

Chapter 11

The Spatialities of the Nordic Compact City



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Introduction

Developing socio-spatial theory on cities from a vantage point of the Nordic countries presents some particular challenges. Although “the Nordic” is a somewhat unclear category, there are several ideas circulating about what “the Nordic” represents. And there is often an interest in research and policy circles about the assumed uniqueness of the region (Bergh & Bjørnskov, 2011). This uniqueness is typically associated with policies and developments within the sphere of socioeconomics, labour and welfare, and has arguably spread into other experiences and perspectives in spheres like gender equality, education, day care, prisons, design, food and culture (Byrkjeflod et al., 2021). The sense of uniqueness is not as marked in the field of city planning, which has been highly influenced by international planning ideas and models (Hall, 2015). But some retain that the welfare state context and intra-Nordic communication and collaboration has created a Nordic Planning Model (Hall, 1991).

Despite this interest, the question is whether theorizing from the Nordic experience based on this assumed uniqueness can lead to *generalizable insights*. As many scholars working in an international sphere of research have experienced, cases from Nordic cities and city planning are often seen as outliers, as Hall (2015) describes in the case of the “Stockholm alternative” of the 1950s and 1960s based on coordinated Social Democratic Planning. There are no easy ways to theory-building based on the uniqueness of Nordic cities, but there are arguably

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exceptional planning models or projects in the region that may be analysed for the purpose of theory building. Such theory constructions may serve as alternatives to the Anglo-American dominance in urban theory, voiced for example by Smart and Smart (2017) on gentrification, Hassink et al. (2019) on economic geography, and Robinson (2016) on urban studies in general.

There is also another way of thinking about such theory building, and this can contribute to a wider debate about what it means to develop socio-spatial theory in and from the Nordics. In our work within urban studies, often building on relational approaches to space developed in human geography, we see Nordic cities as developed in negotiation, dialogue and exchange with global and transnational governance spheres.

The generalized models for “good” urbanism (for example liveable and green cities) are typically shaped by the particularities of cities, and governance in particular cities cannot be understood as separate from the circulation of general and universal ideas of what good urbanism is. This is also the case for explanatory models of urbanism, like the Chicago School and the Los Angeles School models for socio-spatial patterns and developments (Dear, 2002), where empirical research and theorizing based on two major cities were promoted as generic models for urban processes in general. The discussion of the global city thesis (Sassen, 2001) and its replicability is another example indicating that generic models should be avoided. So in this way of theorizing, the key question is not whether the experiences of Nordic urbanism can be generalized, but rather how the uniqueness of Nordic experiences is “in dialogue” with the general understandings of urban governance and planning in their wider circulation.

In this chapter we explore how this way of researching in between the particular and the general could work, emphasizing the relational production of Nordic compact urbanism. Overall, the chapter contributes with a critique of existing socio-spatial perspectives on the Nordic compact city, while also adding to this literature through relational theorization, emphasizing the particular geographies Nordic compact urbanism engender. By re-contextualizing the spatiality of ‘the compact city’, we question whether there is an avenue for a re-contextualized, relational and grounded compact city model. We focus on the larger Nordic city, thereby excluding smaller cities and towns lacking the scale and size needed for example to provide effective and sustainable public transport. Whilst we situate this chapter within the field of urbanism, researching *in between* is relevant also in a broader sense, to the question of what socio-spatial theory means in Nordic geography.

We have chosen to examine the compact city model, which over the last decades has become the dominant idea for urban sustainability governance (Breheny, 1992; Næss, 2006). Given the rapid rates of urbanization globally, policy has been oriented towards curbing sprawl, stimulating transit-oriented development and preserving agricultural lands from urban encroachment. These policy objectives are written into the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the UN Habitat and the Global Commission on the Economy and the Climate, as well as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

At the same time, the compact city model has a particular trajectory in the Nordic countries, as it has been shaped by the governance context of a welfare state and planning traditions. The neoliberal turn in urban planning has during the rise of the compact city strategy set its mark on Nordic cities (Hanssen, 2018; Andersen & Røe, 2017; Bruns-Berentelg et al., 2022; Holgersen, 2015), fuelling the emergence of a public-private regime for urban development.

In the following, we scrutinize the spatialities of the compact city model and examine how the compact city model has played out in the Nordic context, focusing in particular on Oslo. We discuss whether there is such a thing as a Nordic compact city model, and point to some of its political, social and cultural implications.

The Emergence and Spread of Compact City Policy

The ideal of the compact city, which is now arguably hegemonic in international urban governance debates, has a long history. Its modern origins can be traced back to the planning reformers of the nineteenth century (Hall, 2015), who proposed various models to preserve urban qualities from the pressures of industrialization. Ebenezer Howard's "Garden City" is one example of this, as it combined small and relatively dense communities with public transport infrastructure (similar to current models' transit-oriented development) and strict limits on encroachment onto the countryside. Another example is Ildefons Cerdà's grid in Barcelona, combining high population density with public and green spaces in a super-block structure. The last example is the high-rise central city of Le Corbusier, where height and density were imposed on the traditional irregular, messy and also dense traditional city, which Le Corbusier despised, in order to free up space for parks and highways (Guiton, 1981).

These models were designed as healthy and liveable alternatives to the dense industrial city. Messy density was replaced by orderly density, and a model for compactness based on organised infrastructure and public spaces. In the post-WWII era much of the urban planning in the Global North flouted ideals of compactness because of the automobilisation of these societies and their cities (Urry, 2007; Sheller & Urry, 2000), and instead allowed sprawling conurbations dependent on private car use (Kunstler, 1994; Hall, 2015).

Nordic countries also allowed for significant urban sprawl in this era (Haarstad & Oseland, 2017), although they sprawled later than in the United States because of the slower pace of automobilisation, they also developed suburban but compact housing estates outside city cores that were often connected by public transport (Røe, 2017). This may partly be explained by particularities of the Nordic context, characterized by comprehensive municipal planning, welfare-oriented public housing programs, extensive public transport infrastructures and (in the post-WWII period) lower rate of private car ownership, compared to the U.S. (in Norway car sale was regulated until 1960).

In the 1990s, as the detrimental effects of excesses of urban sprawl became evident globally, and sustainability became a political slogan, urban planning ideals increasingly returned toward compactness (Breheny, 1992; Jenks et al., 1996). Research illustrated the strong correlations between sprawl and high energy use, focusing on transport (Newman & Kenworthy, 1989) also in Nordic cities (Næss, 1995; Næss, 2006). Additionally, the revitalization of Jane Jacobs' arguments about dense and mixed communities, Jan Gehl's people-oriented planning guidelines, and the design principles of the disputed New Urbanism movement, were all part of a reviving of human-centric urbanism as part of the post-industrial back-to-the-city-movement starting in the 1980s. Gehl's urban design consultancy has had a marked influence on Nordic city planning, through the development of principles guiding design of buildings and outdoor spaces (Gehl, 2013; Sim, 2019), and in specific projects in urban areas transformed as part of compact city projects. In Oslo, Gehl's consultancy has had an important role in the making of public spaces in the new waterfront redevelopment projects in Bjørvika (Andersen & Røe, 2017).

At present, the ideals of compact urbanism, understood as putting limits on urban sprawl, managing car use, densifying urban cores, and connecting urban nodes with public transit, are arguably hegemonic ideals in urban governance discourses (Banister, 2005; Sultana et al., 2018). The ideal has been strengthened by the international commitment to climate change mitigation and bolstered by attention towards the social implications of compact city developments, especially gentrification, social exclusion and social polarization between urban cores and suburban hinterlands (Anguelovski et al., 2018; Keil, 2018).

While this ideal of compactness circulates widely, actual planning decisions in specific cities are of course results of complex and conflictual processes. The compact city ideal is never implemented 'as is' anywhere, but mutates and transforms as urban planners and other decision-makers and actors struggle over road projects, bicycle lanes, private property rights, building heights and so on. International policy regimes and hegemonic ideas are always confronted by local policy regimes and existing infrastructures (Robinson, 2015; Haarstad, 2016), as well as other path dependencies. So compact urbanism means different things in the different cities and regions that work with and seek to implement this idea.

Conversely, the particularities of implementation shape the abstract idea of the compact city, since cities are horizontally exchanging knowledge and experiences of implementation in concrete projects (Wood, 2015). In other words, Nordic cities need to be seen as developed in negotiation, dialogue and exchange with the compact city ideal in global and transnational governance spheres, such as URBACT (EU's territorial cooperation programme aiming to foster sustainable integrated urban development in cities across Europe), ICLEI (a network of local governments for sustainability) or C40 (network of mayors of nearly 100 cities) (see e.g. Kjærås, 2021; Grandin & Haarstad, 2021).

International ideals of compactness, however, are also shaped by the particular projects and experiences of compact cities and city districts around the world, which represents actually existing compactness. Not that all cities or regions of the world contribute equally, there are certainly power geometries involved in terms of which

cities and forms of compactness receive the label of “best practice” (Bulkeley, 2006). But there is some evidence that the compact city model of the Nordic countries has wide appeal. The Nordic countries are viewed to have been relatively successful in reconciling economic efficiency with social equality (Lister, 2009), and the Nordic cities are frequently branded as best practice in terms of sustainability (Hult, 2015). Below, we discuss the particularities of the Nordic compact city model, using the example of Oslo in particular.

The Compact City as Spatial Theory

Dominant approaches to compact city theory can be described as adhering to an Euclidian spatial approach, which emphasize the city as a territorially bounded urban form; in the conception of Harvey (2006), the compact city is typically approached as an “absolute space”. Arguments for the sustainability of compacting cities are made in reference to this logic. For example, compact cities are often viewed as optimizing human life, through physical proximity and by efficiently utilizing space within the boundary of the city. Urban sprawl, on the other hand, is viewed as utilizing an extended amount of space affording inefficiency and excessive consumption.

Since Newman and Kenworthy (1989) identified the correlation between urban density and energy use, compact city research has taken a pronounced role within debates on urban sustainability. The location of housing and public transport in close proximity within a dense urban fabric is shown to reduce transport demand and energy use (VandeWeghe & Kennedy, 2007). Densely built cities with a diversity of uses and functions are similarly shown to be advantageous for social sustainability (Mouratidis, 2021), although this is disputed because of the associated rise in housing prices and social exclusion associated with compact and attractive cities and city districts (Sheller, 2018; Andersen & Røe, 2017).

While this research holds significance for global discussions of urban sustainability it has legitimized an eco-spatial consensus within planning where ecological and economic efficiency can be achieved through centralization and densification (Knudsen, 2018). In Norway, Knudsen (2018, p. 67) argues that this “new spatial discourse [...] highlights the need to economize with space”. By placing people and amenities in close proximity, this discourse emphasizes the possibility to preserve land and optimize infrastructural and housing needs through co-location. The discourse represents a shift within Norwegian politics where distributional policies – physically and economically – have been an important part of the Norwegian welfare model.

There are several issues with the understanding of compact urbanism as a territorially bounded urban form that we, from the standpoint of relational and critical human geography, problematize. Relational geography, drawing in particular on the work of Massey (2005), but also on assemblage thinking, emphasizes the interconnectedness of entities that may appear discrete and separated spatially. Thinking

relationally compels us to think about how places are constructed in relationships with ‘multiple elsewhere’ (Grandin & Haarstad, 2021). In turn, we have elsewhere argued that the dominant renderings of the compact city overlook the multi-scalar and relational nature of urban sustainability (Kjærås, 2021; Haarstad et al., *in press*). For example, compact urbanism tends to ignore social, economic and ecological factors that are fundamental to sustainability, such as affordability, segregation, urban metabolism and urban financialization.

This means, firstly, that compact city models commonly refrain from engaging with the urban metabolism that compact urbanism entails. For example, the production of goods, from shoes to clothing to technology, remains essential yet typically outsourced from the compact city. These relations are not only significant for global relations of inequality and the power geometries of affluent cities (Sampson, 2017), but for the geographies of carbon emissions, making affluent urban citizens responsible for on average higher carbon footprints (Moran et al., 2018; Heinonen et al., 2013).

Secondly, the relationship between urban form and behaviour remains unclear within compact city models. While much research shows that urban form structures behaviour and therefore is significant for urban sustainability (Creutzig et al., 2016; Mouratidis, 2021; Newman & Kenworthy, 1989; Næss, 2006), the relationship between behaviour and urban form is more complex than direct correlative relations. When explored in depth, other factors such as income appear to play a more central role in guiding behaviour than compact city theory often suggests (Ewing et al., 2018). Including other factors allow for more contextually oriented approaches that emphasise how compact city strategies are embedded within a nexus of social, economic, cultural and environmental structures and politics. Overall, the interconnectedness of compact cities and the urban life that it entails suggest that the sustainability of compact urbanism should equally be viewed through a multi-scalar and relational approach.

The Compact City Model in the Nordic Countries

Nordic cities are often seen as being in the forefront in sustainable development policies, especially concerning policy agendas and technology implementation. All Nordic capitals have set carbon-neutrality targets, and Nordic national capitals are ranked high in sustainability indexes compared to cities elsewhere. The 2018 Arcadis Sustainable Cities Index, for example, list both Stockholm and Oslo amongst its top ten cities, while Copenhagen hovers just below at place 11 (Arcadis, 2018). The Nordic countries are widely seen to be leading in the implementation and up-scaling of innovative and green technologies, like energy systems, although the track records differ (Kester et al., 2018).

However, when looking at urban planning, the image is more blurred, and the current quest for developing compact cities must be seen in a historical and geographical context. Compared to large European cities, such as Barcelona or Paris,

the Nordic capitals have lower population densities and are less compact. But they have over the last decades enforced densification and compact city policies, combined with investments in public transport and infrastructure for cycling and walking, promoting a shift towards sustainable transport modes (Næss, 2006; Luccarelli & Røe, 2012). The surge of research on land use, transport, energy use and sustainability, and the subsequent policy developments, have been influential in the Nordic cities as well as in many cities globally.

Despite the dominant position of the compact city model there may be existing path dependencies and functionally disconnected exurban developments that linger and may contradict the dominant policy shift, for example existing and planned highways within the city region. Another challenge for pursuing a comprehensive compact city strategy is that urban sustainability policies mainly have been directed at the core areas of city regions and within the administrative boundaries of city municipalities, also as part of strategies to promote the city in an increasing inter-urban competition to attract attention, people and capital (Luccarelli & Røe, 2012). Although the city in many ways is inseparable from its suburban and peri-urban hinterland, the larger city region or the metabolism of cities (the flow of people, goods and substances crossing administrative borders in the city region) has to a little extent been included in urban sustainability policies. Rather there may be contradicting policies coming from the city government and the surrounding suburban governments. On one hand, Nordic city authorities' promotion and implementation of the compact and sustainable city may be in stark contrast with the policies of suburban municipalities surrounding these cities, with local politicians adhering to their constituency (Keil, 2018). On the other hand, the same city authorities may not have taken into consideration or account the environmental consequences for the larger region, caused by for example transport of people and goods, waste treatment, mass deposits, etc.

The institutional-geographical context characteristic for Nordic city regions is also of importance. In the Nordic countries numerous and relatively small municipalities have, according to the national planning legislations, great powers to decide on their own legally binding plans for land use, the built environment and transport infrastructure, which are the building blocks of compact city regions. Although national and regional authorities have the opportunity to protest, conflicts have often been avoided, and soft measures (dissemination of knowledge, collaboration, guidelines and co-creation) have been prioritized (Ringholm et al., 2018). This is especially challenging in functional city regions spanning several municipalities, with conflicting interests. One example is the dispute around financing public transport systems crossing municipal borders. Another example is divergence in policies for car restrictions, where suburban municipalities tend to be more reluctant than central city governments.

At last, in a global context there are few large cities in the Nordic countries. In the Nordic region compact strategies are implemented not only in the larger capital cities (with approximately 1 million inhabitants), but also in medium-sized and small cities and towns. The broad variety of city-scales compact urbanism is operationalized within, from megacities to small communities, suggest widely different

types of cities. Because there is bias towards large cities in developing the compact city model, its imaginations and strategies, the implementation of such generic normative theories pose challenges for these smaller cities. According to Gever (2019) smaller urban settlements may fail in attempts to implement compact policies, because of a lack of understanding of small-scale settlements and how the scale of small, remote settlements uniquely influences many aspects of compact urbanism (density, mixed land use, and non-car dependency). This is related to the incapability of generalised urban theory to take into account the complexity of scale, relational aspects of space and the unique contexts of places in the study of the material and social dimensions in specific cities and towns. We now turn to the specific case of Oslo, chosen because of the city's reputation for pursuing urban sustainability policies, including compact and transit-oriented development, and because of the authors' long running experience in research on this city.

The Compact City Model in Oslo

As in other Nordic cities, compact urbanism became the dominant model for urban development in Oslo after the previously mentioned surge of research in the 1980s and 1990s. Particularly in Oslo, a key research project (“NAMIT: Natur- og miljøvennlig tettstedsutvikling”) based on a scenario methodology provided the knowledge base for setting up a national policy (Næss et al., 1992). In the early 1990s state planning authorities published white papers, developed guidelines and changed legislation, in order to prepare for the turn to compact city development. Especially important were the national guidelines for land use and transport (“Rikspolitiske retningslinjer for arealbruk og transport”) adopted in 1993, and several state sponsored pilot projects for environmental urban development (Thorén & Nyhuus, 1994).

Since then, compact city policies have been sought through a strict urban containment policy and spatially differentiated urban densification strategies aiming at urban development in the direction from the inner to the outer city and near public transport hubs, in order to keep development within walking distance to trains, buses, trams and the metro (Oslo Municipality, 2018). Near transport hubs or nodes, building densities and heights are to be higher than in the surrounding city, which in Oslo is mainly of medium density and low rise, signified by the frequently used metaphor “carpet city” (e.g. Oslo Municipality, 2020). This strategy resembles the widely known principles of transit-oriented development (TOD), and has, because of its adoption amongst spatial planners, architects and politicians, led to increased densification within the built-up area of the city and the suburban transport hubs surrounding the city core, as well as massive investments in public transport systems.

Partly as a result of this, as well as the transformation of former industrial spaces in the city and the rise of a new urban culture amplified through gentrification, the share of everyday travel trips made by car decreased from 35,7% in 2009 to 29% in 2019, while the share of public transport increased from 28,3% to 36,8% (Oslo

Municipality, 2021). Meanwhile, the share of walking and cycling was reduced (from 30,7% to 28,3%). Compared with Copenhagen, car traffic in Oslo has been significantly smaller relative to economic growth (Næss et al., 2011). Overall, Oslo's population density has increased by 38%, from 27.0 to 37.3 persons per hectare between 1985 and 2018 (Tiitu et al., 2021, p. 1099).

The implementation of the compact city model in Oslo is not only a result of a turn in the planning discourse, influencing the implementation of plans adopted by public agencies. Although all legally binding plans must be politically adopted, most of the development plans (after a change in the national planning law in 1985) are made and implemented by private real estate developers and builders. The shift in who the dominant actors in urban development are, as well as increased financialization (Orderud, 2006), has infused city building with business strategies, investment returns, competition and place promotion. Since the 1990s Oslo has experienced increases in economic growth, inequality and population growth (Wessel, 2013).

The compact city model has increasingly been coupled with massive, large scale and spectacular development projects in the city and around public transport nodes in the suburban hinterland, of which the Fjord City development (a spatial and social transformation of Oslo's waterfront) and Hovinbyen (the building of a new urban district with 60–80,000 inhabitants and 50–100,000 work places) are the largest. Especially the developments in the Fjord City and Bjørvika, the former harbour and working class area of the inner east, with its spectacular waterfront projects, have been praised and disputed (Ellefsen, 2017). Andersen and Røe (2017) concluded in their investigation of the planning and design of the Barcode, an iconic row of high-rise buildings in Bjørvika, that it represented more than an 'aesthetic break' with, or a 'physical barrier' to the city behind it. Being located adjacent to the traditional working-class and the ethnically mixed East End, Barcode also became a visible manifestation of the socio-economic elite inhabiting the apartments and offices in the city, contributing to on-going gentrification (Turner & Wessel, 2013) and socio-spatial segregation (Wessel, 2015). Arguably this pronounced architectural expression of the compact city model is also part of the newly designed socio-economic enclave in Oslo's inner east, an observation supported by recent studies focusing on housing prices (Cavicchia, 2021) and the role of architectural competitions (Bern, 2018).

In Hovinbyen the high-speed planning and construction of high-density housing projects have fuelled debates on architectural qualities and the social sustainability of the transformed city spaces. The conflicts between social sustainability and compact urbanism have been noted by several researchers in Oslo (Cavicchis & Cucca, 2020; Andersen & Røe, 2017; Schmidt, 2014), highlighting its potential effects on gentrification, social mix and segregation. With respect to environmental sustainability, Holden and Norland (2005) have, moreover, suggested that compact urbanism may not encourage shifts towards low-carbon urban lifestyles.

These transformed and compact new spaces and built forms, which may be coined new-build gentrification (Davidson & Lees, 2010), are not only scrutinized because of architectural facades, but increasingly also because of their contribution

to the creation of up-market smart city nodes and socially exclusive enclaves (Andersen & Røe, 2017), as well as secluded urban spaces and privately owned of public spaces (Bjerkeset & Aspen, 2017). Truly public spaces, without the regulations and restrictions often orchestrated by private actors, are of importance both for the possibility for social gathering and inter-group mingling, as well as representing the city's ideology of openness towards diversity. Arguably, the important role of architectural competitions in developing the new and transformed spaces contributes to a focus on singular projects and built form design, rather than the social structure and the wider urban context (Bern, 2018). These brownfield transformations of harbour areas adjacent to former working class districts, that have come to signify the compact (and green) city model, is arguably part of a generalised process of gentrification found in several Nordic cities, like Gothenburg (Borggren & Ström, 2014), Malmø (Holgersen & Malm, 2016), Copenhagen (Larsen & Lund Hansen, 2008) and Helsinki (Sairinen & Kumpulainen, 2020).

In short, Oslo has adopted the ideals of compact city development, pointing to both social and environmental benefits, and restricted new land use outside strict boundaries. At the same time, the architectural projects built in central locations cater to high-end residents and businesses, while the sustainability footprint is unclear. The question is whether these social implications of compact city developments are the result of the current private-public governance regime and the product of the political economy of urban development, or if the current understanding of the sustainability nexus and the theoretical conception of the compact city as a space are equally important. Compact city development in Oslo is a result of a particular relational geography of urban development and architecture trends that render specific local planning regimes and planning practices legible and justified.

Conclusion: Re-contextualizing the Compact City

With reference to the Nordic countries, compact city development is contextualized and made particular, while also mirroring more general shifts in urban governance and planning. As a traveling model within global policy circuits, it is relevant to discuss the ways in which the 'compact city' is not given but relies on a continuous re-contextualization within specific places. Tonkiss (2013, p. 40) states that the "benefits of compactness [lie] not only in land use, efficiency, energy and emissions, but also in the densities of social interaction...". This means that the context is of critical importance. The possible benefits of density and compactness in newly transformed city districts are not easily assessed based on the generic aspects of the compact city model, but depend on a variety of factors related to the socio-spatial structure, demography, socio-cultural composition, governance regime and political economy of city development.

Moving towards a relational and multi-scalar approach to the compact city inspired by Massey (2005), then, provides a compelling agenda for a Nordic geography of compact urbanism. Here critical insight can be drawn across the

similarities and differences that matters to urban sustainability. The socioeconomic history of Nordic countries with strong labour and welfare systems plays a particular role in the compact city policies that have been developed in Nordic cities. Yet, as the context of development has changed towards entrepreneurial governance approaches, so has the geographies of compact city development, also in diverging directions. For example, today the Nordic countries have very different housing systems and immigration policies, which matters to the types of challenges compact city development assemble. The relevance of Nordic compact cities should as such not only be viewed through the common aspirations for human-centred and rather small-scale urbanised development, but through the diverging choices that are being made and their effects on urban sustainability.

In closing, we want to suggest that it is precisely such a re-contextualization that provides an avenue for a relational and grounded compact city model. If we are to re-conceptualize the compact city in relational terms, compact urbanism is not only enmeshed within a multi-scalar nexus of social, economic and ecological politics, but is made and produced in relations – in and between cities across contexts. This also means that compact city strategies can be adjusted and differentiated. Fixed models, architectural renderings and schematic illustrations, which often represent the traveling imagery of compact urbanism, downplay the role of public interrogation, participation and local knowledges (Graham & Healey, 1999; Sandercock, 2003).

At the same time, such plans are also in many cases based on generic conceptualisations and models of how the reorganisation of physical spaces will result in changing social practices, resembling Lefebvre's (1991) representational spaces and architectural determinism (Richards, 2012), where the role and force of physical design and architecture on social structures and processes are (over-)emphasized. This is a recurring theme in the history of planning (Hall, 2015), but which also are marked in today's urban planning and design.

A relational re-conceptualisation and contextualisation of compact city strategies (see Haarstad et al., *in press*), based on the recent theorisations of relational spatialities within the discipline of geography, may provide knowledges and tools to relate formerly decontextualized compact city strategies to contextual and local systems, structures and practices. Such theorisations may also inform the ambition to create compact city strategies that takes into account the wider geographical, regional and global relations and interconnections, for example in transport of people and goods. As noted in the beginning, the contribution of Nordic geography to wider efforts at theory-building may not necessarily be generalization of particular case studies set in the Nordic context.

The contribution of Nordic geography to socio-spatial theory depends, in our view, not on whether we as Nordic geographers manage to generalize the Nordic experience. Centner (2021) argues that there is “something special about Nordic cities, that despite their variations they have come from a unique set of histories, and even amid changing social formations in the present, there is this overarching effort to create visions for livable futures [...]”. Accordingly, in the case of our chapter, the contribution may rather be to an increased understanding how the particular policy regimes of Nordic cities negotiate with the general ideals of compact

urbanism. This can provide valuable insights into how global ideals are shaped, what actors take part in shaping them, and the scope for negotiating these ideals ‘on the ground’.

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