

# The city life of youths in Greenland La vie urbaine des jeunes au Groenland

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## Article abstract

In traditional Greenlandic literature as among the critics of modern civilisation, modernisation and urbanisation correspond to alienation, loneliness, urban misery, and stress. On the other hand, more and more people try to get to the big cities. An urban centre like Nuuk seems to be a success. In contrast, the small remote settlements in Greenland continuously face major problems of social disorders and poverty because of extreme living costs and unemployment. In this article, life in the city is discussed through the eyes of youths from Nuuk and the rural East Greenlandic small town of Ittoqqortoormiit. The data come from three succeeding projects, CAM I-II-III, which included photos and texts from young Greenlanders between 10 and 20 years of age regarding themes such as “my school,” “my friends,” “my media,” and “my city.” An analysis of the material produced reveals that the views of these young people fit urban theories concerning life style and behaviour; rural dwellers submitting to a life with close connections and tranquillity opposite to the hectic city dwellers’ life in an urban area.

# The city life of youths in Greenland

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Jette Rygaard\*

**Résumé:** La vie urbaine des jeunes au Groenland

Dans la littérature groenlandaise traditionnelle comme chez les critiques de la civilisation moderne, la modernisation et l'urbanisation sont des sources d'aliénation, de misère urbaine et de stress. Pourtant, plus en plus de gens essayent de se rendre dans les grandes villes. Un centre urbain comme Nuuk apparaît d'ailleurs comme un modèle de succès. À l'opposé, les petits villages isolés font face à des problèmes insolubles de pauvreté et de désordres sociaux, à cause du chômage et du coût de la vie très élevé. Dans cet article, des jeunes originaires de Nuuk et du petit village est-groenlandais d'Ittoqqortoormiit discutent de la vie urbaine. Les données proviennent de trois projets successifs, CAM I-II-III, réunissant photos et textes de jeunes Groenlandais entre 10 et 20 ans concernant des thèmes comme «mon école», «mes amis», «mes moyens de communication», et «ma ville». L'analyse des données révèle que ces jeunes se présentent en conformité avec les théories urbaines courantes sur les différents styles de vie, soit comme des ruraux appréciant leur tranquillité et les liens sociaux étroits, soit comme des urbains attachés au rythme de vie plus rapide de la ville.

**Abstract:** The city life of youths in Greenland

In traditional Greenlandic literature as among the critics of modern civilisation, modernisation and urbanisation correspond to alienation, loneliness, urban misery, and stress. On the other hand, more and more people try to get to the big cities. An urban centre like Nuuk seems to be a success. In contrast, the small remote settlements in Greenland continuously face major problems of social disorders and poverty because of extreme living costs and unemployment. In this article, life in the city is discussed through the eyes of youths from Nuuk and the rural East Greenlandic small town of Ittoqqortoormiit. The data come from three succeeding projects, CAM I-II-III, which included photos and texts from young Greenlanders between 10 and 20 years of age regarding themes such as "my school," "my friends," "my media," and "my city." An analysis of the material produced reveals that the views of these young people fit urban theories concerning life style and behaviour; rural dwellers submitting to a life with close connections and tranquillity opposite to the hectic city dwellers' life in an urban area.

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## Introduction

“With our new culture house we can gather the whole world into it” (Girl, 17 yrs, Nuuk, CAM I: 73). “Here we have ‘Telen’ [the telecommunication station]. The ‘Tele’ is a very important place, very important. It makes everything much closer” (Girl, 12 yrs, Ittoqqortoormiit, CAM I: 78). These statements from young Greenlandic participants in one of three succeeding projects, CAM I, II, III, document that the idea of the world outside their local hometown is appealing. To get the world closer, to take part in both national and global events and happenings are a sign of not being left out on the otherwise somewhat isolated and enormous Greenlandic island. On the other hand, their openness towards the world is *not* evidence of *not* being proud of their home society whatever size or offers it holds.

For the CAM research projects on youth culture, media and globalisation, youth participants were asked to use disposable cameras and small diary books to answer our questions. A more theoretical reason was that the objects in photographs are multidimensional and therefore place multiple meanings into the viewer’s hands, based on content, perception of intent, and context. The research projects were not intended originally to reveal traits of urbanisation. Views on urbanisation were an extra asset that came spontaneously from the young people. Using a camera at a distance from the researchers set their creativity free. About half of their pictures and diaries gave us some answers to our explicit questions about media, consumerism, and globalisation. The rest of the material was their way to show *us* about their close surroundings and life world. Being in possession of the research means empowered them to be their own authorities and shoot what we wanted, and what they themselves wanted, while obviously they had fun with the little camera toy. The photos showed us that it inspired them to tell their stories about who they were, what they liked, and who their friends and families were. Going through the results, 1,536 photos and 987 diary texts from 137 young Greenlanders between 10 and 20 years old was an exciting surprise. Several possible new research themes revealed themselves, apart from the questions originally asked about “A week with Media” (CAM I)<sup>1</sup>, “Tweens as consumers” (CAM II)<sup>2</sup>, and “Youth and Globalisation” (CAM III)<sup>3</sup>.

In this article, I will primarily focus on the issues of urbanisation, *i.e.*, the more or less explicit statements/photographs of urban life and behaviour in the youths’ hometowns: Nuuk and Ittoqqortoormiit. The city of Nuuk was chosen as it is the capital of Greenland and a urban centre with 14,719 inhabitants, and Ittoqqortoormiit because it is the smallest community that has a rural town-status with 529 inhabitants (Greenland Statistics 2008). My focus here will deal with only a small fraction of the whole project. Most of the material will be from CAM I and will consist only of data

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<sup>1</sup> CAM I was carried out in 2000 by Birgit Kleist Pedersen and Jette Rygaard of Ilisimatusarfik.

<sup>2</sup> CAM II was carried out in 2003 as a teaching project by Ilisimatusarfik students Mette Larsen Lyberth, Lona Lynge and Johanne Berthelsen. Note that “tweens” are teenagers between 10 and 12 years old.

<sup>3</sup> CAM III was carried out in 2006 as a teaching project by Ilisimatusarfik students Katti Frederiksen and Marianne Hansen.

from 21 informants aged 12 to 17. Some photos will be shown from the CAM II. Fourteen of the young people were from Ittoqqortoormiit (10 girls and 4 boys). Nuuk was represented by seven young people (5 girls and 2 boys) who attended high school or vocational school and were over 17 years old. The young people from Ittoqqortoormiit are a perfect frame of reference to contrast the metropolitan life in Nuuk, in which one finds real traits of an urban culture. Consequently, Nuuk provides a good example of how a “city-dweller-life” can be lived just below the polar circle.

In addition to theories of photography and of urbanisation, the youths’ verbal and pictorial narratives are the guiding lines in this article. With a camera in hand, even a somewhat old fashioned disposable camera, they told stories with their photos, texts, or photos with anchoring texts, a combination of data material which raised some interesting methodological problems on how to interpret such different and non-homogeneous results.

### **The method: A visual ethnographic challenge**

Why ask young people around Greenland to take pictures and write anchoring diary texts? The answer is simple: to attempt to break up the hierarchy between the researcher and the researched (Lather 2000). As a grown up researcher you will never have access to children’s and young people’s life and minds if you are just an ethnographic fly on the wall. In contrast, an informant-insider with a camera can and will go anywhere as demonstrated in other similar research projects (Hubbard 1996; Staunæs 1998). Some of the pictures we received were truly seen from the youths’ point of view: playful, funny and sweet, some were very private, which we of course respected, and some were real and full life stories that touched our hearts as Roland Barthes famous “*punctum* pictures.” Barthes (1987) tells us that a *punctum* picture “pierces the viewer” and denotes a wound, through personally touching details which establish a direct relationship with the object or person within it. In contrast, his twin concept of *studium* denotes the scientific, cultural, linguistic, and political interpretations of a photograph (*ibid.*). In the CAM material there were lots of *studium* observations and some touching, stirring *punctum* pictures. Most of the *studium* pictures were direct answers to our questions, and denoted the resourcefulness and creativity of the young co-researchers<sup>4</sup>. Examples of *studium* pictures are photos of media such as television, play station, and cellular phones.

At the starting point, the *punctum*-pictures were treated as scientific results, but in the long run these photos by individual researchers “demanded” to be analysed as specific case stories that often stood alone without an anchoring text, and told a story that was hard to forget. Although subjectivity is the essence of a *punctum*-picture, the world history of collectively felt *punctum*-pictures is well-known: the concentration

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<sup>4</sup> The use of the term “co-researcher” to name the informants is part of a transgressive method that feminist researcher Patti Lather (2000), among others, coined in recognition of the all-important role of “the other,” “the investigated,” in post-modern research.

camp photographs from 1945 (Sontag 2003: 119), the little Vietnamese girl that was hit by a Napalm fallout during the Vietnam war, and the global horror that we all felt by looking at people jumping from the towers of the World Trade Center at the never-to-be-forgotten 9/11. Not to compare it to world atrocities, I will display one picture from an exquisite series of lively photographs shot by a group of tweens playing around on the ice in Nuuk (Figure 1). These kids are healthy and happy and playfully, fooling around and shooting, as a compliment to us the viewers. Needless to say that this *punctum*-picture contrasts with so many statistical sad facts about Greenlandic children (e.g., Abelsen 2007; Bjerregaard 2008).

## The results

We analysed the material produced as quantitative research data with numbers, percents and graphs (Pedersen and Rygaard 2003). Of the total of the extracted material of 334 texts and 540 photos, in the listed categories (my school, my friends, my media, and my city), I will primarily focus on the ones that are listed under “my city,” but as photographs are multifaceted and as friendship and media are important parts of being both young and city dwellers, the categories sometimes overlap. Since there were almost twice as many photos as texts, not all of the photos had an anchoring text. Some photos stood by themselves, some texts stood by themselves, and finally some photos were anchored with a text. In between these categories, there were also problems of a photo and a text in combination that did not hold a meaning for the viewer, photos that were blurred or damaged or did not correspond to the text at all. For the present article, I will only deal with the clear categories of texts, photos and combinations.

The data from Nuuk and Ittoqqortoormiit displayed an obvious difference. In the case of Nuuk, texts preponderate slightly, while for Ittoqqortoormiit it is unmistakable reversed; more photos are taken than diary texts are written. The difference is in direct ratio to the age of the co-researchers. The older the informant, the more textual capability he/she holds and expresses. In Ittoqqortoormiit, the co-researchers were younger, 12.0 years old on average as the school system is at elementary level only, whereas in Nuuk, an educational centre, the youth were 15.8 years old in average. The 7 young people from Nuuk wrote 111 texts in total (in average 16.8 each), while the 14 from Ittoqqortoormiit, 114 texts (in average 9.1 each). As evidenced by their photos and texts, research with a practical, creative angle is thus best suited for tweens.

**Texts alone** can be analysed through various textual theories. When contrived as a unity however, such as a photo and a text, their meaning could be very implied and referring, and when the photo is missing, it is difficult to know the meaning. In Figure 2, we see differences in answers to the four categories of questions (media, city, friends and school). The youths from Nuuk answered chiefly the question about media, almost skipped the one about school and were equal with the youth from Ittoqqortoormiit on the friends question. These young urbanites, however, were not so explicit regarding the issue of their city, far beyond the obvious interest the young people in Ittoqqortoormiit displayed in their non-urban-like town.



Figure 1. Example of a *punctum* picture celebrating play and friendship. Photo by a 13 years old girl from Nuuk (CAM II, 9: 24).

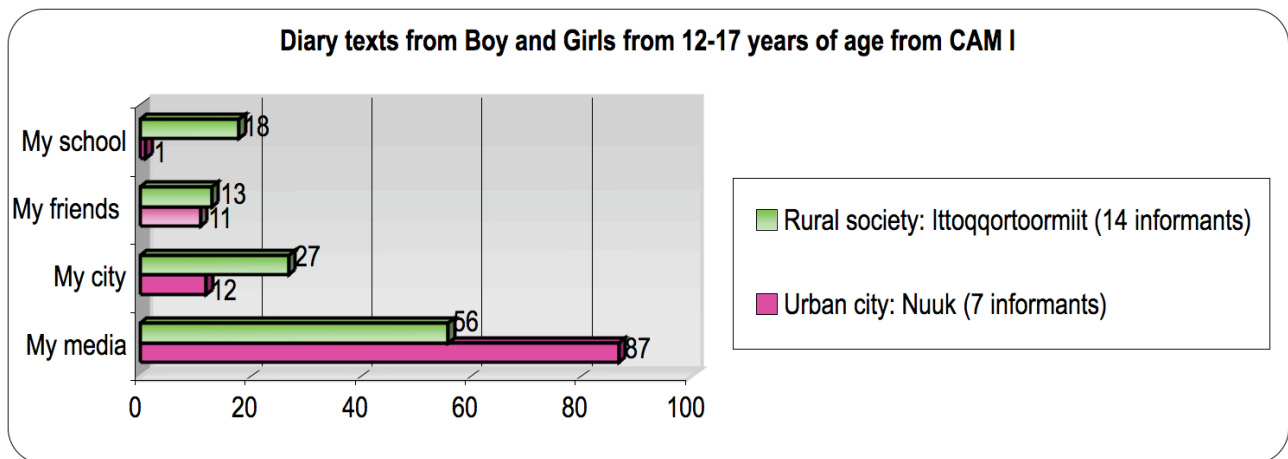


Figure 2. Division of diary texts including those from the photo/text combinations.

The **combination of a text and a photo** is a strong one. We look upon texts and photos as a strategy of authenticity. The text guides us towards a meaning. The picture functions as a quotation or a proof to the ethnographic evidence: “I was here!” (Pink 2001: 123). This unity of text and picture acts as a truth and constitutes a “privileged knowledge” (*ibid.*). The photo, however, in that combination often “loses its autonomy” (*ibid.*: 125) and confirms the traditional text-over-photo hierarchy.

**Photos alone** are a negotiation of meaning. In the opinion of Barthes (1987), the referent sticks to the photo and is simultaneously proof of reality and of the past. New theories of photography however, display the sense of being lost *vis-à-vis* photos that do not reveal their secrets even with the most careful reading: their meaning is an unfinished process, a dialogic movement (Lundström 1995).

Quantification of the photos revealed that there was again a difference between co-researchers from Nuuk and Ittoqqortoormiit. The young teenagers from the small rural society were the most eager photographers in almost all categories. They shoot 255 pictures (on average 18.2 each) while the young people from Nuuk shot 100 pictures (14.2 on average). Because the photographic lens is objective and catches the whole picture with details, we had to incorporate a fifth category named “other” as seen in Figure 3. We see here that the Ittoqqortoormiit youth prevailed in all categories.

Two kinds of pictures without texts were present in the material: “information weak” pictures and “information loaded” pictures. The “information weak” pictures could be portraits of young girls flirting almost model-like with the camera. Of course, we know who “owns” the camera, but who actually shot the picture, and why, is a mystery. What was the sender’s message, if any?

Information loaded pictures needed less explanation and were often easy to read for several reasons. Firstly, because they appeared as “visual inventories of objects, peoples and artifacts” (Clark-Ibanez 2007: 167). The CAM photos were often answers to our questions. Secondly, since they depicted events that were part of “collective or institutional paths” (*ibid.*), the CAM photos included recognisable buildings or places which held a certain familiarity. Thirdly, because they were “intimate dimensions of the social” (*ibid.*), the CAM photos displayed recognisable social conduct.

In the following section, after presenting various theories on urbanisation, I will discuss the combination of texts and photos, as well as the information loaded pictures that were about life in the city.



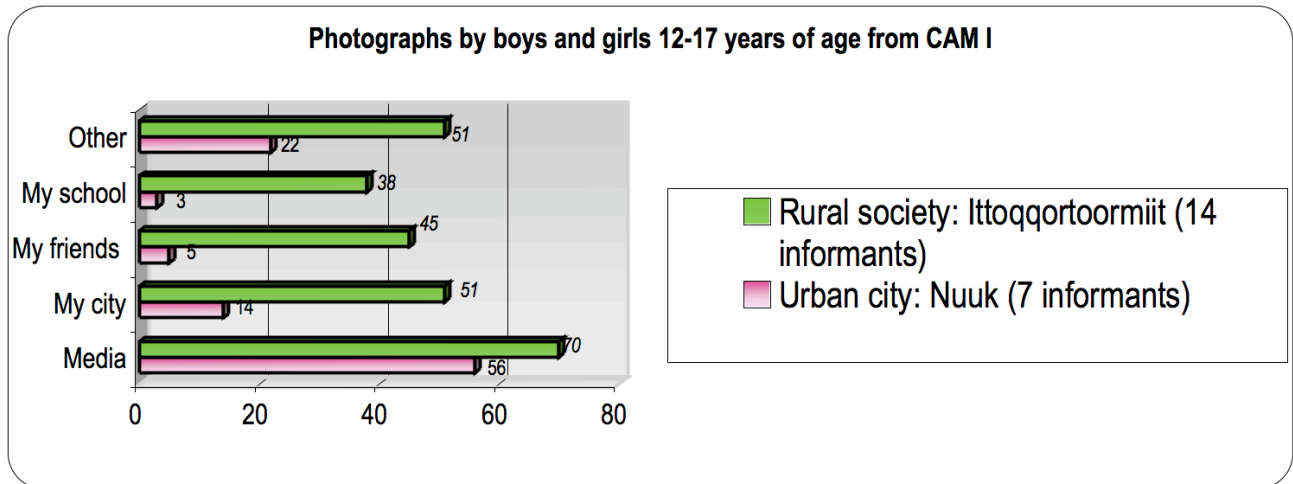


Figure 3. Division of photographs including those from the photo/text combinations.



Figure 4. Examples of information loaded pictures with recognisable buildings or places: apartment blocks in Nuuk. Photo by a 13 years old girl from Nuuk (CAM II, 5: 8).



## Urbanisation

Urbanisation as a general term describes the change from rural life to urban conditions and refers to how large a part of the population in an area lives in cities, in which way they live and in which way it changes their behaviour and social interaction. Except for the growth in population, urbanisation is the dominant demographic trend almost everywhere since the 1950s. It could be said that the push toward urbanisation in Greenland began when the first colonies were founded after the missionary Hans Egede's arrival in 1721 even though a society with only a few hundred souls does not constitute an urban centre. However, no universal standard of what constitutes urbanisation exists. In regard to numbers and percentages, Greenland is unique: a very small population of 56,000 people, with almost 25% living in Nuuk. Another parameter for urbanisation is population density. In that respect too, Greenland, is also rather unique. While Canada and Australia are characterised by enormous, sparsely populated areas with only an average of two or three persons per km<sup>2</sup>, Greenland has only 0,03 people per km<sup>2</sup>. By way of comparison, the numbers amount to 126 in Denmark and 30 in the USA (Rygaard 2007). We are thus talking of relative traces of global city culture when we speak of Greenland, and yet modern technology and globalisation have had an impact.

### *Theories of urbanisation*

Modern cities are the outcome of the growth of capitalism, the industrial revolution and the market economy that during the 18th and 19th centuries transformed small societies into big industrial centres. Especially in the 19th century, the growth was so rapid that it was an urban revolution (Hubbard 2006: 12). On the basis of three concepts, number, density and heterogeneity, it is possible to explain the general features of urban life from three perspectives: 1) physical surroundings and technology; 2) social organisation and social relations; and 3) collective behaviour and attitudes (Wirth 2005: 38). All of these features were said to cause pathological conditions inversely proportional to former rural times with a healthy life, because crowding of people in unhealthy surroundings and in small spaces creates stress and problems (Choldin 1978). The classical urban theories that were "deterministic" (Fischer 2005: 54) vigorously promoted conceptions of the cities as filthy, dangerous, noisy places (Simmel 2005[1903]) where hordes of people work and live at the bottom of society without knowing nor worrying about one another (Tönnies 2005[1887]), places in which the climate of emotional alienation, severe competition and human degradation force human beings into crime, alcoholism, sickness, suicide or violent death (Weber 1985[1922]: 1212 in Hubbard 2006: 20).

Ferdinand Tönnies (2005[1887]), who has been cited for a certain sentimentalism of past times, describes the physical and geographical differences in the forms of society and the spirits of community. In the small city in which the society is organised around families and the nearby local work, the primary emotional and close relations dominate in what he calls a *Gemeinschaft* society. On the other hand, city life is

dominated by anonymity because nobody really knows each other and the inhabitants are familiar with only part of the other peoples' lives. Secondary connections, depending on conditions of work, residence or interest, dominate in this *Gesellschaft* society.

Because of the hasty meetings with many people, the city dweller has to immunise her- or himself to the demands made by other people, and has to act reserved and blasé (Wirth 2005[1938]: 35) in order to avoid reaching a fierce state of “intensification [of] the nerves” (Simmel 2005[1903]: 192). The urban culture is one of sensory stimuli—sights, sounds, smells, actions of others—a hasty and chaotic city culture (Fischer 2005: 54). Furthermore, the urban culture is a visual culture. Later critiques of urbanisation claim that while among swarms of people, the city dweller switches on a form of “tunnel vision” that filters out outside stimuli of marginal importance in order to gain concentration or to behave with discretion (Newman and Lonsdale 1996: 87). To be caught staring at somebody is considered embarrassing and a breaking of the codes in the human jungle. Because of these behavioural rules, many smart and city-like individuals wear sunglasses as shields and to act “cool” (McLuhan 1964: 31).

The pillars of traditional society—close contact, neighbourly conviviality, kinship and solidarity—are in modern *Gesellschaft* societies replaced by playing roles, being in competition, mutual exploitation, and regulations such as laws and traffic lights (Wirth 2005[1938]: 36). Services like nursing and care, that were formerly based on unity and solidarity, have now become commercial products offered for sale (*ibid.*: 37), as seen in one of the young girl's description of the old people's home in Ittoqqortoormiit: “In the old people's home [there] are many old people who do not have a home. But their home is the old people's community. They are sent from their children that are grown-up children, because they are too busy.” (12 years old girl from Ittoqqortoormiit CAM I, 78: 21). The hard, routine work on which city life is centred makes demands on people, and the city dweller needs to recuperate by engaging in amusement and the pleasures of the city, that in a caricature could change to an existence of a passive bystander (*ibid.*: 40). Being *in* and *on top* in the city demands that one is able to master quite diverse functions, possess an integrated personality which is capable of resisting the effects of thriving in a condition of stimulus overload, and simultaneously is able to react quickly yet maintain the endurance required to reach one's goals.

The determinist theory followed the initial period of urbanisation. Another one is called “compositional theory” and claims that the urban city becomes a melting pot or a mosaic of social worlds—a juxtaposition of shrinking families, work-related and social groups where race, religion or individuality co-exist side by side (Fischer 2005: 56). However, it is not the size of the urban centre, the density or the heterogeneity that transforms human life. What matters are the individuals' economic position, their social class, ethnicity, and stage in the life cycle, as well as their marital and family status (*ibid.*). A third theory with the name of “subcultural theory” see social groups as ways to create and strengthen meaningful social worlds (*ibid.*: 57).

Various new urban studies have over the years given birth to renewed attempts to improve city life. Since the 1990s, the visions of city planning, consumerism, and entertainment by urban theorists have had a positive significance (Katz 1994). Now the architects and city town planners distinguish between “the necessary city life” and “the optional city life” (Gehl et al. 2006: 8). Around 1900, in the cities, the necessary, work-oriented life dominated. Around 2000, it is quite the opposite. The necessary city life plays only an unimportant part as most of the exchanges of goods, news, and transport now are indoor activities (*ibid.*: 9). In the same manner, the private sphere is quickly developing as more and more activities are done individually, and in the privacy of the homes where everybody owns means for washing, printing, web-surfing, television entertainment, etc. (*ibid.*: 14). The optional city life is characterised by recreational activities, leisure time and consumption. In order to provide cities with recreational areas, urban-planners have laid down criteria of quality, listed in three categories: “protection, comfort and splendour,” that are requested to secure safe, comfortable and attractive city spaces for the urban dwellers (*ibid.*: 106-107).

Cities have now become places which are “hip and happening,” “hot” or “cool”; places you want to be in, move into, read of, or “play with” (Sorokin 1992 in Hubbard 2006: 5). Even if the cities now have become hip places in which only the rich can afford to live along the parks and waterfronts—Nuuk is a good example—the reek of the past’s denigration of urban impressions is nevertheless apparent in art and culture, not least in that such stories (movies and PC games about urban crimes) tend to make good entertainment (Rygaard 2008). Young people’s vibrant subculture that flourishes in Nuuk often still makes a display of a deterministic attitude towards the urban society. We see it in graffiti terms of abuse (*ibid.*) and rage against society in music texts. The band NU-GEN’s recent album: *Magnetic Northpole*, in which the ‘intro-song’ is called *City of Hell*, is an unmistakable manifestation:

City of Hell  
Gim’me a one good reason to stay here  
I cannot walk alone without fear  
Cos’, this is the fucking city of hell  
[...]  
The streets are small but lot of fear  
They would kill if they all want her  
There is no fucking peace and equality  
The city is dying for cos’ there’s no activity  
[...]  
It’s ruled by drug dealers and criminals  
The parties are we’re all criminals...  
[...]  
I hate the smell the fucking view but say it’s all fine  
[...]  
Cos’, this is the fucking city of hell

Simmel and Wirth could not have phrased it more precisely: An urban centre with smells, anger, crime, fear and no peace, but at the same time with no activity! If the Nuuk youth find that no activity is there for them, what about the small towns?

Looking at Greenland, living in a city versus living in a small community is totally different, much more in line with the subcultural theory and later theories. In the cities and towns of a certain size, there are lots of opportunities to choose among in every aspect of life. In the small communities around Greenland, the inhabitants' lives are restricted. They are confined to crowded households (Greenland Statistics 2008) living in small and obsolete houses without running water or toilets (Andersen 2008). Besides that, they have to face lives with unemployment (Greenland Statistics 2008), missing opportunities, language problems, *i.e.* most of them do not master Danish which is the way to education (*ibid.*), missing infrastructures (Frederiksen and Frederiksen 2008: 17) and no leisure facilities (Andersen 2007). In the last years of an antiquated, corrupt and "nepotism-marked" *Siumut* government (a Social Democratic party), the scandals have been numerous (Thorsen 2008), the lives of the people in small communities have grown from bad to worse (Halskov 2005: 8) and poverty is a real threat (Abelsen 2007: 29).

The fact is, however, that the cities are here to stay; everybody wants to live there as illustrated by the example of a 20 year long waiting list for a flat in Nuuk. City life is much more rewarding in so many ways in Greenland than living in small under-supplied and under-funded societies in the outer districts. Nuuk often draws the attention, the business and the money for centralisation and urbanisation.

### **Nuuk as an urban centre**

"Nuuk—cool capital" is written on a big poster that first meets the eyes in the airport of Nuuk. Visitors marvel at the existence of a metropolis with only 15,000 inhabitants<sup>5</sup> living close to the polar circle. Visitors see Nuuk as "one of the smallest capitals in the world" (Hyllested 2003), "a charming shanty town" (Andersen 2003: 2), and when they discover it matches any other city, surprise surfaces: "They are no fools out here in the wilderness" (Bjørnvig 1998: 5).

The municipality of Nuuk, and particularly its former active mayor, Agnethe Davidsen, looks upon "Nuuk as a locomotive for the development" not only for the city but also for the whole country. (Nuup Kommunea Indstiksavis 2003). The city council has been planning—until now in vain—an enlargement of the Nuuk Airport to the standards of international size airplanes. In recent years, Nuuk's two new quarters, Qernertunnguit and Qinngorput, have forced their way into the original recreational areas, and more people now live in the satellite towns of Nuuk.

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<sup>5</sup> On January 1, 2007, 14,719 people (Greenland Statistics 2008: 468).

Though only the size of a small provincial town in Europe, Nuuk is nevertheless an urban centre. Many inhabitants, both in relation to the extent of the city and to the number of inhabitants of the country, have many possibilities to choose among as far as public buildings, institutions and city-spaces are concerned: numerous schools and educational establishments at almost every level, leisure time activities: a cinema, youth clubs, discotheques, cafés and more cultural offers such as concerts, museums, meetings and public lectures, possibilities for shopping sprees, and public means of transportation such as local buses<sup>6</sup> or taxis. In Nuuk, as in any other urban centre, a modicum of anonymity is also possible. On the personal level, one can manage to live a global lifestyle at full speed, adapting to high levels of noise, the feeling of being comfortable together with many people of different kinds, and to use all these possibilities and challenges on a physical as well as a psychical level. In other words, to live in Nuuk—as in bigger urban centres—you have to react and adapt to the human jungle life (Newman and Lonsdale 1996) appropriately.

Many journalists arriving in Nuuk stay at the renowned Hotel Hans Egede. There is a fine view from its rooms and restaurant to the informal meeting place and trading street in front of the co-op *Brugsen* just on the opposite. If town planners do not place squares and public spaces where people can meet, talk or relax simultaneously (Gehl 2006; Hall 1973: 155), people will devise such spaces for themselves. The square in front of the Co-op is an example: it was never planned as a meeting place; there are no benches, no real shelters for wind and weather. Nevertheless, this place has become the piazza of Nuuk, where people meet, loiter, talk and even organise impromptu flea markets in shelters of the Co-op. Although an official sign on the walls announces that alcohol drinking is prohibited, hash dealers and other befuddled people are also visible in this crowded, central part of Nuuk as in every city, and thereby contribute to the local fear of modernisation.

Pessimistic urban critics are never hesitant to direct their attention to the darker side of urbanisation. They are joined by artists with a critical view towards developments, as is manifested for instance in the Greenlandic artist Ole Kristiansen's video *Zoo Inuillu* (Kristiansen 1988) in which he describes people in the city as zoo people and the city limits as a cage. Inside this cage is darkness and despair, much in line with the deterministic theory (Rygaard 2008: 154). Nuuk of course has its black localities and blemishes such as the many blocks of cement apartments. The reputation, however, is often worse than reality. But then again, there is the other side of the city coin; the proximity to everything in town, its large number of choices, its light and, not least, its neighbours. Danish anthropologist Anne Knudsen (1998: 12) terms the city as the “El Dorado” of civilisation because many people being stacked together is “the secret of civilisation,” a place that creates many possibilities. The city Knudsen describes presumably is bigger than Nuuk, but the many possibilities also hold true for the capital of Greenland as can be seen in the youth photos and descriptions from the CAM projects.

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<sup>6</sup> There is no such thing as ground transportation between towns and smaller communities.

### ***Buildings, institutions and public life in Nuuk***

In a city such as Nuuk that has many cultural activities, a part of life is transferred from the domestic to the public sphere. People meet in the city space and sub-cultures grow up around things of mutual interest: leisure time activities as shopping, cinema, café visits, graffiti painting, dangers-for-fun like wall climbing or bus-skating, urban ways of life well known in many bigger places and cities of the world (Rygaard 2007). To look at the young people's photographs of Nuuk is like taking a walk with a tourist guide. The camera's "eye" proudly stops at the city's sights: the culture centre and cinema, called Katuaq (Figure 5). We see how the photographer zooms in on the *première* posters in the windows, the sun is captured by the big blue globe in front of the Vocational school with Katuaq in the background, the library of the Eskimoslottet ('The Inuit castle') College, a building painted barn red, Tele's (the telecommunication station) parabolic antenna which provides connections to the whole world, a view from a bus stop where graffiti is seen on its green, wooden walls, a bus trip, a close up on the notice board of the late-night service kiosk, young men in front of the landmark of the city, Kagssagssuq—things that tell of a city with many and varied offers.

In Nuuk, the level of sophistication of urban life is much higher than in any other city in Greenland. There is a great variety of things to do, and many possibilities to unfold an urban life. Apparently, the young photographers in Nuuk focused on buildings and objects that they were proud of the most. The dark underbelly of Nuuk, the decay—peeling paint on apartment blocks, destroyed doors, plain graffiti and drunken people in front of the general store—are not caught by the camera's eye except on photos where the focus apparently is the friends, but where the camera's impartial eye also discloses crude graffiti on the staircase of one of Nuuk's five-apartment blocks. Could it be that slums are not to be displayed? Or they did not see them? When somebody asks you to take some photos of your city (which of course we did not), the tourist metaphor may be appropriate: you imagine what "the other" wants to see, but you also censor—consciously or unconsciously—what you want to show or conceal about your "own place." Both in the photos and in the accompanying diary, the explicit sender and the implicit recipient are felt. The pact of presentation is given: "I want to show you..."

### ***Life style, leisure activities and friends in Nuuk***

People who live in the cities have developed a new culture of conviviality. As *polychrone* people<sup>7</sup>, urban dwellers are establishing contact, used to loud noise and information overload. Accustomed to many and different people, *homo urbanus* (Newman and Lonsdale 1996: 10) adapts to hectic city life by staging him/herself and experimenting with different expressions of personality or by using a mask as a protection against crowds. These results can be seen as play, fun and imaginativeness.

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<sup>7</sup> *Polychrone* people are highly involved in each other and are inclined to do several things at the same time as jugglers (Hall 1973: 155).





Figure 5. The globe of Nuuk's vocational school with the cultural center Katuaq in the background. Photo by 19 years old young man, Nuuk (CAM I, 35: 9).



Figure 6. Example of photo without text: Joyous tweens anticipating the fun of playing around with a camera as co-researchers and symbolically occupying the global world. Photo by 12 years old girl, Nuuk (CAM II, 9:34).



### **Ittoqqortoormiit: A mirror contrast to urbanity**

Ittoqqortoormiit is a small society of 529 inhabitants at the edge of the National Park and neighbour to one of Greenland's richest treasures of seals, walruses, polar bears, narwhals, foxes, alpine hares etc. Yet this society is not rich anymore. It is not only the climate change that disrupts the possibilities for hunting, sealing and whaling, but also the care for sustainability, catch quotas or the international communities' morally ambivalent attitudes towards traditional cultures and their ways of living. Although the profession of hunter still has a great importance for the Greenlandic identity and self-knowledge, most of the traditional, material or tangible culture has disappeared into the museums. Substantial parts of the immaterial culture however, are still intact; the hunters' skills, the experience of weather conditions, of the landscape, and of the behaviour and habits of the animals. Nowadays, some of these valuable skills are being transformed into tourism.

In a small remote society like Ittoqqortoormiit, paid work is hard to get and the difference between West Greenland and East Greenland are extensive. In her recent book, Danish journalist Marianne Krogh Andersen (2008) tells of the few possibilities to get paid work in a society in which the old hunter culture is reduced to a spare time occupation (Andersen in Rasmussen 2008: 1). When one reviews papers and articles about East Greenland and Ittoqqortoormiit for the last five year, the most conspicuous feature of this neglected area focuses on severe problems. Drinking problems, children abuse (Rasmussen 2008: 1) and a suicide rate nine times that in Denmark (Bjerregaard 2008) are the issues that receive the most notice. Recently, a heated debate flourished concerning the moral indignation concerning killed narwhals that added fuel to the debate about the hunters' culture (Nielsen 2008: 1). The most positive contributions dealt with powerful nature as an allurements to adventure tourists (Betak 2004: 1).

On the other hand, if one investigates this small town's own home page, it is almost poetic and tells about the meaning of the Greenlandic name Ittoqqortoormiit, meaning 'Big House.' The inhabitants indeed are living in a big house. In the numbers for population versus the area of the municipality extremes meet; 537 inhabitants in the town of Ittoqqortoormiit, 9 in the neighbouring village and 235,000 km<sup>2</sup> area, hence a population density of 0,002. It is hard to imagine an urban existence here and yet, in many ways the global world does not seem *that* far away. The telecommunication station that keeps television, the telephone and the Internet is the life nerve of this small remote society as the young photographers were most aware of directing our attention to their media. The people in charge of the home page do not seem to acknowledge that the world is far away nor see their society as left hanging in the past. They tell us that satellite TV, Internet, fast food and fashion are trends which have a visible influence on life here, like anywhere else (OTWEG 2008).

### ***Buildings, institutions and public life in Ittoqqortoormiit***

The home page of Ittoqqortoormiit proceeds to take us on a guided tour among the buildings and institutions of the town exactly in the same manner as the youth's photographs took us on a guided tour. One marked difference is, however, highly conspicuous. The youth's photographs are taken with a primitive camera, and consequently the quality is not always the best, but the motives, the angles and their anchoring texts are superb; creative, emphasising the best view and, in addition, some provide long and informative explanations. In a little society such as Ittoqqortoormiit, it is obvious that it is not possible to display a large number of city buildings and institutions, but the young people did it all the same, to the degree these buildings were there. Maybe precisely because of the shortage of official buildings our young photographers seem to be especially eager to display for us the signs of urban institutions. They proudly displayed, via their shots and their diary texts, everything from the school to the jail and used—like the rest of the participants—a lot of celluloid, and paper on one of the great interest of young people, the shopping facilities (Rygaard 2003). In Ittoqqortoormiit the big shopping store, the Co-op and its storage house, as well as the new “hot” 24-hour convenience store Sumaar formed these desired facilities. Not only did Sumaar double the town's places of purchase, but it also had—by young girls' standards—a very interesting young man on the staff. The real surprise, however, was their interest in carefully and proudly describing and photographing their institutional buildings.

Nunu<sup>8</sup>, a 13 years old girl was unique as she shot 31 photos with long anchoring texts. Her 12 years old girl friend Aviaja was walking besides her during the whole one-week photo session. Their stories of city institutions as well as their photographs with anchoring text reveal a comprehensive knowledge of the use of the official buildings. Their narration of the “the satellite dish,” “the church,” “the jail” (Figure 7) and the “the old people's home” are extensive stories as well as the rest of Ittoqqortoormiit's official buildings, the Co-op and the Sumaar store. Fourteen buildings represent this little town in their photos. For some reason, they both wrote in Danish. The language and spelling is wonderfully precocious, but hard to reproduce in English. These diary entries, as the rest of their long narratives, unintently tell of some of the hardships that they have witnessed: dying, being sent to jail, addiction, being abused, etc.

In the town of Ittoqqortoormiit, the camera also reveals the lower standards of living and one feels a little ashamed to notice things obviously not intended as the focus. In one picture for instance, a younger brother with a newly slaughtered seal on the floor is the subject of legitimate pride and an intended subject of the photograph, but nevertheless, a little cupboard with an open curtain containing provisions that would normally be refrigerated mercilessly claims our attention as we understand that they have no fridge. Barthes (1987: 28) would say that he met a *punctum*; an element in a photo that has the effect of constantly attracting one's attention.

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<sup>8</sup> All names are made anonymous.

### *Life style, leisure activities and friends in Ittoqqortoormiit*

The most eager and creative group among the Ittoqqortoormiit-group were the 12 and 13 year olds. They wrote rather long and thoughtful texts about the use of media in a very thorough manner, implicating both use and an almost philosophic explanation on the issue of globalisation. These young peoples were much attentive to please our requests. This could be a consequence of their young age, or maybe they were a little authoritarian—a possible feature of inhabitants from a more traditional society. Apart from the media objects and the many village photos, friends were presented one by one in a bilateral case-to-case contact: the photographer and an “easy” target. What stands out in the photos from Ittoqqortoormiit are the relatively few family photos, as compared to other smaller towns as for instance, Sisimiut. The most characteristic photos are from the school and display in a few exceptional cases, a school class of five students. Their attitude is reluctant and they are covering their heads or are looking down or away. This attitude is so much in contrast to the photos from Nuuk, where the same age groups are posing, showing off and playing around as homage to the camera. In contrast to *polychrone* individuals in the cities, *monochrome*<sup>9</sup> modes of existence seem to prevail in sparsely populated regions and small towns. People are exposed to less contact and one seldom does several things at the same time (Hall 1973: 155-156). In the photos, this simplicity in life style seems to prevail. The differences between the photos from Nuuk and those from small towns such as Ittoqqortoormiit support the polychrone/monochrome dichotomy.

### **Conclusion**

In traditional Greenlandic literature as among the critics of modern civilisation, modernisation and urbanisation correspond to alienation, loneliness, urban misery, and stress. Nevertheless, more and more people try to get to the big cities. An urban centre like Nuuk seem to be a success. The waiting time for housing is over 20 years there although the local authorities are frantically building houses. On the other hand, the small remote settlements in Greenland continuously face major problems of social disorders and poverty because of extreme costs of living and unemployment.

In spite of its relatively small number of inhabitants and size, Nuuk is without doubt an urban centre. Nuuk also brands itself similarly. The city-like organisation and the urban speed of life create urban dwellers with *polychrone* and *Gesellschaft* behaviour in contrasts to a quiet *monochrome*, and more *Gemeinschaft* existence in smaller settlements like Ittoqqortoormiit. In Nuuk, urban phenomena like graffiti, a few drunken people, flea markets and local bands prevail. Kids and youths engage in leisure activities and a life style that could be seen in any big city in the world: they play, stage themselves and apparently enjoy convivial gathering in homes, cafés and piazzas not meant to be recreational centres. People and city change each other in a continuous

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<sup>9</sup> *Monochrome* people have a low degree of contact, portion out the time in small sections and get disoriented if they have to occupy themselves with many things at a time (Hall 1973: 155).



Figure 7. The police station. “You can be put in jail if you have killed someone, if you are a drug addict, or if you have stolen some money from a place of work [...]. And if you have tried to kill someone or have misused them [...] or if you have been too drunk. In that case they get handcuffed and are thrown into jail.” Photo by a 12 years old girl from Ittoqqortoormiit (CAM I, 78: 25).



Figure 8. A comparison between photos from Nuuk and Ittoqqortoormiit concerning attitudes towards the camera. Top photo from Nuuk taken by a 13 years old girl (CAM II, 27: 25A), bottom photo from Ittoqqortoormiit taken by a 13 years old boy (CAM I, 83: 27).

mutual influence. People are in a constant dialog with their surrounding world and on the lookout for being seen or heard as individuals active and present. Hence the “*Uangalu* [...] and me—I was here too!” as an exclamation from one graffiti text photographed in Nuuk.

In smaller communities, such as Ittoqqortoormiit, the photographs of young people are more “down to basics” and proudly display their church, police station, and old people’s home. They also focus on their relational existence: ‘Anne my good friend – I have shot again!’ (13 years old girl, CAM I, 80: 2). Their photos display a much slower lifestyle, more person-to-person relationships among friends, much more focus on school and a *Gemeinshaft* life. They eagerly love their town as in this closing remark: “The photograph is called Ittoqqortoormiit! East Greenland YAAH! Bye!” (*ibid.*: 10).

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