

Published in Peter Clark, Marjaana Niemi and Catharina Nolin (eds), *Green Landscapes in the European City, 1750–2010* (London and New York, Routledge, 2017), 212–219.

## **Epilogue:**

### **How Green is Your City? – Transnational and Local Perspectives on Urban Green Spaces**

Marjaana Niemi

This volume, like its two predecessors,<sup>1</sup> has shown that transnational is all around us: monumental parks that resemble each other, tree-lined streets that look alike, neighbourhood parks that share a similar feel and features, and – in the middle of hectic urban surroundings – green wastelands that have been left in a “state of waiting” for years or decades. Even cursory comparisons of different cities reveal that planning, creating, maintaining and even abandoning of urban green spaces has been, in many respects, a transnational endeavour. The exchange of ideas across national and cultural boundaries has been essential in shaping our views of how green spaces could and should be integrated with the built environment and the everyday practices of city dwellers.

What has enhanced the flow and impact of the ‘transnational’ ideas and innovations is the fact that they have been – or could have been made – compatible with a variety of local and national aims. As Dorothee Brantz and Valentina Gulin Zrnić discuss in their chapters in this volume, parks and other urban green spaces have served very different political purposes at different times, and more than one purpose much of the time.<sup>2</sup> People subscribing to very different world views and opinions have therefore been able to feel that policies to create and maintain green areas could further, at least to some extent, their interests and values. What is

also important to remember is that the interaction between transnational and local levels is not a one-way street: transnational ideas are re-interpreted and translated into national and local practices, and then these re-interpretations, in turn, may rise above their local contexts and become ‘transnational’.<sup>3</sup> In this epilogue, I will look at the interaction between different transnational and local perspectives on urban green spaces, and especially to the question of what kind of green spaces cities and their citizens should currently have.

During the last few decades, in the increasingly globalising world, there has been a tendency to pursue greater consistency when it comes to urban environmental policies. Much work has been done, especially in Europe, to develop transnational guidelines on how to conserve natural resources, reduce air and water pollution, develop secure, reliable energy sources and halt global warming. Many of the recommendations stem – directly or indirectly – from the Aalborg Charter (1994), an urban environment sustainability initiative approved by the participants at the first European Conference on Sustainable Cities and Towns in Aalborg, Denmark.<sup>4</sup> Most of the cities examined in this volume, with the exception of Dublin and Paris, are among the more than 3,000 local authorities who have signed the Charter.<sup>5</sup>

The Aalborg Charter, which aimed at “defining what a sustainable European city should look like”, focused on wider green issues – clean air and water, energy efficiency, and waste and resource management – and said surprisingly little about urban green spaces. In fact, parks and other urban green areas were mentioned merely as a means to a greater end: it was important to invest in inner-city parks in order to relieve pressure on ‘proper’ nature, natural forests on the outskirts or outside of cities. With these aims, the Aalborg Charter reproduced the traditional city-nature dichotomy instead of generating new ways of thinking on urban green spaces.<sup>6</sup>

In 2004, when the objectives of the Aalborg Charter were specified, the questions concerning the appropriate quantity and quality of urban green space remained on the margin

of the debate. Local authorities were encouraged to “extend and care for designated nature areas and green spaces”, but the aim was first and foremost to “avoid urban sprawl by building relatively dense cities”.<sup>7</sup> In many places, following the recommendation has resulted in decreasing the amount of urban green space, even though at the same time some parts of the built fabric – courtyards, balconies, terraces, roofs and building facades – have been used to expand green space. The impact of the urban consolidation policies can be seen in many high density residential areas, where green space is relatively scarce but also in suburbs, as graphically shown by Anne Ojala, Jari Niemelä and Vesa Yli-Pelkonen in Chapter 5 dealing with two suburban districts in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area.<sup>8</sup>

The Aalborg Charter in 1994 and the Aalborg Commitments in 2004 – even though they have been city-led movements – have clearly failed to address a key dilemma that many cities are facing: how to pursue two, at least partly conflicting, objectives simultaneously: expanding accessible green spaces while at the same time densifying urban areas. One might suppose that, given the growing evidence of the health benefits of good quality green spaces,<sup>9</sup> the question would have received much attention at the international negotiation tables, but this has not been the case.

### European Green Capitals

The Aalborg Charter has, however, also prepared the ground for a variety schemes which focus more on the quality and quantity of urban green spaces. One important example is the European Green Capital Award launched by the European Commission in 2008 at the initiative of 15 European Cities, among them Berlin, Glasgow, Helsinki and Madrid.<sup>10</sup> The idea for the award came from seeing the opportunities afforded by many EU initiatives, and especially the European Capital of Culture Programme (1985) the aim of which has been to

highlight the common heritage of European cultures and its potential for identification but also to celebrate their cultural diversity.<sup>11</sup> Inspired by the success of the Capital of Culture Programme, the European Commission seized the idea to support and encourage local efforts to improve the environment and quality of life in urban areas where four out of five Europeans live.

The Green Capital Award is not only about urban green spaces. It recognises a city's environmental performance across a set of twelve indicators covering many issues from energy performance and water management to air quality, but one of its clearly stated aims is to encourage cities to expand parks and other green spaces.<sup>12</sup> What has been even more important is the emphasis many individual cities have given to this particular aim and the way in which they have translated it into practice. A number of cities – especially middle-size cities and old industrial centres – apply annually for the Green Capital title, hoping to receive the European ‘quality label’ for their environmental efforts. They have naturally responded to all the objectives outlined in the Green Capital Programme, but many of them have made green spaces as fundamental part of their campaign. For example, the first winner of the award, city of Stockholm (2010), built the focus of its campaign largely around its green and blue spaces. The traditional city-nature dichotomy was relinquished in the campaign: Stockholm was depicted as a city, where cultural and natural values were not incompatible: advancing cultural values did not occur at the expense of natural values, but instead these values reinforced each other: “Stockholm is part water, part green belt, part city”.<sup>13</sup>

It has often been pointed out that many cities have joined such programmes with rather ‘selfish’ aims. The winners of both Capital of Culture and Green Capital awards have been criticised for ignoring the lofty European-level aims and seeing the titles mainly as an opportunity to enhance their own image, to put themselves on the world map, boost economic activity and attract tourists and new residents. Instead of thinking about European integration

or the huge challenges brought about by the climate change, the cities have been promoting their own relatively narrow interests.<sup>14</sup> Criticism has also been voiced against the unequal distribution of the benefits from these urban renewal campaigns. It has been argued that the ways in which the campaigns have appropriated and reallocated green space has been blatantly indicative of power relations: the campaigns have mainly been about beautification and attracting new affluent residents.

The European Commission has been fully aware of the co-existence and complex interweaving of different aspirations – and has mainly been favourably disposed towards the integration of urban green spaces into urban renewal. For example, the European Commissioner for the Environment, Janez Potočnik, stated in 2015 “All [winners of the European Green Capital Award] have benefitted from an increased profile for businesses and investments and enhanced their attractiveness as a destination for people to visit, work and live in.” It is also important to remember that there is nothing new in the incorporation of urban green spaces into city or nation branding campaigns. Parks and other green areas have been used for promoting cities and their international standing for a long time. In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, in the period of rising nationalism, capital cities and the most important provincial cities were important arenas for displaying national identity. Through monumental parks (for example, the National Mall in Washington DC and Tiergarten in Berlin), nations expressed their ideas of what hold them together but also the nature of their relationship to other nations.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, new suburbs built in Swedish and Finnish cities in the 1950s can be seen as important tools for both nation building and nation branding, which comes up in Chapter 4 by Suvi Talja and Chapter 11 by Catharina Nolin.<sup>16</sup>

Importance of everyday green spaces

Whatever the motives of the individual cities, the European Green Capital Award and the ways in which cities have interpreted its objectives have contributed to the important discussion about urban green spaces and the ways in which they should be integrated with the built environment and everyday urban life. For example, the programme has taken a stand on the question of how green areas should be distributed across cities by recommending that all city dwellers should have access to green environment within 300 metres of home. This is clearly an important goal that, when achieved, could result in improved health and well-being in many urban communities. Furthermore, when accessible to all, green spaces could play a redistributive role and therefore redress inequality in society. The city of Stockholm, the first award-winner in 2010, estimated in its application that over 90 per cent of the city population lived within 300 metres of a green area.<sup>17</sup> The most recent winner, the city of Essen (2017), claimed in its application that almost all its residents (more than 99 per cent) find a public green area within the same distance from their residence.<sup>18</sup>

The Green Capital Award has not been alone in emphasising the importance of parks and other green areas in the vicinity of residential buildings. For example, the Nordic Council of Ministers has recommended 250–300 metres as a maximum walking distance to the closest green recreational area. Natural England, which is a public body advising the UK government on sustainable development and nature conservation, has developed the Accessible Natural Greenspace Standards (ANGSt) which state that all people wherever they reside, should live within 300 metres of the nearest green area.<sup>19</sup>

What kind of challenge do these new guidelines pose to old cities? Traditionally, urban green space has been neither uniformly accessible nor equitably distributed in many European cities. Paris, for example, is very famous for its beautiful parks and gardens, but for Parisians sitting or walking through a park has not necessarily been part of everyday life. Jean Luc Pinol shows in Chapter 2 of this volume that many Parisians – both rich and poor – have

lived in densely built areas where green spaces have been comparatively scarce. The situation was particularly bad in the 1950s, when the population of Paris was at its maximum, but from the 1970s onwards the city has been active in ensuring a more accessible network of parks and other green spaces.

Essen, one of the Green Capital Award winners (2017), is a good example of a city that has come a long way from its industrial roots to become a city that invests in a big way in culture and the quality of urban environment.<sup>20</sup> During the rapid phase of economic growth after the Second World War, green and recreational areas were very unevenly distributed in Essen. The policy-makers became aware of the problem in the 1970s, and the first reforms to improve the situation were carried through. In the 2000s and 2010s, before applying for the Green Capital Award, the city invested more than € 50 million in green infrastructure for the development of high-quality green areas, mainly in old brownfield sites.<sup>21</sup> In both Essen and Paris, the reforms carried out after the 1970s have vastly improved both the quantity and accessibility of urban green spaces, but not all European cities have followed the same trajectory, as shown by Matti Hannikainen in his chapter on London (Chapter 3). In terms of creating new green spaces, the most active period in London was the decades after the Second World War.

### Towards greater diversity

The Green Capital Award Programme and the award-winning cities have, for their part, contributed to setting European guidelines for the accessibility of green spaces, but then how to define and measure the quality of green spaces. Urban green spaces come in many forms and have many roles: They are expected to beautify and enhance cities, improve the health and well-being of citizens, bring people together and strengthen social cohesion between

them, and at the same time provide a wide range of ecosystem services. And the picture usually becomes even more complicated when the discussion moves beyond Europe, as Peter Clark has demonstrated in his chapters. What kind of green space network is needed to fulfil the expectations?

European Green Capitals, such as the city of Bristol (2015), emphasise that the key objective of their green space planning is to provide different types of green space.<sup>22</sup> However, local authorities that use green spaces as a tool for urban renewal and re-invention often give strong preference – despite their claims to the contrary – to certain types of green spaces. In city brochures well designed and well maintained parks, cycling routes and walking paths and ‘unspoilt’ nature areas are clearly overrepresented. This approach overlooks many social and environmental benefits that other types of green spaces bestow on city residents; benefits that may not be obvious to outsiders or public policy-makers.<sup>23</sup> Many studies, and among them chapters by Jennifer Mack and Justin Scherma Parchner (Chapter 6) and by Niko Lipsanen (Chapter 10) in this volume, show how essential it is to invest in the diversity of urban green spaces.

Success of a particular place is not only in the hands of architects and planners. People make places, and places make people.<sup>24</sup> This becomes very evident in conflict situations when a green area – whether a major park or a marginal site – has been under threat, and discourses of community and community identities have been strategically mobilised to oppose development plans. In many cases, these campaigns have strengthened both the community and its commitment to the environment, as Bart Tritsmans discusses in Chapter 8.

At their best, urban green spaces have a significant impact on the life of urban communities. They can be seen as a “self-organising public service”, which forms a shared spatial resource from which experiences and value are created,<sup>25</sup> and they contribute to a



sense of place: Multilayered cityscapes integrating built and green structures create distinctive localities with which people can identify.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> P. Clark (ed.), *The European City and Green Space: London, Stockholm, Helsinki and St. Petersburg, 1850–2000* (Aldershot, 2006); P. Clark, M. Niemi and J. Niemelä (eds), *Sport, Recreation and Green Space in the European City* (Helsinki, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> See also, D. Brantz and S. Dümpelmann, 'Introduction', in D. Brantz and S. Dümpelmann (eds), *Greening the City: Urban Landscapes in the Twentieth Century* (Charlottesville, 2011), pp. 1–13; Barry A. Jackisch, 'The nature of Berlin: green space and visions of a new German capital', *Central European History* 47 (2014), 307–333.

<sup>3</sup> For discussion, see for example T. H. Eriksen, *Globalization: The Key Concepts* (Oslo, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> The Charter was inspired by the Rio Earth Summit's Local Agenda 21 plan. N. Duxbury, 'European cities as cultural projects: where is culture in urban sustainability policy?' in S. Hristova, M. Dragičević Šešić and N. Duxbury (eds), *Culture and Sustainability in European Cities: Imagining Europolis?* (London 2015), pp. 69–85.

<sup>5</sup> Gino van Begin, 'Inspiring futures for European local governments', *Local Environment* 9:3 (2004), 203–206; full list of signatories: <http://www.sustainablecities.eu/fileadmin/content/aalborgcharter.pdf> (Accessed 1. 4. 2016)

<sup>6</sup> *Aalborg Charter*: [http://www.sustainablecities.eu/fileadmin/content/JOIN/Aalborg\\_Charter\\_english\\_1\\_.pdf](http://www.sustainablecities.eu/fileadmin/content/JOIN/Aalborg_Charter_english_1_.pdf) (Accessed 30 March 2016)

<sup>7</sup> *The Aalborg commitments*: <http://www.sustainablecities.eu/aalborg-process/document/> (Accessed 30 March 2016)

<sup>8</sup> See also, M. Jenks, E. Burton and K. Williams (eds), *The Compact City: A Sustainable Urban Form?* (Oxford, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> T. Hartig, R. Mitchell, S. de Vries, and H. Frumkin, 'Humans and nature: how knowing and experiencing nature affect well-being', *Annual Review of Public Health* 38 (2014), 473–502; K. Tzoulas, K. Korpela, S. Venn, V. Yli-Pelkonen, A. Kaźmierzak, J. Niemelä and P. James, 'Promoting ecosystem and human health in urban areas using green infrastructure: A literature review', *Landscape & Urban Planning* 81 (2007), 167–78.

<sup>10</sup> For the Tallinn Memorandum, see <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/europeangreencapital/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Tallin-Memorandum.pdf> (Accessed 23 December 2015).

---

<sup>11</sup> E. Palonen, 'Assigning meaning to (EU)-Europe through cultural policy: European Capitals of Culture', in C. Wiesner and M. Schmidt-Gleim (eds), *Meanings for Europe: Changes and Exchanges of a Contested Concept* (New York, 2014), pp. 144–58.

<sup>12</sup> For European Green Capital Award, see [www.ec.europa.eu/environment/europeangreencapital/winning-cities/](http://www.ec.europa.eu/environment/europeangreencapital/winning-cities/) (Accessed 23 December 2015). The winning cities have been Stockholm (2010), Hamburg (2011), Vitoria-Gasteiz (2012), Nantes (2013), Copenhagen (2014), Bristol (2015), Ljubljana (2016) and Essen (2017).

<sup>13</sup> *Stockholm – European Green Capital 2010* (Luxembourg, 2010), [http://ec.europa.eu/environment/europeangreencapital/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/brochure\\_stockholm\\_greencapital\\_2010.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/environment/europeangreencapital/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/brochure_stockholm_greencapital_2010.pdf) (Accessed 20 March 2016)

<sup>14</sup> For a similar discussion on Cultural Capitals, see N. L. Immler and H. Sakkers, '(Re)programming Europe: European Capitals of Culture: rethinking the role of culture', *Journal of European Studies* 44:1 (2014), 3–29; E. Palonen, 'Multi-level cultural policy and politics of European Capitals of Culture', *Nordisk Kulturpolitisk Tidskrift* 13:1 (2010), 87–108.

<sup>15</sup> G. Therborn, 'Monumental Europe: the national years. On the iconography of European capital cities', *Housing, Theory and Society* 19:1 (2002), 26–47.

<sup>16</sup> See also M. Niemi, 'Politicians, professionals and "publics": conflicts over green space in Helsinki, c. 1950–2000', in Clark (ed.), *The European City and Green Space*, pp. 207–228.

<sup>17</sup> *Stockholm – European Green Capital 2010*, 21–23; Stockholm – Application for European Green Capital Award: <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/europeangreencapital/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Stockholms-application-for-European-Green-Capital-revised-version.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/environment/europeangreencapital/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/03\\_Application-EGC-2017\\_Green-Areas\\_ESSEN.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/environment/europeangreencapital/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/03_Application-EGC-2017_Green-Areas_ESSEN.pdf) (Accessed 22 March 2016)

<sup>19</sup> M. Annerstedt van den Bosch et al., 'Development of an urban green space indicator and the public health rationale', *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health* 44 (2016), 159–67.

<sup>20</sup> Essen was the European Capital of Culture in 2010.

<sup>21</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/environment/europeangreencapital/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/03\\_Application-EGC-2017\\_Green-Areas\\_ESSEN.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/environment/europeangreencapital/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/03_Application-EGC-2017_Green-Areas_ESSEN.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> Green Surge, Bristol, [http://greensurge.eu/products/case-studies/Case\\_Study\\_Portrait\\_Bristol.pdf](http://greensurge.eu/products/case-studies/Case_Study_Portrait_Bristol.pdf) (Accessed 10. 4. 2016)

<sup>23</sup> K. Worpole and K. Knox, *The Social Value of Public Spaces* (York, 2007)

---

<sup>24</sup> Worpole and Knox, *The Social Value of Public Spaces*.

<sup>25</sup> For a similar discussion on Cultural Capitals, see N.L. Immler and H. Sakkers, '(Re)programming Europe: European Capitals of Culture: rethinking the role of culture', *Journal of European Studies* 44:1 (2014), 3–29; E. Palonen, 'Multi-level cultural policy and politics of European Capitals of Culture', *Nordisk Kulturpolitisk Tidskrift* 13:1 (2010), 87–108.

<sup>26</sup> P. Selman, *Sustainable Landscape Planning: The Reconnection Agenda* (Abingdon, Oxon, 2012), p. 92.