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Concrete Homes in the Arctic Wasteland

Reconstructing and Reinventing Nuuk's *boligblokke* in Danish Literary Fiction about Greenland

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Abstract

Nuuk, the capital of Greenland, occupies a unique place in contemporary Danish-language literature as both a modern Nordic city and a site marked by colonial history. This urban setting is a common feature of Lotte Inuk's *Sultekunstnerinde* (2004) and Mads Peder Nordbo's *Pigen uden hud* (2017). Through a close reading of significant passages from the two books, respectively a young adult novel with a clear autofictional component and an 'Arctic noir', I will focus on the architecture of (literary) Nuuk, with particular attention to a specific and 'uncanny' type of building: the characteristic concrete *boligblokke* built in the years of the so-called modernization, symbol of the centralization policies favored by Denmark starting from the 1950s. In *Sultekunstnerinde*, these buildings are 'reconstructed' and presented to the reader as places of childhood, while a recurring setting in *Pigen uden hud* is the controversial Blok P – which, in the fiction of the novel, is 'reinvented' as the setting of brutal murders of its inhabitants. The emphasis on spatiality and architecture, given the symbolic significance of these buildings, will be combined with a postcolonial reading.

Keywords: *Dansk grønlandslitteratur*, postcolonial studies, Nuuk, uncanny architecture, *boligblokke*

1. INTRODUCTION

Dansk grønlandslitteratur, defined by Kirsten Thisted (2003; 2013) as Danish fiction with a thematic focus on Greenland, has strongly relied, throughout its almost 200-year-long history, on the dualisms elicited by the encounter with the Greenlandic 'other'. Among these, the most notable and recurring case is probably the opposition between 'culture' and 'nature', categories respectively associated with 'Danishness' and 'Greenlandicness' (see Thisted 2003; 2012). This presupposition alone suggests that the depiction of the Greenlandic natural landscape, which comes across as pristine and almost alien-like in the eyes of the Danish beholder, has always had a central role in this genre – in opposition to anthropic spaces.[1] In the words of Bo Wagner Sørensen and Søren Forchhammer (2011:559), "Grønlænderen er historisk indskrevet i en dikotomisk tænkning, der er centreret om land/by og natur/civilisation, og grønlændere har i vid udstrækning selv taget denne tænkning til sig".[2]

In more recent years, however, the urban element has progressively been integrated into *dansk grønlandslitteratur*. One of the first examples of a 'Nuuk novel', according to Thisted (2011:285), is Kim Leine's *Kalak*, published in 2007. A predecessor, in this sense, can be found in Lotte Inuk's novel *Sultekunstnerinde* (2004; *Hunger Artist*), one of the two objects of the following analysis along with Mads Peder Nordbo's Arctic thriller *Pigen uden hud* (2017; *The Girl without Skin*).[3] These two contemporary novels have been chosen because of their setting in the Greenlandic capital and their attention to a specific kind of building characterizing its unique urban landscape, namely the concrete *boligblok*.

From a different angle, the two books strongly differ from one another. *Sultekunstnerinde*, a young adult novel by Inuk with its evident autobiographical component, is a key text in contemporary *dansk grønlandslitteratur* because it thematizes, breaking an implicit taboo, the experience of a Danish girl living in Greenland in the years just before the Home Rule: "Der har helt klart været en berøringsangst, måske ligefrem en slags tabu overfor at erklære Grønland for del af ens 'hovedstol' som forfatter, når man nu 'bare' var dansker. Det var Lotte Inuk, der i 2004 brød det tabu med romanen *Sultekunstnerinde*" (Thisted 2014).[4] *Pigen uden hud*, on the other hand, can be labelled as an 'Arctic noir', a subgenre of Scandinavian crime fiction that stands out for its setting in the most extreme regions of the North, "hvor stedet og naturen ikke er en eksotisk kulisse om en forbrydelse og dens opklaring, men

[1] The opposition between Greenlandic natural scenery and urban landscape has been discussed by Bo Wagner Sørensen in his *Perceiving Landscapes in Greenland* (2008), where considerations on the identitary value of said spaces are also at stake. The scholar writes: "Greenlanders stand out as part of a particularly harsh and impressive landscape to a much higher degree than Europeans, even if Europeans are inscribed into specific national landscapes as well. The metaphorical fusion of Greenlanders, sea, ice, and mountains tends to be much stronger and more contemporary than that of the Danes, oat fields, and beech trees" (2008:110). On the other hand, when shifting his focus to Nuuk, Sørensen stresses that the Greenlandic capital is perceived by the local people as a substantially "Danish-like" place (2008:114), alien to Greenlandic culture (115). The same point is stressed by Sørensen and Forchhammer in their article *Byen og bygden – grønlandskhedens landskaber* (2014; *The City and the Settlement – The Landscapes of Greenlandicness*), where the focus is on Nuuk as "et stykke Danmark på klipper" (13; "a piece of Denmark on the rocks").

[2] "Greenlanders are historically inscribed in a dichotomous thinking centered on countryside/city and nature/civilization, and Greenlanders themselves have to a large extent embraced this thinking". All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

[3] The attention to the anthropic element in the aforementioned books is mostly limited to the city of Nuuk, although representations of smaller towns are found in *Kalak* – when Kim moves to Eastern Greenland – or in Iben Mondrup's *Godhavn*. In these instances, however, the contrast between 'architecture' and 'nature' is not as strong as in the case of Nuuk, probably due to the fact that bigger buildings are generally absent outside of the capital. It should be noted that although the focus of the present analysis is restricted to Danish literature about Greenland, Nuuk is also increasingly present in contemporary Greenlandic literature; the case of Niviaq Korneliussen's *Homo sapienne* (2014; *Last Night in Nuuk*) is quite illustrative in this regard.

[4] "There has clearly been a fear to approach the topic, perhaps even some sort of taboo regarding the possibility to declare Greenland part of one's own 'capital' as a writer, if you are 'only' a Dane. It was Lotte Inuk who broke this taboo in 2004 with her novel *Sultekunstnerinde*".

plotgenererende" (Andersen et al. 2019:46).[5] In its 'Greenlandic' variants, in fact, this genre often serves as a vehicle for social criticism, emphasizing the contradictions in the relationship between Denmark and its former Arctic colony. This is also the case with the novel under consideration, in which contemporary events intertwine with cold cases from 1970s Nuuk.

To the best of my knowledge, these two novels have never been considered jointly. The focus on literary representations of Nuuk's concrete *boligblokke* is also a new element in the study of *dansk grønlandslitteratur*. Considerations on the spatial dimension within the genre can however be found in Emilie Dybdal and Anders Grønlund's *Bygder og barakker: Arbejdspladsen som konfliktzone i dansk grønlandslitteratur* (2020; *Villages and Barracks: The Workplace as a Conflict Zone in Danish Literature about Greenland*) as well as in Dybdal's *Litteraturen rykker nordpå. Om Grønland i 10'ernes danske litteratur* (2021; *Literature Moves North. Greenland in Danish Literature from the 2010s*). These contributions have the merit of merging a postcolonial approach, the privileged theoretical framework for the analysis of Danish literature about Greenland, with considerations on spaces and (non-)places. A similar method characterizes the present paper, which, nonetheless, is more concerned with architecture than with spatiality in general, be it in relation to Nuuk's urban landscape or to its *boligblokke*.

The latter article by Dybdal has also been an inspiration as to the employment of the notion of the 'uncanny' in relation to spaces and postcoloniality. In her analysis of Iben Mondrup's *Godhavn*, in fact, Dybdal profitably introduces Freud's theorization as a tool to highlight the complex interrelation between spatial, bodily, and 'postcolonial' discomfort. Although relatively unexplored as to Danish-Greenlandic relations, the intertwinement between postcoloniality and the 'uncanny' has previously been pointed out by one of the pioneers of postcolonial studies, namely Homi Bhabha (1992). In his article *The World and the Home*, Bhabha delves into the implications of *unhomely* feelings triggered by displacement or, more broadly speaking, by the condition of 'in-betweenness'. The category of the 'uncanny' lends itself to such discussions as it is located on the cusp of being familiar and, at the same time, 'disturbingly' alien. It should be noted that Bhabha prefers to translate the term employed by Freud, *unheimlich*, as 'unhomely' rather than 'uncanny' – with the aim to preserve its original attention to the home dimension, one of the spaces *par excellence* where individual (and collective) identities are constructed and negotiated.

In the present article, these discourses will be used to analyze two literary representations of different *boligblokke* in Nuuk, the infamous Blok P – 'reinvented' by Nordbo in *Pigen uden hud*, where the apartment block becomes a (fictional) crime scene – and the anonymous and alienating buildings where *Sultekunstnerinde*'s main character Charlotta resides during her years in Nuuk. The fictional retelling of Lotte Inuk's own story through an alter ego, Charlotta, provides the author with an occasion to 'reconstruct' buildings, some of which have disappeared through the years. Likewise, though on a smaller scale, Danish and Greenlandic identities have been erased and reconstructed. In both cases, though, these peculiar buildings seem to elicit negative sensations, partially due to their structural characteristics. The interplay between personal and social discomfort, on the one hand, and architectural features, on the other, is at the center of Anthony Vidler's work on the 'architectural uncanny', which will be reprised especially with regard to Blok P. Before delving into this aspect, the (literary) history of Nuuk's *boligblokke* will be briefly traced.

[5] "Where place and nature are not an exotic backdrop for a crime and its solution, but plot-generating elements".

2. LITERARY DEPICTIONS OF NUUK'S *BOLIGBLOKKE*

The concrete *boligblokke* (Fig. 1) constructed during the years of the so-called modernization policies, which aimed at bringing Greenland – no longer a colony but an *amt*, i.e., a Danish county (see Hálfdanarson & Thisted 2020:148) – up to the living standards of Denmark proper, stand out in contemporary literary descriptions of Nuuk. This holds true in the case of Kim Leine's *Kalak* and Iben Mondrup's *Store Malene* (cf. Turri 2023), as much as for the novels chosen for this analysis.

Several scholars agree on the fact that "[i]n the context of Greenland, the modernization politics of the post-colonial period of the 1950s and 1960s have ironically come to symbolize the destructive power of colonialism" (Rud 2017:127). Greenland's passage from colony to *amt* in 1953 implied, among other things, that the local population was concentrated to the urban areas, a policy also adopted as regards Canadian Inuit (cf. Terpstra 2015:20). According to Tekke Terpstra, an immediate consequence of this phenomenon, defined by the scholar in terms of "forced migration", was the intensification of the ethnic 'conflict' between Danes and Greenlanders (20). The coercive aspect of the centralization favored by Denmark is the subject of numerous literary representations starting from the 1970s, characterized by a particularly politicized afflatus. In this regard, the following lines from Sven Holm's poem *Grønlands historie eller danskernes historie på Grønland* (1978; *The History of Greenland or the History of Danes in Greenland*) is quite exemplificative: "Hvad havde vi tænkt os/da vi kaldte landets mensker sammen på bopladserne/og senere spredte dem/og kaldte dem sammen i Kolonierne/og senere spredte dem/og kaldte dem sammen i byerne?" (Holm 1978).[6]

Figure 1. *Blocks 2-10 in Nuuk, 16 August 2024. Photo by Francesca Turri.*

From the 1960s onwards the *boligblokke* began to characterize Nuuk's landscape, as a consequence of the aforementioned policies. These complexes represented a functional solution to the need to accommodate as many inhabitants as possible while simultaneously offering them a decent standard of living:

[6] "What were we thinking/when we summoned the people of this Country in the settlements/and later scattered them/and summoned them together in the colonies/and later scattered them/and summoned them in the cities?".

> Op igennem 60'erne opstod behovet for mere effektive boligbyggerier end de føromtalte mindre træhuse, hvilket resulterede i opførelsen af større boligblokke. Der var her tale om elementbyggerier, der kunne sørge for flest mulige boliger på hurtigst mulig anlægstid. Blokkene var forsynet med moderne tekniske installationer så som rindende vand og elektricitet, og i takt med at Nuuks bybillede ændrede sig til, medvirkede disse forhold til, at levevilkårene og sundheden for den generelle befolkning hævedes betydeligt. Boligblokkene er i dag et omdiskuteret emne, ikke mindst fordi de nu ofte fremstår nedslidte og dårligt vedligeholdte, hvilket skæmmer de arkitektoniske kvaliteter de rent faktisk indeholder.[7] (*Nuuk Byatlas* 2019:8)

However, the circumstances in which they were built, defined in *Nuuk Byatlas* (a city redevelopment project dating back to 2018) as "et smertefuldt kapitel i landets historie"[8] (2019: 13) and the dilapidated state into which some of the constructions soon deteriorated, contributed to their reputation of "betonslum"[9] (13), regardless of their architectural qualities. Those *boligblokke* that have not been demolished, for example in the areas of Radiofjeldet or Store Slette, remain to this day a testament to the architecture of an era, as well as to a transitional phase of the country. According to *Nuuk Byatlas*: "De repræsenterer en tid, der til stadighed er med til at definere Grønlands identitet og selvopfattelse her i det 21. århundrede" (13).[10]

The most (in)famous of these 'blocks' is undoubtedly Blok P, "[d]et mest håndgribelige symbol på G60-centralismen"[11] – a building with a Le Corbusier-inspired design that, regardless of its demolition in 2012, still haunts Nuuk's imagery (see Bærenholdt 2016:407). Blok P was for instance the subject of a temporary exhibition held at Nordatlantens Brygge in Copenhagen between October 2013 and 2014, titled *BLOK P – en boligblok i Nuuk, 1966–2012* (*BLOK P – An Apartment Block in Nuuk, 1966–2012*). A permanent exhibition at Nuutoqaq, the Nuuk Local Museum, is dedicated to the same trademark building (Fig. 2).

According to the 2013–2014 exhibition's description available on Nordatlantens Brygge's website, this building, which housed 1% of the Greenlandic population, towering in all its bulk in the barrenness of the surrounding landscape (Nielsen 2016:48), was for all of its 46 years of existence "a source of fascination, which attracted not only its own residents, but also tourists, academics, artists, photographers and many others".[12] As said, the fascination with this building is also reflected in literary fiction. Among the texts that include Blok P as a setting, *Store Malene* by Iben Mondrup deserves to be mentioned. In this novel Blok P is a ghost building, uninhabited and awaiting demolition, but the protagonist Justine nevertheless spends hours there, in solitude, observing the traces of life that the former inhabitants have left in the apartments.[13]

[7] "Throughout the 60s, the need arose for more efficient residential buildings than the previously mentioned smaller wooden houses, which resulted in the construction of larger apartment blocks. That is to say prefabricated buildings that could provide as many homes as possible in the fastest possible construction time. The blocks were equipped with modern technical installations such as running water and electricity, and as Nuuk's cityscape changed, these conditions contributed to significantly raising the living conditions and health of the general population. The blocks of flats are today a hotly debated topic, not least because they now often appear worn down and poorly maintained, affecting the architectural qualities they actually feature".

[8] "A painful chapter in the history of the country".

[9] "Concrete slums".

[10] "They represent an era that continues to define Greenland's identity and its self-understanding in the twenty-first century".

[11] "The most tangible symbol of the centralization favored by the G60 policies".

[12] *Blok P in Nuuk*. Retrieved from https://www.nordatlantens.dk/en/exhibitions/blok-p-in-nuuk (19 August 2024).

[13] Considerations on Mondrup's depiction of this specific building and its symbolic implications with regard to the Greenlandic postcolonial context have been made by Volquardsen (2014) and Turri (2023) and will therefore be overlooked in this context.

3. REINVENTING BLOCK P: THE REPRESENTATION OF NUUK'S COLOSSUS IN *PIGEN UDEN HUD*

Blok P plays a primary role in Mads Peder Nordbo's *Pigen uden hud*. The plot of Nordbo's thriller is told through two different storylines set in different years, 2014 and 1973. In the present-day storyline, two years have passed since the demolition of Blok P, but its specter still haunts the city. Blok P is mentioned for the first time in the novel in the following paragraph, taken from a scene where the protagonist Matthew Cave, a Danish-American journalist working for the paper *Sermitsiaq*, walks through Nuuk in the company of his experienced colleague Leiff:

> Der er mange af de gamle blokke i Nuuk, og de står der stadig, selvom de også er smadrede og utætte. De har alle hver deres nummer, men ikke kæmpen, der lå her. Den hed Blok P. Som havde man lige fra begyndelsen anet, at den ville ende sine dage som et tyngende symbol på Nuuks mentale ar. Den blev revet ned i 2012, så det er ikke længe siden, men nok alligevel små 50 år for sent, vil jeg tro.[14] (Nordbo 2018:51)

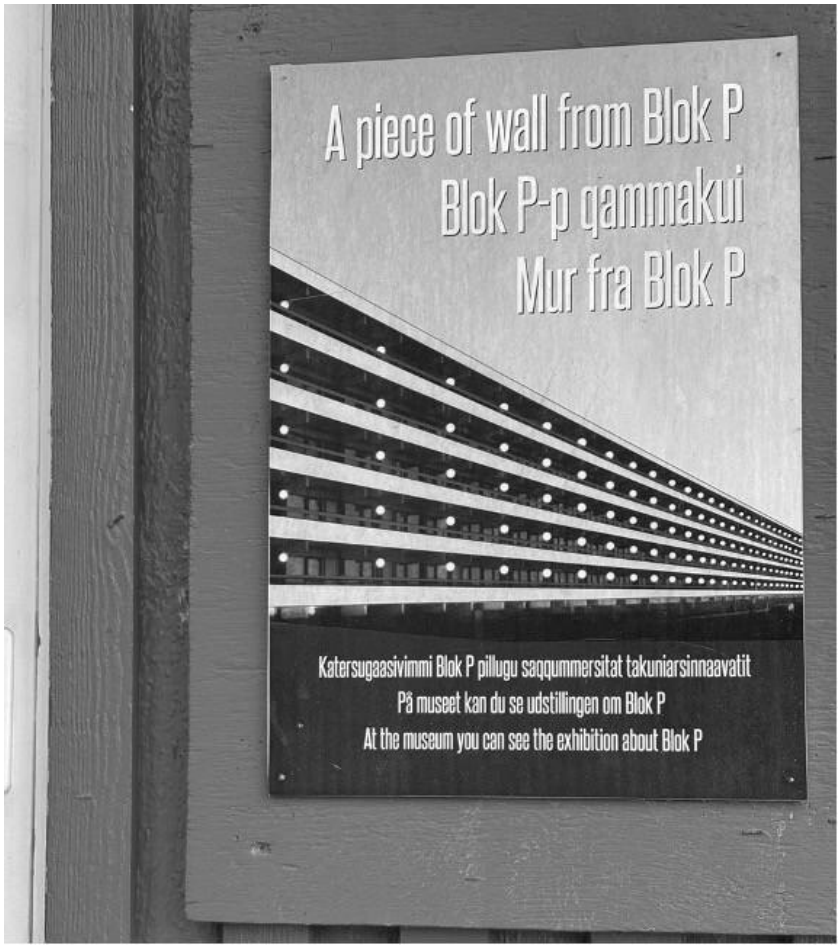

Figure 2. *Permanent exhibition about Blok P at Nuutoqaq, 16 August 2024. Photo by Francesca Turri.*

[14] "Many of the old apartment blocks in Nuuk are still standing, although they're falling apart. They're all numbered, except for the giant that used to be here. It was called Block P, and it became a troubling symbol of Nuuk's problems. It was demolished in 2012, so not all that long ago – but still fifty years too late, in my opinion" (Nordbo 2018:49).

As emerges from the extract, the most evident aspect of the blocks of flats not yet demolished is decay – reduplicated, on a non-strictly visual level, by the social discomfort of which these buildings have become a symbol. Blok P, it could be argued, exhibited these same characteristics in a hyperbolic fashion, starting from its exaggerated and eerie dimensions. This 'giant' housed a significant percentage of the city's population and was 231 meters long – a characteristic that made it stand out in a small city like Nuuk. In his literary depiction of Blok P, Nordbo insists precisely on the disturbing qualities characterizing the building. In the aforementioned paragraph, this subtext can for instance be appreciated in the use of expressions such as "kæmpen" and "mentale ar" (mental scars) – arguably employed by the author with the aim to implicitly align himself with critical stances regarding the relocation of Greenlanders in urban contexts.

Following these considerations, Blok P *per se* can be seen as an example of monstrous and 'uncanny' architecture, and simultaneously as the symbol *par excellence* of Danish neocolonial practices, which, as mentioned, were perhaps never as invasive as in the years of the so-called 'modernization' and 'danification' (see Rud 2017). The policies adopted, in addition to having contributed to the transformation of the Greenlandic landscape, have obviously had a significant effect on the island's inhabitants and their lifestyle. This shift, as specified by Tekke Terpstra (2015:55) has also brought positive effects, nonetheless toned down by Greenlanders promoting traditional culture, in line with the political climate preceding the Home Rule.

The monstrous appearance of Blok P, along with its intrinsically historical significance, can be considered in the light of Anthony Vidler's reflections on the 'uncanny', exposed in his *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (1992). The Freudian concept of the 'unheimlich', used by Vidler with reference to buildings and urban landscapes, addresses a contradictory feeling of familiarity paired with discomfort. A similar ambiguity – at least according to an anticolonial stance with regard to the urbanization project such as Nordbo's – is embodied by Nuuk's concrete block of flats: raised to house hundreds of occupiers and provide them with practical and effective facilities, the construction ended up as a symbol of Nuuk's social disease. The attention to the 'home' dimension is also at the core of Freud's theories about the 'unheimlich' and of Vidler's reinterpretation:

> As articulated theoretically by Freud, the uncanny or *unheimlich* is rooted by etymology and usage in the environment of the domestic, or the *heimlich*, thereby opening up problems of identity around the self, the other, the body and its absence: thence its force in interpreting the relations between the psyche and the dwelling, the body and the house, the individual and the metropolis. (Vidler 1992:X; italics in the original)

Reflections on the "peculiarly unstable nature of 'house and home'", continues Vidler, go hand in hand with "more general reflection on the questions of social and individual estrangement, alienation, exile, and homelessness" (1992:IX). The combination of feelings of unease and estrangement, and at the same time familiarity, finds realization, in the specific case of Blok P, in the discrepancy between the promises inherent to modernization policies and the growing social discomfort. This aspect is taken to the extreme in the fictional reality of *The Girl without Skin*, where the building, besides having housed dysfunctional families where violence and abuse were commonplace, is also directly linked to a series of atrocious murders. The 'concrete' violence of these crimes is echoed by the systemic violence perpetrated against Greenlanders, exhorted to abandon their traditional lifestyle in favor of the assimilation into 'Danishness'. In the novel, the theme is explicitly addressed in the following paragraph, where a clearly anticolonial stance is exposed, at least in the words of Leiff:

> Mange af de familier, der blev flyttet herind til byen […] kom direkte fra små bygder, og de kunne slet ikke fungere i sådan en lukket lejlighed håbløst langt fra deres fødebygd. […] De her mennesker var vant til hver eneste dag at kunne være ét med naturen i deres bygd. Det var dér, de levede, fangede deres føde og trak vejret frit. Herinde kunne de ikke ånde. De forstod slet ikke konceptet med at bo i sådan en kasse hævet over jorden. De fleste havde åbne vinduer døgnet rundt, og nogle tændte endda bål i stuerne. De var flygtninge i deres eget land.[15] (Nordbo 2017:51)

It is necessary, however, to remember that this viewpoint – expressed by Matthew Cave's older colleague – contains an exoticizing subtext, in which the idea of Greenlanders as "naturfolk", irreparably corrupted by contact with modernity, persists (see Thisted 2003; 2012). Nordbo, nonetheless, demonstrates an awareness of the problematic nature of these discourses and uses them, at least in part, critically: the crimes connected to Blok P, initially linked to the substrate of social disease characterizing postcolonial Greenland, are instead to be traced back to broader dynamics. Some corrupted politicians are also involved, and they exploit the mentioned prejudices and mislead the investigations by pointing to an alcoholic fisherman as the most likely culprit. The insertion of these discourses – ranging from sheer anticolonial narratives to a critical use of Danish stereotypical tropes regarding Greenland – are in line with the social engagement that characterizes Nordic crime fiction as a genre (see Mai 2016:126). A completely different afflatus characterizes *Sultekunstnerinde*, as we shall see, and an equally notable divergence in regard to the representation of Nuuk's concrete *boligblokke* can also be appreciated.

4. REMEMBERING CHILDHOOD YEARS IN GREENLAND: NUUK'S ARCHITECTURE IN *SULTEKUNSTNERINDE*

While the contrasting feelings of homeliness and estrangement elicited by Nordbo's fictional Blok P, as mentioned, find their expression in a collective dimension – and, more specifically, in the experiences shared by displaced Greenlanders, forced to leave the smallest settlements in favor of bigger centers – the matter is different in the case of *Sultekunstnerinde*.

A key quality pertaining to Inuk's book is its focus on the subjectivity of Charlotta/Charlie, a Danish girl who moves to Greenland in the second half of the 1970s: Nuuk, in the descriptions featured in the novel, is always filtered through the girl's gaze, and the same happens in relation to the city's natural surroundings. Moslund identifies in the alternation between "den vidtåbnede sansede stedsverden og den sociokulturelt organiserede og identitetsfunderede stedsverden"[16] (2015:211) one of the most evident stylistic features of the novel – finding its realization, I would argue, both in the natural landscape and the anthropic element. The reader's first approach to Nuuk, a depiction of the city from a bird's eye view, is mostly limited to the aforementioned 'sensory' discovery, and Nuuk's buildings acquire a social dimension only later, as the narration progresses.

As stressed by Schramm and Thisted (2015:175), this first scene set in Greenland echoes the trope of the encounter with Greenlandic nature, which appears totally alien to a Danish observer because of its majesty and the absence of trees. The girl, about to land, is also struck

[15] "Many of the families who were moved to Nuuk […] came from small villages, and they never settled in the claustrophobic apartment blocks miles from where they were born. I think it must be Denmark's most disastrous policy ever, wanting everyone in Greenland to be Danish. The Inuit were used to being at one with nature in their villages. It was where they lived, where they caught their food, where they could breathe freely. They couldn't breathe here, and the idea of living in a box high above the ground was foreign to them. Most people kept their windows open day and night, and some even lit fires in their living rooms. They were refugees in their own country" (Nordbo 2018:49).

[16] "The wide-open world of places known through the senses and the world of socio-culturally organized and identity-based places".

by Nuuk's apartment blocks, and hopes not to have to move into one of those buildings, whose appearance strongly contrasts both with the natural landscape and with the wooden houses in the oldest part of the city:

> Under flyveturen har jeg set byen tone frem som et kort og langsomt blive til enkelte huse, jeg har bemærket de farvestrålende etagehuse af træ og inderst inde bedt til at jeg vil komme til at bo i et af dem og ikke i en af de snavsetgrå betonklodser der præger bybilledet på bombastisk manér og ser ud til at være strøet ud over det tilfældigt, uden mindste mål eller idé, og som man forsøger at fortrænge ud af synsfeltet så længe som muligt, mens man grådigt sluger alt det nye og smukke med nysgerrige øjne.[17] (Inuk 2004:15)

Two elements stand out in this scene: first, the narratorial insistence on the ugliness of Nuuk's *boligblokke*, their dirtiness and the concrete, which gives them a rough and colorless appearance. Furthermore, the presence of these buildings contributes to the unique aspect of the Greenlandic capital, whose urban architecture is described, throughout the whole novel, as *atypical* – at least according to Charlotta's European standards: in a subsequent passage, the girl explicitly reflects on the fact that "Byen vi kører igennem med Knuds bil ligner ikke nogen rigtig by, som jeg kender dem. Husene ligger placeret hulter til bulter, en butik hér og en kirke dér; firmaer og kontorbygninger lutter hastigt sammentømrede barakker" (Inuk 2004:18).[18] In the eyes of Charlotta, the buildings in Nuuk appear scattered and randomly positioned, characteristics that deprives the city of any conceivable harmony. Nuuk's peculiar urban architecture, it should be noted, is also a trope present in more contemporary examples of *dansk grønlandslitteratur*, not least Kim Leine's *Kalak*, where the narrator recalls: "Det tager tid at lære at elske Nuuk, med dens lange rækker af betonblokke, våde, ramponerede og affaldsstinkende, og det hvileløst skiftende vejr" (2019:81f.).[19] Also in this short extract, the focus is on the infamous *boligblokke*, here paired with the city's challenging weather conditions – both factors that make Nuuk somewhat inhospitable.

During Charlotta's stay in Greenland, from 1976 to the winter between 1978 and 1979, she and her mother live in two different apartments. The first one is part of an apartment block called *Det Blå Etagehus*, distinguished by blue-painted wooden inserts that soften its severe appearance. Later on, the girl and her mother move to Blok 16, in the Radiofjeldet area. Also in the case of this latter building, it is possible to identify the same idea of 'uncanny architecture' that so productively applies to the – at least in part – fictional Blok P outlined by Mads Peder Nordbo.

Here, the coexistence of familiarity and a sense of alienation is given both by the appearance of the building – ugly and sad, if not downright threatening, according to the girl (Inuk 2004:79) – and by Charlotta's growing inner discomfort as she struggles to find her own dimension between 'Danishness' and 'Greenlandicness', 'childhood' and 'adulthood', somatizing her psychological suffering by showing symptoms of an eating disorder. Charlotta's feeling of oppression towards her 'wrong' body, which she no longer recognizes and wants to regain control over, is mirrored by the sensation she feels staying in her room in Blok 16:

[17] "During the flight, I saw the city appear as a map and slowly turn into individual houses, I noticed the brightly colored wooden apartment buildings and prayed that I would live in one of them and not in one of the dirty gray concrete blocks that dominate the cityscape in a bombastic manner and seem to be strewn over it randomly, without the slightest purpose or idea, and which you try to push out of sight for as long as possible, greedily devouring all that is new and beautiful with curious eyes".

[18] "The city we drive through in Knut's car doesn't look like any real town as I know it. The houses are stacked up, a shop here and a church there; companies and office buildings are all hastily assembled shacks".

[19] "It takes time to learn to love Nuuk, with its long rows of concrete blocks, wet, battered and garbage-stinking, and the restlessly changing weather".

> Den trange rektangulære celle af hultonet beton der var min blev endnu mere iltfattig end den i forvejen var, men jeg er holdt op med at have brug for så megen ilt længere. Jeg behøver næsten intet. Jeg kan nøjes med at trække vejret et par gange i minuttet, og selv da: Med ganske små bidder og slurke.[20] (Inuk 2004:27)

In this case, the contrast between the natural landscape, linked with a sense of freedom, and a threatening and claustrophobic enclosed space is not thematized to denounce a collective discomfort, such as the one catalyzed by the policies implemented by Denmark in Greenland, but to address a deeply intimate suffering. A similar *unheimlich* quality is also possessed, according to Emilie Dybdal (2021:122), by another house featured in a work pertaining to the genre of *dansk grønlandslitteratur*, namely Iben Mondrup's *Godhavn* (2014). This novel, broadly speaking, also revolves around the coming of age of three Danish siblings in Greenland and their feelings of (not-)belonging. Dybdal describes the dialectic elicited by the house where they live as follows:

> På den ene side er hjemmet, helt i tråd med fx Gaston Bachelard (s. 4), et beskyttende kosmos, der trygt og varmt omslutter mennesket […]. På den anden side oplever Knut hjemmet som noget fjernt, uordentligt og nærmest surrealistisk […]. Navnlig ét rum i dette stedvis uhyggelige hjem er knyttet til Knuts identitet: badeværelset. Dette er ikke blot et koldt og klinkebelagt lokale, men et særligt sted, hvor mennesket konfronteres med sig selv: Det er her, vi står afklædte og alene, kun med vores spejlbillede i sigte. En sådan sårbarhed ses ofte hos Knut, der flere gange studerer sig selv i badeværelsesspejlet. Når han gør det, erfarer han endnu en fremmedgørelse, nu over for sin egen krop.[21] (2021:122)

As highlighted by Dybdal, the home seems to lose its familiar and protective quality in the eyes of Knud, and this same contradiction can be detected in Charlotta's understanding of her small room in her mother's apartment in Blok 16. The sense of claustrophobia experienced by both characters in their own homes mirrors the feeling of being stuck in an alien context – a feeling perhaps enhanced by some of the features characterizing the Greenlandic reality, such as its isolation and consequent 'closedness'. The desire to merge with, to 'pass' as members of the local population, present in Knud as well as in Charlotta, can also be explained in the light of these considerations.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The focus on the architecture of the concrete *boligblokke* in Nuuk in *Pigen uden hud* and *Sultekunstnerinde* – both urban novels, albeit belonging to different genres – shows a common tendency to consider these buildings as fundamentally alien to their environment, in line with European (and Eurocentric) conceptions about Greenland, often regarded as an oasis of pristine nature, precluded and protected from civilization.

This perceived contrast between anthropic presence and natural environment generates a first level of the 'uncanny', a Freudian term reprised from Anthony Vidler's reflection on its relevance to architecture as well as from Emilie Dybdal's application of the concept in the

[20] "The narrow rectangular cell of hollow concrete that was mine became even more oxygen-deprived than it already was, but I have stopped needing so much oxygen. I need almost nothing. I can get by with breathing a few times a minute, and even then: in very small bites and sips".

[21] "On the one hand, in line with Gaston Bachelard, for example (p. 4), the home is a protective cosmos that safely and warmly envelops the human being [...]. On the other hand, Knut experiences the home as something distant, disorderly and almost surreal [...]. One room in particular in this sometimes eerie home is linked to Knut's identity: the bathroom. This is not just a cold and tiled room, but a special place where someone is confronted with themself: It is here that we stand undressed and alone, with only our reflection in sight. Such vulnerability is often seen in Knut, who repeatedly studies himself in the bathroom mirror. When he does so, he experiences yet another alienation, this time from his own body".

Danish-Greenlandic context. Furthermore, the notion of 'uncanny architecture' emphasizes the disparity between the promises of comfort and functionality at the origin of the architectural project, and the actual realization or evolution of Nuuk's *boligblokke*. As mentioned, most of these apartment blocks soon became a synonym for social disease and were identified as slums. This especially applies to Blok P, represented in a hyperbolic fashion in Mads Peder Nordbo's *Pigen uden hud*. The writer clearly uses Blok P as a symbol for modernization/danification policies and their intrinsically violent quality, and takes advantage of the building's sinister reputation to make it a crime scene in his thriller. The idea of Blok P as a slum, then, is pushed to an extreme, since the murders in the novel are merely fictional.

In *Sultekunstnerinde*, on the other hand, there is no thematization of the cultural violence inflicted on Greenlanders, forced to migrate from smaller settlements to cities and adopt a lifestyle aligning with that of coeval Denmark. Instead, the focus is on Charlotta's suffering. Charlotta wants to fit in with her Greenlandic peers but, like the *boligblokke* themselves, unintentionally finds herself standing out: her features are unmistakably Danish and, much to her shame, she does not speak a word of Greenlandic. The impossibility of complete assimilation into 'Greenlandicness', as well as the discomfort caused by physiological changes associated with adolescence, lead the girl to feel imprisoned in her own body, and a similar sense of oppression is experienced with reference to the cramped apartment in Blok 16, described as a prison, a cement cell. This twofold claustrophobia can arguably be elicited by the context of Nuuk itself: the city, even though generally perceived as 'big' and 'Danish-like' (see Sørensen 2005), does not align with Charlotta's previous knowledge of urban contexts. As childish games make way to first romances, Nuuk suddenly becomes smaller and less stimulating.

Both novels, then, insist on the contrasts embodied by these concrete buildings, be it in terms of landscape, colonial history, or identity formation. The pristine Greenlandic nature does not seem apt to house these grey bulks, whose severe appearance stands out against the barren background of the Nuuk fjord. Another contrast at the core of both literary representations of Nuuk's *boligblokke* is, broadly speaking, the one between 'house' and 'home'. It is precisely in this regard that the notion of *unheimlich* comes to use, since it addresses the compresence of familiarity and estrangement, of belonging and discomfort. This ambiguous feeling is reflected in Nordbo's representation of the displaced Greenlanders living in Block P, torn away from their element and forcefully relocated to an urban and impersonal setting. This depiction, although it insists on the association between 'Greenlandicness' and a state of nature, resonates with an anticolonial stance – a common strategy used to address Danish-Greenlandic relations in contemporary *dansk grønlandslitteratur*. Despite the sympathy for an (alleged) Greenlandic point of view, such a thematization has the limit to conceive the dimensions of 'Danishness' and 'Greenlandicness' in oppositional terms and virtually impermeable. The matter is different in the case of *Sultekunstnerinde*, where Charlotte's "narrow rectangular cell of hollow concrete" certainly alludes to a problematic relationship with the home-dimension but also becomes the backdrop for the (painful) negotiation of Charlotta's identity, on the cusp between adolescence and adulthood and, at the same time, between 'Greenlandicness' and 'Danishness'.

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