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## **STILL ENTANGLED ADVERSARIES? UNDERSTANDING TODAY'S POPULAR CITY THROUGH PERCEPTIONS OF SUBURBIA**

**ANNE HEDEGAARD WINTHER AND  
CLAUS BECH-DANIELSEN**

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### **Abstract**

Through an ethnographic case study of urban households in Danish cities, this article examines whether perceptions of suburbia are still relevant for learning about current perceptions of the city amongst city dwellers. From a historical point of view, suburban neighbourhoods were developed as a reaction to the unhealthy and even dangerous living conditions in the cities. Yet, since then cities have changed, and Danish cities today are lauded for their liveability and highly popular for residential settlement. Along this journey, cities have adopted suburban features, giving rise to questions whether the city-suburbia dichotomy is still relevant today. This article finds that narratives of suburbia nuance and accentuate the identification of the urban households with an urban lifestyle. Whereas the city is perceived as diverse, social, lively and atmospheric, suburbia is perceived as its near-perfect opposite: a characterless place, where life is confined to one's own cadastre. Despite its physical spaciousness, suburbia is perceived as a place of social claustrophobia. Thus, the article demonstrates how perceived location has a key role in the processes of housing choice and thus affects residential settlement patterns.

Keywords:

City, suburbia, residential settlement, perceptions, urban living, case study

## 1. Introduction

The birth of suburbia has been presented as the nearly complete opposite of the city – the city understood as the dense neighbourhoods of inner urban areas. This dichotomy has its roots in the circumstances behind the development of suburbia, and this is highly evident in a society like the Danish one. There was a time when the city was dirty, filthy, filled with diseases, overcrowded and offered poor living conditions for its population (Snow, 1885; Lützen, 1998). Only the wealthiest could afford proper quality flats or houses. But, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the first steps were taken towards the welfare state as we know it in Denmark today. A key element in this was the development of suburban environments (Bech-Danielsen, 2013; Andersen, 2002; Zerlang, 2001) – quiet, clean and safe neighbourhoods with new flats or houses offering modern facilities, plenty of space and access to greenery, even for lower middle-class households. The mass-produced standard house of the 1960s and 1970s is an iconic part of the development of the Danish welfare state, and the construction boom of this period was so significant that these houses remain the most common housing type in Denmark today (Bisgaard, 2019). Yet since its birth, suburbia has been put under stark criticism from certain voices, with especially culturally and socially advantaged population groups perceiving these neighbourhoods as ugly, alienating and devoid of character (Nielsen & Winther, 2020; Mechlenborg, 2012; Fouberg et al., 2012; Bech-Danielsen & Gram-Hanssen, 2004). Despite the widespread popularity of such suburban neighbourhoods among the general public (suburbia is highly attractive on the housing market (Kristensen & Andersen, 2009)), such criticism remains today. However, since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the city has changed: housing conditions, physical environment and economy have been extensively improved to create modern Danish cities that are quieter, cleaner and safer (Andersen & Winther, 2010). Yet these features ring a bell – a suburban bell – and this has given rise to debates that cities are becoming suburbanised (Stender 2017; Elle 2017). Thus, perhaps this oppositional narrative of city and suburbia is dissolving?

Yet, simultaneously, the city has experienced a newfound popularity, materialising in very high housing prices, growing pressure on local housing markets and an increasing interest from both national and international tourists (Andersen & Andersen, 2017; Monocle Magazine, 2014). The cities are perceived to be fascinating, diverse and lively. The present article is based on an ethnographic case study of five households that have chosen to live in dense urban environments. In four of the cases, this is the city of Copenhagen; in the last, it is the city of Aarhus. Though the two cities are different in some ways – the most obvious one being size, as Copenhagen has a population of approximately 1 million people and Aarhus only of approximately 300,000 people – they are also similar in many ways, especially in comparison to the rest of Denmark (partially disregarding a couple of semi-large cities): both have dense concentrations

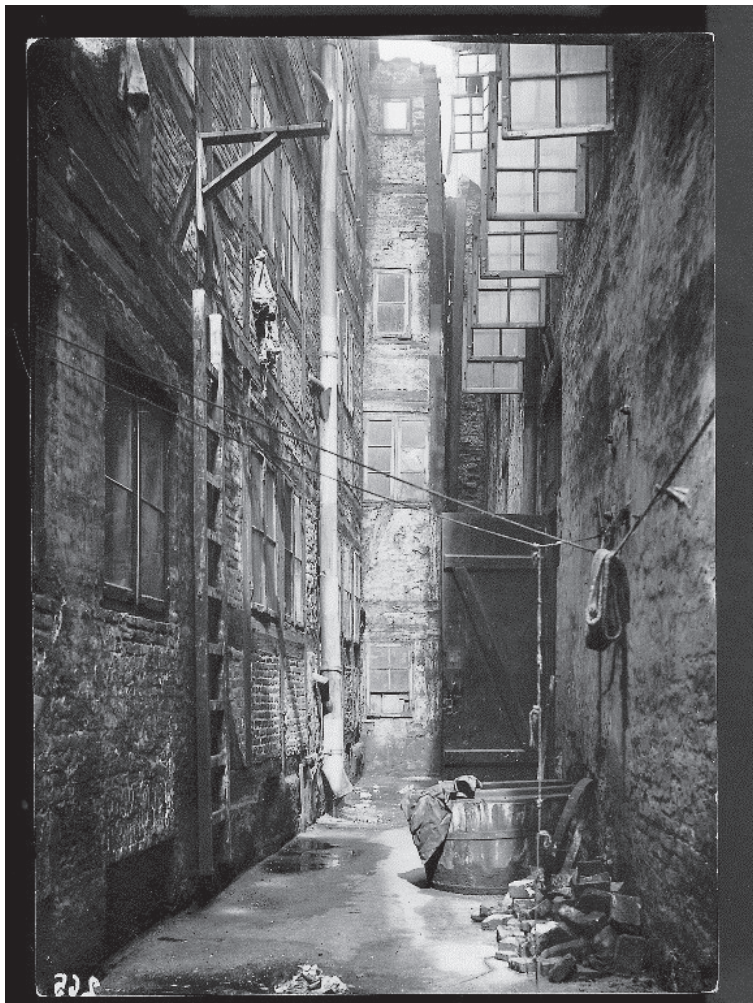
of people, built environments, cultural facilities and activities, business life and commercial life, incomparable to anywhere else in Denmark, and both are growth areas – economically, physically and in terms of population. Another article working with the same case study has shown how the urban location is the key driver behind the housing choice of these households, to the extent that they have compromised on other features such as living space, functional flat layouts and so on (Winther, in press). The latter article demonstrates how these households' perceptions of their local urban environment are key to feelings of attachment to the area and their choices to live there (ibid.). As phrased by an informant of the case study: "At the end of the day, it's your perceptions that decide whether you actually end up moving there or not". Winther (in press) thus underscores the importance of such perceptions for the workings of neighbourhood life and for residential settlement patterns, as demonstrated by e.g., Nielsen & Winther (2020). However, the cities in which these households live are highly different from the unhealthy environments that have previously given rise to the dichotomic city-suburbia narrative outlined above. Thus, this article asks *whether such narratives are still relevant for learning about residential perceptions of the city today and, if so, what can they tell us about urban perceptions of today's city*. To answer these questions, the article first outlines the story of the city-suburbia dichotomy and relates it to Danish housing conditions; secondly, it presents the empirical framework of the case study; thirdly, it analyses the city perceptions expressed in the suburbia perceptions of these urban households; and fourthly, it discusses what this tells us about the relevance of the city-suburbia dichotomy for urban perceptions of the cities of today. The article finishes with a set of concluding remarks.

## 2. City and suburbia – contrasts closely connected

The perceptions of city and suburbia have their roots in historical urban development. Ever since the first suburban development, city and suburb have thus been contradictory, and yet at the same time closely interconnected. When the development of the suburbs began, it happened as a result of 19<sup>th</sup> century urbanisation and the critical housing conditions in the new industrialised cities; the cities grew rapidly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the working class huddled together in small and unhealthy flats, the courtyards were densely populated, the dwellings were located side by side with noisy and polluting industries, and there was a lack of clean drinking water and closed sewer systems (Lützen, 1998). Cities were thus unhygienic, working-class living conditions were unhealthy and, in virtually the entire world, it led to outbreaks of cholera in the mid-1800s (Kohn, 2008; Snow, 1885). In Copenhagen, 10 % of the population died of cholera in 1853 alone (Lützen, 1998). This led to the development of a new view on the city; previously, the city had been considered as a safe place where citizens sought refuge and protection from external dangers



(Zerlang, 2001). Now this picture changed completely, and the protective city walls were exceeded (Bech-Danielsen, 2004). As part of the preventive work against cholera in Copenhagen, working-class populations in the worst affected districts were moved to tent camps outside the city walls (Zerlang, 2001), and the hope of survival and a healthy life became linked to the fresh air in the countryside. The bourgeoisie too took residence outside the cities during this period: inspired by romantic artists, they enjoyed nature in summer residences along the Danish coast, where they could experience the peace and live out the ideal of “a healthy soul in a healthy body” (Bech-Danielsen, 2013). The dense city was left as an unhealthy and obscure dystopia, while suburbia was developed as a utopian counter-image to the city; here, a healthy life could be developed with lots of open space and green surroundings. Suburbia was thus developed in the aftermath of the city-downturn (Andersen, 2002).



**Figure 1**  
 At the beginning of the 20th century, cholera was replaced by new epidemics – such as tuberculosis and the Spanish flu, and the effort to increase health had a major impact on the urban and housing development of modernism. In 1935, the Danish functionalist Edvard Heiberg documented housing conditions in inner Copenhagen. Some areas had an average of only 1.6 sq.m. of housing per person.  
 PHOTO: KØBENHAVNS BYMUSEUM.

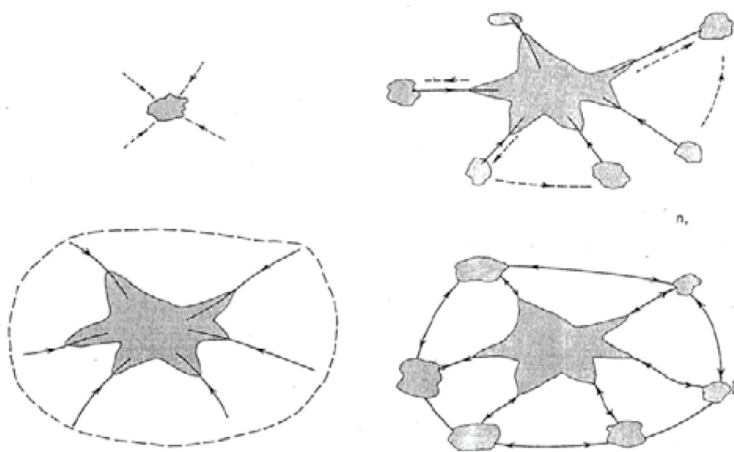
When the Danish suburbs developed further in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many Danish urban planners found inspiration in Ebenezer Howard's *Garden cities of tomorrow* (1898). The ideal of the garden city was developed as a result of the intolerable conditions of the dense industrial cities and in direct contrast to them (Lind & Møller, 1996): The garden city was to be a self-sufficient unit, located in the open landscape, the houses should be low-rise and all homes should have access to a private garden (Howard, 1898). In Denmark, these ideals initially found their way into terraced houses (such as Gerthasminde from 1912 in the city of Odense) (Bech-Danielsen, 2013; Lind & Møller, 1996), but in the further development of the suburbs in the following decades, realities came further and further away from Howard's original ideals. In the 1920s and 1930s, it was increasingly detached single-family houses that were built (Lind & Møller, 1996), and this development was further nurtured when, in the years around WW2, economical support from the Danish state was granted for the construction of small single-family houses (Tietjen, 2010). The economic support was given, among other things, because the Danish Social Democratic Party perceived homeownership as an opportunity for the working class to rise in the social hierarchy. The single-family house in the suburbs was thus connected to the good life of the common nuclear family.

In the post-war period, suburbia became associated with the progress of the welfare state, while the city centres collapsed and was associated with a mixture of poor and outdated housing, dilapidated infrastructure and worn-down industrial areas (Andersen & Andersen, 2017). The industrialisation of construction was affected, single-family houses were developed through mass-production, and thus the extensive construction of single-family houses in the Danish suburbs took off in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>1</sup> During this period, the internal dependency between city and suburbia clearly and concretely came to an expression, as the redevelopment of inner-city settlements paved the way for the expansion of suburbia – and vice versa (Lind & Møller, 1994). It can for example be seen in the population of the city of Copenhagen, which peaked in the 1950s and subsequently fell by over 300,000 inhabitants (corresponding to approximately 30%) during the following three decades (Andersen & Andersen, 2017). In general, the single-family house is popular in a Danish context. Today, there are 1.2 million single-family houses in Denmark, they make up 43% of all Danish homes (Bisgaard, 2019), and more than half of the Danish population (52%) live in a single-family house (Statistics Denmark, 2020b). The most recent studies of Danish housing preferences show that the single-family house is the most preferred housing type of all: nearly 80% express such a preference (Kristensen & Andersen, 2009). It is especially nature and the landscape, the safety in the neighbourhoods, the absence of social problems and the access to a private garden that Danes appreciate (ibid.). It is probably also of great importance that the detached single-family house offers a relatively large living space:

1 Between 1960 and 1979, more than 600,000 single-family houses were built in Denmark, and this still constitutes half of the total number of single-family houses today (Bisgaard, 2019).

an average Danish detached house covers approximately 140 square metres, which is significantly more than the Danish average living space of 112 square metres (Bisgaard, 2019). Moreover, new Danish single-family houses constructed in 2019 contained over 200 square metres of living space on average (Statistics Denmark, 2020c).

Yet as a result of the diminishing population of cities during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the city became less dense and compact; the growth of suburbia has thus contributed to the current “liveability” of Copenhagen (Monocle Magazine, 2014) and to the fact that families with children are increasingly settling in neighbourhoods in the inner city (Andersen & Andersen, 2017) – it is no longer a matter of course for all inhabitants to move to a detached house in suburbia when starting a family. Since the 1980s, the view on the city has gradually improved. This has happened as a result of heavy industry having moved out of the city (among other places to suburbia) and, as a result of urban renewal, creating new qualities in the city’s residential areas (Bech-Danielsen, 2013; Lind & Møller, 1994). In recent decades, there has also been an interest in re-densifying the city, partly because the dense city is considered to be environmentally sustainable (Dempsey et al., 2012), and partly because increased urban density creates the basis for a city life with shops, cultural services, cafes, etc. In connection with this newfound popularity of the city, the single-family house neighbourhoods in Danish suburbia have been severely criticised. This criticism initially arose in continuation of the international critique of the suburbs as “urban sprawl” (Batty et al., 2003; Fouberg et al., 2012), and it has led to descriptions of the Danish single-family house neighbourhoods as boring, sleepy towns (Bech-Danielsen & Gram-Hanssen, 2004). This criticism has been voiced mainly by culturally and socially advantaged parts of society, in particular cultural-radical opinion formers. In their view, life in suburbia abounds in overconsumption and materialism, in boredom and the humdrum of everyday life, in conformist family and gender roles and in officiousness and self-adequacy (Nielsen & Winther, 2020; Mechlenborg, 2012; Frandsen, 2009, 2006). Conversely, the city is described as a vivid, atmospheric, diverse, stimulating, challenging and fascinating scene (ibid.). The unflattering Danish expression “private hedge fascism” (Mechlenborg, 2012 [own translation]) illustrates a view of suburban life as a prioritisation of privacy and a devaluation of social life in the neighbourhood. In such perspectives, urban settlement can be identified as the contrast to suburbia. As will be seen in this article, this also applies to the households of the current research project.



**Figure 2**  
Recent theoretical understandings describe cities and suburbs in the form of complex networks where the monocentric understanding of the city is replaced by a polycentric concept.

SOURCE: HERBERT & THOMAS 1997:78.

Yet defenders of suburbia seem to do exactly the same: they identify and describe the qualities of suburban neighbourhoods by contrasting them to urban neighbourhoods: They perceive life in the city as anonymous, and they highlight the social community as a special quality of the suburban detached-house neighbourhoods (Bech-Danielsen et al. 2004; Bech-Danielsen & Gram-Hanssen, 2004). This is also reflected in the way Danish popular culture perceptions of suburbia contrasts with the perceptions of culturally advantaged population groups described above: In popular or mass culture, suburbia is generally idealised and represented as “a metaphor for the good life, the nuclear family, comfort and close proximity to nature. A longing for withdrawal to a miniature paradise, focusing on family life and being master in one’s own house” (Mechlenborg, 2012, p. 19 [own translation]). Thus, city and suburbia are not only in contrast to one another in a historic sense, they also contrast strongly in the way opinion-formers and residents identify with and understand these housing areas (Bech-Danielsen et al., 2004; Bech-Danielsen & Gram-Hanssen, 2004).

However, a complicating matter is that the completed urban renewal projects, the enormous economic power injection and structural prioritisation of the cities during the last four decades have brought a number of suburban recreational qualities into our cities, like greenery and recreational areas, better air quality, better housing conditions, safer environments, etc. (Stender, 2017; Elle, 2017). Put radically, today’s city is at times described as vertical suburbia (Thomsen, 2002). At the same time, “urban life” has become a keyword in the renewal of existing suburban neighbourhoods and the planning of new ones: attempts are made to multiply activities and facilities in public space, the built environment is being densified, terraced houses are called “townhouses” and local suburban squares are attributed with “pulsating urban life” (e.g., Bellakvarter, 2020; Stender, 2014). Thus, it could be discussed whether it still makes sense to continue to see the city and suburbia as opposites? In a theoretical

context, new understandings have developed of the city, of suburbia and of their interrelationship. The monocentric understanding of the city is suggested replaced by a polycentric concept, where mobility and the technological connections come into focus (Jensen, 2012). These newer concepts build on defining concepts like “informational city”, “zwischenstadt” (Sieverts, 2003) and “splintering urbanism” (Graham & Marvin, 2001), viewing city and suburbia as intricate networks, not as separate entities. But has this emerging view seeped into wider Danish culture, or does the city-suburbia dichotomy still flourish today?

### 3. The case study – methodology and data

The empirical analysis of this article is based on an ethnographic case study. The case study consists of five households living in dense urban areas in Denmark. They are all middle-class households with working adults. In Denmark today, living in suburban areas is much more common for middle-class households than living in the city. As outlined in the introduction, Winther (in press) demonstrates how a strong appreciation for, and sense of attachment to, urban neighbourhoods (and to some degree the cities as a whole) is the key driver of the housing choices of these families. Even though they are all middle-class, housing prices in Danish urban areas are currently high enough for necessitating substantial compromises regarding housing qualities in order for these families to be able to afford living in the city. In particular, they have chosen to live in much less domestic space than conventionally in contemporary Denmark. See Winther (in press) for an examination of the motivations behind choosing this “urban compact living” or Winther (submitted) for an examination of the concrete practices and experiences of it (both publications are based on the present case study). Thus, these five selected cases are examples of households having actively chosen to live in the city, and it can logically be assumed that they are somewhat aware that living in suburbia would have been a statistically more conventional housing choice. By studying in detail the narratives and experiences of these cases about the city and suburbia, insights can be obtained about the relevance of suburbia perceptions, for learning about urban residential perceptions of Denmark’s highly popular cities of today.

As the purpose of the study has been to explore and understand perceptions regarding residential environments, the methodology selected is that of a qualitative, ethnographic case study (Pink et al., 2017; Flyvbjerg, 2015; Thomas, 2011, 2010). The purpose is thus not to produce representative, evidential knowledge that can determine wider perceptions of today’s cities in Denmark or internationally. Rather, the case study acknowledges the particularity and uniqueness of all situations of the social world and interprets these in their own right, while acknowledging the potential in these individual cases for identifying patterns and connections that may recur in other situations, as the cases are never

isolated or detached from the surrounding world (Flyvbjerg, 2015; Thomas, 2010). To study the selected cases in depth and in detail, comprehensive data about them was collected through the following methods:

- Routes and activities of the household members in the surrounding neighbourhoods were drawn and noted on printed maps over the course of four days. The neighbourhood maps were subsequently discussed and elaborated on, with the household members. The purpose hereof was to capture their everyday life practices in, and interaction with, their neighbourhood, as well as their perceptions of the neighbourhood and the city – both cognitive and sensory – and additionally, to spatialise and situate discussions of the neighbourhood and the city.

Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were held with the household members, recorded and subsequently transcribed. The interviews covered topics such as residential history, housing choice and neighbourhood choice, perceptions of the neighbourhood and the city, perceptions of home, everyday practices, etc. The purpose was to capture the perceived and the experienced. Living in the city, the urban environment was an evident part of the interviews. Suburbia, on the other hand, was introduced as a topic by the households themselves, when discussing environments, they would not want to live in, or simply when characterising the urban environments. In some cases, suburbia was introduced by the researcher referring to findings from previous cases, that is, by stating that “other households have stated that they would not want to live in suburbia, how do you feel about that?”. This underscores the explorative, reflexive and understanding-focused approach to the data collection of this study.

- Household members photographed their least and most favourite parts of the surrounding neighbourhood. The photographs were subsequently discussed with the household members. The purpose of this photo elicitation was to open discussion and contemplation about the neighbourhood through visual and more sensory channels, to supplement the solely verbal channels of the interviews.
- Photographs were used as stimuli for the interviews, for instance, images of different housing types or neighbourhood types. These stimulated discussions and narratives about the households' own perspectives.

The cases vary on numerous parameters: They include both families with children (some younger, some older), a couple without children and a woman living by herself. The adults are in their thirties or forties. Some of the households have favoured privacy and enclosed rooms, while others have prioritised open plans to allow for airiness and light. Some enjoy filling their homes with a large number of items in a coincidental

mix, while other have carefully selected the objects, and number of objects, in their home. Some are local to the city in which they live; others have made interregional moves. Yet all of them have actively chosen to live in the city, as opposed to suburbia or the countryside. Thus, they all live in blocks of flats located in relatively dense and relatively central urban neighbourhoods, characterised by close-knit grids of streets lined with building blocks, retail shops and other facilities. Two of the cases live on the border of suburbia and their buildings, thus neighbour areas of detached housing and industrial districts. The remaining cases live in denser and more centrally located neighbourhoods, characterised by narrow streets with early 20<sup>th</sup> century building blocks. Figure 3 shows the location of the five cases, and impressions of the different neighbourhoods can be obtained through the photos included in the remainder of the article.



#### 4. Perceptions of city and suburbia – knowledge from the case study

Though the five cases of this study vary in household composition, demographics and more, they have all actively chosen to live in the city, and as demonstrated above, they all have a strong appreciation for the city and especially for particular urban neighbourhoods. Picking up this thread, the following section will account for the narratives and expressions of the household members directly regarding the urban environment. The next section will examine whether these perceptions can be qualified and nuanced by carefully examining the case study households’ narratives and expressions about suburbia. The purpose is thus to examine whether narratives of suburbia still hold relevant information about perceptions of the city.

Figure 3  
The five case study households all live in relatively dense neighbourhoods located centrally in the urbanised region, i.e. relatively close to the oldest parts of the city. These maps depict the location of their flats. Left map depicts Aarhus, right map Copenhagen. Figure contains data from Styrelsen for Dataforsyning og Effektivisering [Agency for Datasupply and Efficiency], “SDFE-kort”, downloaded March 2021.

ILLUSTRATION BY AUTHORS.



#### 4.1 Living the city

The case study households all express a profound affection for the city in which they live. This appreciation is founded in their lifestyles (see Winther (in press) for an elaborated analysis hereof). Lifestyle is here to be understood as referring to their values, attitudes and tastes and to a much lesser extent to their daily-life activity patterns, as these are very independent of the city: the households attend to school, work, sports, practical errands and spend leisure time at home, visiting friends or family, or making trips to, for example, the city centre or the countryside. Their values, attitudes and tastes, on the other hand, revolve around the city (and especially around particular neighbourhoods): the households' appreciation for the city is to a large extent about its street scene – about what happens in public space, which people there are, which facilities there are and how the physical environment appears: It is about the available shops and facilities, for instance specialty shops like vintage shops, clothes shops, crafts shops, galleries, specialty food markets, etc., as well as cafés, coffee shops, bars, restaurants, takeaway eateries and cultural facilities like cinemas, music venues, theatres, etc. Furthermore, it is about the events taking place, like flea markets, festivals or the like. And finally, but no less important, it is about the people using the area: those minding the shops, visiting the markets, eating at the restaurants, strolling the streets or hanging out in the parks. Blending together, these features interact with the characteristic physical environment of

**Figure 4**  
Typical streetscape of the neighbourhood Vesterbro in Copenhagen where two of the case study households live. It contains a dense grid of narrow streets lined with early 1900s' building blocks of approximately five floors. Streets are mixed use for bicycles, cars, and pedestrians, and the ground floors often contain shops, entertainment or service facilities.

PHOTOS BY AUTHORS.



the urban neighbourhood: the dense network of streets lined with neo-classical building blocks, regularly interrupted by squares or small parks, and create a particular setting<sup>2</sup>. This setting matches the tastes, the attitudes and the values of the informants, it is a setting to which the informants wish to belong, a setting in which they feel at home. Accordingly, the two households that live in less dense, more monofunctional neighbourhoods on the borders between the inner city and its most central suburbs (see Figure 6 below), orient themselves towards other neighbourhoods offering settings like those described above. Their home neighbourhoods function instead as points of departure (Ewart & Luck, 2013). Thus, to the households of the case study, the value of living in the city is as much (if not more) about sensing this particular setting and *living it*, as it is about actually eating in a restaurant or buying a piece of art in a gallery:

*I really enjoy having [a local street] down there, that's where our newsagent is [not a regular newsagent, it plays with the traditional concept], there's quite a nice ambience there. Ok, so it's a really Vesterbro-ish spot [Vesterbro is her neighbourhood], but it's a neat spot, which organises some nice events. We use it for shopping too, because there are no nice supermarkets nearby. They have some curious specialties and good wine and chocolates and beer. And bread for breakfast. And then they create some atmosphere here, they host events, wine tastings, flea markets and so on. So, there is a positive energy there. And of course, there are a lot of youngsters hanging out and chilling out, and that just creates a positive ambience, which makes you think "great!". I really like that about the city, that it has those kinds of things. (Case study informant living in Vesterbro, Copenhagen)*

- 2 Another article working with this case study (Winther, in press) discusses the applicability of theoretical concepts like atmosphere, ambience, etc. in explicating this particular setting.



**Figure 5**  
The local hotspot referred to in the quote of the Vesterbro informant – a combined grocer's, newsagent, wine shop, specialties shop, café, eatery, concert venue and the host of events like outdoor flea markets. Vesterbro is an illustrative example of the special character ascribed to the city by the households and is one of the most popular parts of Copenhagen in terms of the housing market.

PHOTO BY AUTHORS (ALSO PUBLISHED IN WINTHER (IN PRESS)).

#### 4.2 Suburbia: the little man's dull paradise

Turning from the households' narratives of the city, this next paragraph examines their narratives of suburbia. As accounted for above, suburbia was introduced in the data collection process by the researcher in some of the cases, based on the finding that households of the earliest cases introduced the concept themselves. Regardless of the way of introduction, suburbia ignited clear, articulated and precise narratives and an obvious stating of opinions in all the case study households. Suburbia is in no way irrelevant or neutral to them. Furthermore, the perceptions and narratives of these five households regarding suburbia are remarkably alike. Though contemporary suburbia also contains terraced houses, blocks of flats and non-residential functions like supermarkets, sports facilities or recreational areas, the focus of the households is on detached-housing neighbourhoods of primarily 1960s and 1970s single-family houses. Physically manifesting the construction and land development surge of that time, such neighbourhoods are very obvious and characteristic structures in the Danish landscape – one cannot move far without coming across one, and the single-family house of this period remains the most common housing type in the country today.

Figure 6

The cases living in areas on the fringe of the dense city find their local neighbourhoods much less interesting than the inner city neighbourhoods towards which they consequently orient themselves. Left: A local high-street in the neighbourhood Vanløse (Copenhagen) where one of the households live. This area is a mix of low- and high-rise buildings located in much lower density alongside residential roads, main roads with traffic and commercial facilities, and green recreational areas. Right: The location of the Aarhus case on the fringe of the inner city and the suburb of Aabyhøj. The building is located on a large arterial road in a low-density area characterised by industry, drive-in retail, heavy traffic, blocks of flats and large green areas.

PHOTOS BY AUTHORS.



A key point voiced by the households is that in suburbia everything looks the same: they see the residential areas as consisting of numerous identical roads, lined with numerous identical houses surrounded by identical gardens. To the households, the lack of variation characterising houses and gardens of 1960s and 1970s suburban neighbourhoods does not characterise neighbourhoods of older age. This may very well be because most 1960s and 1970s houses are system-built and constructed with mass-produced materials, whereas older houses are typically built independently by local artisans. The case study household from Aarhus describe it in this way:

*Frank: All the houses look like each other and are lined up in rows.*

*Tanja: But let's say they weren't all the same, like [gives an example] on a summer day where you can hear kids play and lawns being mowed, that's an idyll to me.*

*Frank: It's the sixties and seventies houses in particular, the older villas are much more welcoming, I could more easily see myself there, because things aren't all the same, the trees have been allowed to grow tall, you know. Neighbourhoods with absolutely no trees, but only houses as far as the eye can see, that's a drag.*

*Tanja: Yeah, I think so too. It has to do with variation, I guess, in house style and garden style.*

*Frank: Yes, and places where things have grown – each in their own way. Where one house has been built at a time and one looks different than the other. If everything is erected at once, it becomes much less charming. And also, usually they are constructed really fast, with poor-quality materials, so they are already decaying.*

Such opinions clearly mirror those of culturally and socially advantaged parts of society, as described in the first section of the article. The logic of rationality characterising the development of residential neighbourhoods in the 1960s and 1970s thus becomes the source of the problem to the households. The repetition of a perpendicular pattern of roads and plots, the separation of service functions from residential functions and from traffic, and the application of mass-production, prefabrication and systematisation in the construction process are all measures to develop functional houses and neighbourhoods for large populations in a relatively short amount of time and at a relatively low cost. Yet according to the households, the charm and character found in older detached-housing neighbourhoods and in urban neighbourhoods is lost in this process. However, brief consideration must in this context be given to the highly distinct and recognisable architectural style characterising older residential neighbourhoods. Detached houses of the early 1900s' "Bedre Byggeskik" approach (Floris, 2005) form one example, and the neo-classical building blocks characterising numerous urban Danish neighbourhoods form another. Bech-Danielsen & Stender (2015) debate precisely such distinction between a positive and a negative representation of visual uniformity and repetitiveness in Danish residential neighbourhoods (see also Bech-Danielsen & Gram-Hanssen, 2004).

A second key point voiced by the households regards the life led in suburbia. Firstly, suburbia is perceived to be a family sphere. A place for families with children attending school, day-care, sport and leisure activities, playmates and, not least, home life. For instance, to this young woman without children, suburbia does not make sense *because of* this:

*To me, suburban life is all about family life revolving around school and kindergarten. If you don't have strong neighbourhood relations, for instance through your kids, then there's nothing to do in such a place – like for young people, let's say up to 40. (Case study informant living in Vanløse, Copenhagen)*

A large body of research has consistently confirmed the strong link between suburbia and families with children, both in terms of the population groups living in detached suburban houses<sup>3</sup> (Statistics Denmark, 2020a; Kristensen & Andersen, 2009) and in terms of cultural representations and social perceptions of suburban life (Mechlenborg, 2012; Frandsen, 2009, 2006; Kristensen & Andersen, 2009). However, the families with children of this study also find it hard to see themselves in suburbia. Housing choice is a complex, multifaceted process, as demonstrated by a large body of housing research (e.g., van Gent, Das & Musterd, 2019; Jansen, 2014), encompassing much more than, for example, the functionality, practicality or safety typically associated with suburban family life. As clarified above, lifestyle is a key driver in the housing choices of the families in this case study.

- 3 Another common resident group in suburbia is adults of older age groups (see e.g., Kristensen & Andersen, 2009). Since they have generally lived in their homes since their children were living there with them, their housing choices are based on family life and bear traces of it, and consequently this group also adds to the impression of suburbia as a family sphere.

**Figure 7**  
The 1960s and 1970s detached-housing neighbourhoods characterising countless suburbs across Denmark constitute one of the clearest examples of suburbia as perceived by the case study households. Areas like these are found to be uniform, dreary, introspective, materialistic and the perfect opposite of the urban neighbourhoods in which the households feel at home.

PHOTO BY AUTHOR.



Secondly, the cases of the study find suburban life too introspective and socially isolated, for instance to this 50-year-old woman characterising life in suburbia as devoid of community, because “you just put up four walls around you, and then you never ever see anyone”, and to a case study informant from Vesterbro in Copenhagen, suburban dwellers come across as self-sufficient and officious. Bech-Danielsen et al. (2004) have identified similar perceptions amongst city dwellers, yet also reverse perceptions amongst suburban dwellers: They perceive city life as anonymous, alienating and devoid of community<sup>4</sup>. Yet in the view voiced by the households, suburbia becomes the stereotype of a dwelling-centred culture as opposed to a context-centred culture (Attfield, 2016; Winther, in press). For instance, the idea of doing work on one’s house and garden seems highly unpleasant to some of the households (an activity that is actually shown by research on homeownership to strengthen people’s feeling of attachment to their homes (Winther, 2013; Kristensen & Andersen, 2009; Bech-Danielsen & Gram-Hanssen, 2004). Another article working with the same case study (Winther, in press) demonstrates how the housing choices of the households are the results of a prioritisation of area-related qualities over dwelling-related qualities, because they value the former higher than the latter: they have compromised on dwelling-related qualities like square metres in order to gain on area-related qualities, in this case qualities connected to urban areas. According to the households, suburbia’s stark contrast to the multifunctional character of central urban neighbourhoods makes suburbia a boring and way too quiet place to live. In this perspective, the monofunctionality of suburban residential neighbourhoods adds to the households’ impressions of suburbia as a place of residency, not of activity, and as a sphere of introspectively, not of community. This image of an introspective, dwelling-oriented way of life appears highly confining to the households; one informant terms it claustrophobic and phrases it like this:

*I think it would become a little claustrophobic to live in a place where you would just, you know, stay behind your hedges. Of course, one could try and engage in socialising in the area, but how would that turn out...? (Case study informant living in Vesterbro, Copenhagen)*

Given the high-density character of the home neighbourhoods of the households and the substantial compactness of their dwellings, perceiving life in suburbia as claustrophobic may come across as peculiar at first glance. Yet viewing this claustrophobia as social, as opposed to a merely physical claustro-

4 The referenced anthology accounts for a study undertaken by C. Bech-Danielsen and K. Gram-Hanssen, which deals with this topic.

phobia related to spatial restrictions, opens up understanding. Life in the city is perceived as liberating – as a certain freedom linked to diversity, anonymity and constant change and evolvment afforded the city dweller. Life in suburbia, on the other hand, is perceived to be confined by social control, norms and self-absorption. Furthermore, in the perception of the households, life in suburbia is dwelling-centred, entailing that “home” ends at the cadastral boundary. By contrast, they perceive their own life in the city as context-centred, thus expanding the boundaries of “home” to include the entire neighbourhood – perhaps even the whole city. Thus, suburban living comes across as claustrophobic, even in a spacious home, whereas urban living (even in a compact home) comes across as spacious.

These analyses illustrate how the accounts of the households shift in a flow between physical and social or cultural elements in their characterisation of suburbia and the city. The physical environment acts upon the social and cultural – and vice versa (Yaneva, 2009; Castells, 2002 or Sassen, 2000 on cities). The following account of suburbia illustrates this clearly:

*It's just these long rows. In a way, it's an assembly-line kind of life, I think. It just gives me ticks, you know, I just can't stand suburban life. [...] People in suburbia are prone to want their neighbours to cut their hedges in the same way as themselves, and that's where it reaches too far into my private sphere. In the city, we are forced to be considerate of each other.* (Case study informant living in Vesterbro, Copenhagen)

The perspective on suburban hedge trimming voiced in this quote clearly references the expression “private hedge fascism” (Mechlenborg, 2012) mentioned in the first section of the article. Given the clear socio-structural background of the development of suburbia, it is evident why the terms suburbia and city both give associations to certain ways of life and not only to certain physical environments. Suburbia is the little man's dull introspective paradise, whereas the city is the atmospheric meeting place of the socially and culturally progressive.

#### 4.3 Is the city-suburbia dichotomy still relevant for understanding perceptions of the city?

Analysing the accounts of the households makes it evident how their perceptions of suburbia continuously reference back to the city. Their accounts of city and suburbia are entangled and mutually affirming. In perceiving suburbia as quiet, monofunctional and introspective, it practically becomes the antithesis to the city, perceived as lively, diverse and engaging. In fact, the two environments come across as each other's perfect opposites: lively/quiet; social/introspective; diverse/uniform; monofunctional/multifunctional; engaging/self-absorbed; atmospheric/dreary; and so on. Rather than merely highly different environments, perceptions of city and suburbia are highly interrelated, as two

sides of the same coin. The linkages from these case study accounts to the critical perceptions of suburbia, voiced by culturally and socially advantaged population groups today and generations ago, are evident throughout the study. In this criticism, suburbia is perceived as uniform, monofunctional, boring, history-less, devoid of community and inciting introspectivity and egotism. Thus, by ascribing such views of suburbia, the households in the study connect themselves to such culturally and socially advantaged parts of society, rather than to popular-cultural opinions of suburbia. Following the arguments of Savage (2011), building on Deleuze's concepts of identity through difference (2014) and Bourdieu's relational theory (1996), Winther (in press) shows how differentiating themselves from one lifestyle becomes a means for the households under study to connect themselves to another lifestyle. Thus, the central role of suburbia in the narratives of the case study households is a tool for attaching themselves to a lifestyle with which they identify, a lifestyle taking place in the city.

**Figure 8**  
The busy street Frederiksborgvej close to one of the cases illustrates the diversity and liveliness ascribed to the city by the households. It is located in the neighbourhood Nordvest, one of the most diverse in Copenhagen, in terms of both resident composition and composition of the physical environment.

PHOTO BY AUTHORS, ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN  
BECKMAN ET AL. 2015.



## 5. Concluding remarks

The city as we know it in today's context (in Denmark as in several other countries as well) is a highly different place than the city of a hundred years ago. Today, both Copenhagen and Aarhus are internationally praised for the beauty, safety, cleanliness and bon vivant environments they are perceived to offer for both tourists and inhabitants, yet in less celebratory times, suburban neighbourhoods were developed as the antithesis to these cities. Based on ideas of rationality and systematism, suburbia developed as the miniature paradise of the common man – the teacher, the mechanic or the clerk, for whom a modern home in healthy surroundings of fresh air, light, space and greenery had previously been out of reach. Since then, dichotomic perceptions of the city and suburbia have retained contrasting opinions of the two types of living environments. Today, the cities have become popular, to the extent that local housing markets are overheated, and the lack of affordable housing for lower- and middle-class households is increasing. This article argues that an understanding of current perceptions of the city as a living environment is key for understanding residential settlement patterns at play. Consequently, this article sets out to examine whether the dichotomic city-suburbia narrative is still relevant for understanding perceptions of the city today.

To examine this question, an in-depth and detailed case study of five urban households having actively chosen to live in the city is undertaken. These households perceive the city as a lively, atmospheric scene attributed with a particular mix of people, materialities, facilities and activities with which the households feel they fit and in which they feel at home. Examining their accounts of the city in detail reveals how these continuously reference back to suburbia, and how such narratives aid the identification of the households with living-in-the-city. Furthermore, the linkages from these perceptions to perceptions voiced by socially and culturally advantaged population groups, or particularly cultural-radical opinion formers, are highly evident. In such perceptions, the city is virtually the perfect opposite of suburbia: Pairs of opposite features are attributed to the two environments: lively opposes quiet, social opposes introspective, diverse opposes uniform, etc. Thus, the case study households make use of the very well-established dichotomy between city and suburbia to understand and narrate their own identities and positions of belonging. Accordingly, the households' perceptions of suburbia are a valuable and important part of knowing and understanding their perceptions of the city. Even though cities today are highly different from the overcrowded and unhealthy living environments (for the majority of the population) of a hundred years ago, and even though suburbia is in fact consciously aiming to adopt urban elements like higher density and higher functional diversity, the narratives of city and suburbia forming each other's photo negatives are still highly relevant for understanding perceptions of the two living environments. This dichotomy



can nuance and accentuate the characteristics of urban environments as perceived through urban eyes, not only the physical characteristics, but the associated social and cultural characteristics too. The repetitive suburban landscape accentuates the diversity of the urban landscape and so on. This article has thus demonstrated the key role of this dichotomy in urban perceptions of Danish cities today. In these cities, housing prices have risen to a point where ordinary middle-class households must compromise substantially on their housing qualities to be able to afford living there. This context accentuates the relevance of the city-suburbia dichotomy even further, as the perception of living in the city as *living the whole neighbourhood*, as if home includes the whole surrounding area, illustrates the perception of the city as a social place and suburbia as a place of self-sufficiency and introspectivity. Despite its physical spaciousness, suburbia is perceived as socially claustrophobic, whereas the city is perceived as socially spacious. Through this finding, the article points to the key role of location – perceived location, that is – in the processes of housing choice. Narratives and perceptions of different living environments are undeniably complex, subjective and difficult to capture and measure. Nevertheless, they are key for the processes of housing choice, and consequently crucial to attend to when assessing residential settlement patterns and planning the future of our cities.

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