtaposed with one another, particularly affecting vulnerable residential groups with limited socio-economic and physical mobility.

The author collective *Madeleine Bonow*, *Maria Normark* and *Sabine Lossien* from Södertörn University in Sweden take this debate to Stockholm, where the focus stays on the implementation processes of community gardens but shifts from the user perspective to the role of street-level bureaucrats in enabling and/or disabling the creation and maintenance of urban gardens. Through their analysis across different districts of the Swedish capital, they are able to show that seemingly small variations in local resources, expertise, interest and political will might fundamentally shape the outcome of community gardening initiatives, once again pointing to the need to take the socio-spatial context of green space provision seriously.

the process. A special thank you also goes to the authors for their valuable contributions, the reviewers for their fruitful feedback as well as to the research participants in the individual cases. Without their participation, this special issue would not have been possible.

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