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THE MAKING OF PLACE AND PEOPLE IN THE DANISH METROPOLIS

A SOCIOHISTORY OF COPENHAGEN NORTH WEST

Christian Sandbjerg Hansen



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The Making of Place and People in the Danish Metropolis

This book investigates the sociohistorical making of place and people in Copenhagen from around 1900 to the present day. Drawing inspiration from Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of social space and symbolic power and from Loïc Wacquant's hypothesis of advanced marginality and territorial stigmatisation, the book explores the genesis and development of the notorious neighbourhood of Copenhagen North West. As an extraordinary place, the North West provides an illustrative case of Danish welfare and urban history that questions the epitome on inclusive Copenhagen. Through detailed empirical analysis, the book spotlights three angles and entanglements of the social history of this area of Copenhagen: the production of socio-spatial constructions and authoritative categorisations of the neighbourhood, especially by the state and the media; the local social pedagogical interventions and symbolic boundary drawings by welfare agencies in the neighbourhood; and the residents' subjective experiences of place, social divisions, and (dis)honour. In this way, *The Making of Place and People in the Danish Metropolis* analyses how social, symbolical, and spatial structures dynamically intertwine and contribute to the fashioning of divisions of inequality and marginality in the city over the course of some 125 years. It will appeal to scholars of sociology, urban studies, and urban history, with interests in social welfare.

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The Making of Place and People in the Danish Metropolis

A Sociohistory of Copenhagen
North West

Christian Sandbjerg Hansen



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Acknowledgements

I thought I knew the North West well. In the 1990s, at the time when news media and politicians proclaimed the North West to be the worst neighbourhood in Denmark, I frequently visited my good friends there. I had a girlfriend, who lived there, and I worked a traditional hot dog cart there. Born and raised in Copenhagen, I was confident that this was the place to study urban marginality from the ground up. However, as I re-entered in 2014, something had changed. It was not the physical and social landscape, I remembered. New boutiques made their mark, the hot dog carts were now competing with shawarma joints, the old clientele was not so dominant, and new fashionable companies, restaurants, and apartments had appeared. It seemed like a battlefield in which I recognised the conflicts apparent in the transforming Copenhagen: the conflicts of social, spatial, and symbolic inequalities. Instead of an ethnography of urban marginality, I came to study the sociohistory of how classification struggles, welfare work, and lived experiences contribute to the making of place and people in the Danish metropolis.

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I wish to dedicate this book to the memory of Kim. I interviewed him in his one-bedroom apartment in a modernist, concrete social high-rise in the Grey Belt of Copenhagen. Kim grew up in the North West and he lived a rough life. Abused by his violent father and his teachers, having no formal education or steady

employment, he hustled through life, even leaving an unknown child behind as his then girlfriend ran away from him. Chain-smoking, the first thing he said was, 'I'm an early retiree, so I've let myself have some poor habits'. 'You sleep in', I said. 'Sure', he said, 'that too', and we laughed. It was ten in the morning and we started drinking beer. During the interview, Kim said the following:

I don't vote anymore. Sadly, last time I voted for the Social Democrats. But as I tell you, I don't want to do that shit anymore [vote], it's ridiculous. And maybe people tell me, I can't complain then. But hell yeah, I'll fucking complain about those miserable politicians we have. They can't show me anything, they are useless. That's my attitude, right. They say one thing, and then they do another. I saw a young man in the TV the other day, a real rich-kid, right, and that marked his values, right. He just wanted to hold down the unemployed. He just blamed the unemployed for being unemployed, and he said that thing that we fail the unemployed if we let them be unemployed, so he wanted to lower the benefits to motivation up, right. I don't see the fucking logic in that. So I don't vote anymore.

I often think back on Kim and this conversation, and it grieved me when I learned that he had passed away. Kim's story is important. Not only because of the sadness in his life history, the laughter in which he enwrapped that story and the fury he showed when we talked about politics. He also reminds me that in order to play the game, you have to have some chance of success. He reminds us all of the individual consequences of social inequality and of the injustice of the national welfare state we call Denmark.

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Introduction

Introducing Copenhagen North West

A representative of the so-called Nordic Model, Denmark enjoys an international reputation for equality, social trust, and universal welfare. In the same way, Copenhagen has a worldwide brand of virtues like diversity and sustainability, and it prides itself on being an inclusive city. Nevertheless, inequality is increasing in Denmark and Copenhagen.¹ Hand in hand with the gentrification and marketisation of housing go political concepts such as ‘vulnerable areas’ and ‘ghettos’ that stigmatise and target the so-called parallel societies, which are associated with immigrants, criminals, welfare recipients, and social housing estates.

According to Loïc Wacquant, there are places in every major city in the Western world that are ‘publicly known and recognised as dangerous, urban hellholes in which violence, vice, and dereliction are the order of things’.² In Copenhagen, the North West is one such territory commonly identified as a ‘dumping ground for the city outcast’. Located just about four kilometres from the city centre, at the outer perimeter of the city’s municipal border as part of the Bispebjerg district, the North West stands as a mythical territory in Copenhagen.

It was one of those outer districts surrounding Copenhagen, which the municipality of Copenhagen annexed around 1900 and which rose as a working-class neighbourhood hand in hand with the city’s urbanisation in the first half of the century.³ From the late 1800s, the area was known as a poor district and as a hideaway for the infamous Lersø-bøller [the Lersø-thugs]. However, as well-known architects in collaboration with social housing associations erected new and modern tenements, a strong sense of local identity developed in the neighbourhood, especially connected to the working-class workplaces and prestigious apartments—and with Social Democrats living in the area writing proudly about the cooperative organisations in the neighbourhood. From the 1950s, the population decreased in the North West as well as in Copenhagen,⁴ while the newly built greater periphery of Copenhagen offered single-family houses for the most affluent of the working classes. Stovall shows, regarding the Paris ‘Red Belt’, how de-industrialisation and unemployment have combined to produce a new image of dangerous places centred on crime, violence, and social problems.⁵ In much the same way, the industrial plants and workshops in the North West (and in

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Copenhagen) gradually closed, accelerating through the 1970s and 1980s, while the population grew older and unemployment worsened.⁶ At the beginning of the 1990s, the media described the North West as ‘the worst place in the country’, and continuously the North West experiences public denigration with terms such as ‘the North-leather-west’ and ‘the North Worst’.

In the Copenhagen airport in January 2020, advertising signs described the North West as ‘a rugged, authentic, and culturally diverse neighbourhood off the beaten track’ and ‘the place to stumble upon rough diamonds and undiscovered secret spots’. Such descriptions add to the mythology of the North West and signify that even though it is the site of a high concentration of social housing and of the lowest average income in Copenhagen, new counter-symbols go hand in hand with indicators of gentrification: the population increases, new housing arises, and the social structure slowly transforms as the capital-population becomes younger, more educated, and wealthier.⁷

The North West is the site of intensified struggles in the making of a place and people and questions the epitome of inclusive Copenhagen as well as the idealised Nordic welfare. From the annexation of the outer districts and the rise of the urban-industrial working class through the territorial stigmatisation in the wake of de-industrialisation and the social, symbolic, and spatial polarisation characteristic of the ‘resurgent service-cum-welfare city’, the North West constitutes a mythological space and a stark symbol. As an object of sociohistorical scrutiny, the North West is a physical locality and social position; a construction carved in physical space with porous borders, socially dynamic structures, and contested identities; a battlefield of class, honour, and urbanity.⁸

Vagn: it stamps the neighbourhood

Vagn⁹ is around 70 years old and one of the old blue-collar workers in the neighbourhood. He has lived in the North West since he was three years old, and his parents got ‘a brand-new apartment’ in one of the many housing complexes erected between the 1930s and 1950s. Since the 1970s, he and his wife have lived in one of the solid housing cooperatives, ‘in the nice part of the neighbourhood’. Their two kids having ‘left the nest’, working as a teacher and an advertising executive, Vagn dedicates his time and energy to one of the local associations. ‘It’s my neighbourhood’, he says, indicating that no further explanation is necessary because ‘decent folks care’.

Vagn left school when he was 14 years old and took an apprenticeship as a machinist. ‘I’ve always been keen on disassembling things and then assembling them again’, he says. In the first part of his work life, he worked as a machine operator in a small plant in the neighbourhood. In the second part, he acquired secondary training skills to get a job as a technician in a large public company in another part of Copenhagen. As this company began to implement new management plans in the late 1980s and early 1990s, he tried to acclimate to the intensified workloads by switching to a position as a teacher and supervisor in the same company. However, as the new management began to outsource jobs and

consequently initiated large-scale firings, he sought early retirement. 'It was OK', he says of the last part of his work experience, 'too much beer went into it, and I was very lucky'.

When he remembers the 'good old times' of growing up in the neighbourhood in the late 1940s and 1950s, Vagn speaks like many of his fellows in the newly built apartments complexes just outside the city, the neatness, the greens, and the 'many children', as core features of the neighbourhood.

We moved into a brand-new apartment, two and a half rooms and everything. Everything was brand new. The water was not even running yet; it was that new. . . . So, I get many new playmates here; there was a big sandbox and a playground, and many green areas. There were playgrounds between all the blocks. We were 12–13 kids in every stairway. Damn, we were many kids.

Vagn says he still thinks of the North West as a working-class district, but he also highlights the changes and troubles of the neighbourhood history.

Due to the very big move-in we have had, you know, of other ethnic Danes, then it has become different, and, unfortunately, if you look at it, I think—I have not seen the latest statistics, right, but—a big group is on welfare benefits, right. And of course, that stamps the neighbourhood, of course it does.

Worrying about the neighbourhood reputation, Vagn also emphasises the tolerant and inclusive nature of the North West as core values of the old working-class neighbourhood, while oscillating between blaming the immigrant others, the poor, and the municipality.

We want mixed neighbourhoods, right. Just around the corner, well, we have lots of mosques and immigrant-people, right. They should not make these cliques, you know. You have to say, something is wrong. It is too much at once, it should be more spread out, right. . . . The municipality moves them together. And now they [the municipality] are trying to break it up again and get some strong families in there, but you cannot just do that, because nobody wants to live there, right, and you do not want them empty either, so they move troubled families in again. . . . Some schools have like 80% [immigrants]. You cannot change that in an instance, right. It is a huge problem. . . . At one point, it was like, every time a person exits the prison, they re-house him in Ringertoften. When we moved out here, we could change it [the culture of poverty], because we were the many who could change the few. Like that, right. Now the few have to change the many.

Vagn's recollection of the green areas, the many children, and the residential solidarity reminds us of the symbols of the new and modern apartment complexes that rapidly arose and gradually replaced the old neighbourhood and paved the way for a new kind of working-class pride. On the one hand, like so many of

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his generation and his social position, Vagn experienced the transformation of the working conditions as the city de-industrialised and the Keynesian-Fordist contract was dismantled. On the other hand, when he defines and defends the neighbourhood by embracing the logics of ghettoisation and gentrification in his appreciative stance of the ‘well-functioning newcomers’, Vagn also reminds us of the social divisions and symbolic boundaries that now prevail. As he distinguishes between the different generations of residents—the old workers, the welfare clients, the immigrants, and the new families—he also emphasises the stigma that has fastened to Copenhagen North West since the late 1980s and early 1990s and legitimises the gentrification processes as necessary to re-invoke the old neighbourhood honour.

Irene and Tina: still on benefits

Irene and Tina are mother and daughter, 70 and 35 years old, respectively. They were both raised in a working-class family in Copenhagen’s North West district, where they still live together in an apartment, and they are both diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder. While Irene is a retired schoolteacher, Tina has never worked for longer periods because of her anxiety, and money is a recurrent issue to worry about. As Irene says: ‘We live off my pension. If I am not here anymore, she cannot survive’.

‘We are not nice people’, Tina says.

We speak of the things as they are, you know. My mother’s dad was a sewer worker, so, we are not like -. We don’t fit in everywhere, in other places. In this area, it is diverse; most people talk about the things the way they are. Here, we fit in.

Irene and Tina express a profound sense of belonging to the North West, relating their history back to Irene’s grandmother who grew up in some of the homeless housing facilities that the city planned and erected in the wake of the WWI housing shortage. She tells how her mother had to walk through the fields to get to work in one of the plants in the neighbourhood’s southern end and thus hints at the social and geographical constitution of an earlier North West, the poverty, the fields, and the factories. However, Irene and Tina also describe the neighbourhood of today as being ‘a social benefits district’, and they tell of feeling unsafe. They cited a neighbour who was beaten to death, another ‘mentally ill’ neighbour who shouted and was unpleasant when he did not take his medicine, and a third neighbour who was found dead in the attic.

Irene is divorced from Tina’s dad, and none of them has contact with him anymore. ‘He has been drinking since he was 12’, Tina says. ‘Since then, he has simply been an alcoholic, so all his children have dropped him now’. Tina tells of the discomforting visits to the murky pubs with her dad, and Irene explains, ‘I was afraid of him. He beat me’. ‘But I was used to that’, she says and tells of an upbringing characterised by an unkind and violent mother. ‘If it had been today,

my brother and I would have been removed from that home because we screamed so loud that everybody could hear it’.

Irene and Tina have also cut off contact with Irene’s sister, because

we didn’t have the strength to be submissive all the time. They really talked bad to us, it was completely one-sided, you know. So, in the end, we just had to let them go, right. So now we don’t have any family.

Besides a half-sister and a single friend, Tina and Irene mostly socialise in the different social and cultural associations the neighbourhood hosts. For instance, they visit the local church, which has a knitting club and free communal dinners—‘even though we aren’t really religious’. A social activity centre where Tina works as a volunteer is especially a reference point in their everyday life. Tina’s work is mostly administrative, assisting the permanent staff, which gives her a feeling of positive identity. She receives food stamps for her work, and she attends classes that teach her about ‘the normal society, so I can see how that works’. However, she also feels that the support she receives is insufficient and that her labour is exploited. ‘They know that we don’t eat three times a day’, Irene says of the dilemma of receiving surplus food as charity, ‘but it is nice of them to see us’.

While Irene has worked as a minor public servant, Tina has never worked for an extended period. Because of her anxiety, she has been ‘travelling’ through the different corners of the welfare system, from various types of institutions for treatment and examination, through school days of stomach pain and headaches, and through every form of benefits office. She felt relieved when she finally was diagnosed with autism in her late 20s, and she proudly tells of how, despite these struggles, she managed to complete a training programme in needlework.

In the story of Irene and Tina, territorial stigma intersects with the stigma of psychiatric disability and diagnosis and the stigma of not having a job in a society and a welfare system that takes that as an absolute norm of decency and honour. In other words, the transforming welfare state defines their entire social situation as they experience the humiliation of repeatedly asking for help and being met by closed doors, forgotten papers, undignifying mistrust, degrading ‘resource processes’ to ‘clarify’ Tina’s ‘ability to work, and random caseworkers’ random decisions. Tina tells it like this:

Well, I am still on benefits. I am not a pensioner because, apparently, they think that I can work even though I have never worked. They keep pushing the possibility of an early retirement. I am so proud of taking that education, because it has been hell. There has never been any plan. The municipality did have a plan, they just tried to keep me busy. They know I am vulnerable, but they have never really been sure what to do with me. So, it is still somewhat of a struggle to be recognised, you know, that there is something, that I just can’t go get a job. Every time you change caseworker or department or something, it is like you do not have a history. Every time, it is all over again. You have to tell your story one more time. You have to fill in the forms once

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more, and it is just exhausting. Last time, they wanted me to make a contract with my mother. ‘What do you pay at home’, they asked. Really. The system has changed, and it is not for the better. The system is not easy; it does not work with you. The one hand does not know what the other one does. They lose your papers; they do not return your phone call. It is very, very difficult. And they do not believe you. It is not that I do not want to work. If I could, I would. It just seems endless. Maybe when I am 50, I will get my pension.

Ariana and Momir: we mind our own

When I first approached Ariana to interview her and her son Momir about their everyday life in the North West, she was keen to emphasise,

It has been good enough for us; otherwise, we wouldn’t have stayed so long. We never have had problems with someone or something. We learned of a shooting just down the corner through the media. We have never seen anything ourselves, not even car vandalism.

Ariana lives with her husband and two sons in a three-room rental apartment in a social housing complex. Her youngest son, Momir, agrees with her in that they only hear of the area’s problems in the TV news, they never see or hear anything themselves.

You know, you can hear stories about the problems happening here, but for us, our family has known how to stay out of trouble, how to navigate around it all. You know, when you stay away and try to make it through, you know, school and all, do what I have to, mind my own business and stuff, then I don’t experience those things, then I don’t experience the problems happening here and there.

Ariana’s father was part of the unskilled industrial workforce that migrated from the Balkans to Denmark in the 1970s. Ariana came a few years later with her mother and siblings, but soon after joined her mother, who returned to take care of her ill mother. Ariana returned to Denmark in the late 1980s and was educated as a social health assistant. Her husband came in the mid-1990s, having migrated throughout Europe as an unskilled worker. ‘He has adapted very well’, she proudly says of her husband’s language skills and his educational persistence that has made it possible for him to get a semi-managerial position as a low-skilled worker in the public sector.

Ariana limits her definition of her neighbourhood and her feelings of belonging to the housing complex in which the family lives.

The North West is bigger, but don’t ask me about the other areas, I don’t know anything about them. We mind our own. When you have a working life of eight hours of work, pick up the kids, do the shopping, do the food, maybe

a family visit, and it's both my husband and myself, you know, that is the life we have going on, you get home tired, you know. And we are not like we have the need or the urge to check out what is happening in this or that street. We are not like that. I don't want to interfere in the life of others, what they are doing. We just mind ours. But the complex here, we are very connected to our neighbours; they get our keys when we travel, and stuff like that. We meet in the courtyard and on the playground. We visit each other. We have a summer party, residents' meetings. It's cosy and nice [hygge]. But only here, in this complex. I don't know about the other.

Ariana is very proud of her sons, who are doing well in school and who are successfully partaking in secondary education [gymnasium], a fact she and Momir relate to the family's rules of upbringing.

Those problems you hear of happen at night, but our kids have had to be home by 9. Always. Now they are getting older we are not so strict, but there are rules, you know, here is where the line is drawn. We have always had control over the kids. Where they are, what they are doing, with whom they are. And they have their school and football and a job to take care of, so they don't have so much time to be on the street. Other parents don't care what their kids are doing. We take care of our kids. They are what matters most.

The making of place and people

This book is about the sociohistorical making and remaking of place and people in the Danish metropolis from around 1900 through today. As the introductory interviews illustrate, the official symbolism, welfare initiatives, and everyday experiences of life combine to constitute the historical production of that marginalised place in Copenhagen called the North West. Taking the genesis and development of this notorious neighbourhood as a case of possibles, I draw on Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of social space and symbolic power and Loïc Wacquant's thesis of advanced urban marginality to explore how social, symbolical, and spatial structures dynamically intertwine through the course of time and contribute to the fashioning of divisions of inequality and marginality.

Social divisions and symbolic struggles

The basic proposition that places are relational entities and historical products serves as a first guide to the book. According to Bourdieu's understanding of places as specific localities in physical space *and* as positions in social space, it is the active and effective differences and similarities, proximities and distances that define the position of the North West in the urban hierarchy.¹⁰ Bourdieu writes that social space translates into physical space and that there is a hierarchy of places expressing social distances, albeit reshaped by the effect of naturalisation produced by the long-term inscription of social conditions and differences in the

physical world.¹¹ Though this is a study seeking to harvest the fruits of in-depth focusing on a single place, the Copenhagen North West, Bourdieu's relational sociology forcefully serves as a reminder that places exist in relation to other places, that the structure of physical space relates to the structure of social space, and that the place itself is structured.¹²

While Savage argues that 'physical space is the concretisation of social space',¹³ it is important not to think of it mechanistically or directly, but as a relationship distorted by and open to symbolic manipulation and the fuzziness of the practical sense. This implies understanding places as sociohistorical products, as sites of and stakes in struggles over the profits attached to places.¹⁴ Such disputes involve not only issues of land ownership but also symbolic profits connected to life in prestigious addresses and proximity to scarce and coveted goods and services.¹⁵ In other words, struggles over space involve the power over places that makes it possible to make place, define its borders and its content as well as the people who legitimately can occupy it as a group.¹⁶ Bourdieu writes the following:

Struggles over ethnic or regional identity—in other words, over the properties (stigmata or emblems) linked with the *origin* through the *place* of origin and its associated durable marks—are a particular case of the different struggles over classifications, struggles over the monopoly of the power to make people see and believe, to get them to know and recognise, to impose the legitimate definition of the divisions of the social world and, thereby, to *make and unmake groups*. What is at stake here is the power of imposing a vision of the social world through principles of di-vision which, when they are imposed on a whole group, establish a meaning and a consensus about meaning, and in particular about the identity and unity of the group, which creates the reality of the unity and the identity of the group.¹⁷

This obscures any once-and-for-all operational desk definition of a place and orients the analytical interests towards how a place's scope and content, borders and identities are themselves stakes in a struggle. In other words, representations are not given in social reality or self-evident but are weapons and stakes in the struggles of the construction of reality, in the struggles over the legitimate categories of perception and evaluation of the social world. As Wacquant argues, Bourdieu urges urban enquiries to pay attention to 'the words through which people, objects, activities and places in the city are named because consequential categorization is an especially powerful vector of conservation or transformation of reality'.¹⁸ Symbolic power is 'a power of constituting the given through utterances, of making people see and believe, of confirming or transforming the vision of the world and, thereby, action on the world and thus the world itself'.¹⁹ As Bourdieu reminds us, though, this 'almost magical power' can be 'exercised only if it is *recognized*, that is, misrecognized as arbitrary'.²⁰ In other words, the power of words lies not in discourse itself but in the mobilisation of belief, that is, in the authority proportionate to the recognition they receive from a group, which remains to say their symbolic capital. Bourdieu locates 'the symbolic strategies

through which agents claim to impose their vision of the divisions of the social world and of their position in that world' on a continuum of two extremes:

[T]he insult, that *idios logos* through which an ordinary individual attempts to impose his point of view by taking the risk that a reciprocal insult may ensue, and the *official naming*, a symbolic act of imposition which has on its side all the strength of the collective, of the consensus, of common sense because it is performed by a delegated agent of the state, that is the holder of the *monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence*.²¹

Following this basic understanding, this book focuses on the social and historical struggles that make and remake the Copenhagen North West as a physical locality and social position, in short, as a place.

Urban marginality

Loïc Wacquant's thesis of advanced urban marginality, developed in his comparative studies of Chicago and Paris in the late 1980s, constitutes a second theoretical guide to the book. By advanced urban marginality, Wacquant designates a new regime of poverty emerging in post-industrial cities against the backdrop of rising inequality, welfare state transformation, penal system expansion, and spatial polarisation.²² Comparing the transformations of Chicago's black belt and Paris' red belt from the 1960s onwards, Wacquant highlights six features of this regime:²³ Fragmentation and de-socialisation of wage labour and the rise of precarity make formerly stable and secure jobs hard to live on and more insecure. Increasingly, districts of concentrated poverty decouple from the macroeconomic trends and do not benefit from periods of upswing but are retained in a permanent position of impoverishment. Rather than being spread across working-class areas, the advanced urban marginality has a tendency to concentrate in isolated and delimited territories publicly disparaged as urban hellholes. These stigmatised places lose 'meaning' and their formerly positive attraction as a source of identification, that is, they become spatial containers for the urban outcast with whom nobody wants to mingle or identify instead of fixed points for shared sensations and common meanings. The materially and symbolically intensifying domination of the marginalised categories residing in such stigmatised territories strips them of a common language as well as from the tools that legitimately can mobilise and represent the heterogeneous fragments as a single group.

Three sources of inspiration from Wacquant's thesis guide this book. First, the notion of territorial stigmatisation has been widely used to describe and analyse the mechanisms through which a blemish of place is imposed on existing stigmata of class position, ethnicity, and poverty, impacting residents and surrounding urban denizens, street-level bureaucracies, specialists in symbolic production (journalists, scholars, politicians), and state officials.²⁴ Several studies focus on territorial stigmatisation to understand the social situation that people living in 'problem neighbourhoods' confront in their everyday life and the different

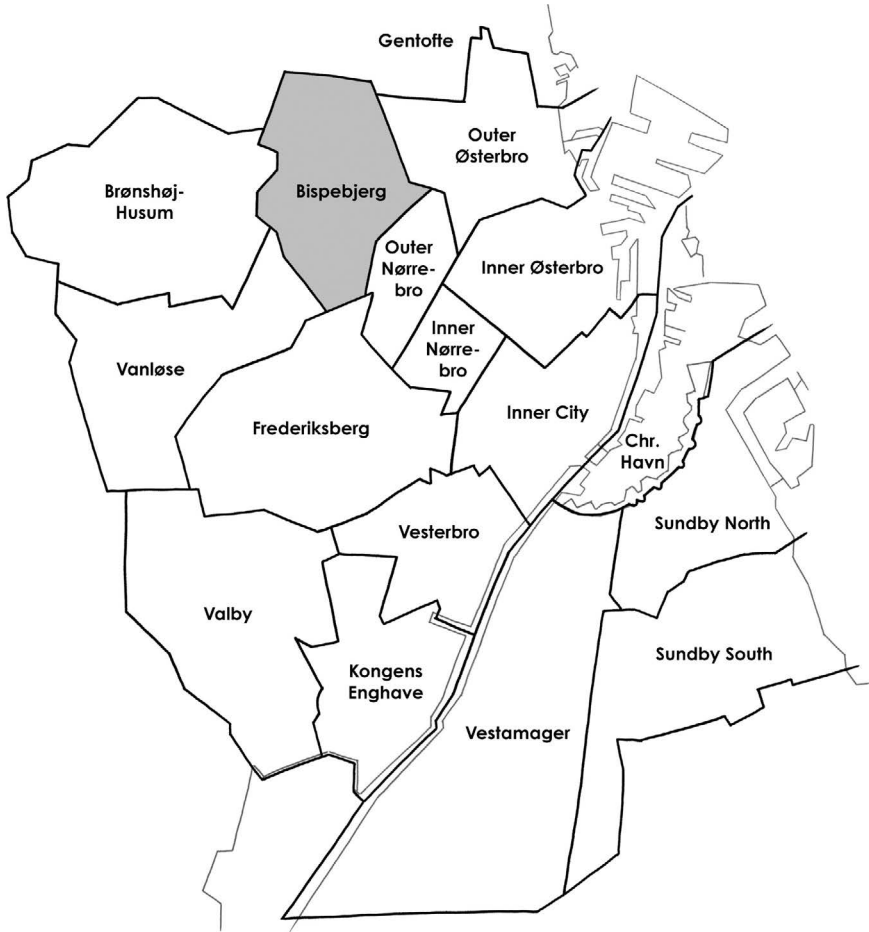
strategies they apply in order to cope with the disrepute of their residential place.²⁵ Other studies have used territorial stigmatisation to focus on the political production of place and how spatial stigma relates to processes of destigmatisation and gentrification.²⁶ Second, the recoiling of the state as a political dynamic fostering urban marginality in the wake of the post-Fordist, post-Keynesian welfare state has inspired studies of the penalisation of poverty and new forms of social control in impoverished neighbourhoods, sometimes as a way of studying the ‘actually existing neoliberalism’,²⁷ sometimes as a way of understanding state-crafting as such.²⁸ Third, while I draw on these research strands spawned by the thesis of advanced urban marginality, I most importantly use Wacquant’s thesis as a cue to probe the nexus of state, place, and social differentiation (especially class and ethnicity) in the Danish capital. Surprisingly, only a few newer studies of class have engaged with the impact of urban marginality, state transformation, and territorial stigmatisation on the formation of class as attention seems to gravitate towards questions of middle-class belonging in globalised modernity or in gentrified neighbourhoods.²⁹ Drawing inspiration from such studies of symbolic boundaries and subjective experiences of class, I strive to show how social differences and divisions relate to the sociohistorical making of place and people situated in the nether regions of social, symbolic, and physical space.

As guides to the book, then, Bourdieu and Wacquant invite one to understand places as historical and political constructions, to see the relationship between social and physical space as the historical product of struggles over the appropriation of spaces, and they prompt one to focus on the ‘*role of symbolic structures in the production of inequality and marginality in the city*’.³⁰

A sociohistory of the North West

From North West’s symbolic south-entrance at the Nørrebro S-Station, which once demarcated the city line, the two main through-streets, Frederikssundsvej and Frederiksborgvej, elevate for about 1–1.5 kilometres to an increase in altitude of 15–20 metres high up to the old Utterslev village, the marsh, and the ‘hill’ of Bispebjerg, where the monumental Grundtvig’s Church alongside the Bispebjerg cemetery and Bispebjerg Hospital constitute the northern perimeter. To the south-west, the highly trafficked Borups Allé, named after the Copenhagen mayor who bought up the land and secured a substantial municipal control of the development of the area upon the 1901 annexation, constitutes another border as the road was expanded to six lanes connecting the motorway in the late 1960s. To the north-east, the railway, Lersø Park, and the hospital constitute another demarcation line towards the Nørrebro and Østerbro city districts.

The history of the North West is in itself a compelling and captivating tale imbued with peculiar mythology and alluring in its own right. The North West has been a place for early welfare initiatives of housing, schooling, and childcare in the first half of the 20th century, a place of working-class pride and defamation. Popular imagination identifies it as a depressed area, an immigrant place, and a new trendy district extraditing diversity. In this way, the North West is also a



Map I.1 The 15 City Districts in Copenhagen in 1998.

Source: Author.

window with a concentrated view of the history of the social divisions and symbolic struggles that cut through the ‘happiest city’ in the world.

In the past 30 years, other scholars have found their way to the North West too. In a 1991 investigation of ‘urban life’ across generations in Copenhagen, human geographer Kirsten Simonsen used a part of the North West as a case due to its urbanity. She described the selected blocks of Boparken as a contiguous urban area with a rather central location in the city and as consisting of apartment housing from the 1930s—built as social housing and private rentals but transformed into private ownership or cooperatives. Furthermore, Simonsen focused on the neighbourhood’s varied age structure and that it was neither ‘yuppie’ nor