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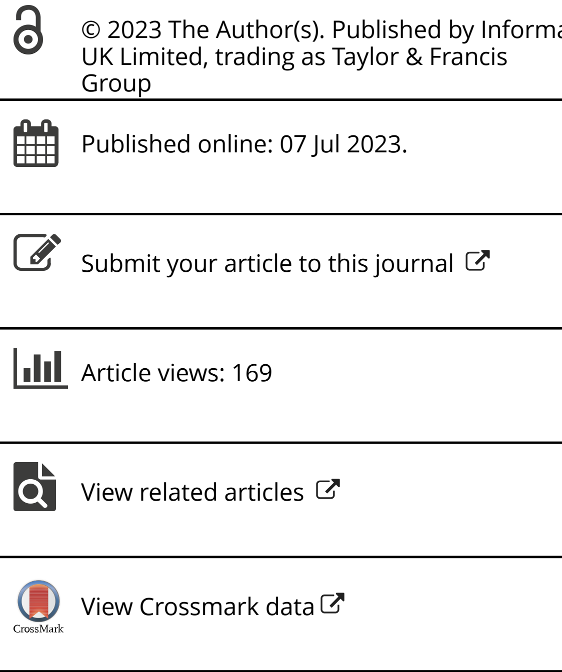

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Growing up sustainable? Politics of race and youth in Urbanplan, Copenhagen

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers how racialized youth in Denmark negotiate sustainability amid contexts marked by intersecting forms of economic restructuring, progressive neoliberalism, white ethno-nationalism, and green urban planning. Urbanplan is a low-income, notoriously "troubled" Copenhagen neighborhood where we conducted fieldwork for 7 months (2019-2020) with fifteen male youth, aged 17-21. Using ethnography, policy reviews, and interviews with city social workers, we explore how intimate experiences of nature, group-identity, and place attachment here relate to and depart from the structural forces actively reshaping the neighborhood. Our analysis combines Cindi Katz's intersectional political economy approach with recent work on green gentrification, Critical Utopian Action Research, and Danish identity politics. The resulting "topography" of youth experience identifies distinctive spatialities of belonging and exclusion, and a faltering sustainability discourse that offers diminishing local returns. While youth in Urbanplan refuse to "grow up sustainable," they await opportunities to enact more empowering forms of socio-environmental belonging.

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Introduction

Across the Scandinavian democracies, promises of mobility and advancement for racialized immigrant groups are encountering turbulence (Dikeç, 2019). A particularly well-documented instance is Denmark, a context from which several sensational illustrations have emerged: from suddenly prominent anti-Islamist extremists (Sorensen, 2019), to growing public support for policies targeting political asylum seekers and refugees for expulsion (Murray, 2021), to the enactment of a notoriously anti-immigrant "Ghetto Plan" (O'Sullivan, 2020). For sociologist Mahvish Ahmad (2020), Denmark's failure to alleviate a widening sense of "parallel societies" exposes the fundamental cruelty of its national project: a belief in "Danish innocence and Muslim guilt". But if the social gulf between Denmark's white and non-white populations has become visible across many sectors of Danish

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civil society, certain domains remain sorely under-examined. The politics of urban sustainability transition, we contend, is one such domain (e.g. McClintock, 2018).

Over the last decade, Copenhagen, Denmark's capital city, has become a potent figure for this globally ascendant prefigurative environmentalism. It is now a "referencescape" for entrepreneurial green policy (McCann, 2017); a place where cultures of sustainability design are "thriving and worthy of learning from" (Anderssen & Grundel, 2021, 144). The formulation exists alongside several other green nationalist narratives: e.g. 1., that "urban greening" (Angelo, 2019) capable of leveraging "nature-based solutions" can enact local responses to climate change, or 2., that Welfarist promises of "public space for all" (Ariza et al., 2019) can assure that "sustainability" efforts will meet the egalitarian commitments for which the Nordics remain lauded internationally. For residents in Copenhagen, an array of new green spatial features – "rewilded" public parks, smart waste treatment systems, expanded e-bicycle infrastructure – have thus become manifestations of a broader national project (Blok, 2020; Bradley, 2009; Winter, 2019). And there is indeed evidence to suggest that they are working: efforts to "sustainabilize" Copenhagen in particular continue to receive high levels of public approval (Ariza et al., 2019; KK, 2011; KK, 2018). Yet as our research makes clear, Denmark's promise of national improvement via sustainability transition is being unevenly applied and unevenly felt. For racialized Black and Brown youth in the Copenhagen neighborhood of Urbanplan, discourses and enactments of sustainability are producing experiences of frustration and loss; a sense of canceled futurity rather than a progressive "green" one. This is important to understand for many reasons, one of which is the almost singular position Copenhagen occupies in the conjugation of urban design and sustainability transition worldwide (Rutt, 2022).

This paper responds to calls for more critical appraisals of the socio-spatial dimensions of sustainability politics (Anguelovski et al., 2019). It considers how racialized youth in Copenhagen negotiate sustainability in context where the new "green orthodoxy" (Connolly, 2019) manifests alongside other socio-spatial tendencies. On the one hand, there is the fact of Denmark's deepening ethno-nationalism, which is rapidly instigating changes in a country once known for its inclusive immigration policies. On the other, there is Copenhagen's particular brand of neoliberal urbanization, one long marked by the appearance of "progressive" green elements, which is seeking to make a metropole already among the most expensive in Europe even more exclusionary (Larsen & Lund Hansen, 2015; Smedegaard Nielsen, 2021). In Urbanplan, racialized urban youth are encountering the novelties of green amenity alongside explosive growth-rates in market-driven housing; new patterns of policing and surveillance; and urban-design interventions which neglect long-held place attachments and associated community values (Mack, 2017). Here, "sustainability" is interlinked with a series of racializing and discriminatory social processes and practices, with effects that have been compounded by a continued avoidance of the topic of race in the ostensibly "reparative" fields of city planning and municipal governance (Gudrun Jensen et al., 2017; Haldrup et al., 2006; Simonsen, 2015). One place where these topics are being addressed, however, is in youth social work. It is the fortunate basis of this research that one of us was invited by "the Partnership," a neighborhood level wellbeing initiative (or "*boligsocial helhedsplaner*"), into their weekly engagement meetings with Urbanplan youth interested in talking about the local changes.[1] Being able to think with and listen to

the social workers and the youth allowed us to formulate the questions which drive this paper: in what ways do hegemonic moves towards sustainability bear on the lived experiences of racialized Danish youth? How do "big green policy ambitions" touch down as intimate feelings of place attachment? What does sustainability *mean* here? Said one youth bluntly: "I am tired and angry most of the time. I don't feel green or sustainable" (Fieldnotes 10/29/19).

In addition to the Urbanplan participants, our research was inspired by recent scholarly work around green gentrification (Anguelovski et al., 2019; Dale & Newman, 2009; Safransky, 2014), urban marginality (Grünenberg & Freiesleben, 2016; Simone, 2018), and race and urban design (Lubitow & Miller, 2013; McClintock, 2018; Romero & Harris, 2019). Our particular effort here is to think with Cindi Katz's intersectional political economy approach (Katz, 2004, 2011) to map the contours of "growing up sustainable" in Urbanplan. For Katz, confrontations between logics of sustainability, economy, and youth identity – captured by statements like the above – produce distinct spaces of belonging and exclusion, or "topographies" of emotive "contour lines' (Katz, 2001). Topographies can link the experiences found in Urbanplan to those observed in other marginalized neighborhoods, both in Copenhagen and beyond. Following Katz, we consider how the interlocking structural forces that manifest in Urbanplan youth reveal a "topography of grief" that explicates multiple youth experiences, while also encompassing us (Mitchell-Eaton, 2019): two white, North American-born researchers working under the ambivalent structure of a Scandinavian state-funded research process. Our aim is not simply to document youth grievances, then, but to affirm in the youth we a political agency of particular relevance to Urbanplan's future. Routinely omitted as political actors, youth can reveal the gaps, hesitations, and application-points of the politics and policies that would seek to control them. Paying attention to their experiences can help to affirm a tremendous societal desire to enact meaningful forms of urban change (Katz, 2004).

A key theme emerges from our engagement: if youth in Urbanplan are refusing to "grow up sustainable," it does not follow that they are uninterested in the politics of nature. Many of Urbanplan youth we spoke to were concerned about environmental issues, and several described efforts to cultivate empowering local environmental relations. In this, they are not alone. Herein exists another iteration of the progressive – even utopian – ideal Katz (2004) observes amid her "topography" spanning Harlem (USA), and Howa (Sudan). In the next section, we offer a description of our methods, including the opportunity to partner with "the Partnership," and the particular social work approach they promulgated: Critical Utopian Action Research (CUAR).

Methods: ethnography, interviews, community, CUAR

This paper draws upon ethnography, policy reviews, and semi-structured interviews. Through support from the Partnership, we were given the opportunity to meet and subsequently engage with two Urbanplan youth focus groups – "Urban Futures" and "Urban Dreams" – who have assembled in an informal meeting hall on a regular basis since 2016. These meetings were made possible by two Partnership social workers, in particular (anonymized here as "Jens" and "Petra"). Over 7 months (2019-2020), one of us went to weekly meetings with a group of +/- 15 youth from Urbanplan (on which, more

below). Over the course of these dialogues, the youth generously shared their perceptions and experiences with their changing neighborhood, into which discourses of "sustainability" would find a range of expressions.

A notable feature of the meetings, as noted before, was the Partnership's use of Critical Utopian Action Research (CUAR), a progressive model of Danish social work first developed in the 1960s and 1970s at Denmark's Roskilde University (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003; Egmose, 2016; Nielsen & Svensson, 2006).[2] CUAR's exploratory format would provide a generative basis for our youth conversations: whether one-on-one, in small groups, or around a large table centered on videogame matches of FIFA 2019. As we document below, CUAR offered the youth a lexicon for translating their embodied experiences into actionable political visions – in particular, through its promulgation of "free space": a relational spatial praxis marked by the conscious reduction of conventional authority structures (Nielsen 2014; Egmose, 2016). A second finding of this research concerns the potentials of CUAR, which we argue extends a rich model for considering embodied youth engagements with sustainability discourses. As we note below, the freedoms inherent in CUAR's process – the various ways it encouraged the youth to speak about nature – stood in contrast to the stifling kinds of bureaucratized knowledge production they would report elsewhere in the rollouts of sustainability transition.

To support our ethnography, we conducted 25 interviews with Danish social workers across the municipality of Copenhagen. We focused on economically and demographically similar contexts to Urbanplan, as part of an effort to discern "topographical" linkages. We asked social workers to discuss their experiences with youth in relation to prevailing national development agendas, including sustainability, urban crime prevention, and green urbanism. We also consulted various planning documents and civic design projects associated with green design in Urbanplan, both for evidence of prominent green discourses and accompanying political economic logics shaping sustainability transition more broadly.

Growing up sustainable?

Our study comes at a time of growing interest in young people as catalysts for sustainability transition (UN-SD, 2015).[3] From the School Strikes For Climate (2018 -), to the youth protests at the 2020 World Economic Forum, to the emergence of the Danish Green Youth Movement, Danish youth have enjoyed considerable recognition as avatars of global sustainability politics (Lechner, 2022; Nordic Council of Ministers, 2019; The Local, 2019). This has been a restrictive vision, predicated on what Stuart Hall (2000) might have termed "Danish-ness". Its membership concentrates in a white and middle-class national stratum, and is consistently inured, our policy reviews would find, to the production of its own colonial others. Asking how "sustainability" has affected daily routines in Urbanplan, one Copenhagen-based youth worker said bluntly, "It's the same talk you hear everywhere, but it doesn't mean a damn thing in terms of funding for our projects [e.g. in socially disadvantaged areas]" (Fieldnotes 10/18/19). For them, there is a disavowed relationship between Denmark's current of racialized anti-immigrant policies, and the low visibility of non-white youth in its sustainability rhetoric.[4] We would agree, but counter to the social worker's subsequent assertion, there is in neighborhoods like Urbanplan much evidence of sustainability's localizing

effects. Put otherwise, *it does mean a thing*. One way "sustainability" manifests in Urbanplan is through an ongoing replacement of local urban features with preferred forms of "green space." These substitutions have produced powerful feelings of local loss (Pull & Richard, 2021) that will pull on racialized constructions of nature (Hagren, 2020). We discuss some below in relation to one green feature specifically: the *Langesti* ("long road"), a cherished thoroughfare and meet-up spot for Urbanplan youth. Added to this loss will be myriad others: including an individual sense of wellbeing, and a collective interest in using the neighborhood's meet up spots – both of which need to be connected to increases in local policing (Safransky, 2014, Lancione & Simone, 2021, McClintock, 2018). In engaging sustainability's uneven spatialities in Urbanplan, we follow Balibar (2005, pp. 14–15), for whom race is a "political object referring to boundaries between social inclusion and exclusion." Our focus on systemic factors of inclusion/exclusion thus encompasses a range of social experiences, many of whose effects will manifest in reports dislocation, anger, and experiences of being "hemmed in" (Fanon, 1969).

Animated by Katz's (2004, p. xiii) call for "thick descriptions" of abstract social processes, we develop these critiques in dialogue with recent literatures on race in Denmark (Gudrun Jensen et al., 2017; Haldrup et al., 2006; Koefoed, 2015; Simonsen, 2015; Wren, 2001), and cultural geographies of youth experience (Horton & Kraftl, 2018; Skelton, 2010; Smith, 2021).[5] Combining these foci, we consider Katz's overarching interest in experiences with deskilling/reskilling–e.g. how youth are slotted into economic paradigms or left out – thus remains pertinent. Also germane is Katz's (2011) conceptualization of marginalized youth as "waste." Counterpoised to the "child-as-accumulation" that constitutes a site for aspirational (capitalist) state investment, the "child-as-waste" exists as part of the state's undesired leftover populace.[6] For Urbanplan youth, this is a spectral figure, hovering as potential. It is one possible destination, standing in contrast to the "techno-moral, energy efficient citizen" of Danish sustainability discourse, towards which Urbanplan youth are (ostensibly) being led (Winter, 2019, p. 1).

Sustainable in Copenhagen? Interrogating the green success story

As codified in its Green and Better Everyday Life Plan and 2025 Climate Plan (Copenhagen, 2012, 2013), Copenhagen's municipal government has committed to extensive introductions of green amenities and actions across its urban fabric over the last decade. Green policies have supported the city's reinvention as an "icon" of sustainable living: new bicycle lanes, green rooftops, and the latticing of energy efficient structures across the built form – all enabling it to pursue a goal of becoming the world's first carbon neutral city (Copenhagen, 2012; Partnerskabet, 2019; see also: Henderson & Gulsrud, 2019). Similarly, in Urbanplan, sustainability investments including in green spaces have become centerpieces of area renewal over recent years – exemplified in a 2016 renewal initiative that proposed the neighborhood as "Copenhagen's best sustainable district" (Trejde Natur, 2016). These visions rely on the transformation of Urbanplan into a "safe and attractive residential area (…) [and] an integral part of the city" (KK, 2014, p. 3) – the latter feature affirming how sustainability will serve not just local residents, but broader urban populations. In varying ways, urban green development thus aims to redress persistent public perceptions of Urbanplan as isolated and troubled: "an island in the city with a negative reputation" (KK, 2014, p. 3). In Urbanplan,

private-sector urban visions, bespeaking a deepening policy neoliberalism, enjoy considerable state support: over two billion kroner (268.5 million Euro) has been allocated in recent years toward a variety of physical infrastructural changes in the neighborhood, including 57 million for renewing its prominent Remise Park (Partnerskabet, 2019).

In a pattern found across other instances of green gentrification (Detroit, London, etc.), narratives of security are a notable "added feature" of the green developments in Urbanplan. "Safe and attractive" goes the line from one the numerous Urbanplan redesign proposals we came across.[7] Taglines like this will align with interrelated refrains: "physical and social challenges"; "improve security"; "positive development," etc. They together reveal how local sustainability are significantly invested in not just economic improvement, but racializing figures of "invest-ability" too (Safransky, 2014). Appeals to security function as a watchword for the local containment of non-white others, while across Scandinavia, the idea that "green lifestyle" now doubles as a form of race and class distinction has become a kind of common sense (Winter, 2019; Blok, 2020; Bradley, 2009). As Anders Blok (2020, p. 2808) summarizes: "most gentrification in Copenhagen since 1990 has … been environment and low-carbon gentrification, as these concerns have come to define the local version of competitive urbanism" – one defined by these twinned logics (Rutt, 2022).

Using a Katzian perspective attentive to the varied socio-spatial dynamics that shape youth experiences, we can begin to outline the elements shaping sustainability politics in Urbanplan: broad national-discursive currents of racialized hostility (Pabst, 2017), widening circuits of international, financialized urban investment, civic cultures defined by new combinations of climate mindfulness and progressive neoliberalism (Fraser, 2017), public spaces marked by a diminishing social wage (one felt especially by the country's racialized urban-immigrant communities), and perhaps most viscerally for the youth we engaged, "urban green fixes" enacting neighborhood-scale transformations and disruptions across their once familiar terrain (McClintock, 2018). This complex of inter-scalar forces focuses attention on the contradictory expectations now confronting some of society's youngest and most vulnerable members. How, we wondered in our conversations with these youth, are assessments of sustainability initiatives being related to the broader changes? Does the refusal of "sustainability" translate into an acceptance of marginality, a kind of being-as-waste? Or might it instead reveal the multiplying failures (institutional, symbolic, material-discursive) of Denmark's sustainability, and at a time when the "greening" of urban patterns of use and movement is in fact desperately needed?

To begin to address these questions, it is necessary to identify the conditions mediating spatialized experiences with sustainability in Urbanplan. Here, we focus on "informal green spaces" (large lawns, small gardens, urban squares, car-free pedestrian paths) where various kinds of social reproduction take place for the youth we interviewed. These spaces have a particular importance within our study context. Across Copenhagen, such spaces exemplify post-war Social Democratic values, and are an important part of more recent state-driven efforts to reduce inequality and promote social well-being (Keil et al., 2021). Katz (2004) explores the "playground" as a lens that clarifies the link between urban transformations and structural experiences of "growing up." Our study highlights a similar function for informal green spaces. In Urbanplan, informal green spaces mediate the politics of sustainability in several ways. Since the early 2000s, the Danish

state has mandated that all municipalities, including Copenhagen, enact climate adaptation plans (Larsen & Hansen, 2008), with informal green spaces now important site for these interventions (KK, 2011, p. 2013, 2017).[8] At the same time, efforts to redress social tensions have looked to these spaces as opportunities for improvement and as evidence of malfeasance, resulting in new forms of policing and surveillance (Rytter & Pedersen, 2014).

During the fall of 2019 and into 2020, Copenhagen's municipality began to intensify its urban greening and urban policing agendas in Urbanplan, resulting in a series of transformations that would elicit powerful emotional responses. For the youth we spoke to, once familiar green spaces were becoming liminal zones, marking new and significant boundaries between official visions and their newly marginalized experiences. To explore these accounts, we now turn to provide an overview of Urbanplan and its discursive positioning at the intersection of sustainability, urban development, and race.

"The plan"

Copenhagen's green reputation encounters its limits in Urbanplan, a place where its "techno-moral, energy-efficient citizen" does not yet dwell (Winter, 2019). Like Belgium's Molenbeek or France's St. Denis, Urbanplan has become a flashpoint for ethno-nationalist anxieties about runaway immigration policies (Hoi, 2016; Pabst, 2017). Located just three kilometers from Copenhagen's city center, with a group of buildings that house nearly 5000 residents at its center, the neighborhood was named after Urban Hansen, a celebrated Copenhagen mayor (1962–1976) who had been elected on the promise of affordable housing. In recent decades, "The Plan" (as immortalized in Morten Pape's (2015) literary noir), has become symbolic of the municipal government's failed promises. A once lauded expression of 1960s Danish modernism – tower block arrays, punctuated by right angles and flat, clean, open spaces – Urbanplan now appeals to liberal critics as a "problem-area." Underfunded for much of the early 2000s, Urbanplan has lately become a site for the restorative urbanism that seeks to solve various marginalized Danish neighborhoods with new green enhancements (Johansen, 2021; KK, 2015).[9] Here, right wing and liberal fear-mongering occlude what in fact remains a vibrant social geography, comprised of over 60 nationalities, along with an array of languages, political and religious affiliations, and ethnicities (Copenhagen, 2016; Sundby, 2010).

While the Danish welfare system remains touted internationally, and the country rates highly in various quality of life indexes, Urbanplan also points to the parallel realities now confronting the nation: in recent years, social mobility has fallen to near USA-levels in terms of marginalized groups (Landersø & Heckman, 2017), local unemployment is creeping upwards (including almost 70% of youth aged 16-29), and low levels of education predominate (over 50% of the entire Urbanplan population has only primary school education) (Copenhagen, 2016). Each of these trends is mediated by an increasingly belligerent nationalist politics of race. "Danish politics, the last 20 years … has always been around, "how do you stop the non-Western immigration. How do you put restrictions on it"?", one city social worker told us (also see: Rytter & Pedersen, 2014). Perhaps the most potent expression of the state-sanctioned racialization is Denmark's now-infamous "Ghetto Plan," a housing policy which targets urban immigrant

populations with excessive policing and eviction mandates (Government, 2018).[10] Once labeled a "troubled area" in this scheme, state-security becomes a priority and policy expectation (Rutt & Loveless, 2018). Large parts of Urbanplan have been subjected to Ghetto Plan mandates over much of the last decade – with the most recent designation only being lifted in late 2020, after the completion of our study. It is widely discussed in the community and would shape local commentaries regarding the meaning and feeling of sustainability too. As the youth explained, the Ghetto Plan has meant brightly lit surveillance areas, CCTVs, and amenities specifically built for the wealthy (white) visitors, "but none of the green stuff [e.g. green amenities] for us" (Pers Comm. 10/29/19).

"Free space"

In this section, we discuss our ethnographic experiences with "Urban Futures" and "Urban Dreams" – two youth groups formed by Urbanplanen youth and the Partnership. Here, we also comment the terms of our research engagement – namely, the intermediation of Critical Utopian Action Research (CUAR) and its promulgation of "free space," As suggested before, "free space" is a call for radically nonhierarchic and relation youth-social worker relationships (Egmose, 2016). It is the literal, not merely metaphorical, requirement: enacting space as a performative basis of self-actualization.[11] In our ethnography, we came to understand CUAR as a form of utopian pragmatism aiming to integrate research and education into platforms for more empowering youth cultures. In the context of our discussions, appeals to "free space" represented efforts to mitigate the bureaucratizing tendencies of most youth engagement work – including on issues of sustainability discourse (including the disciplinary tone of a putative "sustainability-security" nexus). "Free Space" meant that our conversations about sustainability could (and often did) go in multiple tangents – far beyond the officialized remit. Speaking with youth, we also explored perceptions and conceptions of nature, and how plans, creative ambitions, and dreams of a better neighborhood for all might involve its manifold forms.

Rapidly apparent from our initial conversations was the youths' refusal to accept the term "sustainability" as packaged for them. When one of us arrived to an Urbanplan recreation center for the first meeting, an early summer evening in September 2019, a whiteboard stood surrounded by an empty semi-circle of chairs. About an hour into the meeting, one of the social workers (SW2) ripped off a new page and immediately wrote out a short sentence: *Har du ved?* ("do you know?"). Then, in English, he added, ""sustainability" … *Har du ved?*" The aim was to open the floor for new relationships with the familiar term. There was a pause. Then, in slow but confident English,[12] the youth began to speak up. For one, sustainability involved a bus tour: a youth-led caravan that would explore socially conservative parts of Denmark ("the *old-fashioned* countryside," he added), in order forge cross-cultural dialogue with older white residents. A second youth suggested how building a "[shipping] container city" could solve the need for a games room and music areas. It met with approval from Urban Futures' oldest youth: a hip-hop artist who sought a space to develop and share music. Encouraged by these articulations, further ideas came forth: a public green and park-time soccer park, a walkway filled with local art.

As ideas of "sustainability," these and other responses we heard had none of the familiar signifiers in the city: bicycle lanes, car-free areas, gardening plots. Many were

projective and aspirational (e.g. the Bus tour). Others had a defensive orientation – "sustainability," in one case, meant rejecting a recently installed skateboard park because of its gentrification signifers ("that's not a sustainability project to me") (see also: Sørensen & Engelschmidt, 2020). For Jens and Petra, the normative provisioning of "free space" encouraged intellectual and linguistic reworkings – and did so which the goal of transcending the traditional discursive bounds to support actual changes in the youths' lives.[13] What the youth wanted, or *needed*, was to make sustainability a project of local affirmation. The discussions spoke to this theme. As Petra explained after one meeting: "we talk about what kinds of futures we want, and then we talk about how we need to be in present in order for these futures to happen." Jens added: "but that only happens when there are actual physical spaces to do so."

Katz's valorization of "playful" utopian engagements finds affirmation within the Partnership and its embrace of CUAR. In our meetings, "free space" was not just an invitation to ignore official discourse. It was modeled as a socio-spatial basis for re-conceiving common sense. To practice sustainability, the youth explained to us on day, they would need to convert their community meeting room into a temporary games room, a temporary listening space, or just outside a smoker's corner – these too, we were told, were also projects of "sustainability". "How?" we asked. "They give us a break from the stresses, and that's sustainability for us," one explained candidly (Fieldnotes 11/05/19). To be sure, such affordances spoke plainly to other interess, but in important ways, they also reflected "current dissatisfactions" around local green development, "[and] things we need to do to change them." The youth refused to project "sustainability" values into a context where the material basis for its prefigurative promise had been so diminished. Other more pressing issues needed resolution first.

Freedom, space, surveillance

For the social workers, tangible improvements in mood, outlook, and vision were evident after the first month of meeting with youth that fall.[14] "This is just so very rare for them," Jens explained one October evening, "simply to have a place where they can show up and feel good. It's such a difference with the rest of their lives." During what we later learned was a "test period" for a revised CUAR approach, things were looking more hopeful than they had in years. The youth and the social workers were trying something new. "Free space" – with its valorization of "everyday life experiences," (Tofteng & Bladt, 2020, p. 122) – was delivering meaningful results. For once in the day, the youth were not being required to "perform" for an external social worker authority – at least not overtly. In keeping with CUAR's ethos, our own ethnographic interventions took shape slowly, and on the timelines led by the youth. Early meetings did not deliver us opportunities to speak with them about our interests, they more just about "recovering from the day" (Fieldnotes 11/05/19). But if not broached directly, reflections on sustainability did begin to emerge through interrelated experiences "of the day" – including around issues of disenfranchisement and exclusion.

In particular, we came to see the importance of informal green space as a site for making sense of the "topographies" forming around local sustainability interventions. To address the growing socio-economic challenges within Urbanplan, state-supported urban planning regimes have since the late 2010s instigated new green investments,

with a goal of raising the physical infrastructure of the neighborhood to standards observed elsewhere in the city (Bech-Danielsen & Stender, 2017). In 2019, over two billion Danish kroner was allocated for "rapid development and large physical projects" across Urbanplan (Partnerskabet, 2019). At our meetings, youth shared opinions on the changes that were resulting. They considered the proposed razing of the playground adjacent to the Bondegården ("The Farm") to make way for a "smart" park outfitted with sensors and play amenities. The design project was not for them, they suggested, but to meet the needs of "outside" visitors to the neighborhood. A related concern came with the introduction of a local skateboard area in the center of Urbanplan. They scoffed at the gentrification dynamics around the new skateboard park, which was meant to promote low-carbon lifestyles: "That's for outsiders who come in here," one youth explained, "It looks fancy and fun, but we don't skateboard. We bike." Another remarked that there are "white suburban kids skateboard around here now," which, "creates bad situations for us" (Fieldnotes 11/20/19). Some concerns were broader. One concerned a once popular shopping area, "Solvang Centre," razed to create space for new family-sized apartments. For much of 2016 through 2020, the site had become a listless construction zone: walled and fenced, without public access. The redesign, which included energy efficiency benchmarks and new biophysical eco-design, produced cost-overruns and delays which had been poorly communicated to the residents.[15] "They've changed the whole place," one youth explained to us, "No one fucking told us or asked us! They are doing it as we speak," he continued, "They've changed places where I've grown up and my friends have grown up. And it's a hard hit on our background, our personal space" (Fieldnotes 10/23/19; emph ours.).[16] Another youth seized on the hypocrisy of an eco-housing project annulling his opportunity to use a green space: "It's about wanting to make it more fancy. Even though it's cool right now. So if it's green right now why demolish it?" (Fieldnotes 10/23/19) Figure 1.

These changes should be read as interlinked responses to the changing built form, and policies which held that "opening up" neighborhoods to broader (read: wealthier, whiter) social constituencies would better realize the green amenities being introduced (Winter, 2019; Turan & Ågren, 2021). One municipal urban planner confirmed that playground policy in Urbanplan had been moving away from "relationship-based approaches" and towards "general amenity provision" – meaning, more outside residents (Pers. Comm.). With the "green space paradox", Wolch et al. (2014) identify the perverse process at work here: green-space amenities ostensibly established for local needs will devaluate local recipients, because their subsequent attraction to wealthier citizens will

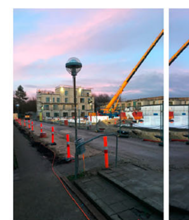

Figure 1. Time series shots revealing ongoing building construction in Urbanplan. November 2019 - March 2020.

become a pretext for the expulsion of the former (see also: Dooling, 2009; Rutt, 2022; Safransky, 2014). Urbanplan was already exhibiting this paradox, coupled with the phenomenon Setha Low (2013) calls "interactional (in)justice." It was becoming, as we often heard from the youth, less welcoming to those who live there. The result was an all-too familiar pattern of "urban-exclusion/urban-greening," now manifest in other areas of Copenhagen as well (Roy, 2018; Rutt & Loveless, 2018).

The most contentious site of local area redevelopment according to the youth concerned the *Langesti* ("Long Road"). Urbanplan is marked by an array of small and large corners, stoops, and as well as small garden patches. But it is this wide wooded pathway, which once bisected the length of Urbanplan, which consistently drew focus. Conversations about the *Langesti* ("beautiful, and lots of trees"; "I could hear birds there and I liked it there" [e.g. Fieldnotes 11/05/19]) almost directly invoked the ecological attachment principles being championed by the city. Every youth we interviewed mentioned the *Langesti's* status as a once essential social meeting spot. "You would always know where to find your friends," one explained. "We would just go there" (Fieldnotes 11/05/19). "It was a place for us," said another, "we didn't feel bothered there, like we are in so many places here" (Fieldnotes 11/05/19). Without the *Langesti*: "There's no space left here to get to know oneself … " (Interview with Social Worker 11–06/12/19). Another noted how the loss of benches meant that homeless people – another set of public space users who do not fit the image of the sustainable city – could no longer enjoy a rest (Rutt & Loveless, 2018; Winter, 2019). The *Langesti* affirmed powerful place-attachments to nature. Even through a major park, *Amager Fælled,* was just 10 min away, it did not include the kinds of "social natures" formed from the daily routines and everyday social exchanges along the *Langesti*.

According to one local political figure, redevelopment in Urbanplan has caused spatial disruption to a wide variety of youth clubs and association activities (e.g. soccer leagues, after school daycare), and not just individual youth mobilities. Clubs that relied on designated parks for sports could no longer rely on steady access or availability. The sense of restriction played out in local perceptions of spatial distance. One exchange we held about a possible alternative site to the *Langesti*, was revealing of its affective pull in this regard.

MR - What about using Englandsparken instead?

Youth - It's not a place for us.

Jens - For these guys its far away. Right?

Youth - Yes.

MR - How long would it take you to walk there?

Youth - One minute.

MR - But it's far away?

Youth - Yea. Psychologically it's far away.

Conversations about the *Langesti* put into relief some of the methodological limits of the Partnership's deployments of CUAR. It is worth reflecting on how CUAR exists as an

artefact of the Welfare State of 1960s Danish society (Interview with Social Worker 8, 11). Its utopianism is marked by this heritage: a post-war Critical Theory rooted in Marcuse (1969) and Freire (2018) [1969]. Whereas CUAR found initial application within a country's disaffected white middle class, today's adherents in Urbanplan are engaging racialized recent immigrant groups – not only different race and class demographics, then, but vastly different relations to the state too (Bladt & Nielsen, 2013; Egmose, 2016; Gleerup, 2010, 2015; Nielsen & Nielsen, 2007; Tofteng & Bladt, 2020). Mindful of these shifting racial dynamics, most of the Danish social workers we interviewed recognized the increasingly limited political agencies available to Urbanplan's youth. "They are an underclass, without any political rights" one confirmed to us. Added another: "They don't have the right to vote, no political influence." Discussions invariably turned to the limited purview of the White social workers themselves. But they also pointed to some of the challenges of an approach whose utopianism appeared almost naively fanciful at times.

Nevertheless, CUAR underscores the essential question of agency, one that must mark any truly transformative nature politics. Rarely do Urbanplan youth have a chance to "space for themselves" even within their own homes, Petra noted. This situation pushes them outdoors, thus placing them under the public and authoritative gaze of police. Experiences of feeling "hemmed in" (Fanon, 1961, p. 26) were noted at multiple occasions. By the beginning of our third month, in fact, experiences of this sort had begun to multiply. Pressures with neighborhood life – born of a range of personal and extra-personal factors (on which, see below) were beginning to overshadow the benefits youth were finding in the weekly meetings. "We're gonna lose them," Jens told me after one meeting in November, "If nothing happens in the next two months'" (Fieldnotes 11/05/19). He was drawing on past experience: the sad cycle of inclusion/disengagement that has typified at-risk youth engagement efforts in Denmark over recent decades (Klarenbeek & Weide, 2020). Petra noted evidence suggesting that the number of young people "at risk" of falling out of established institutional or educational systems (at 12-15%) has not improved over the last 30 years (Tofteng & Bladt, 2020). Part of the problem was the Ghetto Plan, a topic the youth discussed with a mixture of embattled pride and scorn. In recent years, The Partnership has made strategic interventions – including various security and wellbeing interventions – to reduce the area's fulfillment of the associated criteria that would meet the "Ghetto" designation that had been applied to Urbanplan several years starting in 2015. As of late 2021, Urbanplan has been categorized as a "vulnerable area." While nominally an improvement, the designation still results in police and security measures like those experienced under the "ghetto" designation.[17] The racializing effects of the Ghetto Plan was plain to many of those we spoke to. As one planner lamented: "And if you have an area that is only "Danish" people, it can't be a ghetto. Even though you have the criteria." (Interview Social Worker 19).

Given these legacies, it was unsurprising to learn from the youth that police presence in Urbanplan had only continued in its upward creep that Fall. The season saw several salacious news reporting pieces on gang activities in Urbanplan (Frandsen & Ritzau, 2019). Media coverage of an explosion at an Urbanplan restaurant in September describe a possible assailant as a "young man" of "Middle Eastern descent" – descriptors that applied to all the youth we engaged with. (Jørgensen et al., 2019). During that same

period, two nearby immigrant neighborhoods had experienced waves of unrest following the racist provocations of a far-right political organizer (Rasmus Paludan). Police visits to Urbanplan, and an intensification of sidewalk surveillance technologies, had been deemed necessary responses (Ritzau, 2019). It was for one social worker a familiar dynamic: "When things get hot or out of control or whatever, then police have this opportunity for a short while, a month or whatever, to do this. Normally there are legal hindrances to this. But if you're going through an area that is being "culled" then the police have free room to do what they want." During this same period, the Danish government (2019) passed a "double punishment" law that permitted police to establish double punishment "zones" on "narcotics, weapons and explosives, knives and small arms".[18] A "juridicalisation" of urban space (Bhan, 2016) found application to Urbanplan, and became a basis for the further application of racializing, digitally-enhanced surveillance measures – now typical of cities across the Global North (Jefferson 2020). Lamented one social worker, "We hear from the youth they find this very unfair; they're picked out because they're ethnic minority, and youth, and just walking home from school or hanging out with friends, not necessarily with any relation to gangs."

During one of our meetings in late January 2020, Petra was keen to discuss the issue of police surveillance. In Urbanplan, Petra noted, an important difference exists between local police, who are cognizant of the youth dynamics in an area they themselves reside in, and the downtown police, funded as specialized crime prevention units. Throughout that month, the so-called "gang unit" (a term the youth used to describe the downtown police) had been showing up after the Partnership meetings. They came with threats and aggressive pat-downs. There were several "busts" involving alleged marijuana possession (Fieldnotes 11/05/19; 01/14/20). The gang unit bore the violent underside of the socio-spatial order we were engaging with; one claiming that "improvements" coming to Urbanplan in the form of sustainability and urban greening. The youth wanted to contest this image through their dissident pursuit of spatial freedoms. Play – sometimes antagonistic, sometimes joyous – was a medium for this pursuit. Katz (2004) points to "playful work" and "workful play" as the dialectical means youth employ for negotiating shifting spatial realities and the social demands therein. But in Urbanplan, the blocked possibilities of meaningful work upset this unity. Instead of collective visions of reimagined nature, we heard more and more about isolating and disorienting ventures of aimless play. One youth told us about his activity a bicycle thief. It always took him far from Urbanplan, so he could "explore the city streets." Joy riding was a way to cope with social stresses of intensified police tracking, and it was something he was rediscovering in those winter months. "The police," Jens observed at one point, are always three steps behind. Because the youth are always finding new places … (…) They say, "we don't know where the youth are right now"! They can search all of the addresses and they would be home at night, so it's like sometimes they are just disappearing."

We might understand these evasions of police surveillance as "extensionality," characteristic of oppositional space-makings in the contemporary city (Simone, 2020). Youth imaginings of urban space contain anti-oppressive acts of imagining "worlds otherwise" (Escobar, 2007). In their valorization of movement and liminality, they expose gaps in present socio-spatial orders and frameworks, and new potentials for collective inhabitation (Lancione & Simone, 2021). At the same time, as individuated and fragmented

practices, the evasions suggested the social costs of a discourse which had done so little to meaningfully include Urbanplan youth. "Sustainability" was happening all around the youth, in building retrofits, policy, and cultural discourse. But sustainability was not happening for the youth – not these youth. They had powerful place-attachments to nature, they had critiques of developmental forms which prioritized profit over ecological well-being, they were aware of systemic shifts needed to respond to the climate crisis. But "sustainability" was not a frame through their voice and resultant actions could find any meaningful basis.

Conclusion

As Katz (2018) reminds us, geographies of youth deviance are always produced in relation to hegemonic orders, narratives, and spatial processes. Working with one group of youth, this paper has asked: in what ways do hegemonic framings of "sustainability" bear on the structural experiences of those living in Urbanplan? In seeking to explore these dynamics, we have focused on intersections of racialization, urban redesign, and sustainability discourse. One clear shortcoming of our analysis is the absence of female and queer perspectives. This was to some extent unavoidable: before our engagements, Urban Futures and Urban Dreams had self-selected as an all-male group. There were, one youth explained, "things we can only discuss with other guys" (Fieldnotes 01/14/20). We suspect that this group composition, in many ways echoing the traditional cultural and in some cases religious backgrounds of the youth themselves, reinforced a generally heteronormative orientation. The COVID-19 Pandemic, which cut short our ethnographic engagements, further limited our ability to investigate the gendered dimensions of socio-ecological transformation in Urbanplan. This topic warrants further analysis.

What we found in Urbanplan was a complicated picture. The youths' refusal of sustainability does not translate into their acceptance of a liminal role in relation to Urbanplan's future, or to themselves as a social surplus. But it does raise concerns about the societal basis for the transformations they seek. To the politics of sustainability transition, Katz (2004) emphasizes the politics of spatial belonging. In Denmark's much-lauded sustainability transition, the racialized exclusions of place significantly delimit the politics of nature. There are hopeful signs: as Krogh (2022) reports, members of the Danish youth climate justice movement see addressing race and class-based exclusions as central to the future of the movement. But many here are not being given reason to identify themselves in relation to a progressive environmental future. The irony of efforts to "open up" places like Urbanplan to sustainability has been the spatialization of new forms of racialized exclusion; with them, new feelings of loss and affective disengagement (Lancione & Simone, 2021).

One Urbanplan youth told us that, "We are looking forward to being full citizens, but it doesn't feel like we are yet. We are still waiting even through most of us [are] born here." The reference to waiting, captured in this statement, describes the broader political impasse we observed. In Urbanplan youth, we encounter the "political potential which emerges from spaces of liminality" (Hadfield-Hill & Christensen, 2019, p. 6). Urbanplan is becoming a reduced space for Urban Dreams and Urban Futures, a limited space for movement. And yet it is precisely a space where anti-racist and working-class articulations of nature must be able to flourish.

Notes

1. The Partnership is funded primarily (75%) by The National Building Foundation which receives monthly rental payments from public housing associations across the country, alongside 12,5% each from a Danish social housing coordinating organization, KAB, and Copenhagen municipality. Such initiatives are allocated to social / non-profit housing blocks that are identified as vulnerable.
2. There are a range of locally implemented social planning initiatives besides CUAR. Social work in Denmark generally is done in networks of diverse actors from the housing companies to the municipality, to schools and daycares, the police, local businesses, residents, and volunteers. see: Mazanti, L. G. A. B. (2017). *Socialt arbejde i udsatte boligområder* (Vol. 28). Tidsskriftet Dansk Sociologi.
3. The UN sustainable development agenda for 2015-2030 identifies 'youth' as a category of emphasis for sustainability policy outcomes. Each of its 17 goals of sustainable development emphasizes the need for their active participation in the promotion and realization of these objectives and its targets (https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda).
4. Arguably, this dynamic cuts to the heart of the civic politics of race in the country: Denmark currently denies ready access to citizenship rights for “non Western” youth born and raised in Denmark, including the right to vote in national elections (Liisberg, 2021).
5. In a review article, Valentine (2019) observed that “youth” geographies have tended to be conflated with a broader category of “inter-generationality”, resulting in poor analytic specificity. We aim to address this gap, gently shifting Katz’s focus on children towards “youth” aged 16-20.
6. Katz (2011, p. 51) describes the “waste” figure as a “spectre which haunts the figure of the child as “accumulation strategy”. In effect, the former (waste) interferes with and jeopardizes the circuits of value running through the child as “accumulation strategy”.
7. https://www.masuplanning.com/project/Urbanplan/
8. Development plans at Urbanplan have also included housing, but only for residents that meet certain socio-economic criteria -- meaning that they will be more exclusive than other units. The gentrification of neighboring sections of Amager -- including via what Larsen and Lund Hansen (2015, p. 3) call "stealthy and frontal attacks" by the State on the non-profit housing sector, have weakened embedded resident democracy and encouraged commodification.
9. For a comparable development, consider The Green Sydhavn, which aspires for much of the same as Urbanplan: green infrastructure to achieve safety and neighborhood improvements and integrate with the broader city vision. See: Johansen RV. 2021. Unge fra udsatte boligområder skal gøre Bispebjerg grønnere. København Liv magazine. Website accessed 18 April 2023. https://kobenhavnliv.dk/nordvest/unge-fra-udsatte-boligomraader-skal-goere-bispebjerg-groennere
10. The Ghetto Plan applies to all Danish neighborhoods of over 1,000 inhabitants that fulfill a blatant criteria: over 50 percent non-Western nationality or heritage, alongside at least two of four additional criteria related to employment, criminal convictions, and level of education and income (see: Government, 2018).
11. As Bladt and Nielsen (2013, p. 12), explain, “free space should be understood as a democratic process or procedural norm rather than as an absolute demand for the neutralization of power within a field. As a democratic norm of how social learning processes can be developed and advanced, free space becomes a quality within a learning space, which is created by the methods of action research”.
12. The dialogues proceeded in English. MR’s lack of Danish was an unexpected asset, as many youth participants - encouraged by the social workers - seemed eager to try their English, and corresponding knowledge of Anglo-American culture. We suspected that this was related to the youths’ corresponding ability to switch to Danish when necessary for privacy reasons. This suspicion was confirmed by several youth near the end of the ethnography.

13. The meetings were also, we came to learn, expressions of the "Future Creation Workshop" that had guided the youths' conversations over the last two years. The "Future Creation Workshop" is a key component of a Critical Utopian Action Research (CUAR). The Future Creation Workshop seeks to mobilize "the future" as a site of self-actualization in the present (Egmose et al. 2020).
14. The Partnership social worker engagements resumed in September of every year, in conjunction with the commencement of the school year. Thus, this reporting insight occurred in early October 2019.
15. For details in the project descriptions, see: https://www.Urbanplan.com/Urbanplan-i-udvikling
16. Later, I would learn that "Urban Futures" had been as many as 30 members in years prior, before an intergroup "rift" had reduced the numbers to a relatively stable 16 -18 (Fieldnotes 06/12/19).
17. Urbanplan 2020- https://www.Urbanplan.com/single-post/farvel-til-ghettolisten. See also: https://www.kk.dk/sites/default/files/politik_for_udsatte_byomraader_-_printversion.pdf
18. See the law text at: https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/ft/201812L00022

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