

A CITY FOR ALL

Utopia, empty promise, or effect of sustainability and sufficiency thinking?



Keywords: Place, infrastructure, community, safety, inclusion, urban planning, participation, protection

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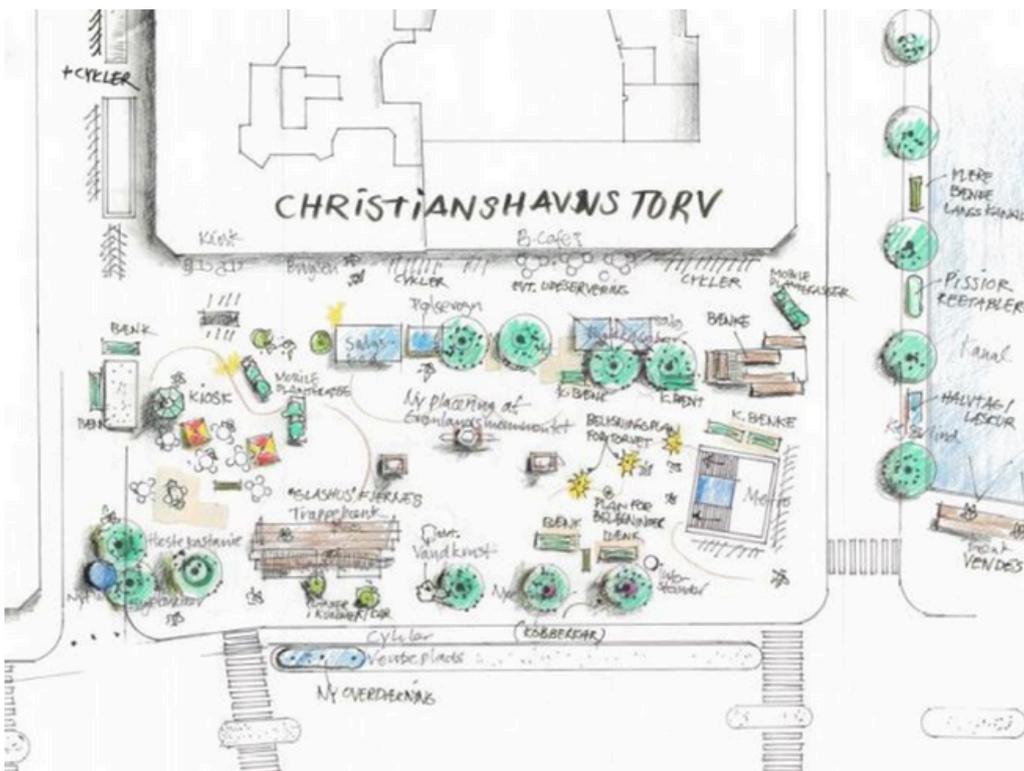
Introduction

“The cities everyone wants to live in should be clean and safe, possess efficient public services, be supported by a dynamic economy, provide cultural stimulation, and also do their best to heal society’s divisions of race, class and ethnicity. These are not the cities we live in” (Sendra & Sennett 2022, p 23)

In their book *Designing Disorder. Experiments and Disruptions in the City* (2022), architect Pablo Sendra and sociologist Richard Sennett argue that urban public places should be developed to bring people together, not to divide them.

Our case is about a small square in Copenhagen and illustrates some of the reasons why doing what Sendra and Sennett are suggesting is difficult—even in places where people are engaged, open, and active. The underlying idea in Sendra and Sennett’s work is that urban planning and development should nurture engagement and diversity through what they call ‘infrastructures for disorder.’ For Sendra and Sennett disorder is not equivalent to the wild and radical per se. The term also comprises more mundane actions. The point is that they must contribute to participation and agency in urban planning and development. Thus, infrastructure for disorder can range from civil disobedience (for example, occupying empty buildings protesting a shortage of affordable housing) to producing the local community’s own plans and initiatives in local development instead of relying on the authorities’ plans and initiatives.

The mobile planters and sun sail described later in this case can be seen as examples of infrastructures of disorder. So too can the plan depicted below, which was commissioned by a local network of stakeholders.



A suggestion for a new design of the Square to the City Council made by the Square Network.

SELECTING A PLACE

In February 2024, we met with outreach workers from The Social Housing Street Contact [Den Boligsociale Gadekontakt], which is a part of the Outreach Services, department of Social Services, Municipality of Copenhagen. Their name derives from the purpose of the unit: a city-wide initiative that started in collaboration with the non-profit housing sector “to create security and prevent or resolve conflicts between drinking communities and actors in the local area” (Københavns Kommune, 2020, our translation).

Drinking communities is a term used across municipal departments to denote a group of people, usually in precarious positions, who meet in public places to drink, gather and socialize. A person from the Social Service describes the term in the following way:

“When we say drinking communities, we think of people who in many cases have housing, but much of their everyday and social life take place outside. They have as much right to be in the public places of the city as anyone else ... like skateboarders or boule players. If their behavior becomes problematic, our outreach workers start a dialogue with them about how to make things work.”

Even though it is a term that comes with its downsides, we have chosen to use it. We did so in recognition of the fact that the term community humanizes and is connected to the well-being of its members.

To kick-start our data collection, we did participatory observations with the outreach workers in different locations in the city. During these observations, it became clear that, because it was possible to trace current urban development processes as well as concrete initiatives regarding precarious communities, Christianshavns Torv (simply called the Square in local lingo) was an interesting place to explore further. The focus of our fieldwork was to understand the ways in which social workers, the local community, the drinking communities and the municipality engage in, and try to solve issues, which arise from the drinking communities using the Square as a meeting place and sometimes ‘public living room.’

From first impressions to lasting themes

The Square of Christianshavn is small (approximately 80 by 30 meters) located in a relatively small and historical neighborhood. It is close to the Freetown of Christiania and sits next to Torvegade, a busy main road connecting the island of Amager and the inner city. The Square is a transportational nodal point, which makes it known to most people in the city.



Christianshavns Torv, simply called the Square by locals. This picture is taken from behind the ventilation platform towards Overgaden Oven Vandet and the canal. Torvegade is not visible in the photograph but is located to the right of your range of vision. You can find a more elaborate map of the area, and the Square, here at the website under the topic 'Research.' When you navigate the map, you will be able to sense just how small the Square is. Photo by Eva Lykke.

The Square has been here for as long as the neighborhood, which dates to the mid-1600s. Today, much of Christianshavn is a protected area. Besides the heavily trafficked Torvegade, the Square is also delimited by the the cobblestone street Overgaden Oven Vandet and the Canal of Christianshavn on one end, and five to six story residential buildings with shops in street level on three sides. Finally, the Square is home to a busy metro station serving thousands of people every day, a supermarket, some smaller shops and eateries, and a library. So perhaps you can imagine that this is a buzzing place with a lot of traffic, noise, and people passing through.

The urban planners we have interviewed often refer to the square as a transitional space, which correlates with our impressions from the first days of observations there. We often found the place hectic—almost compressed—because so much is going on in such a small place. The square has its own rhythms and norms. Sometimes it is quiet and dull, at other times festive and full of commotion. As is exemplified in our field notes from May 2024, a more festive day can very well begin with music:

A group of three people arrive at the square, carrying beers and a sound box. They seem cheerful. Turning on their music, just loud enough for them to dance and work up a groovy atmosphere, they open their beer. Their laughter is loud, and people slowly gather. It remains unclear to us whether they have arranged to meet and feel at home today, or if it is just happenstance that they arrive at the same time looking for the same ambience. They are placed at the various seating spots around the square: benches, ventilation system outlets, the bases beneath the statues displaying Greenlanders in different situations. As the hours pass and the intake of alcohol increases it is not unusual for some of the people to fall into arguments. Today, arguments and conflicts are also present in various forms. Sometimes just between a couple of people, sometimes between more people. Arguments quickly turn into yelling and a tense atmosphere of aggression rises. Occasionally, arguments turn into physical fights, and sometimes the police are called to settle the conflicts. As observers, we get the impression that arguments arise randomly and often without anyone being prepared for the sudden aggression or insecurity the situation is leaving behind. Arguments are oftentimes resolved just as quickly as they arise and, thus, life continues in the square as if nothing happened.

Activities on the square are manifold and with a significant difference in tempo and purpose: people waiting for the bus, school children passing through, people coming and going from the metro, people on their way to or from a visit to the Freetown of Christiania, and people shopping in the local shops. What they all have in common is that they are transiting. However, a few people, between 5-30, depending on the hour, weekday, and weather, are different. They are not transiting. Rather they seem to have chosen the Square as a place for dwelling at least for a while. They are sitting, standing, laying or swaying on benches and sculptures, often talking to each other, sometimes sitting in solitude, and almost always drinking. Because their use of the place differs from most people's, the group seems quite conspicuous. Yet, many people who transit through the place seem to not notice them, or at least not quite read the situation. Many people seem to rush through the square, which is also one of the objections raised by residents we talked to who would prefer the Square to be a meeting place for the local community. Thus, one of the spatial conflicts seems to be that if people dwell or pause here, they might very quickly feel that they invaded someone's private space or crashed a party they were not invited to.

Looking back at our fieldwork and the material we have collected, there are some values that are characteristic for people to associate with the Square no matter which position they speak from. Those are inclusion, safety, protection, and community. Of course, the meaning attached to these values varies depending on who you talk to. Likewise, there are some values that are expressed by people with formal positions or power (i.e., representatives from the municipality, people working directly with the drinking communities, or representatives from non-municipal stakeholders such as the Square Network or the metro company). Those values are participation, inclusion, safety, agency, community, diversity and equity. Again, their meaning varies depending on who you talk to.

Infrastructures for disorder

In May 2024, a few new temporary installations were made at the Square. They were made to moderate the rising tensions and disturbances that drinking communities at the Square apparently posed. For a couple of months, residents and a few media outlets had reported increasing disruption at the Square, and some had complained that the municipality was not doing enough to solve the issues. Thus, a sun sail was placed between the metro entrance and one of the residential buildings, and a handful of large, mobile planters were placed between two locations where people on opposite sides of the occurring conflicts tended to settle. The planters functioned as a decorative addition to the Square while at the same time separating some of the drinking communities into different segments of the larger Square. The planters, we learned, were made on the initiative of the local Square Network and approved by the municipality.

Obviously, the sun sail is a material artifact, but as we will show, it also became a kind of main character in many of the interviews and conversations we had with stakeholders who have invested interests in the Square. It was as if the sun sail came to signify much of what is difficult when it comes to decision-making in urban development. In the spring of 2025, however, the sun sail was already gone again.



The Sun Sail, fall of 2024, photo by Eva Lykke



A Planter, fall of 2024, photo by Eva Lykke

PROBLEM STATEMENT

From a social justice perspective, the main challenge at the square is that it is a meeting place (and in some cases home) to several drinking communities who—in the perspective of some stakeholders—are creating an unsafe or undesirable atmosphere for residents, business owners, and commuters. This situation has attracted attention from the municipality at an administrative and political level.

Here, we describe the situation mainly from a sustainability and social justice perspective (for an elaborate discussion of eco-social work, its sustainability ontology, and its conceptualization of social justice, see Boetto, 2019). From this perspective, the inclusion, dignity, safety, and human rights of precarious urban populations' is a professional contribution to sustainable solutions to urban conflicts. Here, we argue that to grasp the situation at the Square and see it from different positions, it is important to understand not only the physical place, but also the interrelation between place and people. We use geographer Tim Cresswell's notion of place, which comprises both the physical dimension of places and the meanings people ascribe to them (Cresswell 2015). Following this notion, we begin by describing the physical dimensions of the square before continuing to examine the relationship that different stakeholders have to the place, including the meanings and emotions they ascribe to it. To summarize, we are addressing two themes:

- 1) Which meanings different stakeholders ascribe to the square.
- 2) Which visions or ideas different stakeholders have for the square, including the ways in which these are expressed in relation to the drinking communities.

THE CONCEPT OF PLACE

In the perspective of Cresswell (2015), the concept of place is three-dimensional. It is important to understand that place is not something objective that just exists out there independently of human action. Rather, people do places; people act upon and are acted upon in and by places; people are affected by spatial power struggles, norms, conflicts, reciprocities, alliances, tactics etc. Thus, places are saturated with power, negotiation of meaning, and produced through the things people do in and with them. Cresswell (drawing on Agnew) outlines three fundamental dimensions of place: 1) Location, 2) Locale and 3) Sense of place.

Location refers to the specific coordinates of a place and answers the question “where are we?”

Locale refers to the material and visual setting of the social relations within a place. “*The actual shape of a place within which people conduct their lives as individuals, as men or women, as white or black, straight or gay*” (Cresswell 2015, p. 14). Locale refers to every material thing from buildings to roads, statues, plants etc. Thus, locale is about the materiality and specific practices of a place.

Sense of place refers to the relationship between humans and a place, and “*the human capacity to produce and consume meaning*” (Cresswell 2015, p. 14). This dimension concerns the emotional and subjective attachment people have to a place. All over the world, Cresswell argues, people try to make meaning of spaces and assert their identity through place-making; from nation states over graffiti artists tagging the walls of the city, to children putting posters on the wall in their bedroom. Place-making activities are related to our attempts to make meaning of the world as well as to our attempts to claim our place in the world (Cresswell 2015, p. 10). Place-making, Cresswell argues, though less formal than the objective location of place, is still an important component in creating a sense of place (p. 13).

Following this nuanced understanding of places, history is an important dimension of the ways in which places and their materiality are experienced. Thus, before moving forward with describing the current situation at the square, we will take you back in history. This journey is one way of approaching the first dimension of place: location.

THE LOCATION: CHRISTIANSHAVN—A HISTORICAL PLACE

Today, Christianshavn (Christian’s Harbor) is a small area considered a part of inner Copenhagen. The area consists of islets separated by canals, some with colorful half-timbered houses, others with newer buildings. Many significant art institutions are located at the islets: the Opera House, the National Film School of Denmark, the Royal Danish Academy (architect, design, and conservation educations). But once the location of Christianshavn was not even actual land, but merely a patch of land in the harbor entry to Copenhagen. When King Christian the IV came into power in 1596, times were unstable, and he immediately set out to realize plans for fortifying Copenhagen and expanding the fleet—just as his predecessors had already begun to. At the same time, he wanted to strengthen the city's business community. In 1616, he combined these needs by planning the construction of a completely new district, Christianshavn. The area was built with inspiration from Dutch urban planning. In the middle of the area there would be a central square. From the start, Christianshavn became home to high and low, displaying a diversity of ethnicity, homes, and public institutions. Here, you would find rich merchants' houses and modest pubs. Some of Copenhagen's richest lived just a few meters from the prison, which was originally located by the Square.

In the beginning, the Square was called The Children’s House Square. During the approximately 260 years of being located at the square, the prison building itself underwent a development in function, name, and appearance. It started as the Children's House and was initially used for “degenerate, disobedient and orphaned children,” but later also for “thieves, beggars, and promiscuous women” eventually its name changed to the Women’s Prison. The original building was demolished in 1928. The building currently standing here was built in 1930 and is known as Lagkagehuset (The layer cake house). Today, the only reminiscence is the name of the small bridge crossing the canal by the square, which is named The Children’s House Bridge (Hovedstadshistorie, n.d.).



Lagkagehuset photo by Benzen/Københavns Museum.



The Womens Prison, photo by Fritz Theodor

Greenlandic trade

In 1767 the Greenlandic Trading Warehouse was build close to the square. It ensured Christianshavn as the center for trade of goods from the colony of Greenland and would continue to do so for few hundred years to come, the heyday being as late as the 1950s to 1960s. To this day, there seems to be a special consciousness about Greenland in the neighborhood, and some Greenlandic people in Denmark seem to have a special connection to Christianshavn.



The Royal Greenland Dock – Photographer unknown.

Freetown of Christiania

In 1968 the old military barracks in Christianshavn were abandoned. At a time with housing crisis and financial problems in Copenhagen, the area was occupied by squatters (in Danish they are known as Slumstormerne, a political movement that occupied empty and condemned buildings). The Freetown of Christiania was formed in 1971. Today, Christiania attracts around 500.000 tourists a year and is known for both sustainable and alternate forms of living in the city, activism, solidarity with the less fortunate, a liberal approach to cannabis, and much more. In 2024 the notorious Pusher Street was closed after years of conflicts and power struggles over who got to profit from the sale of cannabis in the area. Christiania is only a 5-minute walk from the Square, thus making the Square a nodal point for people coming to and from the freetown.

Metro

The most radical and modern construction at the Square is located underground. The metro station Christianshavns Torv opened in 2002. The station is very busy and as formulated by a representative from the local Square Network in one of our interviews:

“It has become a large floodgate spitting people that are just passing through in and out.”

According to the metro company, around 14.000 passengers use the station daily. The entrance to the metro is relatively small and consists of an elevator and a staircase with a landing below ground. Both the platform where the metro trains stop, and the landing between the Square and the floor where automatic ticket machines are located, are sometimes used by people without housing for shelter or sleeping.

Having described the location and some of the historical dimensions of the Square, we can now begin to describe its materiality and its people. This is the second dimension of the place, or the locale in Cresswell’s terminology.

THE LOCALE: MATERIAL AND VISUAL ASPECTS OF THE PLACE

If you try for a minute to imagine yourself standing at the Square, the first thing you might notice is that is a traffic junction; and you can feel it. Sometimes the ground feels like it is trembling a bit as a heavy loaded truck pass through Torvegade. The wind and sounds that come from buses, cars, trucks, and bikes that are moving through Torvegade can be felt, seen, and heard. Often, your sensory functions will be affected by something or someone transiting through the Square no matter where you are. Of course, there are corners that are more clam than the area facing the main street, but the place is always in motion.

Imagine that you see people moving in all different directions. This is not like observing an anthill where all the moving ant bodies have direction and purpose, moving synchronically and in predictable rhythms. Instead, people seem to be moving in their individual direction, perhaps trying to find the fastest way through the Square. Sometimes the patterns of movement are so erratic that they cause people to bump into each other or end up in one of those awkward moments where they stand in front of each other, swaying in each direction while trying to figure out if they should turn right or left to avoid a collision.

It takes a while for one’s eyes to find a place to rest, and for one’s mind to figure out how to make sense of the action. Having observed for a while, the next thing you might notice is how dark the square is. Parts of the square are in the shade for much of the day, making it both dark, but also a bit cold to reside for a longer time even during summer. No matter the time of year, the sunny spots are scarce.



A grey day at the Square. Notice that the seating around the tree located in one of the corners of the Square close to the main road Torvegade is round. Here, people have difficulties laying down and sitting face to face. This seating area is located next to the only public toilet, which is called the metal coffin by locals because of its shape that looks like a coffin. The seating area is often used by people from the Greenlandic drinking community. Photo by Eva Lykke.

In interviews with stakeholders and representatives from the municipality as well as in informal conversations with people from the drinking communities, we asked them to describe the Square as they experience it on a random day. Most agree that, at first glance, it seems arbitrary, or as formulated by an outreach worker from the department of Social Services: “*a randomly furnished place.*” In that sense, the locale and its norms are open for interpretation and negotiation. This makes way for daily encounters with people and their attempts to define the proper use of the Square, sometimes resulting in conflicts, violence, or a sadness that comes with the feeling that others misunderstand your actions and intentions. Yet, in some ambivalent way the unpredictability and arbitrariness of the place is also a part of its appeal to the drinking communities. As one of the men often spending his days here said in a conversation: “*it’s live TV.*” In fact, this resonates with many of the answers we got when asking people why they would come here: that it is lively, open, a meeting place, a communal place, an entertaining place etc. On the other hand, as we stay here to observe, openness can also lead to a sense of uneasiness. Often during observations, it was difficult to decide where to sit or position oneself as you feel watched and exposed to the gaze of others in most parts of the Square.

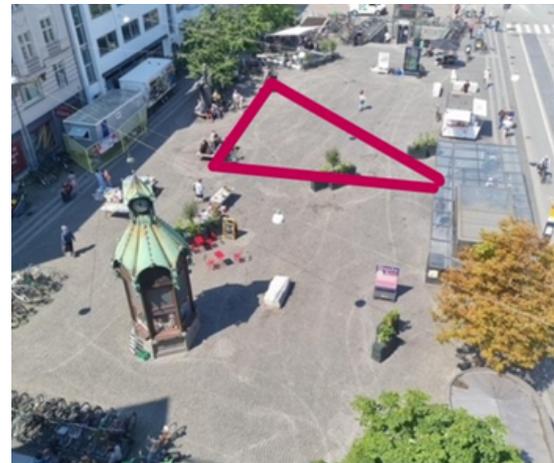
When your eyes have gotten used to the overall impression, details start to emerge. For example, the Greenlandic Monument, which is placed flanking the residential building with a supermarket in street level, located opposite Torvegade. The Greenlandic monument has been here since 1938—for almost 90 years. It consists of 3 separate statues depicting Greenlandic people and fishing traditions. It was made by Svend Rathsack (1885–1941) who travelled to Greenland in 1931-32. The municipality commissioned him to create the Greenlandic Monument. The three granite sculptures are meant to be viewed as one monument. One sculpture portrays two women flaying a seal and cleaning fish, another two women wearing national dresses and fishing for ammassets with nets, a third a fisherman with a qajaq. The fisherman is placed in the middle and all three statues have built-in benches. When people from the drinking communities are around, others seem to avoid sitting at the statues. But when the drinking communities have moved elsewhere, one might see tourists resting here as well.



Two of the sculptures from the Greenlandic Monument by Svend Rathsack, photos by Eva Lykke.

Another reminiscence of Greenland is the granite blocks scattered (seemingly random) around the Square. In total, there are five large, rectangular blocks originally used as dead-weight on ships travelling between Copenhagen and Greenland when they were not carrying cargo. Nowadays, the blocks are mainly used as benches, however, they are very cold to sit on most of the year.

The different drinking communities usually gather in three areas by the statues and the bus stop at Torvegade. As certain tensions are detected in the space in between the groups, some people in the municipality refer to the area as 'the Bermuda triangle.' Since this triangle is also the main route for crossing the Square, tensions are assumed to make commuters and shoppers feel unsafe.



One of the granite blocks. Photo by Eva Lykke.

One of the issues with the locale is that seating areas are limited. This has caused people from the drinking communities to make use of alternative physical infrastructure for seating. For example, there are three large concrete ventilation platforms supplying air for the metro below. They are covered with a metal grid and placed in different corners of the Square. The ventilation platform placed beside the bus stop adjacent to Torvegade used to be covered with a glass roof (see the glass roof to the right of the triangle in the photograph above) making it one of the only places in the Square where people could seek shelter for bad weather. For most of our fieldwork, this place has been used by people from the drinking communities to gather and sometimes sleep. Occasionally, the platform has been occupied by belongings such as

sleeping bags and sacks filled with reusable cans and bottles that are exchanged for cash in the nearby supermarket. After discussing back and forth, departments in the municipality, the police, and the metro company, decided to remove the glass roof in mid-2024. Before the Sun Sail, this roof was the only place in the square providing shelter. The two other ventilation platforms at the square, located at each end, are both surrounded by bicycle parking (with the metro underground bike parking was made, but people did not use it and eventually it was closed off). Street bike parking is a quite messy affair as the number of bikes is staggering. Yet, if one is determined enough, it is possible to squeeze through the bikes and make use of the ventilation platforms for seating, sleeping, and hanging out. Especially the ventilation platform at the quieter end of the Square, placed behind a coffee vendor located in the old telephone booth, farthest from the metro and canal, is often used by elder members of the drinking communities. Here, they seem to be more secluded and shielded from most of the conflicts between the drinking communities occupying the triangle. In the summertime, the coffee vendor has a few tables and chairs out and this seems to be the only place where people who are not a part of the drinking communities will stay seated for longer time. In general, the Square is not favored by Copenhageners as a meeting point for leisure activities unless special activities or events are held here.



The old telephone booth that now houses a coffee vendor. Photo by Eva Lykke.

A SENSE OF PLACE

Most of what we know about the stakeholders' sense of place and visions for the Square are based on informal conversations with people from the drinking communities, observations of outreach workers' conversations with the drinking communities, and a workshop we hosted at a nearby NGO that functions as a low threshold drop-in center catering to the unhoused migrants in the area. These data have been combined with recorded semi-structured interviews with different representatives from the municipality's department of Social Services (outreach workers, managers, and urban planners), the department of Technical and Environmental Affairs (project managers), the metro company, a manager of a local social work NGO, and a member of the local council who is also active in the Square Network (locals who work actively to influence the design and planning of the Square and arrange events and communal activities).

We have mapped the different stakeholders with help from the outreach workers from the Street Contact. As they all collaborate in a transversal network that meets regularly to address issues at the Square, the outreach workers are familiar with most of the stakeholders. Finally, we have access to various public documents concerning planning and development at the Square and discussions between people who live in and around the Square as they play out on social media.

A sense of place: the drinking communities

As mentioned, the drinking communities consist of people whose daily routines include meeting with peers in public places such as the Square. Such entities exist in around 12 public spaces in Copenhagen, some are strongly knit and consistent with a regular group of people, others have a more fluctuating character.

Characteristic for the communities at the Square is that the flow of people is larger than in many of the other places; the communities are not consistent and can change according to time of day, time of month, and time of year. Numbers vary ranging from a handful of people to as many as 50 people at a time. Sometimes the character of the communities varies according to the offers in the two nearby NGOs. One serves Greenlandic food on Thursdays, the other mainly attracts unhoused migrants from Eastern Europe around mealtimes, which are reflected in the composition of people from drinking communities at the Square.

People associated with the drinking communities at the Square share some characteristics as many of them have psychiatric or psychological issues, alcoholism or substance use, are unhoused or in a precarious housing situation, and many experience poverty. Loneliness is one of the major issues facing many of them. It is not possible to uniformly define the social order of the drinking communities; some people travel between two or more communities depending on their sentiment, conflicts, and current relations with others in the community. The most common division seem to be based on ethnicity, very loosely delimiting the people at the Square into three entities: Greenlandic people, migrants from Eastern Europe and sometimes West Africa, and people with ethnic Danish origin. Yet, these divisions are by no means solid. They depend on romantic relations, favors, friendships, conflicts, language abilities, loyalties etc., there are interactions between the communities and more temporary or volatile communities occur.

The people with Greenlandic origin are the community known for its long-term presence at the Square, yet the number of people in this community is currently growing. The Starship at nearby Freetown of Christiania has been a place of residence for some, thus making Christianshavn their home. As the closing down of cannabis trade in the Freetown of Christiania has caused an increase in the presence of gang members in other parts of the city, other people of Greenlandic origin who used to prefer other public spaces have started using the Square because they no longer feel safe in other parts of the city. Most of the people from this group are not unhoused, but a few live in shelters nearby. This group is diverse in both gender and age.

The people with migrant background consist mainly of men from Eastern Europe, sometimes joined by a few from Sweden, Norway or West Africa. Most of them have legal status as EU-citizens. From the outreach workers we know that the two main stories of this community are that they either arrived in Denmark with a labor contract but got terminated because of problems or conflicts and no longer have an income, or they have been cheated into

informal or illegal work building up debt and not being able to return home. Many of them are unhoused and are rough sleeping either in the Square or in other places around the city.

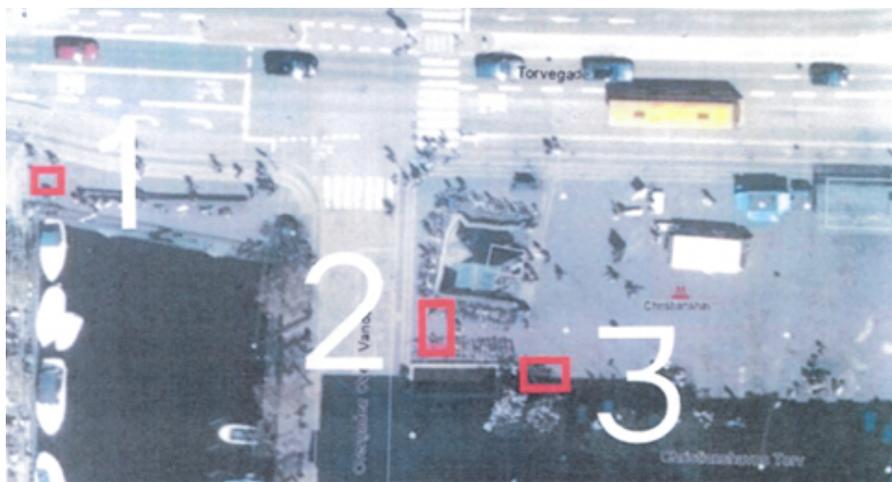
The people with Danish origin are the smallest community in numbers. According to the outreach workers, the size of this group has decreased over the last years. This community is a mix of genders, many have homes, while some define themselves as vagabonds. This community uses the Square as a meeting place for transactions of rumors, stories, and news from the streets, and alcohol is a consistent part of their social interactions. Some are here daily, some come by occasionally.

It seems as if the Square is a social connection point to many of the people from the drinking communities. This is a place where you can be sure to run into the people you feel you need to see. For many people, it is a primary place where much of their life and daily activities unfold. Talking to one of them, he explained that he used to come here a lot because he was unhoused. Now, he is in a permanent housing situation but still needs the Square: *“I come here every day as I need to get out of my apartment.”* While watching an elderly man with a walker, another person tells us that the man with the walker is a former sailor. He lives nearby and visits the Square for the company. He comes from a small town in Greenland, and the people we are talking to know each other from before coming to Copenhagen. They tell us that many of them come to the Square to *“be alone together.”* For example, a woman sitting here with us tells that she was raised among 13 foster children in Greenland before being sent to Denmark when she was eight years old. She can sit in the Square for a long time just observing. She talks about how she likes to come here and just observe in solitude. She sits on the granite block as she comments on the everyday life passing by us, like school children and tourists feeling warm in the summer heat. Occasionally, she talks to other people. She tells us that she appreciates the sense of togetherness at the square. Yet, she also likes solitude. She represents a need for social activity around you, yet still to be able to be private in public. For many of the people from the Greenlandic drinking communities, values such as inclusion, safety, protection, and community were embedded in the reasons they gave for coming here every day.

But not all people are sitting in silence and observing. People’s different reasons for being here can also be observed in patterns of movement and interactions. Some people move around a lot during the day and sit in various groups seemingly busy making contacts. Those moving around sometimes take turns going to the supermarket to buy alcohol to share in the group, sometimes they will make meals together on small disposable barbecue. No matter their preferences for being observers or interactors, a consistent reason for them being here is that the Square offers a place for togetherness and community. Some refer to each other as “brother,” “sister,” or “friend.” People look out for each other’s belongings such as a bag, sleeping gear, or a pram—sometimes even more vital belongings such as when one of the women at the Square asked a friend to take care of her dog for a while.

There also seems to be a sense of place connected to the Greenlandic Monument. Occasionally, alterations are made to the statues. One day the Hunter was wearing skiing glasses. Another day one of the statues was decorated with little white heart stickers. A third day flowers decorated one of the statues and people from the Greenlandic community explained to us that they were celebrating the birthday of the woman, Nuka, who stood model for the statue. Sometimes people embrace the statues and talk to them. These small gestures can be understood as activities that sustain a sense of place and create a sense of ownership over this place even though, formally, none of the drinking communities have any formal ownership here.

To prepare for the temporary installation of the sun sail, outreach workers from the municipality went to the Square to ask people about the placement of the sail. We participated in the activity where around twenty-five people from the drinking communities were asked about their preference for its placement. They were shown a laminated picture illustrating three placements and their preferences were noted down.



For reasons pertaining to the need for more space, rest, shelter from curious looks of people passing by, and security, the majority went with option number two. Option number one would place them away from the Square at the edge of the heavily trafficked Torvegade, while option number three would place them in a more and thus public, part of the Square.

Talking about the sail provided lively conversations about the pros and cons of the placement options and some people suggested alternative placements such as alongside the ventilation platform by the bus stop, or the middle of the Square. Especially those from the migrant community wanted to know if it would be possible to sleep under the sail and if softer seating would be a part of the new structure. One perspective that came up in most of the conversations was that no matter where it was placed, it had to be a place for everyone in the drinking communities. Once it was up, it immediately became a place where different people would gather to barbecue, drink, sleep, and socialize. It seemed as if a new structure, not yet with any specific meaning ascribed to it, would temporarily help tempering the usual conflicts.

A SENSE OF PLACE: STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES APPROACHED THROUGH THE STORY OF THE SUN SAIL

One way of approaching different (and sometimes more remote) stakeholders' sense of place is to look at the matter through discussions of psychical changes in the Square. During our fieldwork, the sun sail was a matter that came up in almost all interviews and conversations we had. Thus, it gave us an insight into the ways in which different stakeholders ascribe meaning to the Square and articulate their visions for the place. We begin by describing the perspective of people from the area; people who live here and hold opinions about the past, present, and future of the Square based on their lived experience.

The local council and the Square Network

All areas of Copenhagen have a local council elected for a four-year period. They constitute a link between the politicians at city hall and the local inhabitants of the areas and are involved in different processes of urban development and renewal. In the area of Christianshavn, the smaller association the Square Network is also represented in the local council.

The networks' mission is to ensure "*a square for everybody*." The network was formed with the purpose of gaining more influence at a political level. It is focused on the daily activities at the square and, more broadly, the ways in which the people using the square can be unified across interests and positions. Ideally, they say, it should be possible for anyone to use it and feel a sense of belonging. The network is also involved in proposing ideas for the physical development of the Square—such as the plan depicted in the beginning of our text—and tries to affect decision making at a political level. In 2024, the experience from the representative of the network we interviewed was that the interest from the City Council was growing. In our interview, she said that the growing interest could be a result of the network doing a good job, but also that politicians living in the area themselves might play a part in this as well.

For the local council the objective is to have a square with room and respect for everybody. The main desires are: More green, better lighting, shielding from traffic, and better and more modern toilet facilities (Christianshavns lokaludvalg, n.d.). It was based on a proposal from the local council that money in 2024 was allocated for renewal in the city budget.

During the interview, the representative from the Square Network was very attentive to the physical dimensions and limitations of the place, underlining that one of the major challenges of this place is its size; it is simply difficult to

accommodate the needs and wants of all stakeholders in such a small place. Thus, she emphasized the need for more experimental and movable design—worrying that once again expensive, permanent solutions that might work in theory, but not in practice, would be implemented. Much in line with what Sendra and Sennett term ‘infrastructure for disorder,’ she said:

“It is a developing square, and, thus, we must have an experimental approach.”

The mobile planters we described in the beginning were also initiated by the Square Network. The planters add to the greening of the Square and function as psychical boundaries in situations where conflicts and tensions arise between the drinking communities. Sometimes suggestions from the network are dismissed because stakeholders from the municipality worry that they will be vandalized or misused (and thus be a waste of money). But in fact, the planters have been taken care of, and everybody seems to agree that they are a good addition to the locale.

Finally, the network is also working with community organizing intended to make the Square a place for social interactions and gatherings—less associated with tensions and chaos, more associated with culture, community, and togetherness—as a part of this, they arrange free concerts, DJ performances, flea markets, communal dinners, dancing, and much more. It is not an easy task to make everybody happy, but the Square Network insists on the possibility of everybody using the square and having a sense of belonging here. Their financial resources are limited, so they collaborate with other associations to be able to host events.

When we asked about the sustainability of this kind of community organizing, the network representative said that the hardest part of the work is to create lasting change through events—although in many cases people from very different positions, and with very different interests invested in the Square, participate and interact in a reciprocal manner, there are those who can (and will) leave as soon as an event is over, and those who must (and will) stay because they have nowhere else to go. But the silver lining is that each meeting between different stakeholders leads to a small increase in their familiarity with each other; when you eat, dance, or sing together, it is easier to really see each other—it is humanizing and creates more equitability in terms of who has the right to the Square.



Danish rapper McEinar performing at the square in May 2024. During the live performance around 150 people were present, including around 30 people from the drinking communities. However, immediately after the event, most people left. Photo by Eva Lykke.

In general, there is no ongoing or formalized dialogue between the drinking communities and the network (or local council), but there is good communication between the outreach workers and the network. When we talk about drinking communities, the perspective of the Square Network's representative is that of pragmatism. According to her, most people in the area acknowledge that this place has always been a meeting place for people in precarious positions—she knows the history of the Square. And she knows enough of, and about, people from the drinking communities to realize that for them, the Square is a place to socialize and be seen (not gazed upon). They live in an urban environment where they sometimes feel invisible to the more affluent urban population so for them, the Square provides a sense of being a part of something larger. She is worried though, especially for the people from the migrant drinking community, for their precarious lives and the long-term consequences of a more hardcore drinking culture than in the past. She thinks it may be due to mental stress and says:

“Then you start the morning with a bottle of vodka and become aggressive. Maybe you start a fight with somebody, and the police come. If they conclude that you’re an EU citizen, you’re back at the Square an hour late waging chaos and destruction.”

The sun sail was not an idea that came from the network. After years of lobbying for something to happen, they approached the municipality's Technical and Environmental department to get permission to put up the mobile planters. When they got permission, the sun sail sort of came along as a bonus—the department asked if they would like a sail as well and they just said yes. When we asked if they did not worry that it would attract more people to the drinking communities, we were, once again, met by pragmatism; the people are already there so we might as well do what we can to make their conditions better by providing shade and shelter. In fact, the better the place becomes, the more likely it seems that people will act as its stewards. For the network, there is a difference between enabling and humanizing. Thus, for a while they have advocated for the removal of the glass roof over the ventilation platform at the bus stop. They argue that enabling rough sleeping by design relieves the authorities of responsibility of finding more sustainable solutions. They problematize the actions of well-meaning people who leave sleeping bags, food, clothes etc. on the platform, only for all of this to be scattered around the Square leaving the place in a worse condition. When pushed on the perspective, the network's representative says that when rough sleeping becomes everybody's business it becomes nobody's business, and, allowing people to rough sleep rather than dealing with the root causes of the problem, such as a lack of affordable and alternative housing, is irresponsible. As the sun sail is temporary, and a lighter physical structure, the network's position is that it is less likely to invite rough sleeping.

Municipal voices and values

The sun sail is a good example of how complex decision making about urban spaces and changes can be. In our interviews, we have tried to determine where the idea of a sun sail came from. For example, we asked representatives from the municipality who made the final decision about its existence, and who paid for it. But we never managed to find any final answers. In one interview (with a project manager from the Technical and Environmental department), we learned that the decision was most likely made in a transversal network for stakeholders of the Square. Here, managers from the different municipal departments are present and, thus, the network can make decisions. What we also learned was that the municipal departments agreed that the sail had to be a mobile and temporary solution. Their hope was that it would remedy some of the conflicts and issues at the Square described in this text; that it would create more safety.

In general, maintaining Copenhagen as a safe city is a highly prioritized theme. Thus, formulating policy strategies and supporting concrete initiatives aimed at creating safety (or a sense of safety) in all areas of the city are a priority. Such strategies include, for example, initiatives to prevent crime, infrastructure and initiatives that support the experience of safety in local areas, and extra resources for areas where people report they are not feeling safe. These strategies are managed through a steering group with management representatives from all departments in the municipality as well as the City Police. In fact, safety has been monitored annually in all parts of the city since 2010, and strategies and interventions are planned by the transversal entity Safe City [Sikker By].

For the most part, when it comes to everyday life in public spaces, the perspectives of municipal departments are that of a distant observer; few of the people working with urban development related to concrete issues and challenges in specific areas have firsthand knowledge about the places, issues, or dynamics in question. Thus, they rely mostly on information from people on the ground such as outreach workers, representatives from the local councils, people involved in civil society initiatives (such as the Square Network), or people living in the area. However, we interviewed one staff member from the Technical and Environmental department who had firsthand knowledge about the Square. He designed the sun sail and later commissioned the municipal blacksmiths to build it. He was also the one who approved of the planters being set up at the Square. For him, adaptability, of material things, not people, and “*thinking outside the box*” are central guiding principles.

In Copenhagen there is a longstanding tradition for municipal support (economically and politically) for harm reduction and low threshold services maintained by the public sector and NGOs in close collaboration. In terms of values, we have, in all our interviews, asked “What kind of city should Copenhagen be?” and, uniformly, the answer has been that Copenhagen is, and should be, a city for all. Yet, there seems to be a decoupling and lack of communication between planning, decision making, site development

projects, and social work. For the planning and policy part of the department of Social Services, a central principle seems to be that they want to avoid engaging in planning and site development projects that make it more difficult for people in precarious positions to maintain a life in the city. Yet, we have not been able to identify a formal or systematic approach to qualifying values such as inclusion and diversity that are expressed in the principle of maintaining “a city for all.” Eventually, the lack of such formal or systematic approaches results in outreach workers, police, NGOs, and civil society stakeholders feeling that they are being left to solve issues following urban planning that did not involve practitioners and citizens perspectives in the first place. This may explain why participation and agency seem to be such central values to most of the people we talked to.

We interviewed people from the Technical and Environmental department. One of their tasks is to keep the city clean and safe. More broadly, they are also involved in urban development, urban renewal, and maintaining public spaces and infrastructure. They also collaborate with Social Services, for example, in creating solutions, technical as well as physical, when Social Services report issues or conflicts in a specific place. In the Technical and Environmental department there is an awareness about the vision of maintaining a city for all. As expressed by one of our interviewees, a project manager in the department:

“The city is for everybody, and you must always keep that in the back of your mind. We do not build anything with the aim of hiding or displacing people. That is 100 percent the fundamental thinking in our department. The city is for everybody”.

A concern in the department is the safety and security of their staff working with cleaning and maintenance in the city. Staff members are instructed not to engage with people whose behavior or presence makes them unable to do their job as: *“We do not need cleaners to act as police”*. The interviewee also mentioned that, since the municipality signed the Homeless Bill of Rights (Housing Rights Watch, n.d.), this bill must also guide their work. However, as with the lack of formal or systematic approaches to qualifying values such as inclusion and diversity when talking about *“a city for all,”* we have not been able to identify a formal or systematic knowledge among staff members in any of the municipal departments in relation to the ways in which the Homeless Bill of Rights should be mirrored in their work.

Local voices and values

Christianshavn is undergoing a transformation and new residents are moving in. This transformation, we were told, has changed the local position on the drinking communities from that of acceptance to a more dismissive attitude. The socioeconomic status of inhabitants of Christianshavns mirrors the general development in Copenhagen: private property prices are on a constant rise, in fact prices in Christianshavn are among the highest in Copenhagen. We have interviewed a manager from a local NGO under the Salvation Army, who said the following about the transformations in the area’s socioeconomic fabric:

“Sometimes new neighbors approach me to say that we (the NGO) should be grateful that they accept us—with the clientele we have. I tell them that we have been here for more than 100 years and have always played a role in the local community, taking care of vulnerable people. So, I remind the newcomers that we are the old timers.”

From the beginning of our fieldwork, we were told that there were “issues” between some of the neighbors and the drinking communities. Especially a few neighbors, also known by everybody in the transversal network, were doing what they could to make their voices heard with the municipality, police, and Square Network. The position of these neighbors was that of frustration with the activities at the Square. We have not spoken to the neighbors but approached their perspective through social media (which is of course not necessarily a testimony to what people would say if asked in an interview). In the summer of 2024, the Facebook group “Os fra Christianshavn” included 11.500 people. Here, people regularly post comments concerning the Square. Some are expressing their frustration with things going on in the Square. Sometimes they criticize the municipality for not doing enough to solve the issues. However, others are defending the drinking communities asking where these people should be if not at the Square. Sometimes the neighborhood’s past is evoked, arguing that the community has always supported precarious populations and allowed them to dwell here. As far as we know, the neighbors have not been involved in the placement of the sun sail, which was also debated in the Facebook group upon its arrival at the Square.

SUMMING UP

From members of the drinking communities, we have learned that many feel a special connection to the place. The reasons are manifold: Some have lived experience with the place and history attached to the Square, some feel connected to the Greenlandic Monument, some consider the square to be a vital junction where friends are certain to pass by, and you are sure to meet them. To many of them this is a nodal point in their life, like the bar where everybody knows your name and greets you as if you were expected. It is chaotic at times and the activities have a tidal movement affected by currents outside the square: payday, activities and developments in other places in the city, and weather to name but a few. Police are often called, as the drinking can get out of hand resulting in fights or people that pass out and sometimes need medical assistance. For some neighbors and commuters these tidal movements instill annoyance, or a feeling of being unsafe at the Square. Meanwhile, at least in principle, the municipality of Copenhagen insists on “a city for all” promoting solutions that must adhere to this principle, yet little is mentioned about the rights of urban precarious populations.

FOR TEACHERS: LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The students achieve knowledge of (part I):

- Spatial meaning and values.
- Interconnections between positions (interests), power, and place.
- Sustainable urban development.

The students achieve the skills to (part I):

- Identify social issues and matters in a place.
- Describe and connect the physical and material dimensions of a place to conflicts related to place.

The students achieve competences to (part II):

- Use their knowledge to apply an advocacy informed approach to promote the rights and dignity of precarious urban populations.
- Reflect on the ways in which social works can contribute to promoting sustainable solutions in urban development.

FOR STUDENTS: DISCUSSION POINTS AND QUESTIONS, PART I

In his theoretical conceptualization of place, Tim Creswell argues that power and place are interrelated concepts—that places do not have meanings that are natural and obvious,

“But ones that are created by some people with more power than others to define what is and is not appropriate” (Cresswell 2015, p. 42).

Thus, when working with either of the three dimensions of place, location, locale, and sense of place, power must be a part of your analysis.

- Make a list of the different values you consider central to each stakeholder’s perception of the place. Create a visual map of the different value positions where you connect the values to psychical and material structures (locale).
- Based on what you know about the Square, give examples of the ways in which dimensions of the locale (such as physical and material structures and/or spatial practices) either enlarge or diminish conflicts.
- Consider the role of power in relation to the different values and needs of stakeholders: which values do you think tend to become favored and why? How would it be possible to merge or balance the different values and needs?

- According to experts, sustainable urban development is about balancing natural ecology with a rapidly growing urban environment and understanding that public space is a driver for creating more engaged, equitable and sustainable communities (see Huttenhof 2021, p. 12-18). Make a list of different ways in which you see that the stakeholders could consider sustainable urban development in future planning for the development of the Square.
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Reading suggestions for part I

Boetto, H. (2019). “Advancing Transformative Eco-Social Change: Shifting from Modernist to Holistic Foundations,” *Australian Social Work*, 72:2, pp. 139-151.

Creswell, T. (2015). *Place an introduction*. London: Wiley Blackwell. 2nd ed. (chapter 1, 2, and 4).

Hyttenhoff, M / SPUR. (2021). Coexistence in Public Space Engagement tools for creating shared spaces in places with homelessness, spur.org/coexistence, https://www.spur.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/spur_gehl_coexistence_in_public_space.pdf

Sendra, P. & Sennett, R. (2022). *Designing Disorder. Experiments and Disruptions in the City*. London: Verso.

FOR STUDENTS: DISCUSSION POINTS AND QUESTIONS, PART II

Sustainability involves thinking about social, economic, and environmental dimensions of our lives, habits, and practices (Purvis, Mao & Robinson, 2018). Usually, it is evident that social work considers social, and perhaps even economic, sustainability, for example, by way of working with inclusion, self-determination and redistribution of economic resources through, for example, welfare services. But the environmental dimension of sustainability may be a bit more difficult for us to grasp. However, the environmental dimension is more present in our profession than one might think, and it is inevitable that social workers must consider environmental sustainability to solve social problems in the future. In fact, the transition towards a more socially, economically, and environmentally just and sustainable world is a major theme in The Global Agenda for Social Work & Social Development Framework for 2020-2030 captured under the headline “Co-building Inclusive Social Transformation” (see <https://www.ifsw.org/social-work-action/the-global-agenda/>).

Research in eco-social work relies heavily on growth critical theory (see Boetto, 2019 and <https://www.ifsw.org/social-work-action/climate-justice-program/>). In fact, the four core values identified in the field of growth critical theory correspond quite well with the Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles. Thus, four of the core values in growth critical theory are sustainability, democracy, justice, and wellbeing.

Based on your reading of the case, answers in part I, and research at the referenced websites, you can now begin to consider:

- Where do you see the values sustainability, democracy, justice, and wellbeing present in the case? Where do you see them lacking?
- How can social workers create and/or engage in processes of finding sustainable solutions that include all stakeholders' perspectives? How would social workers ensure the inclusion of voices of urban precarious populations (such as the drinking communities described in the case)?
- How would you characterize the role of social workers in a case like this? What would be necessary knowledge, skills and competences for social workers?
- Which ethical dimensions do you think need to be considered and why?
- What solutions can be found to ensure inclusive and sustainable solutions for all the stakeholders?

Reading suggestions for part II

Boetto, H. (2019). "Advancing Transformative Eco-Social Change: Shifting from Modernist to Holistic Foundations," *Australian Social Work*, 72:2, pp. 139-151.

Purvis, B., Mao, Y. & Robinson, D. (2018). "Three pillars of sustainability: in search of conceptual origins," *Sustainability Science* (2019) 14, pp. 681–695.

Scourfield, P. (2021) "What is advocacy?" In: *Using Advocacy in Social Work Practice. A guide for students and professionals*. London: Routledge.

<https://www.ifsw.org/social-work-action/the-global-agenda/>

<https://www.ifsw.org/social-work-action/climate-justice-program/introduction/>

<https://degrowth.org/>

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