
Visionary or Exclusionary? The Politics of Green Urbanism in Copenhagen

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ABSTRACT

In a time of urbanized globalization and climate change, those with highly consumptive lifestyles are urged to change this ecologically damaging behavior. In addition, the current unsustainable economic system has been called into question regarding its underlying role in the environmental crisis and promoting such lifestyles. However, conventional sustainability solutions often rest on technological fixes, such as energy efficiency – for example, cities often measure their greenness via carbon emissions. In this article, I develop a post economic growth critique of green urbanism. Rather than concentrating on individual practices or values, my focus is on the discursive meaning and political function of sustainable lifestyles as a concept at the local institutional level.

With an urban ethnographic study of Copenhagen (Denmark), given its ‘carbon neutral capital’ goal, I capture the complexity that certain quantitative indicators neglect. My thematic analysis indicates that sustainable lifestyles are often thought of as riding a bike and purchasing expensive organic food, or privileged class consumption, and this is the dominant narrative by which urban policy makers (re)affirm their insistence on ‘energy-efficient lifestyles.’ By targeting the middle class, the wealthiest go unquestioned and those living in poverty are excluded. These green visions lack community relations or challenges to the consumerism and pro-growth economy. I use this empirical evidence to address existing fruitful literature, such as Hobson’s (2006) urban inspired concept of sustainable living and Soper’s (2008) alternative hedonism approach. Promoting sustainable lifestyles often represents a ‘strong sustainability’ stance where a system change is needed, thus making it a promising tool for post economic growth thinking; however my findings raise a concern for the cooptation of such a term. This article will be of use for researchers, community activists and policy makers alike, for those with interests in urban sustainability, cultural change and a post economic growth system.

Keywords: sustainable lifestyles, green city, post economic growth, urban ethnography, Copenhagen

INTRODUCTION

Both cities and people, especially in the Western world with highly consumptive lifestyles, have been urged to 'go green,' to address current global economic and environmental crises with rising social inequality. Yet when this going green largely relies on lowering GHG emissions, radical social change visions and practices are foreclosed. This article problematizes the reliance on energy efficiency and its conflation with a sustainable system. In order to clarify this point I examine the discourse around sustainable lifestyles in an internationally recognized green city, Copenhagen (Denmark). Using empirical evidence from an urban ethnographic research, I explore this concept and respond to theoretical gaps.

My findings have implications for envisioning how sustainable lifestyles fits into a post economic growth transition, and exposes the politics of who has access to the green city. By addressing this issue at the local institutional level, my goal is not to understand daily individual behavior, but rather to gain insight to the meaning of this concept and how it functions in practice. While sustainable lifestyles has been used in post economic growth thinking to denote a strong sustainability stance, one that demands a cultural change, does this hold true in a 'green' city?

The article is organized as follows: I first provide a conceptual framework based on literature concerning post economic growth, urban sustainability and environmental politics, focusing on the concept of sustainable lifestyles. I then explain my methodology where I selected Copenhagen as a case study, using an urban ethnographic approach to collect data and a thematic analysis to understand and present it. After this I present the Copenhagen case study, by first demonstrating the frames within several urban sustainability policy documents, and explore how sustainable lifestyles is then conceptualized and how this term functions. I conclude by addressing existing fruitful elements from sustainable lifestyles literature, such as Kersty Hobson's (2006) urban inspired concept of sustainable living and Kate Soper's (2008) alternative hedonism approach.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Technological advances, especially energy efficiency, have become the sacrosanct solution to environmental problems. However John Bellamy Foster *et al* (2010) warn of the 'Jevon's paradox.' Although not intended to influence ecological economics, the British neoclassical economist William Jevons refuted the idea that energy efficiency would compensate for resource supply shortages. Conversely, Jevons argued that efficiency improvements would *expand* the economy and have overall multiplier and indirect effects. Meaning that efficiency gains do not necessarily decrease consumption levels, and there can even be a 'backfire' where the levels actually increase. This had led Foster *et al* (2010), amongst others, to be weary of technological fixes, as it does not engage with the root of the environmental problem: "an economic system devoted to profits, accumulation, and economic expansion without end will tend to use any efficiency gains or cost reductions to expand the overall scale of production" (9).

Post economic growth does not entail hard and fast rules. A mixture of ecological economics, degrowth, and radical social change, this perspective claims that environmental solutions are not within the market, and further, that neoliberal market values have

contributed to environmental damage. Ecological economist Tim Jackson's (2009) *Prosperity Without Growth* has become a central text to explore the delicate balance of unstable degrowth, an overall contraction of the economy, and unsustainable relentless growth. He refutes the assumption that gross domestic product (GDP) equates to societal well-being, and argues that changing social structures is necessary.

A new economic system will not suffice, claims Valérie Fournier (2008), a leading degrowth theorist, as she problematizes the entire "ideology of growth" (529). Degrowth is meant to ensure a critical perspective and defend against capitalist co-optation. Not a prescriptive pathway, rather this approach is open-ended and diverse – "degrowth is not just a quantitative question of producing and consuming less, but a tool proposed for initiating a more radical break with dominant economic thinking" (532). Another inspiration to post economic growth is E.F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (1973), which calls for a Buddhist perspective on economics, where sustainability comes from the "maximum of well-being with the minimum of consumption" (61). In this statement he shows how difficult it has been to contest economic growth:

Anything that is found to be an impediment to economic growth is a shameful thing, and if people cling to it, they are thought of as either saboteurs or fools. Call a thing immoral or ugly, soul-destroying or a degradation of man, a peril to peace of the world to the well-being of future generations; as long as you have not shown it to be 'uneconomic' you have not really questioned its right to exist, grow, and prosper. (44)

A post economic growth approach, as a progress in the making, is less about 'cookie-cutter' solutions or conforming to certain practices or one sustainability, but to developing local solutions with a firm critique of the reliance on neoliberal economic growth. Samuel Alexander (2014) claims that a post economic growth research gap is understanding what a sustainable lifestyle would look like – as "nothing resembling the high impact, energy intensive, Western-style consumer lifestyles could be maintained... The point is that living sustainably on a full planet does not merely mean recycling, composting, and buying energy efficient light bulbs, necessary though such practices may be... The changes required would be endless in number and radical in nature" (13).

Within sustainable lifestyles literature, two categories of interrelated drivers exist: internal (social-psychological) and external (social and institutional contexts) (Scott 2009). Scott explains "the internalist perspective assumes that the goods and services we consume play a symbolic role in our lives," with consumption as a communication tool; the externalist perspective concentrates on "fiscal and regulatory incentives, institutional constraints, social perspectives and infrastructures" (17) as the main drivers. I have chosen to focus this research at the institutional level - rather than asking individuals about their daily practices, I concentrate on already existing institutions in a recognized 'green' city to understand how this is discursively defined, and the politics around this definition. As sustainable lifestyles is a key vocabulary tool in the post-economic growth toolkit, empirical research investigating this term, especially in cities, provides necessary insight.

While many in the critical geography field have explored the connection between economic growth and urbanization, the key point in relation to this research is the economic role of the city and how sustainability agendas then get merged with this priority. The role of the city has shifted from an industrial center to the neoliberal "growth engine" – a Floridian creative city to attract a creative class. Mark Whitehead (2013, 1349) asserts that *neoliberal*

urban environmentalism has been the dominant “norm framework” for the past 40 years as it “explicitly linked ecological protection with economic growth, market mechanisms, and a largely deregulated urban system.” Andrew Jonas *et al* (2011) discuss one specific way this currently occurs, through what they call the politics of carbon control and the *new environmental politics of urban development*, which “signals the growing centrality of carbon control in discourses, strategies and struggles around urban development and place promotion” where competition for the least carbon emissions stems from the logic of interurban competition (2539).

Copenhagen was selected as an ‘extreme’ case that allows for a critique of what is deemed as conventionally sustainable. The City has gained international recognition for its action plan (CPH 2025 Climate Plan, 2012, herein referred to as CPH 2025) to become the ‘world’s first carbon neutral capital,’ such as ranking first in Siemen’s 2012 Green City Index; awarded by the European Commission as the 2014 EU Green Capital; and the London School of Economics 2014 *Copenhagen: Green Economy Leader Report* claims Copenhagen’s green growth strategy is the model to strive for. In short, Copenhagen’s urban sustainability (goals) have been hailed as visionary.

In response to the critique of measuring emissions to demonstrate sustainability, I utilized a qualitative approach to account for what quantitative models often neglect. Situated in urban ethnography my field research took “the larger forces of urban life into account... [while recognizing] the importance of the city, its political economy, inequalities, cultures, and conditions of size, density, and diversity in the lives of their participants” (Ocejo 2013, 4). I first conducted an extensive literature review and desktop research to develop a list of a range of actors from researchers, activists and those involved with the City; as well as a range of projects from food to transport to sharing spaces. This helped to identify local institutions involved with sustainability. I talked with City staff, planners and consultants, as well as activists, urban farmers, researchers, the Danish Cycling Federation, several Miljopunkt (Local Agenda 21) representatives, and lived in Christiania for one month.¹

With three months living in Copenhagen my role as a researcher was primarily an ‘observer-as-participant.’ I participated in events, meetings, lectures, demonstrations, conducting informal interviews and taking hundreds of photographs. The outcome of this participant observation was descriptive field notes. Further, I audio recorded semi-structured interviews with key actors². My interview questions were open ended and influenced by many sources: “the problem, a sense of breadth and density of the material we want to collect, a repertoire of understandings based on previous work, study, awareness of the literature, and experience in living, pilot research, a sense of what will give substance to eventual report” (Weiss 1994, 41). The interviews were transcribed, along with daily transcriptions of my field notes. These transcriptions, along with the physical documents I collected and online policy documents, web sites, Facebook pages and posts, form the body of my data. I coded this data using Atlas software; my codes were developed in two main ways: theory driven (deductively) and data driven (inductively). This coding process constituted part of a thematic analysis, which according to Richard Boyatzis (1998, 1) has three stages: recognition (‘seeing’), encoding (‘seeing as’), and interpretation. This method

¹ Christiania is a semi-autonomous ‘eco-village’ in Copenhagen’s downtown, although not typically counted as ‘authentically’ green. I lived in a house for researchers as part of the Christiania Researcher in Residence Project.

² I have changed the names of respondents for anonymity purposes. The analysis presented should not be taken as representative of all Copenhageners, but of those participants who are involved in sustainability efforts.

allows access to social meanings and sustainability discourse. My analysis is presented in the following section.

FRAMING GREEN

In this section I first explore how Copenhagen's recent political endeavors demonstrate its engagement with creative city policies and global branding of the city. I then show how their green action plan is in accordance with this creative discourse through a 'win-win' frame. Scholars have already documented issues around attaining creative city status in Copenhagen. Maintaining the creative class and their industries often results in legal flexibility: Darrin Bayliss (2006) explains that "whilst such deregulation might entail a more raucous environment, the [Municipality's] report argues that this should be accepted as one of the costs of living in a creative city" (899). In addition, Anders Lund Hansen *et al* (2001) assert that rising unemployment and gentrification are overlooked social costs. This gentrification happens by "the deportation of marginalized inner city residents who do not fit in the disneyesque 'creative city'" as the policies legitimize "the need to cater to the 'economically sustainable population' in order to better compete on a global scale" (Hansen *et al* 2001, 853, 865). They claim evidence of such creative city attempts in Copenhagen includes new architecture projects, waterfront development, and luxury shopping and hotels.

One aspect of this international reputation is urban sustainability design. Coined by local urban mobility planner Mikael Colville-Andersen³ and further popularized by Jan Gehl⁴, *Copenhagenize* first meant that other cities should adopt similar bicycle infrastructure. Now the term is used in a general sense, to apply the green city efficiency model of Copenhagen around the world to achieve urban livability. Because of this status, Danish planners and architects are exporting their 'expert knowledge' and molding other cities to replicate their livability ideals. For example, Gehl Architects and Copenhagenize Consulting have now left their mark with projects in Mumbai, Moscow, Sao Paulo and Mexico City. Copenhagenize Consulting (2014) now makes their own international rankings of best cycling cities (*The Copenhagen Index*) and refers to their exporting knowledge practice as "copy-paste Copenhagenization."

The Sharing Copenhagen program exemplifies how the City reinforces this 'world class' green title. Upon receiving the European Commission's EU Green Capital title of 2014, the City decided to create a year-long program that would promote Copenhagen and gain involvement of different actors. Resonating with branding and creative city politics, the frames and priorities reveal a friendly yet competitive eagerness to share their 'green' solutions with the world. The Sharing Copenhagen program split the year into five thematic groups. The first was the *good city life of the future* – "Copenhagen must be the locomotive for growth in the rest of Denmark, while simultaneously moving towards an ambitious goal of becoming CO2 neutral by 2025... focus will be on how the green transition and life in the cities of the future can go hand in hand" (*Programme 2014: Let's Share*, 9). The second was

³ Founder of Copenhagenize Consulting, whose award winning blog *Cycle Chic*, has been replicated in over 50 cities.

⁴ Founder of Gehl Architects, he is famous for resisting modern architecture since the 1960's, advocating for the 'human scale' to be the center of urban design. Quite possibly his most famous influence in Copenhagen, Gehl advocated for the *Stroget*, the longest shopping street in Europe, one of the city's main tourist attractions.

dedicated to projects on *resources and sustainable lifestyles*, with attention on efficiently using resources and recycling. The third takes advantage of the summer weather by promoting *the blue and green city*, highlighting the physical environment like parks and the harbor. *Green mobility* was the fourth group which concentrated on green transport options such as cycling, walking, public transport and alternative fuels. Energy was discussed in the last group, the *climate and green transformation*, as “biomass, more wind turbines and energy efficient street lighting are some of the initiatives leading to the carbon reduction” (69). This concentration on efficiency is clear in their main green action plan document as well.

CPH 2025 maps out a pathway for the City to achieve its goal of becoming the world’s first carbon neutral city by 2025. Published in 2012 by the Technical and Environmental administration, the policy has four main components: energy production, energy consumption, mobility, and administration (City leadership). Each section has targets and goals that center on energy and lowering CO₂ emissions. This plan is extremely top-down, technocratic, written by experts without participation from citizens.⁵ The sustainable development ‘win-win’ scenario where the economy develops along with environmental protection is the main framing device. John Dryzek (1997) explains this frame: “sustainable development also involves a rhetoric of reassurance. We can have it all: economic growth, environmental conservation, social justice; and not just for the moment, but in perpetuity” (132).

CPH 2025 concentrates on the economic impacts of a green city: “the transition [to a carbon neutral city] is one of the key elements to creating increased economic growth in Copenhagen. The city must attract more foreign businesses within the green sector and must establish an innovation and entrepreneurial environment” (26). The framing for this plan is not one of radical environmental change for local residents. The reassurance is indeed temporal: “Copenhagen sees an opportunity to become carbon neutral while at the same time generating green growth” (11). In order to accomplish this in a “smart” manner, Copenhagen plans to “collaborate with knowledge institutions and public/private players about the creation and dissemination of new knowledge” (51), in other words increase public-private partnerships, another urban neoliberal tactic. The City also plans to produce more ‘green’ energy (biomass, geothermal, waste, wind and solar) than it consumes, while considering waste used for energy consumption to be carbon neutral (through incineration). This indicates a scalar displacement of energy, rather than lowering consumption, the materials economy or GDP. ‘Green’ energy production and consumption are not portrayed as strategies to attain a social justice goal; rather, developing the economy is a clear priority.

This win-win frame resonates in Copenhagen’s Climate Adaptation Plan (2011), as part of the green growth strategy and acts to make the city more “attractive.” Higher levels of rain and flooding, as well as heat waves in the summer, with associated public health risks and high costs of infrastructure repair, are major concerns to coastal cities. A 2011 flood cost the City 6 billion DKK, an expense that is stressed when framing adaptation as a *cost-effective* approach. This policy discursively turns climate adaptation into an economic opportunity, where “in developing new methods to climate-proof a modern metropolis, we can create growth throughout the Capital Region, which will also help secure the economic

⁵ There is a specific and separate plan that is to involve citizens, The Local Agenda 21 plan, as required by Danish law. However I found that this had an extremely low budget and resulted in low ambitions, like devising ways to deposit cigarette butts in a receptacle rather than on the street.

foundation for the future of Copenhagen” (57). This plan won the Danish *INDEX: Design to Improve Life* award. Through this competition, other cities should follow suit: “as Copenhagen launches its ambitious Climate Adaptation Plan to design a vibrant and healthy place to live, work, play and create, we can only hope that other cities will follow lead in order to secure a bright future for their inhabitants” (INDEX 2013).

The carbon neutral goal remains to attract foreign investments, the creative class, tourists, and gain international attention with a vibrant image. A key point to make after reviewing these plans and awards is that, at this point, much of the global spotlight has been achieved not through actual results, but through ‘ambitious’ *future* goals, through a perceived political will. Whether or not these goals can be achieved or what they entail for the people living in Copenhagen. When I discussed this goal with Adam (interview), he reflected on the perspective and role of citizens:

The City is coming up with solutions themselves, and getting this rubber stamp they have... manufacturing the appearance of democratic participation. It really plagues this place and demobilizes people, it doesn't create situations for issues of sustainability, resilience and infrastructure, something that citizens are charged with and citizens can help increase the knowledge. There is an immense amount of control over city appearance, infrastructure, there are multiple layers to this: like history, but also nationalism, identity as it's written in the spaces of the city.

The top-down planning regulates energy retrofitted buildings, but what about the people who live in them? The international popularity of this expert knowledge then makes this an issue for countless cities. This sustainable development discourse rests on a ‘win-win’ scenario, in which we do not have to change the capitalist economic system, we simply ‘green’ it, supposedly leading to environmental sustainability while economically growing. The role of the city remains an economic engine, where the competitive aspects merge with these green action plans, maintaining and reproducing the institutions set in place to ensure economic growth. In this way, propagating the city as greenest to attract investments and produce expert knowledge continues to commodify the city and thereby draws neoliberal barriers through which citizens may engage with everyday urban spaces. Or, as Caprotti (2014) claims: “in the case of eco-urbanism, sustainability most often means economic sustainability of a particular, neoliberal and deregulated kind” (1295). The win-win frame that I found in several of Copenhagen’s sustainability plans not only perpetuates creative city policies but is also contradictory to post economic growth thinking. Instead of sustainable or green city, the title itself demonstrates Jonas *et al* (2011) carbon control concept, and shows the reliance on energy-efficiency, an approach that has not proven to deliver its promise.

ACCESSING THE GREEN CITY

To continue, what does this frame and concentration on carbon neutrality mean for Copenhageners and the narrative of living sustainably? What kind of social, cultural and economic barriers does it draw? Has sustainable lifestyles been coopted to describe a trendy, middle class way of life? Again this is not to analyze consumer behavior at the individual level or calculate how much emissions are produced. I am most interested in the sustainable lifestyles discourses at the local institutional level. Duncan and Duncan (2004) explain the importance of this socio-spatial relation: “discourses contain morally charged tales and

loosely linked pieties that connect landscapes to place and places to lifestyles... shaping them all into a dominant aesthetic” (38). Demographic inequalities underlie these urban policies, and underlie in such a way that one must dig extensively, to simply begin to make these connections, the following excerpt from my interview with Edvard illustrates such issues:

[The municipality] make this ‘one fits all’ plans. You have some white middle class people sitting in some kind of government department deciding a campaign on how to get people not to smoke. They get very surprised when the campaign is finished and the poor people don’t stop smoking.⁶ They don’t consider that it might be that the project was wrong from the beginning, because the analysis is wrong that you can make a campaign that fits all people who live in different socio-economic structures. And I am fighting bureaucrats with that all the time because they think they are some kind of super human race where they try to plan everybody else and they don’t understand everybody else.

A green city for *whom*? Understanding this narrative gives insight to how the carbon control plays out in an associated imaginary of how urban citizens should live in a ‘green’ way, as within these plans are expectations for citizens to ‘take responsibility.’ Yet as Edvard’s interview quote implies, the green action plans cannot account for many sustainabilities; or as Anne Jensen (2013) found in her Copenhagen research: “the multiplicity of the city is not reflected in the [cycling] policy representations” (224).

Institutional change is seen as a driver for people living more sustainably, and as Claus Offe (2006) states “institutions have a formative, motivation-building, and preference-shaping impact upon actors. They subsume and subordinate the individual, shape his tastes and desires, and promulgate habitual codes of conduct” (14-15). The win-win frame in these green action plans establishes a positive pathway of economic growth and environmental protection, at all times and for everyone, using models that track emissions and energy use. Citizens are expected to have a green job, live in a green building and recycle. Through interviews with City staff and consultants, environmentally concerned Copenhageners were referred to as “smart citizens,” “creative, innovative and green oriented people” and “citizen cyclists.” The CPH 2025 plan states that Copenhageners should adopt an ‘energy-efficient lifestyle,’ with an ableist perspective – these ‘smart citizens’ should participate in active and recreational activities such as swimming in the harbor and cycling.

In the following I outline the different responses to my interview question of ‘what are some of the key elements of living sustainably?’ I found the themes of food and transport to be quite prevalent and connected to measuring emissions. On the other hand a minority of responses indicated an acceptance for cultural diversity as a factor of how individuals could live sustainably. After explaining this division I explore two underlying demographic issues, one based on the idea that living sustainably is an exclusive class privilege, and another based on geographical area: how suburban identities and practices influence ideas of living sustainably in Copenhagen.

The majority of answers to identifying key elements of living sustainably fell into two categories. The first being *food*: they suggested less meat consumption, purchasing more local and/or organic food, and involvement in community gardens. The second category was *transport*: less private car use, and instead use public transport or cycle. The replies were very quick: ‘food and cycling – that’s easy,’ and are in line with an emissions counting

⁶ There is a campaign for Copenhagen to be a smoke free city by 2025.

lifestyle. Aside from these two categories there were other suggestions. Some participants brought in issues of space, by living in smaller spaces, and creatively using and sharing space. Few discussed politics like voting for green candidates and green investments. Some touted Copenhagen's waste to energy incinerator. Finally, air travel, a practice not bound to the city or counted for its carbon emissions, was one factor that seemed unresolved, without a clever techno-fix – 'I know that I should stop flying but I just enjoy traveling so much.'

Participants within this first theme worried about how the efficiency paradox plays out at the individual level: "I don't know if you know the term greenwashing... you get a check from the company saying congratulations you didn't use much heat here's 200 Euros. What are you using the money for, to go to Paris or something? So I think it's actually very difficult to say when something is sustainable" (Erik interview). Even though skeptical of the efficiency paradox, it did not change their stance that sustainable lifestyles is one where citizens have the opportunity to lower their resource use and be more efficient. Participants seemed stuck in between worrying about how other's larger footprints would negate their attempt to lower their own, and comparing to the one or two 'voluntary simplicity' people they knew who have very low emissions. While a zero emissions lifestyle is not possible, it remains the aim; they do not say 'I am living sustainably', rather 'I *try* to live more sustainably.'

I found a distinct line between those providing 'food and transport' answers, and others (a minority) who denied a puritan understanding and attempted to embrace diversity – 'it is different for everyone.' For example: "I know we have to get the CO₂ down, but I don't think we do that by telling people that they are bad people... you can live on the same street and have different priorities" (Edvard interview). Georg also seemed hesitant about instructing others on how to live, but saw a major problem with consumerism: "I am not saying that they shouldn't be allowed to have this stuff, but the speed that we do it, it's not ok for me, the speed at which we change stuff, buy new clothes and stuff like that." While sitting in her 'tiny' Frederiksberg apartment, Frida explained that her idea of local lifestyles starts with yourself (as a hyper-local scale) – and the people directly around you (like knowing your neighbors). She insisted that a social shift is needed where people should be more concerned with 'being' rather than the consumerist 'to have,' complaining that the work-spend cycle has made Danes too busy to be, think or act sustainably. The important point here is that for those who say that sustainability is diverse and situated do not adhere as strictly to the models of efficiency and lowering consumption.

The sustainable development win-win frame creates the idea that individuals will 'save money and the environment,' yet I found that even in a Scandinavian welfare state context, sustainable lifestyles is viewed as an exclusive class privilege and this connects to the political struggles of who the green city is for. When emphasis is placed on the green city as a goal, rather than a scalar strategy (see Born and Purcell 2006), the process is overlooked and as Caprotti (2014) explains: "these exclusive developments provide environmental 'goods' to those who can afford to live within the eco-city – while little attention is paid to those who built it, or to those who live in its shadow or on its fringes" (1293).

When Johan explained to me that he supported the idea of a car-free Copenhagen, he acknowledged this as a "super elitist arrogant" perspective because he can afford to live in the city center. Living in accordance with the energy-efficient image is a class privilege that requires multiple resources or capitals, as Lea (interview) explained:

It's reserved for privileged upper-middle class. You have to be quite privileged in order to choose that... that takes sort of a certain amount of resources, mental capacity, to have time to even think about that. If you have four kids and a low paying job, what are you going to worry about? I think it has to be more naturally, structurally, implemented, not a matter of something you do if you are sort of, a good citizen, you know, cause it's not a choice for everyone to make.

This point further demonstrates the call for institutional change for citizens to live sustainably; and does not indicate that Copenhagen's 'world's first carbon neutral city' is the type of change needed.

One further underlying theme that I found rather pervasive in relation to class privilege and creating the image of a green city is geographic location, specifically tensions with suburbia. One idea behind regional sustainability planning is to thwart suburban sprawl, to make city life attractive given its economies of scale. The City is clearly well accepting of families with resources who wish to remain in/move to the city (to be shown in the following section) – opposed to the previously observed phenomena of 'finishing college, getting married and buying a house in the suburbs to start a family.' Now that the opposite is trending, there are two elements of suburban lifestyles that provoke tensions in this case. The first is the relationship between the City and suburbanites, as the City sometimes caters its built environment to the particular lifestyles of suburbanites in order to make the city attractive to their lifestyles. The second issue is the relationship between urbanites and suburbanites – the lifestyle difference is seen to negate the urbanites' efforts to lower carbon emissions.

One's chosen geographic location has implications for *how* they live (Duncan and Duncan 2014, 60). Suburbanites moving to the city wish to drive their cars (along with ample parking), enjoy private space, especially spaces to consume. "We are also talking about a harbor tunnel for 29 billion [DKK], so people from the suburbs can come to Copenhagen by car more easily, that is not especially green" (Georg interview). This becomes a goal for City planners, where instead of marketing the advantages of urban living, they attempt to create a similar space in the city. Edvard informed me that in Norrebro, the most ethnically diverse area of Copenhagen, they jokingly say that the suburbanites are the 'biggest integration problem' because of their egocentrism. Martha (interview) expressed her frustration in suburbanites not conforming to a certain urban life:

They want to have their fence; they are used to have their own space. They move in with a kind of idea of life that is not city life. We have a cultural difference there, so it can be hard to integrate those new comers from the suburbs... [In Christianshavn] when the metro came... people moved in and they kept the car and bought an apartment so the price raised and we got more cars, and they didn't take the metro.

The model of an energy-efficient, low carbon lifestyle frames expectations on how citizens should live. Citizens involved with a variety of local sustainably institutions mostly conceptualized sustainable lifestyles along a consumptive, efficiency argument of food and transport, where I found underlying issues like the geographical divide and class privilege. In the following I provide several examples to demonstrate the City politics and exclusionary processes of this imaginary – this helps to answer who the green city is for. The City uses the divergence from their sustainable lifestyle idea as a punitive tool: "the consequence [of air pollution from heavy traffic] has been a very bad situation in Norrebro where people's life expectancy is much lower than in the rest of the city. We say that it is because of pollution

from cars, the municipality tries to say that it is because people have bad lifestyles” (Edvard interview). The City in this example absolves itself from influence over citizens’ everyday lives; the individual is at fault if they do not prescribe to the ‘energy-efficient’ lifestyle recommended.

Even the cycling policies are not without (identity) politics, Copenhagen’s goal (as linked to their carbon neutral goal) is to be the world’s most bicycle friendly city – but friendly for whom? Jensen (2013) claims that current cycling policy is directed to certain groups more than others, that cycling is seen to be “authentic and Danish,” where poor and less formally educated folks do not participate in cycling as much (222). Offering a more ‘natural’ (read: not urban) setting, the green cycle system was found to target ‘active urbanites’; and the cycle super highway, for long distance commuters connecting to suburban areas targeted ‘commuters’; a third category of middle class families is targeted for both initiatives.⁷ Jensen (2014) claims that these subjects are galvanized “in building an urban Copenhagen identity intended to place the spotlight on the city on the ‘global catwalk’ while a range of subjectivities of the diverse city is not present” (224).

Families are sustainability targets as Jensen established, and I found this to be quite revealing. Creating a city for families is within the feel-good, win-win frame, and at first critiquing policies geared towards this end seems difficult. However, Poul, who has worked for the City for 20 years, explained that the reason the City has family oriented policies is an *economic* one, they provide a substantial tax-base and thus are *resource staerke* (people with resources). Two American activists living in Denmark explained this institutional term from their vantage point of outsiders-as-insiders that many locals could not provide – “Danes have a hard time seeing this [‘intense institutional racism’] about themselves” (Ruth interview). The term separates “people of color that are newly immigrated to Denmark that don’t necessarily have a network, or a specific education and they are not *resource staerke*. People with resources are then of course more affluent people and higher paid salary position, usually white people, ethnic Danes” (Ruth interview). Danish cyclists and families with resources are then able to be users of the green city.

The ongoing effort to ‘green’ the private inner courtyards of Copenhagen’s predominantly low to mid-rise buildings, as a method of urban redevelopment since the 1990s, follows this pattern of exclusive access and caters towards middle class families. Even before this began, Norrebro activists in the 1960s attempted to open the locked courtyards for public use, the struggle continues today with the Åben By (Open City) project, members remain concerned about the gentrification effects on low-income residents. The City rebuts their calls for de-privatizing this space, claiming that courtyards are private for safety reasons (read: so that homeless people do not attempt to sleep there) – bolstering their argument with quotes from Jan Gehl who theorizes that semi-private spaces are essential for the ‘good city life.’ However this privilege of safety and access to the green space is only for those who can afford an apartment there. Jane Jacobs (1961) wrote that “this type of planning requires that buildings be oriented towards the interior enclave... the safety of the unspecialized sidewalks is thus exchanged for a specialized form of safety for a specialized part of the population” (91).

These examples point to the ways in which citizens are expected to uphold and participate in certain processes of green city making. Copenhagen continually tries to uphold

⁷ I would add that they also now target tourists, as they are building a ‘harbor ring’ cycle path for tourists.

this urban imaginary of a “climate friendly, green, cosmopolitan, knowledge intensive, tolerant life styles in post-industrial, liveable and amiable, designed and authentic, diverse and green urban spaces” (Jensen 2013, 224). According to Adam (interview) this is problematic as it does not create space for citizen participation: “there’s a sort of self-righteousness in the way the city planning happens, like ‘we are greener than everyone else, we have the answers, this is the right way to do things.’ There’s just a lack of empowerment.” Economic growth remains the priority, without problematizing this growth or the efficiency paradox; while the local citizens’ lifestyle is prescribed based on what would reduce carbon in a techno-fix efficiency model, those living outside of the city, but surely influencing its socio-spatial environments, are not targeted.

DISCUSSION

While there are many ideas about sustainable lifestyles, I found Hobson and Soper’s to be suited for a post economic growth transition, their ideas are less about ‘greening’ products (sustainable consumption) and more about changing ideas and values. Using a post economic growth perspective helps to untangle the infrastructure-culture debate within sustainable lifestyles in that the entire system that these drivers operate within needs to be questioned.

What does this connection to class privilege tell us about how sustainable lifestyles is perceived? It not only informs us about the concept of sustainable lifestyles, but also about the idea of a green city, it can be understood as an *inequitable* city. I found a strong theme in relation to Soper’s alternative hedonistic approach that calls for remaking the image of a ‘good life.’ Yet the issue in this case is that inequality is wrapped up in the image of a ‘good sustainable life.’ If we accept that a consumerist lifestyle has a connection to privilege, then the privilege that is conflated with sustainable lifestyles in Copenhagen is not within the realm of post economic growth thinking. The targeting of these classes in particular ways that may not even prove to be sustainable, reinforces their privilege, rather than uprooting it. Conventional definitions of sustainable lifestyles lack an engagement with a pluralist society and issues that are not strictly environmental. What about those who would actually need to raise their carbon footprint in order to fulfill basic needs? As this socio-economic diversity in cities cannot be ignored, or modeled away, the option is to recognize that the ‘good life’ is not reachable for everyone.

For Hobson (2006), environmental sustainability is the context not the goal, stating that sustainable lifestyles is “no longer just about consuming products but about how social and environmental resources of common good(s), spaces, networks, future and relationships need to foster respect for each other and in turn, for the environment;” the environment being both the common view of ‘nature’ and the “environment of lived spaces and daily experiences” (312-313). However as I demonstrated CPH 2025 presented environmental sustainability as a goal, rather than a strategy, and this is inconsistent with placing the environment as the context. That is not to say Hobson’s concept should be abandoned, at the moment it is best used to highlight this gap.

For comparison, Scott’s (2009) definition of sustainable lifestyles has the environment as a goal: “patterns of action and consumption, used by people to affiliate and differentiate themselves from others, which: meet basic needs, provide a better quality of life, minimize the use of natural resources and emissions of waste and pollutants over the

lifecycle, and do not jeopardize the needs of future generations” (1). My empirical evidence shows that the manner and politics behind how people ‘affiliate and differentiate themselves’ was clearly through unequal power relationships where only certain classes have access to the green city and reinforced by sustainability policies.

While consumer culture remains dominant, minimizing resource use requires an effort to change the overall system, otherwise it again returns to the efficiency paradox. Finally, by concentrating on emissions, we continue to fetishize CO₂ (Swyngedouw 2013) and neglect the social element, where Hobson discusses relationships and social common goods. One factor worth drawing on is the pace of life. While in some sustainability discussions there is a drive for the ‘slow’ life, in counter to the fast pace of western consumerist lifestyles and regaining a work-life balance. This actually relates to the tension between urban and suburban lifestyles as urban life is seen as fast-paced. The courtyards example speaks to a lifestyle of convenience and to create a suburban feel in the city: while safe for the children to play in the private space of the courtyard, however the parents do not have the time to take the children to the playground - they can wash the dishes in their home and look out the window instead. Their safety is prioritized over users of public space.

I found paradoxical reactions to the identity of ‘green’ cities, one that warrants a cautious warning in that this may act as a disincentivizing factor for citizens. Individuals may feel that if the city is indeed the greenest, then they do not need to participate, that their lifestyle does not have a significant influence. This point shows that sustainability is seen in an efficiency fashion, where individuals have less agency: “there’s definitely complacency here, in the sense that *we are already good*, do we need to do that much more?” (Johan interview). The other side to this complacency is that individuals may not engage with diversity or critically question systemic issues, as he later claimed “it’s so easy to have the opinion ‘I am so green because I don’t have a car’ ... some people kind of greenwash themselves in saying that I ride my bike.”

CONCLUSION

In this article I focused on the narrative of sustainable lifestyles in an internationally recognized green city, Copenhagen, by using an urban ethnographic approach. I found that the framing in Copenhagen’s main urban sustainability policy documents (CPH 2025, Let’s Share Programme, and the Climate Adaptation Plan) resonated with creative city tactics of concern for economic growth, investment, tourists and the creative class; with a dominant ‘win-win’ frame where we can protect the environment and develop the economy simultaneously. With the carbon neutral goal, sustainability is understood in a strict techno-fix sense of emissions control, translating into expectations of citizens living in an ‘energy-efficient’ manner. I found that most participants conceptualized sustainable lifestyles in an emissions counting way through key elements of food and transport, while a minority were concerned that this concept is situated and should not be used to instruct others on how to live. There were two underlying issues of class privilege and suburban identities, and the examples of Copenhagen’s cycling and courtyard policies showed the effects of this. Thus while the win-win frame presents a situation where individuals can save money and the environment, sustainable lifestyles was seen in relation to class privilege and trendy consumption.

These findings have implications further than the discussed ideas on sustainable lifestyles, for developing a post growth transition and for the role of urban environmental governance. They also contest the sustainable development idea that economic, social and environmental sustainability operates in a positive correlations. By concentrating on technological fixes and energy efficiency, the underlying root problem is not tackled, or as one interviewee explained: “in contrast working for a *negative GDP* - that would tell me something serious about carbon neutrality” (Adam interview). By taking environmental sustainability hostage, such as claiming CPH 2025 “is a plan for exploiting the ambitions about carbon neutrality as leverage for innovation, new jobs and investments,” (8) it remains difficult to look past the economic goals of these plans. While this research concentrated on local institutions, further research could incorporate other (multi-scale) actors, and/or genealogically trace the (unsustainable) sources of wealth required to take on such grand creatively green projects.

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