

- 1 Kirsi Saarikangas, "The Policies of Modern Home: Organization of the Everyday in Swedish and Finnish Housing Design from the 1930s to the 1950s," in *Models, Modernity and the Myrdals*, ed. Pauli Kettunen and Hanna Eskola (Helsinki: Renvall Institute for Area and Cultural Studies, 1997), 81.
- 2 Harris-Kjisik Architects, *Helsingin jalankulkuympäristöt: Jalankulikutkimuksen laadulliset arviot vuonna 2016* (Helsinki: City of Helsinki, 2016), 1, [https://www.hel.fi/hel2/ksv/julkaisut/los\\_2016-8.pdf](https://www.hel.fi/hel2/ksv/julkaisut/los_2016-8.pdf).
- 3 Jan Gehl and Birgitte Svarre, *How to Study Public Life*, trans. Karen Ann Steenhard (Washington: Island Press, 2013).
- 4 Harris-Kjisik Architects, *Helsingin jalankulkuympäristöt*, 1.
- 5 Harris-Kjisik Architects, *Helsingin jalankulkuympäristöt*, 2.

Architecture and planning have played prominent roles in the post-war formation of the Nordic welfare states. As the art historian Kirsi Saarikangas observes, in Sweden and Finland, "the reorganization of everyday life and the rearrangement of architectural dwelling space culminated in the pre- and postwar period when new architectural aesthetics became an ethical as well as political project."<sup>1</sup> By virtue of its accessibility and its need to address an ostensible "public," the prominence and cultural legacy of Nordic architecture and urbanism continues to hold particular currency as a means of embodying social democratic values in the built environment. However, with the neoliberal market-oriented political reforms of the Nordic states in the 1980s, the role of architectural and urban expertise necessitates reconsideration in relation to the changing welfare state. Through a case study in Helsinki, Finland, this chapter will consider the ways through which the expertise of architects and urban professionals is deployed in the service of the market development following the state-driven development in the first decades after the Second World War. Rather than reasserting the potential of architecture and urbanism in defending the values of the welfare state, the rise of technocratic expertise in the built environment calls for consideration in relation to asset-based welfare policies and the new dynamics of class that such expertise entails.

In 2016, the City of Helsinki commissioned a study on pedestrian environments in the capital region. Utilizing the "Twelve Quality Criteria" developed by the Gehl Institute, the study sought to develop a comprehensive understanding of key pedestrian environments using qualitative and quantitative criteria.<sup>2</sup> First elaborated by Jan Gehl and Birgitte Svarre in the book *How to Study Public Life*, the Twelve Quality Criteria draw on Jan Gehl's decades-long *Cities for People* agenda, advocating for pedestrian-friendly and human-scale principles in the design of public space.<sup>3</sup> Entitled "Qualitative Assessment of Pedestrian Research," the 2016 study was conducted by Harris-Kjisik Architects and handled by a steering group composed of members of the Urban Environment Division from the City of Helsinki.<sup>4</sup> The study was initiated as an opportunity to reassess the quality of public spaces in Helsinki, and to "overcome individual biases and preconceived notions in urban decision making."<sup>5</sup> Conducted over a period of two weeks, with an additional two weeks reserved for supplementary work, the study established a relatively direct translation of Gehl's Twelve Quality Criteria into Finnish and was undertaken by five expert evaluators with backgrounds in architecture, and urban, landscape, and traffic design. Thirty-two sites in central Helsinki were studied, along with 14 sites in the greater capital region. Additional quantitative data was gathered by four members of the Harris-Kjisik team. Tasked with observing and recording users on each site, the team recorded

- 6 Harris-Kjisik Architects, *Helsingin jalankulkuympäristöt*, 22.
- 7 Gehl Architects, "Twelve Quality Criteria," <https://gehlpeople.com/tools/twelve-quality-criteria/>. Accessed March 20, 2022. The worksheet is adapted from the quality criteria published in Gehl's *Cities for People*. Jan Gehl, *Cities for People* (Washington: Island Press, 2010), 239.
- 8 Gehl Architects, "Twelve Quality Criteria."
- 9 Gehl and Svarre, *How to Study Public Life*.
- 10 Bengt Lundsten, "Kortepohjan rivitalokorttelit," <https://docomomo.fi/kohteet/kortepohjan-asuinalueen-rivitalokorttelit>.

observational data using a series of site diagrams, noting the number of users engaged in activities such as sitting, walking, or "other active activities."<sup>6</sup>

There are several key methodological distinctions that should be noted between the Helsinki study and the Gehl Institute's worksheet. Originally designed as a user and stakeholder survey, the Gehl Institute's Twelve Quality Criteria worksheet was intended as a low stakes tool for community engagement and initial research on a particular site. Presented as a simple worksheet that is distributed as a survey, the Twelve Quality Criteria are organized around three themes: protection, comfort, and enjoyment. Survey participants are asked to observe a given site for approximately five minutes, and then to assign a happy, neutral, or a sad face for criteria such as "Protection against traffic and accidents, or the experience of aesthetic qualities and positive sensory experiences."<sup>7</sup> The Gehl Institute notes that the results of the study are "always subjective, since they are based on the perceptions of surveyors in a particular public space. Therefore, the evaluation data is not meant to be compared quantitatively to surveys done in other places."<sup>8</sup> The Helsinki study, on the other hand, utilized a team of expert evaluators across several sites. Instead of the three-point smiley-face scale, the evaluation criteria were assessed across a five-point scale of pluses and minuses. To further add an air of objectivity to the results, the average score of the expert group was used as the final value. The role of the quality criteria was therefore not to engage with stakeholders, but rather seen as a way to overcome *individual* biases in the group, and thus to bolster the group's existing expertise by offering more objective insights into public space.

Despite the City of Helsinki's newfound interest in observational analysis for urban decision making, the methodology has a long legacy within the fields of architecture and urban design. Indeed, in *How to Study Public Life*, Gehl and Svarre trace an extensive genealogy extending back to the early 1960s. Pioneered by figures such as Jan Gehl, Jane Jacobs, and William H. Whyte, amongst others, "public life studies" sought to address the shortcomings of modern architecture. For these figures, "machines for living"—characterized by modernist towers with access to light and air—lacked a concern for the life they purported to support; in contrast, these commentators encouraged a deeper concern with the interaction between city life and space.<sup>9</sup> Such principles similarly found a home in Finland, for example in Bengt Lundsten's pioneering plan for Kortepohja in Jyväskylä, which marked a radical shift in postwar planning in Finland.<sup>10</sup> In place of the loosely arranged blocks set in natural environments that characterized Finnish planning of the postwar period, Lundsten's 1964 proposal integrated research from sociologists and landscape designers early on in the design process. Privileging the "compact, contact" environment of traditional Finnish wooden housing towns, the project marked a shift to compact pedestrian-oriented grid plans in suburban Finland.

The Twelve Quality Criteria, and the City of Helsinki's newfound interest in them, reveal a parallel development in urban policy since the turn of the millennium. On the one hand, we witness the design of public space being prioritized, with the life *between* buildings nominated as the central focus of urban professionals; on the other hand, we can observe the continuing development of urban tools

- 11 Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 35.  
 12 Harris-Kjistik Architects, *Helsingin jalankulkuympäristöt*, 58.

and criteria to serve as the benchmarks for those designs. Though on the surface such shifts appear politically progressive, promising a more “livable” city by way of objective analysis and user feedback, they are also symptomatic of the hollowing out of the welfare state through neoliberal reform. The neoliberalizing welfare state no longer governs primarily through planning and building, but rather turns to subsidies, grants, tax breaks, and other financial incentives to direct market development. As the life *between* buildings grows more prominent as the site of state intervention and the public good, decisions about the life *in* buildings is increasingly offloaded to the market and framed as a matter of economic policy. Assessment tools and criteria such as the Twelve Quality Criteria therefore play an increasingly prominent role in neoliberal governance, serving to bolster what political theorist Wendy Brown describes as a “sophisticated common sense, a reality principle remaking institutions and human beings everywhere it settles, nestles, and gains affirmation.”<sup>11</sup> From this perspective, the role of architects and urban professionals in the changing welfare state extends beyond the production of architectural and urban form and into the benchmarks and criteria that support this change.

Within the context of the neoliberalizing welfare state, there are particular consequences of the Helsinki study that extend beyond a concern for the quality of public space. By assigning an expert ranking—rendered objective through the methods of observational analysis and criteria of the Gehl Institute, multiple sites in both urban and suburban contexts were brought into comparative analysis and ranked. Tennispalatsinaukio—located in the center of the busiest commercial area in Helsinki—ranked highest. Particular significance was given to the feeling of safety and protection offered by the surrounding pedestrian streets. The second-highest-ranking site was Esplanadi (affectionately referred to as “the Champs Elysee” of Finland), which was recognized by the expert group as a significant green oasis in the city. The positive assessments of the highest-ranked sites were seen as evidence of the importance of parks and pedestrian-friendly environments in the urban structure, and the need for the city to invest in them.

The objective claims of the study, however, are inevitably limited by methodology that privileges observational analysis and data. By focusing on spaces “as they are,” such studies risk overlooking how a site and its use may be socially or historically determined. The normalizing tendency of pedestrian criteria for urban quality is particularly evident when we consider the negative assessments in the Helsinki study. For example, Herttoniemi, a postwar neighborhood about 10 kilometers east of Helsinki’s city center, was assessed particularly negatively. The study noted that the views of the traffic interchange over the highway were “not interesting,” and identified the presence of drunks as contributing factors to the negative qualities of the site.<sup>12</sup> By focusing on a narrow set of parameters and criteria, systemic issues of class, race, and gender are glossed over and further deepened. Much can and should be said about the objective claims of the Helsinki study and the Twelve Quality Criteria. Though there could be opportunities to further expand and develop the study, to simply fine-tune or replace the criteria with other options would be to overlook the role of criteria in neoliberal governance in the first place.



View of Tennispalatsinaukio, the highest rated site in a large 2016 study of more than 40 locations in the Helsinki region. The square is bordered by pedestrian streets which contribute to the feeling of safety.



View of Esplanadi, a park in the center of Helsinki, described as a significant green oasis in the Helsinki study.

- 13 Harris-Kjisik Architects, *Helsingin jalankulkuympäristöt*.
- 14 Harris-Kjisik Architects, *Helsingin jalankulkuympäristöt*, 70.
- 15 For example, the main outcome of the study was to identify the need for a comprehensive lighting plan, the need to improve the areas around the central railway station as “the gateway to the city” and the potential of holding an architectural competition to generate ideas.
- 16 Panu Söderström, *Elävät kaupunkikeskukset: Kaupunkiympäristön monipuolisuus ja laatu verkostokaupungin keskuksissa* (Helsinki: Suomen ympäristökeskus (SYKE), 2012).

For a seemingly innocuous study conducted over a particular two-week period in the spring of 2016, the study has other far-reaching effects. Harris-Kjisik Architects, the office that conducted the study, is among the most established urban design and planning offices in Finland. Both of its founding partners are highly esteemed professor emeriti in the country, and their involvement lends the study considerable weight with both students and practitioners. The results of the study have also been enshrined on the City of Helsinki mapping service, and are accessible alongside data on property divisions, land reserves, and other demographic data. As observed by Wendy Brown, neoliberal rationality governs as a soft power, “drawing on consent and buy-in, [rather] than through violence, dictatorial command, or even overt political platforms.”<sup>13</sup> The nature of the Helsinki study allows the expert group to simultaneously conclude that the Gehl method is not completely scientific or objective, yet this is a positive aspect, as it “leaves room for personal interpretation, empathy and the feelings of each evaluator.”<sup>14</sup> Designed to simply ‘test out’ the efficacy of Gehl’s work, the study is shielded from critique as it contains no concrete policies or objectives for further action that can be directly challenged.<sup>15</sup> Further iterations of the assessment criteria have also been developed and applied to Malmi and Kannelmäki, districts in northern Helsinki that are slated for planning revisions. The new assessment criteria build on the 2016 version and add elements from earlier research by Panu Söderström, a researcher at the Finnish Environment Institute.<sup>16</sup> Published just before *How to Study Public Life*, the ten-point 2012 “Living City Center’s” criteria nonetheless draw heavily on Gehl’s *Cities for People*, albeit with a distinctive Finnish flavor. The outcomes of the new studies are less ambiguous, with areas labeled “good,” “poor,” and “bad” on the city mapping services.

There is a long chain of expertise that disseminates across borders, disciplines, departments, and institutions. From Jan Gehl and his eponymous practice in Copenhagen to the Gehl Institute—the shuttered non-profit organization based in New York that develops open-source tools and reports using Gehl’s principles—to the members of the Urban Environment Division at the City of Helsinki, who were taking the survey material and commissioning a local office to translate and apply those criteria on to existing sites. From the results of those assessments being placed on the City mapping service, enshrined as examples of “best practices” for prospective developers and investors looking for available lots, to those developers and investors commissioning architects to tacitly comply with the criteria—the Twelve Quality Criteria are another part of the “soft power” that is crucial for the apparatus of neoliberal urban governance.

## CHANGING WELFARE

It is of particular significance that the success of Gehl’s agenda is grounded in his Danish roots. The appeal of the narrative of *Cities for People* is that it is able to simultaneously anchor the narrative of urban livability, while drawing on the qualities of pragmatism and equality of the Nordic welfare state. For critics of neoliberal reform, the “Nordic model” is often invoked as a bastion of social

- 17 Nick Gass "The best quotes from the first democratic debate," Politico, October 14, 2015 <https://www.politico.eu/article/the-best-quotes-from-the-first-democratic-debate>.
- 18 See Jani Marjanen, "Nordic Modernities: From Historical Region to Five Exceptions," *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity* 3, no. 1 (March 2015): 91–106, doi:10.18352/22130624-00301005; Niels Finn Christiansen and Pirjo Markkola, "Introduction," in *The Nordic Model of Welfare: A Historical Reappraisal*, ed. Niels Finn Christiansen, Klaus Petersen, Nils Edling, and Per Haave (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2006), 9–29.
- 19 Jani Marjanen, Johan Strang, and Mary Hilson, eds., *Contesting Nordicness* (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2021), 20.
- 20 Nordic City Network, *Nordic Cities in Transition*, October 20, 2014, [https://issuu.com/gehlarchitects/docs/1837\\_nordic\\_cities\\_in\\_transition](https://issuu.com/gehlarchitects/docs/1837_nordic_cities_in_transition), 6.
- 21 Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (New York: Zone Books 2017), 314.
- 22 Sanford F. Schram, "Neoliberalizing the Welfare State: Marketizing Social Policy/ Disciplining Clients," in *The SAGE Handbook of Neoliberalism*, ed. Damien Cahill, Melinda Cooper, Martijn Konings, and David Primrose (London: SAGE publications, 2018), 311.

democratic welfare. During the 2016 Democratic primary in the US, Senator Bernie Sanders proclaimed, "I think we should look to countries like Denmark, like Sweden, and Norway and learn from what they have accomplished for their working people."<sup>17</sup> However, for historians of the welfare state, the Nordic model of welfare is a flexible and contested concept. Welfare policies in Nordic countries are seldom the same, to the point that they are referred to as "one model with five exceptions."<sup>18</sup> Jani Marjanen, Johan Strang, and Mary Hilson further recognize that the positive connotations of "the Nordics" have made it an extremely valuable brand, noting that:




The rhetoric of Nordicness is often used to distinguish particular features of the region, but it can also be an appeal to something higher or universal. Talking about the welfare state as Nordic rather than Norwegian or Swedish gives it the character of being something more eminent than a contingent result of a series of domestic political decisions. It becomes a "model" which, paradoxically, is at the same time culturally anchored and universal, and as such replicable by others.<sup>19</sup>

In a report prepared for the Nordic City Network, Gehl Architects outlined the agenda for "Welfare City 2.0," whereby "the new visions for the Nordic welfare cities now center around ideas of attractiveness and experience of urban living. The city is no longer perceived as a system that is the result of a plan and ideology, rather the focus is on people and their lifeworlds."<sup>20</sup> Gehl's *Cities for People* is therefore able to generate considerable goodwill, drawing on the political legacy of the social democratic welfare state, while emptying it of any political concern and casting it as a replicable model of timeless qualities at the human scale. Claims to serve the interests of "the people" are particularly seductive in the defense of the neoliberalizing welfare state. Hard-won through the struggle between the interests of capital and the interests of labor, the social democratic welfare state was a decidedly ideological and political project. *Cities for People* is able to draw on the legacy of that political struggle, while lending a distinctly Nordic spin to the neoliberal narrative for livable cities. Though "the people" may appear as a suitable stand-in for labor, in the dichotomies of Labor vs. Capital and People vs. Cars, cars make a poor substitute for the interests of capital.

Today, "neoliberalism" has gained great popularity as a pejorative term used to describe the privatization of public services and institutions of the welfare state. However, neoliberal reforms are perhaps better understood not as the result of an external force that replaces the welfare state, but rather, as Melinda Cooper notes, as tending to "repurpose rather than dismantle the institutional legacy of the twentieth-century welfare state."<sup>21</sup> As Sanford F. Schram further describes, "instead of repealing the welfare state, neoliberalism involves marketing welfare state operations so they run more like a business in the name of getting everyone in them, policymakers, program administrators, and clients to act in market-compliant ways."<sup>22</sup> Like Brown, Cooper, Schram, and a long list of thinkers drawing on Foucault's *Lectures on Biopolitics 1978–1979* at the Collège de France, we should consider neoliberalism, therefore, not simply as acquiescence to the demands of the market, but as a

# TWELVE URBAN QUALITY CRITERIA

LOCATION:

-  = YES
-  = IN BETWEEN
-  = NO

Protection	<p><b>Protection against traffic and accidents.</b> Do groups across age and ability experience traffic safety in the public space? Can one safely bike and walk without fear of being hit by a driver?</p>	<p><b>Protection against harm by others.</b> Is the public space perceived to be safe both day and night? Are there people and activities at all hours of the day because the area has, for example, both residents and offices? Does the lighting provide safety at night as well as a good atmosphere?</p>	<p><b>Protection against unpleasant sensory experience.</b> Are there noises, dust, smells, or other pollution? Does the public space function well when it's windy? Is there shelter from strong sun, rain, or minor flooding?</p>
	<p><b>Options for mobility.</b> Is this space accessible? Are there physical elements that might limit or enhance personal mobility in the forms of walking, using a wheelchair, or pushing a stroller? Is it evident how to move through the space without having to take an illogical detour?</p>	<p><b>Options to stand and linger.</b> Does the place have features you can stay and lean on, like a façade that invites one to spend time next to it, a bus stop, a bench, a tree, or a small ledge or niche?</p>	<p><b>Options for sitting.</b> Are there good primary seating options such as benches or chairs? Or is there only secondary seating such as a stair, seat wall, or the edge of a fountain? Are there adequate non-commercial seating options so that sitting does not require spending money?</p>
	<p><b>Options for seeing.</b> Are seating options placed so there are interesting things to look at?</p>	<p><b>Options for talking and listening/hearing.</b> Is it possible to have a conversation here? Is it evident that you have the option to sit together and have a conversation?</p>	<p><b>Options for play, exercise, and activities.</b> Are there options to be active at multiple times of the day and year?</p>
Enjoyment	<p><b>Scale.</b> Is the public space and the building that surrounds it at a human scale? If people are at the edges of the space, can we still relate to them as people or are they lost in their surroundings?</p>	<p><b>Opportunities to enjoy the positive aspects of climate.</b> Are local climatic aspects such as wind and sun taken into account? Are there varied conditions for spending time in public spaces at different times of year? With this in mind, where are the seating options placed? Are they located entirely in the shadows or the sun? And how are they oriented/placed in relation to wind? Are they protected?</p>	<p><b>Experience of aesthetic qualities and positive sensory experiences.</b> Is the public space beautiful? Is it evident that there is good design both in terms of how things are shaped, as well as their durability?</p>

# KESKUSTA KOOSTETAULUKKO

LAADULLISTEN KRITERIEN TOTEUTUMINEN KESKUSTASSA  
ASIAINTUNTIJARYHMÄN MUKAAN

	SUOJA			MUKAVUUS						NAUTINNOLLISUUS			KAIKKI KATEGORIAT KOHTEITTAIN	
	Suojien tilanteiden ja onnettomuuksien	Suojien rikoksia ja väkivaltaa vastaan	Suojien epämiellyttävien aistitunteiden vastaan	Kävelymahdollisuudet	Mahdollisuus seisomiseen tai jarruun	Iänmukaisuus	Mahdollisuudet nauttia	Mahdollisuudet kuulla tai joella	Mahdollisuudet kelle- tai upottamiseksi	Mitkäsen	Mahdollisuus nauttia ilmaston positivistisista puolia	Eteetien katu tai positivistiset aistitunteet		
1. KAIVOKATU	--	++	++	++	-	-	+	-	--	++	++	-	-8	+1
2. TENNISPALATSIN AUKIO	++	++	+	+	++	++	+	++	++	++	++	++	0	+21
3. KAMPIN METROASEMA	++	+	++	-	-	--	++	++	-	++	-	-	-7	+1
4. SALOMONKATU	+	+	+	++	++	++	+	+	++	++	+	++	0	+14
5. URHO KEKKÖSEN KATU JA ANNAN AUKIO	-	+	-	++	-	--	+	++	--	++	-	-	-9	+2
6. NARINKKATORI	++	+	-	++	++	+	+	+	+	++	+	+	-1	+13
7. SIMONKATU JA SIMONPUUSTIKKO	++	+	-	+	++	++	-	-	+	+	++	+	-3	+5
8. MAUNO KOIVISTON - JA PAASIKIVEN AUKIO	-	+	--	++	++	-	+	--	-	++	++	++	-7	+2
9. MANNERHEIMINTIE	++	+	-	+	-	--	++	-	-	++	+	+	-6	+7
10. KOLMEN SEPÄN AUKIO	+	+	-	++	++	+	+	++	+	+	+	+	-1	+12
11. EROTTAJAN AUKIO	++	++	-	++	-	-	++	-	-	-	++	-	-7	0

4

In place of the simple 3-point scale of the Gehl Institute version, the Helsinki study utilized a 5-point scale of plus and minuses. To further add an air of objectivity to the results, the average score of the expert group was used as the final value.



- 23 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979* (New York: Palgrave, 2008).
- 24 Michel Feher, *Rated Agency: Investee Politics in a Speculative Age. Near Futures* (New York: Zone Books, 2018), 13.
- 25 William Davies, “Elite Power under Advanced Neoliberalism,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 34, no. 5–6 (September 1, 2017), 238.
- 26 William Davies, 4.
- 27 “This means that analysis in terms of the market economy or, in other words, of supply and demand, can function as a schema which is applicable to non-economic domains. And, thanks to this analytical schema or grid of intelligibility, it will be possible to reveal in non-economic processes, relations, and behavior a number of intelligible relations which otherwise would not have appeared as such,” Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 243.
- 28 See Maroš Krivý and Leonard Ma, “The Limits of the Livable City: From Homo Sapiens to Homo Cappuccino,” in *Avery Review* 30, (2018).
- 29 Gehl Architects, *World Class Streets: Remaking New York City’s Public Realm*, May 23, 2014, [https://issuu.com/gehlarchitects/docs/issuu\\_561\\_new\\_york\\_world\\_class\\_stre](https://issuu.com/gehlarchitects/docs/issuu_561_new_york_world_class_stre).
- 30 Robert Krueger, “Amanda Burden on Creating Value with Urban Open Space,” *Urban Land*, November 23, 2011, <http://urbanland.uli.org/Articles/2011/Fall11/KruegerBurdenVid>.

“governmentality,” or an *art of governing*.<sup>23</sup> Distinct from liberalism, neoliberalism is a form of governmental reason that recasts the liberal *homo economicus* as the self-interested partner of exchange, an owner of their own “human capital.” This shift aligns the interests of labor (workers) with that of capital: formerly socialized concerns, such as defined benefit pensions, public healthcare, and social housing, hard-won through decades of labor struggle, could now be cast as strategic investments into one’s own capital and therefore individualized with the objective of seeking the highest returns possible.

It is worth here returning briefly to the core of the neoliberal project—its critique of planning. Directed in particular toward the figure of the public official, this critique called into question the presumed objectivity of the elite bureaucrats and their supposed service to the public good. For neoliberal critics, the public official was too easily swayed by special interest groups such as unions or lobbyists, risked “buying votes” with favorable policies, and doing more harm than good in interfering with the price signals of the market.<sup>24</sup> Opening up the Keynesian welfare state to competitive markets was therefore seen as a means to keep these institutional elites in check. However, as Will Davies notes, the paradox of neoliberalism’s anti-elite project was that it would require its own vanguard of elites, “a type of flexible, post-jurisdictional elite, which is waged against the jurisdictional elites of state bureaucracy, academic disciplines and professions.”<sup>25</sup> These neoliberal elites would exercise “a type of elite power which interprets what is on the screen, explains what it means, converts it into narrative, but possesses no authorship or authority over it.”<sup>26</sup>

The neoliberal reforms of the late 1960s reconfigured the organization of cities along a “grid of economic intelligibility.”<sup>27</sup> In place of social housing and the state-led modernist planning projects of the postwar era, housing policy was enacted through housing finance, including home ownership incentives and housing subsidies. Couched in metrics such as GMP (Gross Metropolitan Product) and real estate prices, the organization of cities could become a concern not only for architects and urban planners, but a matter of economic policy. The economic paradigm of the neoliberal city would require a human face, one borne not from the authority of the masterplan, but from the narrative of “urban life.” From Jane Jacobs to Richard Florida, Jan Gehl is among a line of urban elites that are distinct from the master architect and planner of postwar urbanism. For the “hooray urbanists,” the ego and naïveté of the master architect was the source of urban decay, and only through the spontaneity of urban life would cities realize their full potential.<sup>28</sup> The “life” of cities therefore was something that could not be planned, but unleashed through strategic investments in parks, cycling infrastructure, and pedestrian environments.

It is not a coincidence that Gehl’s ascent to success coincided with his office’s work in New York during the Bloomberg administration.<sup>29</sup> Under the directives of Amanda Burden, the chair of the New York Planning Commission (herself a protégé of William H. Whyte), “well-designed, well-used public open spaces” can “be a catalyst for the economic and social well-being of a city, and actually change the entire perception of a city.”<sup>30</sup> Noting the paradoxically compatible alignment of the Bloomberg slogan “Building Like Moses with

- 31 Scott Larson, *Building Like Moses with Jacobs in Mind: Contemporary Planning in New York City: Urban Life, Landscape, and Policy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), 13.
- 32 Lisa Adkins, Melinda Cooper, and Martijn Konings, *The Asset Economy* (Medford, MA: Polity, 2020)
- 33 Lisa Adkins, Melinda Cooper, and Martijn Konings, 50.
- 34 Lisa Adkins, Melinda Cooper, and Martijn Konings, 46.
- 35 See Rajiv Prabhakar, "A House Divided: Asset-based Welfare and Housing," *International Journal of Housing Policy* 19 (2019).
- 36 Neil Smith, "Toward a Theory of Gentrification A Back to the City Movement by Capital, not People," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 45, no. 4 (1979), 538–48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944367908977002>.
- 37 Samuel Stein, *Capital City: Gentrification and the Real Estate State* (New York: Verso Books, 2019).
- 38 City of Helsinki, *The Most Functional City in the World: Helsinki City Strategy 2017–2021* (Helsinki: City of Helsinki), [https://www.hel.fi/static/helsinki/kaupunkistrategia/helsinki\\_city\\_strategy\\_leaflet.pdf](https://www.hel.fi/static/helsinki/kaupunkistrategia/helsinki_city_strategy_leaflet.pdf).

Jacobs in Mind," Scott Larson observes that "design becomes a powerful means of enhancing real estate values and encouraging development that is reflective of a broader class-based planning ideology."<sup>31</sup> The timeless and ideology-free qualities of public space that urbanists espouse prove imminently compatible with neoliberal urban development. Though appearing as a "win-win" scenario, where the fostering of high quality and well-designed public space serves as an engine for growth, this process normalizes the consideration of public space in economically speculative terms, directing infrastructural investment not based on need, but to those who are best placed to capitalize on its growth.

## WANING EXPERT POWER

Describing the sociopolitical shifts of the neoliberal era, Adkins, Cooper, and Konings introduce the concept of "the asset economy."<sup>32</sup> Unlike an economy of commodities, an economy of assets shifts the locus of value toward speculation, not toward exchange and use value, but rather *future* value. Housing, particularly the boom of homeownership since the 1970s, plays a vital role in this economy, broadly democratizing participation in the asset economy.<sup>33</sup> As previously mentioned, for Foucault, the concept of *human capital* was central to neoliberal governmentality in aligning the interests of labor with capital. In the contours of the asset economy, the appreciation of assets such as private homes, equities and pension funds became a key vehicle to realize human capital gains, such that strategic investments would accrue capital gains to those who "earned" them.<sup>34</sup> Welfare therefore could be deployed to serve the interests in capital as a form of "asset-based welfare" while clinging to the redistributive promises of social democracy.<sup>35</sup>

Deployed in the service of the "narrative" of market development, the irony of *Cities for People* is that it also advocates cities for capital. Paired with loosened economic policy and increasingly sophisticated financial instruments, the agenda for urbanization and densification has above all, helped to usher in decades of real estate capital growth.<sup>36</sup> As noted by Samuel Stein, "public improvements become private investment opportunities as those who own the land reap the benefits of beautiful urban design and improved infrastructure."<sup>37</sup> Livable cities, human-scaled, with abundant green spaces and safe pedestrian and cycling paths, become a very concrete way to appreciate real estate capital. Thus, investment in the space between buildings could also manifest gains for the life in buildings. Through loans on home equity and investment properties, the rise in real estate value for private homes did actually improve the quality of life for lucky homeowners and investors, not through higher wages or value in their labor power, but through capital appreciation.

Parallel to the 2016 study *Qualitative Pedestrian Environments*, the City of Helsinki released their strategic vision for 2017–2021: namely, to become "The Most Functional City in the World." In the foreword, the mayor of Helsinki, Jan Vapaavuori writes, "Helsinki pursues this vision by seeking to create the best possible conditions for urban life."<sup>38</sup> Alongside the "Nordic model of high-quality city services," it is from the clean and safe urban environment that the livability of Helsinki emerges. The three themes of the Twelve Quality



Situated in the urban periphery, the district of Herttoniemi was one of the lowest ranked sites assessed in the Helsinki study. The expert group noted the presence of drunks and that the views were “not interesting.”

- 39 This post, written by professor emeritus Pentti Murole, just months before his death, is particularly significant as he was the pioneer of the “compact/contact” city that he then expressed some regret for. Pentti Murole, “Kun kaupunkisuunnitteluun tuli mittakaavavirhe, hurma nousi, henki hävisi,” *Kuntalehti*, November 23, 2020, <https://kuntatekniikka.fi/penan-blogi/2020/11/23/kun-kaupunkisuunnitteluun-tuli-mittakaavavirhe-hurma-nousi-henki-havisi/> (In Finnish).
- 40 Katja Kuokkanen, “Nrep houkutteli pormestari Vapaavuoren riveihinsä ravintola Savoyn kabinetissa: Tällainen on pohjoismainen kiinteistöjätti, joka etsii sijoitusrahalta kohteita Helsingissä,” *Helsingin sanomat*, May 13, 2021, <https://www.hs.fi/kaupunki/art-2000007974503.html> (In Finnish).
- 41 NREP, “Nrep hires the former Mayor of Copenhagen as Director of Urban Development,” *NREP*, August 24, 2018, <https://nrep.fi/news/nrep-hires-former-mayor-copenhagen-director-urban-development/>.
- 42 Lisa Adkins, Melinda Cooper, and Martijn Konings, *The Asset Economy*, 50.
- 43 See Amy Lubitow and Thaddeus R. Miller, “Contesting Sustainability: Bikes, Race, and Politics in Portlandia,” *Environmental Justice* 6, no. 4 (2013).
- 44 Cedric Goossens, Stijn Oosterlynck, and Lieve Bradt, “Livable Streets? Green Gentrification and the Displacement of Longtime Residents in Ghent, Belgium,” *Urban Geography* 41, no. 4 (April 20, 2020): 556. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2019.1686307>.
- 45 Marja Elsinga, “Home Ownership beyond Asset and Security: Perceptions of Housing Related Security and Insecurity in Eight European Countries,” *Housing and Urban Policy Studies* 32 (2007): 72.

Criteria—“protection, comfort, and enjoyment”—were particularly timely to the future political vision of the city. In taxonomizing and ranking sites across the city, there is the implicit promise to locate deficient sites and to improve them through technocratic expertise. As the Helsinki strategic vision points out, “the best economic and business policy is to be a functional city.” That the most successful sites in the 2016 study also happen to be the most expensive ones only contributes to this narrative.

Helsinki mayor, Vapaavuori—the former housing minister of Finland—led the coalition between the center-right National Coalition (Blue) Party and the center-left Green League that has dominated Helsinki politics since the elections in 2000. The alliance found surprising compatibility in directing policy to increase the supply of new construction, as advocated by the Blues, while pursuing the compact, sustainable, and lively city promised by the Green League. It was during this tenure that Pentti Murole observes that “pushing green political policies found a connection to brutal construction.”<sup>39</sup> The simmering tension between “the most functional city” with the growing strength of the real estate industry came to a boil with Vapaavuori’s exit from city politics in 2020. Vapaavuori announced to significant public backlash that he would be taking on a position with the Danish real estate company NREP (Nordic Real Estate Partners) as a special advisor.<sup>40</sup> Vapaavuori is not the first mayor that NREP has hired, having appointed the former mayor of Copenhagen Jens Kramer Mikkelsen as Director of Urban Development in 2018.<sup>41</sup>

When property values rise and wages stagnate, the redistributive promise of a democratic society of homeowners becomes available to an increasingly select few. As the authors of *The Asset Economy* write:

The enduring catastrophe of the global financial crisis stems from the fact that it complicated what had long seemed the easiest route to asset-based democracy—upward mobility through home ownership. In recent years, it has become clear that private housing has itself come to serve as a major generator of inequality.<sup>42</sup>

Acute issues of housing affordability and inequality have considerably weakened the claims of neoliberal urban elites promising to make livable cities for people. Phenomena such as the “bike lash” have started appearing around the world, with popular protests to improvements to cycling infrastructure, and pedestrian environments.<sup>43</sup> Within the context of the asset economy, such projects are often “met with resistance as some longtime residents felt that greening was not an end in itself, but only a means of capital accumulation and gentrification.”<sup>44</sup> The anger is not directed toward the bike lanes per se, but rather that urban expertise is unable to deliver the outcomes it promises.

As design and quality criteria have taken on a more prominent role in the built environment, they have also further entrenched the logics of home ownership and the asset economy and obscured what form housing and urban welfare policies can take. In Finland, the housing regime “is based on the presupposition that households satisfy their housing needs mainly by relying on sources other than the public provision of housing.”<sup>45</sup> Housing policy is therefore

- 46 John Doling, "Housing Finance in Finland," *Urban Studies* 27, no. 6 (December 1990): 954. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00420989020080931>.
- 47 John Doling, "Housing Finance in Finland."
- 48 G. Geoffrey Booth, John L. Glascock, Teppo Martikainen, and Timo Rothovius, "The Financing of Residential Real Estate in Finland: An Overview," *Journal of Housing Research* 5, no. 2 (1994): 206.
- 49 Jaakko Eskola and Antti Halmetoja, "General Housing Allowance—Overall Reform of 2015, Development of Benefit Expenditure, and Employment of Benefit Recipients," *VTV National Audit Office of Finland*, April 2023. <https://www.vtv.fi/en/publications/general-housing-allowance-overall-reform-of-2015-development-of-benefit-expenditure-and-employment-of-benefit-recipients/>.
- 50 Aki Kangasharju, "Housing Allowance and the Rent of Low-Income Households," *The Scandinavian Journal of Economics* 112, no. 3 (2010): 595–617. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9442.2010.01615.x>.
- 51 Between 2001 and 2008, house prices in Finland rose by over 42 percent. However, during 2010–19, prices dropped in Finland 8.2 percent, while rising 5.8 percent in Helsinki, lending further credence to the neoliberal urban policy.
- 52 The Norwegian Sovereign Wealth Fund, for example, is one of the main holders in shares of corporate landlords. See Manuel Aalbers, Rodrigo Fernandez, and Zac J. Taylor, "In Real Estate Investment We Trust: State De-Risking and the Ownership of Listed US and German Residential Real Estate Investment Trusts," *Economic Geography* 99:3 (January 1, 2022): 312–35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00130095.2022.2155134>.
- 53 See, for example, Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005); Slavoj Žižek, "How to Begin from the Beginning," in *The Idea of Communism*, ed. Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2010), 209–26.

delivered primarily in the form of tax subsidies and home ownership incentives. Social housing in the form of state-subsidized affordable rentals, however, only accounted for a relatively brief period in Finland during the major urbanizations of the 1950s, when state backed ARAVA loans provided conditional financing in exchange for subsidized rents for dwellings. This policy was crucial in expanding the supply of housing when mortgage financing was limited to deposit banks with repayment periods of less than ten years. Beginning in the mid-1980s, financial reforms opened up the mortgage market, allowing for 25–30-year mortgage cycles and market rates, which coupled with interest rate subsidies opened up pathways to homeownership for many. As noted by John Doling, since the late 1970s direct subsidies and loans have steadily decreased as a percentage of public expenditure.<sup>46</sup> Public expenditure is increasingly spent indirectly in the form of tax relief tied to ever larger loans or allowances for rental housing.

With the challenges of postwar housing shortages eradicated, housing policy directed by state subsidized loans shifted away from housing tenure and toward questions of quality, addressing concerns of design, energy performance, and material and construction.<sup>47</sup> The boom and bust of the Finnish real estate market in the 1990s precipitated a drastic shift in attempts to safeguard home asset values. A new market for housing was created by expanding the private rental market which was supported with interest rate deductions and the abolition of most rent control by 1992, ensuring profitable returns for a new class of private investors.<sup>48</sup> The means of deploying housing welfare also had considerable implications in relation to rental markets. Over the 2015–19 period, 39 percent of households received some form of housing allowance in Finland (in practice the number is even higher as this excludes assistance provided for students).<sup>49</sup> Over 2 billion euros of housing benefits are paid out annually, with over half of this figure going to private landlords. In this manner, housing subsidies serve not just to provide housing for those in need, but by ensuring an average of 300 euros of housing assistance, they also serve to secure a constant return on capital for asset owners by establishing a price floor in the rental housing market. The economist Aki Kangasharju puts it plainly: "one additional euro of housing allowances leads to an increase of 60–70 cents in rent paid by claimants."<sup>50</sup>

By focusing on the life between buildings, the flourishing of urban life is not shared equally, and this is particularly challenging within a Nordic context. Home ownership fractures society along asset-owning (and often generational) lines, a problem that is compounded as real estate prices rise.<sup>51</sup> The pressure to secure constant returns for investors is fraught with tension as strong social security provisions also result in other forms of asset economy participation through pension and unemployment funds, many of which are among the largest institutional investors in real estate and are often behind the most ruthless rent expansion processes.<sup>52</sup> In the asset-based welfare society, appeals to the timeless design qualities of the human scale therefore limit the scope of what is possible in how we might imagine the design of cities today.

Expanding on the tradition of postpolitical thinkers,<sup>53</sup> Hochuli, Hoare, and Cunliffe—authors of *The End of the End of History*—observe that with the ending of the Cold War, the triumph of liberal

- 54 Alex Hochuli, George Hoare, and Philip Cunliffe, *The End of the End of History: Politics in the Twenty-first Century* (Winchester, UK: Zer0 Books, 2021), chap 1, iBooks.
- 55 Hochuli, Hoare, and Cunliffe, *The End of the End of History*.
- 56 See Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).
- 57 Hochuli, Hoare, and Cunliffe, *The End of the End of History*.
- 58 Kira Mautone, "Urban Planner Details how we can Design Cities for a Better Quality of Life," *Fox News*, February 18, 2022, <https://www.foxnews.com/media/urban-planner-cities-design-quality-of-life>.
- 59 In a 2024 report, the UN special rapporteur on housing recommended the need for governments to "actively counter incitement of hatred against foreigners who have been blamed for the housing crisis." See United Nations, General Assembly, "Report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, and on the right to non-discrimination in this context, Balakrishnan Rajagopal," A/HRC/55/53/Add.1 (Feb 28, 2024), <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session55/advance-versions/A-HRC-55-53-Add1-AUV.pdf>.

democracy and market economy, neoliberalism had limited the horizons of politics. Building on Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis, the role of the state was merely to ensure the market's proper functioning, "the big questions, about what is produced and who gets how much, were settled."<sup>54</sup> In its place was *postpolitics*, "a form of government that tries to foreclose political contestation by emphasizing consensus, 'eradicating' ideology and ruling by recourse to evidence and expertise rather than interests or ideals."<sup>55</sup> As design and quality criteria takes on a more prominent public role in the direction of policy, it operates increasingly as a veneer on the capitalist forces shaping the city.

Far from an urban utopia founded on the values of the social democratic welfare state, there is a need to recognize Gehl's *Cities for People* for what it is: a technocratic populism designed to generate consensus and narrow the scope of political contestation. There is an opposite symmetry between Gehl and Fukuyama. For the latter, the triumphant model of liberal democracy was not the United States as the winner of the Cold War, but rather it was about "Getting to Denmark."<sup>56</sup> Yet for the authors of *The End of the End of History*, the popular political upheavals of the past decade have only further exposed the failures of managerial technocracy to deliver the outcomes it promises.<sup>57</sup> There is a very real danger as "the people" is invoked across the political spectrum to critique the neoliberal order, that *Cities for People* finds a home with the nationalistic authoritarian right. In early February 2022, the notable New Urbanist Andres Duany appeared on Tucker Carlson Today.<sup>58</sup> In an interview with the alt-right pundit, Duany effused the merits of walkability and that cars were the most awful part of American life. One of the great dangers of *Cities for People* is that it is also easily subsumed by those wanting cities for "the right type of people," as seen by the growth in far-right parties utilizing rhetoric blaming foreigners for rising housing costs.<sup>59</sup>

However, if there is a redeeming quality of Jan Gehl's *Cities for People* agenda, it is that it continues to remain a powerful galvanizing force within the fields of architecture and urbanism. It is a source of optimism that the built environment can help us live in more just, equal, and sustainable ways. But if there is to be a renewed welfare urbanism, it must contend with a radically altered governing apparatus of the welfare state. In the face of the failed distributive promise of an asset-owning democracy, the waning power of technocratic expertise calls for an ethical and political architectural project that can no longer luxuriate in its presumed objectivity. It must once again imagine anew the dynamics of class and the compromise between labor and capital today.

## A CONVERSATION

