



Retro for Whom? – the Meaning of 50s Identity for Local Centers in Stockholm Suburbs

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April 5, 2019

RETRO FOR WHOM? – THE MEANING OF 50S IDENTITY FOR LOCAL CENTERS IN STOCKHOLM SUBURBS

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper concerns an urban renewal process that took place in the suburb Hökarängen, Stockholm, between 2011–2014, aiming to regenerate the area by enhancement of a claimed 1950s identity. The study departs from a critical reading of the visual coordination manual that has been used for implementing the 50s identity.

Questions discussed are the desire for authenticity, what determines a sense of the 50s and who benefits from it, using perspectives of David Harvey (1996) and Doreen Massey (1994) on place and authenticity.

The aim of the paper is to challenge the dominant narratives promoted by the housing company and media, about aesthetic interventions usually understood as refurbishments, improvements and caring for public good, by suggesting that these can be violent and contribute to commodify places with certain publics in mind.

INTRODUCTION

Hökarängen is an area that was planned and built in the late 40s and is one of the most intact examples of Swedish post-war architecture and planning. It is a low income area that has become a representative of a stereotypical Swedish working class area, on one hand romanticized as a manifestation of the welfare state, on

the other a stigmatized place with nicknames relating to drug abuse and criminality. An illustrative example of the image of Hökarängen and its inhabitants is the term “Nisse from Hökarängen” that has been used within journalism since the 1970s (Johansson, 2002). Nisse is a fictive character representing the average worker and has functioned as an image of the target group for the tv news.

In 2011 Stockholmshem, the municipal housing company owning 76% of all housing in the area including the center, initiated the urban renewal project Sustainable Hökarängen (Hållbara Hökarängen). The threefold goal of this project was to make the center socially, ecologically and economically sustainable. The strategy for implementing the improvements were described as a ‘reinforcement of the sense of the 50s.’

When a Swedish architecture journalist was asked by the local press to review the local centers in the southern suburbs of Stockholm (as he himself resides one of them) he describes Hökarängen as: “(t)he best example of the Swedish People's home, and the clearest identity along the green metro line. A classic working class suburb that has succeeded in becoming a destination. Right now Hökis is in the midst of change, which creates an intersection for mixing. Nisse still lives here, but also others, which creates layers. There is a lot of diversity which is important for the character. The alcoholics are in sitting on the square, but there is also a sourdough bakery and a Ceviche restaurant that people go to from all over town. There is a pedestrian center without cars, and a towerblock, designed by David Helldén who also designed Hötorgskrapan, which is 50s architecture in top class.” (Röstlund Jonsson, 2015)

In this quote, Hökarängen is claimed to be undergoing a change making it a destination with a clear identity. This identity is supported by Nisse – the generic Swedish working class male – still living here, and the exemplary 50s architecture. Furthermore, diversity is claimed to be a quality, not in itself but for the character of the place, and exemplified by the juxtapositioning of alcoholics and a popular niche restaurant.

A 50s identity can be dismissed as nostalgia or supported as care for cultural heritage. Reinforcing the

sense of the 50s is really about enhancing the contemporary ideas and images of the 50s based on ideas of authenticity. An image that is not fixed but constantly shifting. Who has access to the image and mandate to define what a Swedish sense of the 50s is? Who benefits from the 50s identity being implemented on shops and shopfronts in a local center?

This paper will discuss what determines a sense of the 50's and who benefits from it, using perspectives of David Harvey and Doreen Massey on place and authenticity. In order to do so, it will depart from a description and critical reading of the visual coordination manual that has been used for implementing the 50s identity.

The aim of the paper is to challenge the dominant narratives reproduced by the property owner and media, as well as general assumptions in the fields of design and architecture about aesthetic interventions usually understood as refurbishments or improvements for public good, by suggesting that certain aesthetics and design activities contribute to commodify places with certain publics in mind.

VISUAL CHANGES AND THE MANUAL

Visual identities and signage systems are often managed through manuals, instructional documents for coordination of the communicative visual elements in a certain domain. Identity manuals emerged in the early 1900s for corporations to unify their appearance and communication in order to manage and control the image of the company. (Drucker & McVarish, 2012) Early developments of signage systems were designed for airports, where the main function is to facilitate navigation. Today, many Swedish cities and municipalities use signage systems or graphic manuals that not only provide formal design guidelines for navigation but also describe a history and identity of the place and how this should be expressed visually and materially.

During the active period of the renewal project Sustainable Hökarängen, a signage system was introduced together with a manual, functioning as an aesthetic steering document in order to coordinate the center and carry out a visual improvement. The manual giving instructions in how to make Hökarängen more attractive by changing the appearance of shopfronts and shop interiors was distributed to shopkeepers. Personal taste and preferences of the shopkeepers thus became subordinate top-governed aesthetic rules introduced by the property owner.

The manual gives very specific instructions in what to reinforce respectively avoid. Plastic furniture and so called "trashy and cheap-looking" signage should be avoided, street-talkers should be in a specific material – chalkboard with wooden frames – otherwise avoided, covered windows are not allowed, plastic folio framing windows are not allowed and neither are 'too many' ads

in the windows. Neon signs are considered an important part of the "sense of the 50s" and therefore ground floor tenants, not only commercial businesses, are sponsored with a sign for free.

The manual declares that "a 'modern retro-design' is an appropriate style for Hökarängen that can help attracting people who otherwise would prefer the inner city area Södermalm." (ÅWL, 2012) The idea communicated on one of the first pages in the manual is that by changing the visual aesthetics, a new group of consumers can be attracted.

Such attempt can be described as retail gentrification. A common way of thinking about gentrification is that it is driven by housing prices, and that the change of population is mirrored in the surrounding shops and services. But another gentrification process is when consumers are replaced before the population – changes in retail of the area tend to spread to the housing (Hubbard, 2017).

In gentrified communities geographical displacement of residents is a common outcome. Kirsteen Paton argues that even when this is not the case, one can talk about a displacement of a working-class subjectivity. (Paton, 2014).

THE MEANING OF 50S – NOSTALGIC OR UTOPIAN?

Nostalgia derives from the greek words for longing home. When talking about retro and nostalgia, we need to ask who is longing back to what home. Philosopher Svetlana Boym describes present-day nostalgia as a global epidemic, "an affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world" (Boym, 2001), similar to Zygmunt Bauman's description of nostalgia as a "romance with one's own fantasy, an affectionate relationship with an "elsewhere" (Bauman, 2017).

In a Swedish context, the nostalgia of the 50s and the Swedish welfare project 'Folkhemmet' (The People's Home) has been described as a melancholic grief reaction to the loss of two hegemonic images of Sweden – homogeneity and the welfare state – "in this sense of loss, it seems like the "reactionary" and the "progressive" camps suffer from the same inability to acknowledge that Sweden is a postcolonial country." (Lundström & Hübinette, 2015)

Place is often seen as the locus of collective memory, a site where identity is created through the construction of memories, "an active moment in the passage from memory to hope, past to future" (Harvey, 1996). Collective memory can thus create hope and suggest progressive futures. But the construction of memories depend on linking people into the past, and therefore it is important to be observant about the common grounds and boundaries of such group formation or community.

According to David Harvey, the desire for cultural heritage and “rootedness”, in this case exemplified by 50s identity and values of the welfare project People’s home, can be regarded as a response to the globalization and the neoliberal dismantling of welfare – “the ideology of locality, place and community becomes central to the political rhetoric of urban governance which concentrates on the idea of togetherness in defense against a hostile and threatening world of international trade and heightened competition.” The implementation of a 50s identity can in line with this be understood as what he calls “militant particularism”, that is active production of place by invoking “vernacular traditions and icons of place” to form a “basis for a politics of resistance to commodity flows and monetization”.

Masseys response to Harvey is to rethink the boundaries of place and suggest a hybrid conceptualization based on flows and mobility, routes rather than roots (Cresswell, 2004). She also challenges the idea that increased globalization necessarily provokes anxiety. A consequence of this is that a heritage-based identity cannot necessarily be explained as a per se reactionary response to globalization, but rather that place is an area for constant negotiation around identity. As opposed to the Heideggerian idea of places essential identities that can be observed via an introverted delving into the past, Massey suggests an extroverted sense of place and stresses that places are defined by the outside.(Massey, 1994)

The housing company Stockholmshem’s strategy in Hökarängen can be described as a chain-free zone. In contrast to the nearby shopping centers, the manual suggest a signage system that opposes the presence and aesthetics of retail chains.

Drangslund and Holgersen argue, based on examples from Oslo and Bergen, that “chain-free zones do not open for the potential diversity of the city, but may cement existing differences and lead to a (more) class-divided city.”, because chain-free zones do not adequately address the production of today’s cities, since a chain-free island does not contribute to diminishing chainification in the rest of the city and thus cannot avoid taking the character of an asset for the “new economy” like the tourist industry. They argue that “(n)iche boutiques and special café’s are not for all, and these are the kinds of shops that we are most likely to encounter in retail-free zones.” (Anne Klovholt Drangslund & Holgersen, 2008)

According to Hubbard, changes in visual identity or increasing amount of niche boutiques and cafés are often thought to be improving the local shopping provision, but it is not necessarily so that the “unwanted” shops are less economically sustainable.

One example of this is the grocery shop MatDax, which is the main attraction in Hökarängen and the reason why many people visit on weekly basis from near and remote. MatDax is known for being cheap, and thus have low income clientele. In a radio documentary from 2014, journalist Randi Mossige-Norheim interviews people who shop here, and brings out stories about

poverty seldom spoken about in Sweden. (Mossige-Norheim, 2014) On illustrated postcards for promotion of ecological sustainability, produced and distributed by Sustainable Hökarängen, a lazy character who is apparently unaware, leaving his fridge open, is also characterized as a MatDax costumer as a bag with the MatDax logotype is placed in the picture. An illustrative example of pathologization and stigmatization of the local population, as well as a signal that MatDax is not included in the success story of the housing company.

CONCLUSION – CARE FOR WHOM?

In the case of Hökarängen we see the municipal housing company as a stakeholder expressing a will to take care of the physical space and the history of the local center.

A closer look at the micro-practices conveying the aesthetic values connoted to authenticity claims, shows that the seemingly care-taking actions can be violent, depending on the object being “cared for”. This gives reason both to question the objectives and value construction of the renewal project and its identity strategy, as well as the practices through which this or any such project is conveyed.

By extension, this study also raises questions on ownership of local centers and possible aesthetic or other strategies that can be caring or careful of the local center as a public space.

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