

Envisioning Sustainable Lifestyles in Stockholm's Urban Development

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1 ABSTRACT

The urban development in Stockholm, Sweden is an obvious example of the materialisation of the idea of a compact and traditional city as the sustainable city. This paper develops on this theme using the ongoing planning and development of the area Årstafältet in the south of Stockholm as example. With the central planning documents as empirical material, this paper investigates urban discourses that construct and give meaning to an area as urban/suburban, including the role of green space. The city and the urban are today better understood as ideological constructions than descriptions of a place or lifestyle. However, the city/country (or urban/suburban) division still lives on in planning. Årstafältet, on the edge of the inner city is interesting in this context, since it is currently being transformed from a typical Swedish post-war suburb into a post-modern 'urban area'. Its green space is also being re-conceptualised as a "world class park". At the same time as the urban has been coined the "quintessential floating signifier", urban densification and functional mix are considered the solutions to almost all problems. Certain constructions of the city and the urban lifestyle have an undisputed status, and others are given the role of the problem to be solved. In Swedish cities the problems to be solved are often found, or located, in the periphery. The suburb that used to represent the most modern in welfare state urban planning now represents its failure. This paper investigates how planning practice responds discursively to these representations.

2 INTRODUCTION

Paradoxically, at the same time as the urban has been coined the "quintessential floating signifier: devoid of any clear definitional parameters, morphological coherence, or cartographic fixity" by Neil Brenner (2013: 90), densification and functional mix are considered the solutions to almost all urban problems – whether economic, environmental or social. And, whether or not concepts are considered incoherent or outdated, the division between city and country as well as between urban and suburban definitely lives on in urban planning and development strategies (Brenner 2013, Lees 2010; Tunström 2009; Wachsmut 2014). Planning and planning discourse draws borders between city and countryside, between the urban and the suburban, and between different eras and areas, in spite of their elusiveness and in spite of citizens crossing those borders on a daily basis.

Brenner, in several writings, has taken as a starting point that the city and the urban as concepts today are so multifaceted and diverse that they have lost almost all meaning. Brenner & Schmid (2015) for example, consider the urban as a strong frame of interpretation; a theoretical category, but not a bounded unit or a certain type of settlement. The way that definitions and measurements are used in turn has consequences:

"In a striking parallel to the long-discredited modernization theories of the postwar period, the various strands of this metanarrative are now being used as discursive frames to legitimate a wide range of neoliberalizing proposal to transform inherited urban built environments ..." (Brenner & Schmid 2015, 158)

Constructions of the urban and suburban materialise in policy and practice – as e.g. types of densification, in focus on ground floor shops or grid street structures, in different views on car traffic, etc. Categories and categorisations are one of the more central planning tools; pointing at places, giving them an identity and thereby projecting onto them all the ideas, experiences, memories etc. of cities, countryside and suburbs that people carry around.

Swedish planning is internationally known as being at the forefront of environmental technologies and planning for sustainability. However, the technical solutions to environmental problems are rarely framed in social and political terms highlighting justice, gentrification or public/private relations (Tunström & Bradley 2014, Hult 2013, Bradley et al 2013), making technology less evident. In this paper, rather than promoting certain planning solutions or discussing the importance of technologies for sustainable development, the aim

is to find and deconstruct the conceptualisations and “makings” of norms and values related to the built environment, to sustainability, everyday life, green space etc. in Swedish planning visions.

3 A GREEN AND DISCURSIVE FIELD

In this paper a green space called Årstafältet (the ‘Årsta field’) in Stockholm, and the plans for new development there, is in focus. Årstafältet is currently a 50 hectares recreational area located just outside of inner city Stockholm. The green field is located between several residential and industrial areas and is planned to become a new neighbourhood with 6000 dwellings for 15 000 inhabitants sharing a park area smaller than the current green field. The project developing the green field into a neighbourhood is a major one, but it is not framed as a flagship sustainability project such as the previous Stockholm development areas Hammarby Sjöstad or Royal Seaport, which were internationally marketed as spearhead projects of sustainable urban planning. In spite of being ordinary in some ways, Årstafältet is also currently one of the biggest green fields in Stockholm and includes open fields, areas reserved for activities such as golf, rugby and allotment gardens as well as left-overs from a main through road and an old historical road that led to the inner city. The existing housing in the area was planned and constructed during different eras. Consequently, this is quite an ordinary mixed suburban landscape with green structures, infrastructures and housing and other functions from different eras. In addition to the architectural and urban planning related differences, the areas surrounding Årstafältet differ from each other in demographic and socioeconomic aspects.

4 THE ROLE OF PUBLIC SPACE

Apart from the ambitions stated in the comprehensive plan, the main goal in the visions and detailed development plans for Årstafältet is to make the new area “a place for meetings”. This is repeated in planning documents, and illustrated and exemplified in both text and images. It does not have to do with arranged meetings as in conferences, as it may seem at first, but “meeting places” is the Swedish and perhaps less abstract equivalent of saying public spaces, and a concept recurrent in most contemporary planning documents. This can be seen as a pragmatic position in the debate on the privatisation of public space and as related to the idea of the disappearance of public space. Urban spaces are public-private in different degrees everywhere, and there are places formally public but privatised, or formally private, but functioning as public. In light of this, it can be seen as more constructive to focus on collective spaces, regardless of whether they are public or private (Hajer & Reijndorp 2001).

The focus on public spaces or places for meetings does not only indicate the ambition for the new district at Årstafältet, but it is also an analysis on how the area functions today – that this is considered as lacking. Through this vision, the existing areas around Årstafältet are constructed as – currently – segregated from each other, and as unattractive to visitors. Meetings are also connected to an “urban life”:

“Where local and regional passages overlap the flow of people is the biggest and the potential for meetings between dwellers and visitors is the strongest. These are the passages that usually are seen as most central, with a more intense urban life and better preconditions for activities and services.” (City of Stockholm 2010, p.18)

Another ambition in the plans is presented as the importance in connecting the two existing areas Årsta and Östberga to each other. In the architectural competition program the existing area is described as being characterised by barriers. This is stated as a fact, even though it is a characterisation rooted in one particular perception of the area. The emphasis on barriers and focus on creating connections and a continuous urban environment also has as a consequence that the current green space – the field, the park - appears as a barrier more than a park and a place to meet (City of Stockholm 2008, p.7). The architectural competition program emphasizes words like “contact”, “bridging”, “holistic approach” and “connections”. This adds to the construction of the new development as a social integration project rather than a housing project. Also, a coherent and compact structure is considered more “urban”, so the ambitions to create connections must be seen as a part of the “urbanisation” of the area. In the architectural competition program, it is stated that Årstafältet will become: “An urban neighbourhood in which people, environment and architecture blend with the existing neighbourhoods to form a new entity.” (City of Stockholm 2008, p.5) Nya Årstafältet Architecture competition, Brief for an invited architecture competition for Nya Årstafältet, p.5, author’s translation And further on:

”The aim is for the area to have a mix of housing and non-housing to have a functional configuration resembling that of the inner city of Stockholm. A close-knit urban development will create better prospects for shops, cafés, culture and meeting points.” (City of Stockholm 2008, p.7)

Both the focus on public spaces and on physical connections can be interpreted as addressing segregation – but without using that particular, and problematic, word. The emphasis on meetings between different groups positions isolation, segregation and planning for only residential areas as the opposite of the current plans. The fact that meeting places are so central in the plans, and mentioned explicitly and frequently, indicates that it is not any kind of meetings that are imagined, but good, positive and constructive meetings. In images and text a certain kind of public life and urban space is portrayed, not for everyone or for every activity. For example, political gatherings or demonstrations, experiments or ceremonies, food provision, religion, lectures and pedagogics, care etc. are not imagined. In that sense there is a certain construction of public space and the social meetings envisioned there (see also Tunström 2009, pp.111-114).

5 URBAN NATURE AND SUSTAINABILITY

The plans for Årstafältet are not explicitly designated as sustainable, and planning for sustainability is frankly not that visible in the documents, unless the central ambition of a “world class park” is interpreted as a sustainability measure. The existing green space is already a park in many ways and was until now planned to be something called a “landscape park”. The existing green field is however now instead to be “... developed and refined in order to create a good living environment in a more compact city” (City of Stockholm 2010, p.20). In relation to the character of the planned development it is also stated: “When the inner city is growing, the importance of the park will increase.” Statements such as this are interesting both in relation to the strong norm in the idea that the inner city is growing in this very suburban surrounding, and that the park is, ironically, considered to be more important when its size is reduced. In relation to both the expansion of the compact urban structure and to the reduction of green space, the park becomes important to protect – by developing it.

The current plans involve a reduction of green space in the area due to the new housing being developed, but also a redesign of the current space, relocating the gardening plots and creating a pond and wooden pedestrian decks. However, the current plans can be understood to be as much about the designation of the place as about the design of it. The green space that is there today is a field, the Årsta field. A field is easily associated with the countryside, and it could be considered an endangered landscape type in an urban setting. The planning documents emphasize its transformation into a park, but the new development as a whole is still called “Nya Årstafältet”, ‘the New Årsta field’. It is possible to interpret the plan as a development towards a more programmed green space. If a “landscape park” seems more nature-like, the plans instead are a way of transforming this nature into a space of organised activities that can be seen, counted and evaluated. But, there is still nature oriented image-making when it comes to the planned pond. There is a small stream running through the field, and this stream will be made into a pond that will be a “natural” part of the park – even though it is artificial (City of Stockholm 2010, p.15). Clearly, there are both ideas of the city and of nature at play here.

The explicit sustainability vision is not intimately related to the park. In the architectural competition program sustainable development is e.g. about encouraging the dwellers to use public transportation, walk or cycle, about designing the area to maximise use of public transport, about connecting the new development to existing areas so this has an “effect on the urban life”, and about creating an integrated network of streets. It is stated that “[t]he urbanism developing under the shadow of the climatic menace has every chance of becoming more innovative and locally adapted than the large-scale, traffic-centred planning of decades gone by.” (City of Stockholm 2008, p.15). Competition contributions should relate to sustainability mainly by climate adaption in transportation, housing and waste disposal. This is also how the planning documents overall mainly operationalise it. The competition program does however bring up social sustainability, defining it as preconditions for people with different lifestyles, ages and backgrounds to live together. It is also about safety, social mix, places for people to meet, accessibility and planning and design from a child perspective. The planned improvements in the public transport are however relatively small, and there are next to no references at all to e.g. alternative lifestyles or affordable housing, and no discussions about reduced consumption of goods or reduced dwelling space in the future or about the choice of building

materials. All in all it must be considered as a vague and weak, light green, local and eco-modernisation oriented sustainability vision.

6 URBAN RATHER THAN SUBURBAN

Rather than emphasizing sustainability, it has already become clear that the dominant vision of Årstafältet is as an urban area. It appears that it is of central importance that the new development is considered urban, and that it builds on the structure and density of the inner city:

"Årstafältet is a part of the expansion of the inner city (...) Several factors have contributed to the more central and attractive location of Årstafältet." (City of Stockholm 2010, p.6)

Furthermore, there are certain urban qualities that come with density:

"A strong ambition is that Årstafältet will become an area with a rich urban life and many functions. A mixed city demands a certain density, a large flow of people, a strong public space and access to tempting attractions. The development of Årstafältet is part of the development of a more compact Stockholm and a more compact southern district. In addition to the new development planned nearby (...) it is estimated that Årstafältet will get the number of dwellers and working population demanded in order to create the urban qualities that are missing in many suburbs today. Other factors that is beneficial for a lively, mixed and attractive urban environment is the location near the tram, Södra länken and Huddingevägen as well as the big park." (City of Stockholm 2010, p.19)

Urbanity is in this case also constructed – in addition to the common words and concepts (urbanity, attractiveness, diversity, variation etc.) – as natural, human scale, personal, world class, playfulness, variegated, angled and permissive. For example:

"The new city silhouette signals playfulness and variation which is something completely new for Stockholm." (City of Stockholm 2012, p.13)

Apart from using "playfulness" as a planning ambition, the quotation above is a strong statement that tells about the perception of the existing built environment of Årstafältet, or even Stockholm as a whole. It is not playful or varied at the moment. There are several examples indicating that the area today is not considered lively, mixed or attractive, and that also implies that it is a certain kind of liveliness, mix or attractiveness that is sought after. The architectural competition program is perhaps the most illustrative example of the inner city norm. Words like urban, city, central or centre are constantly used and in text and images it is referred to the city centre and to compact urban structures as the norm and goal. Further on, in one of the plans it is repeatedly stated that the new built environment will construct an obvious "urban front" to the park (City of Stockholm 2012). The use of the quite strong expression urban front (compare "urban frontier" etc., see Smith 1996) is somewhat surprising; however it is not commented upon in the documents. An urban front is apparently something making the relation between the built environment and the park not to be understood as functionalist. An urban front is however not the same as a "monumental silhouette" as in the following: "The monumental silhouette of Valla gårde will be replaced by a more varied urban silhouette." (City of Stockholm 2012, p.37). It appears as there must be no hesitation as to whether the built environment is urban, or that the park is an urban park.

Finally, in order to try to understand how certain words or concepts are used to describe plans or places, it is relevant to reflect as much on what is said in the documents as on what is not said and excluded. In the attempt to construct the place as urban, the suburban is silenced. It appears important to not associate the new development on Årstafältet with anything suburban. This has the effect that the new development appears as a kind of 'point zero'. There is nothing there today worth developing further, no major qualities to emphasize. The fact that the area currently is characterized by housing from different eras, a big green space, public transport connections and public spaces, planning and architecture history, is not brought forward. The documents contain very few images from today's Årstafältet, or references to current functions of the green space. Instead, the park is presented several times as if it is a new addition to this part of Stockholm, as in this visionary statement from the planning program for the area as a whole:

"On Årstafältet a big park is created for people to meet. The park will be the heart of the new area, with big spaces for play and activities, and more closed off parts for seclusion and peaceful walks. A compact and

varied urban environment surround the northern and western parts of the park and connect Årsta and Östberga.” (City of Stockholm 2010, p.12)

Similarly, the shift from “landscape park” to an urban park emphasizes the plans as something new, as plans for something that does not exist currently. The current Årstafältet is instead characterised by barriers – the current green field is a barrier for integration, existing roads are barriers and the housing areas suffer from deficiencies that can only be cured by new housing – and the lives that are lived in the area at today are basically invisible. One consequence of the downplaying of both history and the present conditions and lifestyles is that it appears as if Årstafältet today is an empty place, a void.

7 CONCLUSION

As was stated in the introduction, the objective of this paper is to investigate and critically analyse the various images, ideas, values and norms that are associated with the notions of the sustainable city and sustainable lifestyles in contemporary urban planning. In doing this, a vision characterised by a specific kind of conceptualisation of sustainability has been found. If it previously was about safeguarding green space sustainability, is now rather about developing green space into a post-modern housing area. In Årstafältet sustainability in addition is downplayed in favour of urbanity and social integration. The planning vision for Årstafältet is an obvious example of how the division between city and suburb might have lost importance in practice, but still lives on in planning.

It is a compact city structure that is envisioned in order to create a stronger basis for public transport and local services. There are allotments, greenhouses and a park, but urban gardening is not emphasized to any large degree. A sustainable lifestyle is an urban lifestyle and the compact city is the place for it, in this case. However, the envisioned lifestyles are only implicit, in images and choices of words. There is no strong vision of a New Årstafältet being a place for any kind of alternative lifestyles, judging from the vision. It also appears as if the New Årstafältet is planned for activities other than the ones ongoing, in line with the presented ‘point zero’ analysis. Årsta being one of the prime examples of the neighbourhood and community planning of the 1940s and 50s, the contemporary vision for Årstafältet is a strong contrast. If post-war planning was primarily for the residents, and materialised values of local and collective organisation through its public places and community spaces, contemporary urban development such as New Årstafältet embodies a different set of values. It emphasizes visitors as important for public life, safety and attractiveness, and the envisioned public spaces are for recreation rather than collective organisation. Also, certain constructions of the city and the urban lifestyle seem to have an undisputed status, and others have been given the role of the problem to be solved. In Swedish cities, the problems to be solved are almost unanimously found, or located, in the urban periphery. The suburb that used to represent the most modern in welfare state urban planning now instead represents the failure of planning.

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