

A number of publications have, in recent years, reflected on architecture and welfare; many of these have focused on the Nordic region. This is not surprising, given rapid changes seen in the contemporary political landscape. Not only is the relationship between the built environment, the state, and the citizen being rearticulated but the conditions under which the built environment is constructed have shifted. The discourse on architecture thus confronts the question: What is architecture and its role?

While the Nordic countries have been, and continue to be, considered “welfare states,” many welfare institutions have been dismantled or restructured; housing policies have been increasingly challenged by global capital; housing assets, housing companies, and public or common infrastructures have been sold; and housing affordability has been reduced. Many of these changes are closely linked to neoliberalization processes, which have been observable in various forms across the Nordic countries over the past forty years; some are also the result of cultural shifts in how we understand the welfare paradigm and the welfare subject through, for example, the emergence of terminologies such as “livability” and “the livable city.” Recent research has addressed how we should understand architecture in relation to these processes and how we should manage the built heritage of a very different era, when architecture had a different role in the construction of society.

We accepted the task of reflecting on the content of this publication out of a desire to say something about where we stand today and how we might think about the future when it comes to research on architecture/built environment and welfare. If we compare the present with the time around 2013 when the Scandinavian research network on architecture and welfare—which forms the academic background of this book—was established, things looked very different. Today, the democratic welfare state itself is under threat. Ideas about a bygone welfare state, together with nationalism, protectionism, and xenophobia, have created fertile ground for a growing right-wing populism with undemocratic overtones.

Questions and developments like these set the scene for our conversation, suggesting the necessity to revise perspectives regarding the identification, problematization, and interpretation of architecture and the built environment’s relation to welfare and the welfare state. As the editors state in the introduction, this book goes beyond the concepts of *the social democratic regime* and *the Nordic Model* as they are understood from the outside. Instead, this volume examines the welfare state in formation through multiple perspectives from within the broad geography of Scandinavia. We take this critical position as a starting point for our conversation, which circulates around a series of themes that we understand as essential to future research on the developing spatialities of the

1 Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2011), 431.

welfare state, namely: geographical exceptionalism, the universal welfare subject, and—maybe most important—a planetary perspective.

## GEOGRAPHICAL EXCEPTIONALISM

Deane Simpson (DS): Perhaps we could start our conversation with the theme of *geographical bounding*, which has come up frequently in our previous conversations—the geographical distinctions between the Nordics and the world, between the Nordic countries themselves, and between regions and neighborhoods within the nations which the various chapters in this volume touch upon in different ways.

Helena Mattson (HM): Yes, we might talk about this in terms of *geographical exceptionalism* and the contradiction between, on one hand, the specificity of borders and closed spaces, and on the other the concept of welfare as a human right which is ubiquitous (and thus unrelated to borders). It is risky to exaggerate the status of the Nordics or Scandinavia as the exception because this plays into today's growing nationalism. I think architecture's role in this emerging discourse is not something we should underestimate.

DS: I very much agree. In reflecting on the framing of a geographical exceptionalism, it is relevant to reflect on distinctions between how the Nordic welfare model is idealized from the outside, and how it is interpreted from within the Nordic countries. One of the more iconic external idealizations of the Nordic welfare model is Francis Fukuyama's notion of "Getting to Denmark"—framing a mythical space of political and economic stability and democracy, high economic prosperity, low inequality, low levels of corruption, high degrees of social mobility, and so on.<sup>1</sup> Looking at the Nordic states today, it is evident that they are functioning relatively well, according to Fukuyama's metrics and in terms of others such as quality of life, subjective well-being, livability, etc. But while much of this narrative is reinforced by those outside the Nordic countries, within the Nordics there are more differentiated debates going on about the dynamics of diverse changes in welfare states and welfare spaces. In the Danish context, for example, state political initiatives such as *Tættere på II* (2021) have steered housing association resources into expanding the common housing sector and affordable housing in the larger cities. The so-called "Blackstone Law" has been directed toward halting housing speculation in the large cities by global capital firms. While at the same time, as Ellen Braae addresses in her contribution, the Danish government has imposed legislation that has led to the eviction of several thousand residents in vulnerable common housing areas and the demolition or sale of housing within those areas to private investment firms. This suggests that there is not necessarily one singular consistent or coherent thread of welfare architecture transformation within these contexts, or across the Nordic countries—we are given a more complex picture than that suggested by external perspectives of singular Nordic welfare exceptionalism. This is where I think this publication plays a role.

HM: The notion of Nordic welfare exceptionalism is also based on architectural historiography. In the postwar situation, the Nordic sphere, especially Sweden, was showcased as an idealized site of “good architecture.” Sweden was the country standing outside the war, and of course, that made the whole difference. But, as both Frida Rosenberg and Espen Johnsen shows in this book, even this history must be rethought: rather than a place for developing typical Swedish architecture, Sweden was an arena for transnational ideas and cooperations during the war. This demonstrates how important it is to keep a critical eye on historiography when it supports today’s nationalistic ideas of exceptionalism.

DS: This ties to an exceptionalism functioning in temporal rather than geographical terms—in relation to past “golden ages.” The danger of the idealization of historical periods, the romanticizing of a past that never existed, and the lament of its loss—these seem to be the great traps of our time. Whether this applies to a “golden age” of the universal Nordic welfare, or a constructed notion of pre-modernist nationalist identity, there is a link between nostalgia and emerging forms of exclusion.

HM: It is remarkable that only around 2015, the discussion on who was outside and who was inside the welfare state looked so different. One of the key topics today is to rethink this relationship. Welfare for whom and what kind of welfare? For sure, not only are the geographical delimitations decisive but also the social aspects, such as background and ethnicity. This is a spatial and an architectural issue, both as a conceptual figure and as a material question. How are borders constructed in bricks and mortar, both inside the welfare state and toward its surroundings? The tendency to stress policies of anti-solidarity was evident in the 2024 EU election when Swedish political parties competed in reframing Trump’s terminology of The Wall. The bluntest phrase was stated by the right-wing populist party Sverigedemokraterna (Sweden Democrats): “Our Europe is building walls.” So, in this new Europe, architecture has a topical role in building borders and secluded zones but also, in a very twisted and contradictory way, building what is called “integrated” societies through demolishing housing and drawing up new borders inside the national borders—I am considering here the policy of labeling housing areas as “vulnerable” or “parallel societies.” This strategy takes its starting point in the narration of certain areas as failures, which in this book is discussed through three different thematic and geographical perspectives by Guttorm Ruud, Mikkel Høghøj, and Jennifer Mack.

## FROM UNIVERSAL WELFARE TO COMPETITION

DS: The shift toward competition-oriented spatial planning, for example, in the Danish context in the 1980s and 1990s saw a strategic focus on Copenhagen and the capital-region as a growth engine for Denmark. As Tom Nielsen touches upon in this book, competition-oriented spatial planning’s contribution to the spatial centralization of resources and other dynamics, including ongoing urbanization dynamics, saw an increasing differentiation of welfare subjects within an uneven geography of welfare at a national scale.

- 2 Carsten Jensen, *Welfare*, trans. Heidi Flegal, Reflections (Baltimore, MD: Aarhus, Denmark: Johns Hopkins University Press; Aarhus University Press, 2023), 53.
- 3 Peo Hansen, *A Modern Migration Theory: An Alternative Economic Approach to Failed EU* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Agenda Publishing, 2021).

Here, we can think of the depopulation and peripheralization of provinces, welfare institution closings, the thinning out and distancing of welfare amenities in the periphery. While there has been political pushback against this centralization process in a Danish setting, with the decentralization of some governmental agencies or public educational institutions, it might represent another kind of differentiated welfare subjectivity compared to that occurring in Norway, where considerable efforts and resources have been directed toward maintaining a dispersed population and amenity access across the country's varied geography. Here in Denmark we have seen large investments and elevated welfare conditions promoting the attractiveness of living in the "periphery."

Denmark's Parallel Society Act from 2010, which was applied to vulnerable housing areas, can be linked to another scale of differentiated welfare subjectivity—within cities, at the scale of the neighborhood. The Parallel Society Act's application of eviction orders and tougher legal penalties against residents is based on the metrics of the "Ghetto List," which includes the percentage of residents from "non-western" backgrounds, irrespective of whether they are Danish citizens or not. The intention of the Parallel Society Act to produce a "mixed" neighborhood by introducing more "resourceful" residents, and displacing more vulnerable residents has been widely criticized within Denmark and internationally from human rights and housing politics perspectives. It is these supposedly "unworthy" welfare subjects, to use Carsten Jensen's framing,<sup>2</sup> that are increasingly the focus of a biopolitical form of spatial planning and architectural practice driven by populist nationalist anti-migrant politics.

HM: Totally. The political scientist Peo Hansen has written very interestingly on what he calls "the migration myth" and how the contemporary welfare state relies on migrants.<sup>3</sup> Without people transgressing the national borders, the welfare state apparatus, including healthcare and elderly care, would not work. Hansen is basing his arguments on post-Keynesian thinking and New Monetary Theory and shows how the contemporary debate is more or less turned upside down. Instead of acknowledging that without immigration, we would not be able to keep up our welfare, despite politicians, experts, and commentators continuously arguing that immigration is a societal burden and something we have to pay for. To me, Hansen's perspective is extremely interesting and inspiring because it opens up for new strategic thinking regarding the welfare state and immigration. And it holds something positive, something that we can build new knowledge on that rests not on repression but rather construction. So, you know, this perspective radically changes how we perceive the foundations of the welfare state. This becomes urgent today when the notion of a welfare state is used in protective and conservative politics.

Today, we can notice a radical conservative use of *the welfare state* whereby the concept itself shifts meanings and gets new associations. One can compare this to ideas used in the 1968-movement and how they later tied into neoliberalizations. The discourse was slightly transforming into something else, the same concepts, but used in a new context. Now we can see a similar discursive shift regarding the welfare state as a concept.

DS: This is really relevant in its potential to reorient the conceptualization of welfare toward more positively framed ends—challenging narratives that are now ingrained in the political discourse and that are predominantly oriented toward conservation and preservation, and focus on saving and maintaining a “threatened” and economically vulnerable welfare state. Perhaps this points to a possible reconnection to some of the more emancipatory narratives that we might associate with the earlier welfare project and its architecture and planning—whether they have been fully realized or not, which have also been entwined with the democratic project. The emancipation of the working class from the inhuman conditions of the factory system and the industrial city; the emancipation of women from the domestic environment with their movement into the workforce; or the potential emancipation of other groups excluded across local, but also wider geographies.

HM: Yes, I think questions of emancipation in relation to the built environment and the welfare state are crucial. Built structures, such as theaters, public spaces, kindergartens, and libraries, aimed at both liberation and control. Early welfare state policies had the goal to emancipate workers, and partly also women, but many other groups were, as you said, excluded. I would like to return to the notion of being “inside” or “outside” the welfare state. Today, there are vivid discussions in Sweden on doing tests, such as language tests, before you are allowed into the Swedish welfare state community. And a Swedish “cultural canon”—whatever that means—is under construction by the initiative of the government. To become a Swede, you must be a “democratic” welfare state citizen, which can mean almost everything but often means *not* being a Muslim. So, in this way, concepts such as democracy and welfare play into what can be called a new racism, which is not based on biological race but more on language, religion, values, and culture. There has been a tendency to connect ideas of universal welfare to earlier periods with lower immigration and what is thought of as a more homogenous population. So, in that sense, nostalgic ideas about lost welfare can support desire for a “universal” welfare subject, where universal vaguely means something Swedish. To avoid this conservative trap, it’s important to think outside the notion of a limited welfare state and instead talk about planetary welfare. But how to think about the role of architecture and built environment in a landscape of planetary welfare?

## PLANETARY WELFARE

DS: The planetary perspective involves a range of dynamics that continue to challenge the dominant spatial units of the welfare state—the nation state and the municipality. Anti-migrant national policies and discourse, and the hard bordering of the welfare state have intensified in recent years as one of the main impacts of climate change, climate migration, is only expected to increase—as are the demographic imbalances associated with population ageing. Addressing these challenges requires alternate models of thinking, and alternate narratives capable of engaging more optimistic and solidaric outlooks at the planetary scale.

More generally, the polycrisis foregrounds the relevance of planetary urbanization as a conceptual framework to understand contemporary urbanization processes—and also places the anthropocentric focus of the welfare project in greater relief. In a moment increasingly defined by the necessity to come to terms with the ruins of the “urbanocene,” the perspective of limitless resources and uncontained growth that drove it are increasingly in question. Does it make sense today to consider welfare as a dominant agenda that should coexist with urgent priorities of addressing the environmental dangers which threaten human life on the planet? Can welfare become a productive concept if expanded beyond human welfare dispensed at the scale of the municipality or nation state, into the welfare of other species, ecosystems, or the welfare or the faring-well of the earth system as a whole? Could this suggest possible expanded forms of spatial welfare practices?

Clearly, this sketches a conflictual space defined by opposing politics, and spatial logics—on the one hand, one foregrounding an anthropocentric-oriented welfare state conservation agenda focused on the cultural and economic narratives that you mentioned—and on the other hand, others that might prioritize environmental, climate, and biodiversity concerns. I am interested in what this might imply for a more expanded conceptualization of welfare—and if it might reinforce welfare as a still relevant concept.

HM: Yes, I totally agree with you that we have one of the most urgent conflicts here. However, I guess we—humankind—are forced to understand that the conflictual space holding, on the one hand, anthropocentric-oriented welfare and, on the other environmental and climate concerns depend on each other and must be thought together. This will, of course, have a radical significance for the notion of the welfare state. Another thing I want to bring up in relation to this theme has to do with rhetoric. I think we need to be watchful that concepts of environmental welfare, or more-than-human welfare, might support protective and conservative ideas about the local that are legitimized by traveling restrictions and local production. Therefore, it is even more critical to find new ways to connect socially and engage in different geographic, cultural, and social contexts without polluting the environment. So, I guess the role of infrastructure and mobility must be a priority in contemporary discussions about architecture and welfare.

DS: I agree, it is tricky. There is obviously not one answer to what a more-than-human welfare or an environmental welfare-oriented architecture and planning, might be. But perhaps there are relevant weak signals existing, that may not necessarily be immediately incorporated into a regressive popularist discourse: alternate scales of the bounding of planning such as the bioregional scale, a watershed for example; expanded legal rights for ecological systems, granting legal personhood to non-human spatial environments; expanded geographic bounding of the evaluation of environmental impact and externalized costs, mapping of extraction implications of new urban development projects; or planning with economic instruments focused on revaluing of nature contributions; etc., etc. We might consider these kinds of developments as corresponding to an expanded concept of welfare.

## THE ROLE OF ARCHITECTURE

HM: It is critical to consider the role of architecture in a broader sense. For example, how has architecture's role shifted in relation to the four pillars of the welfare state (i.e., health care, housing, education, and social security)? Today, architecture is still part of a state policy with its roots in these pillars but now very different. Instead of aiming to support solidarity, architecture is mainly used as a strategy in a repressive policy, as a way to displace groups of the population using concepts such as parallel societies or vulnerable areas.

DS: I think the analytical filter of the pillars is interesting. Perhaps the pillar linked to the built environment that has undergone the most dramatic changes in a Danish context is that of housing. While the common housing sector is still a considerable proportion of the housing stock—housing approximately one in six Danes—the production of new Almene housing effectively collapsed during the 1990s, and has not since revived due to, amongst other factors, high land prices. Various other milestones include the forced selling off of rental housing assets by the municipality of Copenhagen in the 1990s, the cultural emergence of the private developer in Denmark around that period; the intensified financialization of housing; the increasing unaffordability of the housing market, particularly within larger cities, etc. Tom Nielsen's chapter touches on some of these developments and more. I could imagine that in a Swedish context, you could describe many of those transformations and perhaps even more extreme versions.

HM: Yes, absolutely! In Sweden, housing policy collapsed, or even ended, in the early 1990s, and thereafter a market logic has been governing the housing market. The financialization of architecture, not only housing, in the public sector is also something Erik Sigge discusses in this volume. I guess we can see the same development in the rest of Europe, and also in many other places in the world. But of course, when this transformation toward the market takes place *inside* the public housing sector, the effects become obvious and dramatic. Another effect of welfare being lost and sold is the retrenchment of social services in many areas—for example in suburbs where citizens from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds live, and thus as a symptom of racial capitalism.<sup>4</sup>

DS: It could also be relevant to reflect on the shift in the logic of planning and the production of architecture and urban development from a more evenly universal distributed approach to spatializing welfare—within the logics of the managerial planning ethos of predict and provide—toward more reactive or corrective approaches to intervention, according to more strategic or acupunctural logics of intervention. This might be interpreted as more pragmatic than utopian—whether directed toward addressing a social challenge, or exploiting an economic opportunity. A shift from a new school here and kindergarten there into more strategic investments such as the neighborhood uplift project, or a bridge. Identifying more vulnerable areas where more resources would be focused to try to address local challenges, would have both positive

impacts on those specific communities, but also challenging outcomes such as gentrification. But at the same time, having also more focused welfare, not something only delivered evenly, but something addressing local problems, or sort of focusing problems, some of those more politicized than others, both for good and bad. On the one hand, we see how these neighborhood uplift projects are highly effective in engaging participation from the community, and on the other hand, we see new development area projects, by By og Havn for example, that are heavily criticized for their non-democratic character.

HM: Yes, as you say, acupuncture planning of welfare has replaced universal planning strategies. I would argue that these strategies clearly have reinforced class differences and made some into winners and others into losers. And absurdly, these projects often rely on one individual capacity to take initiative and approach the authorities.

DS: In a Danish context, these developments are often initiated by the state, municipality, or state-owned enterprises. We can discuss how they are influenced by a changed role of the state in relation to welfare—where welfare is a condition to support the competitiveness of the state, and its attractiveness to business. We can see how this ties into the concept of urban livability, its origins, and its competitive metrics—something my colleagues and I tried to address in *The Atlas of the Copenhagens*. We can see aspects of this unfolded in Leonard Ma's chapter.

HM: What you bring up here—that welfare becomes a service to support attractiveness that could enable investments—is crucial. It was a figure of thought that took form with the Third Way policy in the 1990s and Anthony Giddens described in *The Third Way* a new mentality of governance, a way of getting more out of less, which means that one investment should also support others. This new strategy contributed to understanding architecture as a discipline delivering “value.” Within this new, aestheticized perspective, the architecture discipline became an important strategy to attract capital. In this context, one should also recognize how human capital (social competence, knowledge, and experiences) becomes a key asset in the production of welfare. This is a history that ties into Martin Søberg's text on playgrounds.

## OPENING UP TO THE FUTURE

HM: Let's go back to our initial task: where do we stand today and how should we think about the future? We must focus on how to create hope and believe in future alternatives. How can we encourage radical fantasies of tomorrow? This also brings us to the topic of utopia. Today, we can notice the backlashes of the critique of modernist utopianism and see the effects of the lack of radical ideas of a future world. There are of course researchers and thinkers, for example, feminist scholars, who stress that kind of utopianism, but they have not won a platform in mainstream political thinking.



DS: Yes. I think that this is a really, really important discussion to have around welfare as a concept today. Does it, or can it still, hold utopian promise? Can it be relevant and operational, and progressive, today? For some of the reasons you point to, we clearly suffer a deficit of imagination in constructing alternatives to the systems and realities that we're in. And this recurring question as to whether welfare is something that has to be maintained and conserved or whether welfare has to be something dynamic, and responding to the changing conditions that we face, is key. It would perhaps necessarily involve a combination of both, for example, a reengagement with notions and spatialities of solidarity, which have been weakened by the increasing fragmentation and polarization of society. And at the same time, there's obviously the necessity to develop progressive, optimistic, novel spatial and societal imaginaries that address the specific challenges we face today. This is actually one of the key areas to which the discipline of architecture can contribute.

HM: I also think this discussion relates specifically to architecture. Today, there is little belief in architecture having the capacity to present and construct new utopias of a future welfare. This involves the profession and other actors, such as politicians, journalists, and individuals who all form the public debate. One can ask if architecture is part of the welfare project on a political level today. Thinking in these terms, it is urgent to show how architecture as a discipline carries utopian thinking and holds the possibility to imagine new worlds.

DS: That is an important challenge to the practitioners of today. To what extent are they operating in a form of utopian space or a space in which there is an attempt to push the existing boundaries of a system that—as you described—is increasingly dominated by market logics and private clients. I think we can start to see signs of some interesting examples of novel practice forms.

HM: Yes, it is crucial to articulate architecture as a field for play, experimentation, and social thinking where new conceptual figures can take form. In this space, we find the powerful overlap between the aesthetic and the political and the understanding of how designed spatial situations can impact the social sphere. That is a fertile ground of new notions of architecture and what it can do in society. You can rethink politics, come up with new social reforms and how to organize society, but to concretize these ideas, you need to have an architectural idea how to turn this radical fantasy into material form.

