

Unintended outcomes of the marketized housing agenda in Sweden:

- the trolls that never were invited who we now have to deal with

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Abstract Max 150 words (now 164)

This paper discusses how the housing agenda in Sweden has been handed over to the municipalities, under the EU instructions. The marketized housing sector has resulted in unexpected local outcomes, or *trolls*, as for example private slumlords, exploiting their properties to a maximum but with no local responsibility to the tenants. Also, a black market of temporary housing -or beds- is found, which often target vulnerable immigrants. Thirdly, private-public partnerships has emerged, often termed *business improvement districts* (BIDs), who collaborate locally in order to serve long time interests for the property owners, the tenants, the local business-owners and the wider community. In sum, the neo-liberal agenda is found to strengthen the local communities and partnerships, but the tools to deal with the anomalies still lies at the central state. The neo-liberal agenda needs to be anchored by place and local actors in institutional long-term relations in defined places. Results imply that the planning processes need to address this new landscape of actors, and processes.

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#14: Planning, Law and Property Rights

Introduction

“Housing mortgages are closed for a whole generation, they earn too little” the Swedish Daily News wrote 8th of June, 2018.¹ The conclusion comes from a report produced by the market leading national mortgage institute SPAB. The investigation was based on the top 20 municipalities and the prices for a 30 sqm flat, and the average incomes of 25-29 year olds, males and females. Even if the youngsters have saved up some capital, their salaries will most likely not meet the qualifications set out by the banking sector. The result is that young people will stay with their parents up to the age of 30, if they are not lucky to have parents that can deal with the lending issues. The ideal of social mobility which for long was a Swedish sign-mark is proved to be lost in history.²

How did we as a society end up here, and could we not foresee this situation? The situation in Sweden is only one example of many across the European continent. This paper aims to discuss how the marketized housing agenda in Sweden has resulted in a number of possibly unexpected local outcomes, which to some extent also spur illegal activities. Additional responses to these anomalies are local public-partnerships which in part form a counter-response, in the shadow of absent national urban policies. The paper will close with a discussion on how the absence of a thought through housing policy has invited some illegal *trolls*, where the civil society and the local governments now have to deal with the mess – primarily expressed in low-status neighborhoods. But as the citation above indicates, this paper elaborates on the conclusion that the consequence of the outsourced housing ‘issue’ or ‘package’ has diminished the welfare of a generation.

¹ *Svenska Dagbladet Näringsliv*, the Economy Section, 2018-05-05, p. 5.

² The same phenomena have been reported from Great Britain and many other countries across Europe. One of the latest examples is published in *The Guardian*, UK Surge for housing costs for poorest ‘worst in Western Europe’, March 21st, 2018.

The Swedish housing context in brief

The housing policy was for decades one of the core responsibilities for the Swedish state, and the country was "...successful in solving its housing shortage with a minimum of social dislocation." (Goldfield 1982). Previous research has agreed that a typical retrenchment of the housing policy has taken place (Lindbom 2001), but I would take it even further to claim that a devolution to the municipal level took place in the 1990s, combined with increased reliance on the market forces.

The public responsibility and commitments to provide decent housing to segments with weak incomes constituted the prerequisites for the Million homes program in 1965 – 1975, a core mission for the Social democrats at the time. Generations after have disgusted these housing types and areas, regarding them as expressions of large-scale programmatic planning and disrespectful of peoples' cultures, demands, living expectations and their own initiative capacities (Linton 2015; Eriksson 2001; Rådberg 1997; Le Corbusier 1987). Initially, they were often built for the labor population in areas close to industries in the mid-sized and larger cities. Since the larger refugee waves emerged from Latin Americas, Iran/Iraq, former Yugoslavia, Eritrea and Somalia, and lately also from Syria; these areas have had a large influx of various nationalities. Often, the Million program areas have been appreciated as the first step into the Swedish society, but during the past two decades the integration into the general labour market and society has slowed down. When these socio-economic vulnerable people have been destined into such geographically specific areas, problems have also followed in terms of degraded status of the Million program areas, higher levels of criminality, a common sense of unsafety, and poor management of the housing-stock.

When the Million program housings were built in the early 1970s, the government had destined large subsidies to the builders. These subsidies prevailed at a decreasing level, but when the financial crises set in during early 1980s and again in 1991 (when the *Riksbank*³ raised the rent to the banks to 500%), the state financial crisis was a cold fact. Following the trends around at the time, the state started a process of sorting the responsibilities; primary schools were decentralized to the municipalities;

³ Sweden's central bank.

railways, post, telecom, electricity market and national airlines were privatised, as the state run drug-stores and the liquor monopoly (Norén Bretzer, Randrup & Persson, *forthcoming* 2019). As Sweden at this time was approaching the EU for membership, which got realised in 1995, the national political stand on the housing matters transformed from profound national engagement into a minimal. Even if it was not clearly spelled out, the intent of the policies were to adapt to the European common practices in the housing sector. The building subsidies were significantly reduced in 1994 and the former ministerial units *the Housing department* existed from 1974 until 1991. Between 1987 and 2006, a parliamentary committee existed as the *Housing committee*, but was later fused together with the *Civil committee*.

A more recent governmental committee report on housing policy from 2015 bear the significant name *EU and the municipalities' housing policy, SOU 2015:58, (EU och kommunernas bostadspolitik)*, which symbolises how the housing policy clearly is regarded by the Swedish state as a clearly municipal (and market) responsibility. This report primarily reads that the housing responsibility essentially is municipal, and that the EU regulations on assistance to market actors in the housing branch must be respected. Further, it states that the state itself possibly could assist (the municipalities) with legal and in rare circumstances financial help, primarily directed to weak markets. The state can also act as a partner for dialogue.

We should also bear in mind that the numbers of vacant dwellings were all-time high between 1994 up to 2000, which indicated a temporary over-capacity, and in those years houses were even torn down in some economically weaker municipalities with low employment opportunities (SCB 2012, p. 40 and SOU 2015:58, p. 20f). This situation contributed to the low willingness at the municipal level for quite a number of years to engage in any new housing developments.

A contrasting fact is that the National Board of Housing, Building and Planning has in numerous reports underlined the refurbishment needs in the existing housing-stock, and the urgent need for some additional 600 000 dwellings until 2025 (Boverkets 2017:17). These volumes correspond to a new Million program investment, and the building activities have indeed increased, and the population

numbers have increased even more. The needs are especially large in the Stockholm and Malmö regions, where the prices have sky-rocketed on the private market, and the waiting lines for public housing is at least six, seven years in Gothenburg (Boplatz Göteborg) and over 10 years in Stockholm (Bostadsförmedlingen, Stockholm). The Swedish housing-market has throughout the past 27 years changed in such a way that the number of detached homes have decreased with -3%, as has also the rented apartments. On the other hand, the coop apartments have increased by +6% throughout the period (Table 1).

Table 1. The Swedish housing market 1990 – 2017 (number and per cent)

Year	Detached Houses	Rented apartments	Coop apartments	Other	Dwellings Total
1990	1 874 233	1 554 457	616 078	0	4 044 768
2017	2 069 353	1 753 499	1 034 420	1 980	4 859 252
1990	46	39	15	0	100%
2017	43	36	21	0	100%

Source: SCB, Boende 2017, U166.

This has not occurred in an environment with fixed population parameters. Throughout the period 1990-2017, those aged 25-34 increased with 17%, 35-44 year olds increased by a modest 2 %, 45 to 54 year-olds increased by 24% and the last group on the labor market, 55-64 year olds increased by 37% (SCB, population data). [INCLUDE PARAGRAPH ON PRICE INCREASES, ABOUT 20 TIMES IN RUNNING PRICES, CONVERT TO FIXED PRICES] This is a core reason why the coop apartments have increased tremendously throughout the period. Newcomers to the housing-market have met a decreasing share of first-step rental apartments, and the other two alternatives, buying a home or a coop apartment would require a good bank-record and savings. Not all citizens who want to establish their lives, work-life and families would be advantaged in this new housing landscape, as the governmental commission wrote:

“There are significant entrance hindlers for housing-seekers in the form of high housing prices. Long housing queues and the demands that the landlords are putting to coming tenants hinders some households to get acces to renal apartments. A growing group of housholds cannot get access to new built housing or to housing in the most attractive areas as their housholds are not eligbble the bank morgages demanded to buy a home or any possibillity to get a rental home for

an affordable level of rent. Hence, there are groups in the society who risk to be secluded from parts of the housing-market. The housing needs may from a political perspective be seen as larger than what the citizens can demand, in particular when it comes to elderly, youth and newcomers.”(SOU 2015:58, p. 18).

The citation indicates an interesting awareness of the new privatised housing-political context, where access to housing to an increasing extent has been a matter of who has resources and access, and who has not. This exposé has also shown that there is a shortage of housing in Sweden under the present conditions, and that prices have increased throughout the past 27 years in such a way where we now are in a situation where the next generation stepping into the housing-market will see most of their welfare resources taken by the banks – if they ever will get a chance to enter. But the rest of this paper will not be about those who are making it, but about the unwanted consequences, the *trolls*, of this unbalanced housing situation. But before we enter this discussion more specifically, we will need a paragraph on methods and follow up with an ideological section on the neo-liberal thoughts in general and applied to the housing-market per se.

A methodological note

This paper is not a typical research paper, taking out a theory and some data in order to carry out disciplinary hypotheses testing. Nor is it a bunch of interviews collected in relation to an agreeable theoretical framework. This is a first draft that puts together the problem of housing shortages for socio-economic weak groups with the ideological theory-framework which at present seems to be more important for most political actors, than solving the housing problems for the mentioned groups. By collecting numerous of reports and news-paper articles as my initial data, I am starting to lay the ground for complementary interviews and other data collection. From having participated in the Urban investment program in early 2000s, to having done research in poor urban areas with the interest of energy efficiency, sustainable development, crime prevention and urban regeneration, an interest has slowly grown in what the back-sides of the de-regulated housing-market are, and the following harsh living conditions that follows, maybe not for evil but as a necessity. Documented fragments of these

activities therefore come from printed sources, but will in updated versions be complemented along the lines possibly suggested by the reader.

The neo-liberal agenda and how the Swedish housing policy disappeared

To be written later, but a tentative synopsis is:

- Sweden at a financial crisis, a Europe in retrenchment, combined with Thatcherism
- Neo-liberal ideology, according to theory, expectations and promises
- What was so attractive with neo-liberalism, as it was received in Sweden?
Risk-transfer over to the civil society, risk minimizing
- What did we miss? The ‘race to the bottom’ – and future generations?
Disconnecting the social control

Three trolls that came with neoliberalism, the Bad, the Ugly... and the Last Straw

The housing issue has up to now never been able to climb on the political agendas, as it is very complex and essentially fragmented at the municipal level, the regional level and increasingly so also at the state level. In 2014 a Housing crisis committee was appointed by the Chambers of Commerce in Stockholm and Gothenburg, chaired by Klas Eklund.⁴ In addition, the chair of the national Central Bank, Stefan Ingves, went to the media and asked for a parliamentary Housing Commission. The response came immediately from the Christian Democrat minister Stefan Attefall, who said that preparation work was under way.⁵ However, one governmental coalition later, to this date 2019 is an pressing issue slumbering underneath of the political ice. In the meantime, people and potential tenants need to go on with their lives. In the grey, and potentially black zones of the economy, we will

⁴ www.bokriskommitten.se

⁵ www.svd.se/bostadsminister-stefan-attefall-ingves-ar-inte-fullt-informerad

find the slumlords and the illegal trade with apartment contracts and even single bed spaces.

The Bad trolls – the Slumlords

Management has been the term a la mode since the early 1990s, used as a common recipe or treatment by engineers, business scholars, economics and the social engineers alike. But very little attention is brought to mal-management, neglected management or even illegal management. In the poorer urban neighborhoods in Sweden it has been practically known for decades that when housing estates become less attractive, maybe due to large investment needs or maybe because the jobs moved away and the labor-force took a different direction, unserious estate owners may come to the playground.

Example 1: Gamlestaden (The Old Town)

Gamlestaden was such a place, situated in Gothenburg at the west coast of Sweden, where the world-renown industries of SKF⁶ originates. This *Old Town* of Gothenburg had historically been abandoned for the New Town further down the river, and when SKF changed its HQ location, the housing estates of Gamlestaden decreased in attractiveness. To make a long story short – Gamlestaden became a place where poor people were located by the authorities, as for example refugees, drug-addicts or just ordinary poor. Many small private estate-owners were present in the area at the early 1990s, but the houses had not been maintained for a long time, and both the interior and the exterior were in desperate need of restoration. When the (Business Improvement District)⁷ BID Gamlestaden was initiated in 2001, it occurred at the background of degenerating social conditions, increasing criminality and drug use, and shootings at local restaurants.

⁶ www.skf.com/group/our-company/index.html

⁷ Partnerships between estate owners, business, civil society and the public sector has evolved in Northern America, the UK, Germany and is also emerging in Sweden. Various urban renewal initiatives have been around under labels of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), Urban Improvement Districts (UIPs), Neighborhood Improvement districts (NIPs), Housing Improvement Districts (HIPs), Business Improvement Areas (BIAs) and Business improvement Zones (BIZs), among several commonly used terms (Meltzer 2012; Kreutz & Krüger 2011; Edlund & Westin 2009; Cook 2008; Hoyt 2005).

One initial type of problem identified was the frustration from the public estate managers that the often small private estate owners did not talk with one another, and they took the advantages of selling short-term or long-term housing to the Social Office, but they did not care about the actual living conditions in their houses. Some 18 years later, we know that the public estate owners and some of the private together under the collaborative umbrella BID, have invested in outdoor safety, indoor standards and neighborhood governance in dialogue with the residents. One of the main problems remaining, is that some estate-owners do not want to participate: for the sake of dramatization, let me call them slum-lords.⁸ This is also a way to differentiate the good landlords from the bad ones, those who collaborate with their tenants and the local community, and those who don't.

Example 2: Malmö

Let us move from Gothenburg to Malmö, also a harbor city at the very south of Sweden. In the area of South Sofielund, a centrally located area that have for long been known for its low living standards, but therefore not necessarily cheap rents. The local Estate Registry conducted a project where they were knocking the doors, house by house, to inspect the standards, the owners and the tenants (Figure 1).

⁸ This is not similar to the 'slum-lord' found in a shanty-town, or in shacks. They might be related, but the slum-lord in the Swedish context pays very little interest in the locality, as the person or the owner often is nationally or internationally based. See further <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slumlord>

Figure 1. Millionaires on slum management



Comment: The illustration is derived from Sydsvenskan 2011-04-17, page 4, part 3.

The illustration shows that it is possible to detect which owners neglect their responsibility to the tenants and to society at large. We have the regulations, and in combined efforts between state and local agencies, it is possible to act against these phenomena.

The South Sofielund example, and Gamlestaden, are only two among many examples. Similar problems are known from the citydistricts Bergsjön, Hammarkullen and Biskopsgården in Gothenburg, as in Landskrona. There are actors in this branch who just want to maximize profits for the least costs, their business idea is to buy up cheap housing, pay as little as possible for maintenance etc, and a few years later sell the stock when the general market has increased its prices.⁹ Even connections to criminal networks have been detected among the landlords, but it is important to recognize that there is a very broad scale between good and bad. Sometimes, when situations have gone too far, the municipality and its tax-payers have to buy-out these wrecks from the slum-lords, in

⁹ Skånska Dagbladet 2011-12-18.

order to start anew. This meaning that the tax-payers sometimes over-pay non-serious property-owners in order to get them out of the area.

The Ugly trolls – the housing traders

Another third type of activities which have been going on for decades is the trade with housing opportunities.¹⁰ It has escalated during the recent one or two decades of housing shortages. Such can be

- Trade with first and second hand apartment rental contracts
- Trade with official addresses of residence
- When contract-holders are renting out their apartments to second or third agents, taking an unmotivated surplus
- Bed-places per night on mattresses

The Stockholm police issued a report on the issue, identifying that in the distant city-districts of Älta and Fisksätra it is known that so-called *black rental contracts* are applied. The Stockholm Police (2015?) estimated that about half of all rental apartment changes relate to criminal activities (p. 7). They also mention that it seems as if the trade with *black contracts* is rather normalized among the population. Rental tenants are often aware of what they could get to give up their apartment, or change for a less attractive location – especially in relation to what they initially paid. The traded apartments bring a large share to the landlord, and the dealer and the register splits on a smaller share. It is not illegal to buy a black contract, but to sell, but only a handful has proceeded to courts. The business takes place with very low risks involved, and it is a way for criminal resources to find a way. The deficit in housing has turned into a neat business opportunity for those who want to clean their laundry well, without passing the tax-office.

¹⁰ This section is primarily based on Dagens Samhälle 2016-02-18.

The issue was noticed by the government in 2017, when a committee directive was formulated (dir 2017:9), and an SOU report was finalized 2017:86. There are many suggestions in a positive direction, but to the cost of increased control mechanisms, also for the obedient landlords. However, when contracts-holders have been proven to misuse their position, they may lose their contract, the commission suggests. At least this is a first step, it remains to be seen what effects it actually will get – both on the overall housing-market and on the rental queuing-time.

The Last Straw – can BIDs bring any order?

The historical exposé over the erased housing policy held together by the Swedish government depict a landscape which to a large extent have been handed over to the private actors in the roles as tenants, potential and actual coop owners, builders, housing estate enterprises (private and public). The initial promise was possibly to ‘minimize the state’, to bring order to the state in tight control of core responsibilities and to adapt to the European common practice – as it was understood by the Swedish government at the time.

What the national government did not consider was, whether there would be any free-riders out there, or actors that would not work for the common good in the housing estate branch. It has taken years to get a clear picture of what is going on in the slum-like districts, and what the driving forces and options are.

From a liberal theory perspective, citizens would become freer and also more care-taking about their properties if they were having the owning and managing responsibilities themselves. Hence, the state largely out-sourced this issue-area to the citizens. A different way to frame it would be that the state used a risk-minimizing strategy when the housing policy area was handed over to the public (ref.) This prediction may have been true for the majority of the population, or at least the share that have made great surpluses from buying and selling coop apartments throughout this market boom throughout the past 25 years.

But everyone did not become winners. This is clear now, when the next generation is trying to enter the market with empty hands. Not only refugees have difficulties under the present housing regime, but also youngsters 16-30, divorces single persons with or without children, and even widowed persons have problems. Further, if you are over 50 years of age, some banks will not allow you mortgages in order to buy a house or an apartment (if you have stayed in a rented apartment throughout this 'golden age'). The idea of 'freedom of movement' seems to apply to a rather limited group throughout this exercise, and what adds to the societal costs in this equation are that more or less illegal actors in this business to quite an extent end up on the winning side.

The New Urban Agenda signaled the importance world-wide to bring new alliances through public-private partnerships. Could such arrangements possibly contribute with anything new into this discussion? From the two examples mentioned, BID Gamlestaden and BID Sofielund, we learn that when the locally responsible actors, private and public, join together in a given district or location, downward spirals may deplete or change around. Yet, there is too early to draw any specific evaluations on these, as systematic such yet are absent. But these two have emerged in districts with many small estate-owners, who one by one is only there for the money. But when the municipality joins together with the more responsible actors, it becomes evident that there are a few free-riders around who do not apply to the rules of society. The situation constitutes a classical game-theoretical collective action dilemma (Ostrom 1990), as long as no one else collaborates, I will gain from taking part in any collaborative efforts. But when other actors around me become collaborators, I might loose from being the last person on-board. The possible expectations coming with the BIDs, at least as they operate in the Swedish context, these partnerships may take the control back over 'lost districts' and landscapes. We find such collaborations between estate owners in the country-side as well as in the urban contexts, but yet, much more need to be investigated and evaluated with regards to improved living conditions.

In Sweden, BIDs has emerged as collaborative forums evolving across actors related to a defined geographical area. We find BIDs in the three largest cities, Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö, but also BID-inspired collaborations in rural areas such as Vrångö, Floda and Örnköldsvik in the north.¹¹ These have often originated with place-related problems such as decaying neighborhoods, industrial areas in transition, aging population and an attractiveness lost. Not all places share the same expressions; but the problem boils down to the changing conditions, places, estates and local citizens remaining. With regards to planning, law and property rights – I did not mention that Sweden does not have a legal framework for its BID collaborations. Hence, there is still much room for experimentation and variation, but planning issues are definitively on the table among these private and public actors.

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