

Potentials of artistic intervention and artistic research

*Let us make a difference at Södra Älvstranden in Gothenburg,
Sweden*

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The planning process at Södra Älvstranden – The Southern river bank – in Gothenburg, Sweden started in an untraditional, probably unique, and very ambitious way in 2005 with an invitation from the city administration to groups of citizens and independent professionals to come up with ideas about the future use of the area. The groups were even offered some economic compensation for their contribution. The results were made public at both an exhibition and on the Internet (www.alvstaden.nu).

However, strangely enough, the planners and the politicians did not present any concluding analysis of this work. So far they have not even produced a coherent program for the development. We do not know if they found anything usable or really interesting in what the groups suggested at all. Only a few very concrete ideas, as that of a public bath, got support.

As a result of this lack of response a number of more or less conspiratorial explanations have come up. Was the idea only to show that those who often

criticize the established planning process do not have any better or more elaborated ideas or are totally irresponsible by just presenting unrealistic wish lists? If so, perhaps a pre-empted return to a traditional planning process could have been legitimized? People have had their say and did not come up with anything productive. Or did the more basic critique underlining the proposals confuse the planners and the politicians? Did they not know how to react when the traditional framing of city planning was not accepted? To be able to answer this kind of questions a historical background may be necessary.

The Swedish Way of Planning Cities

Historically, city planning in Sweden, as in most other European countries, was concentrated on central parts of important cities. The primary aim was to consolidate economical and political interests and to manifest the glory of those in power. Other parts of the cities were left to agreements between landowners, and conflicts between different interests were settled in court. A new, more interventional, kind of plan was actualized when public investment in systems for water supply, drainage and public transport became necessary.

When the Swedish Social Democrats launched their carefully prepared idea of a welfare state, city planning soon attracted a lot of interest – not least because of the effective instrument for tangible change it offered. New kinds of housing areas, separated from polluting industries and with modern schools, day-care centres and even cultural centres, were presented as a concrete example of the possibilities for the future. Publicly owned real estate companies were also established to secure high and equal standards for all people. To complete the social ambitions a system of subventions and of accommodation allowance was introduced. According to the rhetoric of the time it was stated that no one should be denied a decent home.

However, when the first concrete examples of this new society were established, the social effects did not meet the expectations. The old and central districts maintained their attraction even if the sanitarian standards were lower. People moved from the new areas as soon as their private economy made it possible and the segregation became even more pronounced. At the same time, new monopolies in the construction industry increased the building-costs that, in its turn, burdened the system of subventions and accommodation allowance.

To improve the situation, standardisation and simplifications were initiated which did not improve the attraction. The technical standard of the housing realised during 1960-1980 was also quite low and soon resulted in a need for major renovations. Lately, in consequence with new political agendas and the globalisation and liberalisation of housing markets, the Swedish public housing companies, have started to sell out the most renowned areas to co-operatives or private housing companies. The segregation process has accelerated and some areas are today totally dominated by people without other alternatives, especially new immigrants.

Still, the processes of city planning continued as if the social problems were underway to be solved and as if promotion of equalization and integration was still a central political issue. Politicians and representatives for housing companies rejected the critique in media as too exaggerated although it was strongly supported by facts. The lack of ambition and the shortcomings were swept under the carpet by a concentration on further development of central and established districts resulting in more or less exclusive projects for well-off

people, offices and services. Projects with housing for ordinary people have been put aside based on economical arguments. The rents would be too high.

When asked about this policy and the priorities, the politicians put the whole blame on the construction industry and its lack of efficiency but have not tried to find ways to correct the imperfections. They claim that new demands on the companies would further disturb the basic market functionality. Increased international competition has also been rejected as a solution, a position strongly supported by the unions. The politicians also mean that public subsidies to new housing areas would also be unfair to poor citizens in other parts of the cities.

The result is that people without means or security for mortgages are referred to the second-hand market, i.e. to apartments that better-off people leave. The idea of social housing is, in practice, abandoned. Out of this gentrification, whole areas have become socially homogenous which, among other effects, has resulted in obvious problems in the school system. City planning has become something of a game of make-belief. Like in the fairy tale of the Emperor's New Clothes no one talks about what is really happening – that is, the exclusion of a large number of people from large parts of the cities.

In a way we are back in the old planning practice, where the primary ambition was to relate private building aspirations to local governmental interests. Still, regional and local authorities continue to make plans that regulate the use of land and the primary urban support systems. However, demands for urban and social qualities are not in focus or are only articulated in very a general way, which makes them difficult to follow up. Within this framework the developers are able to choose between many kinds of projects and give priority to the most profitable ones. The necessary plans and permissions are delivered more or less on demand by the municipality. In areas with several developers, local government even acts as coordinator for the different private interests.

In some cities, as in Gothenburg, local politicians try to control the process by means of public development companies. But those companies work under conditions that are the same as for other developers. They are not able to make any real difference beside that the profit stays within the public sector. The effect is also a concentration of power to some of the leading politicians that makes it more difficult for others and for ordinary people to control what is going on.

The Next Step- Invitation of Four Teams of Architects

Whatever the reason was, the planning process at Södra Älvstranden which had started as an open ended process focusing a wide range of urban issues quickly turned into a quite traditional developer-oriented one. Four teams of architects were invited to make proposals for the first part, Skeppsbron. This was carried through within the framework of parallel commissions. We do not know how this commission was presented to the architects, as the guidelines published by the city administration were extremely vague and more or less limited to descriptions of technical data and standards. To judge from the result, it seems that they have been told to work out concrete proposals based on their earlier experiences.

If this return to a traditional process was the ambition, the planners and politicians have achieved what they wanted. All the proposals are typical

examples of the actual and established practice of architects, presenting a built environment, as it would look when the development is finished. There are a lot of pictures and not much text. The presentations are not easily accessible and it is difficult to follow the lines of thinking. The text does not say much about the considerations behind the proposal. There are a few comments about the character of the surrounding areas and their implications for the actual development. The arguments for the chosen assignment of housing, facilities for business and service as well as for the choice of building heights and density are very few and quite generally expressed.

It is remarkable that there are no answers to self-evident, critical questions such as the balancing of different interests, the costs for the development and the relation to goals and demands in overall planning and other policy documents from the city council. Some comments even differ from the official goals. One team argues for the idea that the area should be planned for well-off people with high aspirations, as this would be beneficial for the economy of Gothenburg as a whole. This contradicts the official statements from the politicians and the planners. They have consequently argued for a mixed social environment where all kinds of people should be welcome.

The general lack of considerations and the uniform way of presenting the proposals could give rise to a suspicion that there, after all, exists a ghostlike program, that no one outside the four teams of architects has seen. But when looking into the concrete proposals they are quite different, so this does not seem possible. The feeling of uniformity is probably a result of the actual and established practice of architects in this kind of commissions. It all starts with a vision and most of the work is used to make this vision complete and coherent. There is no time for critical reflections and for a second round of creative work.

Architects and City Planning

How can this praxis be understood particularly as the architects, earlier on, played such a major role for the realisation of a welfare state? Why this change in attitude and practice? Why do only a few architects now openly oppose the obvious backlash and the actual absence of ambitions for integration and social justice in the political agendas? The main reason for this passivity is of course that architects have lost their privileged position. They are no longer guaranteed a steady flow of commissions. To take part in critical discussions about the gap between the rhetoric and the actual planning processes has become difficult and problematic, when considering a professional future in the trade.

Consequently, most architects with social ambitions concentrate on what they are able to do in their own professional work rather than on taking part in public debates. They hope that politicians and stakeholders will be more convinced about the necessity and the possibilities of a social perspective by a positive presentation of a proposal than by traditional arguments. The risk of underplaying the political tensions by focusing on the concrete solutions is not so often discussed. This neutralisation of the discussion on social development is also in accordance with the ambitions of the local politicians to avoid controversies and arrive at unanimous decisions.

Another risk with this strategy is that ordinary people and even politicians may misunderstand the result of plans. It is not the illustrations that will be realised. The formal decisions only concern rules and regulations that can be

interpreted in different ways. If there are no explicit social goals these aspects may not be regarded.

Is there a possibility for architects to get out of this restricting dependency, be more outspoken and take an active part in the critical discussions? Can architects develop a professional status and independency more like that of lawyers and physicians? The problem is that architects are so closely identified with the building process and the building industry. We do not emphasize our fundamental knowledge about space and the use of space. We have become technicians rather than counsellors. It will take a lot of time and efforts to change this building-oriented image of an architect and to develop a practice, at least in parallel with the established one, that concentrates on relations between people, processes and space.

This development cannot take place in isolation. New kinds of cooperation with experts from other disciplines and professions have to be elaborated to identify the need for new knowledge and to find productive new processes. As this kind of approach cannot rely on unequivocal theories but is dependent of local knowledge and local values, to catch the complexity there is also a need for new ways to communicate with the public. Thus, a good start for this development would be to work together with other critical groups. This has to take place in spare time that of course can make it difficult for many architects to join. But in the long run we can become less dependent on projects that have to develop into building projects to be profitable and on the recurrent fluctuations in the economic situation.

A Need For More Basic Changes of The Professional Practice

However, to get rid of the actual limitations of the professional practice and to connect to other professional groups and users in new ways is not enough to re-establish a more socially responsible practice. To make a real change, we also have to reconsider our basic doxa and our perception of the results of our work¹. Most important seems to be to question what has earlier been regarded as our most important skill, the ability to develop and present concrete alternative future situations.

The problem is not the ability to create virtual realities in itself but our fixation on the physical environment. There are a lot of other conditions for urban life that are equally or even more important and that has to receive the same attention and also be related to each other and to space. This interplay between different factors and aspects is so complex that stability and predictability are exceptions. We have to stop regarding the result of our work as something that should be realized exactly according to our proposals and stay that way. What we and all other people involved in city planning have to understand is that we can only offer a starting-point and some support for a continuous design process carried through by many people. Urban planning is a question of 'design for design' where the physical conditions not always – and never in themselves – set the most important rules.

Neither are the conditions we consider today, the ones that will continue to be the most important tomorrow. The processes around us in society change, sometimes fundamentally. Our understanding of them also change even if we as human beings tend to fit the new into the old in order to continue to act the way we are used to. We have to look at reality as "becomings" rather than as states². The key to a new awareness for change is a different attitude to problems.

1. Rosengren, 2004
2. Deleuze, 2007

Instead of narrowly framing them in order to quickly find a well-trying solution we should more often reconsider and enlarge the context to look for more appropriate coherences. By that we are able to identify new “lines of flight” that not only attacks the actual problem in a new ways but also opens up totally new and unexpected possibilities.

To handle the complexity and to achieve that openness we have to reconsider the methods we use when making a proposal. We cannot find unequivocal and solid preconditions for this kind of creative work by systematic investigations based on general methodological rules as most handbooks in planning imply. We have to start by looking into and trying different ways to focus and for framing. As this cannot be done without the use of imagination, it is part of the creative work. This process may be necessary to repeat several times during the whole planning process depending on the results that come out and the evaluation of them. However, even if there are several reconsiderations of the preconditions, the first attempts will inevitably be decisive for the rest. A good presentation of those preliminary points of departure and a well-arranged critical discussion about them are necessary.

Still, even if there is an agreement on a focus and a framing, so that the most basic preconditions could be stipulated, the real changes may be different from the expected, at least over time. There is a need for flexibility in the proposed urban structure. But to talk about flexibility in general terms without specifying what should be left more open is quite meaningless. Scenarios that can be used for tests are needed. Even the development and the choice of these scenarios is a strategic question that should be discussed at an early stage.

At the same time there is a need for a distinct structure that can offer an order for the co-ordination of future changes initiated by different actors. Without that kind of structure, that should be quite simple and easy to understand, even for laymen, there is a risk of anarchy that spoils the basic functions in the city. With too much freedom it would also be difficult to carry through the continuous urban design work. All problem-solving and all creative work is in need of framing and restrictions to be productive and really creative. The core issue for city planning is that a balance between order and openness has to be created. To carry through this agenda, some distinctions and a basic conceptual work that includes the basic role of space for people, companies and society is needed.

Space as Demarcations and Coherences

A very basic way of understanding space is as a system of demarcations and coherences³. Through infrastructure and built environments we enclose activities and groups of people. These enclosures may be the result of already existing communities or organisations and meant to uphold these established relations, exchanges and identities. But as the joint physical environment always results in unexpected meetings, enclosures are also able to create new fora and identities and to develop them in a new direction. The use of common facilities is another basis for this development. People have to find acceptable ways to interact as well as rules for management and maintenance.

However, no demarcations are totally closed. All enclosures have openings, but not in all directions and not of the same character and quality. They allow and encourage some kinds of exchanges, but not others. It could be a question of simple flows of information or of a more developed communication process. In some cases the exchange is of such intensity and importance that the borders dissolve, even at odds with existing physical barriers. At the same time, new

3. Törnqvist, Ullmark 1989

borders of another kind could appear inside the original ones. Our ability to expand inclusion is always restricted. Of course, this is related to the amount of people possible to include in a 'we' – but there are also many other, often more decisive mechanisms constituting a "we" such as cultural, economical, religious and sexual differences.

Architects have for a long period of time tried to develop schemes with rules for the size and composition of urban units with housing and services to optimize the positive social effects and avoid risks for anonymity and alienation. There are also corresponding ambitions for business development. Neighbourhood units and clusters are well-known concepts within this agenda. Urban sociologists have been asked to support this work by empirical studies. The expectations to find general rules that are independent of cultural aspects and local conditions have been high.

However, no clear results that can be used in practice have been presented. Instead, the size of different units and the hierarchy of units have been decided by quite trivial criteria such as the number of people necessary to keep up specific services such as day-care centres, schools and local grocer's shops. As all these calculations give different results the chosen size of the units is always a compromise. The practical results have also been affected by changes of the economy of scale. After a while the local centres have been abandoned, emptied of shops and other services leaving people with a feeling of abandonment and disappointment.

What is the alternative to this way of trying to find a sustainable urban structure? The actual experiences of many urban planners emphasise the consideration of local geographical and urban conditions for the basic structural choices. Abstract principles are rejected and pragmatic and situation-specific solutions are argued for. However, reduction of the use of non-renewable sources of energy has also become a major issue. Urban structures that present alternatives to the use of private cars are favoured which means that condensation and high density building along existing lines of public transport are given priority. The risk for increased criminality because of reduced social control in areas with high exploitation is however a counter-argument.

When combining those different issues and arguments the complexity makes it impossible to present any self-evident starting-points. Different approaches have to be tried and discussed. Once again it is a question of actively working with the focus and the framing and to be very clear about the foundation of different approaches. The general conclusion is that a lot more work should be directed to different understandings of the actual conditions, seen not as static conditions but as flows of becoming.

This cannot be achieved by architects themselves or by groups of other experts. Politicians and citizens must be more continuously involved. There is no shortcut past the creation of social imaginary significations, common for the people involved. Still, architects and other planners have to present a basis for the discussions and the decisions. Other means than the traditional plans and pictures showing an imagined and wanted future situation have to be used. To illustrate dynamic flows of becoming, diagrams, film and animation are more appropriate. To underline the importance of a critical perspective when looking into these documents, several alternative understandings should be presented in parallel. This higher ambition will no doubt result in higher costs for urban planning. But, to repeat an often-used argument, these costs are negligible in relation to the costs for even the most common social problems in new-built areas.

Besides reducing many well-known problems by using the experiences of many people this involvement will also result in a better utilization of the resources and qualities that are created in the process. By becoming aware of the conceptual thinking behind the understanding of the existing and of the proposals, people will know more about what they can expect to work without any other specific efforts and what they have to find new or complementary solutions for. To keep the feeling of being a part of a larger community alive even in parts of an urban area that is difficult to connect to the other parts, specific arrangements, as regular meetings, may be necessary. This discussion can also result in a more developed system for self-determination around management and maintenance.

A Plea For a Reopening of The Process

Well, what is meant to happen in the next step of the planning process for Södra Älvstranden and how could this process be influenced, redirected, affected by the citizens? The planners and the politicians seem to agree that there is enough knowledge and ideas to be able to start working with the final plan for the section Skeppsbron. This plan will probably, according to what the planners informally have told people, become a mix of the four proposals and based on an analysis of the kind of architecture that characterises this part of Gothenburg to make it harmonize with the surrounding areas. Skeppsbron will not be a place for social and architectural experiments. The work will be carried out together with a few developers and housing companies. This means that there will be no new analysis of the site and of the possibilities to make this development a more active part of the realization of the overall political goals. The lack of concrete goals will also make the plan difficult to evaluate.

The alternative to this process would be to go back to the basic questions about the use of the area, making a deeper analysis of the site and its surroundings and trying to find more radical approaches that could result in a sustainable environment from all points of view. This step backwards must not be regarded as a failure. All the work carried through so far, even the proposals from the four teams of architects can be made useful to understand the potential and restrictions of the site. This strategy should also include the creation of a number of scenarios that could be used to identify the need for flexibility and capacity to adapt to possible future developments. The result of this work should be presented at a new exhibition or in a publication and be discussed in many different ways.

A major problem for realizing a social mix is the high costs for the development (especially for the foundation at a filling so close to the river). Housing at this site will be more expensive than elsewhere, which makes the apartments less available for low-income people. The four teams of architects obviously mean, without specifically arguing for it, that social integration cannot be realized by architectural means. Political interventions and subsidies are, they seem to think, necessary to reach this goal. The problem is that there are a lot of other areas and projects in Gothenburg that are in need of this kind of financial support from society. Why give this one a unique position?

However, the architects' resignation is hardly motivated. Buildings that are less complex than the ones presented in the four proposals can reduce the costs and at the same time also the consumption of energy. Another way to get cheaper apartments would be to try a higher exploitation. By that more people

can share the costs for foundation and other parts of the infrastructure. In such a study of different levels of density also other consequences must be considered. This kind of study cannot be carried through by separated investigations of one issue at a time. To find all possibilities and problems alternative concrete solutions of the whole has to be created and critically analyzed from different points of view.

Another way would be to increase the area for businesses and to make those companies pay a larger part of the costs for the infrastructure. This implies more appropriate and attractive facilities in better positions. In the four proposals most facilities are located at the bottom floors of residential blocks that cannot easily be used for apartments. More continuous and larger spaces in nice locations, close to the river, would probably work better. Service industries and offices are also more realistic than several shops and restaurants. To find out what the companies really want tentative proposals are better than general questions about needs and wishes. At the same time the demand for public areas and activities should be examined. Passages for walking along the waterfront would be quite easy to arrange, without any restrictions on housing or facilities. If other public activities should be made possible a budget for that is needed.

After all these creative investigations, and the presentation of and discussion about them, the politicians have to give new directives to the planners. The politicians may still be interested to get more than one alternative developed but at last one program has to be chosen. However, the initial creative phase would still be the critical one. What kind of competence is needed during this phase to both generate innovative ideas and to communicate them? The traditional skill of architects is not enough. The social structure and expected activities and processes are equally important to consider and visualize. People with different competences have to co-operate. How to initiate and carry through this kind of co-operation? What kind of tools and methods are needed? These questions will be the basis for our upcoming work within the Intervention project. Our key word for this development is future documentaries.

Our work is in progress. Some aspects of the research work on future documentaries can be seen in the visual presentation of Henric Benesch in this report – others are to be developed over the coming years.

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