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**THEME ISSUE:
(RE-)ENCOUNTERING THE NORDIC
IN A WORLD OF TRAVELLING IDEAS**

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(RE-)ENCOUNTERING THE NORDIC IN A WORLD OF TRAVELLING IDEAS – EDITORS' NOTES

SIGNE SOPHIE BØGGILD, SVAVA Riesto,
HENRIETTE STEINER AND ANNE TIETJEN

The point of departure for this special issue of *Nordic Journal of Architectural Research* is to examine *Nordicness* as something dynamic and relational, as a phenomenon evolving in relation to a real or imaginary “Other”. “Nordic” has become a prevalent theme in recent years, placed in front of entities such as film, food and architecture. Similar to what was done with the *Design Scandinavia* exhibition of 1950, which travelled internationally and was seen to have coined the term Scandinavian Design. To us, “Nordic” is neither static nor “true” by own means.

In this issue, we explore the multiple encounters, exchanges, and assemblages in which “Nordic” is used and resultantly shaped. Furthermore, we examine how artistic and cultural ideas and currents travel across borders. Traditionally, the writing of architectural history has been focused on tracing how a style (e.g. the baroque) “originated-in” or “arrived-at” various places. Typically, the influence of such travelling concepts disseminates from an active centre (e.g. the court of the French Sun King) to a passive periphery (e.g. Scandinavia). More recent studies have begun to explore the possibility of a dynamic local appropriation of style as a creative, hybrid and productive action. Today, the international influence of many Scandinavian architectural offices as well as the new presence of social and cultural diversity within the formally homogenous Scandinavian countries affirm how ideas continue to travel in our age of migration and globalisation consequently influencing our growing, changing cities.

In line with postcolonial theory, several of the contributions in this issue enable an understanding of the complex relationships involved in how places are perceived, experienced and “created” by means of inside and outside cultural spheres. One could borrow Edward Saïd’s concept of orientalism to characterise how “Nordic” has again become perceived as an exotic cultural phenomenon. Despite being often associated with an aesthetics of melancholy, minimalism and understatedness found frequently in today’s design renderings, this is just one of the many interpretations and narratives of Nordicness.

The question then becomes, which stories should we tell today? In spite of being named “world champions” of happiness and liveability and seen as being an exporter of “democratic” welfare design, there are many narratives that counter this image yet tends to be concealed. Equally existent, though much less acknowledged, are narratives which disrupt the idea of a common identity of city, country and region and question the defining “we” on which the social order of the Nordic welfare states arguably rests. The 2016 Nordic Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, representing some kind of a “we”, posed the question of how to escape the shadow cast by the great canonized Nordic architects. The papers presented in this issue continue this line of thought. Each entry sheds light on various nuanced and alternative narratives with the intention to renegotiate “Nordic” through an understanding of “present pasts” as cultural products affected by complex narratives of Nordic welfare states and cities.

Different trajectories

Seen as a whole, the papers compiled for this theme issue are gathered to re-examine ideas of Nordicness in architecture, landscape architecture and urban planning today as well as to trace their various ways of travelling. The authors derive from landscape architecture, architecture, urbanism and social geography and offer a broad range of perspectives on the overall topic, following four different trajectories of travelling ideas.

The first trajectory is the way in which the neoliberal market-based paradigm interacts with the social-democratic tradition of caring for common goods, thereby challenging the egalitarian stereotype of the Nordic and the welfare city. Julia Frederiksson uses a Swedish case to discuss spatial inequalities in the commercial branding of a generic city centre development. She criticises how the development project obtains its success in relation to the “Other”; the less “sexy” modernist welfare city, mainly inhabited by immigrants and located on the periphery of the city. Liv Bente Belsnes presents paradoxes of present-day planning culture, heritage management and citizen participation through the rare case of the public park Ekeberg in Oslo. She gives an account of how a wealthy tycoon offers Oslo Municipality a sculpture park as a gift based on a

private art collection and personal interests. This curious example of gift economy sheds light on a changing relationship between private stakeholders and the public planning authorities in Nordic planning.

The second trajectory concerns how the ordinary and everyday life can be appreciated as an often-cited value of the Nordic. Today, this perspective is focused on new issues, such as declining shopping centres and rail cities as well as the large number of post-war industrial areas gradually becoming outdated, causing alterations in demography, economics and values. This post-Fordist loss of attraction ultimately causes shrinking cities and unemployment, making it necessary to rethink the potential of these brownfield heritage sites. Niels Boje Groth puts forward three architectural aspects derived from different parts of Europe as potential concepts for supporting the urban restructuring of declining Danish railway towns. Lars Rolfsted Mortensen and Ellen Braae examine young industrial landscapes by comparing a generic and apparently universal industrialisation mode to local Danish appropriations of these ideas and structures. Furthermore, they position the discussion and valuation of these areas as potential heritage objects.

A third trajectory for travelling ideas related to “Nordic” addresses the ongoing tension between modernity and “post-colonisation” in terms of the superimposition of locally anchored values and universal ways of dealing with nature. Thomas Juel Clemmensen examines the changing attitudes towards nature and landscape heritage of the past decades through the Danish case of the straightening and reshaping of the river Skjern. This is a story of shifting values, divergent criteria, and conflicting interests of various stakeholders – an eye-opening study of the denaturalisation of natural heritage. Reporting from the (former) Danish colony of Greenland, Susan Carruth investigates how the post-war export of Danish planning schemes, based on universal one-size-fits-all principles, has failed. She alternatively suggests a reactivation of local building traditions as a more sustainable way of solving future challenges such as climate change, energy sustainability and food supply.

Finally, the fourth trajectory addresses the ways in which various ideas about Nordicness travel out into the world. In her reading of Copenhagen’s squatter enclave of Freetown Christiania, Helen Jarvis examines how Nordic-based social models containing a critical approach to modernity have been exported globally. Through this internationally famous and controversial Danish case, she shows how ideas travel, get exhausted, mutate and return in various guises.

In total, the seven contributions to this issue of the *Nordic Journal of Architectural Research* discuss a Nordic world founded on the constitution of the social democratic welfare societies in relation to the changing conditions today. The “Nordic” brand most definitely exists, yet its

content is elusive when it comes to architecture, landscape architecture and urban planning despite being once considered the founding pillars of the welfare states. This divergence is evident in the various perspectives presented by these papers, each emphasising how “Nordic” is characterised by an ambivalence of location and brand. What results is a tension between and hybridisation of these two extremes, which repudiates the ideas and imaginaries of national entities and identities. In relation to architecture, landscape architecture and urbanism, it is clear that “Nordic” is continuously being renegotiated, dependent on the moment in time, the spatial context and the perspective of those who define it.