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Book Review: Making the Arctic City

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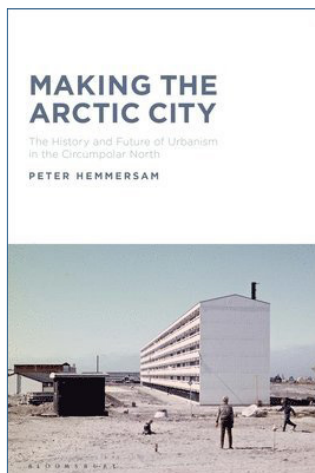
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BOOK REVIEW: *PETER HEMMERSAM* *MAKING THE ARCTIC CITY*

REVIEWER: TIINA MERIKOSKI



If possible, the Arctic is even more interesting today than it has ever been. Perhaps most significantly, it has gained attention by taking over headlines in relation to climate change and some of its most immediate and visible effects. At the same time, tourism keeps growing with many wanting to experience the Northern lights, midnight sun as well as the remoteness and the wilderness.

Furthermore, at least in Finland, getting away from the hassle of the bigger cities in the search for a better connection to nature has been trending. This has resulted in a new kind of migration from cities to smaller communities in remote locations, and the movement has only been enforced by the better opportunities to work remotely. For the first time in decades, the capital region in Finland lost population to migration in 2020 (Statistics Finland, migration).

Also, the indigenous peoples of the polar regions are discussed and appreciated in a new light after decades and even centuries of colonisation and cultural mistreatment. The traditional interests in terms of resource extraction, developing new sea routes and the strategic positions of military bases still exist as well.

For these reasons, Peter Hemmersam's book is highly topical – and very much awaited since publications concerning urban development in the Arctic have been scarce. Furthermore, the starting point of the book is interesting: instead of investigating urbanism within a single country or limited to an era, the common feature is the region's climatic and natural conditions.

The book has been divided into three parts. In the first part, Hemmersam frames the topic by introducing the Arctic and its many definitions. He also provides a brief overall history of city building in the circumpolar North as well as an introduction to existing research and studies of these areas. The public, administrative as well as research interest has shifted throughout history between Arctic exploration, colonisation and resource extraction, which all have left their mark on urban development – the emphasis varying depending on the region.

Hemmersam has chosen to focus his exploration of circumpolar urbanism on three geographical areas: Russia, Canada and Greenland. In the second part of the book, he discusses the development of cities in these regions in more detail by providing knowledge on three levels – all necessary to gaining a comprehensive understanding on the urban development of these regions.

First, the role and position of the North within the wider context of the country or its administration as well as the historical background forming and effecting the urban development of the regions is discussed. For instance, in the case of Russia, city building in the North has been very much linked with larger scale aims of housing projects during the Soviet era, whereas in Canada, the mining companies act as key drivers for community development. Greenland, on the other hand, is the only region with no land connection to its administrative centre and has been interesting not only to Danish authorities but also to the US, due to its strategic military position.

Next, examples of particular cities in these three regions are given. With the examples, Hemmersam illustrates how city development in the historical context has materialised in the particular region. Thirdly, the architectural, characteristic features of the cities are elaborated, and the localised urbanism is discussed.

There are surprisingly many common features framing urban development of the circumpolar cities of the three regions. These include how the Arctic has been viewed during different times; whether the key interest of the administration has been polar exploration, resource extraction or ensuring military presence at strategic locations.

All have their own characteristics as well, related to the strategic aims framing development as well as the political and societal histories of the countries that administer these areas. It becomes clear that urban development in the Arctic has involved dealing with uncertainties. For instance, many failures have followed the experimentations to adapt not only buildings but also the daily lives of the inhabitants to the harsh climatic conditions. In many cases, previous knowledge or experience of city building or living in these conditions, beyond

vernacular traditions of the indigenous Arctic communities, has not been available.

Difficult ground conditions such as permafrost, strong winds and long winters seem to have been among those challenges that architects and planners have aimed to solve. Also, urban greenery has been studied and plantations suitable for the extreme conditions of the North have been explored. Less emphasis has been placed on the extreme light conditions, especially of the summer period.

Also, many cities have been built from scratch, and relatively fast, to serve a single interest, for instance, to house temporary workers of the mining industry. This differs profoundly from the city development of the 'old world' in the more temperate regions, which have long histories and have been studied to provide insights and concepts for urban planning, many of which are not directly applicable to these 'new' conditions.

In the third and the final part, Hemmersam draws conclusions by proposing a definition for urbanism in the Arctic, reflects on architects' positions in the formulation of the circumpolar cities and provides final learnings to take from Arctic city making.

At first, I had hoped that Nordic Lapland would have been included in the book, but in the end, I must agree with Hemmersam on the decision to exclude it from these chapters. I see now that the Scandinavian Arctic and its circumpolar cities would be an interesting exploration and a book on its own. Many of the developments and histories illustrated in Hemmersam's book have, of course, influenced the development of the Scandinavian Arctic cities too. In addition, there are many unique features that apply only for this region and have left their mark in its city building.

For instance, the original villages and buildings in Finnish Lapland were almost all destroyed during the second world war, and the area has experienced massive reconstruction efforts in the decades following the war. Also, tourism has played a key role in the development of circumpolar cities and communities in Finland. (See, for instance, Hautajärvi, 2014; Lapin läänin rakennusperinne, 2004). Meanwhile, many municipalities in the North have suffered from declining populations and are sensitive to seasonality, economic fluxes and global challenges, as they rely on single industries such as tourism or mining. The size of the Finnish cities is also significantly smaller than in other countries – some can barely be called "cities" or "urban".

Furthermore, Norway has its own interesting background regarding urbanism in the North. Even today, many policies are applied to keep the cities and remote areas inhabited and, in many cases, growing.

Norway easily tops Sweden and Finland in the number of circumpolar cities and inhabitants. Kiruna in Sweden provides yet another unique story in which a whole city becomes relocated as the mining industry takes up more space.

For me, the book represents a great compilation of many interesting but dispersed sources. If I would have added anything, it would have been interviews with architects, or planners of the cities or their current residents. I wonder if any local design or planning offices are located in the cities introduced in the book? At least in Anchorage, Alaska, an office working with most interesting design and planning tasks can be found. Almost 20 years ago, as a student of landscape architecture, I worked as a summer intern at Kumin Associates, Inc. I had then the privilege to discuss with the late Jon Kumin, for instance, their design tasks of the 1970s, framed by the needs of the miners and other seasonal workers.

Making the Arctic city provides an overview of both the overall development of cities in the circumpolar regions as well as insights into the city making in the Russian, Canadian and Greenland Arctic areas. Since the political and societal histories are intertwined into the urban and community development of these regions, the book presents a brief but interesting introduction to their overall histories as well. Moreover, the book serves as an inspiration to further exploration of the topic and provides many references and sources with which one can begin.

I was happy to read a printed copy instead of an e-book and appreciated the feel of the quality paper. Hemmersam has framed the three-part content in a logical and clear way. All these parts form a solid, thematic whole of their own.

The book raises many thoughts, also beyond the urbanism in the Arctic. The contemporary discussion on urban development seems to focus mainly on buzzing, big cities and those located in the temperate and densely populated regions globally. Some seem to dominate the headlines and draw the attention of the city planners as well the research community – especially those at the top of global liveability rankings, such as Vancouver, Zürich and Singapore.

There is a need to have our eyes on the remote regions as well – not only because of their niche interest but also because in the ever-urbanising world these cities may play an important role. As megacities reach their limits to growth and struggle to mitigate climate change, they may push communities towards new kinds of migration.

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