



Editorial: Tales of a City

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Issue: [Tales of a City](#)

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Welcome to the very first issue of Urban Matters!

This issue of Urban Matters continues the discussion on how and to what ends stories can be used for depicting, interpreting, sustaining or changing cities and urban life. The tales of a city is a trope familiar from art and popular culture, but also from scholarship. The obvious reference is to Armistead Maupin's novel, which created a genre in which the identities of certain cities are crafted and which has often been published as a series of periodicals in a local daily. Anthropologist Ruth Finnegan however chose the same title as Maupin for her book about how the perceptions of cities and experiences of city-life are mediated through culturally-mediated stories and story-forms (Finnegan 1998). With this book, Finnegan explores different narratives about the city Milton Keynes, which was planned and built in Buckinghamshire in the late 1960s for, as Finnegan puts it, "London's overspill". In her conclusion, Finnegan notes that there is a complex plurality of co-existing stories about Milton Keynes as well as about cities more generally, a condition that she seems to be celebrating.

However, the stories told about a city are not innocent, but rather impact the lives led in the depicted city. The popular memory approach (Thomson 2013; Popular Memory Group 2012; Schwarz 2011) is one way to study narratives as processes of power. According to this approach, dominance as well as resistance arise from the competition between narratives. No actor is in a position to fully control how a given social formation is made meaningful through narration, but rather concessions have to be made. At times, certain narratives become especially persuasive, resulting in the situation that other narratives have to be adjusted in order to be compelling. However, while one narrative might dominate among the general public, alternative stories can be created and kept alive among other particular publics. Whilst Finnegan can be criticised for dismissing culture as a way for people to connect to each other and actively make meaning in order to communicate in specific moments and relationships, the popular memory approach supplies the means for discussing how stories link poetic representations to the social reality in which they are told. Nevertheless, this latter approach has been developed for the study of the social production of national history and needs to be made spatially aware and adjusted to the scale of a city.

The collection of articles presented here has been written as an answer to a call for a continuing comparison between different approaches to studying cities and urban life through narrative. They represent different ways to connect stories to urban studies and/or to interventions in urban reality. Some of them use narrative to give voice to urban experiences, others approach stories as material for studies of urban life or governing, while a third set of articles point out storytelling as a site for differently situated actors to collaborate in a multipurposed production of knowledge and culture. The issue includes examples from cities in different countries but many of them discuss examples from the city of Malmö, Sweden. Malmö can be characterised as an ordinary city playing a part in a curious number of narratives. Many of these narratives, especially the ones which break through outside of Sweden, are told in the mode of the urban noir (Prakash 2010; Schlarek Mulinari 2017). Meanwhile, an especially prolific culture of community engagement has developed in Malmö, with initiatives coming from a broad range of actors from established

institutions for stage production, art or research, but also from private theatre companies and civil society actors. Malmö has become the point from which a majority of the contributions depart, but the local history is important mostly as a way to discuss the general problematic of the place of stories within the understanding and explanation of cities. As historian Charles Joyner (1984) puts it:

“All history is local history somewhere... Still no history, properly understood, is merely of local significance.”

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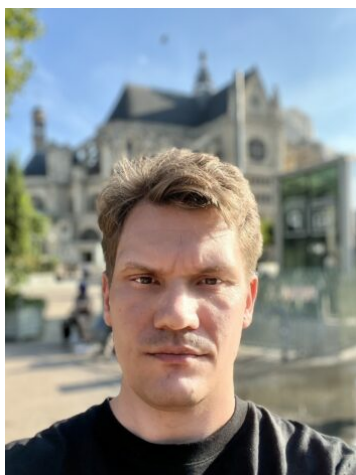
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Carina Listerborn is a Professor in Urban Planning at Malmö University and the Director of the research center Institute for Urban Research (IUR). Her research on intersectional spatial experiences, urban and housing justice and planning practices is grounded in methodologies about the everyday. Her research publications cover racism in public spaces, urban planning strategies, intersectional perspectives on safety discourses, housing inequalities and smart cities.



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Robert Nilsson Mohammadi serves as the theme leader for urban humanities at Malmö University's Institute for Urban Research (IUR), where he coordinates the development of a research environment and hub dedicated to urban humanities.

His current work focuses on how local actors handle the afterlives of far-right racist attacks. By studying public memory art in various cities affected by far-right violence, his research introduces a spatialized, urbanized, and translocal perspective to memory work conducted by those impacted by such violence. He also approaches this topic through the framework of reparative remembering, investigating alternatives to dominant critical approaches and examining how cultural production and spatial practices can be reparative.

Another key research interest concerns participatory practices in the production of culture and knowledge in the public sphere. He approaches this both critically and creatively, analyzing the conditions for just co-production within an unequal society and a political economy that often reinforces the divide between those who contribute experiences and those who refine theories. A central concept in his work is "shared authority." He also studies community art and community archives as examples of participatory knowledge production in urban public spaces.