

# Postcolonial reading of the history of urbanism in the Circumpolar North

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*Making the Arctic city: The history and future of urbanism in the Circumpolar North*  
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The Arctic is still rarely associated with 'urban' even if urbanization has evolved and shaped the local communities and environments in the northern latitudes, especially since the twentieth century. Today, circumpolar cities and towns are home to millions. In this regard, Peter Hemmersam's *Making the Arctic city: The history and future of urbanism in the Circumpolar North* is a highly welcome and comprehensive piece of work, taking on the ambitious task of tracing the underlying ideas, planning visions, and the political, cultural, and historical circumstances that have influenced the extraordinary urban development and city-building across Arctic regions over the past century. The book draws from research literature on Arctic territories, urban planning, and architecture, and it also benefits from the author's fieldwork in several cities and towns over the years. For a researcher and a fairly new resident of the Finnish circumpolar city of Rovaniemi, the book provided not only academic reading but a captivating broader context to reflect on my personal relationship with and experiences about my city.

By exploring the roots and history of urbanism across the Arctic, the book sets out to take a critical look at the current conceptualization of an Arctic City – which the author argues has largely remained uncontested. Hemmersam's starting point in approaching circumpolar urbanism is the recognition of the 'Arctic' as a historically contested and colonized, yet not unified space, where the urban development has been characterized by the power imbalance with southern societies. As Hemmersam argues, the persistent narratives of the Arctic as 'empty', 'undeveloped', 'unique', and 'extreme' have had a powerful effect on the states, planners, and architects' visions to design cities in the North and for the North. For example, these narratives are reflected in the

historical conceptualization of Arctic cities as 'frontier towns, indigenous cultural hubs, industrial dystopias, climate change capitals or as sites of technological modernization and development' (pp. 4–5). In particular, the advocating themes throughout the book are the systematic disregard of local and indigenous voices in the urban planning processes, and the close entanglements between city-building and the domination of northern nature.

The book contains nine chapters, divided into three different parts. The first part is a general introduction to the history of urban development and the study of urbanism in the Arctic. It further elaborates on how the idea of a particular Arctic City started to arise in the 1950s in opposition to the modernist southern urban planning visions applied in many Arctic regions.

The second part of the book narrows down to investigate the urban planning and architectural histories, and prospects for the future in three localities: the Russian North, the Canadian North, and Greenland. Each case is given a chapter, and the text is well supported by visual materials, such as photographs, zone plans, and urban design illustrations. While there are significant differences between the urban development pathways in the case areas, Hemmersam argues that the underlying colonial logic and power imbalance have been present in all of them. He illustrates how the modernist urban visions have been systematically adopted from the South to the 'undeveloped' northern periphery, how locals and indigenous peoples' voices have been to a great extent ignored, and how the urban strategies have been dominated by the goal of economic growth and/or social well-being. This has materialized especially through nature's extraction and efforts to control the harsh climate through experimentation of modern radical technologies and architecture.

The final part of the book returns to the question of how Arctic urbanism is, or should be, approached and reconstructed. In one conclusion, Hemmersam lists various categorizations that illustrate the different ideas and dimensions of Arctic urbanism. In particular, the historical and contemporary challenges and perceptions that guide Arctic urban development are condensed into five interacting dimensions formulated by the author: Arctic City as utopian, postcolonial, provisional, experimental, and ecological. While the categorizations are interesting and resonate with the previous chapters, I was left to hope for a more nuanced and further-reaching discussion about them. What should we learn from these categorizations? How could and should they be approached in the continuous efforts to decolonize Arctic cities?

Urbanism in the Arctic is a peripheral theme both in Arctic research and the broad field of urban studies. Thus, the book provides a comprehensive contribution to the yet marginal investigation of the topic. Through its engagement in the postcolonial study of circumpolar urban planning histories, it offers new tools to approach the topic also outside the Arctic region, enriching the dominant urban planning discourse with critical insights from northernmost urbanism.

All in all, the application of the postcolonial perspective can indeed be seen as a great asset of the book. However, while Hemmersam excellently problematizes, for example, the disregard of indigenous people's voices in the urban planning processes, the book itself does not give visible room to the indigenous or locals' interpretations of their cities, city-building, or the future visions emerging from 'below'. Reflecting on my experience in the city of Rovaniemi, the local future visions are many, and heated debates are ongoing on local newspapers and social media platforms. In Rovaniemi, the effect of tourism on the livability of urban spaces for residents is one of the key issues today. In fact, in addition to the planners, architects, and distant policymakers from outside, the Arctic City and city spaces are constantly (re)negotiated and (re)made by the diverse groups of circumpolar city-dwellers through their everyday lives. Hopefully, this book serves as an inspiration for scholars across disciplines to continue exploring the makings of an Arctic City especially through hearing the spectrum of voices on the local grounds.

To conclude, *Making the Arctic city* offers a compelling angle to enhance our understanding of the persistent colonial perceptions and imaginaries that have largely influenced Arctic urban development and city-building in all circumpolar regions, including the Barents region. Most circumpolar cities may have rather short histories, but the book is a crucial reminder that these cities are far from historyless. With its main scope on the planning and design perspective, the book makes relevant critical reading for scholars, students, and practitioners in the fields of urban planning and design, architecture – and beyond. It would certainly be of interest to scholars and students in the multidisciplinary field of Arctic studies wishing to broaden their perspective on the Arctic towards questions of 'urban'.