What Constitutes a Place?
What Makes a Region Integrated?
Using the case of the dispersed Municipality of Brøndby in Greater Copenhagen, this article focuses on how built-in borders in a given area can be overcome in order to create everyday integration and thus put forward a positive urban development. The integration project of the Danish-Swedish borderland into the Oresund region is a multifaceted process where practices and perceptions of space and time unfold simultaneously.
This article revolves around experiences and results of fieldwork carried out in spring 2010 as part of a larger MACA (Masters of Applied Cultural Analysis) consultancy project done for the Municipality of Brøndby.

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Just as in the Öresund region, the municipality of Brøndby contains a natural border dividing the area. Brøndby’s three boroughs are parted by a vast area measuring approximately five kilometers and composed of fields, forest, meadow, golf courses, football fields, and a main road. The municipal politicians and administration wish to promote integration of the three boroughs as an element of the local city planning in order to progress positive dynamics of centrality within this urban area.

Layers
The natural border within Brøndby is called The Green Wedge. The Five Finger Plan, the grand urban planning initiative of 1947, originally designated this extensive green area as recreational space. The Green Wedge runs through a part of the old Western Rampart of Copenhagen, which was built as an almost already outdated military defense system between 1888-92 and abandoned again in 1920 due to the major technical advances of World War I. The rampart still stands in the midst of the ideas of the well-planned social democratic welfare state, equipped with modernist social housing and public institutions. It is located in the space between the thumb and the index finger intended for fresh air and green sights to benefit the working class. Today, major highways that take commuters back and forth from their 1970’s single-family houses in the provincial cities intersect the rampart. Thus, diverse constructions, ideas and ideologies co-exist in this landscape. This also applies to the architectural expression of the municipality as a fragmented palette of old thatched farmhouses, 1970’s concrete apartment buildings, and more modern apartments and houses in Brøndby Strand.

When seeking to promote the positive dynamics, it is crucial to consider how citizens move and navigate through their daily surroundings and acknowledge the fact that belonging to a place is dependent upon meaningful activities in the various settings of the place. This furthers a practice-oriented notion of place in that any geographical point, even a bridge crossing national borders like the Öresundbrø, can become a vivid and evocative place for people if they have something to do there.

Citizens have a practice to carry out and memories of past activities in the same place. Thus cross-border or, as one might say, cross-barrier integration is indeed possible. But, as all cultural processes, it takes time and effort as much as it depends on familiarization, continuous practice, recall of earlier experience and historical context. Given this perspective, constantly commuting back and forth between places like Copenhagen and Malmö becomes a familiar ritual that transforms the space from an unknown national border into a familiar part of an integrated region.

Ways of creating a sense of belonging
Infrastructure and city planning will not necessarily make the citizens of the intended region travel more within the region. Needless to say, aforementioned factors are, if not prerequisite then at least significant in the development of integration in a given area. Nevertheless, a sense of belonging is created over time as practices create narratives and attachment, as one’s everyday surroundings become a space for identification.

Integration is as much about cultural practices and conceived places as it is about actual facilities. Following this perspective, the hindrance for the integration in Brøndby was not a lack of fast transportation. Instead, the issue for a large number of the inhabitants was that the other boroughs simply did not unfold as articulated places of possibilities. Negative narratives (e.g. narratives about poverty, crime and violence) were associated with the other areas of the municipality, which created a notion that everyday practices across The Green Wedge were not desirable.

Topophilia
For a majority of the citizens, The Green Wedge itself seemed to constitute an obstacle to integration, a natural barrier in the middle of the municipality. Open landscapes run the risk of being perceived this way because they often lack possibilities for activities affiliating people to the physical environment, thus becoming hurdles to cross as quickly as possible.
Alongside these larger historical narratives are sets of micro-scale narratives within the landscape. The narratives are of everyday life, personal anecdotes and family histories. A place such as the cityscape of Brøndby can thus be seen as layered. Different personal stories and glimpses of the larger cultural context are intertwined within the physical surroundings, unfolding as we go through our everyday practices.

Contact with the physical environment evokes memories of past interactions with people and places. These memories are understood within the frame of the national and local identity that has been brought about through education, media and primary socialization. In this way, the past can be brought into consciousness when we re-enact relations with familiar places. There is this need for an earthwork to defend the outskirts of Copenhagen, the grand idea of a well-planned and healthy suburb for the working class as well as our own personal encounters with friends, family and foes. As put so precisely by the French philosopher Michel de Certeau: “Every site is haunted by countless ghosts that lurk there in silence, to be “evoked” or not. One inhabits only haunted sites!”

A model for understanding the variety in time-place relations

The palimpsest is the best way to grasp the co-existence of different times and identities in a cultural landscape. A palimpsest is a parchment in which an older writing has been effaced and replaced with a newer text. As time passes the old writing may or may not reappear.

Likewise, the landscape is imbued with fragments of history as well as personal narratives. The different layers of handwriting on the palimpsest illustrate this multitude of narratives co-existing and ready to be evoked by the everyday practices of citizens in a given region. A positive process of integration can be promoted if a certain landscape or region is viewed as a palimpsest because such a document elucidates the endless process of the “becoming with” of a certain place; that is, the continuous interaction of assorted historical as well as contemporary constructions, narratives and practices.

As with the landscape of Brøndby, the region of Øresund rests on nostalgia for the past; a past where practices of integration were not foreign. The region was part of the same kingdom for more than 500 years. Copenhagen and Lund evolved as some of the most influential urban centers in this unified region. The word “Øresund” got its name during the middle Ages, when goods, politics and education crossed “the narrow water of the gravelly beach.” Striving for further integration of the Øresund region, the palimpsest can be helpful when exploring how layers of common history might stimulate the minds of the present inhabitants of the Øresund region.

People only create memories and feelings about the place when they are going to a given place for a specific reason. For instance, we all feel the difference between thinking about being caught up in a tailback when crossing a national border and going on a cozy trip with friends or family. The memories we have turn into narratives or stories of our lives and we are grounded in the physical places we have visited. In this way, we become acquainted with the physical settings in which our lives unfold. Over time, places can become familiar to us and people can actually have an intimate and emotional relationship to a place. This process of creating belonging is referred to as topophilia. When memories of meaningful activities are turned into narratives, an open landscape holds the potential to be transformed into a welcoming place.

The citizens of Brøndby that partook in activities in The Green Wedge shared this kind of topophilia for the area. They related to the area in a positive way as it reminded them of good times, whether it was intense football matches or pleasant walks with friends. A successful integration of the Øresund region can be promoted insofar as the citizens relate to the regional spaces in an affective way.

Naming

Language can also further a sense of belonging as it creates new meanings through naming places. Naming can draw links to the past, initiate a break with the past, create social collectivities or be divisive. In the case of a neighboring municipality to Brøndby, Heje Taastrup is an extensive city planning project that was carried out in the beginning of the 2000’s. As part of the project, the name of the central road was changed from the anonymously sounding Køgevæj (Koge being a bigger town more than 30 km away) to Taastrup Hovedgade (i.e. “Taastrup Main Street”). The connotations of the two names are very different: Køgevæj draws the attention to a destination far from Taastrup, making it only a city to pass through in order to reach another destination: Koge. The new name, Taastrup Hovedgade, is more likely to be associated with older Danish villages whose main streets were scattered with bakers, butchers, and grocer’s shops, often called the “Hovedgade.” The renaming of the street was intended to create a new center that attracted the periphery’s attention, as opposed to earlier days when Taastrup was thought to consist of dispersed housing, orienting themselves towards different centers outside the city.

Naming and creating new concepts through language involves yet another dimension when it comes to the Øresund Region: two similar yet different languages, Swedish and Danish. An example of a way to overcome the differences and create a common sense of belonging through language can be seen in the logo of the Øresund Bridge.

Choosing the invented spelling, Øresundsbron, the region establishes a new, common language for a region that should be both Swedish, Danish and, at the same time, a hybrid because it is something different, it is the Øresund region.

“Øresundsbron” is a mélange of the Danish Øresundbroen and the Swedish Öresundsbron.

Narratives of everyday integration

To sum up, practices and shared narratives play a crucial role in stabilizing links for everyday integration as illustrated in the case of Brøndby. Comparatively, this approach can be applied to the ongoing integration processes taking place in the Øresund region, which can furthermore be regarded as an empirical example of how different uses and practices often seem to coexist. While some people in the Øresund region might identify themselves as
Practices make up places

One of the many narratives existing in Brøndby highlights disintegration. Many people told the story of how citizens from the different boroughs did not interact. They expressed that people from Brøndbyøster (one of the three boroughs of the municipality) do not orient themselves towards Brøndby Strand (another borough) and vice versa. Instead, the citizens told tales of mobility in other directions – towards the neighboring municipalities. The area between Brøndby’s boroughs was indeed conceived of as an intrinsic border that could not easily be overcome. These locals found it exhausting to travel from one end of the municipality to the other, tending to overestimate the actual distance through The Green Wedge. However, different narratives were present among those citizens who were engaging in activities in the area. They did not perceive the area dividing the boroughs as an impenetrable border, but as an asset. To them, the area was a meaningful place that allowed activities such as football matches, visits to the nature school and medieval village, Nordic walking, golf and strolls in the forest.

Analyzing these different conceptions of the same area can help reach an understanding of the processes of everyday integration.

Oresund citizens due to everyday transnational movement patterns, others might stay on one side of the strait and seek a more confined and nationally-bounded center for their everyday practices. For these people, crossing the bridge might be thought of as something extraordinary. For instance, it might be connected to childhood memories of a visit to Tivoli or recreation in a Swedish summer cottage or even as a tiresome and difficult outing.

In this manner, the distance between Denmark and Sweden as well as the distance between the northern and the southern part of the Municipality of Brøndby can seem interminably long, adventurous or simply routine. Highlighting the various practices, historical and personal narratives told in the region can lead to a greater understanding of the convoluted nature of places. From a planning perspective, it can also help to generate some valuable ideas for looking at traffic junctions not merely as convenient gateways but also as cultural palimpsests. Which stories do we want to further in order to create everyday integration in the Oresund region?