

Constructing a centre on the periphery: urbanization and urban design in the island city of Nuuk, Greenland.

Adam Grydehøj

Island Dynamics

Denmark

agrydehoj@islanddynamics.org

ABSTRACT: Both islands and cities are often conceptualized in terms of centre-periphery relationships. Scholarly attempts to nuance popular associations of islands with peripherality and cities with centrality reflect awareness of underlying power relationships. Drawing upon island studies and urban studies knowledge, the case of Nuuk, Greenland, is used to explore how centring and peripheralizing processes play out in an island city. Greenland as a whole came to be regarded as a peripheral region under Danish colonialism, but since the 1950s, Danes and Greenlanders have sought to transform Greenland into its own centre. Nuuk grew into a city and a political, administrative and economic centre relative to Greenland's small settlements, which came to be seen as central to Greenlandic culture. Nuuk's rapid growth – dependent on imported Danish designs, materials, technologies, policies and labour – has resulted in an island city of immense contrasts, with monumental modern buildings standing alongside dilapidated 1960s apartment blocks and with strongly differentiated neighbourhoods. Nuuk is both at the centre and on the periphery, enmeshed in power relationships with other Greenlandic settlements and with Denmark. Nuuk is a result of urban design processes that are conditioned by both infrastructural systems and a confluence of spatio-temporal factors.

Keywords: centre-periphery relationships; Denmark; Greenland; island cities; Nuuk; urbanization; urban design

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Introduction: centres and peripheries

A central task for any field of research is to define its subject area. For island studies, this might appear straightforward, yet the oft-cited *Encyclopædia Britannica* definition of “any area of land smaller than a continent and entirely surrounded by water” has proved insufficient. ‘The island’ is not *just* a particular relationship between land and water but carries a range of other associations, some largely positive (purity, paradise, close-knit community) and others largely negative (isolated, behind-the-times, socially suffocating). In a seminal article, Baldacchino (2008a, p. 38) discusses the “debilitating” ways in which mainland and metropolitan forces look at, describe, act upon, and objectify islanders – and of which islanders are not always aware. The ‘island lure’ to mainland and metropolitan forces is linked to “the fact that islands suggest themselves as *tabulae rasae*: potential laboratories for any conceivable human project, in thought or in action” (Baldacchino, 2006, pp. 5-6). Islands are regarded as somehow ‘more real’ and ‘authentic’ than other places. Key here is the idea of the island as something peripheral to and different from the mainland, with the result that common island associations – even positive ones – have an othering effect.

Mainland associations of islands with isolation have led to an island studies concern with removing islands from the periphery and placing them at the centre of the research field (e.g., Depraetere, 2008; Hay, 2006, 2013; Pugh, 2013). The island may be peripheral to the mainland, but it is often quite central to those who live on it. Yet, space and distance continue to matter, and relatively isolated island communities are subject to negative social, economic, cultural, and political effects as a result (e.g., Baldacchino & Pleijel, 2010; Briguglio, 1995; Amoamo, 2013; Pam & Henry, 2012, Grydehøj & Hayward, 2014; Grydehøj, 2008).

The field of urban studies has faced a similar challenge, but from the opposite direction. If we ask, ‘What is a city?’, we are likely to receive answers that hinge upon the city being a centre to numerous peripheries. The city, like the island, is relative: city population sizes vary the world over, and what is deemed a city in one context may not be deemed a city in another.

‘The modern city’ has not fared well in artistic and popular discourse. Often contrasted with a golden age of togetherness and social cohesion, the city’s problems are commonly reduced “to the replacement of thick ‘local’ face-to-face interaction taking place in ‘small’ communities by thinner interaction taking place ‘at-a-distance’ in ‘large’ communities” (Amin & Thrift, 2002, p. 37). In this popular understanding, the modern city is the anti-island: it is a centralized chaos. There is something about the city that is transgressive, dirty, subaltern, that challenges established norms and makes worse people of those who live within it.

Yet, if island studies scholars reject the association of islands with paradisiacal peripherality, many urban studies scholars reject the association of cities with hellish centrality. Koolhaas celebrates the death of comprehensive urban design and the triumph of creative individuality (Koolhaas & Mau, 1995; Koolhaas, 1995). Castells (2005) sees in the chaos a gap that Information Age architects and planners can fill with justice- and community-oriented “shared symbolic meaning.” For Amin and Thrift (2002, p. 8), the stereotypical chaos of the city is itself creative,

Contemporary cities are certainly not systems with their own internal coherence ... The city has no completeness, no centre, no fixed parts. Instead, it is an amalgam of often disjointed processes and social heterogeneity, a place of near and far connections, a concatenation of rhythms; always edging in new directions.

The city here is precisely incoherent, at once without a centre and at the centre of everything. This echoes the idea of the ‘complete urbanization’ of society, introduced in Henri Lefebvre’s *La révolution urbaine* (1970): that is, the urban is both a phenomenon and a process, consolidating human activity and creating difference (Lefebvre, 2014). In this, “centrality eliminates peripheral elements and condenses wealth, means of action, knowledge, information, and culture” (Kipfer, Schmid, Goonewardena & Milgrom, 2008, p. 291).

In their book *Splintering urbanism*, Graham and Marvin, drawing on the work of Castells, grapple with how the consolidating and differentiating social processes of urbanization are underlain by vast ‘networked infrastructures’.

The life and flux of cities and urban life can be considered to be what we might call a series of closely related ‘sociotechnical processes’. These are the very essence of modernity: people and institutions enrol enormously complex technological systems (of which they often know very little) to extend unevenly their actions in time and space (Graham & Marvin, 2001, p. 10).

To maintain that there is a ghost in the urban machine is not to deny that the machine has hardware too. Within what are generally considered to be singular cities, material infrastructure (transport, communication, water, power, etc.) ‘splinters’ the urban environment, distancing groups of city dwellers from one another as well as creating – sometimes explicit – special zones and favoured and less-favoured districts. This infrastructure also underlies the “connective forces” between places both within and outside the city (Graham & Marvin, 2001, p. 8). Once rolled out and put into service, such infrastructure is difficult to roll back up, and its architectural and social legacy continues guiding development even after it has been functionally superseded by ‘superior’ technologies. Nodes of urban specificity that developed to exploit train lines and communications infrastructure can thus become enmeshed in the sociotechnical processes on which they were founded, even as new infrastructure (for instance, high-speed rail and state-of-the-art internet capacity) becomes available elsewhere in the city. This encourages processes of zonal differentiation, leading to “secessionary networked spaces” that form “enclaves” of infrastructural privilege within the city (Graham & Marvin, 2001, p. 259). This is a form of what I refer to as a ‘sticky’ historicity: a confluence of spatio-temporal factors (whether human or machine) that abidingly guide development in interplay with further external inputs.

The above analyses of the city emphasize its dual power to connect and disconnect. Yet, even as the whole of society is drawn into the urban process, cities remain rooted in distinctions between centre and periphery. It is simply that the ‘centre’ is no longer necessarily the city as a unit, and the ‘periphery’ may no longer be the countryside (Brenner, 2014). Centrality and peripherality are instead relative measures of social, economic, cultural, and political power. In the words of Lefebvre, “wherever a dominated space is generated and mastered by a dominant space – where there is periphery and centre – there is colonization” (cited in Kipfer et al., 2008, p. 294). In producing disassociated and differentially empowered spaces, cities reproduce the very centre-periphery relationships that urbanization has illusively exploded.

Centre and periphery are socially constructed and relative concepts. They are powerful concepts both in that they affect how we think about and interact with people and places, and in that they are grounded in relationships of power.

This paper

What, then, are we to make of island cities (cities on islands), pulled between competing centre-periphery dualities? This paper will use the case of Nuuk, Greenland, to explore how centring and peripheralizing processes play out in practice in an island city. There are many kinds of island cities, and there can be no such thing as a ‘typical’ example. Nuuk, however, presents excellent opportunities for combining island studies and urban studies knowledge in an examination of how peripheries can be created and how centres can be constructed within them. This paper starts with an introduction to Greenland and its island status, and reviews the processes by which Greenland was first made peripheral and then cast as its own centre. A description of Nuuk’s urban development follows, with an analysis of how its development as a centre has been influenced by a combination of spatio-temporal factors, political and planning decisions, and infrastructural embeddedness. A conclusion locates Nuuk as a centre, yet on the periphery.

The islands of Greenland

Greenland, the world's largest island, has a land area of 2,166,086 km², of which around 80% is permanently covered by ice, leaving just a thin strip of habitable land along the coast. A former Danish colony, home to barely 56,000 souls, life in Greenland is dominated by its pitiless arctic environment. In Greenland, you never forget that nature is in control.

So goes the traditional description of Greenland, variations of which introduce countless books and articles, both popular and scholarly. Greenland is the huge blotch of white in the upper-left corner of the North Atlantic, the empty space on the map, so empty because – unlike the ocean itself – nothing ever happens there. In the Danish mindset, that of the former colonial master, Greenland is conclusively 'islanded' (McCusker & Soares, 2011), is a monolithic white space, so admirably suited for receiving the projection of Danish dreams, guilt, compassion, superiority. Greenland is the ultimate periphery, at the outermost edge of the central Danish experience. It is a tendency for peripheries to be elided. From a common Danish perspective, there is simply Greenland. No Ilulissat, no Sisimiut, no Nuuk. Just Greenland.

This description of Greenland from the mainland perspective is only one interpretation. For thin though that strip of habitable land around Greenland's coast may be, it is nearly ten times the land area of Denmark proper. Greenland, furthermore, is only an island when viewed from a distance, on the world map. In reality, Greenland is an archipelago, a large island fringed by a multitude of small islands. Greenland's capital, Nuuk (2013 population 16,454), may be situated at the extremity of a long, narrow peninsula; but of Greenland's 13 towns with populations of over 1,000, Aasiaat, Nanortalik, Uummannaq, and Upernavik as well as numerous smaller settlements are located on islands off the coast of the main island.

But what does it matter whether a town is located on a small island if, as is the case in Greenland, none of the towns or settlements on the main island or anywhere else are connected by road? Islandness is not a marker of peripherality when the land is close to impassable: In transport terms, the sea is easier to master than the inland ice. By summer, movement between towns and settlements can only be achieved by sea or air, with many Greenlanders depending on private boats (Bærenholdt, 2011, p. 117). In winter, boats continue to ply the routes around Greenland's southern coasts, and travel atop sea ice becomes indispensable in the north. Mobility can prove expensive: A plane ticket from one town in Greenland to another regularly exceeds the price of a plane ticket from Nuuk to distant Copenhagen, and even the slow, sporadic ferry service is priced beyond the means of the average private citizen for frequent travel. If Greenland is monolithic, it is so in the sense that it is all equally fractured and fragmented.

There is likewise considerable cultural difference between Greenland's various geographic zones. A friend of mine, a man in his early 30s from South Greenland, tells me that he does not regard South Greenland as 'the real Greenland', i.e. as authentically Greenlandic (cf. Bendix, 1997). For him, the authentic Greenland is not sheep farming South Greenland but is instead located to the northwest, in the land of seal hunting and dog sledding. In the same manner, one is constantly being told, by both Greenlanders and Danes, that Nuuk – home to nearly one-third of all Greenland residents – is not authentically Greenlandic (Sørensen & Forchhammer, 2011, p. 588). Nuuk, from this perspective, cannot be Greenland's centre, for it is hardly Greenlandic at all. A complex historical process has led Greenlanders to locate Greenland's cultural heart – its emotional centre – on Greenland's own periphery, coinciding

with the popular Danish conception of the isolated, peripheral, traditional Greenland. As Baldacchino (2008a) notes, it is not uncommon for islanders to acquiesce to or even celebrate the peripheral identities that mainlanders grant them.

Creating a peripheral Greenland

Greenland was not always peripheral.

The islands were first settled by people from present-day Canada around 2500 BC, followed by successive waves of settlement over the next millennia, resulting in Greenland's current Inuit culture. In the pre-colonial period, communities consisted of extended families, which moved between temporary living places, following the marine mammals (whale, seal, porpoise, walrus) they hunted. Seals were the building block of old Greenland, providing food, fuel, clothing, kayak skins, and tent material (Madsen, 2009, p. 10). This nomadic lifestyle meant that even the sturdier winter housing – turf huts – was temporary and disposable.

It was this nomadic culture that the Norwegian Lutheran pastor Hans Egede encountered when he came to Greenland as a missionary in 1721, thus initiating the age of colonization, at a time when Denmark and Norway were united as a single state. Egede's plan was not to convert the Greenlanders but, rather, to locate and convert the Norse settlers who had come to Greenland from Iceland in the 10th century and who, if they were yet living (which they were not), would still have been toiling under the folly of Catholicism. In the event, Egede founded the colony town of Godthåb (today's Nuuk), and the native Greenlanders were gradually converted to Lutheranism.

In the early colonial period, the Dano-Norwegian administration sought to isolate the Greenlanders and prevent their 'corruption' by outside influences, instituting a trade monopoly in 1774 and in 1782 forbidding the supply of alcohol to Greenlanders as well as marriage between 'pure' Greenlanders and Europeans (Loukacheva, 2007, p. 21). In order to preserve the local hunting societies, trade between Greenlanders and foreigners was minimized (Højlund, 1972, pp. 23-25). Nevertheless, the earlier temporary turf home architecture began to be adapted for permanent dwellings in the vicinity of the Danish colony towns (Hansen, 2013, p. 88). Greenland's urbanization had begun.

Greenlanders, who had lived for centuries largely isolated from the outside world, without a concept of being peripheral, had at last been 'islanded' by an external power. Dano-Norwegian society envisioned Greenland as a potential island of Christian simplicity, unblemished by the market economy. Prior to colonization, Greenland cannot be said to have been 'underdeveloped' since 'underdevelopment' is a product of interpretation by those who deem themselves 'developed' (Frank, 1969), just as 'peripherality' is a construct of those who possess 'centrality'. Yet, the nomadism of pre-colonial Greenlanders meant that they also lacked centrality. Colonialism's novel and static concepts of centre and periphery thus brought with them a relativization of economic and social norms.

When Norway left its union with Denmark in 1814, the latter retained authority over the Faroes, Iceland and Greenland, and life in Greenland continued much as it had before. In the early 20th century, however, the dynamics of Greenlandic society underwent a shift. Greenland's population had been rising steadily, in part through the introduction of (still-basic) healthcare by the colonial authorities. Climatic changes began pushing the seal population farther north, making it difficult for the increasingly numerous people of South Greenland to survive from traditional hunting activities (Dickmeiss, 2006, p. 36; Madsen, 2009, pp. 11-13).

Even in the north, population pressures meant that the seal-based lifestyle rapidly became unsustainable. The warmer waters around Greenland brought with them a strong increase in cod numbers, presenting possibilities for a change in livelihood.

Fishing, however, did not present the same opportunities as did seal hunting inasmuch as cod could be used for food alone, unlike the multifunctional seal. Fish could provide fuel, housing, clothing, and boats only if they were sold for money. Such commerce required industrial centres for fish processing, fish sales, and boat maintenance. Greenland's first fish processing plant was established in Sisimiut in 1921 (Hansen, 2013, p. 87). The introduction of a market economy encouraged increased purchasing of imported goods, the emergence of a fledgling retail sector, and a form of dependence on the central importing and exporting power of Copenhagen. Thus were the permanent small settlements (known locally as *bygder*) created. Today, such settlements are popularly regarded as the carriers of pure, traditional, and authentic Greenlandic culture: "The town has had a disreputable status in Greenland's literature over the years since the town is seen as incompatible with the Greenlander, who, in this line of thought, is a person of nature" (Sørensen & Forchhammer, 2011, p. 559; translation my own). Yet the settlement lifestyle is itself scarcely a century old, and its origins are deeply embedded in Greenland's colonial administration, which funded and encouraged the transition from nomadism to sedentarism. Today's Greenlandic and Danish valorization of peripheral Greenland is a late- or post-colonial creation and is applied to places that, in the context of their founding, in fact represented early steps in Greenland's journey toward urbanization.

Creating a central Greenland

On April 9, 1940, Denmark was occupied by the German military, cutting Greenland off from its colonial power, and the Danish administration in Nuuk was forced to function independently from the government in Copenhagen. World War II opened up Greenland to the outside world, bringing with it a benevolent occupation by the American military, which constructed military bases and infrastructure, including the airfield that has become today's international airport in Kangerlussuaq (Bærenholdt, 2011, p. 119).

Greenland's wartime separation from Denmark (which ended on May 5, 1945) had major consequences (Fleischer, 1996). The war highlighted the problematic nature of the Danish trade monopoly, and with decolonization on the international post-war agenda, plus the dramatic independence of neighbouring Iceland in 1944, the normalization of Greenland's status with Denmark became a popular cause both among Danes and the bilingual, educated Greenlandic elite (Højlund, 1972, pp. 23-24; Olsen, 2005, pp. 38-39). In 1953, Greenland's status was normalized, and it formally became part of Denmark, theoretically on the same terms as a regular Danish municipality. Greenland was to be de-peripheralized and brought into the centre of power.

This normalization and de-peripheralization proved difficult to achieve, however, in part because of the very success of early initiatives. Better healthcare led to sharp declines in mortality rates due to tuberculosis and other diseases, resulting in an unanticipated population surge. The Danish authorities (aware that Greenland's population had risen from 6,000 in 1805 to 21,000 in 1947) assumed that the population would be around 31,000 by 1970; in fact, by 1970, the population had reached 46,000 (Højlund, 1972, pp. 52-53). Similarly, better education expanded the ranks of the Greenlandic middle class and its expectations for how life in Greenland ought to be lived. In 1964, the 'birthplace criterion' (*fødestedskriteriet*)

systematized wage differences between Greenlandic and foreign workers, aiming both to adjust wages to the Greenlandic market and to successfully attract Danish skilled labour. Greenlandic dissatisfaction with this economic discrimination led to the gradual weakening of the birthplace criterion and its final abolition in 1991. However, underlining the complexities involved in balancing social and economic needs, one can note that the necessity of equal pay has massively increased the costs of development. Whereas many developing states and former colonies can invest in new, labour-intensive services at relatively inexpensive labour costs (Sen, 1999, pp. 47-48), this option is closed to Greenland.

The provision of an expanding and deepening range of services required not only money in itself but also a sophisticated and expensive administrative system. Conditions in Greenland discouraged the withdrawal of state involvement in industry, and the Royal Greenlandic Trading Department (which had operated the Danish trade monopoly since 1774) continued to run a number of important state-owned production, retail, and shipping businesses. So significant is the Greenlandic government's continued involvement in the local economy that Karlsson (2009, p. 155) regards it as a form of 'state capitalism'.

In 1979, as a partial consequence of Greenlandic concerns about entering the European Community, the Home Rule [*Hjemmestyre*] system was introduced, granting Greenland limited autonomy and its own parliament. Indeed, following a referendum, Greenland chose to opt out of the then European Economic Community in 1985. Desire for further self-determination led to another referendum in 2008, which resulted in the implementation of Greenlandic Self-Government [*Selvstyre*].

Greenland has thus gradually moved toward becoming its own political centre, in line with a general desire among Greenlanders not to simply be part of the Danish periphery. However, the trappings of increased self-determination and long-term internal sustainability have proved costly, necessitating further sophistication of Greenland's governmental and administrative machinery. Furthermore, during the transition period from the 1950s through to the start of the 21st century, conditions in Denmark progressed as well. As a result, the goal of 'development' has been constantly pushed out of reach, beyond the societal horizon. The annual block grant [*bloktilskud*] from the Danish state continued to increase due to a rising Greenlandic population and rising societal demands. With the establishment of Self-Government, the block grant was fixed at 3.5 billion Danish kroner (around €470 million), accounting for nearly 27% of Greenland's annual GDP. The government of Greenland continues to move forward in terms of taking responsibility for more powers – particularly economic – from Denmark (Ackrén, 2014).

Urban development in Nuuk

Economic development processes in large or geographically dispersed countries – and indeed, the world as a whole – tend to foster centralization (Brenner, 2004, pp. 12-13; Sassen, 2001). In the colonial era, Greenland was largely governed directly from Copenhagen, with colonial representatives undertaking local administrative duties from the colony towns. Political devolution and democratization necessitated for the first time the creation of a centre – namely Nuuk – in a land that had previously been politically peripheral in its entirety. The population of Nuuk grew rapidly, from 4,867 in 1965 to 7,478 in 1970 to 10,559 in 1985 and to 16,454 in 2013. This was driven not only by growth in the administrative structure itself (dependent on a labour force including both Greenlandic and Danish administrators) but also by a concomitant

surge in ancillary services, from shops to schools to bars. Nuuk became a centre for businesses operating in multiple sites in Greenland, due to the benefits that came from closeness to the political and administrative machinery, emergent economies of scale, and access to a growing skilled and unskilled labour force. Similar dynamics have influenced Greenland's three other 'growth towns' (Sisimiut, Ilulissat, and Qaqortoq – 2013 populations of 5,598, 4,541, and 3,229 respectively), yet Greenlanders tend to regard Nuuk as a unique case, as Greenland's first, and so far only, city.

Nor was Denmark adverse to such trends in the years following normalization, for Greenlandic centralization at first glance eased efforts to affect Greenlandic development: economies of scale proved attractive in the provision of public services as well. The Greenland Commission of 1960 recommended a 'concentration policy' by which more of Greenland's population would live in the largest towns and fewer would live in the settlements. Such centralization of development similarly followed its own course of self-justification.

As Danish-funded and Danish-designed housing estates and other infrastructure contributed to turning Nuuk into a city, so was it perhaps inevitable that the demands of Nuuk's residents – including a disproportionately large middle class by Greenlandic standards – came to be those of urban rather than rural dwellers. Even today, the creation of cultural, leisure, and communications services in Nuuk drives demand for additional services in smaller communities inasmuch as the Greenlandic government can (and is) otherwise accused of privileging the economic centre over the periphery. A compounding of the demonstration effect leads to a spiralling rise in Greenlandic expectations, as Nuuk becomes an inadvertent staging ground for development elsewhere in Greenland and as such development subsequently suggests a need for further improvements to Nuuk as the Greenlandic centre.

In the 1950s, Greenland's Technical Organization (GTO) began constructing standardized modernized housing – available at hugely subsidized rates – in settlements across Greenland. The government utilized some of the same techniques employed in impulses toward rapid urban development elsewhere in the world during the same period (e.g. Kong & Yeoh, 2003). The growing population of Greenland's towns required more housing – and required it quickly. Thus arose the now much-maligned system of constructing large apartment blocks ([Figure 1](#)) for rental (and later, private ownership) in what is now central Nuuk. At the time, such residences – with electricity, heating, and running water – represented major improvements in living standards over the 'traditional' Greenlandic permanent housing. Today, these apartment blocks – rapidly constructed and often poorly maintained – are in a state of dilapidation, giving parts of Nuuk a slum-like appearance. The most notorious of these buildings, Block P (completed in 1966, 64 flats long and five storeys high), was demolished in 2012, and there are plans to demolish the remaining lettered blocks from this period in the coming years.

Arctic urbanization is a general trend (Baldacchino, 2008b; Nordic Council of Ministers, 2011, pp. 20-37), and Nuuk's population is still increasing. In the late 1970s, Nuuk experienced strong spatial expansion in the form of both detached houses and apartment blocks built in Nuussuaq, now a primarily residential district with a population of around 6000. Nuussuaq is to the north and east of the city centre, from which it is physically separated by a high ridge and a lake. More recently, in the late 2000s, the city has expanded farther east, across the bay into Qinngorput, a new neighbourhood consisting primarily of tower blocks. Indeed, residents of the now-demolished Block P building were offered preferential rights to rent and subsequently purchase flats in Qinngorput (Kalaallit Nunaata Radio, 2010a), though

not all residents of places like Block P – located in central Nuuk – wish to move to more peripheral and expensive accommodation elsewhere in town (Kalaallit Nunaata Radio, 2010b). Wealthy Nuuk residents have been constructing spacious detached houses since the 1950s, but even at the close of the 1980s, the state owned around 90% of middle-income housing (Hansen, 2013, p. 90). Private ownership rates have since increased, divesting the Home Rule administration and (now Self-Government) of maintenance costs.

Figure 1: One of Nuuk’s many large apartment blocks constructed by Greenland's Technical Organization.



Photo: © Adam Grydehøj, 2014.

Over the decades, much of the construction in Greenland as a whole and in Nuuk in particular has been of a modular nature, with buildings being constructed in Denmark and then assembled, piece-by-piece, in Greenland. New housing is being built upward rather than outward. The tallest buildings in Greenland, colloquially known as ‘the Twin Towers’, are a pair of 12-storey blocks (completed 2008, containing 60 flats each), which were constructed southeast of the town centre. MT Højgaard, the contractor (with its offices on the outskirts of Copenhagen) that built the Twin Towers, is also responsible for two other major projects in the city: Nuuk Town Centre [*Nuuk Bymidte*] (completed 2010), a retail and office building that hosts the city’s first skywalk, and the city’s most massive building, Nuuk Center (2014) (completed 2012) (Figure 2), a ten-storey shopping mall and office complex, also housing the Self-Government. Both these buildings are ultramodern, and neither would look out of place in a Danish city. The same is true of Katuaq (2014), Greenland’s Cultural Centre, completed 1997, designed by the Danish Schmidt Hammer & Lassen Group, as well as Malik (2014)

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(swimming hall, completed 2004) and the Ilimmarfik (2014) buildings (completed 2007), both of which were designed by the Danish KHR Arkitekter group.

Figure 2: Nuuk Center, housing a shopping centre and offices.



Photo: © Adam Grydehøj, 2014.

The ‘sticky’ historicity of urban design

Over the past three centuries, Greenland has transitioned from being a land with no centre and no periphery, to being the periphery of a Danish centre, to being its own centre. Within Greenland, the early 20th-century establishment of settlements created numerous centres, which have now become peripheral to the politico-economic powerhouse of Nuuk. The settlements maintain a position of privilege in popular Greenlandic discourse, being regarded as the site of a ‘traditional’, ‘authentic’ Greenlandic community life; one, however, that never truly existed. This harkening back to a mythical Greenlandic culture represents an attack on the colonial peripheralization of Greenland; yet the mythical culture was itself constructed by colonialism’s imposition of centre-periphery power relationships and its creation of a primitive, peripheral Greenlandic other. However ahistorical it may be, the claim that Nuuk is peripheral to Greenlandic values relative to the centre of these values in the settlements dovetails with a feeling elsewhere in Greenland that Nuuk drains resources and attention from other communities without contributing much in return; even if, as noted above, the demonstration of development in and of Nuuk may propel rising standards of living across Greenland.

Nuuk’s development illustrates many of the lessons of the past decades’ urban studies. Underlying the city’s apparent chaos are social and technological systems that are perpetuated precisely because they are easy to build upon, yet difficult to undo. The concentration policy,

based on anticipated efficiency savings, became self-justifying inasmuch as Nuuk's economies of scale and the settlements' diseconomies of scale both became stronger as the policy was implemented: Nuuk's growth spurred its own further centrality in accordance with embedded administrative logics and the dynamics of the market economy. This market economy may well hold advantages over what had existed in Greenland before, and it may well be impossible to return to 'traditional' ways of life regardless; but it was also an economy that was introduced into Greenland by the very social forces (the Danish colonial administration) that later found themselves in its service (at great expense).

And thus does development demand ever more of itself. The wisdom of the political decisions made in the years prior to and following normalization can be debated, but they were not pernicious. They were contingent upon the conceptions of reality at the time: The de-peripheralization of Greenland encouraged the creation of a Greenlandic centre. Additional people in Nuuk required additional housing, hence the construction of Nuuk's apartment blocks, such as Block P. Comparing Block P with enormous apartment blocks in Denmark, Weiss argues that,

Block P was raised at the same time as Høje Gladsaxe, Vollsmose, and Gellerupparken, which we have learned to love to hate for their monumental immense scale, which recklessly exceeds the human scale and local building tradition in its hunt for achieving the utopia of the ultimate residence (Weiss, 2014, n.p.; translation my own).

Block P – at the time, the largest apartment block in Denmark – was the epitome of development. Block P was the future.

But the future always eventually becomes the past. The success of development and population concentration in Nuuk necessitated further development. Eventually, it was deemed necessary to demolish Block P, which required new houses to be built. What is the solution when it is necessary to simultaneously demolish old public housing and expand housing provision (Winther, 2013, p. 72)? Residents of Block P needed other places to live before Block P could be demolished, so it was necessary to first expand the cityscape to Qinngorput and between existing nodes of settlement. The creation of Qinngorput itself required expansions of the transport, communications, power, and water infrastructures, not to mention the building of a new school.

Now demolished, Block P continues to haunt Nuuk from beyond the grave. Space has opened up on the town map, and the question becomes: How can we fill it? Practically speaking, there is only one appropriate way to fill it: namely, with imported Danish architecture (Arnfred, 2013), consisting of imported Danish materials, built by imported Danish workers (*Sermitsiaq*, 2011). Nuuk possesses economic centrality and economies of scale relative to the rest of Greenland, but given its spatial peripherality to population centres abroad, it does not possess the capacity in resources and expertise to internally undertake the design and construction of large building projects.

The spatial specificity – the climate and landscape – of Nuuk seems to beg for advanced technological solutions (Figure 3). The subarctic climate places demands not only on how buildings must be constructed and which materials are most suitable for construction but also on from where this specialist knowledge and these materials must come: largely, Denmark. Although Nuuk is located at the tip of a peninsula rather than on a small island, the effect is largely the same: the city is ringed by mountains and sea, and even if the mountains should be crossed, the path beyond them leads precisely nowhere. Even Nuuk's internal

geography is fragmented. Houses perch atop ridges, rocky hills disrupt the urge toward urban rationalization, bays prevent the easy concentric expansion so beloved by urban planners of former times. There can be no grid plan, no long thoroughfares here. So, sophisticated technological systems are enlisted to pull together this at once geographically self-contained and geographically fractured city. The public housing projects of the 1950s-1970s represented an enormous technological effort to provide a public good in a spatially, economically, and temporally efficient manner. The constituent parts of Nuuk's networked infrastructures – its roads, mega-buildings, power station, and so on – all continue to fuel and be fuelled by Nuuk's agglomeration, yet as they connect and make the city whole, so they also push its people apart, creating social differentiation between neighbourhoods and building types as well as commuter suburbs and industrial centres that reinforce the dominance of automobile transport.

Figure 3: Nuuk's landscape of sea, ridges and hilltops, seen from the northeast.



Photo: © Adam Grydehøj, 2014.

Plans for a new industrial harbour are illustrative of this process. Given Nuuk's placement in the Greenlandic archipelago, the city might be expected to possess a strong maritime identity. However, the dominance of air transport and seasonality of sea transport mean that Nuuk is strangely, if disparately, self-contained. Although pleasure craft and small fishing boats reside in Nuuk's harbours and bays, the sea is not generally regarded as a 'sea road'. Even among the people of Nuuk, the iconic image of the maritime Greenlander is the Northwest Greenland seal hunter in his kayak – not the trawler fisher or the longshoreman. Nuuk remains Greenland's largest seaport, receiving goods from abroad and fish for processing; yet here too, the momentum of technology's restless advance makes itself felt: the city's industrial harbour,

Constructing a centre on the periphery: the island city of Nuuk, Greenland

Atlantshavn, was constructed in 1952 outside of the town centre. But the city has encroached on the harbour, and new maritime technologies – container ships, cruise ships, and massive land-based cranes – have rendered the current harbour infrastructure insufficient to its task. As a result, a massive new industrial harbour will be constructed on the Qeqertat islands, jutting out into the bay. Such a development is not simply a matter of building a harbour though: Nuuk's road and tunnel network will need to be extended, and land will need to be compulsorily acquired (Riger-Kusk, 2013, pp. 16-18). Nor does the story end here, for, as the government's 2006 socio-economic report on the project explains, once the new harbour has been constructed, 'synergies' will open up,

A new harbour in Qeqertat and scaling down of the old harbour will provide new perspectives for urban development. First, it will free up nearby areas for urban purposes besides heavy harbour industry. Second, placement of a new harbour on Qeqertat will logistically support continued urban development in Qinnqorput and then into Siorarsiorfik as well as urban development either on the islands south of Nuuk or on Akia ... In the old harbour, it will eventually be possible to transform the areas from industrial purposes to, for example, an attractive housing area with offices. This has been seen in other countries, where urban and anachronistic harbour areas are transformed and give new life to the city when harbour functions are moved to new areas (Nuup Kommunea & Ineqarnermut Attaveqarnermullu Pisortaqarfik, 2006, pp. 22-23; translation my own).

Construction of a new harbour will thus simultaneously facilitate the redevelopment of central Nuuk and usher in a massive territorial expansion of the city across the bay. By further necessitating the introduction of an intra-Nuuk ferry service, such an expansion could at last provide Nuuk with something of a maritime character. The new harbour is also regarded as a prerequisite for a new airport on the island of Angisunnguaq. The potential has not been lost on the Copenhagen-based BIG (Bjarke Ingels Group architecture company), which is proposing an 'AIR + PORT',

Rather than seeing these major infrastructural investments as two separate activities, the project elaborates on the idea of merging the two in one coherent symbiosis of transport systems. ... "Rather than waiting for the past infrastructure to get decommissioned and reborn with a new social program – could we conceive of our public infrastructures to come with intended social side-effects from day one?" Bjarke Ingels ... Founder of BIG. As a hedonistic approach the space under the runway, normally reserved for excavation dirt, is programmed with public content. A programmatic cross breed of airport and cruise ship terminals, office space, hotels and parking facilities plus a mix of public cultural programs... Instead of bringing the airport to the city, the project brings the city to the airport (DAC, 2014, n.p.).

Is this a case of urban design driving infrastructural development, or of infrastructural development driving urban design?

Nuuk, and Greenland in general, possess highly sophisticated political and administrative machinery; but local human and spatial conditions at the time of political normalization encouraged pre-fab solutions (administrative, technological, planning, philosophical) imported from outside, which have in turn encouraged yet more solutions along the same lines. The history of early decision-making is 'sticky': networked infrastructures may be hard to deploy, but they are even harder to remove. Even recent and future innovatively designed solutions like BIG's airport plan are built atop layered deposits of infrastructural history. This is not technological determinism, for it is people who construct, empower, and exploit these systems. Strongly material, physical factors (Graham & Marvin, 2001) occasion an emotional, culturally mediated response. Cities are constantly being designed and redesigned through their residents' urban practices (Tonkiss, 2013), and these practices alter how infrastructures are used and which powers infrastructures project. Some practices lead to dispossession, others to possession; the effects are felt both within Nuuk and across Greenland.

Conclusion: Nuuk at the centre and on the periphery

Monumental, iconic buildings are a common means by which island communities seek to project a sense of identity and control over their own future (Grydehøj, 2011). The monumental Katuaq (designed to resemble the *aurora borealis*), Malik (designed to resemble waves on the sea), and Ilimmarfik buildings are all popularly praised for their Greenlandicness, yet this Greenlandicness (like the purported paramount Greenlandicness of Greenland's settlements) is a form of Greenlandicness that has been invented and designed in association with Denmark. Nuuk has helped centre Greenland, but the administrative, technological, planning, and philosophical solutions deployed in this task have also kept alive Greenland's peripherality. The future of Greenland – so proudly expressed in its monumental architecture – is a hybrid Greenlandic-Danish future. Perhaps such a hybrid future was inevitable from the moment Danish colonization took hold.

Is this reason for despair? Does the dual challenging of the future central Greenland and the 'traditional' peripheral Greenland leave us with an empty Greenland: a Danish-built blank, white space?

I argue that this is not the case. That which can be read as the techno-politically systematic destruction of traditional culture can also be read as a triumph of community- and nation-building in a land in which community and nation – much like healthcare and freedom to choose one's own livelihood – had been in short supply prior to the rise of Nuuk as Greenland's first true centre. Indeed, there has been a gradual shift in Greenlanders' ideas concerning urban life, with the city no longer being regarded as quite so inimical to Greenland (Tróndheim, 2012). This is not to sugarcoat Danish colonialism or to ignore the human costs of social change; but it is to recognize that, when change occurs, it can be productive to think through how and why it has occurred; and to keep an eye on the opportunities that emerge, not just those that have been lost. Inevitably, in our daily lives, we design our own futures: the key is to realize that we are doing so (Appadurai, 2013, p. 267).

Nuuk is both centre and periphery. The triumphs of Danish monumental architecture, raised in this urban space, have come to enclose the old Nuuk: the Nuuk of (Danish) lettered slum-blocks and (Danish) plain arctic practicality. As new residents flow in from elsewhere in

Greenland, is this a city that is being hollowed out? Or is it a city that is being replaced, piece by piece? How do you gentrify a city when there is nowhere for the dispossessed to go? Elsewhere, including in Denmark, they might be pushed out or hemmed in, but here in Nuuk, they are pushed up – into the skyscrapers, into the slick spaces of benevolent Danish design imperialism. The buildings may be Danish, but because Nuuk is what it is and where it is, Nuuk's way of life is surely a Greenlandic one.

Urbanization and island life are both processes of negotiating, deconstructing, and reproducing centre-periphery relationships. Both islands and cities possess multiple centralities and multiple peripheralities. Their meanings are dependent on both centrality and peripherality. There is no one 'right answer' to the problems of urbanization or island life. These belong to complex power structures that do not end at the territorial boundary, the mountains, or the sea. Yet thinking through how island cities develop can grant us greater understanding of the contingencies and interconnections within these processes.

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