

## **Discursive place making. Expressions of urban renaissance in Sweden**

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### ***Is the city – or its categories – dissolving?***

The contemporary western society is often designated as urban in the sense that more and more people and activities are concentrated to the cities. In addition, contemporary phenomena such as environmental problems, citizen participation and democracy, the social climate in society or the economic development, can all be put in an urban context, and interpreted as part of “the urban” in some sense (Elander (ed.) 2001, Lidskog 2006, Amin & Thrift 2002). But, what urban specifically means is increasingly contested. And what is the role of the city in contemporary society? The western, and Swedish, city a hundred years ago was considered as a centre of industrial production and trade, but today the importance of the city for industrial production and as trade centre is challenged by outsourcing, flexible systems and ICT. This does however not mean that the city is considered as without purpose. It is for instance considered as an important node in the development of a knowledge society, and an important player on an international field of competition, hunting for capital investments. (Boyle & Rogerson 2001)

Regarding the city as locality, the city core as the obvious centre today is also undermined by for example external shopping centres and virtual meeting places. The locality is dissolving, as ‘edge cities’ and ‘urban sprawl’ removes the focus from the centre to the urban periphery. This implies that separating the city as location from the countryside, the rural, is no longer simple or always relevant. (Hajer & Reijndorp 2001, Amin & Thrift 2002) The spread out and sprawling city is denoted as a product of post-war planning and development, and as contrasting to the density of the old city, both as regards physical structures and everyday life patterns. There are those that, due to for example this development, claim that traditional categories used to conceptualize urban space no longer apply or suffice. We need new spatial categories in order to conceptualize the contemporary landscape. (Borret 2005, Hajer & Reijndorp 2001, Sudjic 1992) Private and public are also important categories that seem to have lost clarity or importance – places can be privately owned, or administered in public-

private partnerships, but still function as public places. Or, publicly owned and maintained places can become privatized by different groups during certain times of day or night. What is private and public space is today at least not evident from spatial characteristics.

In urban planning however, the awareness of these more theoretical reflections is not always high. At least the dissolving city is not considered as something that should be stimulated. Instead, in the capital region of Stockholm in Sweden for example, several municipalities have added “city” to their names, as if to indicate their belonging to the urban region or their character as urban. New areas are built with explicit ambitions to “make a city” of a place, or build “a city in the city”, and they are given names that emphasize them as urban or part of the city, making it appear as if we know what and where the city is. The retrospective architectural idiom in much of the new construction could also be interpreted as a similar tendency to maintain the city and the urban. If, according to the reasoning above, the city no longer exists, is dissolving, or at least no longer appears “as it always has”, perhaps a continued dissolution can be hindered by new construction connecting to the past? Or, if the new Swedish city is built as the old was – with market places, parks and small neighbourhood shops – perhaps the categories will also be re-established? This somewhat nostalgic position mourning the traditional city and community has been referred to as a “narrative of loss”, or an academic “literature of loss”, and it is represented also in urban theory. However, there are others that designate reasoning and construction of this kind as leading to a simulacra city. Consequently there are opposing views regarding the dissolution of the city and its categories. (See e.g. Sorkin (ed.) 1992, Nadal 2000, e.g. p.10, 21, 152, Sandercock 1998, p.190-194) What this shows however is not that the city no longer exists, but that its discursive construction is central. (Amin & Thrift 2002, p.2)

In this text I will discuss the Swedish planning discourse in relation to the city and its categories as questioned. I will focus on two strong tendencies related to categories and categorizations that can be observed in the Swedish urban planning context. First, (certain) historical categories have an almost undisputed status in the construction of the urban ideals. Secondly, the inner city is the norm that a majority of new construction relates to in some way – as a continuation of it, an opposition or a failed interpretation of it. This is part of my PhD project where I analyze the construction of the urban ideals in contemporary planning in Sweden, and specifically the tendencies towards an “urban renaissance”. I see urban planning and building as discursive activities where the city and the urban *becomes*, through e.g. plan

or vision making, information and marketing, architectural sketches, new construction or the maintenance of existing buildings. It is difficult to designate processes in the Swedish urban planning and building as completely non-discursive or non-ideological. The city and the urban are constantly and simultaneously constructed by activities such as brick-laying *and* by the bricks being made meaningful in a discursive practice. (See e.g. Beauregard 1993/2003 and Boyle & Rogerson 2001) And, we cannot say anything about the objective functionality of places, but only about our (changing) ideas about whether a place functions or not according to different measurements or preconceptions. There are no “descriptions” of the city reflecting “pure” objects such as houses, streets etc. but only constructions that both emanate from the objects of the city, and construct them.

In my project central questions are: How is the city constructed in the planning discussion? What concepts are used in the construction of the urban environment? What is constructed as problems and solutions? How is the urban dweller and the urban life styles constructed, and what norms related to these are expressed? To answer these questions I analyze the Swedish planning discussion in texts, for example from the Swedish journal of planning (Plan) which is the empirical material I focus on in this text. Of course, the articles from the journal cannot give a full picture of the Swedish urban planning discussion, but using the journal is one way of approaching it. Previously I have looked at texts from the National Board of Housing, Building and Planning (Boverket), and in the future I will broaden my scope more and include municipal planning and vision documents. Consequently, this text presents conclusions from an ongoing project, and must be considered as preliminary and as part of an unfinished whole.

I would like to encourage alternative approaches to the city and the urban in a planning context, and to formulate the city as in constant reconstruction and not as something given or static is a first step. I agree with Amin & Thrift (2002) that we no longer can agree on what the city or the urban is. The city is among other things a site, a historical monument, a settlement, a shopping centre or a home. This multiplicity puts, as I see it, the discursive process, *the city making*, in the centre. Amin, Massey and Thrift further emphasise the hybrid and conflictual nature of cities in *Cities for the many not the few* (2000):

There is simply no point in imagining the future of cities in terms of a harmonious, consensual, ‘solution’ – a ‘state’ which can be arrived at. What we need are mechanisms for ensuring the democratic control and management of what will

necessarily, by the very nature of cities, be a constantly contested, constantly changing, open future. (Amin et al 2000, p. vi-vii)

This perspective implies scepticism towards some urban planning, since planning proposals and practices somehow necessarily have to interpret the city as a place or a thing, as something definite and as something that *can be* harmonious and consensual. Even though it is important to believe in the capacity of planning, it is as important to be sceptical and to question the absolutism in things and places and instead develop the planning practice through for example socio-physically integrated tools and sector integration. (See also Amin et al 2000, e.g. p.4)

### ***Or is the city having a renaissance?***

It is useful to relate to the British “urban renaissance”, as well as to the American New Urbanism-movement since they both involve similar tendencies, and can be interpreted as reactions to similar phenomena as the contemporary Swedish development. They appeared during the 1990s, and are both concrete planning ideas and ideals, *and* stories or ways of talking and writing about the city and the urban. As I see them they are important as ideas even if they do not always result in urban planning and building completely according to their own principles. (Robbins 2004, p.212) In my interpretation the urban renaissance in Sweden<sup>1</sup> involves more than a retrospective architectural idiom. It constructs planning and life style ideals and it also involves specific conceptual constructions. I consider the urban renaissance as a discourse, necessary to analyze and critically evaluate as such. This means that my analysis focus on language as constitutive for and constituted by ideologies and power relations connected to the planning of the city and the urban life.<sup>2</sup> (See also Beauregard 1993/2003) I focus on the 1990s and the first years of the 2000s. During this period expressions of an urban renaissance are strong in Sweden. In 1988 the National Board of Housing, Building and Planning (Boverket) was established, and given a somewhat different

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<sup>1</sup> I will use both urban renaissance and new urbanism for the Swedish development, fully aware of that there are both important similarities and differences. However, in lack of a better term for the Swedish tendencies, I think that the British and American terms are suitable at this stage.

<sup>2</sup> Here it is necessary to comment on the fact that I normally write in Swedish. The object of study and choice of method makes this necessary, but it might also affect this text that is written in English. Some nuances in formulations, choice of wordings etc. in the text examples get lost in translation, and sometimes there might be a lack of text examples, due to the translation problem. All quotes from the empirical material have been translated by the author for the purpose of this text. I hope the quotes function as examples and illustrations, and that the lack of examples does not affect the validity of my argument.

mission than its predecessor The National Planning Authority (Planverket). Boverket is supposed work more knowledge oriented – spreading and collecting knowledge – and to have a holistic perspective on planning. This means that Boverket becomes an important producer and communicator of ideas and that the focus on planning from the authorities is more unified. In 1989 the Urban Environment Council (Stadsmiljörådet) is established, a body related to Boverket. It is supposed to be both an advisory body to the authority and to encourage a broader debate on urban planning issues. Until 2004 they are central to the spreading of urban renaissance ideals in Sweden through their publications, conferences and newsletters. Finally, in 1992 the housing fair in Örebro was the first one with an explicit urban focus. Housing fairs is an event for spreading architectural and urban planning ideas and ideals. The urban focus has after the Örebro fair become the model for the Swedish housing fairs. Consequently, there are several tendencies strengthening the city and the urban as ideal during the 1990s.

The use of the concept ‘city’ or ‘urban’ is however not something exclusive for the time period of interest here. Also during the era of modernist rational planning in Sweden the ambition was the “new city” in different guises, and surely expressions of retrospective urban ideals could be found also in the community planning during the first decades after the Second World War. But the frequency and the types of argumentations increased during the 1990s, and the discourse is still evident. Perhaps also the alternative ideals are fewer today? Finally, there are the international simultaneous tendencies New Urbanism and urban renaissance that I already mentioned, where also urban character, density etc. are stressed and where the Swedish discourse can find inspiration.

### ***Discourse analysis and urban perspectives***

There are two central dimensions of the discourse concept and thereby also of a discourse oriented approach, following Michel Foucault. ‘Discourse’ designates 1) a collection of statements on a certain limited phenomenon, and 2) the rules regarding what is possible to state on the specific phenomenon. (Foucault 1972/2002, e.g., pp.133-145) The rules and the statements, the discursive practice, can be actions that include and exclude, categorize or define whereby context, wholeness, is created. These practices also put the power struggle over what is held as true in the centre. (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000, p.7, Boréus & Bergström 2000, p.17, Börjesson 2003, pp.86-91, Mills 2004, p.55) In discourse analysis

power is central, both as a repressive and a productive force. Which, or whose, stories are interpreted as true and false, respectively. Or, how can individuals, groups or institutions use power as a productive force to express their opinion, to construct their own truth. The discourses of the city are central in urban regeneration processes, and thereby they are political. They are used as tools and become instruments of power in the urban policy process.

The statement in Foucault's terms can be text, speech or other kinds of expressions. The rules regulate the conditions of existence for the statement. Is it mainstream, radical, true or false, common knowledge etc? Central is consequently not if the discourse constructs a correct image of a hidden truth, but *how* the discourse is organised in order to show no weakness or contradiction. (Foucault 1972/2002, pp.133-136, pp.141-142) But even though discourse seems to be without weakness or contradiction, analysis is also about looking specifically for the incomplete, the cracks and gaps. (See also Boyle & Rogerson 2001, p.410.)

In discourse theory terms, my study is partly about establishing the nodes of the discourse of the new urbanism. But it is also central to see what is presumed as true, real and good. The true, real and good city, how and with what concepts is it constructed? What planning problems are constructed and what solutions to these problems? Hereby it is also possible to reach the contrasting pictures: the false, unreal and destructive city in the discourse of the urban renaissance. Robert A Beauregard's *Voices of Decline. The Postwar Fate of US Cities* (1993/2003) and Loretta Lees on the British urban policy for an urban renaissance (Lees 2003) are examples of similar approaches to the urban discourse, where problem construction, or "framing" is discussed, as well as conceptual nodes and oppositional pairs of concepts.

Starting from the city and the urban and not only its politics as discursive construction means risking critique that this is not possible, the city is not only a discursive construction since "it is there", and we can easily see and feel it. The buildings are tangible and you can walk on the streets. But, at the same time as the city and its places seem to be in existence, and very tangible, discursive processes define and redefine them as safe or dangerous, beautiful or ugly, segregated or integrated. 'The city' in definite form seems to slip away, and its representations constantly changes guise. This was a theme in the academic debate around the discursive turn in urban studies in the 1980s and 90s (e.g. Hastings 1999, Imrie, Pinch & Boyle 1996). And, 'the city' as place is also constructed relative to, and as separate from 'the countryside' and 'the suburb'. This implies the importance of language and of the conceptual.

The constructions are also normative mechanisms that include some places, lifestyles or social groups in the ideal, and exclude others. ‘The city’ in the discourse of the urban renaissance in Sweden seems to be a key word. But what it means is unclear. Is it strong and normative, or empty and possible to fill with several different meanings? In my analysis I hope to shed some light on this tension between the empty and the meaningful concept, in the discourse or in a specific text or statement.

### ***Urban renaissance is an international tendency***

In the American context, the New Urbanism-movement – in spite of its name – represents an ideal of a return to the city from the previous turn of the century. The new urbanism-movement tell a story of the contemporary city as problem-ridden by urban sprawl, lost place identity, negative car dependency and what is considered bad urban planning mainly from the decades after the Second World War. The planning ideal of the American movement mainly concerns measures to take care of the considered problems, and to do that by (re)creating the dense, small scale, and functionally mixed city or urban district and the local community that, it is believed, most people like. (Robbins 2004) The British comparable case is the “urban village” ideal, or the “urban renaissance”, for example expressed in the so called Urban Task Force report *Towards an urban renaissance*. Urban renaissance usually means upgrading of urban areas for increased attractiveness, sustainability and economic growth and it involves ideas about what kind of urban structures and life styles that is ideal for this purpose. The renaissance concept points to something coming back or being taken back, rebuilt or reborn, and in addition has an air of solemnity and history. Human geographer Loretta Lees denotes urban renaissance as a discourse, and as such it constructs specific urban problems and prescribes specific solutions. Also, she points to that the concept seems hard to resist and is favoured by many instead of the more complex and contradictory concept of ‘gentrification’, which connects urban renewal to problems of class differences and unequal distribution of economic resources among urban dwellers in a way that urban renaissance does not. (Lees 2003, p.61) Instead it seems to celebrate urban life in general. (See also Amin et al (2000) on The Urban Task Force report, e.g. p.1, 4) Other key concepts in the discourse are ‘sustainability’, ‘diversity’ and ‘community’. (Lees 2003, pp.75-80) Through the use of these concepts in the discourse an urban ideal is constructed, and certain sustainability, diversity and community is normalised.

“The discursively invisible process of gentrification is promoted by policy makers as the saviour in troubled English inner cities, and this vision of a continental-style café culture feeds into this language of sustainability, diversity and community (and thus citizenship and rights).” (Lees 2003, p.61)

The opposing image to the urban renaissance is one of the “stultifying and sterile suburbs” of monotony and concrete, a problem that is solved by measures for increased ‘diversity’. (ibid., p.77) This will be discussed more below related to the Swedish context where this is as striking. Diversity is a unanimous good in the discourse, as is community. There is very little awareness that these concepts can be seen as multifaceted, or even contradictory. (ibid., p.75-80) In addition, Lees points to that markers of class and ethnicity are connected to the physical form of the city, as is physical form to environmental problems:

... the foundation for urban renaissance and sustainability is densification of the urban form. Densification of the urban form has become a magic cure-all for a variety of environmental *and* social ills. The compact urban form will reduce traffic congestion and pollution, reduce pressure on open space, habitat and agricultural land in the greenbelt, and reduce global warming. (ibid., p.75)

Lees claims that the discourse of urban renaissance constructs a storyline where we have lost control over our towns and cities, and through industrialism we also lost the “continental attitude” towards urban life. The discourse both constructs a universal subject, and hides who is responsible for the considered problematic. Who are “we”? The middle class? (ibid., p.65) I would add that “we” could also refer to the planning professionals, and still both hide responsibility for the problems, *and* point to who is responsible for the urban renaissance. The urban planning of the post war decades is admitted as a failure, and this in turn makes room for new measures from the planners of today, and for the reinstatement of the “traditional” city. This has been stated in the North American context by Mercier (2003):

By advocating respect for the traditional image of the neighbourhood, the new urban planners become self-professed saviours who have finally restored neighbourhood history, of which the area had been dispossessed – or so the story goes – by a modernist invasion programmed by urban-renewal advocates. (Mercier 2003, p.87)



Tracey Skillington (1998) discusses the construction of Dublin in a newspaper debate concerning a process of urban renewal. She points to how ideological structures and power relations in society are expressed in the urban renewal context, making the debate working in two directions, so the construction of the city can also be constitutive for society as a whole.

... discourse shapes our sense of the city and expectations of it through public negotiations. Discursive representations of Dublin's transport conditions have more than just rhetorical performative force; their referential aspects have wider political and cultural relevance. (Skillington 1998, p.467)

Skillington sees what she calls "position-taking" in the urban renewal process, i.e. a play of ideals positioning themselves in relation to each other, e.g. different positions in relation to renewal – renewal for economic development or as in recreation of a (fabricated) past. (ibid., p.460) This underlines how urban renewal as a project both aims into the future and into the past. Skillington also points to the different lines of argument in the debate. Either the arguments appeared scientific and rational, or more emotional and experiential. According to Skillington more than one story of Dublin came out of the debate. There was the nostalgic story with the historical town as a product up for sale, and there was one where the fear of the periphery was expressed and parts of Dublin were excluded. (ibid., p.460, pp.464-465) Parts of the city were constructed as having a history, and the peripheral parts were without history.

Nadal (2000), analyzing discourses of urban public space in post war US, does not use the concept 'urban renaissance'. But his reasoning about a strong economic logic in parallel to increased demand for urban public life that led to what he calls "new public space" has definitely similarities with the British development. Nadal's "new public space" is privately administered pseudo public spaces with a lot of focus on consumption spaces and activities, and constructed on the basis of historical ideals. Like Lees Nadal emphasise how community and diversity in this "new public space" are inclusive and exclusive concepts and measures. Through design and safety measures urban public space is segmented, and the urban public space that is created is attractive to – according to the economic logic – the attractive consumers. (Nadal 2000, pp.146-151) Here they meet a specific type of diversity and community that confirms them and their choices and that excludes less attractive consumers – individuals and groups that Nadal designates as "[n]on-conforming individuals, non mainstream sub-cultures and various sorts of marginalized social groups." (ibid., p.149)

In the following sections some of the tendencies discussed so far will reappear, in connection to the Swedish planning discourse. In my analysis presented here I focus on concepts and groups of concepts and argue that they are of specific importance for the discourse of the urban renaissance in Sweden. They are frequent in the empirical material and they appear as signals. But for what? For example, how is ‘integration’ constructed as a physical ideal? What ‘mix’ is the planning ideal? How can ‘diversity’ as ideal be interpreted in the articles? What is it that should be ‘recreated’ in contemporary and future urban planning and building? How are urban categories such as ‘street’, ‘square’ or ‘block’<sup>3</sup> used, and what kind of city is constructed with their help? Finally I will discuss the construction of the urban core, the city centre. What is there, and what is its importance in relation to the city as a whole? Consequently, gradually I move both towards the centre of the city and the discourse of the urban renaissance in Sweden, via the definitions and uses of concepts. I have not strived for a separation between the existing and the ideal city. In my project the historical, the ideal and the existing city are all constructions of similar importance, even more so since I mainly work with texts.

### ***The concepts of the city***

I have looked at articles from the Swedish journal of planning (Plan) in order to come near the Swedish urban planning discourse in general and the discourse of the urban renaissance in Sweden specifically. Plan is a forum for professionals, researchers, politicians and students interested in urban and regional planning and development. The journal has an editorial board that commissions or reviews sent in articles. About 4-5 issues per year are published. I have initially selected articles out of all issues from 1988-2006 (but so far I have only worked with the period 1988-2000). I emphasize that I do not analyze Plan as journal, but instead I use articles from it as expressions of the Swedish planning discussion of the 1990s and 2000s. My selection is articles that in some way contribute to the discursive construction of the city. I consider this to be articles that implicitly or explicitly concern questions such as: What is ‘the city’? Where is ‘the city’? How does it look? Who lives there, or how should you live there? What threatens or supports its growth, that is, what planning problems and solutions are there? The texts concern *the city* as physical and social space rather than the region or the

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<sup>3</sup> In Swedish block is ‘kvarter’, and more explicitly connoting to the grid structure city of streets and houses by the streets from the late 1800s and early 1900s. It might be that the English ‘block’ doesn’t function the same way.

nation. In addition, they concern *urban planning and building* rather than regional development and regional planning. They might treat *the historical city*, *urban cultural heritage* or visions for *the future city*. Finally, a relevant theme is *urban life* – about the inhabitants of the city and their everyday life. *The city as physical space* is in focus, but this does not completely rule out articles concerning *the city as social space*. To draw a line between the two is difficult, and not always relevant.

### **Integration, contact, continuity**

‘Integration’, an integrated city or contact between parts of the city or between buildings in a continuous urban landscape is something unanimously positive, and it is positioned as opposite to separation. Integration is mainly used as a planning term referring to *physical integration*, and not to social or ethnic integration. Either this could be interpreted as a strategic measure to establish connections between urban planning and building and social climate, or it could be seen as emphasising the difference between the good (inner) city and its opposite, the suburb, the anti-city – a product of the ideal of functional separation. ‘Suburb’ then becomes intimately connected to segregation, monotony and lack of social contacts, while ‘city’ represents integration and diversity.

The good city is constructed as one of traditional urban patterns and functional mix, human contacts, respect and humanism and its opposite is characterized by monotony, separation, environmental conflicts and pollution. Integration appears as a simple concept, as if it is evident what should be integrated and on what level. That it can take many forms, depending on to what level the concept is applied, is not considered. Integration of for example that which could be called common everyday life units ‘work’, ‘housing’ and ‘service’ differs on the level of a single real-estate, on housing area level or in a city as a whole. So, the concept is not as clear as it first appears in the articles. However, there seems to be a general agreement in the discourse that we all know what the integrated city is.

### **Variation, mix, diversity**

Integration can be connected to ‘functional mix’, ‘variation’ or ‘diversity’ – all central concepts in the construction of the good city. A good urban environment is for example “rich in variation”. The meanings of these concepts are to a high degree only implied, and it is not clear what kind of functions that should be mixed and to what degree, as with the integration ideal. In addition, the concepts are often positioned as oppositions to the negative functional

separation, monotony, uniformity or simplicity. As it is used, a binary structure is established, of good variation and bad functional separation.

## Identity

The city in the discourse, or places in the city, should have an ‘identity’. Identity appears as something in itself positive and something natural that grows with time. The city has a “spirit”, or it consists of “identity carrying characteristics”, or each block has “its own individuality and distinctive features”. Identity is also connected to uniqueness and recollection.

In the articles, the identity of the city makes it appear almost human, and it appears possible for a place to have *one* identity. Identity is something inherent in a place but at the same time something that can be planned for, and built. A consequence of this is that places also can be considered as lacking identity. ‘The suburb’ is in the discourse considered as lacking or suffering from a weak identity, or in an identity crisis between the urban and the rural. There is one example where identity is constructed as something natural, not possible to fabricate, but at the same time the identity of the suburb must come out of the making visible of assets such as nature, history and contemporary culture. There is a clear contradiction in this, the suburb both has and has not an identity, it is something inherent and natural *and* it must be produced and made visible.

But in the ambition to copy the modern and the urban, the old qualities of the suburbs were forgotten. The charm that the several hundred years old church villages and train stops from the turn of the century could offer was not considered interesting to preserve or integrate with the new. The impression of a completely modern and competitive suburb was disturbed by the old! (Plan 2/91, Persson)<sup>4</sup>

Identity as something original and inherent puts it in opposition to modern places such as the post war suburban areas. The old is given charm, while the suburb in the quote above is connected to modernity, competitiveness and lack of identity. In the quoted article the area of concern, Södertörn, is presented as a multicultural environment, but this is not related to the desirable place identity. The desirable place identity seems to be something that comes from within, that is original, from before multiculturalism.

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<sup>4</sup> All quotes from Plan have been translated by Tunström.

The identity problem can also be connected to growth. Too fast growth can lead to “problems of integration and identity” (Plan, 3/93, Berg). Or, in another article it is stated that the modernist functional separation and a “decomposed everyday life” can lead to psychological problems.

In one article it is actually reflected upon that a place identity is something designated, and not necessarily from within. The Stockholm suburb Tensta should, according to the article, be designated as a ‘city’ with blocks and districts. This produces an image that can function as a basis for identity and identification, according to the author. ”At the same time Tensta lacks the urban identity carrying characteristics.” (Plan 3/93, Larsson) Here the use of concepts is constitutive of the place and Tensta becomes urban if we call it urban. And connection to the city is made into a basis for place identity and status that the connection to the definition as a suburb is not.

### **Alive, attractive, good**

In the articles the ideal or good city is the main focus. In some sense all planning discussion start from some kind of problem, but more central for planners is to produce proposals, solutions, good examples and ideals.<sup>5</sup> The aim of the planning, or the ideal, is communicated through signals such as ‘alive’, ‘attractive’ or ‘good’. Some keys to the meaning of these concepts can be found in the articles. An attractive city has for example an attractive city core, and this is something that must be recaptured if lost. In a city there are further on attractive locations, but where they are and to whom they are attractive is mostly implicit, although waterfront locations are put forward. A strong local community, and pavement cafés seems to make a lively city. Tidiness, preserved cultural heritage and fewer cars increase the attractiveness, as does densification and clearance.

‘The good city’ is the final goal of all urban planning, even though in my empirical material this specific expression is not so frequent. Formulated goals are instead such as “good urban places”, “good urban environment”, “good physical environment” or “good living environment”. The good city is in addition an ideal image produced on the basis of the historical or the old city and its successive development up until modernist rational planning. The old city

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<sup>5</sup> It could be argued that this focus on positive examples and solutions is something inherent in planning. But the sometimes overly positive tone in the urban renaissance discourse has been noted by others, such as Amin et al (2000), p.1-5, on the Rogers report.

is even on occasion constructed as something natural and given, as opposed to the modern city. “Medieval genes” in one article, is opposed to the borrowed patterns of the modern dormitory town. In another case there is a “vocabulary and grammar of the city” to relate to.

The modern city and the peripheral areas that came as a result of modernist rational planning are positioned as the opposite of the good city. “Modern areas are often less alive and less attractive than those planned a hundred or five hundred years ago.” (Plan 4/98, Söderlind) There the shopping malls, the suburbs, the segregation and social problems are located, and these places are related to lack of attractiveness, the “dead” suburbs, the “dormitory towns”, the monotony and the “concrete dominion”. Consequently, the good and attractive city is alive and part of a natural development, while that which is excluded is dead, in-authentic or unnatural.

### **Recreate, recapture, restore**

Modernist rational planning is mainly constructed as constituting a break with a long tradition, an exception, or as the reason to contemporary problems. That is the reason for the talk of urban renaissance or about ‘recapturing’, ‘recreating’ or ‘rehabilitating’ the city or the urban, the old or traditional city or planning ideals, the diversity, the open square or the street. In the articles I find the expressed will to “recreate the lost spatiality in the new city”, that was “lost during the functionalist era”. The concepts in these kinds of expressions, construct a history of planning as a row of successes up to the breakthrough of the rationalist ideals. The responsibility for the break is put on planning and the planners, but they are also, perhaps paradoxically, responsible for the renaissance. Contemporary planning is authorised by the previous planning being characterised as bad. Now the attractiveness of the urban core must be recaptured and strengthened, the street space must be recaptured from the cars, the urban public spaces be restored or the “publicness” recapture its role. It is space in a physical sense that is to be recaptured, and in addition certain types of activities in this space. The following quote illustrates this:

The city is not a settlement. Indeed, people do live in the city, but what makes the city a city is all its uninhabitable places: the streets, squares, parks, theatres, cafés, monuments. The city is the public space, the space that has been shaped and reshaped for public life during decades – communication, trade, festivities, ceremonies and everyday encounters between people. But this knowledge has been lost during the last

fifty years (...) Private life and housing is in focus instead of public life and urban space (...) By that public space has been dissolved into left over (and left behind) in-between spaces. (Plan, 5/97, Nyström)

Some additional comments on this quote are necessary. First, it is clear that the author's starting point is privileged. In her interpretation of urban history it is unnecessary to focus on housing construction. Secondly, the places she refers to as uninhabitable could alternatively be constructed as places where individuals and groups either are forced to be, in lack of a place of their own, or where they are excluded from spending time on their own conditions. The places "left behind" are only left behind by those with a home to leave them for, for others they might be one night's refuge. Thus, in order to claim a return to the city and to urban public space it is necessary to have a home to start from, as the author in this example, and the story is only ideal for those able to choose their home and able to choose to leave it for a few hours in the streets.

### ***The categories of the city***

Concepts referring to direct physical referents in the city I call *categories*. Some frequent examples from the articles are 'street', 'square', 'place', 'block', 'suburb', 'walking path' or 'cycle path'. But there are also other kinds of concepts that categorize places and that are central to the construction of the ideal city such as 'city character', 'meetings', 'meeting places', 'housing area' and 'urban district'. These are used to categorize places, architecture or planning elements and they can be understood as concrete and descriptive categories. The concept 'street' is necessary in order to be able to talk about the transport spaces of the city. But, the concepts can also be interpreted as historic concepts, with different meanings or connotations depending on historical context, or sprung from a specific historical context. For example, designate a 'street' as 'avenue', and the transport space is filled with Sunday flaneurs and green trees. The essence of the city or of public space is in the expression "in the streets", and it has been for long. "In the streets" (in Swedish "på gator och torg" or variants of it) is a common way of expressing "in the city", or "in public space". As concrete and descriptive concepts the category refers to physical locations, the places where cars and bicycles move around or where people walk. But, in addition "in the streets" reconstruct a historical city where the central events and activities happened "in the streets". Today, public space can be seen as wider and more contradictory, and sometimes less visible, as was briefly

discussed in the beginning of this text. Public life takes place in a wide variety of spaces and places, and if it is empty “in the streets” the city doesn’t necessarily have to be deserted. Choosing to refer to a place as a ‘city district’ or as a ‘housing area’ is another example of signalling. A ‘city district’ is part of a city, whereas a ‘housing area’ is a functionally separate environment, not necessarily connected to anything.

In the list below the central categories of the city that I have found in the articles are listed. They are in two columns, where the left one contains concepts that are important in the discourse of urban renaissance. In the column to the right I have listed concepts that make out the “anti-city”, the functionally separated city. As an “anti-image” however, it is as important for the ideal as the concepts in the left column are.

<i>Street</i>	<i>Suburb</i>
<i>Square</i>	<i>Area, housing area</i>
<i>Place</i>	<i>Green space</i>
<i>Park</i>	<i>High-riser</i>
<i>Meeting, meeting places</i>	<i>Million program area*</i>
<i>Block</i>	<i>Mall, shopping centre, Shopping barn</i>
<i>City character/Urban character</i>	<i>Crane track*</i>
<i>Esplanades</i>	<i>Tenement houses</i>
<i>Boulevards</i>	<i>Loafs*</i>
	<i>Houses thrown out onto the fields</i>
	<i>Walking paths, cycle paths, motorways</i>

In the articles the concepts ‘city’, ‘city district’/’urban district’, ‘area’ or ‘block’ are often overlapping. It is difficult to definitely give the urban discourse a specific scale or geographical level. This reflects a wider tendency where municipalities add “city” to their geographical names, new housing construction is called “city”, or the process of new construction is referred to as “making city”, or building “a city in the city” etc. ‘City’ seems to refer to both the street level, area level and higher. However, instead of the specific scale, I

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\**Million program area* (“miljonprogramsområde” in Swedish) designates the housing areas from the modernist rational planning era. More specifically the so called Million program was a government initiative to build a million new dwellings in ten years, 1965-1974. However, the concept is often used rather bluntly, and thereby referring to more than this specific initiative, such as housing from the post-war era, or suburban areas. *Crane track* also refers to the rational planning era where an established image is that the crane tracks on the building sites designated the distance between the built houses. It constructs an image of a fully industrialised building process, with little sensitivity to other aspects of planning. *Loafs*: The houses build during the functionalist era and onward are sometimes referred to as “loafs” due to their shape.



see the marker ‘city’ (or ‘urban’ or ‘town’ in English) as the thing to focus on here. The marker (in Swedish it is often a prefix) constructs specific images and signals. Concepts such as “city character”<sup>6</sup>, “townscape”, “city festival” or “urban space” are used with intent, to send specific signals constructing the good, the dynamic or interesting city and a city of continuity. There are only very few examples where ‘city’ or similar is used to construct a negative image. ‘Block’ is also a positive concept in the discourse. “The city of blocks”<sup>7</sup> designates the contemporary and future ideal, a model based on traditional urban structures from the time before the breakthrough of an open space ideal. Formally, there are blocks in plans characterised by the open space ideal as well, but in the discourse of the new urbanism the historical aspect of the concept is emphasised. The following quote is a significant example:

All projects are imbued with an ambition to counter one-sidedness, functional separation, monotony, and to see to the unique, versatile and traditional. (...) There is need for a new concept. City character is wished for, and whole, functionally integrated environments arranged in traditional urban patterns such as blocks and esplanades. (Plan, 3/89, editorial)

In the following example the use of concepts clearly signal a specific planning ideal and process:

Streets, roads and places should, just like in the city, be the connecting web between the blocks. Each block should be able to develop in its surroundings independent from how other parts of the area develop. This principle, in opposition to strict centralisation (...) It is important that each block has its own distinctive character, and not appear as satellites to the central block. (Plan, 6/88, presentation of a planning proposal for a hospital area in Solna)

By using expressions such as ‘centralisation’ and ‘satellite’ an opposing image to the proposal is constructed. The ideal is an area of ‘streets’ and ‘places’, a ‘city’ instead of a hospital area.

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<sup>6</sup> City character is “stadsmässighet” in Swedish and literally it could be translated as “looking like a city”, or “functioning like a city”. It could then be said to signal that the place is not *really* a city, but attempts to be one. However, in the contemporary Swedish discourse it is used as the ideal characteristic of urban places.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Kvarter’, ‘block’ in Swedish, refers more clearly to the grid structure city, and ‘Kvarterstad’, ‘city of blocks’ in Swedish also connotes a strong local community.

The following is another similar example, also a proposal for a hospital area. The area should become a city, or a part of the city:

The lack of a uniting and defined idea regarding the creation and building of the area or its role in the city context has with time led to an area that can be experienced as shattered, large-scale and institutional-like. The central idea of the master plan is that the hospital area be re-shaped into the city of blocks and that the area is more clearly linked into an academic park zone. (...) Thereby the area becomes an integrated part of the city with blocks, parks, squares and places ... (Plan 3/93, presentation of a planning proposal for Lund academic hospital)

There are, in this time period, also examples of planning proposals for housing areas or new city districts that are presented in Plan. "Barkarbystaden" or "Alsike stad" (Barkarby city and Alsike city) are constructed as a "city district" and "a traditional city" respectively. In Alsike an ambition is to construct "blocks of development", "blocks of manufacturing", "handicraft village" or "company village" and a local community with an international profile. Some of these functions – because this appears paradoxically as functional separation more than the integrated city, in spite of the conceptual markers – are designated as 'block', some as 'city and some as 'village', although they all concern the same location. But through the use of concepts the place is constructed as a city, a small town or as a village, with a local or an international profile. It seems that I as a reader can choose the place identity that attracts me the most.

In 1992 there was a housing fair in Örebro and the housing area called Ladugårdsängen was built. This was the first housing fair with the city and the urban in focus and with a more holistic planning perspective. It appears already in the advertising. In Plan 2/92 there is an advertisement for the fair saying that the new area will have "a definite urban character and distinct blocks, avenues and car free streets. The buildings are very varied." It seems important to emphasise the urban character and the variation, the avenues and blocks. The area of Ladugårdsängen becomes urban because it is conceptually constructed as such, independent from how it is built or architecturally designed. With alternative concepts the area could have been constructed as a 'suburb' or as a 'housing area'.

In the articles a strong belief in the importance of the categories is apparent. And, as I have tried to explain and illustrate, the categories both refer to our contemporary urban environment, and to a historical city. The categories of the old city are constructed as evident, unambiguous and timeless. Also, I consider it as active choices to use 'street' instead of 'road' and 'park' instead of 'green area' or 'green space'. If there once was a difference between these concepts, today it is more a question of designation than difference in design or use.<sup>8</sup> I consider these choices as necessary for the discourse to be coherent, to appear as unified. Nadal (2000), an American urban researcher, follows a similar line of reasoning as I do but regarding the US context. According to him the concept 'street' returned in the 1960s after having been banned by the modernists for a time period. Also in the 1960s the new concept 'urban public space' was introduced. Nadal's hypothesis is that these concepts were necessary and brought to the fore at this moment in time since they represented something threatened. It was necessary to be able to talk of them as lacking or disappeared.

... public space was named – i.e. brought into existence as a discursive object – only when its possible physical 'disappearance' became an issue. It was invented only in the act of accounting for its 'loss' and in the fight for its 'restoration' and protection. (Nadal 2000, p.30)

The emphasis of boundaries comes as a consequence of the categorisations. It appears important that the boundary between city and countryside is clear and kept, as well as the boundary between public and private space in the city. Streets should be designated as streets, and roads as roads. The former is found in 'the city', the latter in 'the countryside' or 'the suburb'.

However, there is an interesting contradiction as regards the importance of boundaries in the discourse. I have previously mentioned the ideal of integration, continuous space and mixing of functions. This is put in contrast to the modernist rational planning ideal of open space and functional separation. If functional separation and zoning once were ideal for safety, today integrated urban spaces are the safest and healthiest. However, not as regards certain categories, such as the mentioned urban-rural or public-private. Here integration means

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<sup>8</sup> In the Swedish National Encyclopedia 'gata' in Swedish, similar to a street, is located in a town, and 'väg' in Swedish, similar to a road is located outside of the town. However, if it ever used to be that clearly differentiated in use it is definitely not that anymore.

obscurity. There is consequently a tension between integration and segregation (boundaries) in the discourse.

The public spaces of the city are presented as important. They are supposed to function as “unifying”, that is as filled with people and activities – as encouraging an urban community. An urban community is constructed as something in common for those that for example can walk home from work, school or the store and who can spend time outside in the evenings. The public spaces should ideally be delimited, in line with the importance of boundaries. Whether this boundary should be physically visible or if it has more to do with administrative clarity is not said. But the physical design of the urban public spaces seems to be important, since the essence of the city is constructed as “streets and squares”. Associations are here made to “the old city” where the street was “a space that united the houses, a space where all spent time, met and acted.” (Plan 4/95, Ullstad) The urban public space as good and free from conflict is a strong image in the discourse. There people dwell and meet as equals, equals with work from which they stroll home, and with resources to spend out on town in restaurants and cafés in the spare time. Free individuals meeting people mainly in public. Public space as a site of struggle and conflict is not real public space in the urban renaissance discourse, or private space as meeting place is not constructed as important.

The physical design is important for the city. From the discourse it is clear that the city is something that we can build, and that we need to construct “a city in the city”, and that the beginning of the physical urban structure should be easily visible. The city is also constructed of physical objects and spaces such as “house, yard, street”, and it should have “good details”. It is also defined as having a certain degree of exploitation, certain building heights and buildings with shops in the ground floor. It is important that the buildings in the city are of city or urban character, or that they have a “city-like firmness”. But what does this mean? That it should look like a city although not being one? Someone claims that the ideas of the Canadian 20<sup>th</sup> century urbanist Jane Jacobs are good criteria for measuring the degree of city character (short blocks, mixed age of the buildings, mixed functions and enough density (Jacobs 1961). But at the same time “city character” is constructed as something more than a specific urban design; it is also a specific kind of life. Or perhaps the image of a specific kind of life?

### ***The core of the city – a consumption space***

The construction of the city in the articles is made out of categories of functions or activities. The main categories are *home/housing, work/work places, shopping and service, businesses, offices, culture* and *meeting places*. Sometimes these categories are more specified, such as “handicraft” or “small shops”. There is also always a ‘centre’ or a ‘core’ in the city. More often actually a core than a centre, since the latter signal of functions and thereby it is usually placed in the periphery of the city, in the post-war suburb. The city core can be found in the city and it signals of history and of origin more than of a specific limited function. The following quote illustrate this. The same location in the town of Staffanstorp has, by urban planning measures, changed from being a centre to being a small town.

More and more planners realize that the city must be planned with the city itself as role model. In Staffanstorp outside of Malmö a run-down centre from the 60s has been transformed into a small town with shops, housing and a main street with room for buses and cars. (Plan 4/98, Söderlind)

Another example illustrates the role of the city core as the essence of the city:

The city core is by tradition the natural meeting place in Swedish cities. It has a rich selection of shops, restaurants and cinemas but also public institutions such as museums, libraries and theatres. Buildings and places bear witness of the history of the city. Thus it is an environment that to a large degree defines the contemporary city. (...) To stop the depletion and strengthen the urban core in its role as the natural meeting place ... (Plan 2/94, Gustafsson & Sandahl)

The city core is tradition and nature and the evident and undisputed centre. It is evident that shops, restaurants, cinemas and theatres are the most attractive in the city. And that it is the buildings in the city centre that bear witness of the urban history. Note however the tension between the city core as something natural and at the same time as something in need of measures to strengthen it.

Naturally, other uses of the concepts of ‘centre’ appear in the articles but I would like to claim that ‘city core’ or ‘inner city’ has more legitimacy as a category in the discourse of the urban renaissance. Not only the construction of the city core establishes this, but also it is confirmed

by the role of the periphery. Centre and periphery of the city are two distinct phenomena, with a division of roles that mainly should be preserved, according to the discourse. The boundary between urban and rural should be kept, and obscurity (“urban sprawl”) is a threat.

In the city core it is possible to “run most of your errands”, and it is the “natural basis” for shopping. But it is also “more than just stores”. In the city core there is a lively urban life and “everything” is nearby. In my empirical material the following appear as functions necessary in the city core: shopping, restaurants, cafés, libraries, cinemas, cultural activities, entertainment, theatres, exhibitions, public and private services, historical monuments, schools, parks, homes, work places. A city core is consequently characterised by “manifoldness”, “variation”, or “mix”. This mix is not only functional; there should also be a mix of people, a “crowd” or a “swarm”. A city should “vibrate of life also in the night”, in one example. It is however difficult to find out more specifically what is mixed, what the manifoldness consists of or what kind of life the city should vibrate from. The enumeration above is in the end not that detailed. “Shopping”, “restaurants” etc. are general categories, which do not necessarily mean variation and mix. Also, consumption is established as a central activity – consumption of goods in the shops, food in restaurants and cafés, of culture and entertainment in theatres and cinemas. The importance of homes, schools and libraries is mentioned, but the consumption activities are given a more central role. Consumption is what makes the city live and what creates meetings and movements, according to the discourse. The urban dweller in the ideal city work, walk home from the work place and has time and money to spend the evenings in restaurants or theatres. Spare time consisting of other than this type of consumption is invisible, as is domestic work or working from home. The crowds of the city consist of consumers rather than demonstrators, of friends rather than enemies and of those with resources rather than those lacking.

Since ‘city’ mainly is a positive marker in the discourse, and the city core is the “natural” city, the old or inner city is constructed as normative. It is the starting point, and the constant which shall grow, or is threatened or imitated. That which has been built that does not adhere to the norm or the core is what broke the continuity and the city. According to the discourse this took place mainly during the modernist rational planning era during the decades after Second World War and it is the reason for the contemporary need for “city healing”. This focus on the inner city and the city core establishes a strong dualism between ‘inner city’ and ‘suburb’, where both concepts are as simplistically constructed. ‘The inner city’ is the city and the ideal,

‘the suburb’ is the anti-city and the bad example, what broke the city and what is not natural. In conclusion, the city core is what is guarded the most in the planning discourse. It is, and should be, at the same time the centre and totality of the city and urban life. (In parallel, the problem of ‘the suburb’ is a central theme, although it is not made as much of as the inner city theme.)

### ***A different kind of planning?***

In this analysis I have not focused much on the construction of planning and planning methods in the discourse. However, some comments on the subject are needed since they relate to the construction of the (ideal) city. A dualism is established between the modernist rational planning as ideology and method, and the new planning methods that are aimed at in some contemporary practice and presented as desirable in theory. The contemporary and future planning should be a planning for an ‘attractive’ and ‘alive’ city as opposed to the modernist rational planning that – according to the discourse – destroyed the city through functional separation and industrial scale.<sup>9</sup> The different kind of planning that is idealised in the discourse should start from the needs of the people, and from the local, the place identity, and seek knowledge in alternative ways. (Plan 4/93, Berntsson). This is considered lacking in the modernist era. Also, in several editorials in Plan the need for a new planning and new planners is emphasised. Planning is considered to be at a crossroads during the 1990s, looking for new knowledge and new methods.

The modernist rational planning has sometimes been portrayed as a planning for safety, equality, rationalism, and healthy living environments. Irrespective of whether this is considered as having been successful or not, it is discernible how concepts used in the construction of ‘the good city’ at that time, still are being used – but perhaps with changed intentions. Then, functional and traffic mode separation were considered measures for safe living environments. Or, increased accessibility to services was reached through the construction of shopping and service centres. This, in the contemporary discourse, represent the ‘anti-city’ and rather *insecurity* since it is considered leading to empty housing areas, large, dangerous and high speed motorways and dark tunnels. (Nadal (2000), e.g. p.68 follows the same line of argument with reference to the American context.) The idea to locate work

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<sup>9</sup> Of course, it could be debated whether there really *is* such a shift. E.g. Strömgren (2007) claim that in spite of the talk of a new communicative, humanist planning a rationalist continuity can be observed in Swedish planning policy since the 1940s and until today.

places, homes and services in relation to each other as in the modernist rational planning ideal (the community centre idea) today represents separation rather than mixing, and the contemporary ideal is perhaps work places, shops and homes mixed in the same building. Note however that this is not specifically for the people who live there, but more for the sake of the 'urban life'. Previously, a healthy home meant having access to running water and private bathroom, today health is interpreted as, and achieved by, the ability to walk or cycle among shops and cars in the functionally mixed city. The dense city has become a health argument.

### ***To conclude***

Hopefully it is clear in this text that the urban renaissance is both *observed* and *confirmed* in the Swedish discourse. The (European) city from the previous turn of the century appears as the norm and as something indisputably good. This comes out of the use of concepts and the construction of the discourse. The traditional city is today threatened or destroyed and must be re-established and healed. The traditional city is, and was, city-like, mixed, green, urban, dense, attractive and alive, but how this is measured or more specifically what it is made out of is only implicit in the discourse. The city should be green – but not too green, the houses high – but not too high. The inhabitants in the city are rarely poor, unemployed, cramped for space, disabled or ill. The attractive city is the one that mixes functions, but to what degree and more specifically what functions is not always obvious. The functionally mixed city as ideal is inspired by an idea of the old, traditional city, but it is a selective history that is put forward. Some parts of the history of the Swedish city, and aspects of the historical city are put forward as ideal, others are made invisible. Conflicts, crowding and illness are aspects that in the discourse are impossible to connect to the traditional city. Instead the focus is on (the good) meeting places, a (good) multifaceted urban life and the healthy aspects of functional mix.

The city as a norm is constructed as a unity and the connection between physical aspects and social life, between everyday life patterns and the character of the dwellers, is made to appear as strong. This both confirms the importance of planning, *and* makes planning and planners appear as to blame for the problems connected to the modernist rational planning. This is an obvious contradiction, but at the same time it makes it possible to both blame the planners and the planning, and point to a “different kind of planning” as the current solution and take a



self-critical stance as profession. Also, it makes it possible to claim the traditional urban structures as something good. The rational planning is placed in opposition to a humanistic planning putting faith in common sense and dialogue instead of in experts and models. This refers back to the oppositional pairs of concepts that the discourse is constructed around: city – countryside, inner city – suburb etc. and now rationalism/modernism – humanism/a “different kind of planning”. An inner city norm is constructed, and a planning history is established where the suburb is the deviant. The traditional city as ideal has monopolised concepts such as diversity and variation, and it is impossible to connect them to the functionally separated areas from the post war decades, unless it concerns the ambition to, with planning measures, “make a city” of the suburb. And then the inner city norm is even more confirmed. By a sometimes over-explicit use of concepts and construction of post war planning history (through concepts such as “shopping barn” or “concrete dominion”) the traditional, old, original city appear as the obvious contemporary and future ideal. Urban planning with functional separation is a threat to urban life, and to the sustainable city. Functional integration in the city promotes the good urban life, although not as regards urban and rural, or urban and suburban. Here integration means dissolution, and is a threat that constructs “non-places”.

The importance of categories and categorisation imply a prevailing functional thinking in line with Strömberg's (2007) hypothesis that the rationalism has prevailed in Swedish planning policy in spite of the rhetoric on communicative and humanistic planning, and mixing as ideal. Nadal (2000) states, speaking from the American context, that the functionalist thinking characterising modernism was replaced by a more holistic and post-modern approach oriented towards “the urban life” in a wider sense (Nadal 2000, e.g. p.16, 61). In my case it seems that the holism has resulted in ‘city’, ‘city character’, ‘urban life’ etc. becoming like functions and planning terms. A continuing functional thinking, but with new functions.

‘City’ is constructed as a positive concept, and used as a signal for dynamism, development, manifoldness etc. Thus, it could be imagined that ‘city’ as concept is used with an ambition to signal inclusion. I fear however that the effect is the opposite. The city and the urban life that is constructed as ideal in the discourse is not open for everyone. And everyone's lives are not legitimate as urban.

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