

## Taling Two Cities – Nuuk, Ilulissat, Modernity, Climate Change and the Icefjord Centre.\*

**Tore Holst and Lars Jensen, Roskilde University**

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way - in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only. (Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, 1859, opening)

To begin an essay that meditates upon a Greenland caught in the rapid and perhaps not so rapid transformation of its society as it seeks to launch itself as a globally oriented nation, with a reference to something as stale and staid as a mid-nineteenth century British novel set in revolutionary Paris and non-revolutionary London, is at best a defiant leap of the imagination. At worst ahistorical metaphorising; narration replacing history, substituting fiction for data collection. Yet, Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* is of course also simply a retrospective portrait of two urban spaces – even metropolitan spaces – of Europe's two major empires at the time – caught up in revolutionary times.

It is the staging of the urban spaces through narration that we use as a point of departure to scratch at the surface of – rather than postulating we can get under the skin of – two of Greenland's current urban centres, Nuuk and Ilulissat, produced out of two different histories, and at the same time located at the intersection of a number of current influences – and determinant structures.

To begin with the tale of history, Nuuk, is the government town of Greenland. Its capital, its administrative and political hub, the place to which corporate capitalism and government head – the order here is deliberate – come to impose, to negotiate, to leave an imprint. Nuuk's history as government town begins with the arrival of European settlement – Hans Egede – the epitome of a protestant mode of existence, the integrated view of Lutheranism, trade and governmentality. It continues with the Moravian Brothers, the creation of a colonial proto-type state that always

---

\* This essay has not been peer reviewed. It is a reflective essay over the process of 'researching' Greenland that has been made possible by the HERA Arctic Encounters project.

remained peripheral to proper colonial states established by other European empires with far bigger colonial populations to fry. The skeletal format of Danish administration made potentates out of small bureaucrats, yet they were often impotent in their dealings with Copenhagen bureaucracy, and relied heavily on the support of the Greenlanders, whose inferiority was required for the legitimisation of the Danish presence. Through this a seemingly perpetual narrative was initiated where Danish denial of being coloniser went hand in hand with repression.

The anticolonial struggle, bringing first political party formation, then home rule and finally self-government, meant the bureaucracy of repression finally passed into the hands of the Greenlanders. Even if Danish colonialism was entrenched in the structure – alongside Danish as the de facto language of bureaucratic power – Nuuk became in itself two cities with radically different tales. Governmental bureaucracy, corporate capitalism, and a stream of visitors – from Danish comedian Casper Christensen, over General Nice Group (who took over the licence for the iron mine in Nuuk Fjord from London Mining – a company whose economy is bigger than Greenland's) to Hillary Clinton – demarcates one side of the town's life. The shortage in affordable housing, low salary, unemployment and a variety of social problems characterise the other – even as this is not the sum of who they are.

Ilulissat manifests some of the same clashes of power and powerlessness. As in Nuuk, the latter is represented by certain segments of the local – and not so local – population of the town and its surrounding small settlements. Power and wealth however have in recent years flowed selectively into Ilulissat primarily via the climate change tourism industry, which is linked to postcolonial governmentality in different ways. Heads of states arrive at Ilulissat Airstrip and Harbour alongside regular members of the global North's mobile middle classes, prepared to bear witness to a script of climate change induced sublimity; the awesome destruction of a calving glacier or a close encounter with an iceberg floating out of the nearby fjord. The icebergs detach themselves from the icecap at Sermeq Kujalleq and float past the town at a rate that the scientific community almost unanimously believe have increased due to global warming. The icebergs perform a circuit that can be seen from a plane, before they take off on the grand tour down the Canadian east coast in weird forms, at times reminiscent of a small Italian medieval village clinging to the hillside of these mountains of ice.

The most recent addition to the prestigious Artic Hotel has been set up to witness this. Aluminium-clad Deluxe Igloo-Huts situated on the water's edge remind residents of a hunter culture, where

ephemeral shelters of ice sometimes have to be forged, when one is far from home. Plaster Igloos are undoubtedly more comfortable than sub-zero ice-caves, but they also illustrate that it is no longer possible to construct ice-caves here in summer, when most tourists visit, and they have thus become symbols of the vanishing ice themselves, rather than mere vantage points from which to watch the process. From here, a wooden pathway leads over an ancient burial ground to the hotel restaurant, *Ulo*, named after the traditional knife made for scraping hides clean. Here, the use of locally gathered produce is marketed as a Greenlandic version of the New Nordic Kitchen, where preindustrial grains, seaweeds and species are included in ‘emulsions’, ‘fibres’ and ‘soufflés’, with names of dishes such as *Artic Umami*, casting the cooks as ethno-chique alchemists of taste.

The demand for climate-witnessing has thus brought the town both economic and cultural capital. But the sublimity of the experiences Ilulissat has to offer is based not only on the familiar truism that tourist sites in time become ‘spoilt’ by the very tourism that enables visitors to experience them in the first place. The possibility of the gulf-stream being obstructed by enormous amounts of cold freshwater being led into the North Sea invokes a library of cli-fi catastrophes, where the world order is reversed, symbolised by tidal waves burying metropolis after metropolis. The calving glaciers of Ilulissat thus signals the impending destruction not only of this tranquil habitat but of Western civilisation itself and has become the church where climate change sceptics go to convert, while spokespersons already pushing this agenda go to find affective evidence for what complicated scientific reports may or may not indicate. The sound and fury of the falling ice signals the pit of impending hell that awaits if nothing is done, while simultaneously also acting as the voice of creation that apparently speaks to visiting dignitaries and tourists alike.

Controlling such a site of sublimity converts into political currency, both for Denmark as a nation and for individual politicians. The informal influence on US foreign policy, the Danish state sought to gain in exchange for Greenland’s proximity to Russia during the Cold War, is now sought when the affective reality of climate change needs to be illustrated. The number of hours the Danish minister of foreign affairs spent in Air Force 2 alone with the US Minister of Foreign Affairs, John Kerry, was thus carefully enumerated on Danish television, when Kerry visited Ilulissat in the spring of 2016. Here, Kerry’s rite of sublime immersion in a landscape of climate change was recorded by television on the deck of a boat with a background of floating ice. He was standing alongside Danish and Greenlandic dignitaries, who acted as metonyms of the nations they represented, and thereby naturally also furthered their own political careers by being cast as movers

and shakers in the global community, even if the colonial relationship between these nations remained unresolved.

The two cities can be read as expressing two versions of late modernity. Nuuk is the old capital with old capital stemming from public investment, funded to a considerable extent by the annual transfer from the Danish state. In effect, what Denmark decides is a suitable compensation for its continued enormous influence on Greenlandic society, which in turn provides Denmark with a disproportionate influence on global affairs in the Polar regions that would otherwise not exist. Ilulissat on the other hand is the new capital of the north with emergent capital derived from the neoliberal economic circuit of tourism – a business that the two national Greenlandic newspapers are pinning their hopes on, as the projected mining boom fails once again to materialise, with the inevitable complaint that mining and oil exploration industry are withdrawing from the west coast. In terms of the new neoliberal economy Ilulissat does not so much replace Nuuk as a hub, because Nuuk never really was one. Rather, Ilulissat offers a different tourism experience from what the old tourism centre in South Greenland could offer, alongside a proximity-to-Iceland geared tourism on the Greenlandic east coast.

From 2020 however, foreign dignitaries will probably be publicly witnessing climate change from a projected Icefjord Centre near the ‘dog fields’ on the outskirts of the town. In 2015, a (by local standards) absolutely huge private-public foundation, Realdania set up a competition to find a design for the new centre. They did so in agreement with the local 660,000 sq. km municipality and the Greenlandic government, who are both co-funding the project with Realdania. Yet, Realdania is, as the name betrays, not just any foundation, but possibly the largest foundation in the world dedicated to architecture, the largest Danish foundation as such and one which has invested heavily in public buildings in Denmark. Greenland is clearly seen as a logical extension of these activities – even if the map of projects on the Realdania website does not include Greenland – but only Denmark ‘proper’.

The winner project (announced in June 2016), designed by Dorte Mandrup Arkitekterne, is a stretched, curving, flat building with a panoramic view across the landscape towards the opening of the Icefjord. Its curvy design is reminiscent of the cultural centre in Nuuk, and its flat structure a clear priority as it minimises its interference with the perspective across the landscape.

In the pre-qualification material Realdania stipulates its selection criteria:

The future Icefjord Centre is to be a local and international meeting place for tourists, climate researchers, debaters and official guests from all over the world. The new centre will be a gathering point for political debate on global climate change and a destination for tourists who are attracted to the dramatic and distinctive icefjord scenery. The centre will also focus on Greenland and the cultural history of its people. People have lived in harmony with the icefjord for 4,400 years, and fishing and hunting remain important activities in the area... The competition promoter welcomes international participants, but all applicants should note that all Danish norms and standards will apply and that the working languages will be Danish and English. (Realdania 2015: 2-3)

While the vision of the centre as a hub for the international community is clear, the vision for the incorporation of the local Greenlandic component is vague. Are Greenlanders seen as visitors like the visiting tourists? If so, how are they understood to become part of a, by local standards, huge intervention into their space? And the reference to the importance of the area to 4,400 years of local culture means exactly what in the context of contemporary Ilulissat? While hunting and fishing remains important it also suggests merely the continuity of thousands of years of local practice – as if that is all they have to offer. Equally interesting to note is the final passage on ‘Danish norms and standards’ where any Greenlandic element other than that seen as metonymic to the Danish is simply written out. Hence local Greenlandic culture either exists as immemorial practices or as a subdivision of contemporary ‘Danish norms and standards’.

The ‘criteria for assessment’ stated in the pre-qualification material similarly obliterates any Greenlandic consideration, as it homes in on the UNESCO site’s tourist potential as a display of dramatic nature. Here even the long Greenlandic presence in the area mentioned in the above quotation is omitted, giving the impression that it is primarily an ethnographic tableau envisioned as part of the exhibition space, while the considerations guiding the design and layout of the building need not be concerned with where the building is *culturally* located – only *naturally*:

#### **CRITERIA FOR ASSESSMENT OF ENTRIES**

Entries will in no order of priority be assessed on their overall ability to

- optimally realise the overall vision of presenting and interpreting the unique icefjord and its natural surroundings
- create a unique icefjord centre that is worth a journey in its own right
- create a building that is sustainable, buildable and adapted to the harsh, dramatic nature of the site

- comply with the budget earmarked for the project and with the time schedule anticipated. (Realdania 2015: 5)

The promotional video released by the winning ticket (Dorte Mandrup Arkitekterne) devotes its 7 minutes to detailing the various features of the building. It is framed by a narrative of the ‘global importance’ of the Icefjord granted by its UNESCO listing, but also by its tourist potential and significance in the ongoing highlighting of the urgent pressure to address climate change. The ‘locals’ merit two direct references and one indirect. The indirect is a reference to visiting school groups that due to the expensive journey involved would necessarily refer to the local school – even if not exclusively. The direct mention is to locals (and visitors) coming to the Icefjord Centre to enjoy the sunset/evening sun (towards the end of the video) and in the opening of the video where it speaks of the site as a ‘gathering place’ for visitors and locals. Situated in an open landscape beyond the town itself, the location minimises interference with the existing townscape, but also segregates the Icefjord Centre from the community that actually hosts it (the video speaks of ‘the visitor leaving the city behind’).

Ilulissat with its less than five thousand inhabitants is hardly a city, but it is of course an urban space – in fact a colonial modern town whose architecture reveals both the legacy of Danish colonial architecture and the modern blocks of flats devised by Danes during the ‘modernisation’ period and continued by the Greenlandic administration after 1979. The sense of the Icefjord Centre’s segregation is enhanced by the lack of integration suggested if not by the design then certainly by how the layout of the spaces are spoken of in the video – presumably loyally representing the views informing the approach of the winning entry. Its emphasis of the structure as a viewing platform with a commanding vision across the landscape evokes both typical tourist narratives ‘a hike to the top’, and the predecessor of tourists – explorers. This appeals clearly to prospective visitors but hardly speaks to locals who would be more interested in conceptualising the place in terms of continuity and change from the urban space. You can see parts of the mouth of the Icefjord from various vantage points in the town itself and many would get a closer look on their fishing trips. Hence, the place as a spectacular vantage point refers primarily to the first time visitor, a tired old colonial trope (‘overlooking the trail before walking on’). If the space is also conceived of as a site for locals, it remains unclear how they are invited – invited here operating as a problematic replacement for engaged or consulted. The narrator speaks of taking in the view or going for a walk hence foregrounding the idea of the ‘leisured space’ a place for visual

consumption. The transition from the ‘intimate landscape protected by the curved building and the rock wall to the open expansive landscape forms the gateway between civilisation and nature’ illustrates the tensions between understanding the Icefjord Centre as a ‘global place’, conceptualised in the neoliberal imaginary where tourist places exist to be consumed through ‘leisured’ activities, and the Greenlandic town which forms the backdrop of the Icefjord Centre, rather than its continuation. Hence the Icefjord Centre understood as a ‘new peak’ of civilisation does not represent an extension of a Greenlandic civilisation already there. There is no reference to Ilulissat itself in spite of the fact that it is just around the corner, separated from the Icefjord Centre only by the ‘dog park’. (The pivot of) civilisation and the ultimate wilderness becomes the dramatic encounter between man and nature, segregated from the continuation of man and nature in Ilulissat itself, which runs according to different criteria from neoliberal leisure. The visitor, as the narrator says, is introduced at the Icefjord Centre to the UNESCO site and the Icefjord, not to the town and its history and relationship with the fjord – it only mentions that you can look ‘back to Ilulissat’. The description of the centre’s interior is clearly hampered by the fact that designs for the centre have been instructed not to deal with possible exhibitions, even so there is marked emphasis on leisured activities; panoramic views, seating areas, shops, café with facilities etc. Tourist potential is alluded to through the reference to the spacious layout allowing several staff to be around during the high season. The video ends by addressing the importance of ice ‘to humanity’ and a reference to its importance to the people of Greenland. The Realdania website for the Icefjord Centre<sup>†</sup> completely omits any reference to the locals, other than to mention there is a tourist town, Ilulissat, in the vicinity.

As you walk through Ilulissat the number of sizeable public and private buildings you come across are limited. A few hotels, a couple of supermarkets and some social housing – an Icefjord Centre – regardless of its design will architecturally be a major addition to the townscape, even from its position on the outskirts. How will its presence impact life in the town? Already you hear locals protesting over tourists who do not keep to the side of the dusty road (in the non-icy part of the year) on the non-existent pavement. Also elsewhere in Greenland you hear of locals going camping in the short season of tourists and mosquitoes, to escape the former (there is no escaping the latter). Hence there is the perception that the two national newspapers’ approach – in tourism we trust – is not shared by all Greenlanders. Understandably, since Greenlanders will not run the enterprises associated with tourism if the experience of the rest of the global south is anything to go by. Yet

---

<sup>†</sup> <https://realdania.dk/samlet-projektliste/ilulissat-isfjordscenter>

what is perhaps the most fascinating aspect of this lack of embracing, occasionally outright rejection, of the neoliberal and neo-colonial discourse of economic opportunity – and its shadow counterpart eternal damnation – is how do these Greenlanders envision their own lives, and the future of Greenland? Everyone has aspirations, thoughts, desires regarding their own community/society/nation's future. Turning your back on tourism, being anti-extraction and anti-oil-exploration industry is also to envision a future – not merely to embrace bleakness. If Realdania wishes to embrace the local community it seems they will have to accept there is also this sensibility in the local community.

**Works cited:**

Dickens, Charles (1859) *A Tale of Two Cities*. London: Chapman and Hall.

*Ilulissat Icefjord Centre* [video] (2016). <http://aasarchitecture.com/2016/06/dorte-mandrup-arkitekter-wins-competition-design-icefjord-centre.html>.

Realdania (2015) *Icefjord Centre. Ilulissat, Greenland. Prequalification*. Realdania.