Urbanistica n. 124
May-August 2004

Distribution by www.planum.net

Urban challenges in Sweden

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A common cliché of the present is to say that we are living in turbulent times, or to be more dramatic: "We are in the middle of a paradigm shift". This does not apply well to the Swedish built urban landscape. But, it certainly fits well in a description of the forces that, with so far few visible effects, are creating a widening gap between supply and demand of urban products. This text examines a number of economic, social and technical changes that underline the need for a new 'urban politics' as well as some suggestions of what that could mean in reality. The basis for the analysis is, apart from literature and reports, the executive courses in Urban Management that KTH, the authors' university, has been arranging for local decision makers, city architects and community leaders since the year 2000.

Cities in the wrong places

Out of Sweden's 290 communities, only 40 have today a growing population, around 40 are balancing at *status quo* and the rest are in a state of 'reversed growth'. The reasons are simple to formulate but just as hard to accept in a society in which growth has been taken for granted since the start of the Swedish economic miracle in the beginning of the 20th century, supported by absenteeism in Europe's two great wars, an efficient centralized state, a peaceful labour market, close social ties between entrepreneurs and the financial sector and an extraordinary strong industrial development. Ericsson, Saab, ASEA, AGA, IKEA, Volvo, Scania, Facit, SSAB, MODO, Avesta, Pharmacia, Astra, Tetra Pak, are just a few names of what used to be 'Swedish' companies active in the international arena, brand names that made possible the build up of the Swedish success story: 'Sweden, the middle way', combining capitalist efficiency and socialist solidarity. This period is now over, with the sell out to 'foreigners' of the two strongest icons, car manufacturers Volvo and Saab. With global networks of production conglomerates replacing the national companies, in intensified search for economy of scale, cost cutting, research intensive urban areas and specialisation, our built geography could be described as 'too many small cities in the wrong places'. The situation is similar to the one before the previous geographical revolution, the mechanization of farming leading to depopulation of the country side and urbanization in the late 19th century. If form, as the old modernist architects used to say, follows function, a functional (in the sense of being well adapted to the production system) geography of Sweden would be three major cities: Stockholm the capital, Gothenburg the 'West side story' and Malmö in the South (now, with the Oresund road-train bridge in place, more or less being transformed into a giant suburb to its Danish both stronger and more attractive neighbour Copenhagen). If, just as a minds game, every building in Sweden was given wheels, supply and demand would allocate them to a few dense, and hopefully beautiful, cities, returning the country side to animal life, EU-subsidized farming, summer huts and vacation areas, from skiing to golf courses. How come? As stated numerous times by regional development expert and professor Åke E Andersson of KTH, the natural size of cities is directly linked to the level of division of labour. The more diversified our economy becomes (simply put, the thicker the 'yellow pages' of the phone book directory of companies) the greater the need for a larger number of people to gather at the same spot. In Sweden, being a technically advanced country with a strong political leadership and a strong sense of *status quo* being the best formula for the future, houses are not put on wheels. Instead, under the banner of 'let the whole of Sweden live' the population is put on wheels. To preserve the uncomfortable and unpractical dispersion of our population, much effort and money is put on the second best solution, let people travel! Following the strategy of the national board of planning, the *Vision of 2009*, commuting from homes in distant housing areas and small cities, to the three major cities is more and more becoming a normal life style. If the same strategy had been technically and economically possible a hundred years ago, the former farmers would not have become city dwellers at all. Instead, we would have had large factory areas, intact villages (turned into housing areas) and a lot of trains and roads in between. And no cities. But, there is a second reason for this strategy being successful. With work-places having less closer ties to raw material (farming, mining, fishing) companies move to where the workforce is the best (best trained or cheapest). And decisions on where to live is today a family decision. The quality of life, the view from the window, the attractiveness of the city and other 'soft' factors play an increasingly important role. Apart from the older parts of the big cities, the historical core and some garden city areas, the post world war two suburbs are not offering these qualities. Thus, families choose gladly to move out to small and green traditional towns and one family home areas, and commute to work in the big city. Freedom of choice challenges the present urban landscape. What most people want today is either the traditional dense and diversified pre modernist city, or the garden city environment.

A non-urban heritage

At two points in history, strong political decisions have generated major changes in the built landscape of Sweden. In the 16th and 17th century land reforms were conducted to create a more efficient production system. In the historic villages, each farmers land was scattered as small strips on numerous different places, as a result of inheritance and subdivision of land between many children. This pattern which fostered a large amount of communal work and cooperation, was replaced with large and efficient farming areas, placed around each farmers free standing house, what is called the "village blow up reforms". Instead of the old intense, and economically speaking unpractical village structures, with a large amount of social interaction, the Swedish farmers found themselves in splendid isolation, with kilometres instead of meters between neighbours. In the second half of the 20th century, the population of the countryside and small towns moved into expanding urban areas, without actually becoming city dwellers. Inspired by mostly British principles of neighbourhood planning, traffic separation and the need for decentralization of cities, the explosive building

activities of the post world war two period created a pattern of dispersed and geographically separated apartment, one family house, industrial, office, university, and shopping areas. It seems that the later in history urbanization takes place, with the introduction of cars and modernist planning ideals, the smaller is the amount of real dense and mixed use cities. The Swedish capital has in comparison a much smaller inner city than Denmark's capital, not to mention cities more top the south. Today, the housing areas of the 1960s and 1970s are more and more turning into ethnically and socially segregated 'cities within the cities'.

From strong planning to weak markets

The time of heavily subsidized social housing production, with local public building companies, national control of money markets and controlled housing prizes that fitted well with the 'Fordist' production system, has been replaced with a market situation characterized with low economic incentives for building and an oligopoly structure of the building sector. The four big construction companies that dominate the building sector are more and more converting themselves to master planners, sometimes even taking over the previous role of public planners. New building activities are directed more and more towards specific demands such as life style housing areas (elderly but healthy, golfing communities, students areas, ecological communities). Due to a much debated national economic transfer system (in short, rich cities with high wages and a thriving economy subsidize the majority of the weak, small and often northern communities and cities) we are confronted with troublesome housing shortages in the potentially growing (often university) cities. Many local politicians say that new inhabitants, due to this transfer system, actually decrease tax revenues over time. The abolishment of local property taxes about 20 years ago, also decrease the political will to open up new areas for building. In the same time, demolishing empty housing in the 'reversed growth' areas, has become a new part of the building sector. The legal planning system itself, presently under revision, has a strong tradition of openness, communication and plenty of possibilities for actors that do not approve of plans, to delay or obstruct decisions. The low speed and the well organized criticism (often of NIMBY type) against building in areas in with high demand of new buildings, creates unnaturally high housing prices, and in the same time new opportunities for smaller cities and the newly established university towns. In short, Sweden has left the previously successful politically administered supply oriented building of distant suburbs, to a yet to come privately led demand oriented building of dense and mixed city environments, garden cities and concept areas.
Troublesome as this picture may look, it is also true that creativity is the child of troublesome times.

A totally new discussion

During the last 6-8 years, the urban discussion has totally changed direction and the use of words.
Under challenge is most of what was true only 10 years back. The initiative is back on the local scene, with identity, image and tradition as important ingredients to success. The public demand for real city qualities, as well as private homes in attractive natural surroundings, has so far led to more innovative building companies and projects.
The next issue on the agenda is probably a revision of planning legislation and economic conditions. A few examples will illustrate the tendency of traditional town developments replacing the 20th century suburban tradition.
In Staffanstorp municipality, outside Malmö (third largest city), a decaying suburban centre surrounded with housing only areas was converted into a small mixed use traditional town in the beginning of the 1990s. The proposal by architect Peter Broberg and the Landskronagruppen architectural company put forward four concepts: Structure, Coherence, Cityscape and Regional Tradition. A new main street, with parking along both sides and shops in the bottom floors of new housing blocks, totally changed the municipality identity, and attracted new inhabitants and shops. The architecture was strongly controlled, with sloping traditional roofs and traditional materials. A remake of the local history, proved to be a successful recipe, with close cooperation between politicians and private developers.
Outside Stockholm, in the Nacka community, an old and partly abandoned industrial area with a rich industrial heritage was in 1996 planned to be totally demolished and replaced with traditional housing boxes. Due to heavy protests from neighbours and the initiative to talk to the real estate owner, architects-planners Håkan Jersenius-Vernon Gracie, were given the chance to put forward an alternative scheme for a small mixed use city with 600 housing units and 1.200 workplaces, in a traditional small city block structure, mixing new and old architecture. One important reason for the success is said to be the question the real estate owner got from Jersenius-Gracie: "What do you want to do with your life, What do you want to show your kids and point at and say: 'I did this'?" Protests against the plans for destruction of the old industrial buildings also gave a clear signal to the real estate owners: listen to people, create an attractive small traditional town instead, and building activities can start this year, not in 2-3 years in the future. Making profit is today linked to quality and listening to both the market and what the neighbours demand. A large number of offices and shops, a bowling facility, a large furniture company and schools, in old buildings has created an unusual side effect: a large number of persons involved in planning and building the Järla Sjö Project are today themselves living in the area, as well as the land owner, the Oskarsborg real estate company's headquarters.
A third example of this tendency is Jakriborg in the South. Planned and developed by brothers-developers Jan and Krister Berggren, (borg meaning 'castle') directly at the local train stop between Malmö and university city Lund. Sweden has been given an almost exact replica of a medieval Hanseatic trade town, in the design of architect Robin Manger. With stone laid streets, brick walls, lampposts, windows, pitched tile roofs, all designed as 'the real thing' the Jakriborg project is growing from today 240 apartments to a projected 6-7,000 inhabitants town. This 'concept city' surely beats even the Walt Disney

project Celebration in authenticity. With the difference that a lot of apartments are for rent only, possibly preventing the gated community effect. Bottom floors in most houses along the main street are prepared for shops, offices, restaurants. The project also challenges the meaning of 'modern architecture'. A large number of Swedish architects have followed the international trend to build neo-modernist housing and offices (cubist style boxes with flat roofs, minimalist glass facades or white non decorated concrete walls). If the shift to demand led building becomes stronger, we are faced with a situation in which the 'modern consumer' demands more traditional looking urban districts and houses. An update of the meaning of the word 'modern' thus could mean that the consumer has the right to choose, not that architecture should look 'modern' in the sense of being 'modernist'. Apart from these three trend setting projects, a large proportion of housing is built according to the 'garden city' concept, one family housing along traditional small scale streets with trees and public parks.

For the future, one question that is high on the agenda is the conversion and restructuring of the post world war two apartment housing areas. Most of these areas are still centrally owned, by public municipality companies or large private real estate companies. The lack of local ownership gives few if any incentives for the inhabitants to care for their home areas. The inhabitants are here, as opposed to the situation in the projects described earlier, still treated as willingness 'clients' in need of help from central decision makers. The word 'urban politics' has so far only generated a number of help projects directed to engage inhabitants (many of them not born in Sweden) in leisure and educational projects. As a symbol of the situation, a common question of conflict in these areas is the satellite antennas placed on the balconies of apartments, giving inhabitants a possibility to view programs from their native countries. These antennas are often regarded as security risks by the owners of apartment houses, they 'might' fall down and hurt someone. In some cases inhabitants are threatened with eviction, if they do not remove this technical symbol of freedom of choice. The previous "one nation, one culture" concept is here threatened by the new multicultural reality. The cul-de-sac structure of the road net in these areas also creates bad conditions for shopping and services, that in most cases are moving out from the small neighbourhood centres to new shopping centres along the main highways. Small shops and local enterprises are badly needed in these areas, but are still not given the two basic preconditions for a thriving urban landscape: a diversified ownership pattern, a continuous street grid that generates meeting places and through-traffic. These two basic features of what a city is still remains to be introduced, as part of an urban policy for the 21th century. The question has been raised: how come that the new inhabitants, immigrants of for example Denmark and Britain have a much higher degree of employment than their Swedish counterpart? Two answers are obvious: they often live in premodernist planned areas, in which it is possible to own your own apartment, restaurant or shop. They live in areas not planned according to the neighbourhood principle (secluded areas with no through-traffic). The pattern of the city thus becomes highly political. It is the firm belief of this author, that the 'apartheid light' structure of Sweden's suburban areas, have to be changed. In many areas there is a potential for Swedish versions of Chinatowns (self manged city areas) to emerge. Traffic planning and chopping up property, from public to private, are the two most important questions.

Meanwhile, the drive towards diversification of cities and new roles for public planning are emerging. Laws and norms are changing, as a result of public pressure. In Eskilstuna, formerly an industrial city in decay, the biggest housing project today is, according to leading politicians Hans Ekström, the self managed and self financed conversion of 3,000 summer houses into permanent housing.

Only eight years ago, public planners put much effort in prohibiting people to live permanently in their summer houses. Today, Eskilstuna is helping its inhabitants to fulfil the dream of living in a house designed and built by themselves. As a closing remark, the legislation on the "protection of beaches and shores" is probably the next part of the Fordist concept of planning, that is to fall. Established in the 1950s to prevent building along shores and rivers, this legislation is now threatened by a coalition of companies, public planners, politicians and individuals.

In the new place hunting time, where businesses follows households in search of the most attractive and dream-fulfilling location, this legislation is under growing attack. If people want to have a home, or an office, with a view to the lake, why should they not have it? The answer is, that this is against the concept of sustainability and ecological diversity. Especially for small cities and towns, competing hard with the big cities, building along shores is becoming a more and more popular concept. In the landscape of Sörmland, new ways of interpreting this legislation is currently discussed. The opposition against this is in part led by the 'green' part of our state agencies and local planners. As a result, new ways of interpreting the catchword sustainability is needed. Preserving the green structure for 'future generations' becomes more and more futile, if the present generation wants something different.

Combining ecological, social and economical perspectives on sustainability and replacing the old legislation of 'restrictions' with a new legislation of 'attractions' could be the next step in Swedish planning development. The global paradox is here: the spatial freedom of enterprises and households does not make the 'place' less interesting. On the other hand, when places and spaces become more of a commodity the image of these places turns out as one of the major factors in attracting capital private and local as well as public or global. The major paradigm shift has yet not happened. But, when big changes take place, you can not see it happening. But they take place. And arranging places for new dreams to be fulfilled, that is what Swedish planning is just now all about.

Geography matters. The map is being redrawn. In legislation as well as in reality.