

Abstract

Bodies, Bricks and Black Boxes: Power Practices in City Conversion (Kroppar, tegelstenar och svarta lådor: maktpraktiker i stadsomvandling) ISBN-10: 91-975353-2-X // ISBN-13: 978-91-9753-532-8. Thesis at the Department of Ethnology, Göteborg University. Written in English with a Swedish summary. Author: Joakim Forsemalm. Digressiv Produktion, Göteborg 2007.

The aim of this thesis is to account for power practices in city conversion. This is carried out from the theoretical perspective of Actor-Network Theory, in which two main points of departures are that power is performed and enacted and that agency is heterogeneously distributed by humans and non-humans. Power is not "possessed" but achieved through actions of translation. Two conversion processes in Göteborg have been accounted for and discussed: Långgatorna and Östra Kvillebäcken. Both are centrally located areas that, during the first years of the new millennia, were subject to the scrutiny of the local Planning Office. The thesis discusses how conversion is not only empowered by planning – or by economy or politics. By accounting for a considerable number of actions on the part of a variety of actants – the concept used to discuss the heterogeneity of elements empowering conversion – it is stressed that objects such as porn, music, seminars, criminality, and conversion ideals also perform power in conversion processes.

In the first case, concerned with Långgatorna in the western inner city of Göteborg, a submitted building permit application becomes a starting point for a chain of events in which a large number of actants work to achieve different agendas, create durable programs. Humans and non-humans are connected to perform the district as "worth preserving" and as a "good example" for other conversion processes. Långgatorna is measured as a "living city" both by the media and seminars circulating the idea that a living city is "alive after 19.00". Why is it important to preserve Långgatorna? Because it has "character", a character that is assembled, that becomes through a vast number of actions. It becomes as "international", "continental", "vivid", and "mixed". Simultaneous with the assembling of the character worth keeping, "conversion pressure" is mounted. The fear of what will happen to this "characteristic" milieu as Göteborg's inner city grows by the adding of large infrastructural ventures and waterfront projects, ventures that activate lobby organisations, newspaper discussions and planners. These are some of the construction sites at which "conversion pressure" is enacted.

The other case concerns Östra Kvillebäcken, a district that until recent years was at the fringe of the inner city despite only being five public transportation minutes away from Central Station and the most central parts of Göteborg. The district is performed to have been neglected for a long time, with the consequence of becoming an infamous place in the city. Making the district central is one of many efforts made to get a conversion going. A variety of planning ventures had been attempted for over twenty years, and humans and non-humans had worked hard, albeit without "success". Maps with arrows pulling the district closer to the centre have been published in the newspaper, moving the district into fields of strategic development in the city, joint ventures between the Planning Office, researchers, property-owners and the Regional Business Secretariat have been set up, an EU-project has been harnessed, and the contemporary hot planning ideal "mixed-use city" has been employed. They all become work-forces in the assembling of an Östra Kvillebäcken future.

Why do some things work while others don't in city conversion? How do things become powerful? As this thesis discuss, "success" is a matter of being able to be translated. If "you" (the human or the non-human) enrol others in "your" program, strivings and desires, "you" may succeed. City conversion happens when heterogeneous elements are assembled.

Keywords: city conversion, power, material heterogeneity, city planning, Actor-Network Theory, assemblages, planning ideals, architecture, preservation, multi-sited ethnography, urban studies, character, built environment, agency, performance, city transformation, standards, classification, planning documents, lobby group, enrolment, city district identity

Distribution: Digressiv Produktion, c/o Forsemalm, Bäckegatan 26A, 41316 Göteborg. Book orders: digressivproduktion@radar-arkplan.se