

# Reading the Signs

Distinction-Making Nostalgia  
in Swedish Postwar Suburbs

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UNIVERSITY OF  
GOTHENBURG



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Unreflected nostalgia breeds monsters.  
—Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*

Our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting.  
—bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*



# Abstract

## Title

Reading the Signs  
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## Keywords

design, nostalgia, urban renewal, suburb,  
discourse, public space, shopfronts, signage,  
Hökarängen

Undertaken against a background of urban aestheticization processes, this doctoral research explores how Swedish postwar suburbs are imagined and how design is employed through “urban renewal” projects that seek to rebrand urban areas. The research project investigates *nostalgia* in particular, arguing that its social and political function in this context is to *distinguish* the studied suburbs from stigmatized and racialized suburbs by rendering them as historically rooted and thus “Swedish.”

The central case study is the suburban center of Hökarängen in Stockholm, and the urban renewal project Hållbara Hökarängen, which took place 2011–2015. In addition, the two nearby suburban centers of Bagarmossen and Bandhagen are also studied in relation to the primary case, in order to follow the migration and developments of the concepts and practices embedded in Hållbara Hökarängen.

Methodologically, the research proceeds by way of a discourse analysis of: 1) a signage system manual; 2) interviews with representatives of the property ownership and management of the studied suburb centers; and 3) other collected media, documents, and publications that are related to the renewal projects. The discourse analytical study is informed by, tested through, and intertwined with a series of situated artistic/archival interventions framed as “reparative interstices.” A combination of paranoid–reparative (Kosofsky Sedgwick, 2003) operational modes, based on a double situatedness as resident–practitioner, stand as central to this methodology.

The study shows the importance attributed to micro-practices and sensory and atmospheric qualities when imagining how public spaces in Swedish suburbs could be redesigned. Building on Bourdieu’s (1984) notion of *distinction*, the study further describes design strategies as “distinction-making,” (Trinch & Snajdr, 2017) a term employed in order to describe how design establishes narratives of an “authentic” and “progressive” character, with connotations of the (idealized) inner-city. This place identity and narrative is constructed and conveyed, inter alia, through the *sense of the ’50s* as a central theme and rhetoric, which can be understood as “restorative nostalgia” (Boym, 2001). The study thus challenges the idea of the renewal project in general, and its claims to authenticity and progressiveness in particular, showing that the design practices employed in the field of urban renewal are not innocent: rather, there are powerful social and political implications and exclusionary mechanisms at work in them that need to be attended to. Furthermore, the study offers a renegotiation of the designer’s role and suggests methods for reparative practices based on a “dig-where-you-stand” positionality (Lindqvist, 2023 [1978]).



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# Chapter 1

## Introduction





Fig. 1.  
The mural *Albys gyllene regler*.  
Photo: Andrzej Markiewicz, 2010



Fig 2.  
Mural removed from the wall in Alby.  
Photo: Maryam Fanni, 2023

## Prologue

This thesis will invite you to think with and through early postwar suburbs in Stockholm and explore the depths of the nostalgia for the 1950s. However, before entering those spaces and that topic, I want to share a backdrop from another place and time as a reminder that places don't exist in a vacuum, they are relational—and to speak with philosopher Édouard Glissant: we carry place within.

Friday, September 13, 1996, the local center of the Stockholm suburb of Alby was reinaugurated. As the (then-teenage) Princess Victoria was photographed cutting a ribbon on a newly built stage in a public space, the event was reported in the newspaper *Expressen* under the rubric *Victoria hos invandrarna* (Victoria visiting the immigrants) (Citron, 1996). At the time, I was eight years old and participated in the celebration together with my teachers, classmates, and other Alby residents. The center of Alby is located just below the hill Albyberget, where I lived and where our school also was located. From the schoolyard on the very top of Albyberget, we had a view of the surrounding forests, and if the hill or the school building would have been a tiny bit higher, we could have looked out over the villas of Bromma and Ekerö, places we didn't know the names of at the time and where none of us had been. Our school was built in the 1970s, like all of the residential buildings in the area, as part of the Swedish “Million Program.” The apartment buildings were eight stories high, and the school was accommodated in a low brick building clad in wooden panels in Falu red. Based on today's building standards, real estate market, and land use patterns, it is incredible to imagine that at that time such a plot of land—the plateau at the top of a hill—was reserved for a single-level elementary and middle school. It is particularly striking when considered in light of today's shortage of adequate schoolyards, a development that is attributed to steep land prices in Swedish cities. Despite this, and much else that was fantastic in our everyday life, we knew that the place we grow up in was considered “Sweden's worst suburb” (Lagercrantz, 1994) and a “problem area” where the problem was spelled out as us and our parents: the *invandrare* (immigrants). At the start of each fall semester, this was confirmed to us when classmates whose parents had the opportunity moved—a process that is called “white flight” but in reality extends well beyond “white” residents. My family

eventually did the same. But the place—the suburb, the Million Program, the view from the school yard, and the reinauguration of the center—is all engraved in me, as is moving to a new suburb and being thrown between the city’s different extremes and identities. Alby—or to be more exact, the complex web of places and intersections that Alby was made up of, then, in contrast to the one-dimensional image of “Alby” that was presented to the outside gaze and in the media—is a scene that has shaped my gaze.

When Princess Victoria cut that ribbon in 1996, it was to inaugurate a center had in fact already been inaugurated back in 1972. The later ceremony was to mark the demolition of a parking garage, the renovation of the center facility, and above all, a new beginning to the story of Alby: a *cleansing* and a fresh start. A central part of it all was a text-based mural called “Alby’s Golden Rules,” which my classmates and I had contributed to without really understanding that what we wrote in the classroom would be stuck on a wall in the local center that residents of Alby would pass daily on the way to the grocery store Vivo or the subway. Nine commandments about things like the end of knife violence and becoming drug-free were painted in burgundy letters against a mustard yellow background. Art historian Macarena Dusant has accurately described the mural as a “moral finger pointing at Alby’s residents in which paternalism is costumed in the form of a public notice board, with school pupils as an alibi” (Dusant, 2015).<sup>1</sup> The commandments reflected the stereotypical image of Alby as a place of crime and violence that we already mastered as children and could reproduce with ease. When we got a little older and passed that wall, we would feel betrayed by the adult world that allowed our words to be misused. The mural was for many years the subject of discussion and criticism in debate articles in local newspapers, in civil society’s correspondence with the municipality, and in the arts (see, for instance, Ahmed Nuru’s film *Alby mitt hem* from 2014), but it was only as late as 2017, 21 years after its installation, that it was finally painted over.

In 1999, sociologist René Léon undertook a study of the local organization Samling för Alby (Assembly for Alby), which initiated the renovation of the center with its accompanying mural (Léon, 1999a). Léon’s study shows how individual community leaders<sup>2</sup> can have a great impact

1 All translations author’s own unless otherwise stated.

2 community leader might be an inaccurate translation of the Swedish word *eldsjäl*, which lies closer to “driving spirit” and literally translates to “fire soul”. It does not necessarily include a community-building or representative approach but mainly focus on an individual drive and energy for a specific issue. The term is generally positive, but Léon’s and Velasquez’ studies problematize the role given to such individuals in relation to democratic structures.

on local contexts because representative democracy—in this case, the municipal politicians—tends to cooperate with associations that are to some degree representative of the local community, disregarding a lack of democratic structures within such institutions in order to achieve rapid results and media attention. In the beginning of the 2000s, the municipality also organized a so-called “community leaders’ seminar” (*eldsjälsseminarium*) to further ground and formalize this type of collaboration (Velásquez A., 2005, p. 45).

The mural in Alby can be seen as an attempt to, through an aesthetic and narrative approach that started with a stereotypical image of the place as a stigmatized suburb, bring about an imagined positive change by creating the story of a place rising from moral decay. The demolition of a parking garage, the reinauguration of the center, the children’s voices in the form of a mural, and the royal visit were the central elements that hit home with the media. What the mural had managed to register and empower was the already established image of the suburb rather than anything else.

The following study is not about Alby, but about Hökarängen, a suburb that was planned and built in the late 1940s and 1950s, during early labor immigration and before so-called “mass” immigration came to Sweden. Hökarängen is thus an area that has escaped the racial stigma applied to Million Program suburbs like Alby. However, the “bad reputation” that is considered characteristic of working-class suburbs in Sweden was invented in Hökarängen, which is known as Sweden’s *first* stigmatized suburb—the first locus of media-covered phenomena such as criminal gangs and sexually motivated murder, for instance—in parallel with its romanticized identity as a site of early modernist planning and social engineering. More recently, the stigma has been slowly and partially washed away in favor of a nostalgic shimmer. While places like Alby are facing increasing stigmatization, suburbs like Hökarängen are on the contrary romanticized. It is this divide and movement, and the practices, nature, and consequences of *nostalgia* in one of Europe’s most segregated cities (Thörn & Thörn, 2017), Stockholm, that I have sought to grasp and describe. This work has been driven by a loyalty to the children and residents (including my younger self) who again and again become objects within place narratives that do not respond to their own experiences of life and community.

## Background

The years between 2010 and 2013 saw a lot of civil organizations and movements in Swedish suburbs protest changes that were occurring to their suburbs and their living conditions (Rosales & Ålund, 2017). Widespread discontent over a lack of welfare resources sparked riots (Hörnqvist & De los Reyes, 2016; Sernhede et al., 2016) as well as the emergence of new forms of grassroots organizations. Youth movements such as Pantrarna in Gothenburg and Megafonen in Stockholm (Sernhede, 2019); occupations of community houses in Husby, Högdalen, and Hagsätra (Polanska & Wåg, 2019); petitions and demonstrations against privatizations of housing such as the initiative “Alby är inte till salu” (Alby is not for sale), all aimed at preventing deteriorating living conditions in the urban environment in various ways, variously addressing urban inequality, the right to the city, and the right to housing, often in parallel. These activities responded to many years of the privatization of housing stock, cuts and closures of community services, and an increasing tendency of selling off public properties to profit-driven venture capital companies. In southern Stockholm, suburbs such as Hagsätra and Högdalen experienced takeovers by companies like Ikano, Citycon, Veidekke, and Granen Fastighetsutveckling AB (later Arwidsro). When the new property owners of Högdalen center, Citycon, introduced measures to make the center more shopping mall-like through sanitization and heavy rent increases for the shopkeepers, Sweden’s first center strike was made possible through the cooperation of shopkeepers with the local organization Linje 19 (Mejan Arc: Resources14, 2015, p. 93).<sup>3</sup> One question that these suburb movements raised, in my view, was that of *the future* and how it can be imagined. In resisting the new and irresponsible private ownership practices exercised by venture capital over housing and public spaces alike, public actors also came under scrutiny. The attention directed at public

3 In 2007, the municipally owned company CentrumKompaniet in Stockholm sold off ten centers to the multinational venture capitalist company Boulton (Lindblad et al., 2012), which marked the beginning of a chain of changes in property ownership due to speculation and opened for more centers to be sold off from the public stocks. Many local centers have since increasingly been in decline. Alongside this issue, what in public debate is referred to as “retail apocalypse” leaves spaces vacant as a result of online shopping and urban planning in combination (Bergman, 2003; Borén & Koch, 2009; H. Lind & Gavric, 2006; Rämme, 2016).

property owners included a mix of criticism about the way they—through a lack of maintenance and in some cases aggression towards tenants—conducted operations, a loyalty to or belief in their *publicness*, and a grief over and longing for the welfare state, despite its injustices and malfunctions.

In parallel with increasing lines of conflict between the public and private, and civil society and large corporations, Hökarängen served as a contrasting example; here, the municipal housing company invested in a renewal project focusing on soft values such as art and sustainability, and improvements of the suburb's center focusing on small businesses and atmospheric qualities. This kind of area-specific renewal project in a suburb was not at all a new phenomenon, but rather a continuation of a fragmentary but more or less permanent politics (Dahlstedt, 2018; Kings et al., 2018) repeatedly exercised in Hökarängen for decades (Hertting, 2006). However, against the aforementioned backdrop of events in neighboring areas, here, other kinds of lines of conflict arose: for instance, a split between those who feared that the renewal would lead to social stratification and pave the way for future privatizations and those who saw it as a development in a positive direction and associated it with progressive values. As the municipal housing company Stockholmshem maintained close to monopoly ownership over property in the area, Hökarängen could appear to constitute a utopian, ideal image of a publicly owned community in miniature in contrast to the patchwork-like fragmentation or majority-privately-owned suburbs (since then, Hökarängen has become more of a patchwork, as a result not of being sold off but of the new buildings raised by various property owners). This condition was also addressed as a framework for the renewal project, which made the project difficult to criticize, given the larger landscape of offensive events and general absence of engaged housing companies in Stockholm. As a result, Hökarängen became more isolated from the shared challenges of other suburbs and what local suburban organizations were experiencing.

Around the years 2013–2017, I was engaged in an artistic, “right to the city” collective called Söderorts Institut För Andra Visioner (SIFAV)<sup>4</sup>,

4 Söderorts Institut För Andra Visioner can be translated to The Southern Districts Institute for Other Visions, a name intentionally referring to the official *Vision 2030* (including Söderortsvisionen – The South Districts Vision) of the city of Stockholm. At the time Stockholm was run by a local right-wing government with the city slogan “Capital of Scandinavia” (n.b. the slogan was in English, not Swedish) paired with the city logotype. SIFAV included members Sarah Degerhammar, Maryam Fanni, Elof Hellström, and Klara Meijer, and was active between 2012–2017. The activities centered around and annual publication series and the organizing of activities in a variety of formats around the production and distribution of them, including performances, walks, lectures, local radio broadcasting, and more.

which included members from across the southbound green metro lines. Rooted in different grassroots initiatives, our ambition was to make connections and renegotiate the topologies between the nearby neighborhoods that were cognitively separated by the urban planning and metro line system but also the different political conditions mentioned above. I had moved to Hökarängen in early 2012, and already during the first year, as I was exploring my new home neighborhood, I witnessed changes in its public spaces, noting as some shops closed or had their contracts terminated and were replaced by new shops targeting more middle-class audiences. My observations were confirmed and mirrored in the local press where the narrative about the place was one of transformation: the stigmatized suburb with bad reputation and social problems was becoming hip and popular, and at the center of this narrative was the renewal project with attributes such as sustainability, artist studios, and a retro vibe. The idea of transformation, and elevation in status, was also reflected in everyday speech about the place, as conversations often circled around speculations about the ongoing changes, varying from worry to ambivalence to excitement to questions to disputes about the new words “gentrification” and “hipsters”; the increased rents, renovictions, and privatizations witnessed in the public housing stock; and the plans and long-sightedness of the public housing company Stockholmshem and their loyalty to their tenants. I arrived to this situation after a summer in the arctic mining town Malmberget in the north of Sweden, where I had facilitated a temporary artist residency in collaboration with the municipality, supported by the state-owned mining company LKAB. In Malmberget I had witnessed the mining company’s beautification project, in which artists came in handy, in tandem with the trauma and personal tragedies induced by the demolition of housing required by the dramatic expansion of the mine. This experience left me critical of my positionality as an artist and designer, but also equipped me with a number of important insights regarding processes of aestheticization that could be applied to urban areas. When I arrived in Hökarängen, I was, as a result, already familiar with some of the logics, objectives, and rhetorics behind beautification projects. All of this took place in the aftermaths of the 2008 financial crisis, the response to the threat of a 2010 EU directive which compelled public companies to operate in line with profit motives, and two on consecutive periods of a right-wing government in Sweden (including the entrance of far-right nationalist party Sweden Democrats in to the Government in 2010). Against this background, the SIFAV collective,

and later the Mapping the Unjust City collective, which I also belonged to, became platforms for knowledge production, debate, and experiments departing from a “dig-where-you-stand” (Lindqvist, 2023 [1978]) philosophy. Aiming to employ aesthetic and artistic strategies to make connections between places while negotiating difference, we explored the conditions and relations of micro and macro levels in the urban, in an attempt to renegotiate what is possible to say, imagine, desire, and dream of. These were some, but not the only, experiences and moments that shaped the frameworks of my design practice, pushing me to a discipline-critical position from which I sought to question assumptions and established approaches around art and design which saw them as harmless practices undertaken for the “public good,” and to work with the objective of operating from and within the intersection of resident–professional roles, distributing agency to the resident and understanding the designer as a worker.

My first attempts to study and engage with the visual and material transformations under way in the neighborhood was through a form of visual archaeology, intended to document and map out the new elements in the “typographic landscaping” of the suburb (Järlehed and Jaworski, 2015), whereby typography acted as a “material witness” (Schuppli, 2020) to a larger historical and political landscape, helping me to explain the micro-practices at work in the urban renewal project Hållbara Hökarängen, which was ongoing at that time. What I saw and wanted to unpack was the eeriness of a concentration of signs communicating the *type* of store but not the *name* of the business, visually drawing on a tradition of uniqueness and variation in handblown glass neon signs only to present the stiffest version of that medium in order to orchestrate visual consistency and place-branding. This eery phenomenon reminded me of cultural theorist Mark Fisher’s assertion that “modernism is now something that can periodically return, but only as a frozen aesthetic style, never as an ideal for living” (Fisher, 2009, p. 8). As new shops and signage frequently popped up, I started collecting photos of illuminated shop signage, which I learned were introduced by the housing company and not by the shopkeepers (see Fig. 3). From this initial collection of photographs of glowing letters, a history started to unfold, which eventually led me to write this thesis. Importantly, the data analyzed in this thesis is not the built environment and the signage itself, but the accounts, design strategies, and narratives leading up to and following them, not only in Hökarängen but also in the two nearby suburbs of Bagarmossen and Bandhagen, where the same concept was later adapted.



Fig. 3.  
Illuminated signage in Hökarängen;  
most signs are LED signs in the style of neon signs, mounted during  
the urban renewal project Hållbara Hökarängen, from 2011 onwards.  
Photo: Maryam Fanni, 2013

*The suburb* is not just any place, but one that reflects society as a whole; in a Swedish context, the suburb has historically acted as a projection surface for utopian ideas as well as for stigma and problems (Kings et al., 2018). The suburban center in turn combines public space and community center functions, while acting as a commercial arena for retail, thereby actualizing on the one hand the tensions and challenges related to “the consumption society” and capitalism, and on the other hand questions about public space’s functions and relation to community and democracy.

Urban planning always involves—implicitly or explicitly—an understanding of the history, the present, and an imagined future. The role of visual and material practices in constructing society is in no way new; design practices have for long been central to the invention of community and living conditions.

In the studied cases, a desire to “enhance the sense of the ‘50s” (*förstärka 50-talskänslan*) stands central to the design-driven urban renewal projects. This desire connects to “People’s home nostalgia” (*folkhemsnostalgi*)—a genre of nostalgia popular in Sweden in the 2000s and more notably in the 2010s. This type of nostalgia is typically seen as *banal*, *progressive*, and *innocent*. However, nostalgia is always a matter of longing that is directed back to idealized pasts, which must be unpacked carefully if we are to locate the distances and proximities it builds on and proposes. Therefore, what is at the heart of this research endeavor is an unpacking of the imaginaries built into this type of nostalgia, and investigate the relationship and tensions between the idea of the soft and cozy early modernist suburbs, with their “sense of the ‘50s,” and their “failed,” conflicted, privatized, and implicitly racialized late-modernist counterparts.

The social and political landscape, however, has changed rapidly on a local as well as on a global level during the period of this doctoral research, as nationalistic and xenophobic ideologies and authoritarianism have increasingly gained power in Sweden and beyond. This does not, however, mean that the questions and topics that informed this study have lost their relevance: quite the opposite. When the project initially was formulated in 2017, and even more so during the artistic and grassroots activities around 2013 that led to its formulation, some of the connections—for instance, between nostalgia and nationalistic and xenophobic sentiments—were perhaps less obvious (to some) than they are now. Nostalgic approaches have bloomed in Sweden on all kinds of levels, from imaginaries of the nation state and its claimed homogenous white population

to those present in architecture and the organization of family life. The populist Arkitekturupproret (The architecture uprising)<sup>5</sup> advocate against modernist architecture and idealize classicism, adopting a nostalgia-driven position that is careless and at times openly aggressive in its critique of the buildings of not only late modernism but also the (otherwise oft-celebrated) functionalist era. In the field of planning and architecture, there are many more nostalgic tropes that tend to go unnoticed in the shadow of such extremes. On a more general societal level, conservative gender ideals such as the “soft girl” trend, which popularizes the housewife and young women’s financial dependence on their male partners, and government initiatives such as the definition of a Swedish “cultural canon” are examples of conservative, nostalgic orientations and practices. As this study will show, nostalgic sentiments point towards idealized pasts of and imagined continuity of a white population and a smoothing out of frictions and difficult memories. However, nostalgia is only one part of a larger landscape of xenophobic politics against non-white populations and increasingly violent migration politics in Sweden and beyond. In this regard, the title of the thesis, *Reading the Signs*, has a double meaning, on the one hand, referring very literally to signage in the public space as the entry point to the study and a recurring topic throughout the materials collected, and on the other hand, speaking figuratively, by alluding to the temporality of the sign as a mark of something that is happening or is an indicator of what is to come—a materialization of accumulated events and histories and thus a “material witness” (Schuppli, 2020). At the same time, to read the signs is also to search for indicators of what is to come, a hint to a worrying future, as in art historian George Didi-Huberman’s theorization of firedamps in mines as signs of (a continued) catastrophe to come in *Sentir le grisou* (2014) or Mauricio Lazzarato’s theorizing of signs as operators that enter directly into material flows and the creation of subjectivities (2014).

I approach this work with a particular interest in the property owners and their perspectives, from the point of view of design as a framework. As such, this study contributes to the field of urban studies, as insights from the design field can be employed for critical investigations of current devel-

5 Arkitekturupproret is an association, originally a Facebook group started and administered by fake accounts, advocating for what they call “traditional” or “classical” architecture and against modernism. Ethnographer Lovis Moreau, who has studied this group, argues that “The city they want to see in the future is made to be experienced, as a tourist or as a permanent resident on leisure. On this matter, their thoughts are in line with the politicians and commercial actors” (Moreau, 2017, p. 79).

opments of urban planning strategies. Simultaneously, it contributes to the design field by offering analyses of how design practices and strategies in urban “renewal” processes shape material, narrative, and imaginary aspects of place and belonging, raising awareness of power and positionality and calling for responsibility to be taken for the inevitably political dimensions of any visual and material practice.

The focus on the perspectives, language, and tools of formal power—as embodied by property owners and managers—does not necessarily imply that I assume that these actors are successful in the exercise of controlling the narratives and aesthetics of the properties and spaces they own, and the places where they are located. Neither does it mean that I do not acknowledge that public space is under constant negotiation by a multitude of stakeholders and that power is mobile rather than fixed (Massey, 1994). But the delimitation and the purpose of this research project is to examine how the formal power and the stakeholders with the greatest material resources operate: how they see the local center as a public space and how they decide on the narratives they stage.

## Aim and Research Questions

In this study, I investigate how the design practices involved in the imagining and creation of public space and place narratives also play an important role in relation to the interests of property owners. The study concerns how contemporary understandings and practices of design operate in the aestheticization—the in-betweenness of the real and the imagined—and construction of the suburb, and thus how seemingly innocent, banal, or taken-for-granted acts and materials not only serve to invent place identities but also to ultimately open up to or circumscribe conditions for positionalities and imagination.

The purpose of the study is to offer a situated reading of the narratives of the urban renewal project Hållbara Hökarängen (Sustainable Hökarängen) whose main objective was framed as an “enhancement of the sense of the ‘50s” (*förstärka 50-talskänslan*), and the other two suburbs—Bandhagen and Bagarmossen—that adopted parts or variations of the same concept. The aim is to lay bare the social and political functions of so-called “50s nostalgia” (*50-talsnostalgi*) or People’s home nostalgia.

In this research project I will investigate how the design practices of property owners (both public and private) create *distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984), through place narratives that differentiate one place from another. The study focuses particularly on the use of *nostalgia* as a distinction-making narrative.

Public space is here not studied as a space, but as an imaginary and a projection, in order to understand how distinction is made to create social order. The object of the study is thus not the built environment but the actors’ ideas, which are examined through their manifestations in documents and in speech. In its differences from previous research on the suburb, and previous research on public space, this study contributes to both of these areas. Previous research conducted on the peripheries of the city has mainly focused on the stigmatized suburb, with a focus on social problems, housing, demography, or representations of the place. On the other hand, studies on public space usually focus on the inner city and examine questions about public-private divisions and articulations of the space; how and by whom it is designed and renegotiated. Unlike these themes, this study instead focuses on suburbs where other narratives and events are

in focus: a suburb that wants to be differentiated from its stigmatized past and racialized relative.

What I am particularly interested in is the *professional vision* (Goodwin, 1994) of the property managers and the logics that professional vision (re) produces, the voices it legitimizes and delegitimizes, how power is exercised in its “unmarked presence” (Allen, 2006), how social hierarchies are established through the creation of distinctions in everyday public spaces. In addition, I undertake a series of practice-based interventions as a researcher-designer-resident on site, renegotiating and countering narratives of formal power and dominant discourses.

The studied cases are three suburbs located in the south of Stockholm: the primary case is Hökarängen, and two additional cases are Bagarmossen and Bandhagen. The selection of primary case is tightly connected to the researcher positionality as long-term resident which also informs the methodological approach. This study does not claim to present findings that are valid for and representative of cases beyond those studied, but rather to present an in-depth analysis of the particular cases and the construction of discourses identified there.

The research questions to be explored are:

- How does the creation of *distinction*, in how public space and place narratives are imagined, create social imaginaries of exclusion and inclusion?
- What is the role of *nostalgia* in design-driven urban renewal?
- How can the nostalgic narratives and the narratives of urban transformation in a suburban context be challenged or renegotiated through artistic practices of counter-narratives, mapping, and archiving?

## Walk-Through: Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into six chapters and a series of *reparative interstices* that are separate from, but intertwined with, the chapters.

In this introductory chapter, I have presented a background to the research project, placing it in its geographical and temporal context—namely, Stockholm’s southern postwar suburbs in the 2010s. Even though the focus of the study is the nostalgic narrative employed in the place-branding of a suburb planned and built in the 1950s, such nostalgia, like this study, must be read and understood in relation to a larger context of suburbs, including those built in the 1960s and 1970s as part of the so-called Million Program and its (later) racial stigmatization. In what is left of this chapter, the three studied cases will be introduced, with particular attention paid to the main study case of Hökarängen, while Bagarmossen and Bandhagen are presented more briefly.

“Chapter 2: Distinction and Nostalgia in the Swedish Suburbs”, serves to present a theoretical framework connecting the three central concepts—the *suburb*, *distinction*, and *nostalgia*—thus forming the basis for this transdisciplinary study, which spans design, urban studies, and memory studies. First, the concept of the (Swedish) suburb is presented; I theorize this as a *projection surface* for “dreams and nightmares,” utopias and failures. Linked to this is the bordering practices theorized by Étienne Balibar, who writes the construction of inclusion and exclusion in society and the ways in which national borders come to be internalized and common sense. This urban landscape of imagined and practiced divides acts as a foundation for the concepts that are subsequently introduced. Firstly, I introduce Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *distinction* as a social marker, and its relevance in the design and imaginaries of public spaces—a practice which has become increasingly *atmospheric*. This is also where I present an approach to design, advocating that design should be understood in its everydayness rather than as extraordinary; in this way, it is understood to reflect the social imaginaries surrounding it. The last part of the chapter presents the key concept of *nostalgia* as inherently divisive and as maintaining a bias towards *the nation*. Thus, the particular type of nostalgia studied—namely, Swedish 1950s’ nostalgia or Swedish “People’s Home” nostalgia

(referring to the political project)—is here framed as a “guilt-free homecoming” and welfare nationalism, rather than innocent, neutral or progressive.

“Chapter 3: A Theory and Practice of Reading (the) Signs” presents the methodological optic of this research project. Rather than a pure methods chapter, theory and method are here intertwined as epistemology is inseparable from ontology (Law and Urry, 2004). This is particularly the case in the two chosen modes of operation set out in the two parts of this chapter: firstly, a *paranoid-reparative* reading methodology, and, secondly, a *discourse analytical* reading of collected material. The paranoid-reparative method is informed by the theorization of queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and essentially proposes combining the close-reading of discourse analysis and the use of reparative artistic practices as practices of renegotiation. In this way, it acts as a framework to connect the two parts of the thesis. As part of the paranoid-reparative concept, I present my double situatedness as “resident-professional (researcher-designer).” This includes my use of the dig-where-you-stand approach (Lindqvist, 2023 [1978]) and the writing of anecdotes as methods for a situated research practice. In the latter part of Chapter 3, I present and theorize two rhetorical devices—“Before and After” and “Mood Board”—that are central to how I understand the material analyzed in Chapter 4. Lastly, I reflect on the interview method and present the empirical material collected through the discourse analytical study: documents and interviews are, as I explained, each analyzed in their own chapter.

The thesis’ two empirical chapters then follow. The first, “Chapter 4: How to Put a Place on the Map,” examines the mechanisms through which urban renewal projects construct place identity via branding. The chapter opens with scenes from the film *Amatörer* (2018), which illustrate how stereotypical and exclusionary images of place are used to attract capital investment. This sets the stage for a critical reading of a signage system manual developed by architects for the municipal housing company Stockholms-hem and their renewal project Hållbara Hökarängen. The document, which is intended to guide how the public spaces of the center of Hökarängen are to be conceptualized and designed, is treated as a discursive artefact embodying a professional vision (Goodwin, 1994) on urban aesthetics, which in turn, I point out, promotes 1950s nostalgia. In this chapter, it is argued that the manual works to “put the place on the map,” which ultimately means to elevate the place and distinguish it from other places, using the concept of “a sense of the ‘50s.” Furthermore, I show how

openness and transparency act as a (guiding) binary throughout the manual, providing it with its core morality and is here read in terms of its effects on class hierarchy and of racialization. The “sense of the ‘50s” is analyzed as a *restorative nostalgia* (Boym, 2001) that functions to root the suburb in Swedishness and create a distance to other—more lowly—suburbs.

While Chapter 4 focuses on the signage system manual as a set of instructions and ideas for how urban renewal is imagined to be realized, “Chapter 5: Not Like Other Suburbs” explores how the formulated ideas were operationalized and reflected upon by the people employing them on-site. The empirical material analyzed here primarily consists of interviews with representatives of the property owners, and, in addition, representatives of neighborhood associations. In this chapter, I first present the concepts of *chronostalgia* (Gospodinov, 2020) and “national Thing” (du Plessis, 2015; Žižek, 1993) that together serve to theorize the designing of a nostalgic atmosphere as a “time shelter” for enjoying as a Swede. By this, I mean that the nostalgic “vibe” is experienced as a sense of enjoyment that keeps the community together based on a sense of nationhood. I discuss the 1950s as particularly central to such nation-biased nostalgia. Against this background, a series of distinction-making practices are analyzed, showing how “the sense of the ‘50s” is operationalized through and translated into practice. The practices that I examine include acts of branding, handpicking shopkeepers, supporting shopkeepers who adapt to the specific desired atmosphere, and designing through erasure, the latter showing just how selective nostalgia is in what it remembers and forgets. This chapter shows that throughout the interview material, the studied cases are constructed in opposition to neighboring suburbs along binaries that render the case study suburbs as “progressive” and as having particular atmospheric and sensory qualities. The “sense of the ‘50s” effectively functions as an umbrella to prove that the studied suburbs can be distinguished from their neighbors—they are simply *not like* other suburbs: they are something particular and unique, more authentic, and more enjoyable.

In the final discussion presented in “Chapter 6: Towards a Conclusion,” I summarize and reemphasize nostalgia’s composition, as a product of both selective memory and forgetfulness, and as such an aggregate of social imaginaries that, when employed in the design of place narratives and public space, work to create distinction and place valorization that essentially builds on racial and class-based exclusions. I highlight the transdisciplinary qualities of the thesis and the contributions it

makes to the fields of design and urban studies respectively, as well as how the methodological framework offers a development of the paranoid-reparative conceptual apparatus of Kosofsky Sedgwick, emphasizing its dialectic quality and showing how it can be employed. Throughout the final discussion, I point out the delimitations and envisage possible openings and acute calls for further investigations.

Across the thesis, five sections, called “reparative interstices,” are designed to interrupt the text to simulate how these activities have been positioned in the reality of my research trajectory—not separated from but conducted in parallel with the writing, the collection of empirical material, and practices of discourse analysis. As such, the reparative interstices have offered me real-world situations to touch ground with my questions, theories, and findings, and to refine my work through conversation and collaboration with others.

The interstices are presented in reverse chronological order, starting with an archival project re-activating the citizen-driven local history archive Hökarängsarkivet through the establishment of a voluntary group, which collected discount shop signage to an archival volume accompanied by a contextualizing publication. This interstice is only the beginning of an engagement that will continue beyond the PhD project, providing a space to think with, and through, Hökarängen. Essentially, the focus of the delimited project presented here was to add to the archive a history that it had missed, while at the same time employing the practice of making to rethink the structures, mechanisms, and taken-for-granted logics of the archive through an addition.

The second reparative interstice is formed by a series of eight montage posters made on commission for the independent theatre Hagateatern. The posters collect primarily local newspaper clippings, but also other images and texts that show examples of how the nostalgic “sense of the ‘50s” discourse is projected onto the public space of the southern Stockholm suburbs. This shows how local media supports and re- och co-produces narratives of property owners, working to register a popular discourse that is familiar to locals.

The third reparative interstice is an account of, and reflection on, a guided walk through Hökarängen that was produced in response to a commission by the local art space Konsthall C. This walk was designed to challenge *chrononormative* (Freeman, 2010) conceptualizations of time, which enable some bodies and events to be presented as

more significant than others; instead, I adapted a historiographic approach to make cross-temporal connections at each stop, in order to nurture a discussion on how place is made and how place identity is constructed.

The fourth reparative interstice reflects on the process of photographing shop windows for an online exhibit also commissioned by Konsthall C. This interstice offers a methodological reflection on my researcher-resident positionality and an attempt to stretch my perspective as I walk my neighborhood(s), as well as a discussion on the limits of what allows itself to be recorded with the camera.

The fifth and last reparative interstice presents *centrumkartan.org*, an online interactive tool created by the collective Mapping the Unjust City in which the financial ownership of Stockholm suburb centers along the metro lines are mapped out. While my research centers around a municipal housing company and a private housing company in the form of a resident-driven housing association, *centrumkartan.org* provides an overview of the landscape in which my research project is situated, and serves as a reminder of the increasing number and diversity of property owners in Stockholm, which now include remote venture capitalist companies and short-term owners. While this work served as one of my entry points into the PhD research project, it is placed at the end of the thesis in order to point towards an under-researched landscape that calls for further engagements.

by Maryam Fanni (2023–2024)

I first encountered Hökarängsarkivet (Hökarängen’s archive) in 2014, when I learned about the project *En annan historia* (A different story), which was initiated by gender theorist and archivist Jessica Nordström with the staff of Konsthall C, and highlighted a shadow side of the early Swedish welfare state that is seldom spoken about—namely, institutional homes for unwed mothers. My apartment at the time, I discovered, was in fact located in one such building. A commission to design the 10-year anniversary publication for Konsthall C in 2015 then led me to briefly engage with the archive, where I searched for clippings and on-the-ground documentation of civil engagement in times of urban renewal in the 1980s and 1990s (one of the objectives for the establishment of the archive). In this regard, Hökarängsarkivet is in itself a counter-archive. While the “dig-where-you-stand” approach (Lindqvist, 2023 [1978]) resonates with me, like the initiators of the *En annan historia* project, my understanding of Hökarängen as a place didn’t always align with mainstream narratives about the suburb or the frame offered by the archive’s institutional home, Konsthall C. The way the archive was presented there centered Hökarängen as a prime example of the People’s Home project, locating the archive’s

uniqueness in this exemplary quality. While grassroots initiatives were mentioned, authorship over these was attributed to individuals in a manner that has later proven to be incorrect, as more than one person was involved in establishing and maintaining it in the early years. Such narratives effectively produce a particular optic, which in turn invites a nostalgic approach.

As my research activities raised various questions about Hökarängen and about the use of history, I became increasingly interested in getting involved in the archive. To some extent, this was also an ethical question, as for me it became a kind of answer to the question of how my research about and on the place could give something back to it, even though that question has more than one answer. I became further aware of the importance and uniqueness of Hökarängsarkivet after visiting the City Archives, which also include the  
40 archive of the municipal housing company Stockholmshem.

The official archives' limitation to formal documents became a reminder of the value of the materials and statements that do not fall into these categories, such as oral histories or donated images, flyers for cultural events and other ephemera that can be found in Hökarängsarkivet. In the later phase of my research project, the nearly two-year project *Det globala i det lokala* (The global in the local) took shape. The overall aim was to initiate a discussion about the two components of the construct "Hökarängsarkivet" (i.e., the place and the archive, respectively), their boundaries, and their logics of inclusion and exclusion. How is the place Hökarängen understood and delimited and what consequences does this have for what ends up in the archive? How, in turn, does the archive work—what mechanisms for collection, categorization, ordering, and preservation are at work in it, and how do they in turn affect the understanding of the place, its history, and its future? Counter-archiving, or any meaningful renegotiation of an archive's structure, needs to be more than a process of diversifying a

conventional archival practice by adding histories framed as “new” in relation to already existing structures (cf Ware, 2017, who points out that marginalized groups tend to be categorized as “new” despite that they always already were present). Rather, such renegotiations must interrogate the logic of archives—as black and queer counter-archivist Syrus Ware argues, archives always begin with whiteness and counter-archiving is a practice of interrupting it (2017).

*Det globala i det lokala* was designed to inaugurate and facilitate a reflective process of investigating the mechanisms and narratives of the archives through practice-based collection efforts divided into two projects of contemporary documentation formulated in relation to the Caribbean poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant’s ideas about place as relational (2011) and geographer Doreen Massey’s theorization of place as under constant renegotiation (1994). Filmmakers Daniel Aguirre and Morgana de Mello were commissioned to collect 41 oral histories from the Latin American diaspora of Hökarängen; these were eventually presented in the form of an interview film. In parallel, I collected the discount posters of MatDax, a famous discount supermarket showcasing diversity in products and customers but rarely gaining any recognition as a culturally valuable site. I produced a twin-publication, made up of a hand-bound archive catalogue of original posters and a publication that played with the format of a letter of donation, which discussed the poster collection as a concrete example of an intervention and renegotiation of archival practice (Fanni, 2024). In addition, artist and carpenter Adam Gustafsson was commissioned to redesign the interior of the archive room to provide adequate storage for the use and preservation of new and already archived material. Gustafsson’s design also accommodated new functions of study and display. In the painstaking process of producing an inventory of the collection, human geographer, archive volunteer, and self-taught archivist Corina Damian played a key role; her work was

supervised by archive volunteers and professional archivists Aurora Bergh Edenberg and Jessica Nordström. All three are residents in the neighborhood.

Most importantly, the project also meant establishing a voluntary group, which continues to be an organically growing social context and support structure around the archive, as well as a site for thinking together and for the continuous renegotiation of approaches, memories, practices, futures, and more. One question that has come up through the work of the group, especially in its decision making functions, relates to the concrete negotiation of memory: what is and what is not absorbed by, taken care of, or highlighted in the archive? The experience of working with *Det globala i det lokala* has inspired me to more explicitly employ the concept of *solidarity* in future engagements with

42 the archive. In demanding a continuous countering of the narrow, imagined communities invoked by seemingly unavoidable nostalgia, solidarity acts as a device that can place an archive in dialogue with other neighborhoods and other citizen-driven archives—in Stockholm, Sweden, and beyond. Archive volunteer Corina Damian also discusses the concept of *solidarity* in relation to suburb experience and archiving in our publication *Extrapris i arkivet – ett donationsbrev* (a title which translates to “special offer in the archive: a letter of donation”); how, she asks, drawing on the work of geographer Ash Amin (2006), might Hökarängsarkivet function as a social infrastructure for urban solidarity? Essentially, this project contributed to the establishment of social structures and an intense process of learning together and learning from each other that has opened up a landscape of new questions and objectives to be investigated, alongside and in tandem with the act of archival maintenance.



Hökarängen Center and view of MatDax, September 2024.



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MatDax's discount signage used to be handscripted. This photo is from a series found by volunteer archivist Corina Damian in Hökarängsarkivet. It is most likely photographed around 2010, but the photographer is unknown as metadata is missing. The photos are likely taken to document the construction site next to MatDax, but happen to be the only documentation we have found so far of the handscripted signs.

MatDax posters were collected in two batches on Monday mornings in September 2022 and September 2023.



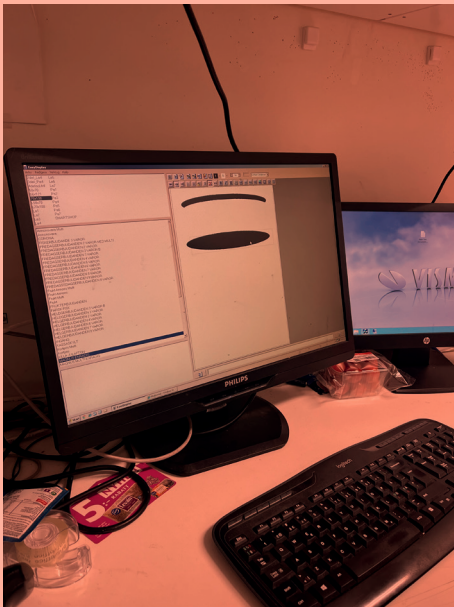
One poster was donated to Kungliga Biblioteket (the National Library) to stimulate a discussion about the boundaries of the collecting mechanisms of the library. Here, librarian Carina Broman, formerly officer of a department called "ephemeral prints" (*vardagstryck*), is being interviewed after having formally accepted the donation.



Hökarängsarkivet in August 2024. A mix of adhoc archivism and unfortunate storage. Since the archive moved to the premises of Konsthall C in 2004, the interior and storage structures of the archive has taken shape by means of reuse, responding to acute needs rather than a long-term plan for how it ideally could function, due to lack of resources. The storage and layout of the room was functional for the most part, however was not suited for all formats of archival material (for instance, videotapes and large-scale maps) nor from conservation or user-friendliness perspectives. An interior designer and carpenter was commissioned to respond to these needs, so the archive could accomodate materials and visitors more easily.



Studio of bookbinder Johanna Svenonius on Cigarrvägen, neighbor of Hökarängsarkivet. Preparations for a so-called Japanese binding of the discount posters into a poster catalogue to be archived with adequate materials.



Intern Marie Godefroy and I in the inhouse print room on the second floor of MatDax, experimenting with their sign-making-software to create a decorative cover for the poster catalogue to be archived. Covers for archival catalogues are traditionally marbled. We wanted to make our own ornamented cover by employing the same printing device as the posters and using the only recurring graphic element in them: the oval. The software (EasyDisplay) is designed to minimize the risk of straying from the set standard of the signs, so, for instance, you cannot rotate elements. Thus we found ourselves playing with ovals vertically.



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Saturday November 9, 2024. National Archive Day takes place the second Saturday in November every year in Sweden and calls for archives of all types to open for the public. On this day, Hökarängsarkivet opened up to celebrated its new collections and the interior designed and built by artist and carpenter Adam Gustafsson, including new doors (which it previously had lacked).



Video piece *Nico i Hökarängen* (2025) by Daniel Aguirre and Morgana de Mello collects four interviews with individuals from the Latin American diaspora with connections to Hökarängen. The title references to the concept "Nisse i Hökarängen," a term for "the man on the street."

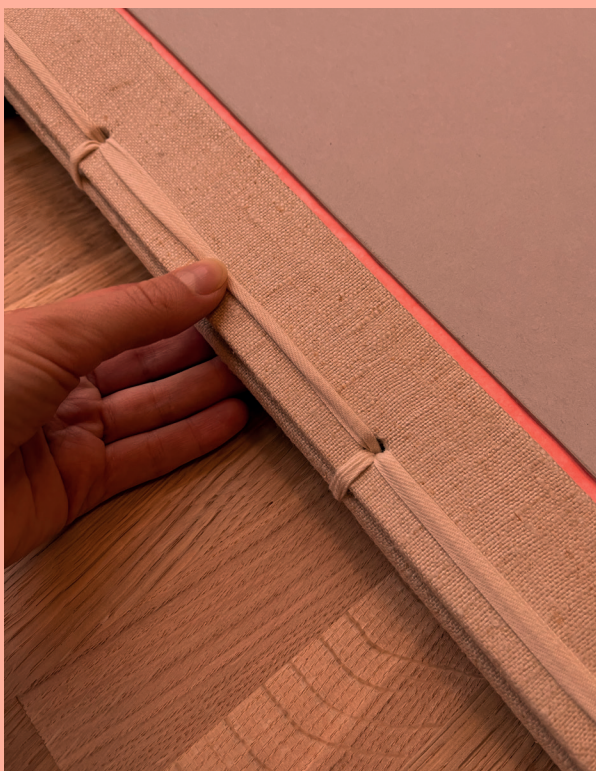


The project "The global in the local" also initiated a volunteer group that has continuously held meetings, gathering new members and questions to be negotiated along the way.



Publication playing with the concept of a "letter of donation," collecting a number of perspectives on the "Extrapris" poster collection project and unpacking how it was executed. Graphic designer and resident of neighboring suburb Farsta, Vendela Wetterström, was commissioned to design the publication. Together with Johanna Svenonius, they made manual inserts in each copy using cutouts of left-over posters: the inserts function as a sample of scale and materiality of the object being referred to.

Bottom image: Vendela Wetterström



The poster catalogue as bound volume.  
The table in the study section of the new archive is designed to accommodate large formats, using a pull-out section.

The project was funded by Swedish National Heritage Fund (*Riksantikvarieämbetet*). It was finalized with the reinauguration of the archive interior and its two new collections, including a release for the publication *Extrapris i arkivet – ett donationsbrev*, a panel discussion, and other activities on Sweden's National Archive Day, Saturday, November 9, 2024.

The project was carried out in close collaboration with project manager Erik Annerborn at Konsthall C, and together with archive volunteers and consultants, including art historian and archivist Aurora Bergh Edenberg, human geographer and self-taught archivist Corina Damian, and gender theorist and archivist Jessica Nordström. Others involved in the voluntary group at the time, and engaged in the overall work around the archive, were: artist Camilla Carlsson, citizen of Hökarängen Kerstin Björkman, city walk guide Anneli Forsberg, representative of Konsthall C board Merituuli Holm, and architecture historian Martin Rörby.

The publication *Extrapris i arkivet – ett donationsbrev* was made possible thanks to Carina Broman, Vendela Wetterström, Johanna Svenonius, Randi Mossige-Norheim, Helena Lindblom, Marie Godefroy, and Annette Bergqvist, with support from Längmanska kulturfonden.

## Cases

I examined three cases through this doctoral research: the suburban centers of Hökarängen, Bandhagen, and Bagarmossen. Located on each of Stockholm's southbound green metro lines (lines 17, 18, and 19), these centers were all built in the postwar era (namely, the 1940s and 1950s) and have all undergone renewal programs of some kind in recent years. All three also belong to the larger area known as *söder om Söder* (meaning “south of the south”), a vernacular term for the area lying south of Södermalm, the southernmost island within the archipelagic structure that forms Stockholm's inner city. In administrative terms, the areas *söder om Söder* more or less correspond to Söderort, a *kommundel* (municipal district) made up of 52 *stadsdelar* (subdistricts); the three case studies are situated within three of these neighboring—although not immediately adjacent—subdistricts. Söderort is the southern part of what is known as *yttre staden* (“the outer city”), often referred to as *utanför tullarna* (“outside the tollgates”), reflecting the old customs checkpoints that marked the entrances to the city. Today, these checkpoints exist primarily as traffic control points on the road network, with remnants of the old *tull* names found in areas such as Hornstull, Skanstull, Norrtull, etc. The total population of the municipality was 988,943 people in 2023, while the total population of the Stockholm region—an area defined by the administrative borders of the *län* (County) and made up of 26 municipalities, including the City of Stockholm—was 2,454,821 inhabitants. The outer city thus forms a circle of districts that are located within the municipality of Stockholm but outside of the inner city.

Hökarängen was the primary case examined within this research. The two other cases were initially chosen based on the hypothesis that they maintain a causal relation to Hökarängen, as, according to documents and media, experiences from the most recent renewal project in Hökarängen were subsequently applied to, or inspired changes within, the two other centers, a link that was confirmed by the research material and interviews. The cases of Bagarmossen and Bandhagen thus illustrate the ways in which policy, practices, and narratives migrate, highlighting and even challenging observations and analysis made in relation to the primary case of Hökarängen. One significant difference between these suburban centers is that Bandhagen center is owned and managed by a private

property owner (the housing cooperative HSB),<sup>6</sup> whereas a majority of the properties making up both Bagarmossen and Hökarängen centers are owned and managed by Stockholmshem AB, one of the four municipal housing companies in the City of Stockholm.

While all three of the suburbs studied here are typically regarded to be working-class areas, they are not necessarily stigmatized or racialized in the same way that other nearby neighborhoods (for instance, Rågsved and Hagsätra) are. Mostly built before the so-called Million Program in 1965–1975, figures on the “foreign background” of residents show that all three of the areas examined—Bandhagen, Hökarängen, and Bagarmossen—are located in-between a belt of “white” suburbs (where a notably low numbers of residents have foreign backgrounds) to their north and suburbs with higher numbers of residents with foreign background to their south.<sup>7</sup> In 2011, just before the urban renewal project Hållbara Hökarängen was initiated, the three case suburbs all had higher a proportion of residents with foreign backgrounds than the Stockholm average and in this regard were closer to their southern neighbors than the suburbs to their north. Twelve years later, this relation has changed. Hökarängen and Bagarmossen have dropped below the average while their southern neighbors have increased their share of residents with foreign backgrounds. Segregation, in other words, has increased. In the Hökarängen case, the difference between Hökarängen and its southern neighbor, Farsta, has increased from 3.4% to 11%. While I do not analyze these figures—or any other demographic data—in this study, it is worth paying attention to the (often ignored) issue of racial segregation. In studies of the gentrification of these areas or the municipal housing company’s talk of their increasing “popularity,” emphasis tends to be placed on increasing square-meter apartment prices, the growing number of years in the municipal rental queue required to obtain an apartment, tendencies for residents to move from Södermalm to these areas, or rising average income levels. I have not come across any study that discusses racial segregation or whiteness in Söderort.

Of the three cases, Hökarängen has the largest number and highest

6 HSB is Sweden’s largest cooperative housing federation and is owned and run by its members. This innovative cooperative organization was founded in 1923 in response to the major housing shortage in Sweden at that time. In 2023, it includes 676,649 members (cf. Sweden’s population 10,54 million) in 4 136 local tenant owned cooperative housing associations across the country.

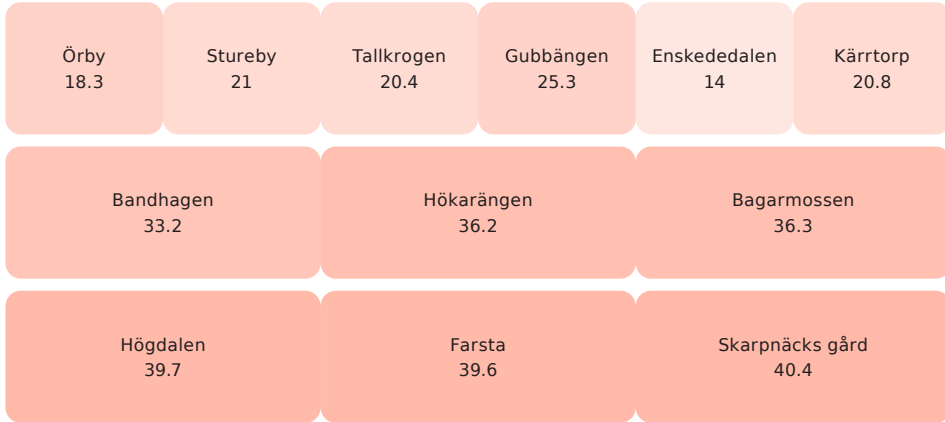
7 “Foreign background” here includes residents who are born outside of Sweden and residents who are born in Sweden but with two parents who both are born outside of Sweden.

concentration of studio apartments (which in Swedish are called *1:or* or “1-room” apartments) and 1-bedroom apartments (in Swedish *2:or*, or “2-room”) while Bagarmossen, in comparison to Hökarängen and Bandhagen, accommodates a greater number of large apartments, with three or more bedrooms (i.e., *4:or* or larger). These trends tend to be reflected in the demography, as Hökarängen serve as a place of passage for young people and is home to a high number of single or small low-income households with low mobility, whereas Bagarmossen attracts households who need, or can afford, big apartments. Hökarängen also stands out in terms of its tenure patterns—particularly its high density of municipally owned (public) rental housing, a number that decreased from 74.5% to around 60% in 2023, due to a massive increase in the number of other types of rental apartments and cooperatively owned housing (*bostadsrätter*), as a result of the “mixed city” political objective, for which Hökarängen serves as a site of experiment (see Runting et al., 2023 for a study of the patchwork of infill projects in Hökarängen during the last decade). In this regard, despite the later infill, Hökarängen serves as a prime example of the modernist idea of class-bound planning through homogenous tenure (Runting et al., 2023) and as such lies at the heart of the Swedish social-democratic Folkhemmet (“People’s Home”) project. Bagarmossen and Bandhagen are, in comparison, more mixed: the former is particularly mixed in tenure (as mentioned previously, even buildings in Bandhagen center are owned by the housing cooperative, which is quite unique) and in the latter includes both a more homogenous 1950s area and a part that was built in the 1970s as part of the Million Program around the street Byälsvägen. However, in a larger Stockholm context, they are all part of the neighborhood planning that is typical of the 1950s. All three areas also include single-unit housing areas (*småhus* or *egnahemshus*) that for some reason were not included in municipal statistics for 2011 but were included in 2023, however, these are vanishingly few in comparison to apartments and do not change the overall statistical composition. All three areas present a strong contrast to neighboring “villa suburbs” and areas built as part of the “own-your-own-home’ movement” (*egnahemsrörelsen*)—i.e., Örby, Stureby, Tallkrogen, and Enskededalen—in this respect (see Fig. 4 and 5).

## Chapter 1

### Foreign background in % (2011)

Stockholm average: 32.8



### Foreign background in % (2023)

Stockholm average: 34.9

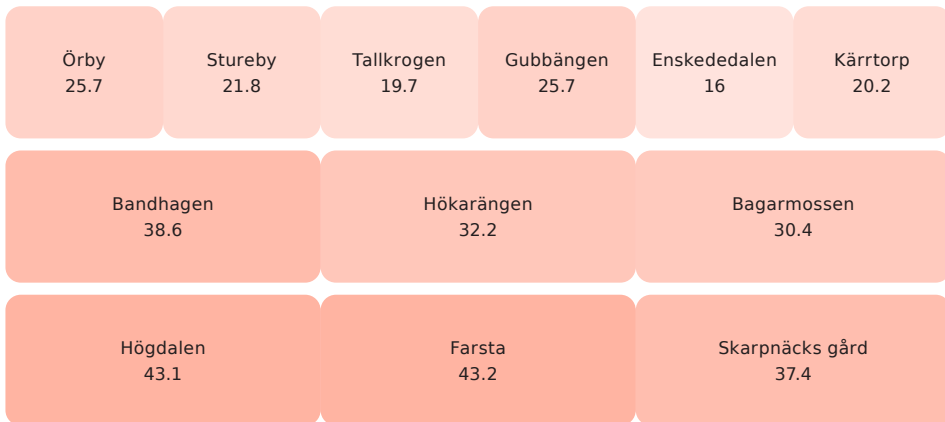


Fig. 4.

Sources: Områdesfakta, Stockholm stad, 2011 and 2023

## Introduction

### Forms of tenure in apt buildings 2011

	Bandhagen		Hökarängen		Bagarmossen	
Municipally owned Public housing rentals	1 082	32.6%	3 317	74.5%	2 794	54.7%
Other rentals	1 280	38.6%	589	13.2%	785	15.4%
Housing co-operative (Bostadsrätt)	958	28.9%	547	12.3%	1 529	29.9%

### Apt sizes 2011

	Bandhagen		Hökarängen		Bagarmossen	
1 room	629	18.2%	647	13.2%	816	14.5%
2 room	1473	42.6%	2530	51.5%	1944	34.7%
3 room	985	28.5%	1259	25.6%	1864	33.2%
4 room	326	9.4%	372	7.6%	763	13.6%
5+ room	45	1.3%	103	2.1%	222	4%
	<b>3458</b>		<b>4911</b>		<b>5609</b>	

Fig. 5.  
Sources: Områdesfakta, Stockholm stad, 2011

## Hökarängen, Stockholmshem, and the Urban Renewal Project Hållbara Hökarängen

Planned and built in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Hökarängen is considered to be one of Sweden's most intact examples of postwar architecture and planning. A low-income area, with a lower average income than the municipality of Stockholm (Stockholm stad, 2019), Hökarängen is representative of a stereotypical Swedish working-class neighborhood—on one hand romanticized as a manifestation of the welfare state, on the other stigmatized and given nicknames relating to drug abuse and criminality (“Krökarängen” and “Mördarängen”). An illustrative example of this image can be found in the term “Nisse from Hökarängen,” which was popularized in the journalism of the 1970s (Johansson, 2002). The term has come to refer to the average citizen, “the man on the street,” the average blue-collar worker, and the target audience of public service news. In a television segment produced by journalist Tom Alandh in 1979, coworkers at the Swedish Television (SVT) news desk were asked how they imagined “Nisse”; “it’s hard to constantly translate all weird things happening in society for him,” they responded, adding that “while you shouldn’t underestimate Nisse, there are of course things that can be difficult for him to understand, for sure” (Alandh, 1979) (see Fig. 6).<sup>8</sup>

Despite being more ethnically diverse than the broader municipality of Stockholm—and significantly more than the inner city (Stockholm stad, 2019), Hökarängen is thought of as a predominantly “white” working-class suburb. As social stigma has been reassigned from class-based designations to racialized ones, and thus to the so-called “Million Program” areas (Molina, 1997), Hökarängen has in recent years undergone a relative elevation in its social status (Borén & Koch, 2009).

Throughout the years, Hökarängen has experienced a series of refurbishments and renewal programs. When the center was established in the 1950s, it had more shops and services and a larger population (and thus customer base) than it does today. By the 1980s, following the general trend towards shopping at large, car-based centers, half of the original shops and services had disappeared (Schönning, 2000). An extensive program, called “Upprustning av den äldre ytterstaden” (Refurbishment of the

8 Original Swedish: “det är svårt för oss att hela tiden översätta det här konstiga som *händer* i samhället”, “man ska ju inte underskatta Nisse i och för sig men det kan vara en del som är svårt för honom att fatta, det är klart.”

## Introduction



Fig. 6.  
Stills from *Fäderneslandet och dess television*,  
Sveriges Television 1979.

older suburbs), was initiated by the city to deal with this decline. For most districts, supplementary measures were proposed, while some districts, including Hökarängen, were considered to be in need of aggregate, area-wide interventions. As part of the program, an *områdesledning* (area management authority), a cooperation between authorities and voluntary residents, was introduced; in Hökarängen, this authority was active for a number of years. The model for local inter-organizational collaboration regarding neighborhood renewal that was implemented in Hökarängen—which became known as “Hökarängsmodellen” (the Hökarängen model)—received attention not only in Stockholm but also nationally and was regarded as “best practice” (Hertting, 2006, p. 35). The success of this model has been both discussed and problematized by scholars (Hertting, 2003, 2006).

In 1994, a new program for upgrading the suburbs was initiated by the city, “Ytterstadssatsningen” (the outer city project); work on this began in 1996. Hökarängen was again considered one of the areas in need of interventions. One of the focus areas was the refurbishment of the center and surrounding buildings, which were to be renovated and restored to their original form. At the recommendation of the municipal authority’s Rådet för Stockholms skönhhet (Council for the Protection of Stockholm’s Beauty), also known as Skönhhetsrådet (the Beauty Council), facades were restored to original colors, and balconies, awnings, signage, and lighting were renovated in line with their original materials and appearance (Schönning, 2000; personal communication with the former secretary and head of the office of the Beauty Council, April 23, 2013).<sup>9</sup>

In May 2008, upon the initiative of Hökarängens stadsdelsråd (the district committee for the area), a collaboration was established between the municipal housing company Stockholmshem (which owns 76% of all housing in the area including most properties around the center), Stadsbyggnadskontoret (the municipal urban planning office), Exploateringskontoret (the municipal development authority), and two researchers—architect Lars Marcus at the Royal Institute of Technology (KTH) and human geographer Thomas Borén at Stockholm University. Marcus and Borén were commissioned to produce a study on future development possibilities for suburban centers of the size of Hökarängen, work that resulted in the report *Platser i praktiken och social hållbarhet – Hökarängen och*

9 The Beauty Council - the Council for the Protection of Stockholm’s Beauty - is a municipal body that mainly examines detail plans (*detaljplaner*) and building permit cases (*bygglovsärenden*) that have been referred from the municipal urban planning office.

*andra centrumbildningar i fokus* (Places in practice and social sustainability: Hökarängen and other center formations in focus), which was presented at a seminar at the art space Konsthall C on February 4, 2009 (Borén & Koch, 2009). Based on seminars, interviews, and data, this report focused primarily on planning issues and strategies related to retail and service but also on the production of identity; it later functioned as a point of departure and foundation for Stockholmshem and other actors in formulating interventions in relation to the center. Advocating, among other things, densification, place-branding based on culture and tourism, and a niche retail strategy, *Platser i praktiken* suggested that the planning of landmarks can have a place-branding effect, even if they never end up being built, by virtue of the debate that they can create in the media and the increased visibility that they thereby provide the name of an area. While the report does not include a proper map of existing shops and services, it does mention some destinations—the art space Konsthall C, for example, is brought up as an important node that invites outside audiences to the area. The following year, on May 8, 2010, Stockholmshem arranged a citizen dialogue to collect resident opinions about improvements that could be made to the area of Hökarängen and its center,<sup>10</sup> in 2011 initiating the urban renewal project Hållbara Hökarängen (Sustainable Hökarängen) with the goal of making the center “socially, ecologically, and economically sustainable.” The strategy for achieving this goal was described in terms of “enhancing the sense of the ‘50s” (Stockholmshem, 2013).

Against this background, the urban renewal project Hållbara Hökarängen—along with its sister project Bagarmossen SmartUp—must be seen as a continuation of a permanent politics of repeated and regular, fragmented renewal that were enforced upon various suburbs (cf Tahvilzadeh & Kings, 2018). The reasons for studying these particular projects in this work does not lie in their uniqueness but rather in the role that they play within a larger landscape of related interventions. They are characterized by an articulated employment of a nostalgic past to produce social imaginaries and narratives and thus serve well as cases for a study on the functions of nostalgia in urban renewal. Studying this landscape, I argue, allows us to understand the typology of “the suburbs” and suburban

10 For a critique of citizens dialogue (*medborgardialoger*), see Nazem Tahvilzadeh’s article “Medborgardialog – dess kritiker och förkämpar” (Tahvilzadeh, 2013) and Sofia Wibergs dissertation “Lyssnandets praktik : *Medborgardialog*, icke-vetande och förskjutningar” (Wiberg, 2018).

place-marketing strategies in far greater detail than previously.

Although it is not central to this research, it is also worth noting the meaningful role that Hökarängen has played in relation to the identity of the housing company Stockholmshem. In the 1940s, Stockholmshem became one of the most important players in Stockholm's housing market, building mostly in the city's south, with the greatest volume of new construction taking place in Hökarängen. In the 1950s, the city's metro system was expanded and the station at Hökarängen was the first to be built. This meant that the suburb expanded with another 600 apartments, becoming Stockholmshem's largest urban area. As Ulrika Sax, researcher on the history of Stockholmshem and other municipal housing companies, writes, in this way "Hökarängen became Stockholmshem's 'home ground'" (2007, p. 49). In this regard, the company and the place are intertwined: each constructs the other. As journalist Sven Lindqvist reminds in his influential research handbook *Dig Where You Stand* (2023), the influence that certain companies exert on particular places is reason to investigate them from the ground (i.e., in those places) and to in this way counter their narratives.

Hökarängen is attributed a certain level of architectural value, as a relatively intact example of the architecture and planning of the 1950s. Architecture historian Martin Rörby, who later became the secretary and head of office of Stockholm's Beauty Council and regularly figures as an expert on Swedish television, wrote his PhD dissertation on the modernist architect David Helldén, who designed Hökarängen. Rörby's work positioned Hökarängen as a pre-study for the inner-city "Hötorgskvarteren" project (which translates to "blocks around the hay market" and refers to the subway station Hötorget in the city center) and defined Hökarängen's center as Sweden's first pedestrian shopping street, with reference to the fact that the suburb was planned and built as a testbed for car-free zones later to be introduced in the inner city, thereby ascribing the area a high level of architectural importance. The dissertation was written at a time when early modernism was looked down on and before People's Home nostalgia and functionalism retro had become phenomena. In recent years, Hökarängen center has been highlighted as a good example of architecture and planning—when interviewed by the daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* upon his appointment as the City of Stockholm's City Architect, Torleif Falk said that he saw Hökarängen as a role model for a sustainable Stockholm (Ritzén, 2016), while Swedish architecture journalist Dan Hallemar has described the area as "(t)he best example of the Swedish People's

Home (Folkhemmet)” (Röstlund Jonsson, 2015).

The Swedish concept of *grannskapsplanering* (*neighborhood planning*), which was influenced by models imported from both the US and UK, was clearly ideological and closely connected to the People’s Home project. In 1945, the master plan *Det framtida Stockholm* (The future Stockholm), written by Sven Markelius, one of the co-authors of the influential functionalist manifesto *acceptera*, was published, setting out a vision for the city’s expansion. Critical of *stenstaden* (the “stone” architecture of the inner city) and the early functionalism of the 1930s (which had failed to include workplaces and services), *Det framtida Stockholm* introduced neighborhood planning as an alternative (Sax, 2007). The focus of the social engineering performed by this new model was the production of the nuclear family, meeting places to support community, and social relations in order to counteract fascism and Nazism.

As a response to the grand narrative that portrays Hökarängen as the successful utopian postwar suburb, one local attempt to contribute to more nuanced and critical history writing is the archiving project *En annan historia* (a title which translates as “a different story”), initiated and led by gender theorist and archivist Jessica Nordström in collaboration with Konsthall C. She writes:

In addition to the stories about urban planning, architecture and the child-rich families, Hökarängen carries other memories and stories that are not visible in the archive today. (Ahlstrand & Nordström, 2012, p. 2)

The archive in which the project takes place is Hökarängsarkivet, which was established by a cultural association and the local resident Lars Malm (among others) and is housed at Konsthall C (Konsthall C, November 5, 2024). *En annan historia* collected documents and oral histories relating to the many children’s, girls’, and mothers’ homes that were located in Hökarängen—including Storgården (1956–1972), Fagersjö flickhem (1949–1970), and Hökarängens flickhem (1950–1955), which was later named Hökarängens mödrahem (1956–1970), all located on Tobaksvägen (Nordlöf, 2006). These were institutions where unmarried women were forcibly placed: as such, these histories highlight the patriarchal nature of the welfare state project (Hirdman, 2010).

The renewal program Hållbara Hökarängen, which is central to this research project, has been examined from a range of

perspectives in recent years; this scholarly interest is possibly due to the project's work in actively communicating with media, which made it public knowledge and garnered attention, but also because the project's multiple dimensions and goals—which were both aesthetic and environmental—interested students and researchers with diverse research interests in a range of fields, including energy/sustainability (Linder, 2016; Wallström, 2014); art/design (Stone, 2020), including my own BA project (Fanni, 2013); architecture/planning (Brolund de Carvalho, 2013; Fredriksson, 2011; Jöhnemark, 2013; Svensson et al., 2018); and humanities/geography (O. Johansson, 2014; Wadensjö, 2016). Most of the studies are student projects, and qualified research studies that have been pursued after the finalization of the renewal project are yet to be presented—at present, all available documentation and evaluations have been financed by the housing company itself (these are described in “Material Collected” on pages 187–194). Apart from formal research, the area has also been the subject of a number of art projects, works of literature, TV productions, and radio shows; for instance, the 2009 TV show *Arkitekturens pärlor* (The pearls of architecture); the 2014 TV show *Bokcirkeln i Hökarängen* (the book club in Hökarängen); the true crime novel *Söndagsvägen* by historian Peter Englund (2020); the community art project *Gubbängsutredningen fortsätter* (Strandberg, 2019); the artist's book *Please Don't Make Hökarängen Cooler* (2013), etc.

### Bagarmossen

Bagarmossen is a suburb located 7 km west of Hökarängen. Like Hökarängen, it was planned and built in the 1950s and most of the center is owned and managed by the same housing company, Stockholmshem. In contrast to Hökarängen, the center is arranged around two squares and has no pedestrian shopping street. The renewal project *Hållbara Hökarängen* has in official documents been described as a “test pilot” later to be applied more effectively in primarily Bagarmossen (Elfors, 2015).

In 2014, Stockholmshem initiated the development project “Blomstrande Bagarmossen” (Blooming Bagarmossen), later “Bagarmossen SmartUp,” with three tracks: urban gardening, a vivid center, and creativity and entrepreneurship (Stockholmshem, 2019a). Like Hökarängen, Bagarmossen has since the renewal program seen an increase



Fig. 7.  
View of the northern square of Bagarmossen center, called Lagaplan.  
Photo: Maryam Fanni, 2019



Fig. 8.

Signage in Bagarmossen center.

The sign saying "Bagarmossens kyrka" (church) is not part of the signage system of the urban renewal project, whereas the other two – "Bibliotek" (library) and "Bistro" are.

Photo: Maryam Fanni, 2019

shopfronts. The official website of Bagarmossen SmartUp states that a local inhabitant specialized in shop windows has functioned as a design consultant for the shopkeepers (Stockholmshem, 2019b). There is reason to study Bagarmossen in order to see how experiences from the renewal project in Hökarängen inform and are translated into new places and situations.

## Bandhagen

Bandhagen is located 3 km east of Hökarängen; the center was built in 1954 and includes around 20 shops. The center properties are, unlike Hökarängen and Bagarmossen, privately owned, but the square and outdoor furniture is owned by the municipality, and the wall structures around the subway station are owned by the municipality and the public transport company SL.

The private owner is a local section of the members-owned cooperative housing association HSB, which owns 538 apartments in Bandhagen, including the center and 129 commercial spaces (HSB Bandhagen, 2019). In Stockholm, and possibly Sweden overall, it is not common that a local center is owned and managed by a *bostadsrättsförening* (cooperative housing association).

The urban renewal project Bagarmossen SmartUp was initiated by Stockholmshem in 2014 based on experiences made in Hållbara Hökarängen. In 2016 and 2017, a series of new signs were mounted (Informants 1&2: Board members of HSB Bandhagen, 2019; Tonström, 2017). In 2015, HSB's central office suggested HSB Bandhagen sell off the center to stabilize the finances of the association. Seeing what was happening in nearby Högdalen, where the center has faced a transformation towards shopping mall, HSB Bandhagen decided not to sell but rather engage and become more strategic and active in managing the center (Informants 1&2: Board members of HSB Bandhagen, 2019).

By 2018, all the shopkeepers contracts were renegotiated and the majority of shopkeepers replaced (HSB, 2019). In 2014, 400 locals signed protest lists against the eviction of shopkeepers due to increased rents (Thornton, 2014), an event dismissed by the board members as a misunderstanding about the technicalities and procedures of renegotiation of contracts (Informants 1&2: Board members of HSB Bandhagen, 2019).

As opposed to Hökarängen, the center managers are not professional (except they hire a professional negotiator for



Fig. 9.

View when entering Bandhagen center, exiting the metro.

Area owned by HSB, public transport company SL,  
and the municipality of Stockholm in combination.

To the left, there is a square and to the right a shopping street.

Photo: Maryam Fanni, 2019

## Introduction



Fig. 10.

Signage in Bandhagen center saying "Yarn," "Dog," and "School."  
The new signage, resulting from the urban renewal projects, includes both commercial businesses and public services and tend to name the general type but not the specific name of the business/service.  
Photo: Maryam Fanni, 2019

dealing with the chain grocery shop and their contract) but a group of volunteering board members who are responsible for the management on their leisure time (Informants 1&2: Board members of HSB Bandhagen, 2019). There is a difference in resources compared to Hökarängen and Bagarmossen in this regard.





## Chapter 2

### **Distinction and Nostalgia in the Swedish Suburbs**



This research project explores the intersection between design and urban planning, urban studies, and public space. The departure point is that design methods, and a variety of aesthetic practices, are increasingly applied in the planning and in its articulations of the urban, both in the built environment and on a symbolic and narrative level, in the creation and circulation of stories and imaginaries about places.

In this chapter, I will discuss how design and aestheticization processes can be understood in relation to urban planning and public space, and present the theoretical perspectives and concepts that I have chosen to apply in this particular study. As I will show, urban planners increasingly work in similar ways to interior designers. I argue that more attention and professional competence is directed towards the urban space as an aesthetic and sensory environment, in a manner oriented towards ideas of harmony and well-being, which is also reflected in the vocabulary used when describing public spaces and urban transformations. This tendency and orientation take place at the expense of structural understandings of politicized, socioeconomic, and cultural dimensions of society. This critical assertion about design becoming increasingly important should not be understood as a negative attitude towards or diminishment of the recognition of form and the importance of spatial qualities for our being in the world. On the contrary, a fundamental standpoint for the study is that aesthetics is often more important than what is acknowledged and that issues concerning design are under-researched compared to many other disciplines. The question to be explored is how design is used in planning and imagining public space in the urban and what ideologies are embedded in these design practices.

The aesthetics of public space, and its similarities to designed interiors, is far from banal and innocent: larger structures are always embedded in material outcomes and in the acts that make up the design process. I am interested in seeing what ideologies, societal structures, historical heritages, and contemporary political phenomena are reflected and reproduced in current aesthetic practices and expressions in the city. Aesthetics thus becomes an arena for reproducing ideology, and its study becomes a study of the political in the seemingly apolitical. The built environment affects life and behavior not only on a purely spatial level such as movement patterns and quality of life, but equally on a cognitive level, in terms of how we view society, defining the possibilities and limitations of our imagination, how we understand ourselves, what communities we build, and what we can wish for and dream about (Deutsche, 1996; Sennett,

2018; Willis, 2006).

The increasing tendency towards aesthetic approaches in urban planning can be explained on an overall level by the paradigmatic shift that occurred in the economies of the Western world from the 1980s onwards whereby production was replaced by consumption. As a result, in Western societies, a change from a welfare society to increasing privatization and public-private partnerships has taken place, through the introduction of what has been termed *entrepreneurial urbanism* (Harvey, 1989). This shift has resulted in a move from management to an entrepreneurial approach based on competition between cities. As a result of the crisis of Fordism, in Postfordism, property become central to economy; in order to stimulate speculation in property value, marketing strategies are foregrounded (Hall & Hubbard, 1998). As a consequence, we have witnessed an increasing pre-occupation with the aesthetic aspects of places and a belief in beautification processes as solutions to “urban problems.” The focus on competition to attract capital (wealthy individuals, tourists, investors, companies) to the city has made strategies to create identities and narratives central in city management. Strategies that have been invented and developed in the marketing and PR fields, which are usually called “storytelling,” are, in this way, used to make the city a marketable and consumable place. Place-marketing, nation-branding, or city-branding have in recent decades become a field intersecting PR and urban planning and have become well-established as part of the management of cities and regions (Anholt, 2007; Florida, 2002; Landry, 2000). The aspiration of branding the district of Farsta, where Hökarängen is located, as Stockholm’s Harlem, and Liljeholmen as Manhattan—both as part of the project STHLMNYC—is an example of such work (Dahlgren, 2015; Jarnlo, 2015; STHLMNYC, 2024).

In the entrepreneurial competition for financial resources, the creation of identity emerges as an important issue. In a general discourse analysis of Swedish urban planning over the past decades, planning researcher Moa Tunström finds *identity* to be a central concept:

The discourse suggests that the city, or places in the city, should have an “identity.” Identity appears both as something positive in itself and as something natural or organic. ... It is inherent in a place but, at the same time, something that can be planned for and built. A consequence of this is that places can also be considered as lacking identity.

(Tunström, 2007, p. 689)

The creation of a clear and defined identity that is without contradictions requires acts of sanitization and inventions to eliminate unwanted elements before the desired narrative can be created and maintained (Mitchell, 2003). Sharon Zukin describes this process of refinement as a combination of consumption and repression, the “iron fist in the velvet glove—or the velvet fist in the iron glove—nourishes our desire for cultural goods while making places safe enough to consume them” (Zukin, 2010).

Urban development and renewal projects are tightly connected to design. What both urban renewal and mainstream design have in common are ideas of advancement, progress, development, and a search for the better. In this regard, urban renewal projects and conventional design discourses and practices also share ground in that they build on problem solving and the necessity of change. The problem, and object of inquiry, are often neighborhoods that are considered in need of change (Björgvinsson & Keshavarz, 2020; Tahvilzadeh & Kings, 2018). The city is not seen as a relational entity under such a view: rather, some places are pointed out as “problems” and others pass as “well-functioning” and thus as “good.” This means that there is not always a structural approach to a solution, but selective measures are taken. The “product” that is the subject of the design work in such projects is often public space, and it is the atmosphere, the sensory qualities, and the distinction enjoyed by one place with respect to others that is designed.

It is today difficult to draw sharp lines between private and public, partly because collaborations of various kinds have become very common, and partly because it is often no longer possible to ascertain differences in the logics from which they operate. This does not mean that private and public are uninteresting categories, but rather that they must be examined and handled carefully. In this study, the primary case Hökarängen and the additional case of Bagarmossen both include a large public housing company, Stockholmshem, while the other additional case of Bandhagen includes a smaller private owner, HSB Bandhagen. While I will discuss the differences that this ownership status entails, I am particularly interested in the similarities, which I understand in terms of the more general discourses and logics circulating between different arenas in society, not necessarily linked to specific actors or ownership forms, which they share.

I am also interested in a double movement that can be identified between the public and the private, whereby, on the one hand, we see an increasing privatization and commercialization of urban space, as the result of the public sector giving way (both in terms of

property ownership and governance) when new legislation opened up for a profit-driven operation of Swedish municipal housing companies (Grander, 2017). On the other hand, there are also examples of the public sector's attempts to control the private sector. This is not necessarily a contradictory movement, as it can also be perceived as a consequence of the public sector imitating commercial actors' strategies. This double, or perhaps not so double, movement is present, and makes for an interesting study, in both Hökarängen and Bagarmossen, where the public housing company attempts to take greater control over the content and design of the commercial environment (namely, the private sector of predominantly small businesses). Such act can either be considered and interpreted as a more active management in a tradition of urban planning or as a commercialized strategy to control aesthetic order, marketing, and storytelling.

## The Swedish Suburb as Dream or Nightmare

Suburb. Locality. Periphery. Middletown. Between city—and rural area. Million program. City edge. Problem area. Risk area. Vulnerable area. Particularly vulnerable area. Poor resource area. Socioeconomically vulnerable area. Parallel society. Low-income area. Marginalized area. Slum. Ghetto. Criminal area. Immigrant-dense area. Immigrant-dominated area. Immigrant area. Clan area. No-go zone.

—Meira Ahmemulic, *De höga husens Rundgång*<sup>11</sup>

Artist Meira Ahmemulic's virtual reality video piece *De höga husens Rundgång* (The acoustic feedback of the highrises) (2015) destabilizes space and explores relationships between language, architecture, and place. With VR-glasses on, the spectator is relocated between several scenes in 360 degrees. In one scene, a man in suit (a politician? a real estate broker?) is standing on a terrace in the Million Program neighborhood of Gårdsten in Gothenburg, chanting the above words in a megaphone.

The Swedish word for suburb is *förort*. The periphery is attributed already by the prefix *för* (before), which embeds the movement towards a center in the word. For this reason, the pre-fix is contested and more recently, it has been abandoned by social and cultural movements, who have proposed the term *orten* as “a symbolic statement that moves the center to themselves. Linguistically, site-specifically, emotionally, socially and politically” (Léon Rosales & Ålund, 2016). As Jennifer Mack writes, “Constant descriptions of catastrophe in Million Programme neighborhoods imply both that radical change is necessary and that emotional attachments to the existing environment are impossible” (Mack, 2021, p. 566). However, *förort* does not only indicate stigmatized suburbs (although this perhaps is its primary connotation). In Swedish, suburbs are differentiated with the help of prefixes such as *närförort* (inner suburb), *villaförort* (single-family-

11 “Förstad. Ort. Periferi. Mellanstad. Mellan stad - och landområde. Miljonprogram. Stads Kant. Problemområde. Riskområde. Utsatt område. Särskilt utsatt område. Resurssvagt område. Socioekonomiskt utsatt område. Parallellt samhälle. Låginkomstområde. Utanförskapsområde. Slum. Ghetto. Kriminellt område. Invandartätt område. Invandrardominerat område. Invandrarområde. Klanområde. No-go zon.”

house suburb), *miljonprogramsförort* (Million Program suburb), *betongförort* (concrete suburb), with the two latter referring to areas characterized by the larger scale architecture of the 1960s and 1970s.

In the public debate, a problem-oriented image of the suburb has dominated for many years, and it is this story that Hökarängen, Bagarmossen, and Bandhagen relate to, and, as I argue, distance themselves from. In an American context, for instance, the concept of *the suburb* has completely different, if not diametrically opposite, connotations. In a Swedish context, the suburb is connected to discourses linking social problems to the physical environment. Rather than being an adequate term for a certain kind of geographical site or built environment, the places that can be described as suburbs vary a lot, so that as Nazem Tahvilzadeh and Lisa Kings argue “the suburb does not exist. It is created” (Kings et al., 2018, p. 8). According to them it is a symbolic object that has repeatedly been used as a “container for diverse wills” or a projection surface for a variety of ideas, ranging from utopia to failure:

For those who want to achieve something—whatever it may be—the suburb is always available to realize this something—may it be dreams as well as nightmares. (Kings et al., 2018, p. 8)

The Swedish Million Program suburbs were originally built with inspiration from British models, but the scale made them different and not long after accomplishment those inhabitants who had the possibility left, moving to other locations and the million program suburbs successively became home to a predominantly less socially mobile population (Franzén & Sandstedt, 1993; Molina, 1997). While initially representing an optimistic future vision of a modernized Swedish society, the word *förort* later came to be reserved for a certain kinds of suburbs, sites, and people constructed as “the Other.” In line with Edward Said’s theorization of the Westerner’s Othering gaze on the “Oriental” (Said, 1978), Ericsson et al., drawing from studies of how the suburb is represented in Swedish media, argue that:

In the journalistic representations of the exotic and threatening, the distant proximity is created where the reader is drawn into a dramatic sequence of events. In the same way as the photographers pictures are cropped, one can say that the journalist’s text is cropped and focuses its center, its gaze, on ideas and images about inequality, danger and threats. (Ericsson et al., 2002, p. 99)

They further argue that conceptions about the place and built environment of the suburb tend to be transmitted to its population, so that if the architecture is considered “cold and raw” the people living there are consequentially seen as “anonymous strangers” (Ericsson et al., 2002, p. 99). Whereas anonymity connotes vitality in the discourse around the inner city, in the suburb it instead connotes social problems (Tunström, 2009, p. 79).

On April 23, 2013, the local newspaper in Hökarängen ran a cover story with the title “Sunkförort blev trendigt centrum” (Trashy suburb became trendy center) (Mitt i Söderort, 2013). The article told a story about the development of the center of Hökarängen, from vacant spaces two years ago to a sourdough bakery and bicycle repair shop, thanks to the ongoing renewal project. Citizens gathered on social media and complained about the disrespectful newspaper headline and in the next issue a public apology was published (Mitt i Söderort, 2013). But the headline is representative of a media logic and language use around suburbs, as well as an established narrative of desired progress (see Fig. 11).

The tendency for changes to areas to be described in terms of a rhetoric of a radical development from “trashy” to “trendy,” or from “nightmare” to “dream,” has been theorized by geographer Neil Smith in terms of “urban frontiers.” According to Smith, urban frontiers are often located in less exclusive areas neighboring more exclusive areas, and in which property owners see a potential for development—in a Swedish context, most often the suburbs of the bigger cities. Smith describes this kind of rhetoric, often reinforced by newspapers, as “taming the urban wilderness” (Smith, 1996, p. 12) and draws parallels to colonial ideologies:

The frontier imagery is neither merely decorative nor innocent ... but carries considerable ideological weight ... The poor and working class are all too easily defined as “uncivil,” on the wrong side of a heroic dividing line, as savages and communists. The substance and consequence of the frontier imagery is to tame the wild city, to socialize a wholly new and therefore challenging set of processes into safe ideological focus. As such, the frontier ideology justifies monstrous incivility in the heart of the city. (Smith, 1996, p. 16)

Sweden is one of the countries in the Western world where social and economic inequalities in society are increasing most



Slutar aldrig  
tvivla trots  
alla succéer  
SIDAN 16-17



tipsen till  
den som vill  
bli gammal  
SIDAN 19



# Söderort

Farsta  
Sköndal

## Fick känsliga uppgifter från F-kassan på svararen

**NYHETER** Justiteombuds-  
männen, JO, riktar allvarlig  
kritik mot Försäkringskas-  
san.

Detta efter att myndig-  
heten flera gånger talat in  
känslig information om en  
kvinna bosatt i Tallkrogen på  
familjens telefonvarare.  
Informationen gällde  
bland annat hennes hälsotill-  
stånd, uppgifter som hon  
inte vill att hennes barn  
eller man skulle höra via  
telefonvarare.

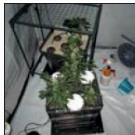
Enligt JO borde Försäk-  
ringskassan vara bättre på  
att respektera sekretessen  
och skydda den enskildes  
integritet.

Försäkringskassan kri-  
tiseras också för långsam  
handläggning av kvinnans  
ärende.

• **MATTIAS KAMGREN**

## Tonåringar ska ha torterats

**NYHETER** Fyra män står  
åtalade för att under tortyr-  
liknande former ha miss-  
handlat tre pojkar – 14, 15  
och 16 år gamla. SIDAN 10



Cannabisodlare. Nu satsar  
Stockholms stad tio miljoner  
kronor på att stoppa drogen.

## Fler odlar eget krak hemma



Jässer. När Matte Lydecker skulle öppna bageri ville hon först inte till Hökarängen. Nu stormtrivs hon och kunderna står i kö. FOTO: CARLOS MONTECinos

# SUNKFÖRORT BLEV TRENDIGT CENTRUM

• För två år sedan stod många lokaler i Höka-  
rängens centrum tomma. Men genom projek-  
tet Hållbara Hökarängen har stadsdelen fyllts

med nytt liv. Surdegsgbageri, cykelverkstad och  
remakebutik hör till det som har öppnat bara  
sedan årsskiftet i det nu trendiga Hökis. SIDAN 4

## ARENABYGGARNA SPURTAR

**SPORT** 1 000 man jobbar för att få klar Tele 2 Arena till premiärmatchen mellan Hammarby



Fig. 11.  
Cover of local newspaper Mitt i Söderort,  
23 April 2013.

rapidly (OECD Economic Surveys, 2017). This is reflected not only in growing income gaps but also in increasing gaps in health and self-confidence (Therborn, 2016). The increasing inequalities are also manifested spatially through what is called “segregation.” The spatial separation between rich and poor is both a consequence of an unequal society and in itself a driver of further inequalities (Franzén et al., 2017). Since poverty is increasingly linked with racialization in Swedish society (Lundström & Hübinette, 2020, p. 13), urban segregation also contributes to reinforcing discrimination and racism, and in addition the poor and racialized districts and populations are themselves pointed out as the cause of social problems (Hörnqvist & De los Reyes, 2016). Geographer Irene Molina argues that housing segregation existed in Sweden long before the 1960s but has come to be described as an “immigrant problem” (Molina, 1997, p. 64).

The stigmatized suburb in general can be regarded as an “over-researched” area (Clark, 2008; Neal et al., 2016; Sukarieh & Tannock, 2013). The repeated attention paid to populations and communities of low-income or racialized areas by researchers, which often asks for participation (through interviews or other kinds of activities) but doesn’t share back, has been criticized for resulting in what has in a Swedish context been termed *projektrötthet*, or “research fatigue” (Holgensen, 2019; Sand, 2019; Stenberg et al., 2013; Tahvilzadeh, 2015). Despite the fact that the isolation of the rich population has increased more than the poor (SCB, 2014), the suburb is the place usually pointed out as both the origin and symptom of segregation, and thus a subject for research studies. For example, the area of Rosengård in Malmö, experienced a total of 345 research and development projects in only eleven years (between 2000–2011) without seeing any results in terms of improved school results or employment rates (Björgvinsson & Keshavarz, 2020, p. 259). Thus, there is an imbalance in what kind of areas researcher’s direct their attention towards:

Urban scholars have consistently overlooked districts of wealth, power and privilege for the simple reason that they pose few “social problems” to city managers and because sociologists have long harbored a romantic infatuation for subordinate social categories and territories. (Wacquant, 2018, p. 101)

The word “suburb” is in a Swedish popular discourse and media landscape representative of stigmatized architecture inhabited

by equally stigmatized people. It stands in opposition to the ideal inner city, and is considered in need of improvement, as it is perceived as an isolated source of social problems in itself. But the ideal city cannot exist without its counterpart: the suburb as problem is needed in a binary of success and failure, to support the inner city as a successful ideal.

In her dissertation *In Search of the Good City: Constructions of Ideals and Problems in Swedish Urban Planning Discussion* (2009), Moa Tunström investigates contemporary ideals in urban planning and constructions of the city and the urban in a Swedish context through a discourse analysis of the urban planning periodical *PLAN*. One of her findings is the polarization between the inner city and the suburb, whereby the suburb and its citizens are seen as “others” and outside of or even contradictory to the ideal urbanity. Departing from this identified binary relationship, in the study at hand I am interested in further exploring how such discourse is activated in the description and invention of created place identity for the suburb Hökarängen, and not only how the suburb positions itself in relation to the ideal inner city but also in relation to other suburbs.

### **Beauty “For All”: Design and the Swedish Self-Image**

Racism and discrimination are often assumed to be intentional and result from ill will. In Sweden, where the country is seen by many as a leading country when it comes to equality, the question of racism is often handled through denial and projection: racists are thought to be right-wing extremists, “somebody else, somewhere else” (Pred, 1997). However, racial discrimination can and does also take place unintentionally, through, for instance, everyday racism and normalized, cultural racism (Skadegård, 2017). In the 1990s, research by mainly Swedish and Danish scholars called attention to racial structures and the national self-image of Nordic welfare states (Andersen & Nielsen, 1987; Deland, 1997; Molina, 1997; Schierup, 1993; Tesfahuney, 1998), work which has since opened up for a field of studies on the matter.

In design and urban planning, abstract concepts such as “open,” “inclusive,” and “for all” are very common, manifesting good intentions while at the same time leaving out any recognition of structural injustices or conversations about how they are to be directed. Researchers

in landscape architecture and urban planning Burcu Yigit Turan and Mia Ågren assert that such claims recall the “all lives matter” backlash responses to the Black Lives Matter movement, and ask, “if this notion in planning as a rhetorical instrument functions to obscure the problems and maintain class, race, gender privileges and inequalities as they are” (Yigit Turan & Ågren, 2022). The questioning of the rhetorics, and beliefs, in the notion of “for all” is particularly pertinent as it is posed against a background of Swedish cities being among the most segregated in Europe (Thörn & Thörn, 2017). The segregation reflects social hierarchies in society overall and thus must be understood as a spatial materialization of racializing social and cultural practices and processes (Backvall, 2019; McEachrane, 2018; Molina, 2005; Pred, 2000).

In Sweden and the Nordics, the quest for integration has been the dominant research and policy approach in questions concerning migration and minorities. The integrationist approach departs from a “culture of wholeness” (Teshahoney & Grip, 2007) and a will to smooth out differences into the sameness of majority culture. However, the boundary towards the other as different is perpetually redrawn, leading to segregation and thus constantly legitimizing the quest for integration. This circular logic is what researchers of migration and racism Marta Padovan-Özdemir and Trine Øland call a “conundrum of integration” where segregation reinforces integration so that a “paradoxical treadmill or circularity is reinvented continuously in welfare state practices” (Padovan-Özdemir & Øland, 2022, p. 15). The *integrationism*—which puts up boundaries towards the Other while keeping intact an imagined wholeness—that was rooted in the welfare state has been conceptualized as “welfare nationalism” (Keskinen et al., 2019; Padovan-Özdemir & Øland, 2022; Suszycki, 2011) to explain the motivation of citizen’s will to accept the burdens of sustaining the welfare state, as well as the exclusionary functions of it (based on citizenship, ethno-national ideas, residence permits or “those who work,” etc.). Welfare has never been and is still not “for all,” although it is imagined to be.

In the Nordic context and Sweden in particular, there is a strong connection between design and politics. The development of the social democratic People’s Home project and the welfare state was tightly connected to functionalism—esthetic visions and ideologies were thus present and in fact central to the construction of the Swedish welfare state and its international reputation. Connections between early-twentieth-century pre-functional ideas to contemporary design discourses still

prevail. The tie between design and the welfare state is central to this study, since the studied cases are postwar suburbs framed with a “1950s” identity, and therefore partly lean on values linked to the People’s Home and functionalist architectural history, which I return to in the analysis set out in Chapters 4 and 5.

Design has a long history of functioning as a tool for educating the working class in “good” taste and bourgeois values and lifestyles. In the early 1900s, a series of events took place and publications were written that became influential for the formation of the Swedish design scene, establishing its importance for ideology and politics and cementing design discourses that are existing and actively negotiated still today. *Beauty for All* (Key, 1899) was a particularly influential book authored by Swedish suffragette Ellen Key; in it, she agitates for the working class and rural population to learn *good taste* (see Zetterlund, 2012, for a critical account on the development of Swedish early functionalism). The detailed critical propositions that Key made about “ornament versus hygiene” came to pave the way for functionalism, followed by *The Home Exhibition* at Liljevalchs in Stockholm in 1917; the propaganda publication *Vackrare vardagsvara* (Beautiful everyday goods) (Paulsson, 1919); *The Stockholm Exhibition* in 1930; and the influential manifesto *acceptera*, written by the key figure Gregor Paulsson and colleagues (1931). Researchers Helena Mattsson and Sven-Olov Wallenstein write about the latter that:

In many respects the Swedish manifesto is deeply rooted in the European avant-garde discussions on architecture and urban planning, and the sources of its rhetoric are obvious. But on the other hand, it displays a distinct and unusual emphasis on a new form of social engineering that not only attempts to adapt modernism to a Swedish context, but also to portray the theory itself as a specifically Swedish phenomenon. (Mattsson et al., 2009, p. 33)

In a Swedish context, functionalism has gained a political connotation and been linked to the welfare state, democratic ideals and social democracy, and the concept of “democratic Swedish design” has also been exported internationally (Werner, 2018). It is not a local or typical Swedish phenomenon that design can have a taste-educational function, but in the Swedish context, the concept of functionalist design and democracy building are interwoven in a way that overshadows the fact that it is about

shaping the worker and working class based on bourgeois ideals. One of the most well-known examples of the adaptation of the concept of “democracy” connected to design is found in the marketing of IKEA (Mattsson et al., 2009, p. 33). Art historian Jeff Werner argues that the “democracy” of IKEA does not refer to either economic or organizational democracy but rather serves as an empty signifier for affordable design (Werner, 2018). Another example of a product line and branding project tightly connecting affordability with a nation building concept of democracy—that, in contrast with IKEA, was not internationally exported but well-spread nationally—was the cooperative union KF (Mattsson, 2012).

Functionalism is closely linked to the political concept of *the People’s Home* (*folkhemmet*), which was central to social democracy, and which, from its very beginnings, included both a nationalist and a socialist element (Björck, 2000). The concept was a significant part of the Swedish modernization project and has not only a political but also an ideological history that is relevant to understanding housing and planning issues in Sweden (Molina, 1997, p. 64), as well as a Swedish design history and present. Irene Molina describes the People’s Home as a “social hygiene project” with an organic grammar based on the metaphor of “the body of society,” which combines pathology and moralism (Haraway 1991 in Molina, 1997, p. 66). Poverty was associated with the risk of infection and the city could be described as sick. Health, welfare, family life, and similar moral incentives were its expressed goals. Philosopher Donna Haraway has theorized this form of pathological rhetoric with military metaphors as the influence of immunology on science and how its logics influenced ideas and rhetoric about nation-building as an organism (Haraway, 1991, p. 203).

The architecture and urban development of the Swedish People’s Home period can, against the backdrop of the social hygiene discourse, be understood in line with philosopher Michel Foucault’s theories of how architecture can be used to discipline the body, a wish to and method for ordering of the working class. The People’s Home was not a gender equality project but formulated by and centered around a patriarchal perspective (Hirdman, 2010). In addition to women, there were more groups that were not in reality included in the People’s Home, in parallel with the democratizing ambitions in politics and political rhetorics, for example, demonstrated in sterilizations of various groups in the population, amongst others the Roma population (de los Reyes, 2019).

Design has been used since at least the early 1900s as a

tool for education in good taste—for ordering the working class and its consumption patterns, in the name of democracy and emancipation. This makes the working class and their concerns—including cultural and material expressions, economic conditions, labor done, and political issues—invisible on several levels. I will return to the concept of People’s Home and discuss it in relation to concepts such as *nostalgia* and *melancholy* in the analysis chapters, where I argue that the packages of values and connotations associated with the People’s Home are implicitly embedded in today’s design discourses, particularly with respect to its democracy-building claims.

### Bordering Practices

In a foreword to a collection of her selected writings, Sara Ahmed explains how she always has been interested in “how emotions work to orchestrate a ‘we’ and how institutions work to create an idea about who and what is ‘in its right place’” (2020, p. 9). Against the background of urban segregation in Sweden, this study will show that nostalgic narratives can function to cognitively support segregation and thus constitute a form of bordering practice that *distinguish* between areas by means of design.

Philosopher Étienne Balibar theorizes *bordering* in terms of the construction of relationships of inclusion and exclusion in society. In particular, he is interested in how exterior borders, such as national borders, come to be internalized by individuals and become a condition and essential reference of a collective identity and communal sense—with reference to Fichte, Balibar describes “*invisible borders*, situated everywhere and nowhere” (Balibar, 2002, p. 78). Borders are thus not only physical boundaries, but also symbolic representations of social, political, and cultural divisions that create hierarchies and power dynamics. In a context of racial discrimination and social injustice, Balibar’s concept of *bordering practices* describes the ways in which barriers are erected between different groups of people, leading to the marginalization and exclusion of certain individuals or communities. These practices can manifest through various means, such as structural inequalities, institutional biases, and cultural norms that reinforce existing power imbalances. In essence, Balibar’s work emphasizes the importance of critically examining the ways in which social borders are created and contested, and how such practices shape social relations and identities.

Researcher in landscape architecture Burcu Yigit Turan's analysis of Superkilen, a public park in Copenhagen, illuminates how a showcase of success in the architecture and design fields can in fact function as a bordering practice (Yigit Turan, 2021). Yigit Turan explores the relationship between the park and Denmark's coloniality, nation-building myths, and border and citizenship politics, asking how the Danish bordering regime is reproduced in the design of the park. Among other factors, she highlights that during the design process, residents of the area were asked to contribute based on their ethnicity and background, in order to "be included" on those very premises. The participatory design process, in this regard, departs from an ethno-cultural and nativist perspective, and as a result,

The design of Superkilen almost re-animates all the myths of nation-building, colonial governmentality, and biopolitics, and fulfils a pedagogical role in the normalization of internal colonization ideology. It ignores the hybridity and dynamism of one's subjectivity, deriving instead from an underlying colonialist binary hypothesis that one can only have a sense of belonging to a place, or cultural heritage according to an ethnic category tied to another land, under which he/she is classified. (p. 72)

Furthermore, the design of the park—in which different countries are represented through objects and plants that are "typical for them"—"temporarily makes the subordinate groups visible, under an intentional symbolic and social regime ... It signals the elimination of 'unwanted things'; it signals that the other is tamed" (p. 71). Yigit Turan's analysis shows how Superkilen, despite being advertised as a multicultural space that celebrates diversity, may inadvertently perpetuate social inequalities and reinforce existing power dynamics.

Overall, the analysis of Superkilen illuminates the need for critical examinations of urban spaces in terms of how they shape social imaginaries, inclusion, and belonging. The nostalgic framework of urban renewal projects in Stockholm's southern suburbs, in contrast to the case of the design process of Superkilen, do not explicitly divide residents into "belonging" and "not-belonging" (native and those with foreign background), neither are they explicitly framed as projects intending to support (a very specific notion of) inclusion. However, the question of belonging and divisiveness is at the heart of nostalgia, which in its very concept

centers the notion of *homecoming* (*nostos*). In this regard, this study has a lot in common with the analysis of Superkilen, despite that the two public spaces studied differ in their character.

## Designing Distinction

When creating identities and stories about places, in a competition for visibility and capital, it becomes increasingly essential to distinguish places and expressions from those with lesser status: signaling distinction in this way enables a symbolic vertical movement upwards. Value hierarchies can be understood with help of the theories of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who suggests that “distinction making” and “taste” are means for positioning oneself in a social space (Bourdieu, 1984). Social space, for Bourdieu, is a multidimensional space constituted by different categories of capital: social, cultural, financial, and symbolic. Social space is materialized as a physical, symbolic space in which we can position ourselves through attributes and activities. In this way, lifestyle and consumption patterns define and present our identities, or as Bourdieu argues, our personal qualities and personalities:

What is at stake is indeed “personality”, i.e., the quality of the person, which is affirmed in the capacity to appropriate an object of quality. The objects endowed with the greatest distinctive power are those which most clearly attest the quality of the appropriation, and therefore the quality of their owner, because their possession requires time and capacities which, requiring a long investment of time, like pictorial or musical culture, cannot be acquired in haste or by proxy, and which therefore appear as the surest indications of the quality of the person (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 281).

By making *distinctions* between similar things, we can present ourselves and our aesthetic dispositions, and in the process mark our status and distance ourselves from lower groups. Taste is thus something that is socially produced, depending on access to the various categories of capital elucidated previously, meaning that the privileged or the ruling class can define “good taste” whereas the disadvantaged or working-class do not have the means for producing definitions of this kind. It is thus a form of symbolic violence to accept dominant forms of taste as essentially good.

Bourdieu’s concept of *distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984) is a relevant tool for understanding aesthetic and narrative strategies and how they operate relationally. *Distinction* is a useful concept when addressing opportunities for mobility in social status; it can be used to maintain high status to prevent a fall, or to enable elevation. Some areas in the city do

not have to distance themselves from something similar to appear to align with their desired identity. For example, for high-income villa suburbs such as Djursholm and their populations, the strategy is rather about disconnecting from the rest of the city and thus passing unnoticed or becoming “invisible” (cf Bernhardtson, 2013; cf Holmqvist, 2018; cf Vikström, 2024). *Distinction* may be a less useful concept when studying such cases, at least when concerning active relational positioning in larger geographical and discursive urban contexts (Holmqvist instead uses “consecration” to describe the marking of social status within that community and the social position of the financial elite in society). The principal case studied here concerns a Stockholm suburb, Hökarängen, that needs to position itself partly in relation to the binary of the inner city as an ideal versus the countryside as its opposite, and partly in relation to other suburbs which in themselves form a spectrum from attractive, predominantly white, neighborhoods to stigmatized, racialized, so-called “Million Program” suburbs. As tools for distinction-making, design strategies provide a framework to study how this positioning is crafted and created.

With reference to Bourdieu’s early studies of urbanization in Algeria, Loïs Wacquant argues that Bourdieu’s thinking is productive in urban studies, as his early studies “establish that all social and mental structures have spatial correlates and conditions of possibility; that social distance and power relations are both expressed in and reinforced by spatial distance” and thus the concepts of Bourdieu “can not only energize urban inquiry but also merge it into a broader analytic of the trialectic of symbolic division, social space, and the built environment” (Wacquant, 2018, p. 90).

A considerable number of studies have been conducted investigating how class markers are manifested in urban contexts employing Bourdieu’s concepts; these have often taken the form of ethnographic or sociological accounts, whereby, for example, photographs of streetscapes are analyzed employing the concept of *habitus* (cf Rajčan & Burns, 2020; Scott, 2017). One of Bourdieu’s major contributions lies in the connection that he forges between representation and materiality, and his insight that linguistic constructions are worth studying in themselves. In his text “Site Effects” (1993, English transl. 1999) he reminds the reader of the dimension of rhetoric and vocabulary that *create reality*, and their ability to inform and create legitimacy for political action:

almost automatically brings to mind, not “realities” ... but phantasms, which feed on emotional experiences stimulated by more or less uncontrolled words and images, such as those conveyed in the tabloids and by political propaganda or rumor. But to break with accepted ideas and ordinary discourse, it is not enough, as we would sometimes like to think, to “go see” what it’s all about. There are compelling reasons to believe that the essential principle of what is lived and seen on the ground—the most striking testimony and the most dramatic experiences—is elsewhere (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 123).

In line with Bourdieu, filmmaker and researcher of urban studies Sylvie Tissot argues that the concept of “problem area” not only defines and creates the particular place described as such but also has consequences for how the city as a whole is understood (Tissot, 2018, p. 151). She places her study of French “problem areas” in parallel with a study of a district in Boston where urban renewal takes place in the name of “historical” or “authentic” neighborhood, a model that evokes symbolic struggles between different social groups in the area as it raises the question of “whose renaissance” the model and renewal project support.

### **Design as a Promise of Progress**

*As a first-year bachelor student of graphic design, I remember we did a course in which we were asked to redesign the visual identity of a small local bakery in Telefonplan, the area where the university was located—a fairly recent establishment already quite aware of their design presence. As the engaged and enthusiastic student I was, I dived into the task and enjoyed making sketches and design proposals. One afternoon on the way home, as I walked out of the metro station in my home neighborhood and passed the local grocery store—what is generally called Middle Eastern shop or in Swedish orient livs (although the owner, I believe, was Greek)—I noticed myself momentarily imagining how this store could be redesigned as well. I found myself identifying their signage and appearance as disorganized and imagining how easily it could be replaced with a more coherent system. I immediately felt discomfort about my impulse and thinking and realized how quickly the education was forming me. My education not only provided me with tools to operate with but also formed my perception and cognition. I had been equipped*

*with a point of view that sought to create order everywhere, and saw anything diverging from the mainstream as disorderly and in need of improvement by a designer with a capital “D”. I felt resistance towards it. The geographical relocation that had taken place, me going home from school, entering one metro stop on one side of the city, and exiting another on the other side of the city, underlined the violence in my imagined act of redesigning the grocery store, as my body had relocated from the gentrified area of the arts uni to the residential suburban neighborhood. Even though the act of redesign was “only” taking place in my imagination, this experience made me aware and suspicious about the education I was going through and the designer’s role that was being programmed in me.*

This anecdotal memory is intended to illuminate the way that design education often centers around an idea of *progress*. Inherent in this is the contention that the designer can provide solutions to someone in need, and thus that design changes the world for the better—a notion that I problematize below.

The aesthetics and imaginaries of public space, and in the case of my research project more specifically, shopwindows and shopfronts in the suburb, can either be understood as insufficient and in need of improvements by professionals (according to a conventional design approach that builds on linear and binary ideas of progress), or they can be understood as material culture, and social and cultural expressions, which are constantly being made by a flora of agents and should be valued and respected as such. The latter perspective is one that suggests a more respectful approach towards the local community and asks for responsibility to be taken by the design field and other professional fields. A circular and relational design approach encourages designers to reframe and rethink one’s role as service (and/or solution) providers and to unlearn the skills of delivering aesthetic improvements, rather learning how to recognize and acknowledge a vast scope of material practices.

In his seminal book *Design for the Real World*, which was written in the late 1970s, Victor Papanek expressed worry that “designers have become a dangerous breed” (Papanek, 1984, p. ix) as a result of industrialism and “Third World development.” His observation concerned a dominant concept of design as a problem-solving activity that makes positive impact, is centered around progression and development, and is exported globally from the West. He was critical about this tendency

in terms of its inattentiveness to the ecological and social qualities being violated by growth-driven Western agencies. Similarly, in his critique of mainstream understandings of design, design researcher Mahmoud Keshavarz theorizes design as never only a “service provider” but the opposite as well, reminding (and showing through his research on passports as border-makers) that design can be hostile (Keshavarz, 2016).

The notion of design as service provision is eventually dependent on the existence of a receiver in need. In such asymmetrical relationships, the designer becomes a “persona who solves problems for people and speaks for the ‘other,’” (Akama et al., 2019, p. 65) a role that is increasingly being contested by theorists and practitioners who are influenced by feminist and decolonial ideas. A redefinition of design challenges the idea of linear development, instead acknowledging a “double movement” in designing (Willis, 2006, p. 80), meaning that we design the world and the world designs us back. Not only does the designed object design our being, but the acts and activities of designing does so too—“in designing tools (objects, structures, policies, expert systems, discourses, even narratives) we are creating ways of being” (Escobar, 2018, p. 4). This understanding has been conceptualized as “ontological designing” (Escobar, 2018; Willis, 2006; Winograd & Flores, 1986), which departs from the phenomenology of Heidegger and his concept of *Being*, “not to be conceived as yet another entity—a supra-entity—such as Spirit or God, but as the conditions of the possibility of presence” (cf Ehn, 1988; Willis, 2006, p. 81). This is why we need to be attentive about the tools and ideas that we use, as they are part of determining our being in the world.

As a response to Heidegger’s examination of the essence of a jug in his essay “The Thing” (Heidegger, 2001), Willis takes a tetrapak fruit juice box as an example to make the argument that what it gathers (in terms of materials and actions) makes its design, its “inauthentic essence” as she calls it. By describing the features of the juice box, Willis shows how it “designs eating and drinking as an individualized, rather than communal activity” (Willis, 2006, p. 89) and contrasts this to Heidegger’s idea of the jug as essentially pouring. Similarly, one needs to examine a particular public space design in order to understand what kind of activities, relations, behaviors, etc., it produces and contains, rather than relying on assumptions about its essential properties as a public space in general terms (for example that it is assumed or supposed to be “open”).

One result of this view is that one cannot make a distinction between an object made by a designer or by someone who

is not formally a designer without acknowledging power and value hierarchies. Walter Mignolo's observation of the two coexisting concepts philosopher and *amauta* ("wise man" in the Inca culture) serves as an example:

Both words name a social role and a type of activity that have "thinking" in common. So, from the decolonial perspective, they are coexisting concepts in different languages, social organizations, social visions, etc. On the other hand, however, since 1500, "philosopher" became the point of reference to make sense of "amauta." (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2014, p. 203)

With this example, Mignolo argues that since the advent of colonialism, a Western framework became globally dominant. In this regard, the "designer" and Mignolo's "philosopher" share the same property of over-writing the making and thinking of other actors. The concept of progress and progressivity in urban renewal, and design in general, needs to be interrogated against the background of colonialism as a four-hundred-year-long-event (Lelliot, 2020) which is still taking place and acting out its consequences. Designers must dare to look for, see, and acknowledge oppressive structures in the seemingly benevolent.

### Public Space as an Open and Frictionless "Living Room"

In a popular discourse on public space and "the urban" that circulates in a Swedish context, a number of dominant ideals and imaginaries are worth scrutinizing. One revolves around *stadsmässighet*, a term that translates roughly as "city character," which describes a desire to apply the qualities of the inner city's social structures and architecture to other areas, regardless of the qualities of the rural or the suburb (Raattamaa, 2006; Tunström, 2007). Another is "the mixed city" (*blandstad* or *blandad stad* in Swedish), a concept that promotes a mix of tenure and social income groups, which is most often used as an argument to build privately owned housing in areas dominated by rental apartments (and less often as an argument for the opposite). Further, in visualizations of architectural plans and vision documents created by planners and architects, more renderings of *the ideal city* can be discerned, in which good weather, smiling people, and spacious pavement terraces seem to be the recipe (Runting, 2020). These

are a few examples of concepts and discourses that have been criticized for providing simplified solutions to how democracy and inclusion is induced through the built environment.

Architect Catharina Gabrielsson (2006) and urban theorist Catharina Thörn (2011) have both identified living room as a recurring term in descriptions of public space. Gabrielsson argues that as a metaphor taken from the private sphere, the living room performs a domestication of the public. She further makes connections to the People's Home, arguing that "The idea of the public space as a pleasant living room is ideologically a strange hybrid. It is based on a society that no longer remains—the homogeneous welfare state, whose care for the public space also contained elements of strong social control," going on to assert that this idea is most present among the so-called "new urbanist" movement in Sweden, which she describes as a network of practitioners lobbying against modernist approaches and promoting traditional European ideals (Gabrielsson, 2006, p.57). Thörn similarly identifies *the living room* as a central concept in a studied case of a renewal project in Gothenburg and observes a more immediate and literal application, where public space is portrayed in newspaper advertisement as the private living room of a well-dressed couple. Like Gabrielsson, she argues that this kind of imagery "favors the notion of consensus, which is very strong in Swedish political discourse" but that "the problem with consensus is that it represses potential conflicts and uneven power relations" (Thörn, 2011, p. 998).

"Open" and "meeting place" are terms that are often attributed to the ideal public space, suggesting that public space is characterized by the fact that everyone has equal access to it. This idea has its roots in the Greek agora—considered the primeval scene of democracy. But the concepts of *openness* and *meeting* are vague and easy to use as empty signifiers—as containers that can be filled with arbitrary meaning. "Meetings" typically describe positive encounters with strangers, which often cross different social boundaries. In his 2018 book *Building and Dwelling*, sociologist and urban planner Richard Sennett suggests that a housekeeper should be able to shop in the same store as the woman she works for, because then both are exposed to other social classes than those they belong to (2018). On the one hand, Sennett's example reflects a slightly romantic idea about the public space as enabling random encounters between strangers across different social boundaries, and a belief in the power of dialogical meetings that per se would lead to harmonious coexistence and tolerance in

society. Responding to Habermas' concept of the bourgeois public sphere, which lies beneath such romanticized views, Nancy Fraser argues that the notion of the public as essentially open, in the sense of a limitless place where exclusion is not possible, is problematic, as this idea comes from a patriarchal point of view: the idea that something is "for everyone" in that way is utopian and obscures existing conflicts and inequalities that must always be considered and navigated (Fraser, 1990).

On the other hand, the example illuminates an important function of public space, namely that of providing an arena for exposing and making visible the socioeconomic structures of society. Public space ideally reflects society and allows for social conditions of society to become visible in an unavoidable manner and thus politicized. Privatizations and spatial segregation on the contrary minimize exposure to others' realities. A related function of public space lies in the way that its accessibility allows for political actions, such as protesting, for groups that do not necessarily have access to other politically influential arenas. In this regard, the "openness" of public space, in terms of accessibility and visibility, has important democratic functions (Franzén et al., 2016, p. 41ff).

If inclusion exists, exclusion does too, and responsibility must be taken for the question of whom public space is designed for and what parts of society are reflected in it. The openness and democratic functions of public space are not to be taken for granted. Especially today, in the face of sanitization practices and privatization processes that regulate and circumscribe public life. To borrow from Rosalyn Deutsche: "Conflict, division, and instability ... do not ruin the democratic public sphere; they are the conditions of its existence" (Deutsche, 1996, p. 289).

### **Designing Ambiences and Atmosphere**

A considerable amount of research has been conducted on beautification projects and aesthetic ordering endeavors around the world (Franzén et al., 2016; Gotham, 2005; Hellström, 2006; Pow, 2009; Tran, 2019). Place-sensitive approaches calling attention to the particularities of each context and its geographical, historical, social, cultural, and economic conditions, and the outcomes of those conditions, are crucial in order to avoid centripetal views and simplified understandings of such events (Rossi, 2017).

Addressing the urban obsession around aesthetics, German art theorist Wolfgang Iser comments that, “if advanced Western societies were able to do completely as they wish, they would transform the urban, industrial and natural environment in toto into a hyper-aesthetic scenario” (Iser, 1997, p. 13). According to Maria Hellström, the concepts of aestheticization “describes the blurred boundaries between real and imaginary, between art and daily life,” especially when “applied to processes of consumption of objects or commodities, including architecture, urban environments, places and landscapes, aestheticization can be seen as the driving force of an economy of symbolic exchange” (Hellström, 2006, p. 15). Aesthetics should here be understood as a way of “making sense of the world” through “perception of the senses” (Dikeç, 2015, p. 1).

A number of concepts have been used by researchers to study the creation of aesthetic order and social imaginaries in public spaces in urban settings: aestheticization (Hellström, 2006), interior urbanism (Frykholm, 2020; Rice, 2008), ambient power (Allen, 2006; Thörn, 2011), and sensescapes (Degen, 2008) are some that appear relevant to the research at hand.

*Urban sanitization* can be practiced and manifested in many different ways. *Broken windows theory*, also known as *zero tolerance*, was a concept introduced in New York in the 1980s under the government of Mayor Rudy Giuliani, based on the idea that because small-scale vandalism has an epidemic effect and leads to larger-scale crimes, it should be radically prevented (Kelling & Coles, 1996). The concept of *defensive* or *hostile architecture and design* has evolved to name public furniture that limits certain behaviors (such as sleep or socialization without consuming); in a Swedish context, this has more recently been addressed by Edin (2017) but was also considered in earlier research on homelessness (Sahlin, 2004; Thörn, 2004). Light is often introduced to disperse disturbances and create safety (Listerborn, 2002). Jonathan Crary describes an increasingly illuminated “24/7” world in his book of the same name, describing that world as a “disenchanted one in its eradication of shadows and obscurity and of alternate temporalities. It is a world identical to itself, a world with the shallowest of pasts, and thus in principle without specters” (Crary, 2013). He refers to the installation of urban streetlights in the 1880s, noting that this

achieved two interrelated goals: it reduced longstanding anxieties about various dangers associated with nocturnal darkness, and it expanded the time frame and thus the profitability of many

economic activities. The illumination of the nighttime was a symbolic demonstration of what apologists for capitalism had promised throughout the nineteenth century: it would be the twin guarantee of security and increased possibilities for prosperity, supposedly improving the fabric of social existence for everyone. (pp. 16-17)

Today, illumination in public space is often called for based on the suggestion that it has the same effects.

But it is not only surveillance techniques, gates, and guards that regulate the presence and behavior of bodies in public space. Researcher of geography and power John Allen locates exclusion not only in the (already mentioned) evident authoritative manifestations of controlling power, but also in what he calls the “ambient qualities” of space—how it is designed to be experienced (Allen, 2006). Thus, he points to a “logic of seduction” that manifests power “through inclusion rather than exclusion,” through the production of affects which direct the curiosity and attention of people along certain lines, making them think of a place as open and accessible (p. 441). It is not necessarily an illusory openness, but it is “harder to pin down, precisely because it is something that is felt through the invitation to mingle, circulate and inhabit” (p. 445). In such spaces, one is likely to think that power is not present, but Allen suggests that power is in these cases exercised through its unmarked presence, in the way we experience the place, which he conceptualizes as “ambient power.”

A related concept is Monica Degen’s *sensescapes* (Degen, 2008), which can be useful for understanding how place is produced through its experience as a sensuous landscape. This can be relevant in order to understand not only what the intentions of authoritative power in producing place, but also how residents (and others who inhabit the space) produce place in their everyday life, through actions that are usually not understood as “resistance,” because they are not addressing and not directed towards the acts of marked power, but rather as being “an alternative mode of living and experiencing which happens alongside normative rhythms and expectations—yet thereby fracture a uniform imposition of experience of place” (Degen, 2017). On a related note, in a study of the renewal of a central shopping area in Gothenburg, Catharina Thörn employs the concepts of Degen and Allen to show the centrality of the practices and politics of small details (Thörn, 2011). Here, a number of micro-practices together contribute to creating an atmosphere that extends consumption

from the shop to the street (p. 128).

Similarly, in the cases addressed in the research at hand, as I will show how the imaginary of the suburban center to a large part relies on ideas about design and material practices that shape an atmospheric and sensory experience. This experience is, importantly, not only related to individual shops, but also to the place as a whole—the individual shops are in this sense subordinate to the consumption of the place itself.

### Design as the Study of *et ceteras*

In the last stages of my research project, I regularly spent morning writing hours at a traditional, quiet establishment close to my studio in Skanstull: Gunnarssons, a family-owned patisserie that has been run at the same address since 1946. Although the signage, address and assortment of baked goods are colorful and alert—the macaroons in the shop window are youthful—the interior and the employees' white bakery shirts and hats say "classic." I go to Gunnarsson's because there is no music, no Wi-Fi, and the carpet contributes to a muffled acoustic that allows me to focus on my reading. When I look up from my printed articles, I think that the decor here is like being at someone's grandma's house—rather than a contemporary construction of a nostalgic past, it feels like the decor here is the result of preservation.

Some time ago, a competitor opened a large premises on the other side of the street, where the family-owned shoe company Skobell was forced to close down as a result of the pandemic, after 69 years and four generations. There is now a branch of another Stockholm institution, the patisserie Vetekatten, which has developed into a chain. Somehow, it feels like the neighborhood's identity is kept intact when Skobell's neon sign is replaced with a similar retro sign, and Gunnarsson's italic script sign gets company. It is hard not to think that this new establishment draws value from Gunnarsson's presence, that the nostalgic branding both builds on and differentiates from that of its neighbours. Vetekatten's retro identity is different from Gunnarsson's: this new establishment has a brand-new marble interior, gray carpentry and gold fittings which, as a whole, have more in common with other newly renovated cafés with an exclusive feel. If Gunnarsson has a pastel pink sign and macaroons in the shop window, the most colorful thing at Vetekatten is the cinnamon

buns. A few blocks away, another retro cafe has opened, the place is called “Älskade traditioner” (which translates to “loved traditions”) but the illuminated sign says “Cafeteria,” thereby following a contemporary retro trend whereby the façade sign indicates the type of business and not the name of the company. Here, as opposed to the other two establishments, nostalgia dominates its most kitschy sense: shelves and walls are bursting with nostalgic objects and posters, and the women on staff are dressed in red-and-white polka dot dresses reminiscent of Minnie Mouse, which recalls an American diner and a rural-style nostalgia, rendering the former examples more urban and elegant. What all these three places have in common is that they build their brands on references to the past, and although it is done in different ways, tradition, heritage, and authenticity are invoked in all three cases to some extent.

Past-themed marketing is very common in branding, and in marketing research this has increasingly been a subject of study through concepts such as *retro*, *vintage*, *heritage*, and *nostalgia* (Dam et al., 2024). In the case of the cafes, every small detail in the design contributes to an overall impression, a mood, an atmosphere, which in design research can be called “sensescapes” (Highmore, 2008). While Älskade traditioner relies on nostalgia as source for enchantment or amusement, Gunnarssons and Vetekatten rely on nostalgia as heritage and authenticity—“retro marketing can momentarily reassure consumers by sending them back to an imagined space of moral certainty and romance while at the same time fostering feelings of uniqueness, newness, and exclusivity” (p. 5). Although nostalgia is a popular research topic in marketing, marketing researchers have identified a gap regarding nostalgia’s value-creating and sociocultural functions. This study constitutes a contribution to such gap, drawing from design research, approaching nostalgic imaginaries as well as brands and atmospheres as results of design processes and activities.

Design researcher Ben Highmore describes design as “nothing but an et cetera.” The “et cetera” here stands for a celebration of the ever-continuous list of anything one can think of that you would find in everyday life—from school chairs to discarded shoes—and that all these things are to be included in the potential field of design studies that engages with the social structures of things. The world of ubiquitous design “is a world of circulating objects and intricate connections ... a place where bodies bristle and stomachs rumble: a lively place” (Highmore, 2008, p. 5). Looking at design from this perspective allows plumbing

systems to be object of design studies just as much as Bauhaus.

Here, design is understood in terms of its everydayness, not its extraordinary qualities. If a mainstream field of design and design research is busy attending to novelties and innovation, what Highmore advocates in his “Sideboard Manifesto” (2008) is attendance to the ordinary, the ubiquitous, and the established. A preoccupation with “the new” and innovation maintains a progress/decline dichotomy in what is defined as constituting “designed” objects. Studying the ubiquitous asks for a radically different approach and a refusal of logics like *epochal value*; it is rather about recognizing the qualities, functions, configurations, and potentials of its object of study.

All designed artefacts and situations imply and propose certain social ways of being, acting, and perceiving. Highmore proposes to think of design in a process-oriented way,

as a series of negotiations, as an orchestration (of sense, of perception and so on), as an orientation (something that encourages and generates propensities and proclivities), as an assemblage (and as an assembling activity, where it is always possible that combinations themselves combine), as an arrangement (a temporary coming together) and so on. (Highmore, 2008, p. 4)

Similarly, feminist graphic design researcher Martha Scotford argues that “Design is a social, economic and cultural activity” and proposes that design researchers seek “to study design activity, to study design roles, to study response to design, rather than to concentrate on individual designers and their artifacts and use these as the sole filter for graphic design history” (Scotford, 1994, p. 139).

Highmore’s concept of *sensescapes*—which he describes as designed artifacts, consisting of a variety of material, social, and historical scales and conditions—is related to Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of *assemblage* (1988) and Mahmoud Keshavarz’s concept of *articulation* (2016). Drawing from Stuart Hall’s understanding of articulation as attending to the renegotiable linkages between parts—that are “not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time” (Hall & Grossberg, 2020 [1986], p. 144), Keshavarz suggests that the concept of articulation “examines how heterogeneous forces interact and combine to produce effects that are not necessarily identical to those elements existing in the articulation of a force, a thing or an event” (2016, p. 40).

The object of study in this research project is not an easily defined artefact but rather a number of places— more specifically, *imagined* places and the narratives and practices that support their creation. Thus, the social and processual lie at the center of this study. However, artefacts—such as a signage program for coordinating shop signage in a suburban center—are also involved. The signage program is, in a way, an elevated design object in the traditional sense, as it has a formal function as a design instruction that is produced on behalf of and designed by actors with formal power. At the same time, it is somewhat informal in terms of its visibility, as it is a design artefact that lives its life discretely and does not claim to be seen by many: it is just the “recipe” behind the meal, so to speak. The signage program is shaped by existing values and discourses and aims to launch a story to be translated into a physical space—however, whether and, if so, how it succeeds in doing so is a completely different question, since the physical space consists of many actors and negotiations. The story of the signage program is therefore to be regarded as an aspiration, a wish, and a fantasy. And as such, it is telling with respect to the social imaginaries (Taylor, 2004) surrounding it. As Highmore asserts, “There is no design without a concomitant social imagination” (2008, p. 4).

As I’m sitting at Gunnarssons, looking out through the window with a view over Vetekatten, I am reminded that nostalgia is everywhere, in a variety of shapes and expressions. An approach that understands design as an everyday practice and process is helpful to unpack and understand what social imaginaries, values, and discourses are accumulated in and inform nostalgic brands and atmospheres.

## Divisive Nostalgias

Nostalgia can—regardless of intentions—distinguish and perform borders. In fact, nostalgia is inherently divisive, as what is “home” to some is not necessarily home to others. Therefore, it is more accurate to speak of nostalgia in plural. The “homecoming”—the *nostos* in nostalgia—also has a bias towards the imagined nation as a home. The divisiveness of nostalgia, and how it can play out in an everyday setting in a Swedish urban context, is performed in the Swedish-Iranian director Kasra Alikhani’s theatre play *Handla med hjärtat* (a common Swedish slogan, literally “Shop with your heart,” proposing ethical and environmentally aware consumption), which was staged at Hagateatern in Gothenburg in 2023.

It takes the premises of a former Middle Eastern supermarket, where an organic foods chain store is about to establish, as its point of entry. The new owner—Larry, a middle-aged majority Swede—is assisted by Laleh, a young Swedish-Iranian female summer worker, whom he confidently and enthusiastically teaches how to attract and treat the anticipated middle-class, conscious, customers. The concept of the store and how the interior signage and shopping procedures are designed is characterized by the owner’s longing back to a lost and less complicated Sweden, while the summer worker looks at the remnants of the recent Middle eastern store with a sentimental sense of loss. In one scene, as she is cleaning the shop, she finds some of the former supermarket’s price tags—handwritten with black marker pen on bright colored paper—and instead of throwing them away she decides to keep a few as a memory as they make her feel nostalgic.

Laleh does not share the affects and convictions of Larry’s nostalgia, which builds on a romanticized idea of Swedishness. As opposed to Larry, Laleh is moved by the marker-pen price tags, since she, as a minority Swede, feels connected to such shops typically run by an *amo* (“uncle” in Arabic and Farsi), and the erasure of the supermarket and its materiality touches a string of grief in her. The story of Larry and Laleh and the process of re-designing the shop shows that nostalgia is divisive. Their nostalgias reflect power relations, in that what Larry is longing for, and in practice doing, is erasing and replacing what Laleh feels, or seeks, comfort in. If Larry’s nostalgia relies on the loss of an imagined ideal motherland and a solid Swedishness prior to immigration, Laleh’s nostalgia is rather a

contemplation of loss in a framework of (inherited) exile. Larry's nostalgia is enacted as micro-aggressions towards Laleh, correcting and instructing her when imposing his values and aesthetics onto her; as a result, Laleh feels increasingly insecure, stressed, and even offended in his company. Whereas Laleh's nostalgia passes unnoticed to him (like when she is wearing a t-shirt with a print of the Iranian 1970s pop star Googoosh) or just seems irrational and nonsensical (like when he discovers that she has saved a few of the former price tags instead of throwing them in the bin).

The play beautifully shows how the nostalgias felt in both cases are evoked and constructed by sensorial materials and design. In another scene, Laleh has been instructed to handwrite the new price tags for fruits and vegetables on black chalkboards. The next day she has accomplished the task, but Larry doesn't find her handwriting suitable for the shop and replaces them with his own, more traditional, italic script, when she is away. The materiality—chalkboard in this case—as well as the typography and handwriting of the signs, are shown to be significant in the construction of the nostalgic sensescape (Highmore, 2008)—the sensorial landscape or the atmosphere—of the shop.

Nostalgia is an individual sentiment but also a historical emotion with sociocultural bearings. As such, it is more accurate to talk about *nostalgias* in plural, as socially and culturally shared nostalgic sentiments are context-specific and may sometimes stand in conflict. A romanticized past that may serve to support a sense of belonging, a conviction that “things were better in the past,” or a (sometimes even dramatic, homesick) longing for some, may just as well be perceived as provocative, aggressive, pathetic, or nonsensical to others. This is why there is reason to study nostalgia: it serves as an intersection for memory, social imaginaries, emotion/affect and design, and can illuminate power dynamics, and sociocultural and political divides. Particularly when it comes to the design of public space, nostalgia activates senses and affects and brings political and divisive dimensions to the fore.

### A Long-Distance Relationship

“Nostalgia” is a compound Latin word that comes from the Greek *nostos* (homecoming, reach a place, return) and *algos* (longing, pain, suffering).

When the term was originally coined in the seventeenth century, it was a medical term for morbid homesickness, for which

remedies were also invented. It could, for example, affect soldiers at the front who became unable to carry out their missions because they suffered from a strong longing for home. Throughout the 1800s, nostalgia was more or less regarded as a physical illness, but as doctors failed to identify the locus of the pain and the fact that it became increasingly less curable, by the end of that century it was excluded from the “Nomenclature of Diseases” and instead considered an incurable psychological illness—only in Israel did the former definition last longer (Boym, 2001, p. 7). Later, the term has been broadened to refer to the longing for a home in a wider and more figurative sense—i.e., a past, in time and/or space, that has been lost.

Nostalgia can be an individual sentiment, but given its medical and cultural history, it should here be understood as a historical emotion. As such, it can be theorized as a response to the Enlightenment’s emphasis on universality and reason, which bloomed with Romanticism and its emotional yearning for the particular (Boym, 2001, p. 12). While nostalgia originally was considered a physical disease of homesickness and later a psychological “immigrant psychosis,” and thus related to spatial dislocation, the later developments of nostalgia as a historical emotion can also be related to a changing conception of time. Philosopher Svetlana Boym, one of the key thinkers on nostalgia, suggests that nostalgia and progress are “alter egos like Jekyll and Hyde” (2001, p. XVI), as both are “dependent on the modern conception of unrepeatable and irreversible time” (p. 13). But the distances in time that nostalgia addresses are tightly connected to distances in space, as the narrative of progress is not only temporal but also related to spatial expansion. The scales by which Westerners have measured the distance between the barbaric and the civilized, or the eccentric and the universal, also align temporal distances between the past and present/future, leading the local and the past to overlap. In this regard, nostalgia is “a result of a new understanding of time and space that made the division into “local” and “universal” possible” (Boym, 2001, p. 11), where the nostalgic becomes one who is longing back to the local, particular.

In Boym’s definition of nostalgia, distance and the imagined are central, as the home that is the object for the longing per definition “no longer exists or has never existed” (Boym, 2001, p. XIII). She argues that “(n)ostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy” and thus “(n)ostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship” (p. 7).

## Nostalgia, the Nation, and a Longing for “The Golden Age”

Nostalgia has strong ties to nationalism and the nation as imagined community (Anderson, 1991). As mentioned above, as a historical emotion it emerged as a response to the universality of reason assumed by the Enlightenment and grew as “romantics began to celebrate the particularism of the sentiment” (Boym, 2001, p. 12). Coinciding with the formation of nation states, nostalgic “longing for home” became a central trope of romantic nationalism.

Despite the longing for locality, and the central role of homecoming in the narratives of nostalgics, Boym proposes that the form of the nostalgic narrative itself is hardly local. On the contrary, nostalgias today are a multitude of moving scenarios that span national and cultural boundaries—Boym has therefore described contemporary nostalgia as an “epidemic” and as “global.” Different nationalities claim to have their own unique and untranslatable sense of homesickness (for the nation) and nostalgic melancholy, that in fact are synonyms for the same historical feeling—the nuances vary but the grammar is the same, she argues. The Portuguese *saudade*, the Russian *toska*, the Czech *litost*, the German’s *heimweh*, and the Spanish *mal de corazon* are examples of such concepts.

Which objects or situations evoke nostalgia, and which eras or places become an object of it, varies based on cultural context. In the United States, a strongly right-wing conservative nostalgia has spread with the slogan “Make America Great Again,” which has come to signify a historical revisionist longing for a return to an imagined white America. Similarly, many Russians share a longing to return to the “golden age” of the Soviet era and a Greater Russia. In many cases, revolutions or other regime shifts feed nostalgia, as they function as a break creating distance in time, which for some lead to exile, also adding distance in space to the equation. In the case of Iran, for instance, the revolutionary year of 1979—when the country turned from a monarchy to an Islamic theocracy—is a central event in narratives of the nations’ history and people’s life trajectories (Naghibi, 2016). Even under the Shah, Iran was an authoritarian state where dissidents were repressed and resources were unevenly distributed so that large parts of the society were dissatisfied, which eventually led to the revolution.

Despite that, the Iran of the 1970s appears in the shimmer of nostalgia as a dream: in the nostalgic images that are shared

in documentaries and social media, you see middle class or elite men and women walking on avenues or relaxing on beaches, the royal family in all its splendor, streets with flamboyant restaurants, and so on. The year of the revolution was such a severe break that the time just before it appears as an almost surreal past and becomes the object of a mixture of grief and pride, and an exaggerated beautification. This break highlights the moment in time that was lost—the 1970s—and obscures earlier pasts, so that the nostalgic idea of the past is reduced to certain characteristics of a certain era. However, the Iranian post-revolutionary 1970s nostalgia ties into an earlier well-established nationalist nostalgia: a proud nationalist sentiment surrounding the “golden age” of the Persian Empire. In this regard, the two “golden ages” build on each other, and the longing for them is divisive as many do not long back to monarchy or do not share, or find useful, idealized imaginaries of the empire. Researcher of diasporic Iranian literature Nima Naghibi writes: “While Iranians in Iran [during the big protests of 2009] were expressing their hopes for the *future*, the chants of Iranians in the diaspora bore the weighty memoirs of their past connection to Iran, and in this case, of a romanticized, ancestral past celebrating the glories of the Persian Empire” (Naghibi, 2016, p. 33, *emph. added*). Her example highlights the problem of nostalgic distance and its incapacity to formulate relevant responses or even solidarity.

Nostalgics do not necessarily understand themselves as political subjects, as nostalgia is often thought of as apolitical. The claim to “apolitical nostalgia” is the subject of study of media theorist Nermin Elsherif’s research on social media groups dedicated to nostalgia about Egypt’s “good old days” (*al-zaman al-gamil*), in which she sees how orientalist representations of Cairo’s past invite processes of collective (re)interpretation that produce meaning, whereby comments and reactions negotiate topics such as nationalism, conspiracy theories, identity politics, and post-revolutionary frustrations (Elsherif, 2023a, 2023b). Against the backdrop of the extreme depoliticization of the Egyptian public sphere, where people refrain from defining their nostalgia historically or politically, nostalgia is instead directed towards a lost social order; a moral, national stability; and an authentic Egyptian identity. Elsherif argues that this nostalgic discourse is not just an apolitical escapism, but that the sharing of images of the “good old days” gives form to a distinct social imaginary of the ideal citizen and the ideal nation. Furthermore, the infrastructure of the platform of circulation and debate is active in shaping nostalgic discourse, as

the neoliberal and algorithmic logic, as well as the speed of interaction on social media platforms, stabilizes dominant nostalgias and notions (such as those surrounding, for instance, the nation).

Boym argues that while nostalgia does have a bias towards reactionary nationalisms that long for lost “golden ages,” it also has other potentials and qualities that on the contrary may work as a tool for reflection and negotiation. Given that the precondition for nostalgia is the experience of loss and distance in time and place, which are characteristics of the experience of exile, nostalgia is also a shared sentiment of diasporas. Although the experience of exile can definitely contribute to co-constructing nationalistic longing for an imagined authentic past, it does not necessarily have to.

### **Restorative and Reflective Nostalgia: Curing Versus Staying with the Painful Condition**

In this case study of Swedish postwar suburbs, I choose to focus on *restorative nostalgia*, reflecting the fact that Swedish nostalgia for the 1950s—and thus for the “People’s Home”—invokes a “restoration of home,” whereby social imaginaries of the nation’s past are produced through acts of urban renewal and place branding. This is distinct, I note, from what Svetlana Boym terms “reflective nostalgia” (2001). The “restorative” term emphasizes *nostos*, the home, and an obsession with reconstructing a lost home; it gives rise to a nationalistic culture of memory. Restorative nostalgia is strong in many parts of the world today, not least in Sweden, where right-wing nationalist forces are gaining success through populist ideas that are often based on the designation of scapegoats and the ambition to restore a homogenous, nation-bound community. Reflective nostalgia, in contrast, has a different quality as it focuses on *algos*—pain and the suffering as a condition of life. Rather than a desperately stubborn restoration of “home,” it dwells on and explores longing, is less black and white and more ambivalent and probing, and stands for a social culture of memory. While the restorative nostalgic wants to cure suffering at all costs, and sees national community as a solution and cure, the reflective nostalgic is not afraid of suffering, or, at least is not driven by the desire to eliminate it. To some extent, suffering is a part of life, Boym argues: the irreversibility of time is a painful condition of existence that the nostalgic has difficulty accepting.

inability to think about the future. Philosopher Zygmunt Bauman argues that we live in a time that is unusually poor in visions of the future and faith in the future (2017), which proves increasingly true, as we face a climate catastrophe with unpredictable and irreversible consequences. The “We’re fucked” slogan of the climate movement Extinction Rebellion, largely mobilizing young people, is telling of this, and stands out in its pessimism among political slogans historically. For this reason, our time is instead populated by visions of the past, which Bauman calls “retrotopia” (Bauman 2017). The sentiment that “it was better before” and that the future might not bring progress is what fuels the reactionary and nationalist imaginaries that Bauman define as “retrotopias” and Boym as “restorative nostalgias.”

However, the longing back in time might not only be a longing for a more favorable time, but also for a longing for future optimism. Philosopher Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback talks about a “longing for longing” (2018). Drawing from Boym, who argues that “(m)odern nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values” (2001, p. 8), Sá Cavalcante Schuback argues that people today long for meaning, for a condition in which value is something beyond commodification. In this way, nostalgia can be understood as a kind of secular longing for spirituality. The longing also extends to locality and presence. As a countermovement against globalization’s leveling of places—where multinational companies such as Starbucks and McDonalds homogenize cities (Rossi, 2017) and erase local cultures, and do everything to make people consumers more than anything else—some people yearn for locality, place, and position (Sá Cavalcante Schuback, 2018).

Through the typological division between restorative versus reflective nostalgia, Boym suggests that we do not necessarily have to dismiss nostalgia as populist and reactionary per se, but that there may be forms of nostalgia that can recognize suffering as a shared experience and seek constructive ways forward that do not belong to nationalist and *nostos*-oriented solutions. Reflective nostalgia is particularly useful and applicable in studies of diasporic and exile culture (which is not the focus of the study at hand). With that said, the studied case offers an example of how these two types of nostalgias are sometimes difficult to distinguish. Nationalistic tendencies and conservative values must not necessarily be articulated and easily identified and may come to the surface only through close examination. In the case of urban renewal, the nostalgia may well be embedded in progressive rhetorics. The concept of reflective nostalgia can

help complicate, nuance, and interrogate the nostalgic character of Swedish 1950s nostalgia and its contemporary applications in Swedish suburbs, as well as to, in contrast, highlight its restorative qualities.

Reparative Interstice 2

*Du ska veta att det  
känns att det är 50-tal, or,  
You Should Know That It Feels  
Like It's the '50s, a Montage  
Poster Series*

by Maryam Fanni (2023)

This series of eight montage posters draws on my collection of local newspaper clippings where keywords such as *50-tal* ("50s") or "retro" appear repeatedly in relation to local center facilities during the years 2013–2018. In addition, I have woven in a found, handwritten protest notice; photos of illuminated signs that are part of urban renewal projects in the area; a quote from an interview with a neon sign manufacturer; and a couple of quotes from my interviews with people working with the management and renewal of suburban centers.

# Nya retroskyltar ska göra Bagis tryggare

Bagarmossen fixas till i det lilla med retrokorrekt 50-talsreklam. Snyggt och tryggt säger Stockholmshem, olak gentrifiering säger kritikerna.

butiksägarna erbjuds nya fönster, skyltar samt rådgivning om hur deras affärer ska bli mer lockande. Galler och jalousier ska bort, istället blir det okrossbart så kallat "hammer glass".

” Vi vill att Bagarmossens centrum ska få stil och se prydligt ut.

ringsarbetet möts av kritik. Det har anklagats av olika grupper för att utgöra en komponent i gentrifierings-taktik, där Stockholmshem på sikt vill byta ut Hökis traditionella arbetarklass mot medelklassiga hipsters. Ett uppanoat centrum lockar mer köpstarka boende vilket leder till chockhöjda hyror.

– De gav mig ett förslag och jag sa "vi kör på det". Det är fräscht ut. Och såklart hoppas jag att den ska locka mer folk. Klockan är strax före nio

Inget nytt galler. På andra sidan torget har Gi-bras och Mashos kens att redan från 50-talsförvandling och

se folk fritt att säga hälsningar även ny LED-logo kommer ut till 80 000 kronor beroende på storlek, en sällsig s

# VI VILL

Kärrtorp hämtar inspiration från Hökarängen. Nu vill staden förstärka torgets 50-talskänsla med nya skyltar.

landskapsarkitekt på exploateringskontoret.

## 50-talskänsla

Staden skissar nu fram ett förslag på ett helt nytt torg som

# DEN HÄR

LÄS ÄVEN Bandhagens C rustas upp för en miljon – får skyltar i 50-talsstil

(<http://www.stockholmdirekt.se/nyheter/bandhagens-c-rustas-upp-for-en-miljon-far-skyltar-i-50-talsstil/aRKpem!00j9JmzfM34hJ8pAmCCcKg/>)

i-50-talsstil/aRKpem!00j9JmzfM34hJ8pAmCCcKg/)

Men Kärrtorps torg ska inte bara få nya skyltar.



Foto: Leonard Goldberg

det viktigaste

är ju bara att hålla koll på det så att det inte skenar iväg

och blir nånting annat som då i mina ögon kladdar ner det hära,



50-tal. Nu har nya skyltar satts upp i Bandhagens centrum. Foto: Leonard Goldberg

## Nu är Bandhagen en del av retro-hajpen

I veckan sattes de nya retro-skyltarna upp i Bandhagens centrum. Det rör sig om ett 10-tal skyltar i snirklig 50-talsstil.

Nyheter  
Publicerad: 11:47, 3 feb 2017

Den nya rean i Hökarängen i Bagarmossen och i veckan sattes de nya skyltarna upp i Bandhagens centrum. De lysande skyltarna som skapar en känsla av 50-tal, från den tiden då centrumet skapar en känsla av 50-tal

# FULLA

## HÖKARÄNGEN. Hökarängen ses ofta som en förebild när det gäller förortscentrum, dels för



(<http://media.bagarmossensmartup.se/2016/12/26/konstnarna-ger-nya-skyllar-pa-plats>)

Innan förändringen var det stamkunder som hittade till butiken.



Nu när galler är borta och ny skylt är på plats har bagisborna börjat hitta till Skor & Kem.

det stora signumet som det ändå är, den gamla stilen

# Skola

## TIDNING

Bagisbo ger designrådgivning till butikerna

butikägarna? Vi var med när ~~Full Skola~~ fick ny skylt.

### Nyheter

Publicerad 12:13, 26 jan 2017

– De gav mig ett förslag och jag sa "vi kör på det". Det ser fräscht ut. Och såklart hoppas jag att den ska locka mer folk.

” Vi

# VÅRAT FINA

Jag är en gammal neongubbe,

# 50-TALS

designrådgivning

# CENTRUM

nya ljusskylt ovanför porten. Den är i 50-talssnitt och matchar frisörgrannens gamla logga som sitter intill.

personer som kommer, som gillar att centrum är,  
att centrum är ett retrocentrum,  
ett 50-talscentrum

# EN DOFT AV 1950-TAL

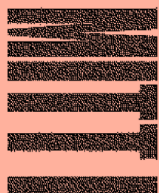
Fastighetstidningen. 2018-03-05. Sida: 18-19

När Bandhagens centrum i södra Stockholm skulle rustas upp blickade ägarna, bostadsrättsföreningen HSB Bandhagen, bakåt i historien för att hitta inspirationen.

## Han brukar kallas Mister Neon

belysningen kvällstid för att öka trygghetskänslan när man kommer hem

Fastighetsägaren Stockholmshem byter till retroskyltar på butiksfasaderna även i Bagarmossen, rapporterar Stockholm Direkt. Tidigare har samma arbete genomförts i Hökarängen. Målet är att göra stadsdelen snyggare och därmed tryggare och mer attraktiv. Ogästvänliga galler och jalusier på butiksfönster ska bort och ersätts med okrossbart glas med nattbelysning. Samma omgörning har skett i Hökarängen, som blivit betydligt mer eftertraktad.



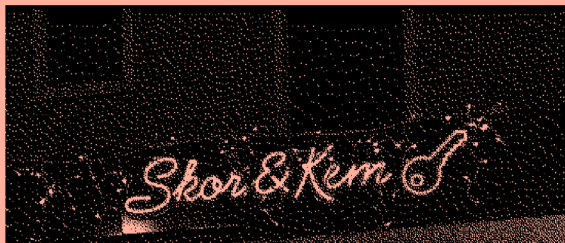
## Här är skyltarna som förgyller vår vardag

## Som i Hökarängen

det ser ut på det här sättet och vi behåller det så

# Skyltprogram skapar trygghet och trivsel

← Föregående (<http://bagarmossensmartup.se/permakulturtradgard-i-kvarteret-parmmataren/>)  
Nästa → (<http://bagarmossensmartup.se/vi-lever-vidare-i-ny-form-2017/>)



*Kanske har ni lagt märke till att det börjar ske en del förändringar i handlarnas fönster i centrum?  
en slump att det börjar se trevligare ut, det är helt enkelt en del i arbetet som utförs för att göra ce  
trevligare och tryggare plats.*

## Bandhagens Centrum - Utveckling och framtid

HSB Brf Bandhagen äger och förvaltar centrum, som byggdes under 1950-talet.

»Vi kan inte ta ner månen åt er, men vi kan göra en åt er«

Stockholmsstaden har startat ett skyltprogram för att hjälpa de lokala handlarna att uppdatera sina skyltfönster och neonskyltar för att dels skapa en mer inbjudande och vänlig atmosfär, men även för att i förlängningen göra centrum till en ännu mer trygg plats.

**Sveriges första. Men också för att butikslokalerna i de välbevarade husen är prydda med neonskyltar som andas 50-tal.**

Femtiotalsatmosfären har bevarats och lunchsolen

skapa otrygghet

orsmoment

förpestar

stor varböld

inte ger nånting

ingen positiv effekt på området

ditt skyltfönster ska se trevligt ut

De minner om en svunnen tid. Och väcker känslor hos

**AFTONBLADET**

MANDAG 4 NOVEMBER 2023  
Dagens namn: Gustav Adolf

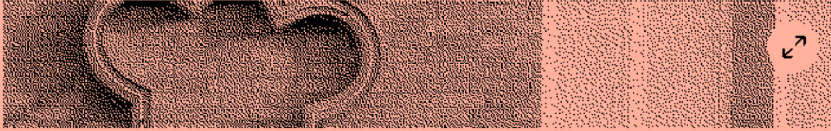
Stockholm / Bagarmossen

# Retroskyltar ska göra Bagarmossen attraktivt

Aftonbladet

Uppdaterad 2017-01-31 | Publicerad 2017-01-30

[Dela artikeln](#) [+ Följ skribenten](#) [Spara artikeln](#)



aktivt med att förvalta den planeringstanke och estetik som präglade den tiden, bland annat genom ett enhetligt skyltprogram i retrostil.

## kemtvätt redan

Många butiksägare och restauranger har tackat ja till de nya retroskyltarna.  
fått en 50-talsförvandling och

**JÄRNHANDEL**



när du kommer till

så ska du se att du kommer till

ett 50-talscentrum

ett 50-talscentrum



För två år sedan stod många lokaler i Hökarängens centrum tomma. Men genom projektet Höllbara Hökarängen har en del av dem blivit omgjorda till nya verksamheter som bageri, restaurang, butik och kontor. Bild: Ulf Eriksson/STERN

# SUNKFÖRORT BLEV TRENDIGT CENTRUM

För två år sedan stod många lokaler i Hökarängens centrum tomma. Men genom projektet Höllbara Hökarängen har en del av dem blivit omgjorda till nya verksamheter som bageri, restaurang, butik och kontor. Bild: Ulf Eriksson/STERN



Med nytt liv. Sundegebageri, cykelverkstad och rena kebucik hör till det som har öppnat bara Höllbara Hökarängen. Bild: Ulf Eriksson/STERN

för Hökarängen. Där måste nu alla affärer ha enhetliga neon-liknande skyltar som andas 50-tal.

## Twättstuga

förändra utseendet på sina verksamheters fönster. Samtidigt finns Stockholms uppdatering av neonskyltar och borttagning av galler. Genom designrådgivningen

## Kärrtorps torg ska bli ännu mer 50-tal

andas 50-tal

**YOGA** upp nya retroskyltar i gammal stil. Det är lite tillrättalagt, tycker jag. Hökarängens centrum är det finaste av alla.

– Det är ju lite dött men väldigt fint. Jag skulle inte ha

känslan hur det skulle kunna ha sett ut när området var nytt på 50-talet

– Vi vill få tillbaka känslan av 50-tal,

**fixas till i**

**det lilla med retrokorrekt  
50-talsreklam. Snyggt  
och tryggt**

The series was originally developed in response to an invitation by Kasra Alikhani, guest director of the independent theater Hagateatern in Gothenburg, to present parts of my research project in the theater's foyer in connection to his play *Handla med hjärtat* (Shop with the heart), which is based on a fictional story about the design process taking place when a trendy grocery store moves in to the premises of a former Middle Eastern corner shop.

## Chronostalgia: Well-Being for Whom?

“Chronostalgia” is a term coined by Bulgarian novelist Georgi Gospodinov. It combines *chronos*, meaning “time,” with “nostalgia,” to emphasize the centrality of the fantasy, or even obsession with, of a past located in a specific time as the site for a nostalgic longing. Chronostalgia is thus counterposed against longing for a place, in contrast to the primary understanding of *nostos* (homecoming) as spatial. This is the guiding concept in his novel *Time Shelter* (2020), in which he describes the phenomenon whereby specific decades are constructed as “safe spaces.” The novel tells the story of a clinic for Alzheimer patients, which is unique in that it provides rooms designed to correspond to the memories of the patients. The interior design of the “past clinic” creates decades with precision and attention to detail, from wallpaper to cigarette brands and even smells.

In design, “retro” is a term that is more frequently used than “nostalgia.” Retro can be understood as one form of nostalgia, often connected to reuse and recycling and particular styles usually connected to specific decades of the 1900s (which goes along with a linear and modernist understanding of design history, focusing on isolated aesthetic styles from a Western point of view). In this regard, retro is a form of nostalgia closely related to chronostalgia. But, if retro is a more interchangeable term and may include pop cultural practices that pick from the past at random, sometimes even in a subcultural ironic manner, the concept of *chronostalgia* rather highlights the cutting out of a specific time with an ambition of surgical precision, and additionally comments on the relationship between time and space in the quality of longing, and of the crafting of it.

As is often the case, reality surpasses fiction: on career websites, “nostalgist” is listed as a future job (Careers Wales, 2024; Navigate the Future, 2024) and described as:

... interior designers who recreate living environments for people after they have retired. These new living spaces will be based on an individual’s special memories. They will help to create the retirement village of the future—by focusing purely on the past. The Nostalgist will combine the role of Interior Designer with Historical

Researcher and Therapist. (Careers Wales, 2024)

In marketing research, nostalgia has been conceptualized as a useful ingredient or a tool for increasing revenue or the well-being of customers, primarily drawing from psychological research framing nostalgia as a “well-being emotion” that may increase self-esteem, social connectedness and a sense of meaningfulness, or even “self-continuity” (Sedikides et al., 2016; cf Sedikides & Wildschut, 2018). Marketing-oriented design research on nostalgia (Li et al., 2023; Xue, 2017) depart from these benefits to present strategies for “dormant brand revitalization” (Xue, 2017, p. 144), exploring how nostalgia can be employed for “commercial success and social good” (p. 18). If a psychology research approach focuses on individual and emotional dimensions of nostalgia, in other fields such as sociology, philosophy, and the humanities, nostalgia is usually approached as a historical emotion and collective phenomenon influenced by social, cultural, political, and technological factors.

Marketing-oriented design research explicitly engages with the utilization of nostalgia for commercial goals. Xue argues that accelerating change is one of the key features of our times and will remain so, and that for this reason nostalgia is likely to be increasingly valued. What research in psychology and in marketing broadly have in common is their interest in measuring the values, benefits, and uses of nostalgia, and their view of nostalgia as a designed strategy, capable of providing well-being for consumers. What it fails to address is for whom this well-being is intended, and the ways in which it is both relational and divisive, as well as its impacts on a discursive, sociopolitical level. Gospodinov touches on the asymmetries of nostalgia in his novel, most notably through the story of a patient who survived the Holocaust, for whom the chronostalgic interior design strategy seemed less of a solution for well-being.

### **Austerity Nostalgia and Welfare Nationalisms**

In *Theatres of Memory* (1994), Raphael Samuel analyzes the most everyday nostalgia—not only the expressions of nostalgia found in cinema, fashion, and popular music—present in taken-for-granted arenas such as flea markets, gift shops, product packaging, and restaurant menus.

126 In this, he identifies a populist phenomenon that he terms

“retrochic”: a tendency to sidestep established historical narratives, making room for historicist fantasies in everyday life (Guffey, 2006, p. 16–17). The seemingly everyday and banal can carry value-loaded nostalgias (as this study will show, even “welfare nationalisms,” with their ideas of a benevolent state that overshadow uncomfortable histories).

Drawing on Samuels’ work on everyday nostalgia, in *The Ministry of Nostalgia* (2017), Owen Hatherley excavates nostalgic ideologies embedded in British popular culture such as celebrity chef Jamie Oliver’s TV cooking shows and grocery store budget brands, seeking to understand why retro designs alluding to an authentic “Britishness” of the time around WWII, as well as why the postwar era has been so popular the last couple of decades. His primary object of analysis is the widely reproduced and paraphrased poster, “Keep Calm and Carry On.” This poster serves as the basis for an interrogation of what Hatherley comes to define as “austerity nostalgia.”

“Keep Calm and Carry On” is set in modernist typography (originally in Caslon Egyptian, which is no longer in use and often replicated with the British-designed sans serif Gill Sans) on a red background, with a logo of the crown on top of it. With variations include using the same layout with other messages, or exchanging the crown for other pictograms, the poster can be found anywhere from souvenir shops to cafés and PR campaigns. Originally part of a series of three posters designed for the British Ministry of Information in 1939 for the purpose of “stiffening resolve” in case of Nazi invasion, the “Keep Calm” poster never became an official propaganda poster (as opposed to the other two) and in fact was never mass-produced until 2008 when it gained so much popularity so that by 2009 it was copied and paraphrased widely, in Britain and beyond (Hatherley, 2017, p. 16).

The “Keep Calm” poster and the other (more and less ironic) paraphrased versions of its slogan are only the “tip of an iceberg” of austerity nostalgia; it must therefore be understood as one example of a larger landscape of popular culture that discursively produce certain kinds of ideological orientations towards national identity and history writing. Alongside the poster, Hatherley analyses selected parts of what he calls “a whole micro-industry of austerity nostalgia aimed straight at the stomach” (Hatherley, 2017, p. 25). One example is multi-billionaire celebrity chef Jamie Oliver, whose mission is to educate the working classes to eat well, by introducing a menu that heavily references postwar Britain. While Oliver is rescuing the poor with his “austerity nostalgic” cuisine, Hatherley argues that

“real” austerity nostalgia can be found in the grocery store’s budget shelves. Similarly, delivered by multinational food manufacturers and targeted to low-income population, brands such as Tesco Value and Sainsbury’s Basics (that, in a Swedish context, would be equivalents of, for instance, Axfoods’ Garant and Ica Basic, formerly Blåvitt) are affordable, low-quality products alluding to postwar modernism in their designs (cf Helena Mattsson’s analysis of Swedish budget brand Blåvitt (Mattsson, 2012)).

Central to Hatherley’s analysis is the contention that “austerity nostalgia” is a rhetoric through which right-wing austerity politics gets people to agree with, and adapt to, budget cuts, by referring to a time when the left-wing movement and nationalism merged, in the face of the dangers presented by WWII. Nationalistic austerity nostalgia also fails to acknowledge colonialism and the racial characteristics of the past and contemporary working classes. Hatherley illuminates this point through an analysis of how the working class and British empire is portrayed in Ken Loach’s documentary *Spirit of 45* (2013), which, rich with archival footage, celebrated the radical changes made by the Labour government of Clement Attlee in postwar Britain, which came to power in 1945. Hatherley argues that the documentary’s ignorance of Britain’s colonial history makes it an example of “left-wing melancholy” and that the references in the film, such as brass bands and union banners, do not necessarily speak to the working classes of today, rather on the contrary feed into nationalism and an imagined community based on wholeness (Hatherley, 2017, p. 54). As a contrast, Luke Fowlers’ avant-garde film *The Poor Stockinger, the Luddite Cropper and the Deluded Followers of Joanna Southcott* (2012) also tells a story of postwar Britain, presents a complex and dialectical narrative, not a populist one. This film employs landscape rather than archival footage and, as Hatherley argues, there is nothing in it that Blue Labour could find useful—there is no Gill sans or other elements of austerity nostalgia (Hatherley, 2017, p. 53).

*The Ministry of Nostalgia: Consuming Austerity* argues that the first myth of the “Keep Calm” poster, and thus of austerity nostalgia, is that of “the benevolent state” and that the poster’s aesthetic function to disguise its iron determination (Hatherley, 2017, p. 33). Paraphrased versions of the “Keep Calm” slogan were used in campaigns for public institutions such as Transport for London in 2000 and the London Police in 2009, with the original text replaced by provocatively authoritarian slogans which Hatherley describes as “examples of disavowal and the use of irony to say appalling things unchallenged” (p. 36).

What the poster and its paraphrasing siblings do is to draw a direct line to the British 1940s, which was a moment of victory tapping into a “narrative about Britain’s ‘finest hour’—the aerial Battle of Britain in 1940–41—when it was the only country left fighting the Third Reich” (Hatherley 2017, p. 16). This moment in history has been exploited by right-wing politics since 1979, legitimizing a scarce provision of resources through a rhetoric of sacrifice. Referring back to the 1940s has, in a British context, become an obsession, functional for “the need to get back to the place or moment before the country lost its moral and cultural bearings” (Gilroy, 2004, p. 96–97, in Hatherley 2017) and helping to actively forget other aspects of recent British history such as the colonial Empire.

While the “keep calm” nostalgia points back to and draws from the post/war times, it is not based on lived experience as it is mainly consumed by younger generations. As such, Hatherley argues that it serves as an example of “legislated nostalgia” (Coupland 1991), meaning an imposed collective memory that serves an ideological function: “The poster,” he argues, “isn’t just a case of the return of the repressed, it is rather the return of repression itself. It is a *nostalgia for the state of being repressed*—solid, stoic, public-spirited, as opposed to the depoliticized, hysterical, and privatized reality of Britain over the last thirty years” (Hatherley, 2017, p. 21).

Austerity nostalgia is thus a form of nostalgia for the public modernism thought to characterize the period between 1930s to early 1970s, but it could just as well be described as a conservative longing for security and stability as a response to hard times. By pairing Empire-amnesia and the national heroism of the Blitz together with the myth of a benevolent state, the narrative delivered through austerity nostalgia is one that combines a conservative nationalism with welfare state socialism—and in doing so, fails to acknowledge the colonial past and present or to deliver adequate responses to present-day austerity.

Hatherley’s in-depth analysis of the “Keep Calm” poster is valuable as it shows that this ironic, seemingly unimportant, innocent artifact in reality functions as a rich container of social imaginaries, drawing from a highly politicized well. The modernist tongue-in-cheek shop signage in Hökarängen, Bagarmossen, and Bandhagen, which repeatedly is pointed out as a success in interviews and ascribed value has similar qualities in that it embodies a certain imaginary of the nation.

## Swedish “People’s Home” Nostalgia: A Guilt-Free Homecoming

Swedish “‘People’s Home’ nostalgia” (a phrase which can be distilled to the single word *folkhemsnostalgi* in Swedish) shares some characteristics with British “austerity nostalgia” but is also different. If national nostalgias often are fueled by revolutions or other rapid political and societal changes, People’s Home nostalgia can be seen in the light of similar neoliberal politics as Britain. During most of the twentieth century, modernism, the welfare society, and the social democratic People’s Home were the dominant political projects and synonymous with a Swedish national self-image. The 1950s in particular was a time marked by optimism for the future and financial growth. Cities grew and so did commerce. In the 1980s and 1990s, Sweden changed. With the right-wing winds that blew in came system change and deregulations. With role models such as Ronald Reagan in the US and Margaret Thatcher in the UK, concepts such as growth, individual freedom, and entrepreneurship were foregrounded and the trade union movements were repressed. According to historian of ideas Jenny Andersson, contemporary People’s Home nostalgia is a result of the austerity policies of the 1980s and the financial crisis of the 1990s, rather than a product of a certain year of revolution (Andersson, 2009a). During these decades, Swedish society changed so radically that it laid the foundation for the preceding postwar era to feel increasingly distant and lost. It is only during the late 1990s and above all the 2000s that People’s Home nostalgia took shape and became a phenomenon. Prior to this, according to Andersson, the political project of the People’s Home, and objects and aesthetic expressions reminiscent of it, were not considered attractive but rather associated with the exercise of power and negative connotations of social engineering. When the crisis of the 1990s eventually turned into a boom, a nouveau riche middle class emerged in Sweden, housing speculation and lifestyle consumption flourished, and People’s Home nostalgia became popular. The canonized post-war graphic designer Olle Eksell’s label design for “ögonkakao” could be seen hanging on walls in homestyled real estate ads, and the housewife ideal grew strong in blogs and fashion magazines with leading figures such as the blogger, and later tv show host and social media influencer, Elsa Billgren personifying a contemporary version of a 1950s housewife. In recent years, there is even a real estate firm that sells apartments built in the 1950s in Stockholm’s suburbs as exclusive “historic homes”

(literally the name of the company, *Historiska hem*), something that was unthinkable one or two decades before. Hatherley comments on the equivalent tendency of certain postwar architecture in Britain coming into fashion again: “If, for Adolf Loos and generations of modernist architects ornament was crime, here modernist buildings are made into ornaments” (Hatherley, 2017, p. 29). It is important to emphasize that is true of *certain* architecture, as other modernist postwar buildings are subject to stigmatization and demolition (Mack, 2023a; Schalk et al., 2022). Hökarängen in Stockholm, Sweden, may serve as an example of how People’s Home nostalgia is celebrated and may even shape the (sub/)urban landscape in urban renewal, as this study will show.

Boym has argued that nostalgia and the formation of golden ages often follow revolutions: the French revolution gave shape to its preceding era, *l’ancien regime*, and the Russian perestroika and independence of former Soviet Union states paved way for a longing for Russia’s golden ages. However, she reminds us, such nostalgia “is not always for the ancient regime or fallen empire but also for the unrealized dreams of the past and visions of the future that became obsolete” (Boym, 2001, p. XVI), which may well be true of the Swedish People’s Home nostalgia in times of neoliberalism.

While nostalgia is primarily understood as a form of remembering, the remembering hinges on forgetfulness: “what [memory] contrives symptomatically to forget is as important as what it remembers” (Samuel, 1994, p. x). If Hatherley, drawing on Gilroy, points to how British welfare nostalgia is constructed to actively forget the empire, then such memory loss is also built into Swedish People’s Home nostalgia. In the idea of a progressive and benevolent welfare state that accommodates “all” by erasing difference through the concept of (one) “people,” uncomfortable stories about the patriarchal and nationally uniform structures of the People’s Home are obscured. Such amnesia makes possible what Boym calls “a guilt-free homecoming” (2001, p. XIV), drawing from Michael Kammen’s definition of nostalgia as “essentially history without guilt” (1991, p. 688 in Boym 2001).

### Nostalgia and Distinction

As stated previously, in marketing, nostalgia is considered a device that increases individuals’ well-being and can be useful for brand revitalization. Ethnographic research into marketing shows how



Fig. 12.  
Film still from interview film with TV-host, blogger and influencer Elsa Billgren, produced for the exhibition "Mitt 50-tal" at Nordiska museet.



Fig. 13.  
Photo of shop entrance and interior of the furniture shop Folkhemmet, from their website [www.folkhemmet.se](http://www.folkhemmet.se), accessed 7 January 2025.



Fig. 14.  
Screenshot from the website of real estate company Historiska hem (Historical homes) advertising a *funkis* (functionalist) apartment in Bandhagen, accessed 7 January 2025.

nostalgia is employed by shopkeepers to differentiate themselves on the market and to captivate consumers (Brembeck, 2015; Brembeck & Sörum, 2017). Nostalgia functions as a marketing device to increase the value of “singular” objects on the market—be it single products, a shop, or even the shopping street. One example of this is a shopping street in central Gothenburg called Magasinsgatan, on which the shopkeepers employ a variety of nostalgic strategies, which might be described as “affective assemblages,” that distinguish that street from, on the one hand, the commercial inner city and, on the other, the suburban flea markets (Brembeck, 2015). The retro and vintage displays—not necessarily meaning that the products sold are second hand—help increase the value of the shopping street. The display is thus a device that can offer an identity to commercial actors in an ambiguous market space, helping them to differentiate themselves from other markets. Retro retailing thus often exists in ambiguous spaces, between the mainstream and the alternative (Crewe et al., 2003). Nostalgia is here one ingredient among a series of micro-strategies employed to create order and articulate a place identity that can serve as branding for this renewed district (cf Franzén et al., 2016). The nostalgic vibe can be created with different devices, it may be objects or practices (bartering, renting, food culture). This can be understood as “affective assemblage”—but the affect is generated only in composition with the right bodies (Brembeck & Sörum, 2017).

Brembeck’s study show how individual traders use nostalgia as an affective compositional tool to increase the value of their products and shops, while Franzén, Hertting, and Thörn’s study of the same street puts the value creation in a wider context of place-branding and shows the centrality of micro-strategies in the creation of new place narratives and their consequences on the function and understanding of public space. The affective assemblages (Brembeck, 2017) helps to create a hegemonic “sensescape” (Franzén et al., 2016) so that “when the senses align with the overall theme, the space functions as inviting for some groups and exclusionary for others. We analyze this process as a dialectic between imagining and cleanliness ... In urban theory, this is called a form of atmospheric power (‘ambient power’)” (Franzén et al., 2016, p.191).

As this study shows, nostalgia is a marketing tool that is also used in place marketing to raise the value of an entire neighborhood, or even type of neighborhood or housing stock (for instance, 1950s suburbs), and create distinctions between different neighborhoods, which in turn can contribute to discursively strengthening segregation in

the city. Furthermore, studies such as Brembeck's make an important point that affect is generated, and nostalgia becomes effective only in composition between certain bodies. It is important to dwell on this reasoning and see it in the light of a multicultural society characterized by structural racism, in which some bodies are more valued than others in the market-oriented value production of place.

## Nostalgia as a Distinction-Making Device

*Nostalgia* inherently builds on long-distance relationships. As a recipe, the comforting ingredient in nostalgia is always a sense of belonging in relation to an imagined community, which is mixed with the pain of its loss. The quantities of these ingredients may, however, vary, with some nostalgias leaning more towards the lost community and restoration of “home” and longing for wholeness whereas others are more oriented towards the pain while accepting homelessness to some degree. Thus, when talking about nostalgia, it is useful to use the plural form to acknowledge that there are plenty of types, with varying qualities. What philosopher Svetlana Boym defines as *restorative nostalgia* wants to re-install that imagined home, not really acknowledging that it is imagined, while *reflective nostalgia*, on the other hand, is a more grief-like, processual, and less solution-oriented sentiment. While restorative nostalgia is a useful framework for nationalist and/or far-right political projects, reflective is closer to the experience of exile. However, restorative nostalgias do not necessarily identify or frame themselves as far-right or nationalist—on the contrary, there are many examples of restorative nostalgias that are thought of as innocent and friction-less re-installments of a public good that is beneficial for all, which makes them ignorant and superior nostalgias. The fact that nostalgia builds on a notion of “homecoming” (*nostos*) inevitably makes it divisive, as what is “home” for one may not be home for the other. Nostalgia is thus divisive in its nature, and its main components are distance and fantasy which inevitably mean that a landscape of nostalgias offer a variety of positionalities and dreams.

What Owen Hatherley calls “austerity nostalgia,” and I term “(Swedish) People’s Home nostalgia”, are two examples of popular and seemingly innocent nostalgias that rely on nationalist ideology paired with socialist welfare state political projects. These nostalgic fantasies think of the national identity—Britishness or Swedishness—as central to the welfare state, forgetting the colonial histories which make them incapable of thinking the future beyond a repetition of the logics of the fantasy of the respective Western nation as an imagined community. Hatherley’s deconstruction of the widely paraphrased and often ironically referenced “Keep Calm and Carry On” poster is helpful to understand present-day

nostalgic designs and discourses in Sweden. No matter the amount of critical distance and tongue-in-cheek irony that nostalgia is presented with, it still reproduces and co-constructs an orientation towards—if not a longing for—a certain national uniformity. As nostalgia is divisive, this is a meaningful fantasy for *some*, while for others it may pass unnoticed or be found triggering or provoking; in all cases, it is discursive.

Nostalgia is activated through design: through objects, services, or created atmospheres or *sensescapes*. Nostalgic design can be understood as a device that can be used to define an identity and positionality. The case of the shopping street Magasinsgatan in the Swedish city of Gothenburg shows exactly this, as various forms of nostalgia are employed by the shopkeepers to captivate consumers and add value to their businesses and products, while it is also an atmospheric strategy that brands the street as an “ambiguous space,” positioned against the mainstream commerce on the one hand and the suburban flea markets on the other hand, a “third (market) space” and a place identity that fits into the reinvention of the postindustrial city. In this regard, nostalgia is a distinction-making device: the divisiveness of nostalgia is an inherent function of the way in which it manifests distances. As the researchers studying Magasinsgatan point out, the *sensescape* of the street speaks to certain audiences and the affective nostalgia appears only in relation to certain bodies—those who find a sense of “home” in the nostalgic design and function as consumers of it. Nostalgia is thus a design device that has exclusionary functions which, in a multicultural and pluralistic society, call for closer examination.



## Chapter 3

A Theory and Practice of  
*Reading (the) Signs*



## Paranoid and Reparative Reading: A Methodology

The title of this thesis, *Reading the Signs*, recalls the function of signs both as “material witnesses” of past and present events and ideologies (Schuppli, 2020) and as indications of a (potentially worrying) future. The “reading” that I refer to in the title follows, in this work, what queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick would describe as *paranoid*.<sup>12</sup> Her discussion of paranoid versus reparative critical reading practices is helpful for understanding the methodological composition of this study, which performs, on the one hand, a discourse analysis of urban renewal projects and, on the other, a series of “interstices” that describe my practice-based explorations; I treat these two approaches as different but intimately intertwined modes of operation.

Sedgwick’s *paranoid reading* is one that departs from suspicion and criticality, striving to reveal hidden meanings and underlying assumptions and power dynamics, and, ultimately, to uncover and challenge the hidden agendas and biases of a text (or any object of reading). As such, discourse analysis is per se a form of “paranoid reading” in that it is a method for scrutinizing what is being, as well as what is not being, said, against a background of what is possible, and what is not possible, to say. Sedgwick argues that the main imperative of paranoia is to eliminate surprises, which makes it a “strong theory,” explaining that “the aversion to surprises seems to be what cements the intimacy between paranoia and knowledge per se” (2003, p. 130). In this regard, suspicion makes the reader productive and enables a critical and scrutinizing positionality and work-mode, focused on evidence and exposure.

The reading of the signs in Hökarängen and other Stockholm suburbs undertaken in this research would not have been possible, or at least would not be the same, without on-site presence and long-term dwelling. In this regard, it is inevitably an embodied reading, which points back to the development of Sedgwick’s concept of paranoid reading as one based on suspicions accumulated through lived experience in which embodied

12 A special thanks to Klara Meijer who introduced paranoid reading as method and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s thinking to me through her article “Läsaren som medskaber av affekt: En paranoid och skamfylld läsning av Inger Christensens roman *Azorno*” (Meijer, 2013).

knowledge serves as a resource (her thinking and examples derive from gay communities, post-AIDS). She reminds us:

In a world where no one need be delusional to find evidence of systemic oppression, to theorize out of anything but a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naïve, pious, or complaisant. (Sedgwick, 2003, pp. 125-126)

In contrast to paranoid reading, Sedgwick proposes reparative reading as an approach that seeks connection, healing, and transformation. Here, she employs the *object theory* of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, who sees the paranoid position as oscillatory in relation to the depressive position. For Klein, “paranoia” is a state of defensive alertness to dangers projected onto, carved out of, and ingested from the world around. The depressive position, in contrast, mitigates anxiety and it is from this position that it is possible to assemble oneself or repair “the murderous part-objects into something like a whole.” However, Sedgwick emphasizes,

not necessarily like any preexisting whole. Once assembled to one’s own specifications, the more satisfying object is available both to be identified with and to offer one nourishment and comfort in turn. Among Klein’s names for the reparative process is love. (p. 128)

While the paranoid position is self-reinforcing, the reparative reading that builds on Kleinian understandings of “depression” represents an achievement and a more risky position and activity, one that inaugurates possibility and seeks pleasure.

When applied to the structure and methodology of this thesis: If the discourse analysis at hand relies on a paranoid reading, the series of artistic and designerly interventions framed as “reparative interstices” represent reparative reading in their collaborative and community-making approaches and their countering and renegotiations of narratives. The interstices search for more adequate narratives, insisting on the on-the-ground practices regardless of the narratives imposed by housing companies or the media. Paranoid and reparative practices are *mutable* (Sedgwick prefers the term “practices” to “positions” and emphasizes that it is not about personality types but rather about approaches in operating): as she puts it,

to, and need to, develop and disseminate the richest reparative practices” (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 150). Moreover, both paranoid and reparative reading must here be understood as umbrella concepts including and assembling a variety of methods. As researchers Celia Lury and Nina Wakeford argue, “it is not possible to apply a method as if it were indifferent or external to the problem it seeks to address ... method must rather be made specific and relevant to the problem” (Lury et al., 2014, pp. 2–3). Furthermore, epistemology is not inseparable from ontology—sociologists John Law and John Urry remind us that methods are productive in making and enacting social worlds and thus are involved “in the business of ‘ontological politics’” (p. 391). In this chapter, I will introduce a number of methods that in combination make the “methodological assemblage” (Law, 2004) of the research study at hand, which I present as being intertwined with ontological politics.

### The Dig-Where-You-Stand Graphic Designer

This research project is undertaken from the positionality of a double situatedness, at the intersection between being a long-term resident and a discipline-critical graphic designer. Both forms of situatedness can be located *in the margins*: I am not any resident, but one in a stigmatized suburb, which also has implications on my position as a designer working from and with this location—as such, I am not (only) a designer with a capital “D” but one that engages with the boundaries and margins of the discipline.

bell hooks conceptualizes *margins* as spaces of not only repression but of resistance, radical possibility, and openness. She argues that it is crucial to understand marginality as a state and site of creativity and power—“that inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonized/colonizer” (hooks, 1990, p. 343). In the margins, one develops a special way of seeing reality; one is aware of the center and aware of the political relationship between center–margin, an awareness which enables an oppositional world view.

In the context of the study at hand, the margin–center relationship in the segregated city overlaps with the margin–center relationship in the design discipline. The two layers inform and illuminate each other. The mobility and dialectic between margin–center constantly raises questions about agency, room for action, direction, address, resource use, and more. hooks argues that margins are not only a matter of

positionality but also a location to be chosen. She invites her readers to participate in the margins, seeing the world and acting from them, as a productive place that offers insights into the state of the world and opportunities to intervene in it. Ultimately, it is the margin and not the center that enables true insight into the conditions of the world.

A related concept that offers a framework for the double situatedness at hand is journalist Sven Lindqvist's "dig-where-you-stand" concept, which is also essentially a theorization of positionality, worldview, and room for action. Lindqvist wrote the handbook *Dig Where You Stand* in 1978, which aimed at supporting industrial workers in Sweden in researching their own work and workplace. In this book, Lindqvist presents a materialist analysis of history writing, arguing that the labor history is and will continue to be written by the employers (capital-driven success stories of companies, obscuring the deep knowledges of production and the lived realities of workers and their life trajectories) unless the workers write their own. In a powerful first chapter titled "In the World," he critiques, for instance, how traveling abroad has become part of leisure life, and that workers encounter new places as consuming tourists rather than in their capacity as workers or for the sake of collegiality and knowledge about production. In essence, this short chapter delineates the connectedness between worker and place, and the meaningfulness of arriving at new places with the optic of one's own situatedness.

With this handbook in informal research or "barefoot" research—which he argues to be no less valid than formal academic research—Lindqvist wanted to encourage workers to counter their employers' narratives by undertaking research by themselves and writing about their workplaces in self-organized study groups. Each chapter in the handbook presents sites and methods that are useful to "dig" with—to investigate and collect data. This includes, for example, the archives of the Work Environment Agency, and methods like oral history. Following the book, a movement called "Dig Where You Stand," or just "The Dig Movement," took form and in only a few years resulted in around 10,000 study groups in Sweden and other countries. The study groups produced exhibitions, books, theater plays, and ultimately the movement led to the establishment of 1,300 permanent "museums of working life" in Sweden.

Researching Hökarängen, I am digging where I stand as resident. But the digging is done while employing my professional vision as graphic designer and is an investigation of the labor in design

in at least two ways: through it, I explore how design is employed in urban renewal and how design can be practiced in reparative initiatives.

### **The Design Optic as a Pedagogical Tool**

The dig-where-you-stand approach here offers the graphic designer, as a reader of the urban landscape, a pedagogical tool.

Essentially, graphic designers and visual communicators are specialized in creating sensescapes, and work with highly granular tools (for instance, the detail in typography and the precision in colors) to create distinction so that one brand or trademark (words that are increasingly used for even the least commercial agents and activities) renders itself distinguished from another. Graphic design is not just about the composition of text and images in a layout but just as much about the development of strategies for visual communication, which essentially is about taking a position in a social landscape and speaking with a visual voice that connects with certain audiences, targeted or not. This is not only applicable to commercial designers, if a clear cut separation between commerce and public is possible at all, but just as much to designers like myself, who have mainly worked for public cultural institutions and academia—also in this field, the expertise of the designer is, on the one hand, that of an organizer and visual editor, and, on the other, the creator of a voice and positionality in the field and the public realm. This work includes the interaction between designer and commissioner/client, where the strategy is implicitly or explicitly negotiated and manifested. This to say, that graphic designers (or art directors, visual communicators, visual strategists and more) specialize in operating in and navigating a social landscape; this certainly does not mean that they are necessarily socially mobile and have access to social groups or audiences—quite the opposite, as the cultural field is generally overrepresented by a white middle class. However, the professional vision (Goodwin, 1994) of the designer holds knowledge, and may ideally share insights into how social hierarchies are crafted, renegotiated, published, and distributed in our everyday lives and through the most ephemeral and taken-for-granted, such as for instance shop signage and “typographic landscaping” within urban environments (Järlehed & Jaworski, 2015).

If the practice of designing visual identities and artifacts is inherently, or at least partly, about creating distinction and consistency, then the discipline-critical approach advocated for and practiced here is about resisting distinction and allowing things to exist side-by-side,

questioning instead of supporting social hierarchies, siding with amateur and illicit design practices (Martin, 2022) and acknowledging design with a lower-case “d” (Attfield, 2020).

I see my design practice as inherently containing a paranoid-reparative dynamic. This includes a healthy and curious suspicion about my designerly preferences and choices, affirming and following the joy of creating while always also being open to, or even attracted to, scrutiny of those paths and an awareness of the performative aspects of designer role (which is the paranoid part of it). This then is practiced in tandem with a reparative approach, which is attentive to and seeks out sites, gaps, and interstitial spaces where the designer’s skillset and criticality can come to use, not only as a service-provider but also as a knowledge-provider and pedagogical opportunity.

My practice in both design and education (as teacher and learner) is rooted in the Swedish pedagogical tradition called *folkbildning*, a relative of the radical pedagogy of Paulo Freire or what is known as “really useful knowledge” in a UK context, for instance. Essentially, an anti-authoritarian educational tradition, *folkbildning* is driven by the questions and curriculums defined by the participants themselves, based on a belief in equally learning together rather than a vertical expert–student or master–apprentice-relationship. *Folkbildning* and its formal infrastructure, the *studieförbund* (adult study association), was also the institutional framework for The Dig Movement, and where I worked previous to my PhD studies.

By reading the urban landscape through the professional vision of a designer, it is possible to unpack why things look the way they look. This is a pedagogical opportunity, in which professional vision and design practice ideally can be employed to support the agency of those who fall outside of the category of the professional authority, including informal designers (in an urban context, this would be the shop owners or any other agent whose presence is made in the urban landscape) and residents. In this regard, the dig-designer’s reading bursts open the neutralized aesthetic veneers of the urban landscape and invites an exploration of its segmentations and contestations. It unpacks the implicit social dynamics of designed artifacts, asking: What values they emanate from, and what do they, or what are they intended to, evoke? Thus, the dig-where-you-stand graphic designer works as a tool to intervene and produce interpretative tools to reclaim agency, rather than to merely “communicate.”

Walking, I will establish my presence, as one who is claiming the earth, creating a sense of belonging, a culture of place.

—bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place*<sup>1</sup>

It took me a long time to notice, and then acknowledge, that walking, one of my taken-for-granted ways of operating, can be understood as a research method. Be it individually or with others, in self-initiated or commissioned work, I have (co-) organized walks as an artistic method for years, as a form of embodied practice of reading a place. Tailored to specific audiences and situations, the walks have focused on different themes and routes. I have also joined many walks that others have arranged. Even though a walk is a predetermined route and story, it leaves many openings for conversation, interaction, and input—in this way, it is unpredictable and dialogical. It is also a shared temporal and sensorial experience. In my practice, the walk has been a form of both dissemination and exploration—it has been a format for me to try out a narrative, to read and write my surroundings and the object of my study, and to make connections.

One walk that I co-organized back in 2014 as a member of SIFAV,

in collaboration with un-disciplinary researcher Josefin Wangel, addressed the theme of “the sustainable city.” We began in Hökarängen and ended in the newly established area of Hammarby sjöstad, a short bus ride away. By putting these two places in relation to each other, we were able to have a conversation about the divided city and how sustainability initiatives relate to class. Both Josefin Wangel and I had followed sustainability initiatives by the same housing company, Stockholmshem, but in very different places: while Hökarängen is a low-income area where a large part of the population has a comparatively (in a Swedish context) sustainable lifestyle, Hammarby sjöstad is a newly built district populated by residents who fly and drive and are terrible at even the simplest act of recycling. Despite this, Hammarby sjöstad is used by the City of Stockholm in its international branding as a showcase for sustainable urban development (Wangel, 2012).

148 While the lifestyles of the residents of Hammarby sjöstad are made invisible, in contrast the residents of Hökarängen are subjected to programs targeting desired behavioral changes in the form of courses on how to cook vegetarian dishes and a competition about reducing electricity consumption, run by the municipal housing company. The walk became a format where these narrative differences and inequalities in access to and consumption of resources could be examined and discussed on-site.

As a doctoral student, I was asked by Konsthall C, an art space in my neighborhood, Hökarängen, to host a short walk in the area for a Nordic network for art and urban planning. In this walk, I took this opportunity to try a new route and a perspective that commented on the narratives I have been told about the place through literature, guided walks and media. Typically such narratives are linear, placing particular emphasis on the suburb’s origin and the individual authorship of architect and planner David Helldén, the concept of neighborhood planning (*grannskapsplanering*), and the political visions

of the People's Home project, in particular highlighting architectural qualities and details. Additionally, in some cases, attention would normally be directed to contemporary and sometimes sensational elements such as new cafés or the increasing housing prices, which attested to a place in a state of change, somehow rendering the area as two-fold and dichotomized: a contemporary presence that cannot live up to its (romanticized) visionary original: a utopia and a failure.

I applied a historiographical perspective in framing the walk, attending to structurally overlooked histories and following a non-linear, decentralizing narrative. A guiding principle was to renegotiate the dichotomy that poses the past as *authentic* and the present as *inauthentic*, as well as the chronological, normative, conceptualization of time that queer theorist Elizabeth Freeman has theorized as "chrononormativity" (2010), which enables some bodies and events to be perceived as historically significant, while others are  
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erased or forgotten. The walk attempted to renegotiate these understandings by making (other) connections across time.

The walk began after a study visit by the group to the artist Valeria Montti Colque's hard-to-find semi-basement studio,<sup>2</sup> which is located in the middle of a residential area. This allowed the route to echo that of a resident leaving their apartment to, for example, head to the metro or the grocery store, instead of adopting the visitor's position, which arrives at the metro station and then moves deeper into the neighborhood from there. Since it was a cold winter and there was a lot of snow, I limited the walk to three stops.

2 Swedish-Chilean artist Valeria Montti Colque's works draw from diasporic experiences and questions of belonging. The landscapes of Hökarängen can often be found in her image-universe, for instance in the monumental installation *Cosmonación* presented in the Chilean pavilion of 60th Venice Biennale 2024.

The first stop was on Tobaksvägen, where I talked about the unique co-op Cigarrlådan, where I used to live. It is the only co-op in Sweden that was initiated by tenants in an apartment building that is not architecturally designed for the purpose of housing a collective kitchen. The association was started by single mothers who helped each other out with their kids. After the co-op was established, it expanded apartment-by-apartment after negotiations and cooperation with the housing company Stockholmshem in the 1980s. Cigarrlådan is still very active today and is also unique in Sweden in terms of how communal meals are organized and their frequency. The story about the mothers of Cigarrlådan reflects another story, this one about mothers of the previous generation: in the 1950s and 1960s, the same building housed a  
 150 so-called “maternity home,” an institution where unmarried women were placed with their children. I had become aware of this story through archivist and gender theorist Jessica Nordström’s counter-archiving project *En annan historia* (a title which in English means “a different story”), which was undertaken at Hökarängsarkivet (the Hökarängen archive) in 2014. Through the project, Nordström collected oral histories from people who had lived in the Cigarrlådan building with their financially disadvantaged and socially stigmatized mothers as children (the open call included the mothers but didn’t garner any responses). This stop in the walk, with its stories—of the maternity home and the co-op—highlighted many things: marginalized women’s histories of the area, unique and visionary but under-researched living practices (the co-op), the shadow side of the public housing project (the maternity homes), and the changing role of the municipal housing company. Today, it would be more or less unthinkable to negotiate and cooperate with individual civil servants in the way that was—admittedly thanks to the enormous efforts of a well-organized

group of women—possible at the time of the co-op's establishment in 1985.

2

The second stop was at a smaller square, an open space on the pedestrian street in the suburb's center which is called "Nisses torg" (Nisse's square). Nisses torg is home to the premises of the Cornelis Vreeswijk Society, named after the well-known troubadour Cornelis Vreeswijk, who lived in the neighborhood and worked in the social work office in Hökarängen in the 1960s and whose lyrics reflected his meetings with individuals in need. Located at the square for a number of years, the society arranges music events and other events. At this stop, I began my talk by explaining a concept drawn from the 151 journalism of the 1970s: "Nisse i Hökarängen," a term for "the man on the street." This concept, together with Cornelis Vreeswijk and a number of other examples of how Hökarängen has been portrayed in media, served as an entry point in addressing notions of: places and their residents, the (absent) agency of the uneducated laborer, and Hökarängen as the "image" of a white working-class suburb (while at the same time, the area's population is more ethnically diverse than the City of Stockholm's average). This last point alluded to the forgetfulness surrounding immigration, not least as a cornerstone of the Swedish welfare state, and Sweden's much longer history of diversity in its population. Nisses torg thus served as a place to reflect on the concept of "the man on the street" and how places, and place names, project stereotypes that in turn construct narratives of the neighborhood or the nation.

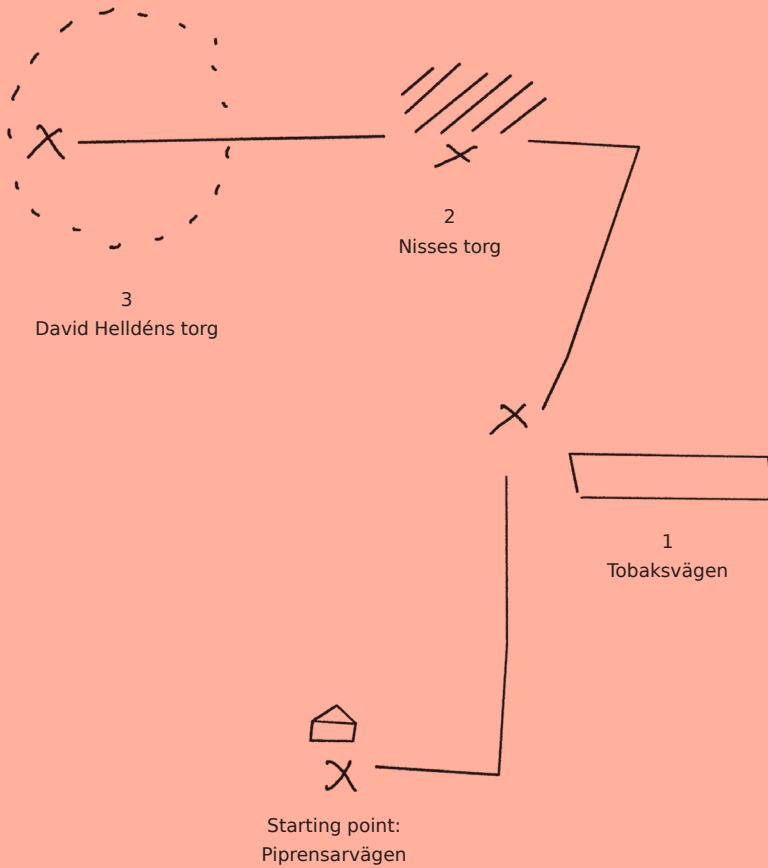
The third and final stop was at a corner of David Helldéns torg, the main square in the center of Hökarängen, which is named after the area's architect. Here, I presented my current and previous research on the planning conditions and challenges that this suburban center has experienced in comparison to other counterparts, discussing how these challenges prompted a series of initiatives leading up to the urban renewal project and nostalgic narrative that is subject of the present doctoral research. Thus, this stop used the center's square as a setting for a conversation about the politics of the local center, considering how in particular its origin story has regained relevance in times of austerity, and thus how the past is used to project the future.

152 Overall, what was most difficult to map out and unpack was Hökarängen's ethnic diversity and migration stories, which pointed towards a lack of verbalized knowledge and discourse on this matter, as if such stories are reserved for certain areas of the city while in others they remain obscured and untold. At the third and final stop in the walk, I addressed the Latin American grocery stores and restaurants that are or have been located on the site and partly function as spaces where diasporic communities gather. The challenge represented by the many stories yet to be researched or verbalized also prompted a discussion with Konsthall C, which led to the collaboration I describe in the section addressing Hökarängsarkivet (see Reparative Interstice #1 on page 39).



Nisses torg. 2022.  
Photo: Erik Annerborn

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The guided walk was designed in response to a commission by Konsthall C. It was held on November 21, 2022, for and in conversation with representatives of the Museum of Impossible Forms (FI), meter (DK), Til Vægs (DK), and Femma Planning (FI).

## What Is It Possible to Say?

*During the pandemic, I occasionally broke the isolation at home by going to my local bakery in Hökarängen. At one point, I saw an ad for a guided walk and signed up. It turned out that the guide had lost his job at the Town Hall because of the decreasing number of tourists during the pandemic and instead organized guided tours in his own neighborhood. We were a group of five people that afternoon, three of whom were a group of friends who had gathered from other parts of the city. The walk departed from the bakery, and the guide, who himself had a previous career as a pastry chef, said this bakery was a very good one, and that prior to their establishment the premises used to be a café for retired members of the local tenants' association, which I as a resident remembered very well. The three gentlemen responded that they'd had coffee at this new café, and it was all good, but that they had been treated badly, and criticized the bakery for being more self-confident than was justified. Next, the guide stopped at a local pizzeria that recently had changed owners and told us that the new owners know what they're doing, real Neapolitan pizza, as opposed to the previous owners who made pizza that you can find just everywhere. One of the gentlemen in the group asked about gentrification in the area, but the guide couldn't answer, as he had not heard this word before. As we continued the guided walk, we passed terrace houses, and the guide told us that a decade ago they were converted from public rental apartments into condominiums (bostadsrätter) and that the tenants had made big profits from the affair. Later, he would continuously tell us about not only architecture and historical events, but also the house prices.*

A guided walk can be done in many ways and be organized around particular themes and focuses. What was notable about the guided walk described through the above anecdote was that it centered a narrative of improvements, and an approach that valued the current shops over their predecessors. Such an approach is not unique to this individual city guide but rather reflects a narrative recognizable from popular discourse and media. At one point, one of the participants suggested the term “gentrification” as a possible framework for connecting and understanding the stories presented by the guide. But this term shows itself to be difficult to gather around, as it is unfamiliar to some and may have different meanings and connotations to others.

With this example, I intend to show that there is a topology

of stories or narratives that can be recognized, told, and retold. In this case, a narrative of a suburb in change—with high-quality shops replacing vernacular, supposedly lesser quality, ones, and increasing housing prices—is presented as a natural way to introduce the area to new visitors. There is also a possibility of reframing and establishing new frameworks and narratives. In this case, the term “gentrification” serves as an example of a concept that, when suggested in the conversation, was not established or recognizable enough to be understood yet still functioned as an attempt at a contestation of the presented logic.

What is possible to say and what is not possible to say can be explored through the concept of *discourse*. Discourse can be defined as “a system of exclusion, a historical, modifiable and institutionally constraining system” (Foucault, 1981, p. 54). As opposed to what structural methods do, discourse analysis is not about linguistic construction or formal rules that allow communication, but rather a search for the conditions of the existence of meanings. The question of discourse is “not one of codes but one of events: the law of the existence of utterances which made them possible” (p. 105). Michel Foucault, a key thinker of discourse, in his seminal book *Archaeology of Knowledge*, which was first published in 1972, relates discourse analysis to a form of archaeology, thereby invoking a description of the archive—the archive being the set of rules defining the social and historical embeddedness of utterances (Foucault, 2002). Discourse, for him, is a question of the forms and limits of *sayability*—of what is possible to speak about, what is recognized as valid versus questionable, and what is allowed to enter memory and what is left without leaving traces. Which utterances are noted and circulated, and which are repressed or even censored. For Foucault, this is also a question of appropriation—what individuals, groups or classes can access certain discourses; what relationship the discourse has with the sender respectively receiver; to what extent, and how, is the discourse institutionalized. In this respect, access to discourses is a matter of negotiation and struggle (Foucault, 2014, p. 106). Foucault argues that “discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized” (Foucault, 1981, pp. 52–53).

In order to explain what a discourse is, then, Foucault breaks it down into constitutive units, the smallest being *utterances*. In the specific contexts and modalities in which they are voiced, utterances form *speech acts* or *enunciations*. A discourse can be described as “an ensemble

of singular utterances dispersed on the sociohistorical terrain” (Foucault, 2014, p. 98). According to Foucault, “the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a number of procedures” (Foucault, 1981, p. 52), the first one being *prohibition*. This procedure of exclusion is based on the taboos and rituals of the circumstances for speech, which regulate what can or cannot be spoken of in certain contexts. Sexuality is one example of an area that Foucault himself studied profoundly, and in which he claims that the grid of prohibitions is tightest.

Along with *prohibition*, two other principles of exclusion that he identifies are *division* and *rejection*, which derive from the long history of opposition between reason and madness in Europe and the West. He talks about the madman and his rejected words of speech: “they were the place where the division between reason and madness was exercised, but they were never recorded or listened to” (Foucault, 1981, p. 53). This procedure of division and rejection, Foucault argues, is still operative in contemporary knowledge production. He exemplifies with a doctor and a patient, asking who among the two is permitted to speak and be listened to and who is more likely to be mistrusted or even withhold their speech. Another example in the realm of the city could be of an architect and a resident, or a city planner and a citizen—the professional role has more legitimacy in speaking about the subject matter and better chances of being heard.

Foucault defines the aforementioned procedures as ones that operate from the exterior, as they function as systems of exclusion tightly linked to desire and power. But he also speak of internal procedures, internal in the sense that the discourses exercise their own control, through classification, ordering, and distribution. These he describes in terms of *commentary* (discourses that are repeatedly referred to and thus produce new speech acts—religious and scientific texts, for example), *authors* (not individuals, necessarily, but the origins and coherence of the meanings), and *disciplines* (domains for construction of new statements). A third category of procedures that he identifies are those that determine the condition of the application of discourses and thus permit the control of them.

Discourse analysis is a package of both theories and methods that are connected and used in combination. It is grounded in an approach to reality as constructed, and the idea that language, symbols, and signs are constitutive for our understanding of reality. Language is both shaped by and shaping its social context, in a dialectic relationship (Fairclough, 1992, 2010). Thus, language is never neutral but always political,

as it has the power of not only reflecting but also constituting reality.

Along the same lines, critical image analysis was developed by semioticians Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco in the 1950s–1960s and has later been developed by other thinkers. According to Barthes, codes in images can be identified on three levels: *denotative*, *connotative*, and *ideological* (Barthes, 1964). On a first, denotative, level, the objects in the image can be recognized regardless of their meaning. On the next level, the connotative, the first codes are located, and a meaning or rhetoric of the image can be recognized. On a third and final level, these codes together form an ideology, that is, the conveyed message in a broader context. Barthes argues that “pictures, to be sure, are more imperative than writing, they impose meaning at one stroke, without analysing or diluting it,” going on to note that that “a photograph will be a kind of speech for us in the same way as a newspaper article” (1990, p. 108, 109).

Similarly, a politicization of aesthetics is theorized through philosopher Jacques Rancière’s concept of the “distribution of the sensible,” by which he suggests that politics can never escape a perceptual and aesthetic understanding and, conversely, that all art or aesthetic practice is political. Briefly, the *distribution of the sensible* refers to how the dominant social order in society determines whose voice can be heard and recognized, and which identities are considered to have voices worth listening to. Further, he defines *politics* as something that challenges this order, thereby rejecting more conventional ideas about politics that reduce it to certain activities within the frames of representational democracy. By suggesting that the dominant order of perception in society defines our concepts of voices and positions, he shows that aesthetics and politics are deeply connected, meaning that aesthetics can be related to distribution of resources (Rancière, 2013).

The concept of *discourse*, and discourse analysis as method, is a helpful tool for identifying narratives within a certain field. Identification of discursive narratives help to lay bare inherent structures of argumentation, norms, problem formulations, and ideals. In the case of this study, a discourse analytical approach interrogates the material with questions such as: What are the central narratives of the place, in terms of its history, present, and imagined future? What are considered to be its “problems,” and what are their “solutions”? How is the identity of the place defined, and how does it fit into argumentation around problems-solutions?

form of digging. Not as in revealing an “existing-but-covered” underlying meaning that is waiting to be discovered, but rather as a process of exploring the relationship between the visible and the invisible. Media theorist Jussi Parikka suggest that digging is a method for getting across or through surfaces, it “opens up visibilities and distributes a new sense of the infrastructural underground that underpins the surface of what we take for granted as a subject of everyday experience” and in this way “opens up to what conditions experience” (Parikka, 2018, p. 164).

The practice of discourse analysis can be described as a crafting with codification and aggregation, in a process where words and sentences are analyzed separately while at the same time one alternates between the isolated statements and the contextual and social power relations through which they have taken form. In other words, the analytical practice entails moving back and forth between text and context.

When analyzing the collected empirical material for this study, I highlighted words and sentences, seeking to remain attentive to how concepts are coupled—either when they are combined in an additive manner, or presented against each other as contradictory terms. Alongside reading and marking, I sometimes used tables to organize the vocabulary and concepts in order to see how the content is structured.

Through this practice, I have been able to locate repeated words and concepts that I have identified as “empty signifiers”: vague containers of unspecifiable and variable meaning (Barthes, 1990). These have formed the foundation of the analysis in Chapters 4 and 5.

### **Anecdote**

One question that I have carried with me throughout the research project, and for which I have needed to find tools, is how I make visible and handle the knowledge that comes from living in the area I study. At the time that this project concludes, I have lived in Hökarängen for thirteen years, with some shorter breaks. As a resident, I both catch sight of and become blind to things. I am embedded in the place: I walk in certain circles, and I have my own relationship to and history with people and places. Even if no research position can be neutral, in this case, it becomes inevitable that my relationship to the object of study is characterized by lived experience, my particular viewpoint, and how the place shapes me. On

a methodological level, questions arose regarding how I would collect and materialize the moments that informed my knowledge and analysis, such as conversations and observations that took place in daily life, i.e., outside the methodically arranged situations for data collection such as interviews and document collection.

Field observations and the exercise of interviews has called for a research diary practice as a method for documenting the research process in a way that allows for and activates self-reflection. I have not systematically conducted a consistent research diary. Instead, I have on different occasions made different kinds of notes, sometimes in direct relation to empirical studies such as interviews or more tentative thoughts about the analysis of documents, sometimes about the research project and the double positionality of researcher and resident, and sometimes regarding anecdotal observations or experiences from the sites of study or classroom situations. Although these notes have been made in different formats and are scattered and fragmentary, I have for the most part had the habit of date marking, and in this way, the material could be gathered into a more cohesive series of notes on the research process. Thus, the research diary has not been made in a format-consistent manner, nor with any major regularity, but constitutes a highly varied material.

One of the uses of this material lies in the telling of anecdotes that I have incorporated in italics in some parts of this manuscript. The noting down of anecdotes functions as micro-histories (Ginzburg et al., 1993) to be unpacked, and departure points for explorations. The use of anecdotes in the text is a way of making my research process transparent and embodied, and marking my positionality. A research project that intends to investigate power structures and professional legacies must also address the role of the researcher. Feminist philosopher of science Donna Haraway's concept of *situated knowledges*, for instance, argues "against various forms of unlocatable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims" (Haraway, 1988, p. 583). The anecdote serves as a resource or tool of analysis and self-reflection. But it also has the quality of writing the author into the research and narrative, and as such it both helps elicit the constructedness of itself and the text (and research in general) and also makes visible the process of becoming of the author and researcher (Michael, 2014, p. 28).

Departing from dictionary definitions of "anecdotes" as short accounts of incidents of private life, sociologist Mike Michael  
160 defines anecdotes as telling something that stands out of the

ordinary, and as such enacting difference—“the unusual event articulated in the anecdote serves to highlight, and is highlighted by, the usual run of events that surround it” (2014, p. 28). In this regard, anecdotes “seem to demand to be told, to be put into circulation” (p. 25). Given that the anecdote has this character of “standing out,” he argues that *anecdotalization* has both a topological and a nomadic flavor. It is topological in that it “brings together what might once have seemed distant and disconnected” (p. 33) by using trivial episodes from the past to illuminate how they reflect contemporary experiences and may invoke critical reflection. He suggests that this “bringing together” also can be related to the nomadic or rhizomic concepts of Deleuze and Guattari (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988).

He further characterizes *the anecdote* as a method closely related to auto-ethnography but also different from it. While auto-ethnography is (a field or set of) methods in which the data is based on the researchers own experiences, he argues that the use of anecdotes has characteristics that, unlike auto-ethnography, allows it to “serve as a means for tracing the co-emergence of research, researcher and researched” (Michael, 2014, p. 27). In this regard “rather than seeking anecdotes that can become exemplars of, or analytic fodder in, this or that conceptual framework ... anecdotes can operate in ways that disrupt such frameworks and precipitate methodological and theoretical reorientation” (p. 29).

In my research, I have only tentatively made use of anecdotes and intend to explore the possibilities of anecdotal diary-writing more actively, in other projects, in the future. Still, I have already experienced how attention towards seemingly “small” situations can help locate and illuminate central questions or problems, and serve to give direction to useful theories and concepts. In this way, *the anecdote*, rather than being a piece of data and an object of study that says something about the social world or illustrate a concept or argument, introduces a performative dimension to the research process and holds a potential to challenge and refresh conventional categories and paths. Ideally, the anecdote becomes a “means of interrogating the research process itself” (p. 33).

Seeing the anecdote as “an openly ambiguous textual form: combining the real and the constructed, holding them in tension” (Michael, 2014, p. 27) opens up for explorations of associations and meanings without holding a claim of representationality or exhaustiveness. The upfront ambiguity of the anecdotal format is a characteristic that may put things in motion both within me as a researcher and in the

reader, as it “entails a semiotic and material dialogue between past and present through, and with, bodies, memories, stories, objects and texts” (p. 34).

### Distinction

*One evening, in the first years I lived in Hökarängen, as my partner and I walked through the center, we burst into spontaneous laughter. Our laughter was provoked by a new shop front sign saying Bokförlag (publishing house) and was an immediate reaction to this new message’s unexpected presence and appearance. Oddly, it did not say the publishing house’s name. When taking a closer look at the shop window, we realized that the publishing house was a small independent one, run by one of my former university professors, publishing no more than two titles of academic literature a year on the specialized field of Islamic mysticism. We were surprised that this enterprise would promote itself with a LED-sign in a calm and quiet shopping street in this Stockholm suburb. Other surrounding signs said “Flowers,” “Tobacco,” and “Café,” and this one stood out as unconventional, pretentious, and misplaced. The contact-seeking and loud expression of the sign contrasted to the plain environment in a way that appeared comical, as if the sign had misunderstood where it was located. It seemed unlikely to us that those two titles would be objects of spontaneous consumption on that street (we might have been wrong!). Later, I would find out that the sign was not by choice mounted by the publishers but sponsored and attached to the tenancy contract by the housing company as part of an urban renewal project with the objective to uncover and display the activities in ground floor spaces through shop windows and signage in the area. The “Bokförlag” sign was my first encounter with an illuminated sign in their program. I think of this walk and laughter as one of the moments this research project originates from.*

Humor and laughter have the power to disrupt, impose, and reveal order. Drawing on Henri Bergson’s writings on the social dimensions of laughter (Bergson et al., 1999) researcher of social psychology Michael Billig theorizes humor and laughter as disciplinary, arguing that it is rhetorical, and connected to embarrassment. In this regard laughter has a corrective function in relation to social norms, and thus being attentive to laughter may give insights into symbolic resources and how they

construct social order.

Similar to the laughter described in the anecdote above, I observed many people giggling or laughing when in 2019 passing by the artwork “Pizzeria” of artist Jörgen Svensson, which was mounted on the building of Gothenburg art museum. It consisted of bronze letters in a classic serif typeface looking like they belonged to the monumental building and its authoritative façade with high vaults, proudly watching over the central plaza Götaplatsen. But the word they spelled out contrasted to the settings, and thus manifested a play with material, language, and place, laying bare the aesthetic conventions and value hierarchies in place (see Fig. 16).

A study of shop signage in Brooklyn, conducted by socio-linguists Shonna Trinch and Edward Snajdr, also departs from a moment of what they call “laughter of recognition”:

Shortly after moving to Brooklyn, New York, in 2003, we shared some initial field notes about living in the borough in an Anthropology 101 class with John Jay College undergraduates, most of whom were New York City natives. When one of us jokingly complained that Brooklyn was “the kind of place where people cram as many words as possible on a storefront sign,” the students’ laughter indicated to us that they knew what we were talking about. They told us that signs with a lot of words represented a “back-in-the-dayness” or an “old school” Brooklyn. They explained that “old school” meant “origin” or “of another era,” but one deserving “respect.” With no sign in front of them to read, the students’ reaction, we realized, revealed that such signage was an emic textual norm of the commercial landscape that they could picture in their minds. Their remarks also revealed that this norm was in dialogue with a rapidly changing city, which included the appearance of new shops throughout Brooklyn that had signs with very little text. (Trinch & Snajdr, 2017, p. 2)

These three examples of “laughter of recognition” point towards the way in which social norms and value hierarchies manifest in public space, revealing that the social order is communicated, shared, and recognized in ways that sometimes include affective expressions.

In the study of shop signs in Brooklyn that I address above, the authors employ Bourdieu’s concept of *distinction* as (a pair of) “glasses,” through which they look at the collected photos of shopfronts in



Fig. 15.  
Neon sign in Hökarängen, saying "publishing house"  
Photo: Maryam Fanni, 2013



Fig. 16.

*Pizzeria* by artist Jörgen Svensson, Gothenburg art museum 2019  
Photo: Courtesy of Göteborgs konstmuseum/Jörgen Svensson



Fig. 17.  
Old school vernacular or capitalism without distinction,  
versus distinction-making signage in Brooklyn, photographed between 2003–2016.  
Photo: Shonna Trinch and Edward Snajdr

order to categorize them and formulate interview questions. *Distinction* is the concept that Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1984) puts forward to describe “both the contrast between similar things and an evaluation of those things as having qualities that mark variation in cultural capital” (Trinch & Snajdr, 2017, p. 14). The concept interrogates the proximity or distance between shop signage in terms of how signs are designed to liken or differ from one another. Two salient types of signs are then identified that the researchers name “Old School Vernacular” versus “Distinction-Making” signage (see Fig. 17). They find that the first category includes shop signs that are descriptive and rich with words describing the services or products provided, arguing that this category of signs stands for an “aggressively democratic system of commerce” (p. 14) that can be described as a “capitalism without distinction” denoting inclusion as they take in regard a variety of by-passers and possible consumers. In contrast, the latter category is characterized as one signaling exclusivity by means of minimalism in both words and colors. *Distinction* is again employed in their interview study, as the interviewees are asked to respond to questions regarding the difference between the signage types and what they believe are the intentions behind how the signs are articulated. Working-class informants talk, for instance, about the latter category of signs as “secret clubs,” and say that not knowing what is inside the shop makes one uncomfortable. While the first category of signs is intrusive, the latter is exclusive.

In the research project at hand, *distinction* is a useful concept to lay bare the mechanisms in the identity invented for and applied on the studied cases. The design solutions invented for Hökarängen and later introduced in Bandhagen and Bagarmossen—most clearly detectable in the signage system manual *Skylltprogrammet för Hökarängen* (ÅWL/Stockholmshem 2012) and the narratives produced and circulated in policy and policy-like documents, media, documentations, evaluations, and interviews—all contain elements that tell what the place is like and what it should be like. In the creation of a wished-for scenario, distinctions are made with regard to values and places, rendering the shop or the area in a certain light through an act of distancing. This distancing, and the formulation of identity through negation, is the subject of the present analysis, alongside the detection of repeating concepts and narratives.

## Reparative Interstices

This PhD project has been formulated and carried out from the standpoint of my own artistic spatial practice as a designer. The research design and thesis monography are confined to the research questions and the methodologies and empirical studies tightly connected to them, however the research project is inseparable from a number of artistic research activities that were carried out as experiments that tested out, challenged, or provoked insights and questions that in turn informed the research trajectory. In this regard, the research project has been embedded in and entangled with a body of work, responding to the questions raised by such a practice.

A number of “reparative interstices” are distributed throughout the monography, interrupting the thesis manuscript. Each interstice restores an incomplete account of the practiced intervention and discloses its guiding principles and gained insights. The series of interstices also function as loci for the disclosure of employed methods, acting as another layer adding to the methods chapter.

The “interstices” explore the margins of the research project and helped me to identify research gaps and test out how preliminary analyses may inform on-site community practices.

### Interstice

: a space that intervenes between things

especially: one between closely spaced things

: a gap or break in something generally continuous

: a short space of time between events

: occurring in or being an interval or intervening space or segment

: of, relating to, or forming an interstice

: situated within but not restricted to or characteristic of a particular organ or tissue

An “urban interstice” has traditionally been understood as an in-between space in the urban fabric and associated with wastelands and the unplanned (Mubi Brighenti, 2013), and that which falls outside boundaries of accepted categories and is thus difficult to categorize. The in-betweenness, and smallness, may indicate a minoritarian position in relation to what surrounds it, as the concepts of *leftover* and *byproduct* equally propose a power hierarchy in which the interstice is a passive gap between more institutionalized spaces. The interstice may be seen as renegotiating such hierarchies and core/periphery dichotomies, and thus acknowledged as an active component, rather than gap, and a site for reconceptualizing power, resistance, and agency. The interstice may therefore serve as a framework to delineate a parallel trajectory, and function as an opening, a porosity, or a container of possibilities. As Mubi Brighenti suggests, “Interstices cannot be known in advance, not simply physical place, but very much a phenomenon ‘on the ground’, a ‘happening’, a ‘combination’ or an ‘encounter’”, an approach that resonates well with the situated practice of the interstices presented here (Mubi Brighenti, 2013, p. xviii).

The term “interstice” is deliberately chosen for the format perforating this thesis, partly inspired by (but also different from) the use of interstices in Sarah E. Truman’s *Feminist Speculations and the Practice of Research-Creation: Writing Pedagogies and Intertextual Affects* (2022). This is to acknowledge the unknowns and the messiness of a research trajectory, highlight the social entanglements and contexts that include more than a single author, and as intersperse an interruption/metatext comment on the format and content of the thesis.

The reparative interstices are placed so that they interrupt the thesis manuscript: they do not appear in a well-behaved manner chronologically or in a separate section, but rather break in between chapters and sections. This is to reflect their position in the research process. The works presented through the interstices were not included in a pre-planned research design but rather constitute momentum-dependent engagements that have demanded my attention, “interrupting” my desk-based research and writing, only to inform it and give it new directions. It requires a certain flexibility to work in this way, which I think must be the premise of research that is not limited to the intra-academic. That said, how they are placed in this book is of course not completely random but carefully thought out and subjected to editing, but on the basis that the desired effect is precisely the interruption rather than sequential compliance, and the emphasis

is on integration rather than separation. The choice of engagements were also far from random: to the contrary, they were selected and formulated with care and consideration and deeply integrated with the research project as a whole.

In both urban research and art, it is a norm and an imperative to arrive at places, collect knowledge from field studies and informants, and write about them from a placeless, disembodied, mobile basis of activity. It is far from always that such type of research or artistic practice addresses and makes visible the positionality from which the researcher arrived at the place, or remained there over time, and was available for follow-ups, maintenance work, or management of its consequences. Temporary engagements often bear a risk of lapsing accountability.

I want to emphasize that this research project is not written from the positionality of a temporary visitor but a long-term dweller. I understand my own activity as place-dependent—as informed by the place, a result of the place, as partial and not representative of the place. Nor should the place be understood as singular, pre-defined, and isolated, but as something that is under constant renegotiation. Long-term dwelling and situated engagement mean, for example, that the reparative interstices are not isolated experiments but rather should be seen as a chain or network of interconnected activities and relationships that spill over each other, where one ends and the other begins.

This research project, and the reparative interstices, are not the beginning, but a continuation of my own and others' activities and practices, formulated as responses to what was already there, and asking for continuations. The etymology of "reparative" may be helpful to illustrate its temporal quality, as "reparative" essentially means *re-prepare*: the reparative does not point backwards to a lost whole but is rather about preparing and opening up for other possible futures.

## Methods

### Distinction-Making Rhetorical Devices or Tools in the Design Process

I have previously introduced Bourdieu's concept of *distinction*, discussing how it is useful in studying social orders in urban imaginaries (beginning on page 93). In the following section, I will present two rhetorical devices that I have identified in the signage system manual (the document to be analyzed in Chapter 4 of this thesis); these devices, I argue, function as containers and organizers in the creation of distinctions.

The first device is based on a dichotomization of rights/wrongs or other value contraries/couples. Even though temporal properties are not central to such figures, I choose to call them "Before and After," in order to read them in relation to the popular visual convention known as such. I will firstly interrogate the dualism in the characterizing juxtaposition of this figure and secondly interrogate the characterizing gap between the combined image couple, as this gap is central in constructing the narrative by, as I argue, obscuring the agents and actions in the sequence.

The second device is the *mood board*: a collage technique used in many creative fields to sketch up and define aesthetics frameworks and establish reference points. A central characteristic of the moodboard is that the reference samples that are included in it don't necessarily have any connection to each other, other than that the sum of them is supposed to evoke a certain feeling or idea of atmosphere. Thus, form is superior to content.

In the signage system manual (ÅWL/Stockholmskem, 2012)—which is introduced and analyzed in Chapter 4—these two categories appear once each, on pages 4 and 6, respectively (see Fig. 21-22 on pages 215 and 220). But, I argue that they are also repeated in various ways in other parts of the document, and that they are useful in understanding the rhetoric of the document as a whole.

These figures, that I frame as tools or devices, constitute the structure for how arguments are made, and meaning is produced in the document. Once I have presented an analysis of the logics of the

two, I will in the next chapter look at and analyze the text and images they contain and the narratives they produce.

### **Before and After**

Most people have, at some point, been exposed to advertisements for beauty procedures, with promising “Before” and “After” images presenting radical—and sometimes unlikely or even laughable—effects of treatments such as teeth bleaching, hair growth or removal techniques, diets, or workouts. In these ads, typically, a bland face turns into a smiling one with a straight row of shining white teeth, or a weary bald man turns into a confident man with an impressive haircut, and so on.

The same kind of image principle has also become common in home styling, proliferated by home improvement TV shows such as “Extreme Home Makeover” and fueled by a growing market for interior design and refurbishment of real estate. In fact, a Google search of “before after interior design” gives almost 2 billion image results. But there’s another, less known yet more public area where the *Before and After* principle is taking hold: the city and the field of urban renewal.

In documents relating to planned urban renewal projects, as well as in presentations of the results of implemented projects, I have often found image couples showing a street or a façade in two different conditions. Like the aforementioned, more well-known, examples, image manipulations may sometimes be detected in such visualizations: angles are changed or images are retouched to improve the impression of the “After” result, in comparison to a more documentary and supposedly unflattering “Before.”

These proposed or documented transformations on paper are of course mirrored in the actual cities themselves. In many urban neighborhoods in the Global North as well as in the Global South, citizens witness how their local environment changes character. Public spaces, high streets and shopfronts are renewed or replaced, often as a result of more or less explicit urban renewal projects initiated by city governments, property owners, and investors. With help from designers, architects, and sometimes even artists, such strategies aim to reinvent or control the atmosphere of the place and the activities taking place there.

Whether in cosmetic commercials, home makeover shows, or urban planning contexts, the Before and After figure follows

the same principle. It promotes and argues for a product in a simple and easily understandable form that doesn't even need captions: two photos repeating the same object, but with some obvious differences, are coupled together to narrate a move towards a visually convincing aesthetic improvement. In art theory, this would be called a "juxtaposition"—a term used when meaning is produced between two combined images presented next to each other.

The Before and After figure is a powerful rhetorical device and design tool. The words "device" and "tool" underline the operational properties of this recognizable model of juxtaposing images. In this regard they could also be defined as a form of "operational images." The term was first used by artist and filmmaker Harun Farocki to describe war images produced by machines (such as missiles and warfare robots) that primarily have an operative function of locating targets or navigating in space: images made "not to entertain nor to inform" and "that do not represent an object, but rather are part of an operation" (Farocki, 2004, p. 17). Yet, the high-technological automated war images are only a contemporary example as part of a longer history of images with operational functions.

The use of images as tools for operating in the urban environment is nothing new. A variety of visualization technologies such as aerial and street photography, cartographic maps, and bird's eye perspective renderings have been used in urban planning, historically and today. As new technologies emerge, urban planning and particularly the field of smart cities, is increasingly informed by usage of big data, sensors, and interactive, more visual technologies. Photography has been used not only "to document the city, but [has] also played a symbiotic role in its symbolic and material transformation" (Barns, 2020, p. 240). One example of an early use of "before and after" photography is Charles Marville's photos of Paris, taken before and after Baron Hausmann's modernization project of the city. The images were presented at the Universal Exhibition of 1878 in Paris, where they functioned as evidence for the rationality of the project and arguments for the "sick city" to be demolished (Barns, 2020).

Ines and Eyal Weizman, in their essay publication *Before and After* (2013) argue that the before-and-after image is directly linked to the technology, as it is a relic of the early developments of photographic technique and a result of its limitations:

The history of before-and-after images is as old as photography. Indeed, they emerged from the limitations of the early

photographic process. The few dozen seconds required for the exposure of a mid-19th-century photograph was too long a duration to record moving figures and abrupt events. The result was that most often people were missing from the image; only buildings and other elements of the urban fabric were registered. To capture an event, two photographs were necessary. The technique was thus useful in representing the consequences of urban conflicts, revolutionary action and large-scale urban reconstructions. (p. 2)

The Weizmans propose that one of the earliest before-and-after photographs are a pair of daguerrotypes of the barricade in Paris' Rue Saint-Maur Popincourt captured by Eugène Thibault, before and after a clash between workers and the National Guard in 1848. According to photography historian Marie Warner Marien, the Before image shows an intact barricade of sandbags while the After image is blurry. No humans are depicted in any of the two photos, but as military equipment is seen in the After image one can tell that what happened in between the images were captured is the defeat and killing of the workers. The Weizmans argue that this pair of images can be regarded "as a kind of very early montage: a form of construction in which images are commented upon, not by words, but by other images" (p. 14).

If the Before and After figure is an operational design tool, then we also must ask how it is used and where in the design process it is located. This, of course, varies. In the research set out here in *Reading the Signs*, Before and After-like images are found in the signage program manual analyzed in Chapter 4. In this case, architects have conducted field observations, created image archives, made an analysis of a site, and delivered a guide including imaginary Before and After images back to the commissioner. So, on the one hand, the Before and After figure is a result of a design process, meaning that it is the outcome and summary of research and analysis; on the other hand, from that point onwards, the figure is also the beginning of a design process, as those juxtaposing images became part of an instruction manual for how shopfronts were to be designed.

Apart from occupying these two concrete locations in a conventional linear design process, Before and After figures, more importantly, design our perception, thinking, and being in more general terms, just by their presence in our cognition and minds. As such, we should not only study the actual images the figures contains (what they represent

and the meanings they convey) in each particular case; more importantly, it is the very possibilities of meaning production that this figure allows by how it is constructed that need to be considered. Because the Before and After figure is in and of itself discursive.

### Flawed Dualisms

All Before and After figures juxtapose a binary: problem–solution, past–future, reality–promise, unwanted–desired. Dualism is thus a central feature of the Before and After figure. This can be traced back to the role accorded to dualisms in Western conceptualizations of design (Escobar, 2018), as well as more generally in Western Modernity (Mignolo, 2011). Looking at the dualist logic in a larger context might illuminate some of the “darker” mechanisms of the Before and After figure, as they share features and are related.

A mainstream understanding of design implies a dualist separation between planner and maker/producer. Design historian Carma Gorman argues that

a designer is simply a certain type of participant in a mode of production characterized by a division of labor between planner(s) and maker(s). This definition does not necessitate (or even imply) a bias in favor of modernism, mass production, or innovation; it simply refers to the fact that within industrialized societies (and within certain non- and pre-industrial ones, too), labor often is divided in a particular way among two or more people. (Gorman, 2001, p. 81)

Such a divide gives design professionals more legitimacy at the expense of makers or producers as it establishes an asymmetrical relationship between the designer as service-provider and an “othered” receiver in need (cf Akama et al., 2019, p. 65). What is more, this dominant conceptualization of design is in turn a product of Western Modernity, which was being fundamentally based on a series of binaries, the most central being: nature–culture, us–them, and subject–object (or mind–body). Again, these are (dualist) ideas that need to be looked at critically.

In his 2018 book *Designs for the Pluriverse*, for instance, anthropologist and design theorist Arturo Escobar argues that “the problem is not that dualisms exist ... the problem is with the ways in which such divides are treated culturally, particularly the hierarchies established between the two parts of each binary, and the social, ecological, and political

consequences of such hierarchies” (Escobar, 2018, p. 94). Escobar further proposes that such hierarchization of binaries can be referred to as coloniality, and that a central feature of coloniality is its approach to difference—in terms of categorization and establishment of hierarchical classification.

The core narrative of a Before and After image is one of difference. Or more precisely, difference in value, with the After image being the preferable category and the destination of the move. The Before and After image thus is a model for presenting and establishing value hierarchies imposing social order, along the lines of a colonial dualist idea of progress.

### Consider the Gap

What the dualist figure of Before and After skips is the step in between: it renders the acts and moments of the actual making of the improvement invisible and mystified. It does not speak explicitly about, explain, or make visible the step in between; where and how the transformation takes place, how the value hierarchies are reached, and what they are based on. As Ines and Eyal Weizman argue, “before-and-after photographs are used to privilege a direct line of causality between a singular action and a unique effect” (Weizman & Weizman, 2013, p. 2) and that the erasure of the event in the gap in-between is similar to trauma of memory that can be considered “as a reservoir of imagined images and possible histories”. However, this gap entails practices that should not go unnoticed and unconsidered. We need to look at it and ask: What is being done, and by whom?

The gap usually represents a product or a professional service with a promise of progress, which the Before and After figure promotes. But the gap also obscures the embodied practices and social and cultural contexts of the improved object. Instead, it reduces the object to a flat surface, reaffirming a binary of form—content and paying attention only to form.

Design theorist Anne-Marie Willis argues that there is a “double movement” in acts of design: “we design our world,” she argues, “while our world acts back on us and designs us” (Willis, 2006, p. 80). Not only does the objects we design form us, further, but the *act* of designing does so too—the behaviors, procedures, relations, and more that make up the practice of designing are reflected in the designed object as well as in the designing individual and community.

The Before and After figure discipline our view of the world by constructing a divide between a messy, unwanted past and an ordered, desired future, hindering us in seeing and acknowledg-

ing a flora of simultaneous aesthetics in the urban public space that reflect, rather than polish, society. The Before and After figure provokes the idea that there is a “one-size-fits-all” solution by pointing out one ideal. The Before seems interchangeable but the After is what all Befores strive to become. This entails a linear movement, in one direction, towards progress, rather than a circular movement, back and forth, that would entail simultaneity, relationality, interconnectedness, and dialogue.

## Mood Board

One of the pages in the signage system manual which I analyze in Chapter 4 describes the “character” of the suburb Hökarängen and “potentials and design concepts” for development as part of the renewal program. This design concept is presented through text and images in combination. The images are organized as a collage, mixing photos, and illustrations, differing in content and expression and originating from a variety of sources (see Fig. 22 on page 220). A collage-like composition of images that do not necessarily have an obvious thematic or narrative connection to each other, used in a professional design context, can be defined as a “mood board.”

A mood board is a visual tool used in certain branches or industries, including product/industrial/interior design, architecture, photography, and not least the luxury industry where it is employed to invent new ideas and trends (Godlewsky, 2008). The purpose of this method or tool is to present an inspirational summary of the research phase in a design process (Eckert et al., 2012, p. 259) and/or to “introduce a certain mood, theme, or consumer world” (Godlewsky, 2008, p. 266). This helps communicating visual references to clients or collaborators, in order to impose or reach an agreement on a shared vision and desired result. In this regard, it has both a communicative function and an organizational function, as it can serve to coordinate the work process when several designers are involved.

Mood boards can be digital or physical and contain different images as well as color and material samples. The images should be perceived as a whole rather than individually or in a linear manner, and the connotations that grow “between” the images are superordinate to the individual images (Maier et al., 2013, p. 97). As the individual images and their meanings or content are subordinated to the overall impression, sometimes mood boards are actively blurred in order to disestablish



Fig. 18.  
Before and After images depicting streetscapes.

Top: Jan Kattein Architects, South Chingford, London.  
Featured in Jan Kattein Completes High Street Regeneration Projects in London,  
*Designboom*, July 20, 2014

Bottom: Excerpt from Shop Front Design Supplementary Planning Document,  
adopted March 2016, London Borough of Waltham Forest.



BEFORE



AFTER

cafe du metro before and after  
photo © Jan Kattein architects

The quality of a street has an impact on whether shoppers come to an area and affects how long they stay

Individual shops should not seek undue attention or dominate their surroundings unnecessarily.



A shop front should not overly dominate.

'The High Street Life in Waltham Forest' provides character studies of some of the borough's main shopping areas giving design recommendations on each

#### Corner shops

Corner shops, including banks and pubs, have a particular impact on the quality of the street because they are usually the most prominent. It is therefore particularly important that they are designed to a high standard and as a general rule should take advantage of their location by having a frontage on both sides.

Corner shops have a particular impact on the quality of the street



Corner shops should be high quality and double fronted

Fig. 19.  
Before and After images or instructional regeneration images depicting individual shopfronts.

Top: Jan Kattein Architects

Middle and bottom: Shop Front Design Supplementary Planning Document, Adopted March 2016, London Borough of Waltham Forest

boundaries between images and create a “semi-abstract figure in which only partial objects are decipherable” (Endrissat et al., 2016, p. 2356).

Design researchers Deana McDonagh and Ian Storer (2004) argue that mood boards are effective in supporting product development but that the process of generating a mood board needs to be rapid and relative to the overall time frame of the design process. They describe mood boards as “sensory-centric” (i.e., beyond the visual) and speculate that they in the future even “may be captured and communicated by designers through three-dimensional animation with sound and smells” (p. 30). Mood boards differ from other communication in that they do not focus on technical functionalities with already codified properties but require digestion. Although they are visual, and in that regard communicate immediately, “the process of developing a sense of its meaning occurs over time” (Endrissat et al., 2016, p. 2357). The function of a mood board is thus not to convey technical or functional properties, but rather to provoke “surreality” (Endrissat et al., 2016, p. 2359) that stimulates inspiration and functions as a sensory and atmospheric idea or concept for designers and clients to gather around:

Here, the integration is a question of *aesthetic consistency*, not of technical adjustment. The role of visual materiality is therefore not to communicate functional information, but to appeal to the senses of the actors involved in creative development. Similar to artworks, the mood board requires intense interaction evoking associations that influence the actors’ thinking and action and providing a poetic definition of the final product. (Endrissat et al., 2016, p. 2360)

While mood boards may appear informal, the reading and employment of them are dependent on learned interpretation skills (Maier et al., 2013, p. 97; McDonagh & Storer, 2004, p. 24). The idea is to transfer an overall idea of the tone and atmosphere of the intended product, that sets the scene for the various sub-processes of design production line. In this way, the presence and influence of the creative director is manifested and mediated in all levels of the production through the mood board (Endrissat et al., 2016, p. 2357). Consequently, while the mood board certainly allows for interpretation, it should have an instructive and coordinating function, and how it is constructed is not negotiable. An employee can respond to it, but not necessarily reconstruct, modify, or replace it. Thus the use and

the workplace or in the project.

While the mood board coordinates the design process in a manner that, according to researchers of creative industries Nada Endrissat, Gazi Islam, and Claus Noppeney (2016), allows for interpretation, it can also be used as an argument for regulating the design process. In their study of the use of mood boards in the production process of scents in a German artistic perfumery, they observed that when two perfumers have conflicting ideas in a meeting, one of them picks up the mood board “as if having an ally at his side,” arguing that the suggested scent does not match the mood board, and that the mood board is asking for something else than what the colleague has presented. In this regard “the mood board serves as a point of reference, as a source of legitimization at moments of aesthetic non-alignment” (Endrissat et al., 2016, p. 2358). Their study of the perfumery does not further explore how the mood board’s ambiguity allows for power hierarchies to be manifested in decision processes. Still, the example of such moments when non-alignment is regulated with reference to the mood board calls for further exploration and raises the question of whether one property or “benefit” of the mood board is that its ambiguity allows for an arbitrariness that help upholding already established power hierarchies as it is difficult to question and legitimately challenge a mood board. Such vertical structure can be contrasted to when a mood board is created or used in a horizontal collective act in a professional or educational context, as a “warm-up” exercise and/or to promote discussion and encourage group synergy (McDonagh & Storer, 2004, p. 29), rather than created and introduced by a (creative or artistic) director.

The mood board is thus not only a tool for communication but also potentially a tool for organizing and coordinating a group of people who are collaborating in a design process. According to Endrissat et al. (2016) the management of creative workers poses challenges and calls for new forms of management and organizing that combines coordination with “the imperatives of creativity and autonomy,” as designers and other creatives tend to resist rather than accept traditional workplace coordination (Gotsi et al., 2010), and value creative autonomy and opportunities for expressing signature styles (Elsbach, 2009). Departing from this conflicting relationship between coordination and creative autonomy, they argue that the mood board works to both coordinate, or as I would argue potentially control and regulate, while it allows, or appear to allow, creativity and individual initiative.

Like the artistic perfumery or other creative businesses, the case of Hökarängen center and its shopfronts also contain the challenge posed by the dualism between coordination and autonomy. On the one hand, the shopkeepers possibly desire and are desired to promote their businesses in a creative and individual manner, on the other hand the housing company intend to coordinate the visual and material expression and the narrative of the area and the public space in which the shops are contained. The mood board—that possibly could be expanded to include the signage system manual as a whole and not only part(s) of it—while being ambiguous and allowing individual interpretation, acts to centralize the concept and coordinate involved designing actors. It can also be used as a point of reference when regulating non-aligned initiatives and suggestions.

By introducing the mood board as a framework to understand the content and functions of the signage system manual, I argue that the conceptual atmospheric and sensory approach is here central to the production of place and public space and serves to coordinate the visual and material articulations on site with textual and narrative ones. Further, I argue that the ambiguous property of the mood board allows interpretations of the housing company to be superior to interpretations of the shopkeepers. Ultimately, the mood board is a practice of creating sensescapes by putting things together irrespective of context and reality. Mood boarding is not montage: it is not a reading of images with images, but rather a colonial gesture of cherry-picking that disregards time and space in favor of seductiveness. Cherry-picking is thus a shared quality of the mood board and the selective memory of nostalgia.

## Interviews

The aim of the interviews conducted in this research was, on the one hand, to gather information that could inform subsequent steps of the study and help locate relevant research questions, and, on the other hand, to collect material to be analyzed. Interviewees were asked questions formulated on the basis of collected material such as press and official documents. They were asked to reflect on work that they were involved in, decisions that they made, and also to evaluate the outcomes of that work.

The interviews were semi-structured. For each interview, 182 an interview guide was designed, based on questions relevant to

the position of the interviewee and their anticipated knowledge and experience. But the interviews were conducted with an openness to the course of the conversation, with follow-up questions to elaborate on and explain matters that came up or new questions posed to cover and explore unexpected issues. In the early and exploratory phase of the research project, rather than applying a systematic method for analyzing interviews, I applied a bricolage analysis (Kvale et al., 2014), which entailed an eclectic combination of various methods for analyze that work well in identifying patterns and new data in an exploratory phase. The interviews were all done in the domain of the interviewees—at workplaces or equivalent.

As with any other method, the interview has benefits and limitations. The interview gave me, as a researcher, a limited insight into the experiences and thinking of the interviewee. For instance, I was able to perceive from my interview material that the subject discussed was to some degree a sensitive matter; there seem to have been internal conflicts, and only a few of the interviews express this whereas in other interviews the dictum is more “whole” and flawless. While my focus was not to investigate the conditions of particular conflicts and disagreements, conflicting ideas and contradictions were interesting for exploring complexities in the study. The interview is a good method for gathering statements about, and gaining insight into, the rhetoric and reasoning around issues—in the case of *Reading the Signs*, the imaginaries surrounding urban renewal projects.

### **Reflections on Interviews and the Role of the Researcher**

Several of the interviewees had rarely or never been interviewed about their work, as the project managers (of whom two out of three declined to be interviewed) mainly represented the renewal projects. Therefore, most of the interviews became an opportunity for reflection that seemed, or explicitly was, appreciated by the interviewee. In several cases the interviewees showed interest in my view and perspective on the subject matter, since my study concerns questions and events they are or have been deeply involved in. In general, I tried to avoid sharing my opinions or ideas, so that they would not color the interviewee’s reasoning. But in certain moments, I reasoned “together” with the interviewees, when I was directly asked questions, or when the interview took a more conversational direction; however, I still tried to avoid any valuation and conclusions and to dwell on questions instead. I also generally tried not to confirm the interviewees by nodding or acknowledging their reasoning. Still, in some

situations, a confirmation, like saying “What you say is interesting,” serves to encourage further reasoning on that track, or as an opportunity to change track without downplaying what has been talked about.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The influence of the recording devices can be discussed. In some cases, the recorder created a formal situation, almost as if it was an interrogation and not an interview. Especially in the early interviews, I was less experienced and needed support from my interview guide, which then became a visible paper document on the table, together with the devices (a zoom recorder and my cell phone recorder as a backup). The formality of the situation became especially clear when the devices were turned off, and a contrasting, more informal and relaxed atmosphere took over; questions were asked back to me and more personal and candid statements about specific actors were sometimes made. The spaces in which the interviews took place is another factor. In the later interviews, especially those done on-site outdoors or digitally on zoom during the pandemic, both the technology and my supporting papers became less present in the interview situation, which created a less formal situation from the beginning, in comparison to some of the interviews that were conducted in office or meeting room settings.

I avoided asking questions that suggested a particular value, in order to not start from—or impose—my perspective, in case it was not meaningful. The interview guide’s questions were partly evaluative (relating to what is considered good/desired or what is considered bad/unwanted, etc.) because this was something I was attentive to and wanted to find out and understand. But in most cases, I omitted such questions at the time of the interview because they felt too leading. However, I still received answers more organically, and as the evaluative reflections were shared on the initiative of the interviewees, I could also be sure that the themes they brought to the table were central to the discussed matters and not introduced by me and my questions.

In the interview with a representative of Stadsdelsrådet (the neighborhood association), the interviewee was an individual with whom I have had contact over the years in various contexts. He is familiar with my previous engagements in the neighborhood and I with his. Of course, I was still convinced that he could have things to say that I did not already know, and regardless, I was interested in how he would choose to answer my questions. I clarified this initially, to minimize the risk that he would exclude things that he takes for granted that I know. This

interview is the one where my person and position most clearly risked influencing what was said, based on preconceived notions about who I am, how I position myself, what I think of things, and what I am assumed or expected to already be familiar with. But to some extent, this has been a dilemma in several interviews, because I have not been systematically consistent in telling interviewees, for example, that I live in the area, or that I have followed the renewal projects since their active phases, as this would risk undermining the sense of legitimacy and authority for those who work in my area without necessarily residing there. My approach was to leave room for the interviewees to tell their version, without being colored by an idea that I “already know” or “know better”—not least because my position as a researcher and the fact that I approached them via my university email already marked an advantage in knowledge which was not necessarily accurate.

In some cases, the interviewees expressed valuing statements and opinions that I would typically have reacted to and questioned. As an interviewer, however, I chose to humbly and curiously follow up with questions of clarification or ask new questions. This was partly because there is an asymmetry of power in the interviewer-interviewee relationship, and I did not want to exercise more power than I already did in terms of being the one who sets the premises for and controls the path of the conversation. For the sake of the study, I was naturally interested in exploring and understanding what was meant, not least to make sure that I understood the interviewee correctly. But as a consequence, I occasionally felt somewhat uncomfortable, or even false, when not being transparent about how certain language use and values disturbed me.

### **Analytical Practice and Identification of Themes**

My approach privileged a *thematic* analysis, which was attentive to narratives and the construction of arguments in the responses of the interviewees (Kohler Riessman, 2004). While it is interesting and valuable to address *how* things are told, my main focus was on *what* is being told. This means that the analysis set out in this thesis does not primarily focus on the linguistic dimension of the responses, or the structure or form of the language and utterances, but rather the content. This is also reflected in the detail level of the transcriptions from which I quote: while I kept the exact formulations of the interviewees, I left out notations of pauses or other rhetorical moments. The English translations are also sometimes slightly simplified compared to the often-more-wordy, everyday speech

of the Swedish original.

I carefully and repeatedly listened to the interviews when transcribing them. Later, I read the transcriptions and sometimes read and listened simultaneously. During the first stage of my analysis, I highlighted and coded sentences into conceptual groupings, and underlined repeating or phrases and words that were interesting for other reasons, in each interview. I then organized quotes from all interviews into tentative themes in order to identify an over-arching thematic structure. As the themes were defined more in detail, I searched for words in the transcriptions to help further locate and identify relevant keywords, identify patterns, or confirm observations.

I did not analyze the interview material through a case-by-case categorization. This means that I didn't group the interviews according to what suburb areas they related to (even though this is how they are presented in the section called "Material Collected" on page 187). Instead, I analyzed all interviews individually, and later together as a whole and in relation to each other, looking for repeating patterns, themes, inconsistencies within the interviewees' reasoning and similarities as well as contradictions between perspectives and accounts.

In the empirical chapters, I first analyze a signage manual (Chapter 4) and then the interviews (Chapter 5). While the signage manual formulates a vision and instructions for an ideal version of renewal, the interviews showcase the messy reality of how those instructions met the world. Most of the tropes identified in the signage manual come up again in the interviews: in this sense, the two correspond tightly, with the major difference being that the interview material is much more complex and reflexive in comparison. I have framed the tropes differently in the two chapters to get to the core of the interview material more precisely. For instance, the 1950s is identified as an important trope, although not the same way that it was in the manual: if the manual strongly promoted the concept of "the sense of the 50s," the interviewees, although generally leaning towards a belief in that same concept, tended to reflect upon and distance themselves from it (most of the time only to fall back into supporting the concept, rather than proposing alternatives). The interviews vary in the amount of attention that is paid to this concept and the notion of a 1950s' identity or atmosphere tends to be connected to and intertwined with other topics so that it partly works as an empty signifier.

186      The interviewees either hold, or have held, formal positions within property ownership and management related to the

urban renewal projects—for Stockholmshem (in Hökarängen and Bagarmossen) and HSB Bandhagen (in Bandhagen)—or are representatives of civil society from the two associations Stadsdelsrådet (the neighborhood association) and Företagarföreningen (a business association), both of which are connected to and based in the primary case study Hökarängen. When quoting these people, I have not necessarily specified their position, as this is of less importance than the reflections that they share. Two of the key figures, namely the project leaders of the main studied urban renewal project Sustainable Hökarängen, declined to be interviewed. I have struggled to find a way to make the absence of their voices and views visible and meaningful, and while I considered leaving two pages blank as an embodiment of their silence, and perhaps as a way of making a space that corresponds and contrasts with their vocal and medial presence during the active period of the renewal project, I decided that it may be wrong to think of them as central characters. A benefit of their decision to decline to be interviewed was that other voices that are usually made invisible or thought of as peripheral could come to the fore. I was also tempted to ascribe as lack of accountability to their refusal to participate, given their roles in a public housing company (one of them has a prominent role in the company still) but this risks being judgmental—the interviews were, after all, voluntary.

In the interviews, a lot of attention was paid to individual shopkeepers and professionals in the urban renewal projects' management teams. Rather than structural, strategic, and overall plans or descriptions of the objectives of the renewal project, single actors repeatedly served as examples. This included the role and design of signage and shop windows, and how shopkeepers and property managers might work towards improvements—in my analysis, I frame this as “aspirational shopwindows and entrepreneurial personalities,” as the ambition of achievement is central to the enactment of the shop window and its role in the future of the suburb. Similarly, on the part of the interviewees, more focus was placed on individual virtues and less on links to teams, policies, or larger structures of conceptualization and decision making. This aligns with a larger picture of suburban politics as a permanent politics of temporary (local renewal) projects (Tahvilzadeh & Kings, 2018; Urban, 2018), in which individual enthusiasts or participants may have more influence than democratic processes (Hertting, 2006; Léon, 1999b; Velásquez A., 2005).

## Material Collected

The selection of material to be analyzed determines what questions can be posed and responded to. The primary sources for this research project were documents authored by, and interviews conducted with, representatives of property owners and managers in the studied cases, and some additional sources that are closely related to the cases. Since the property owners are actors holding formal power, this selection of material allowed me to pose questions around how their power is, or intended to be, exercised. I did not assume that because they have formal power, they can control the activities and aesthetics of the public space and the shops, as these arenas are subject to constant negotiations between a variety of actors. However, my research shows that the property owners constructed ideas and imaginaries about the identity and future of the three places studies, since they had certain resources to exert influence, as policy makers, or to set guidelines. For the same reason, I found it interesting to study work tools and invented practices that were not present in formal policy documents, and to consider how the individual representatives reflected on such documents and their function.

The primary source analyzed in *Reading the Signs* is a design tool—a manual for a signage system. The thesis sets out my analysis of the discourses and narratives produced in and through this document, before addressing a series of interviews that I undertook in order to investigate how representatives of property owners and local associations relate to and reflect upon suburban centers and to understand whether the identified discourses of the signage system manual were reflected in or challenged by their utterances. Additionally, the thesis also makes occasionally reference to a range of other related documents (project plan, documentative publications, evaluation), and media (news articles, TV and radio shows) that were not subjected to a systematic analysis but are relevant to the discussions it stages. In the following section, I provide a more detailed account of the different categories of materials collected.

### Documents

Two documents describing the renewal project Hållbara Hökarängen were obtained by request from the archival service of the housing company Stockholmshem: *Skyltprogrammet för Hökarängen* (ÅWL/Stockholmshem, 2012)

(The signage system manual for Hökarängen), and *Projektplan Hållbara Hökarängen—Ett utvecklingsprojekt inom Stockholmshem*

(Stockholmshem, 2012) (Project plan for Hållbara Hökarängen). The signage system manual constitutes the primary source for the empirical study set out in Chapter 4. It tells the reader about the identity of the place, defines problems, outlines solutions, and gives instructions. I chose to study this document because I believed it representative of signage systems or urban renewal projects in general, but because it was useful in investigating how problems, ideals, and solutions are formulated, how arguments are organized, what narratives are established, and what themes that can be derived from the seemingly pragmatic propositions and instructions.

The signage system manual has also informed the choice of the two other cases studied, Bagarmossen and Bandhagen, as this manual, which was initially invented for Hökarängen, was later applied to, and developed for, these two additional areas. Policy migration as such is not, however, a subject of analysis in this study, which does not aim to locate the origins of ideas and determine how they circulate. The reason that I added the two additional case studies was rather to mirror the primary case in order to add complexity and broaden my perspective in ways that could challenge or highlight findings and help locate possible future study objects.

The other document that I address in this research is a revised project plan for the development project Hållbara Hökarängen, from the early stages of the project. Dated October 5, 2012, the plan is an internal document authored by the project leader that entails a background, problem formulation, strategies, and actions to be taken, including how the project is organized and the staff engaged. The revised project plan refers to and thus is authored *after* the production of the signage system manual. This project plan partly informed the choice of interviewees.

The cases of Bagarmossen and Bandhagen are only investigated through interviews, so there are no particular documents linked to these cases.

## Interviews

A total of 8 interviews of approximately 60 minutes each, with 9 interviewees, were conducted in the period 2019–2021. While most of the interviews related to the case of Hökarängen, a few focused on Bagarmossen but included reflections on Hökarängen as well; one interview concerned Bandhagen only.

The selection of a majority of interviewees was based on the names of staff listed in the project plan of Hållbara Hökarängen

(Stockholmshem, 2012). Some were approached after they were referred to by other interviewees. Below, I present the selected interviews one by one, together with a brief description of their position and the reason for their selection.

Four interviews were undertaken with people in different roles relating to Hökarängen. One of these people was a freelancing consultant involved in Hållbara Hökarängen, who was mainly responsible for acquiring new shop keepers and tenants (primarily artists) for the ground-floor spaces. As he was later employed for the renewal project in Bagarmossen, the interview partly covers reflections on the relation between the two projects and areas as well. I also interviewed a commercial manager of the Hökarängen and Bagarmossen centers, an employee of Stockholmshem. As opposed to the other Stockholmshem interviewees, he was never engaged in any of the renewal projects and is therefore not mentioned in the project plan but was selected based on his position and the fact that he was referred to in another interview (with a representative of the local business association). Both interviews—with the former consultant, and the current property manager—were done digitally on video-chat due to the intensified pandemic.

While I prioritized interviews with representatives of the housing company, I also performed two interviews with representatives of local associations in Hökarängen, known (from documents or other interviews) to be in different ways related to the housing company Stockholmshem and the emergence, or consequence of, the renewal project Hållbara Hökarängen. One was with a representative of Hökarängens stadsdelsråd (Hökarängen's district committee), which is—unlike what the name signals—an independent local association that was formed in 2003 and engages in various issues concerning the local environment. A report written by researchers from the Royal Institute of Technology (KTH) in 2009, which later was presented to Stockholmshem and sparked the idea to start the renewal project, was a result of an initiative of this association. In this regard, what they identified as a question or a problem to be investigated, which later resulted in the project and processes that form the object of this study. The other was with a representative of Hökarängens företagarförening, an association for local entrepreneurs that was formed by Hökarängens stadsdelsråd at the request of Stockholmshem. I was interested in this origin story, and wanted to understand how their function was desired by and beneficial to the housing company. This interview also provided an account of how the efforts and acts of the housing company were perceived from a

shop keeper's perspective, even though this is not the primary perspective of the study at hand.

Two of the interviews that I conducted were tightly connected to Bagarmossen, but both of them include reflections on Hökarängen as well. One of the interviews was with a former employee of Stockholmshem who used to be the project leader of the renewal project Blomstrande Bagarmossen/Bagarmossen SmartUp, but who prior to that was responsible for the formulation of and recruitment for the project leadership of Hållbara Hökarängen. In this regard, the interviewee's experience covered the planning phase, the active years, and the aftermaths of Hållbara Hökarängen and how it influenced the Bagarmossen project. This interview was done on-site, walking around in Bagarmossen center, and focused mainly on what was done there, but naturally included reflections on Hållbara Hökarängen and how the two projects are linked. Similarly, an interview with the (now former) real estate manager of Bagarmossen center, at the time of the interview an employee of Stockholmshem, also covered Hökarängen and reflections over the relation between the two areas, as the interviewee was previously a manager of Hökarängen center during the renewal project. This interview was done indoors in an office room in Stockholmshem's area office in Skarpnäck (a neighboring area to Bagarmossen).

The first interview that I conducted within the study was with two representatives from the board responsible for the development of Bandhagen center. This interview, which took place in the meeting room of the association HSB Bandhagen, was the only one solely related to Bandhagen. Another early interview was that which I conducted at the office of architecture firm ÅWL in Södermalm in Stockholm. Stockholmshem hired the firm in 2012 to work on the development of Hökarängen center. The interviewee worked on this project as one of his first projects as a newly recruited junior architect, together with two colleagues. As he explained in the interview, they primarily worked on the signage system, lighting, and specific shops. He is the only one from that team who is still working at the office, and thus his former colleagues were not interviewed.

### **Media/Press**

The material addressed in the present research focuses on the period 2011–2015; it primarily consists of texts written about the refurbishments of centers and changes in the status of the three areas analyzed. My sources were mainly: the local press, larger daily newspapers, TV,

and radio. Initially departing from a subjective selection of articles related to Hållbara Hökarängen that appeared in the local newspaper *Mitt i Farsta*, found in Sköndal's archive, from 2012–2015, I later complemented this material through database (Mediearkivet, Svensk Mediedatabas, and Svenska dagstidningar) searches on the keywords “Hökarängen,” “Bandhagen,” and “Bagarmossen,” as well as “skyltar” (signs), and “butik/butiker” (shop/s), in order to locate material that related to the cases in general on the one hand and to the aesthetics of the shops on the other. Other media addressed included the communication channels of the housing company, such as the official websites of the property owners and the blogs made as part of the renewal projects. I do not analyze these as a single entity, but rather extract from them illustrative examples of rhetoric and narratives about how the area and its activities are understood, described, and talked about.

### **Additional Material**

I also collected documentation produced *after* the finalization of the renewal projects. Two of these sources concern Hållbara Hökarängen and one Bagarmossen SmartUp, all three of which were initiated and financed by the housing company Stockholmshem.

The first source of this kind was a book titled *Hållbara Hökarängen: en dokumentation av ett utvecklingsprojekt* (2015), which translates to “Sustainable Hökarängen: documentation of a development project,” written by sustainability consultant Susanna Elfors of the company SUST, Sustainable Innovation AB, which was commissioned by the Hållbara Hökarängen project and published by the publishing house Molin & Sorgenfrei. This publication stands out from the publisher's catalogue, which tends to focus on academic literature on the history of religion, but at the time their office was located in Hökarängen center. The book includes an account of aims and activities in the project, and interviews with actors involved, and reactions to the project, concluding with experiences learned and tips for future projects of a similar kind. In 2017, a smaller publication in the form of a thirty-page booklet was authored by the project leader of Bagarmossen SmartUp and published by Stockholmshem (2017). Apart from giving an account of the project's aims, it is structured around three themes: the vivid center, creativity and entrepreneurship, and cultivation. For this publication, thirteen local interviewees are represented in text and imagery. Both of these publications are rich in images.

192                      Lastly, in 2019, a follow-up evaluation of the project

Hållbara Hökarängen was commissioned by Stockholmshem and carried out by the architecture agency White Arkitekter (White Arkitekter, 2019). As opposed to the other two publications, which are more inspirational documentations, this one takes the form of a report based on qualitative and quantitative studies, including the presentation of a series of graphs. The focus of the evaluation is the perspective of a number of locals who were attracted to and voluntarily engaged in the activities initiated by the renewal project.

Intended for a public audience, the 2015 book was publicly promoted upon release and available to purchase in local shops. The evaluation conducted by White Arkitekter was likely intended for internal use for the housing company or a professional audience, even though it is published on the Stockholmshem webpage and available for download, and the Bagarmossen booklet is somewhere in-between—an internal document that may also be distributed to an interested public.



by Maryam Fanni (2022)

*Ögon möter ögon*, which translates to “locking gazes,” placed the reflections cast by shop windows at its center, in a reorientation of my own gaze away from discussions of the display, disposition, and retail gentrification, and towards the dissolution of spaces into each other, the shop window as montage, and the reevaluation and blurring of pre-defined categories. In the photographs making up the work, my own reflection in the window is repeatedly present, reminding me of my positionality, how I choose to frame the photograph, and what it includes and excludes. In the early stages of my doctoral research, I made some (unsatisfying) attempts at using photography to record the sites of my case studies, only to be reminded that most of what I wanted to grasp did not necessarily lend itself to being recorded through a camera lens. The *Ögon möter ögon* photo series can be described as an exploration of my own suspicion about photography as a recording practice.

Sociologist Les Back suggests that researchers must take distance from the practice of recording because we have become too obsessed and dependent on it. In his writing, he primarily stages a departure from audio recordings and the tape recorder as a device, but addresses the camera too, writing:

While I want to defend the value of the humble tape recorder, I want to argue that we need to break with our dependence on it. Our addiction to the tape recorder has limited our attentiveness to the world. This, in part, is because there lingers the presumption that if it is not on tape it does not exist. (Back, 2014, p. 251)

This argumentation resonates with what bell hooks calls “remembering whens”—a method of investigating anecdotes with others (in her case, her mother and other family members)—because it recalls the attentiveness, experiences, and memories and that we already have, which do not necessarily have to be presented as recordings to be valid.

When I started this photo series, I didn’t really know what it would lead to. As such, I see *Ögon möter ögon* as an artistic experiment—a photographic process, tool, and research diary. It is certainly not a finished work. Going out in the morning with my phone, with its camera, in my hand, I asked myself, “If I point this at the shop windows, what can I see and record?” This was in the summer, and the strong sunshine combined with the fact that many businesses were closed in the morning, or for the season, or even permanently, meant that it was sometimes difficult to see through the windows and even more difficult to record the shop interiors with a camera. The process would certainly have looked different if it had occurred in the dark winter months, as was the case when I photographed illuminated signs in 2013 (see page 28). The reflections in the window centered my own presence, the sunlight, and the surrounding environment, highlighting the mirror-like quality of the shop window. Walter Benjamin writes that: “The way mirrors bring the open expanse, the streets, into the cafe—this, too, belongs to the interweaving of spaces, to the spectacle by which the flaneur is ineluctably drawn” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 537). I chose to heed this function and move away from the shop window as a set of signs and design practices, instead approaching

it as a call to self-reflection, a melting pot that dissolves space, and a montage technique. Like a magpie looking for shiny objects, I began to look more freely and without prior categorization into reflective window surfaces, which in turn meant that I was reminded of the variety of shop windows that exist in the areas that I was researching—a diversity that rarely becomes visible, as some services and activities are allocated more prominence than others. This technique caused me to stop at, look into, and document many windows (shop windows and other windows) that I had previously only passed by.



ATLAS NO.3

ÖGON MÖTER ÖGON\*

INDEX

EXIT





## **Chapter 4**

### **How to Put a Place on the Map**



In director Gabriela Pichler's film *Amatörer* (2018), the fictive Swedish town of Lafors is in desperate need of regeneration after years of population decrease and abandoned industries. The problem seems to be about to be solved when the German discount warehouse Superbilly is discovered to be considering establishing a store there. Lafors only needs to win the competition. The municipal management of the town decides to set all other activities aside and produce a commercial that will attract the Germans. Since there is no budget to hire a PR firm, the municipal officials start making their own film, together with a local landscape photographer, and the shooting of this (expectedly cheesy) idyll begins. In one scene, the main character Musse, one of the municipal officials, is asked to step back and is replaced by a blonde colleague, as his appearance would—the photographer argues—confuse the German audience. Musse's brown skin does not match the imagined white Swedishness and thus he is excluded from the video commercial, ironically despite the fact that he, in his profession, is a formal representative of Lafors. The imagined place-identity proves to be more important than representing the reality on site when “putting a place on the map” for the distant gaze of capital investors.

In another scene, the team decide to capture footage of a typical Swedish red cottage (see Fig. 20). They find a cottage that is perfect for the shoot, it's just that it's not red. They install the camera tripod and then paint the cottage so that the portion of the façade visible from that angle is red. The commercial is not about reflecting Lafors as it is, but to imagine and present Lafors as they think that the Germans want to see it. The replacement of Musse and the painted cottage are two of several examples of how the image, or “branding,” of Lafors is constructed and designed.

The renewal of a Stockholm suburb such as Hökarängen follows a similar reliance on hegemonic notions of white Swedishness and the image of the nation. Instead of red cottages, in Hökarängen a representation of authenticity and Swedishness is staged with neon signs referencing the People's Home era, and instead of the discount chain Superbilly it is the inner city's entrepreneurs and customer base that is targeted; in both cases, however, each place is to be made attractive to capital. Just as Musse is maneuvered out of the advertising film for Lafors, invented place identities and architectural visions are often characterized by an eerie absence of ethnic diversity—or, more precisely, what researchers of spatial production Helge Mooshammer and Peter Mörtenböck describe as a “strategically curated diversity” based on their observations on marketplaces



Fig. 20.  
Film still from *Amatörer* by Gabriela Pichler, 2018.  
Photo: Johan Lundborg, Copyright Garagetfilm International AB

deliberately designed as “informal” (Mooshammer & Mörtenböck, 2023, p. 9)—but not the heterogeneity, dissensus, and polyphony of real diversity.

“Putting a place on the map” inherently means crafting a relative elevation of a place by way of creating narratives (and, in some cases, staging sensescapes to support the narratives) that reinvent and stabilize a designed identity—the *brand*—to make the place marketable. This is not a rhetoric invented by individual stakeholders but rather a logic that they parrot. To *elevate* a place, it must be distinguished from other places. In the case of Hökarängen, this act of distinction was performed by linking it with a nostalgic concept of origin and heritage, manifested in a narrative and sensescape labeled as “a sense of the 1950s.”

To “put on the map” has become a mantra for transforming places; to speak with philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre, the change in inhabited places that this strategy seeks is a shift *from use value to exchange value*. Certain vocabularies and aesthetics dominate. Anyone who experiences transformations in their home neighborhoods and questions them can easily be dismissed as paranoid, naïve, backward-thinking, a rumor spreader, or a troublemaker (Brolund de Carvalho et al., 2024). It can be difficult to locate the stakeholders in power—and even when it is possible to identify actors with formal power such as property owners or city councils, it can be difficult to acknowledge and identify the power at work in the narratives, assumptions, and approaches that pave the way for and legitimize a certain way of operating and that explain why and how urban renewal today looks the way it does. Property owners, PR consultants, architecture firms, etc., are all caught up in the logic of place-branding and competition—in this regard, these are not rhetorics that individual actors are to be held responsible for inventing. To unpack the content and meaning of the language and the logics that have become naturalized, studies are needed that both go into detail and connect to larger disciplinary and discursive landscapes.

## A Document with Aesthetic Guidelines

While the fictive filming of the commercial for Lafors was done intuitively and without formal guidelines (which shows how the hegemonic narratives are stories we “know by heart” without necessarily being able to locate where and how we learned them), in Hökarängen the urban renewal process actually produced and printed guidelines and thus recorded the hegemonic values that guided it, in the form of aesthetic instructions. It is these guidelines, in the format of a signage system manual for the local center, that will be analyzed in this chapter.

The signage system manual for Hökarängen is a professional document created in 2012 by a group of architects at the Stockholm based architecture agency ÅWL. It was commissioned by the municipal housing company Stockholmshem for their urban renewal project Hållbara Hökarängen, as a concept and tool for coordination of the shop signage and shopfronts in Hökarängen center. It is a 22-page document, distributed as an A3-sized printed manual or digital pdf. Its function is to establish values and guidelines for the aesthetic order of shop signage and shop window displays in primarily the center but also in other locations in Hökarängen. The document presents a variety of arrangements of text formats and image material, sometimes more descriptive and other times more technical and instructive. The image material includes archival photos, maps, documentary photos of shopfronts, shop interiors, and signage, and digital drawings, in some cases illustrating text and in other cases thematically organized.

The document was developed specifically for the case of Hökarängen (although after implementation, it informed renewal projects in Bagarmossen and Bandhagen, which are referred to in the interviews in a next chapter). It defines problems and characteristics of the place and based on such dictum, it presents solutions in the form of aesthetic and technical guidelines to be followed by the housing company and its ground-floor tenants, the shopkeepers. It leaves no room for self-reflexivity, an articulation of positionality, or acknowledgement of other views and pluralism. In this regard, it is authoritarian and confidently allows itself interpretative priority. Chronologically, the document can be divided into  
206 four sections: first, problem-formulation and aims, followed by

a historical background of the place; second, design guidelines, including a mood board and instructions; third, technical guidelines for implementation of the design strategy, together with inspirational images; and fourth, an account of decision order and the responsibilities of actors involved. The problem-formulation is fundamental for the rest of the document and the four parts neatly build on each other so that the solutions stabilize the problem and vice versa.

I analyze this document in this chapter by asking: What is being communicated in the image material and the text material, separately as well as in combination? My analysis focuses on the rhetorical devices presented in Chapter 3 (namely, “Before and After images” and the “mood board”); the lens they provide allows me to locate arguments, dichotomies, contradictions, repetitions, and patterns in the document, and show how and what these categories include and exclude. In analyzing the document, I pay attention to what is not being said or articulated as much as what is, by acknowledging and reading the gaps, as well as cuts and silences in the material. Since this is a site-specific manual purpose-made for a renewal project, I pay particular attention to what it tells us about the place—its past, present, and possible future(s)—and how these temporalities are connected. I ask: What claims and arguments are presented in it, and what are the implicit assumptions that it makes? What kinds of narratives are constructed? Posing these questions helps me to identify and articulate the discourses that explicitly or implicitly are manifested and communicated to a reader of the manual.

### **Professional Vision and Intended Readers**

The signage system manual is not a document that is aimed at a general public. Its intended readers and users are rather, primarily, the employees of the housing company and the company’s ground-floor tenants (the shopkeepers). Rather than being a strictly formal and merely instructive document, similar to a corporate identity manual or municipal guidelines for signage in public space, it may also function as an inspirational document intended for a layperson (for example, shopkeepers with a variety of professional backgrounds). This particular document has a meta-level, as it presents the reasons for its own existence: the problem to which it is a solution.

The document reflects the specific point of view of its 207

creators, and the norms and practices that prevail in the professional field of architecture. According to communication scholar Charles Goodwin, professional discourses emerge from the production, distribution, and interpretation of materials and representations such as diagrams, photos, and surveys, which are collected and referenced within the profession. These constitute the cognitive infrastructure that enables theory building in the field. The signage system manual can be seen as a collection of representations and materials that manifest and reproduce the architect's perspective. Goodwin argues that "(p)rofessional vision is perspectival, lodged within specific social entities, and unevenly allocated" and that as a consequence of this, certain perspectives are more legitimate and recognizable than others, and this determines "what kinds of talk can and cannot be heard, who is qualified to speak the truth, and the conditions that establish the rationality of statements" (Goodwin, 1994, p. 626). The document thus represents a particular perspective on the place and issues that it concerns—a perspective that occupies a legitimate and influential position on a policy level.

Similarly, as a response to, and continuation of, the concept of "operational images" (Farocki, 2004), Jussi Parikka uses the term "expert-readable images" to address particular knowledge-roles within visual culture through acknowledgement and studies of "professional perceptual skills, trained judgment, and expert practices of observation and instruction" (Parikka, 2019). As a trained designer, I might read the document differently than someone from another professional field who is not familiar with instructional documents related to design or conceptualizations of place. The document, in my reading, exposes a mainstream aesthetic orientation that is a well-recognized norm in architecture and design, but while value hierarchies often remain implicit in the field, here they are presented in a more explicit manner. This is needed in order to bring about a coordination of actors—what Mats Franzén, Nils Hertting, and Catharina Thörn call "the politics of small details" and "the magic trick" (Franzén et al., 2016)—in order to communicate a new identity. In this, it acknowledges that that order is dependent on the participation of several actors.

The document must be understood as a "design device," not only in the sense that it is an instruction for how the place should be designed, but also discursively a product of contemporary aesthetic ideals and professional practices in an urban Swedish context which in turn is part of a North-European, Western cultural history. In this regard, it contains familiar tropes that are historically charged.

## Bringing About Order in Public Space

How a suburb center is organized is of course not only a result of the hands of one single agent but the constant negotiations of many agents inhabiting, and operating within, the same space. To understand the relationship between the design and mechanisms of agency and order one need to examine the power relations and social structures behind the designed environment. The signage program is inherently an ordering mechanism, which seeks to bring about a specific outcome in the physical space it is designed for. Regardless of which concepts or logics inform that order, the mere fact that it wants to bring about order in public space is ideological as such its ambition stands in contrast to the concept of public space as an arena for encounters, frictions, and negotiations between diverse subjects. The signage system manual is, in this regard, an ideologically biased design artefact, in that it aspires to control the aesthetics and narratives of a place.

Genealogically, this kind of device originates from corporate branding and visual identity guidelines intended to control and maintain consistency in the communication and visual presence of companies on a market. Visual identities or corporate identities 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). The design concept for AEG developed by Peter Behrens is often pointed out as an early example of corporate identity, as industry started collaborating with artists. Products, internal and external communication material, packaging, and even the architecture of the factory building followed a coherent visual concept. Early developments of signage systems were designed for airports, where the main function was to facilitate wayfinding. Similar to corporate identities, signage systems are based on controlled and coherent visual elements. The visual identity for the Olympic Games in Munich in 1972, designed by Otl Aicher, is one early example of a combined wayfinding system and corporate identity that was implemented throughout a city. Conventional design history writing locates the advent of designing consistent visual identities in the early 1900s, following mass production, or the postwar era, however, there are earlier examples of design as a tool to control visual identity to manifest territorial power—for example, in the work of designer John Lockwood Kipling for the British presence in India, for which he made detailed visual and material design programs for ceremonies, where everything from interior design to invitation

cards were coordinated visually (Dutta, 2007).

Contemporary documents for visual and material coordination have different names in different situations; these include: corporate identity, visual identity, signage system, design manual, design program, urban environment program, etc. In a Swedish context, the word for signage system, *skyltprogram*, signifies municipal guidelines developed to regulate commerce and protect architectural or heritage values, although increasingly they tend to be not just regulatory but identity-producing. The term *skyltprogram* still leans toward connoting a bureaucratic document for public good or way-finding, but in this case it is a document that should rather be read as a branding device and a corporate identity. Designers Metahaven and art theorist Marina Vishmidt argue that, “Even a ‘brand personality’—supposed to humanize the abstractions of organization—has trouble closing the gap between itself and the intangible thing it stands for. The emblem or image that represents an organization is a surface to cover that void. Such an image may appeal to people’s needs, desires, or expectations. It may also appeal to their fears” (Metahaven & Vishmidt, 2010, p. 7). This is particularly true in the case of public space and neighborhood—there will always be a massive gap between the invented identity and the “thing” it stands for.

The *raison d’être* of the document *Skyltprogrammet för Hökarängen* (ÅWL/Stockholmskem, 2012) is announced in its very beginning: the goal is to create a “Signage system for sustainable trade” as a solution to the problem of “decreasing number of visitors”—a problem formulation tightly connected to the ideology of entrepreneurial urbanism and the viewpoint of property ownership. It is likely that problems would have been formulated differently by other actors such as residents or shopkeepers. This problem-solution pairing lays a foundation of assumptions and the narrative that makes all other utterances in the document possible. If we begin with this goal, an assumption is made about the signage system supporting sustainable trade: no indications are made that “sustainable” in this case means *environmentally friendly*—it rather indicates “long-lasting,” as in a *commercially successful* local center (see page 235 on the concept of sustainability). This goal is then further manifested through sub-goals such as

Through coordinated, well-thought-out signage, attractiveness increases, the range is made visible and more people find the center of Hökarängen.

... a clearer and more attractive Hökarängen center where the shops are doing better and selling better.

Increase the status of the Hökarängen center. By investing in upgrading the public space, the center's attractiveness increases.<sup>13</sup> (ÅWL/Stockholmskem, 2012, p. 2)

These clearly show an assumed causality between certain aesthetic qualities in the signage and public space and the circulation of customers and revenue of the shops. Furthermore, the causality is circular, as what is defined as "attractivity," which is sometimes *the means* and sometimes *the goal*. In this initial presentation of goals and aims, a number of concepts are introduced, and a vocabulary is used, that marks out key words for the ideals: "attractive," "sustainable," "find one's way to Hökarängen," "more clear," "feel better," "sell better," "beautiful," "fun," "personal," "coordinated," "thoughtful," "increase the status," "increase the pulse," "make sure that the street life is visible!" "vital," "open all day," "the typical 50s' character," "care," "quality," "safe environment."<sup>14</sup>

If we go on to the problem formulation to which the above is a response—the "decreasing number of visitors" (in the context of supporting local trade, visitors must be understood as consumers)—no background or context whatsoever is provided to explain the reasons for why this is the case and why it is a problem, nor are references to other documents provided that could serve to explain this. Nothing is mentioned about the local center in a larger context, addressing consumption patterns in relation to either socioeconomic aspects such as income levels or political-economic factors related to architecture, urban planning, transportation, and policy-making dictating loci for shopping on a local or global level. The conditions for shopkeepers are also not addressed—for instance, no analysis is offered of rent levels in relation to revenue. Implicitly, the phrasing "visitors" and the absence of locals' perspectives on the matter suggest that Hökarängen

13 "Genom samordnad, genomtänkt skyltning ökar attraktiviteten, utbudet synliggörs och fler hittar till Hökarängens centrum."

"ett tydligare och attraktivare Hökarängen Centrum där butikerna mår och säljer bättre."

"Öka statusen på Hökarängen centrum. Genom att satsa på en upprustning av den offentliga miljön ökar centrumets attraktivitet."

14 attraktiv, hållbart, hitta till Hökarängen, tydligare, må bättre, sälja bättre, vacker, rolig, personlig, samordnad, genomtänkt, öka statusen, öka pulsen, se till att folklivet syns!, levande, öppna hela dagen, tidstypiska 50-talskaraktären, omsorg, kvalité, trygg miljö.

needs to make an effort to appeal non-local customers—this is what the document will instruct the shopkeepers how to do.

If geographer Doreen Massey (1994) argues for an understanding of place as multiple and full of internal conflicts and tensions of heterogeneous communities, the document serves as an example of an approach on the very contrary, in terms of defining the place based on the perspective of one single agent. The lack of context around the problem definition obscures and alienates all perspectives other than the landlord's, putting the blame for low revenue on the shopkeepers and their aesthetic choices and design-erly approach and abilities. The vaguely defined problem also allows for the presented design solutions to appear stable and natural, which is precisely why they call for examination.

After the problem and goals, a brief account of the “development” of the area, going back to the 1600s, is presented; this focuses on the city plan, architecture, and public transportation, and is accompanied by archival footage from the center and a map to help locate Hökarängen in Stockholm's geography. What is striking here is that despite the fact that a contemporary and current problem has been defined, the historical background makes no attempt to address or link to the current conditions of the area or even the 2000s. A strong focus is on the '50s' characteristics of the area, with formulations like “today, a feeling of the '50s lingers here,” and “Time almost seems to have stood still.” Even when population numbers and public transport routes are mentioned—which could be of great relevance to the claimed problem—the numbers and routes predominantly focus on the 1950s. The historical background is not designed to bridge over to or give leads about the current situation of the area or the claimed problem; rather, what it does is to define the area as closely linked to the years around when it was planned and built. This use of historical account establishes a “creation myth” of the place. The desire to root a place authenticity in history has been delineated by Harvey (1996) and Massey (1994) as a reactionary sense of place. Massey argues that “(t)he specificity of place is continually reproduced, but it is not a specificity which results from some long, internalised history” (p. 155), highlighting that one concept that may allow for a progressive sense of place is to think beyond the boundaries of place and acknowledge how places are intertwined and multiple.

The signage program does refer to other places, e.g., Vällingby center and the inner city. But those relationships go via the 1950s' identity: it is a series of historical, aesthetic qualities that connects

the places. In this way, the proximity of the place is anchored in history or historicizing aesthetics rather than spatial/geographical or other parameters. It is not unreasonable that an architectural or architecture historical perspective is adopted, but this perspective has consequences for the understanding and narrative of the place.

*Place* can be 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). But the construction of memories depends on linking people into the past, and therefore one must attend to the common grounds and boundaries of such group formation or community. I will later return to a more in-depth analysis of the functions of the 1950s in particular as the foundation for a creation myth that builds on and reinforces homogenous “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1991).

What the document does is to present the place, Hökarängen, as isolated and particular. The relational is present, however implicitly, in the document’s foundational notion of *places in competition* and the possibility of *relative elevation*. What the document does not do is to explicitly put the place in relation to other places, address communities, and understand it as multiple and negotiable. This is symptomatic of place-branding strategies that focus on rendering place as unique, single identities (although this is often done with reference to multiculturalism (cf Mukhtar-Landgren, 2012)). In Chapter 5, I show that when stakeholders reflected upon the application of the manual in a given place, they were quite explicit about its relationality and relation to other places, even if only nearby.

### Precise and Measurable Solutions to the Problem

The instructive part of the document—its largest section, which presents design solutions—has a clear theme: the retro aesthetics of the 1950s. The proposed aesthetics and design guidelines are first established through mood boards and “right-and-wrong” figures before further detail is provided through a series of technical, format-specific instructions. Four categories are presented as frameworks in line with which the area’s potential is to be developed; these categories are “50s,” “artistic,” “green/verdant,” and “near and cozy.” These categories are illustrated with a mood board, which collects images of various kinds, centering

the 1950s nostalgia and making the other categories subordinate—for instance, an articulated example of “artistic” happens to be a play sculpture from the 1950s, likewise the illustration of “near and cozy” is a café with 1950s retro interior.

After the moodboard presenting the centrality of the 1950s characteristics, the instructive section of the document continues by way of a series of clear statements (in either text or images or both) about what values and aesthetics should be eliminated from the local center, and what should be emphasized or introduced. These dichotomizing rhetorics include a list of things “to avoid.” In some cases, the instructions are vague and highly subjective, such as the avoidance of “signage that looks cheap and trashy,” and in other cases it is more precise, for instance specifying “plastic furniture.” While the page presenting the potentials and design concepts declare positive characteristics and ideals for the center, using words like “intimate,” “conscious,” “creative,” “pearl,” etc., the avoid list focuses on negative values, using words like “cheap,” “trashy,” “security,” and “raw.”<sup>15</sup> If the list of avoidances is text-based, the next set of instructions is dominated by images (with captions that are worthy of attention too). Two rows of street photos present “bad” examples contrasted with “good” examples of shopfronts (see Fig. 21). This is not only a rhetorical device to give aesthetic instructions but should be read as an aggressive scheme reflecting how businesses are valued based on class and ethnicity, because the photos deliberately defined as “bad” or unwanted represent businesses typically run by immigrants or in suburbs or—even though it is not declared as such—along a heavily car-trafficked street (Hägerstensvägen). The “good” examples, in contrast, represent middle-class, inner-city shopping. Thus, if other elements in the document have not already made it clear, this page should: this is not an innocent or neutral design manual, it is a discursive document advocating an approach to the urban environment and promoting design practices that are insensitive to structural hierarchies such as class and racism, despite the fact that these hierarchies are manifested spatially and commercially.

The final section is organized around material categorizations and discusses a sequence of different kinds of signs: neon signs, flag signs, and shop windows (with the sub-categories “bars and sunblinds,” “plastic foiling,” “coverage and display of shopwindows,” and “window ads”). Each category is described in general terms, provided with technical details such as

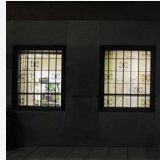
Dåliga exempel



Förtäckta fönster. Sluten, skräpig och billig skyltning. Stor, oestetisk ljuslåda som flaggskylt. Skräpig gatupratare.



Samma information många gånger ger billigt intryck. För mycket av glaslet är täckt. För stora och oestetiska ljuslådor som flaggskyltar



Fasadgaller. Oengagerad nattskytning. Otrygg känsla.



För mycket galler. För stor flaggskylt. Billigt intryck.



Skräpig gatupratare.

Goda exempel



Öppen känsla. Frestande exponering. Sparsmakad flaggskylt



Enkel men effektiv text. God insyn. Kreativ skyltning.



Spännande nattskytning.



Öppenhet. Frestande exponering. Generöst intryck.



Fin gatupratare för restaurang. Kvalité i material och tidlös/retro-känsla

Stockholmshem

HÖKARÅNGEN C

SKYLTPROGRAM

2012-01-12

ÅWL

Fig. 21.  
Page 6 of Skyltprogrammet för Hökarängen  
(ÅWL/Stockholmshem 2012)

measures, and illustrated with photos presenting a few promoted examples as well as one marked “not allowed” (*ej tillåtet!*) in red capital letters. Each category also includes a divide of basic requirements and possible “extras.” These instructions are further clarified with a few pages presenting examples where different shopfront solutions are digitally sketched out with measurements, in order to present full solutions of the different components combined.

The last page gives an account of decision order, the actors, and their responsibilities, and the terms for coverage of costs. It is clarified here that the shopkeepers are responsible to follow the guidelines that are defined by the housing company, and that the housing company provides funding for the illuminated signs. This section, in its rationality and pragmatism makes it difficult to point out a value-oriented voice and discursivity. But in fact, its technicality is discursive in itself as the move to this section neutralizes the previous sections and manifests a linearity and solution-orientedness, further obscuring any possibilities to negotiability and instead consolidating that there are precise and measurable solutions to the problem. It is striking to see that the document that begins with the problem statement about “lack of visitors to the center” ends with a response in the form of technical guidelines for consistent measurements.

## Identified Tropes

The problem statement, set out in the highly dichotomizing design-oriented section of the document, focuses on *trashiness*. The solution, however, is not framed as order or tidyness but as transparency and openness. The dichotomies of “cheap and trashy” versus the “open and transparent” are obviously not opposite words—therefore the analysis of this trope focuses on the dynamics of this gap and a critical examination of the concepts “trashy” and “open.” Geographer Irene Molina’s theorization of racialized Swedish suburbs is useful here, as it provides tools to understand the conditions for a public space and a commercial landscape in the suburb in a segregated European city like Stockholm.

The buzzwords “open” and “transparent” can be unpacked employing philosopher Édouard Glissant’s concept of opacity. In his book *Poetics of Relation* (1997 [1990]), Glissant insists that we must “clamor for the right to opacity for everyone” (p. 194). For him, the demand for a right to opacity functions as an ethical stance against imperialist domination. His theories, including opacity, grew from the site-specific conditions of post-colonial Martinique in the Caribbean, relating in particular to the French imperialism, but has become widely employed in media and cultural studies, political thought, art criticism, etc. For Glissant, the right to opacity entails a right to unknowability and thus serves as an ethics, or a poetics, that promotes the idea that all differences cannot be recognized, and that it is a violent act to demand transparency. Instead, it suggests that in a multi-relational world and in cross-cultural communication, we must accept a level of unintelligibility and illegibility. In this regard, opacity functions as a stance of scepticism towards assimilation and Western universalism and instead offers de-hierarchization.

The tension and the distance between the concepts of *trashy* on the one hand and *openness* on the other provide a measure of the moral and incitement of the signage program (and the urban renewal project it sits in); underlying these terms is the assumption that a suburb’s “wrong” characteristics must be fixed if an elevation of status is to occur. In order to wash away the “suburb” label from the place, design devices/concepts are needed: here, the concept of “a sense of the ‘50s” becomes useful. *The 1950s* is the most prominent trope in the document, which functions as creation myth and claim of authenticity and origin of the place, as

well as a simple aesthetic theme. The 1950s nostalgia can thus be claimed to “merely” have a branding function—however, that would render the nostalgia rather innocent and replaceable with any other design concept or style and ignore the social and political functions of such narrative. Therefore, by employing Boym’s concept of “restorative nostalgia” (2001), I pay particular attention to how this nostalgic narrative serves to measure out a positionality and distance from the stereotypical stigmatized and racialized suburb (Molina, 1997). The seemingly apolitical and aesthetically oriented, or even thought-to-be progressive 1950s nostalgia works as a container of nationalist sentiments and social imaginaries of whiteness. The 1950s as sensescape and narrative is understood here as a device for the creation of the specific type of order that is desired, and a story to conceptualize the place identity and function as branding to promote visibility and elevation of status and “put the place on the map.”

In particular, two parts of the manual form the basis of the analysis that I perform in this section: firstly, I look at the list of “things to avoid,” then to the page where “good examples” are compared to “bad examples” in order to establish aesthetic values. I then turn my attention to the trope identified as “business-as-usual: eco-aesthetics and entrepreneurial art,” investigating how the concepts of *sustainability* and *art* function in this context, and showing how sustainability is reduced to “eco”-branding and aesthetics, with “art” left to signify an upbeat, ambitious mood—a helpful ingredient and problem-solver. I will argue that this superficial take on sustainability and art further shows that the 1950s identity and concept constitutes an aesthetic and narrative strategy that is disconnected from a discussion of history in terms of progressive values and practices. It is this disconnect which makes the strategy’s claim to progressiveness clearly questionable. Rather, the use of *eco* and *art* shows that “the enhancement of the sense of the 50s” is embedded in a “business-as-usual” neoliberal urban renewal process, rather than any challenge to the status quo.

### **“Open and Transparent” Versus “Trashy”: A Racializing Binary**

I have previously referred to a film scene in Pichler’s film *Amatörer* in which the Swedish-Tamil municipality official Musse is cut out from the place-branding commercial of his hometown with reference to

his skin color not matching the image of a Swedish town. The figure (Fig. 21 on page 215) from the document that contrasts “good” and “bad” examples of shopfront design, discussed above, echoes the class and whiteness hierarchy that is manifested when Musse is maneuvered out of the promo film because of his skin color. The implicit message in this instructional picture is that businesses that connote people and places that are racialized as non-white or non-Swedish or typically situated in peripheral or marginalized places and low in the class hierarchy are “bad” and should not be associated with the place and not be included in its branding. The shopfront designs that are, in contrast, *desired* in the reinvention of the area not only represent fashionable shops in inner-city locations but they are also cropped differently, centering the shop window and showing less of the façades and the ground. Black studies scholar George Lipsitz has asserted that whiteness is everywhere but it is very hard to see, “(a)s the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations” (Lipsitz, 1995, p. 369). Here, it becomes useful to speak the name of whiteness as a category and to talk about its constructions of difference—I propose that this is how these image examples can be read.

The differentiation between “good” and “bad” in this instructional page can also be understood as mirroring the division between *branding* and *advertisement*, using author and social activist Naomi Klein’s distinction between the two, as highlighted by Claire La Berge:

the latter [advertisement] concerns buying a product; the former [branding] concerns cathecting to a product, an act which may lead to its purchase, but by a more circuitous and associative route.

Branding, then, is an investment in future earnings mediated through contemporaneous representation wherein the representation itself should be understood as both associative and evaluative. The associative is transformed into the evaluative and, retroactively, the associative becomes the evaluative. An example may render this process, in which most of us engage daily, a bit less opaque. I need a new computer and I immediately imagine an Apple. Whether I buy it or not, the fact of my association from desire to branded commodity is already an evaluation, one which is a value-producing operation for Apple, although that value may not be realized immanently. (La Berge, 2014a, p. 60–61)

**Hökarängens karaktär:  
potential and designanslag**

**Utveckla:**

**50-tal**

Karaktären är välbevarad och av hög kvalitet. Hökarängen är verkligen en pärla i sammanhanget. Den lite sömniga stämningen har sin charm men behöver kontrast för att inte kännas avsmådd.

Modern retrodesign passar väldigt väl in i Hökarängen. Med medveten utformning kan Hökarängen bli ett hemma-ställe för många som annars söker sig till t.ex Söder inne i stan.

**Konstnärligt**

I Hökarängen finns konsthall, ateljévåningar och ett riktat boende för konstnärer och musiker. Fler synliga konstprojekt i centrum skulle kunna ge en mer kreativ, levande och aktuell karaktär.

**Grönskande**

Träd skjuter upp rakt ur gatstenen. Detta är en stor tillgång som ger sympatisk svalka och skönhet åt platsen. Ett ekologiskt anslag skulle kännas helt rätt.

**Nära och Mysigt**

Centrum kan vända sin småskaliga, intima känsla till en fördel. Här kan människor känna sig hemma. Genom medveten utformning känner besökaren sig välkommen och väljer att stanna kvar.



Stockholmshem

HÖKARÄNGEN C

SKYLTPROGRAM

2012-01-12

ÅWL

Fig. 22.  
Page 4 of Skyltprogrammet för Hökarängen  
(ÅWL/Stockholmshem 2012)



In this case, if advertising would be the act of individual shops advertising their products, the branding does not concern a specific commercial brand or an individual shop but the area as a whole, constituting a place-branding of Hökarängen. If we acknowledge and “see” the whiteness, it becomes clear that the “good” versus “bad” figures in the instructional design manual of the branding strategy suggests not just any aesthetic consistency and order but promotes an accumulation of whiteness, and an erasure of racialized and othered aesthetic expressions. La Berge continues:

To relate brand identity and racial or ethnic identity is to return to the remedial natural of branding as an economic logic. It seems an insulting comparison. But in his argument about “the possessive investment in whiteness,” George Lipsitz suggests that whiteness accumulates very much like branded identity. Both are sites of aggregated value wherein a representation of symbolic exteriority confirms an evaluation of interiority. In both, future profit and past investment come to stabilize and justify each other, and association between them becomes a site of value. (La Berge, 2014b, p. 70)

La Berges’ and Lipsitz’ proposal of whiteness as site of aggregated value can also be understood through the lens of *racial capitalism* (Robinson, 2000), a concept that points to the interconnectedness of capitalism and racism. While racial capitalism is often associated with the most explicit forms of white supremacist exploitation such as slavery and colonialism, it is increasingly useful and used also for understanding contemporary and less explicit “liberal and multicultural terms of inclusion to value and devalue forms of humanity differentially to fit the needs of reigning state-capital orders” (Melamed, 2015, p. 77). In the context of this study, the valuation of whiteness in the signage manual must be related to the racially segregated city.

Geographer Irene Molina, Sweden’s most prominent and pioneering researcher on the racialization of the country’s suburbs (Molina, 1997), has also studied how images and narratives in the media shape whole ideas about what neighborhoods are, about what is ugly and what is desirable (De los Reyes & Martinsson, 2005, p. 112), and about how people and phenomena can be associated with specific places and spaces (p. 101). In a study of representations of the suburb in the media, Ericsson, Ristilammi, and

222 Molina argue that mass media help to reproduce discourses about Million Program suburbs as problems and that the “perception

of the city in terms of good and bad areas tends to strengthen segregation in the city” (Ericsson et al., 2002, p. 39). Just like certain residential areas or certain types of buildings and architecture styles are being associated with specific groups of the population, certain kinds of shops and shopfronts are associated in the same way. In parallel with this statement, it can be argued that the valuation that is performed by the signage program contributes to certain expressions being understood as problems and others being seen as valuable, along lines that follow class hierarchies and structural racism.

Now I will look more closely at the “good” and “bad” examples in this figure (Fig. 21 on page 215). The bad examples are made up of five photographs: a small grocery or tobacco store, a combined dry cleaner and tailors, a basement space with two latticed windows that glow in the dusk, a florist, and a “street talker” sign in plastic or metal with posters and advertisements taped onto it. What these pictures have in common in terms of signage is that all three stores have a light box against the facade and a flag sign that is also in plastic or a light box. The grocery store and dry cleaner have plastic foil and advertisements in the shop windows, the florist has latticed windows. In all three cases, the signs indicate the product that the store sells. Sociolinguists Shonna Trinch and Edward Snajdr argue that the explicitness of these shops can be understood as “capitalism without distinction”—a potentially intrusive approach that doesn’t divide consumers into wanted and unwanted groups but rather communicates in a highly informative manner—as opposed to an approach that only speaks to certain audiences that are already in the know and looking to consume and manifest lifestyle (Trinch & Snajdr, 2017). They call this latter approach “distinction-making capitalism” and argue that while they might aesthetically come across as more humble and less intrusive than the more explicit and rich-with-words signage, typically their business relies on a more financially strong audience and are thus exclusionary of less affluent customers.

The good examples represent a café, two hardly identifiable kinds of shops, a florist, and finally a street talker in the form of a blackboard with a wooden frame. In contrast to the preceding line of images, these photographs show stores where the type of business or products sold are not stated in the text in the signage. The café is identifiable through pictograms representing a pretzel, cup, and rolling pin, and the bread that is visible through the shop window. The flower shop is easily identifiable as the flowers are on display. The other two shops are harder to identify, and could be hair salons, perfumeries, fashion shops, or something

else. While the “bad examples” communicate in text form in their signage, the “good examples” communicate indistinctly in text and have mysterious names, instead exposing their goods in or outside the shop window. Thus, through this juxtaposition, the document promotes aesthetic approaches to shop window display that communicate through sensorial and atmospheric qualities rather than language-based, informative communication. According to the categorizations proposed by Naomi Klein, it advocates *branding over advertisement* (La Berge, 2014a, p. 60–61). The importance of exposure in shop windows can be understood as a blurring of the boundary between shop and street, and an incitement to consume the shopping street as a whole—an atmospheric and sensory experience of the total of the shop windows on a street—rather than specific goods that can be purchased in the individual shops (Franzén et al., 2016 p. 241). The demand for a more scenographic approach to the design of shop windows is, in this way, tightly connected to the aspirations of the property management and their reinvention of the shopping street in a manner that excludes shops that are connoted with populations racialized as non-white.

Distinction-making	Capitalism without distinction
Branding	Advertisement
Whiteness	Racialized
“Open”	“Trashy”
“Tempting”	“Cheap”

### Trashiness

The Swedish word *skräpig*, here translated to *trashy* in English,<sup>16</sup> is repeatedly used in two parts of the manual: first in the list of things to avoid in shopfront signage and shop window design, and secondly on the page presenting “good” and “bad” examples:

In its less thought through form a street talker contributes to an impression of cheapness and trashiness.

Covered, trashy and cheap window display.

Trashy street talker.

16 The English translation of this word has more obvious class-related and racist connotations, through uses such as “white trash,” which the Swedish word doesn’t have; this may obscure the social dimensions at work in the word *skräpig*, keeping its interpretation literal.

Window display that looks trashy and cheap.<sup>17</sup> (ÅWL/Stockholmshem, 2012, p. 5, 6, 6, 6)

“Trashiness” is thus ascribed to certain materials and objects: street talkers, plastic, pennants, and when ads or signs are applied in a quantitative and busy manner. To counter this, a number of solutions are presented: metal, wood and textiles to replace plastic; chalkboards instead of ordinary street talkers. These material choices are anchored in and argued to play well with the characteristics of the place (p. 5).<sup>18</sup> Trashiness is here also repeatedly connected to being “cheap,” and in one case to “closed/covered” (p. 6).

It is not necessarily antonyms that are presented under the categorization “good”–“bad”. “Cheap” and “trashy” are the most common words among the bad examples, while none of the good examples are described with the opposite “expensive” or “clean.” Instead, “generous” is used, which can be said to be in conflict with “expensive” and not in direct opposition to “cheap.” In the table below, I have compiled the words that the document dichotomizes and tested them against their antonyms to highlight the directions in which the words point, which are not being made explicit. It reveals that the dichotomizing layout of the page hides more layers of meaning than what is revealed in the words on the page.

I have identified the pictures that indicate good examples as having been taken on Götgatan and St Paulsgatan, two of the most central shopping streets on inner-city Södermalm; the bad examples come from Hägerstensvägen, a busy street in the suburb of Hägersten, which, in comparison with the inner-city shopping streets, is car-bound rather than dedicated to pedestrian shopping. The fact that these streets are set against each other implicitly promotes the inner city as an ideal.

The line-up of good versus bad can not only be understood as a question of how a certain type of shop should improve its presentation, but also, or above all, that the type of shop itself and its presence in the urban environment is valued.

17 “I sin mer ogenomtänkta form bidrar gatupratare bara till intrycket av billighet och skräpighet.”

“Sluten, skräpig och billig skyltning.”

“Skräpig gatupratare.”

“Skyltning som ser skräpig och billig ut.”

18 “bör samspela med Hökarängens kvalité i materialen.”

My notes	From document	From document	My notes
<p><b>Suggestions for opposites to good examples:</b></p> <p>Ineffective, difficult, ugly, unappetizing, uninviting, ungenerously, stingy, evil, unimaginative, extravagant, uninteresting, time-typical trend-sensitive, closed</p>	<p><b>Good examples:</b></p> <p>effective Simple Fine Tempting Tempting Generously Good Creative Thrifty Exciting Timeless Open Transparency</p>	<p><b>Bad examples:</b></p> <p>cheap cheap Cheap Too much Too much Too large Too large Disguised many aesthetic unaesthetic unengaged insecure same Closed trashy trashy trashy Big</p>	<p><b>Suggestions for opposites to bad examples:</b></p> <p>Expensive, too little, too small, aesthetic, committed, different, open, fresh new tidy tidy, small</p>
<p><b>Förslag på motsatsord till goda exempel:</b></p> <p>Ineffektiv, svår, ful, oaptitlig, oinbjudande, ogenerös snål, ond, fantasilös, överdådig, ointressant, tidstypisk, trendkänslig, sluten</p>	<p><b>Goda exempel:</b></p> <p>effektiv Enkel Fin Frestande Frestande Generöst God Kreativ Sparsmakad Spännande Tidlös Öppen Öppenhet</p>	<p><b>Dåliga exempel:</b></p> <p>billig billigt Billigt För mycket För mycket För stor För stora Förtäckta många oestetisk oestetiska oengagerad otrygg samma Slutet skräpig skräpig skräpig Stor</p>	<p><b>Förslag på motsatsord till dåliga exempel:</b></p> <p>Dyr, för lite, för liten, estetisk, engagerad, olika, öppen, fräsch ny ordningssam städad, liten</p>

Fig. 24.

### Open and Transparent

Another word that reoccurs in the signage system manual is “open.” I propose reading this term in relation to the concept of *trashy*. Openness is presented as tightly connected to and almost synonymous with the transparency of the shop window. The images functioning as inspirational examples in the manual are captioned as follows:

- Open feeling. Tempting exposure. Fastidious flag sign.
- Openness. Tempting exposure. Generous impression.
- Open signage with low rim in the back edge shop window.
- Openness towards the store.<sup>19</sup> (ÅWL/Stockholmshem, 2012, p. 6, 6, 15, 17)

In the list of things that should be avoided, the first point made is that signage that looks trashy and cheap lowers expectations for both the individual store and for the center in general (see Fig. 23 on page 221). The list

19 “Öppen känsla. Frestande exponering. Sparsmakad flaggskylt”  
 “Öppenhet. Frestande exponering. Generöst intryck.”  
 “Öppen skyltning med låg sarg i bakkant skyltskåp.”  
 “Öppenhet in mot butiken.”

includes covered shop windows, duplicated signage, and cluttered or covered shop windows including bars and blinds (with some exceptions). The message that shop windows must not be covered but must be transparent is repeated several times throughout the manual. This is explained in different ways: first, by claiming that double signage “looks unjustified” and that the surface can be “used better”;<sup>20</sup> second by claiming that “in order to increase security and give the center a pulse, the shops must offer their inner life”<sup>21</sup> as in expose their interior to the street by keeping windows possible to see through. In this sentence, it is suggested that the transparency of the shop window creates security. Later, the argument about security reappears in other words: “a barred signage contributes to a rougher environment. A vicious circle is formed.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, certain materials and objects—in this case, bars—are not only associated with, but also believed to evoke, crime and vandalism. Bars and blinds should thus preferably not look like bars and blinds but somehow be designed differently in order to be interpreted as objects with other kinds of connotations. The manual suggests that one should “Make sure that the bars/blinds are given a careful and discreet design”<sup>23</sup> (ÅWL/Stockholmshem, 2012, p. 13).

In the hyper-mediated information society that we live in today, a dominant logic is that everything must be exposed, detectable, knowable, publicized, and shared (Echchaibi, 2019). Since 9/11, the demand for transparency has increased, particularly for certain groups, such as Muslims and bodies racialized as non-white. It is against this background that we must understand how an aesthetic quality such as *transparency* can, when translated into *openness*, be equated with *security*. The imperative of openness and transparency is about giving an account of who you are and providing proof of your innocence, which is not the same for everyone but relies on the asymmetrical landscape of structural racism in which some bodies are seen as threats and others in need of protection from them.

“Openness” can be understood in several ways. On the one hand, it connotes the basic principles of public space and its democratic mechanisms—that is, openness as *publicness*, or accessibility to the public, and thus a potential arena for social, cultural, and political negotiations. Since

20 “Dubblerande skyltning. Ser omotiverat ut och tar upp yta som kan användas bättre. Är endast motiverat i hörnlägen.”

21 “Igensatta fönster. För att öka tryggheten och ge centrum puls måste butikerna bjuda på sitt inre liv.”

22 “en igenbommad skyltning bidrar till en råare miljö. En ond spiral bildas.”

23 “Måna om att galler/jalusi får en omsorgsfull och diskret design.”

it is shop premises and shopwindows that are addressed in the document, though there is also a connotation of *opening hours* and a specific openness towards consumption (but not necessarily other activities). In this context, I argue that “open” is used in a particular way: in opposition to “cheap” (see Fig. 24 presenting an analysis of vocabulary and antonyms) and paired with “tempting” and “generous,” which marks desirability. “Openness” is also used to describe the effect of transparency and the possibility of seeing through the shop windows—and this is presented in contrast to the stores with cluttered windows that are “closed,” “trashy,” and “cheap.” One could have expected that open and openness would be coupled with *affordability*, but in the dichotomy presented here this is not the case, as openness rather is connected to a desirability that either is in conflict with or has an undefined relation to the *cheap*.

In a context of the urban renewal, it is even more important to understand “open” as a word that cultural studies scholar Patrick Leary would call a “keyword” (2018) in the framework of urban development—a word that loses its meaning in being a buzzword, while at the same time it accumulates meanings that call for examination. “Open” is seemingly a positive and progressive word that is impossible to speak against, because it signals conflictlessness and limitlessness. This is exactly what is problematic with it, as the unreflected use of words such as “open” or “free” risk being a “colonial gesture of creating a ground zero” (Snelting & Mugrefya, 2022) obscuring the asymmetrical relations in our world. Openness is relative and conditional, what is read as open depends on who is the recipient and openness is also closely connected to accessibility. The mantra of openness is thus a dominator’s ignorance of unavoidable limits and limitations. While insisting on openness may be the most fundamental condition for democracy and co-existence, it may well work to hinder just that. “Open” has become a buzzword, in architecture, culture, planning, technology, design, etc.

Philosopher Édouard Glissant’s concept of *opacity* provides a critical perspective on the popular use of “open” and “openness” and the aesthetics of transparency. He argues that opacity is “that which protects diversity” (Glissant, p. 62). “Open” and “openness” have strong connotations with respect to democratic values and are thus nearly impossible to speak against. In spite of their positive connotations, they must be seen in the light of what they do in a discursive and aesthetic context like this and what they close off towards. In this context, *open* becomes a cornerstone of place branding: “open” as in *within reach* (but, similar to

“tempting,” not necessarily reachable); “open” as in *not dangerous*, innocent, and ultimately “white.” “Open” serves as a container or framework for the atmospheric design: for the sensescape. Contrary to its literal meaning, in this case, “open” is a closed, confined, and exclusionary concept—its meaningfulness lies in what it excludes, what it is *not*, without being explicitly open about this.

I propose open-trashy as a foundational binary in the morality of the signage system manual *Skylltprogrammet för Hökarängen* (ÅWL/Stockholms-hem, 2012). In essence, the design program advocates a vertical move, from lowly trashiness to an elevated openness—from a closed and opaque attitude or identity to a transparent, nothing-to-hide, legible one. This move can be understood as a form of class mobility or “respectability politics” (Brooks Higginbotham 1993). In the coming, I will focus on a trope that functions to legitimize this moral by developing a rather vague notion or value of open/transparent into a more familiar and applicable concept: the 1950s.

### **Distinction-Making 1950s: Roots not Routes**

An online real estate ad for an apartment in Hökarängen begins with a description of the area before going on to the apartment itself:

Hökarängen is modern and vintage at the same time. This is precisely why the area has become so popular. Great effort has been put into giving the shopping street in the center its nostalgic feel from the 50s/60s.<sup>24</sup> (Hemnet, 2024)

What is interesting here is that the ad is not just saying that the area has a 1950s or 1960s character but that it has a “nostalgic feel,” furthermore alluding to the feel being actively constructed, as the result of “great effort.” In this way, this constructedness is presented as a form of investment or care, which while it might seem to contradict the idea of *authenticity*, in fact is used to signal *heritage*. The formulation “great effort” provokes questions of by whom, how and why. These are the leading questions in the coming

24 “Hökarängen är modernt och vintage på samma gång. Just därför har området blivit mycket populärt. Stor möda har lagts ned på att ge köpgatan i centrum sin nostalgiska prägel från 50/60-talet.”

analysis, wherein I address the aesthetic and narrative concepts and guidelines presented in the signage system manual, through a close interrogation of the most explicit trope of the signage programme, namely the “1950s.” I will argue that this trope stands for a so-called “restorative nostalgia” with particular social and political functions in differentiating Hökarängen from other suburbs to signal a specific quality of authenticity which entails white Swedishness, and as such it is a place-branding narrative inevitably paving way for real estate ads like the one quoted above, that emphasizes the atmospheric character or the sensescape of the location—the “nostalgic feel”—as a “unique selling point.” The classic principle of real estate brokers, “location, location, location!” is here supported by “atmosphere, atmosphere, atmosphere!” a reminder that the value of location is not fixed, just like the value of authenticity or heritage isn’t but can be negotiated with the help of aesthetic micro-practices and narratives. With reference to marketing research on failed heritage brands, marketing researchers Christian Dam, Benjamin Hartman and Katja Brunk remind that “value is not something that emerges organically from the heritage itself ... heritage needs to be activated and managed to create value, for example by creating an authentic aura of heritage” (Dam et al., 2024, p. 8).

The 1950s and the “sense of the 1950s” is a concept repeated throughout the document in various ways: it emerges as central to the character and history of the place, as a direction of development with instructive and inspirational examples, and as part of the goals and aims of the renewal project.

Take advantage of the typical 1950s character. There is care and quality in the details as well as the whole.

The center was designed in its entirety by David Helldén and even today a feeling of the 50s remains here.

In connection with the Ytterstadsprojektet in the late 1990s, the houses in the center were renovated and restored to their original condition, among other things, the neon signs in the 50s style that are now outside every store were put back.

Develop: 50s. The character is well preserved and of high quality.

Hökarängen’s neon signage was varied. This variation contributes to a vital street environment. Picture from the 50s.<sup>25</sup> (ÅWL/Stockholmskem,

25 “Utveckla: 50-tal. Karaktären är välbevarad och av hög kvalitet.”

“Ta till vara den tidstypiska 50-talskaraktären. Det finns omsorg och kvalitet i både

2012, p. 2, 3, 3, 4, 7)

Hökarängen is repeatedly anchored in and defined as originating from the 1950s. Words like “care,” “quality,” “well preserved,” “original,” in combination with “50s,” mark that the focus is on the 1950s in an *aesthetic* sense, and that “the 1950s” functions as a container of positive values which can be read as a nostalgic, idealized past. The modernist architect David Helldén, who designed the urban plan and buildings of the area in the late 1940s, is mentioned by name—interestingly, this architect was later in his career associated with large-scale complexes within the Swedish Million Program, and, most notably the university buildings of Frescati, which were fatal to his reputation due to the anti-modernist debates at the time (Rörby, 2002). However, in this context, the naming of the architect adds value in terms of authorship and heritage to the area. Similarly, the mention of “Ytterstads-satsningen” (translates into “the outer city project”) in the 1990s (discussed in the Introduction at page 60) despite the spelling out of “1990s” works to further anchor the values of authenticity and historical origin, pointing to a restoration to original conditions and the installment of neon signs. Much of the contextualization of the area is thus formed by selective and superficial references focusing on the architectural qualities connecting to the 1950s, leaving out histories or reference points that could guide other directions or contribute to a more polyphonic approach. The variety ascribed to the neon signage refers to the artisanry and design of the craft of creating unique neon signs, typical for the 1950s and possibly 1940s, whereas in the 1960s neon signs increasingly turned more functionalist in their style, italics and pictograms were replaced by capital letters (Eriksson, 2023, p. 42). In this regard, the illuminated signs introduced in Hökarängen in the 1990s and 2010s are more similar to the 1960s rather than 1950s in their design. However, “variety” here does not mean a multicultural society’s reflection in businesses; ironically, it marks the opposite—an homogenization of aesthetics in the public space.

helhet och detaljer.”

”Centrum ritades i sin helhet av David Helldén och än idag dröjer sig en känsla av 50-tal kvar här.”

”I samband med Ytterstadsprojektet i slutet av 1990-talet blev husen i centrum renoverade och återställda till sitt ursprungliga skick, bland annat satte man tillbaka de neonskyltar i 50-talsstil som nu sitter utanför varje affär.”

”Utveckla: 50-tal. Karaktären är välbevarad och av hög kvalitet.”

”Hökarängens neonskyltning var varierad. Denna variation bidrar till en livfull gatumiljö. Bild från 50-talet.”

The term “‘50s” is also attached to contemporary inspirational photos for shop windows or interiors:

The diamond pattern on the glass gives a clear ‘50s character.  
A tight display cabinet with a ‘50s feel can fit well.<sup>26</sup> (ÅWL/Stockholms-  
hem, 2012, p. 14, 15)

The focus in the examples above is on an idea of re-introducing or emphasizing certain characteristics in the design of the place, while at the same time anchoring it in a particular historicity. The historical anchoring has a distinction-making function in that it creates proximity with the ideal inner city and distances itself from the suburb that is discursively understood as “without history” (cf Tunström, 2009).

Furthermore, the place is described as a “gem” (*en pärla* in Swedish). The term “gem” is often used in place branding and in property advertisements to signal that a place is considered authentic, where there is potential for refinement, or a place or property stands out from the rest (cf Harvey, 2001). The expression can be likened to the use of “uncut diamond” (*oslipad diamant*). Describing the place as a “gem” implicitly suggests that other places are not gems—a sign of distancing oneself from other suburbs and marking that this is a 1950s suburb with architectural history and value, unlike for instance much of the 1970s suburbs, which, according to this logic (and popular discourse), lack architectural value (Mack, 2023a) and are rarely described as “gems” or “diamonds.” (Certainly, not all architecture from this era has a bad reputation: some buildings, such as terraced houses and brutalism, have even been declared “cult,” while high-rises have come to characterize social problems and, with Denmark as a model, are currently seen as objects for demolition.) The possibility of “turning the small-scale intimate feeling into an advantage”<sup>27</sup> suggests that it is not an advantage at present. The use of the word “advantage” alludes to competition between suburbs or shopping centers where small-scale intimate opposes large-scale anonymous, the latter typically characteristics that are ascribed to either shopping malls or the architecture of the million programme. The city and the idea of “vital” appear as an implicit ideal here (cf Tunström, 2007).

Harvey argues that the desire for cultural heritage and “rootedness,”

26 “Romblmönstret på glaset ger tydlig 50-talskaraktär”

“Ett tätt skyltskåp med 50-talskänsla kan passa.”

27 “vända den småskaliga intima känslan till en fördel.”

in this case exemplified by a 1950s identity and values of the welfare state's People's Home project, can be regarded as a response to 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" (1989, p. 14). The implementation of a 1950s 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" as an attempt to form a resistance to a vaguely defined threat that in theory is sometimes framed as "globalization" but in the studied case not really defined.

### The "Sense of the '50s" as Restorative Nostalgia

Svetlana Boym's concept of "restorative nostalgia" (Boym, 2001) as well as Zygmunt Bauman's related concept of "retrotopia" (Bauman, 2017) both focus on reactionary, nationalist sentiments and movements. But nostalgic longings for the past also exists within the left. The left's longing for past moments are more commonly termed "left melancholy," a term originally coined by Walter Benjamin (Benjamin, 1974), drawing from Freud's theories on grief, loss, and melancholy. Benjamin's "left melancholy" has been interpreted by several thinkers as a political possibility rather than dead-end (Cvetkovich, 2012; Love, 2007; Traverso, 2016).

In a Swedish context, '50s nostalgia needs to be understood as a combination of left melancholy on the one hand and right-wing retrotopia or restorative nostalgia on the other. This mixed characteristic is theorized by researchers Tobias Hübinette and Catrin Lundström in their concept of "white melancholy," which highlights the intersection of white Swedishness and progressive politics and thus is closely related to and build on the concept of Swedish/Nordic exceptionalism—a nationalistic welfare state-pride with a high degree of historical amnesia (Lundström & Hübinette, 2011).

Tobias Hübinette and Catrin Lundström argue that while Sweden in the 1960s–1970s became a leading Western country supporting anti-colonial movements, social justice, and gender equality, *whiteness* constituted the central core and master signifier of Swedishness. The

progressive welfare state has thus been based on an idea of a homogenous society and people, reflected by the concept of *The People's Home*, originating from Germany, and the idea of “one people.” Sweden is a country that has imagined itself as a non-racist and post-racial utopia “with no colonial past.” Consequently, HübINETTE and Lundström argue that

Sweden is currently undergoing a double crisis of Swedish whiteness. “old Sweden”, i.e. Sweden as a homogeneous society, and “good Sweden”, i.e. Sweden as a progressive society, are both perceived to be threatened by the presence of non-white migrants and their descendants. Both the reactionary and racist camp and the progressive and antiracist camp are mourning the loss of this double-edged Swedish whiteness. (Lundström & HübINETTE, 2011)

This explains why an urban renewal project based on “the enhancement of the sense of the ‘50s” in Sweden in the 2010s can be presented and understood as progressive or politically neutral—the ‘50s is that loved imaginary past that confirms a popular idea of Swedishness in terms of both whiteness and welfare state status quo or “a future that could have been” (Naghibi, 2016).

Jenny Andersson argues that Swedish history writing has been so focused on the history of the welfare state as a history of consensus and national unity, obscuring conflicts or rendering them anomalies, that as a result the People's Home is understood as a “more or less teleological trajectory as something deeply inscribed in Swedish political culture” (2009b, p. 231). She does not see tendencies to progressive usage of nostalgia in the Swedish context:

... a nostalgic reappraisal of the past stands opposite to a progressive use of the past, as an inclusive source of identity and as a way of situating us in time without resorting to teleological arguments that are, by definition, exclusive. I would suggest that recent decades in Sweden have been characterized by a failure to challenge nostalgic notions of the past and by a failure, by politicians and the academic community, to claim the past as a source of constructive rethinking of the Swedish identity rather than as a source of isolation. Clearly, one of the characteristics of politics in post-modern times is that they are directly historiographical in character—  
 looking to history for sources of identity in a time where, allegedly, all identities are in flux. (Andersson, 2009b, p. 241)

Thus, although People's Home nostalgia is popularly understood as a progressive celebration of welfare state, it is questionable how progressive a nostalgic concept of "the sense of the '50s" is, and can be. as its main characteristic is a rootedness in an exclusive concept of Swedishness. In this regard, it is more of a restorative nostalgia than a progressive nostalgia, as it primarily stabilized national identity.

**"Business-as-Usual":  
Eco-Aesthetics and Entrepreneurial Art**

The contemporary global homogenized and homogenizing urban development revolves around a number of concepts such as "sustainability," "creativity," "art," "smartness," "openness," "entrepreneurship," etc. Social scientist Ugo Rossi names these as "policy catchwords" (Rossi, 2017), while Patrick Leary calls them "keywords" inspired by cultural theorist Raymond Williams' seminal book in cultural studies of the same name (Leary, 2018; Williams, 1976). Williams' *Keywords* was a glossary of concepts central to modern society, investigating their shifts in meaning through a cultural rather than etymological approach. What Rossi and Leary point to is more specifically the vocabulary of buzzwords that have come to dominate a contemporary capitalist and market-oriented view of the city and urban development practice. Like Williams, Leary believes that some of these words become dominant words, they come from environments linked to actors with power, and such words stabilize rather than destabilize hegemonic ideas. Therefore, it is important to unpack the meaning of them with some suspicion—Leary asks, "How can we think and act critically in the present when the very medium of the present, language, constantly betrays us?" (Leary, 2018, p. 11). Words like "art" and "sustainability" can thus appear as positive value words, but through their circulation in a global urban development lingo, they have accumulated meanings and shifted in such a way that the meanings and values they contain need to be examined.

**Sustainability**

If the consumption of the 1950s was characterized by mass production, fossil fuel, and plastic materials, on the contrary, in the nostalgic fantasy of the urban renewal project it is craftsmanship, locally produced goods, and organic materials that are advocated within the framework

of the “sense of the ‘50s.” The urban renewal project Hållbara Hökarängen centers, as the name indicates, sustainability (*hållbara* literally means “sustainable” in Swedish). Another much present keyword is “artistic.” These are the two central keywords next to “‘50s.”

The following quotes from the signage system manual include the word *ekologisk* (sometimes translated to “organic” and sometimes to “ecological”) and *hållbar/het* (“sustainable/sustainability”).

Simple corner signage for an organic store.

An ecological touch would feel just right.

Signage program for sustainable trade.

Stockholmshem wants to recreate a sustainable service offering.<sup>28</sup>

(ÅWL/Stockholmshem, 2012, p. 17, 4, 2, 2)

The green ideal is argued to be based on already existing characteristics and potentials of the place.

Hökarängsplan in 1950. Lush trees are already standing in the paving stones.

Trees shoot straight out of the pavement. This is a great asset that gives sympathetic coolness and beauty to the place.<sup>29</sup> (ÅWL/Stockholmshem, 2012, p. 3, 4)

The two sentences about trees breaking out from the pavement play with the contrast and binary of vegetation versus stone/urbanity and promote the green feature as an atmospheric and aesthetic quality.

In the signage system manual, the concepts of *hållbar* (sustainable), *ekologisk* (organic/ecological), and *grönskande* (verdant) interact. In this context, “sustainable” can be understood as sustaining and point more in the direction of lasting and social/economic sustainability. “Organic” occurs mainly in terms of trade, here the image material is important because several image examples are taken from (one or more) shops that are branded

28 “Enklare hörnskytning till ekologisk butik.”

“Ett ekologiskt anslag skulle kännas helt rätt.”

“Skytprogram för hållbar handel.”

“Stockholmshem vill återskapa ett hållbart serviceutbud.”

29 “Träd skjuter upp rakt ur gatstenen. Detta är en stor tillgång som ger sympatisk svalka och skönhet åt platsen.”

“Hökarängsplan 1950. Redan nu står grönskande träd i gatstensbeläggningen.”

as organic. “Verdant” or green aims more at spatial qualities and the architectural planning where trees are interspersed among the buildings. This quality is connected to organic shops, and thus the spatial quality is employed as an argument for a specific commercial content with associated aesthetics.

The lack of precision around what is meant by “sustainability” and “organic” shows that it is a keyword, or a policy catchword, which signals progressiveness and should function as a positive value word even though it is unclear what its concrete meaning is in this specific context. As Leary points out, “Sustainable has the advantage of being unambiguously good—who wants to be exhaustible?—and invitingly vague” (2018, s. 133). What is meant by “sustainability” within the framework of the Hållbara Hökarängen project was central to the part of the project addressing energy use (not addressed in this study)<sup>30</sup> but it is also present in the actions surrounding signage—in fact, the signage program can be understood as subordinate to this ideal (see for instance, the aforementioned prohibition of plastic material and proposal of organic material such as textiles and wood). Here, shop windows and businesses must change their looks so that they present as being “organic.”

Environmental researcher and anthropologist Melissa Checker argues that a capitalization of the vocabularies and initiatives of environmental movements in urban development have led to a post-political era where power has shifted from politicians to consultants and technocrats, rendering green urban renewal projects as politically neutral. Sustainability as style and aesthetics is not an isolated phenomenon limited to this urban renewal project but must be understood in a larger context of environmental gentrification (Checker, 2011), green-washing, and smart cities.

### **Artistic**

Next to sustainability, the artistic and creative is defined as a central direction, also based on claimed already existing characteristics and qualities:

Make room for the artistic direction that is being developed in Hökarängen.

Pennants can look trashy but clearly advertise that the store is open.

Maybe a topic for an art project?

30 The project “Ett resurseffektivt Hökarängen” (A resource efficient Hökarängen) was financed by Swedish Energy Agency in 2012–2014. (White Arkitekter, 2019).

More visible art projects in the center could give a more creative, vibrant and up-to-date character.

Artistic. In Hökarängen there is an art gallery, studio spaces and a targeted accommodation for artists and musicians.<sup>31</sup> (ÅWL/Stockholms-hem, 2012, p. 2, 5, 4, 4)

Art is mainly mentioned in instrumental terms in the document, as a method or ingredient that can provide for a more vital atmosphere or solve certain aesthetic problems. Artistic activities have been identified to take place in Hökarängen and these are in particular subject for development, the manual does not attempt to give an account of what more kinds of activities are taking place in the area, and also does not acknowledge the ongoing artistic activities as sufficient as they are. The artistic is a “direction” subject for development—and its *visibility* is of particular concern.

Art and artistic are words repeatedly used in the image captions for inspirational examples of signs and shop windows, thus defining artistic aesthetics as an ideal. This ideal is presented with some reservation, as it is made clear that it is not a demand but something “extra.” Shopfront signs “can be” art, and an art-resembling shop window is “very ambitious.” Formulations like these signal that an artistic quality is not expected or demanded, but that an *ambitious approach* is wished for.

Neon signs can be art.

Window bars as art.

Very ambitious shopwindow that function as a kind of art.

Creative display.

Flag signage with a creative feel.<sup>32</sup> (ÅWL/Stockholms-hem, 2012, p. 7, 13, 15, 6, 10)

31 “Ge plats åt den konstnärliga inriktning som utvecklas i Hökarängen.” (målsättning)  
“Vimplar kan se skräpiga ut men annonserar på ett tydligt sätt att butiken är öppen. Kanske ett ämne för ett konstprojekt?”

“Fler synliga konstprojekt i centrum skulle kunna ge en mer kreativ, levande och aktuell karaktär.”  
“Konstnärligt. I Hökarängen finns konsthall, ateljévåningar och ett riktat boende för konstnärer och musiker.”

32 “Neonskyltar kan vara konst.”

“Galler som konst.”

“Mycket ambitiöst skyltskåp som fungerar som en slags konst.”

“Kreativ skyltning.”

“Flaggs skyltning med kreativ känsla.”

The signage program explains that “modern retro design” fits into Hökarängen, which can be read as if that there is also outdated (retro?) design; when the wording “conscious design” is repeated, it similarly suggests that other designs are unconscious. Street talkers are said to contribute to cheapness and trashiness in their “more ill-considered form” (*mer ogenomtänkta form*), which suggests that they could be well-thought-out and then possibly come across as expensive and orderly.

Through coordinated, well-reasoned signage, the attractiveness increases, the supply is made visible and more people find their way to Hökarängen’s center.

Double signage. Looks unmotivated and takes up space that can be used better.

Through conscious design, the visitor feels welcome and chooses to stay. Make sure that bars/blinds are given a careful and discreet design.

Those who must still use bars should think about offering something extra in the form of, for example, an ambitious neon sign.

Great care must be taken to make attractive signage that at the same time provides insight into the store.

The signage must then be deliberately designed to collaborate to a good overall environment in the center.<sup>33</sup> (ÅWL/Stockholmshem, 2012, p. 2, 5, 4, 13, 13, 15, 15)

In this context, art and design needs to be understood in relation to entrepreneurship and lifestyle. It is not addressed in the signage system manual but the Hållbara Hökarängen project included branding the area as the new artist hub by making artist’s move their studios into ground floor spaces there, meaning that the focus on art and artists’ goes beyond what is articulated in this document.

The relationship between urban development and art during the

33 “Genom samordnad, *genomtänkt* skyltning ökar attraktiviteten, utbudet synliggörs och fler hittar till Hökarängens centrum.”

“Dubblerande skyltning. Ser omotiverat ut och tar upp yta som kan användas bättre.”

“Genom medveten utformning känner besökaren sig välkommen och väljer att stanna kvar.”

“Måna om att galler/jalusi får en omsorgsfull och diskret design.”

“Den som ändå måste ha förbommat bör tänk på att erbjuda något extra i form av t.ex ambitiös neonskylt.”

“Stor omsorg ska läggas på att göra attraktiv skyltning som samtidigt ger insyn i butiken.”

“Skyltningen ska då vara medvetet utformad för att samverka till en god helhetsmiljö i centrum.”

market-oriented capitalism of the 21st century has been extensively investigated in relation to gentrification (see for example Deutsche, 1996; Rosler et al., 2013). In Leary's *Keywords*, surprisingly, Art is not listed in the glossary, but the closely related terms Design, Artisan, and Creativity are. Leary points out researchers Joseph Schumpeter and Richard Florida as having greatly influenced creativity becoming a keyword in contemporary urban development. Florida, who invented the category of the "creative class", argues that they share certain values, preferences and lifestyle. In the planning document for Hållbara Hökarängen, it is particularly clear that Florida's ideas have influenced the way the project is formulated as vegetarianism and trips to Berlin are mentioned as shared experiences among the population of Hökarängen:

The target group is interested in organic food, vegetarian lifestyle and gardening. They are well-travelled and several have lived in Berlin. (Stockholmshem, 2012, p. 8)

Leary writes, "A taste for city life, in fact, is one of the creative class's most treasured preferences, and Florida's ideas promised to leverage these to repopulate declining urban centers without significant public expenditure on social welfare or infrastructure," which explains why art, design and creativity are vague concepts being employed in a regeneration project in a Stockholm suburb—it is not necessarily about supporting art and culture in general, it is rather a vocabulary saying "we need to reshape the center from working class culture to middle class lifestyle" without saying it. "Art, music, and social diversity are no longer independent values, but rather values dependent on their appeal to high-wage knowledge workers" (Leary, 2018, p. 48).

## Conclusion

The elevation of status and “putting a place on the map” logics have become normative in the field of urban planning. Practices and rhetorics of such logics are not invented by individual stakeholders, but rather popular discourses and professional “lingos” that they parrot. The case of the urban renewal project Hållbara Hökarängen, initiated by Stockholmshem, must be understood as part of such landscape and logic, impregnated by familiar buzzwords: “sustainable,” “green,” “eco,” “vital,” “artistic,” and more. To bring about an elevation of status the place needs to be *distinguished* from other places: in the studied case, where the concept of “sense of the ‘50s” has become central for the framing of the suburbs, this very concept must be understood as a strategy of distinction-making.

The object of study in this chapter has been a signage system manual designed by the architecture firm ÅWL and commissioned by the municipal housing company Stockholmshem. The document presents frameworks for a history, current characteristics as well as a planned identity for the suburb and gives instructions for how this to be achieved. Throughout the document, the vital inner city appears as an ideal that the suburb shall strive towards. The analysis has identified a guiding binary across the manual: that of openness and transparency as opposed to trashiness. This binary couple serves as the core morality of the design program, essentially advocating a vertical move from the lowly trashiness to an elevated claimed openness and transparency, which is here critically read along lines of class hierarchy and racialization. The moral is legitimized by, and operationalized through, a more familiar, popular and charming concept: the aesthetics and atmosphere of the 1950s. What is central here is a making of distinction that renders the area different from stigmatized and racialized suburbs without articulating such comparison. The overall strategy is an anchoring in history through the framework of the 1950s as an origin.

The nostalgic concept of “enhancement of a sense of the ‘50s” alludes to authenticity and draws from the past to render certain characteristics of the place as dominant. As such it works to root the suburb in the welfare state’s People’s Home project, which Andersson describes as a “more or less teleological trajectory ... deeply inscribed in Swedish political culture” (2009b, p. 231). The social, cultural, and political

function of the nostalgic concept in the case of urban renewal here is the anchoring of a place into a notion of authentic Swedishness—while escaping clearly nationalistic orientations, instead being understood as progressive or neutral, both in general terms as celebrating the People’s home era in an apolitical heritage-leaning manner, but also emphasizing the self as a caring and responsible housing company investing in making good for the suburb.

While People’s Home nostalgia, and concepts like “the sense of the ‘50s”, are popularly understood as progressive celebrations of welfare state Sweden, the progressiveness is questionable as the main characteristic of such nostalgia is a rootedness in an exclusive concept of Swedishness (Andersson, 2009b, p. 231). Instead, Boym’s concept of *restorative nostalgia* helps unfolding the aesthetic-political function of 1950s nostalgia as stabilizing a national identity and promoting what can be described as welfare state nationalism—a concept that will be further presented in the next chapter. Rather than a solidarity-driven progressivity, the “sense of the 50s” produces discursive segregation through racializing distinction, rooting the suburb in Swedishness and taking distance from being—as modernist suburbs generally are—understood as othered and “without history” (cf Tunström, 2009).

While diversity is identified as a key concept in the urban renaissance narrative (Lees, 2003; Mukhtar-Landgren, 2005; Tunström, 2009) and an often-used buzzword in promoting a vital city, interestingly the word diversity is conspicuous by its absence in the documents about Hökarängen. This can as well be understood as a signal of taking distance from the racialized suburb. The relative elevation in status of Hökarängen in relation to racialized suburbs, is addressed by Koch and Borén (2009) in their report leading up to the formulation of the renewal project, and reflected upon in the documentative publication summarizing Hållbara Hökarängen:

this [the elevation of status] may be due to the fact that Hökarängen has “aged” and established itself, it may also be due to its [geographical] proximity to the popular inner city and that qualities such as nature and good public transport attract people there.<sup>34</sup> (Elfors, 2015, p. 43)

In the publication documenting the project, commissioned by Stockholmshem, the elevation in status is framed as natural and related to time passing

34 “detta kan bero på att Hökarängen “åldrats” och etablerat sig, det kan också bero på dess närhet till den populära innerstaden och att kvaliteter som natur och god kollektivtrafik lockar folk dit.”

(aging), and generational shifts in the population and geographical location, and is located to the time before the urban renewal project. The urban renewals, intentions or outcomes, or the discursive function of its concepts, are not discussed in relation to the status of Hökarängen or other suburbs.



## **Chapter 5**

**Not Like Other Suburbs**



The concept of designing Hökarängen in a “1950s style” was not invented by Stockholmshem in 2012: it has a much longer history. In a radio documentary from 2003 (almost a decade before the studied urban renewal projects), Swedish journalist Katarina Wikars explores Hökarängen with questions about the future of the suburb in her mind. She asks: “Hökarängen centrum is today carefully renovated but are neon signs typical of the time enough to survive?” (Sveriges Radio, 2004). Among the interviewees are Greger Heinze, who at the time was a property manager at Stockholmshem:

We have talked about what we could do to get a bit more of the ‘50s feel—it was (how should I put it?) that inside the shops they could have a bit of a ‘50s environment, they could wear some ‘50s clothes, just so you would feel like you are coming back to the ‘50s. And this spring, we had a “nostalgia day,” “Hökarängen’s Day” is something that goes back, a long way back in time, when you met different organizations, political organizations, and local tenant associations; and then we had things from the ‘50s, we had some motorbikes, ‘50s motorbikes, one should *feel that here is the ‘50s*, in one way or another, so to speak ...”<sup>35</sup> (Wikars, 2003)

The conversation goes on, with Louise Modig-Hall, at the time chairperson of the local neighborhood association, Hökarängens stadsdelsråd, discussing the structural challenges faced by the suburb. She addresses the shopkeepers’ struggles to make enough revenue to pay the shop rent and points to the fact that the area lacks cultural venues in comparison to neighboring areas. When the journalist asks if people pay visits to see the newly renovated ‘50s characteristics (such as original awnings, which, according to Heinze have been moved from neighboring areas and mounted in Hökarängen for the authentic feel) she and her co-resident laughs. Despite the structural issues that they discuss, and their pessimistic laughter, Stockholmshem’s property manager goes on:

35 (24:20) “Det vi har pratat om att vad vi skulle försöka göra för att få lite mera 50-talskänslan, det var att, vad ska man säga, att inne i butikerna att de skulle kunna ha lite 50-talsmiljö de skulle kunna ha lite 50-talskläder bara för man skulle känna att man kommer tillbaks till 50-talet. O i våras här hade vi ju en sådan här nostalgisk dag, Hökarängens dag va, som e nånting gammalt som ligger tillbaka lång tillbaka i tiden då man träffas typ olika organisationer, politiska organisationer och lokala hyresgästföreningar, och där man hade då saker från 50-talet, vi hade en del motorcyklar, 50-tals motorcyklar, man ska känna då att här är 50-talet på eller annat sätt så att säga...”

and there have been ideas about making this a visitors' trail, getting out of town, shuttle out tourists and tell them this is Hökarängen, a genuine '50s, umm, property, and see if you could have some shuttled trips around the area."<sup>36</sup> (Wikars, 2003)

The concept of *nostalgia tourism* is believed to create the traffic needed to support the financial and cultural deficit in a suburb where services like the post office and health center has closed down and shops struggle to remain, while the issues addressed by the residents, such as the rents, are more or less overlooked. The radio documentary is a reminder that branding based on 1950s nostalgia has a longer history than the studied urban renewal projects and that the talk and practice of such branding already existed in the municipal housing company Stockholmshem before the formulation of the project Sustainable Hökarängen. It is fortunate that this was documented by a radio journalist, as it has not been possible to locate any such documentation through the housing company itself and their archive, nor the local citizen's archive, Hökarängsarkivet.<sup>37</sup>

The excerpt from the radio documentary illustrates a conversation and negotiation between the housing company and the civil society, and a tension between their views and approaches, that broadly can be described as a tension between *on-the-ground structural issues* on the one hand, and a belief in *micro-practices and strategic nostalgia* on the other. This chapter will be looking more closely on how the next generation of Stockholmshem staff, in the 2010s, conceptualize the "sense of the '50s" and its imagined benefits for the suburbs when employed in renewal projects through their professional vision as "curators."

In a previous chapter, the signage system manual for the renewal project Hållbara Hökarängen was discussed and analyzed as a set of guidelines for implementation of desired changes, showing how a professional vision delineates an ordering of public space that supports social hierarchies and promotes a nostalgic narrative, in order to bring about a distinction that elevates the status of the suburb and put it "on the map." This chapter will

36 (28:17) "o det har kommit fram tankar kring att man ska gör det här till ett visitor spår, man ska ut från stan och slussa ut turister o tala om att här är Hökarängen, ett genuint 50-tals, eeh, fastighet o se o man skulle kunna ha lite slussade resor runt omkring i området."

37 By chance, through an artist friend, I came across personal documentation of illuminated signs for Hökarängen in 2004 designed by her father, artist and cultural heritage consultant Magnus Carlén. These are currently in the process of being donated to Hökarängsarkivet.

move on to show how the concepts set out in such a document translate into practice. Here, the empirical material consists of interviews with representatives of property ownership and civil society in Hökarängen, Bagarmossen, and Bandhagen, who are asked to reflect upon the strategies and effects of the renewal projects. The interview material reveal both a strong belief in the concept of “sense of the ‘50s” and more nuanced reflections on it, overall showing how the operationalized professional vision works to mark a distinction and a distance from neighboring suburbs in a more articulated way than the signage system manual. Basically, as I show, the “good and bad” examples of the signage system manual translate into actual places, shops and shopkeepers. This chapter focuses on the operationalization—the practices—of distinction-making, through a combination of handpicking and removal of shops and other elements in public space under the umbrella of an atmosphere and coziness defined as “sense of the ‘50s.”

To provide a framework for how such coziness could be understood and unpacked, I will begin by theorizing it using the concepts of *chronostalgia* (Gospodinov, 2020) and “national Thing” (du Plessis, 2015; Žižek, 1993). The atmospheric qualities of the “sense of the ‘50s” and coziness attributed to it contains a form of middle-class welfare-state nationalism, I argue, and a wish to escape the world into a designed “time shelter” which supports such sentiments.

## *Chronostalgia* and “National Thing”: Designing a Time Shelter for Swedes’ Enjoyment

In the novel *Time Shelter* by Georgi Gospodinov, the Western world is suffering from such an acute “deficit of future” that nations in Europe hold referendums on the past, instead of the future, to decide which decade or year of the nation’s history to return to (2023). This bizarre fictional world, which suffers from amnesia and a disease-like nostalgia (in the novel, presented as a parallel to Alzheimer’s) is disturbingly recognizable. While referendums traditionally are organized to choose a path for the future, in *Time Shelter*, the future horizon has closed and the only direction remaining is facing the past. Gospodinov suggests that the very idea of nostalgia has changed. As opposed to what the etymology of the word suggests, “nostalgia” here no longer focuses on a return to the home (*nostos*) as place, the longing for an imagined “homecoming” has now been replaced by the longing for a different time: for what he calls *chronostalgia*, which he describes “as if the map of Europe shifts from territorial to temporal, and nations close themselves up—for a very short while—inside their own happy past” (Gospodinov, 2023). In the fiction of the novel, Italy elects the 1960s, Germany the end of the 1980s, and so on.

The Swedish election polls for a long time gravitate towards the 1950s but in the end the election results are for a return to the 1970s; explaining this decision, Gospodinov makes references to fun and happy years characterized by Abba and Ikea design classics. This is an interesting and somewhat surprising outcome. In present-day Sweden, it seems unlikely that the 1970s could offer a national nostalgia and it is easy to think that this fictional election result reflects the view of Sweden from abroad—reflected by the fact that Gospodinov refers to his boyhood dreams of the blonde in Abba, an indication of the popular stereotype of Swedish sexuality represented by promiscuous blonde women. Perhaps the 1970s would win the election if a foreign gaze were to vote for their idea of Sweden’s happiest—or most entertaining—era.

From a local point of view, situated in a Stockholm suburb, it is hard to believe that the current Swedish nation self-identifies with the 1970s—a decade that is associated with leftist hegemony, Million Program architecture and labor immigration. Especially now, given that

parts of the late Million Program architecture of the 1970s in some areas are subjected to increasing stigma, racialization, and political suggestions of demolition (Aktion Arkiv, 2024; Brolund de Carvalho et al., 2024; Mack, 2023a, 2023b). It seems more likely that the 1950s would win such an election, since—as will be shown—this decade holds a particular place in the Swedish self-image. However, it might be that the ‘50s nostalgia is stronger in the capital Stockholm than other parts of the country and possibly there are local variations in how Swedishness or other local identities are constructed through nostalgias. For instance, in Gothenburg, wooden architecture of early functionalism (until the 1940s), called *landshövdingehus* (governors’ houses) characterize typical (now mostly gentrified) working-class areas and encapsulates an imagined, white working-class community—this architecture thereby supports nostalgic sentiments relating to a “lost community” and provides a platform for a certain local Gothenburg identities or stereotypes. While Gothenburg is connected through tram-lines, in Stockholm, the metro system (*tunnelbanan*) was built in the 1950s; Hökarängen was the first suburban station in this system, reorganizing the structure of the city and emphasizing the utopian nature of the suburb’s planning. This infrastructural project may be a reason why a nostalgic 1950s narrative might be perceived as more prominent in Stockholm compared to other places in Sweden. While in Gothenburg, an early functionalist architecture serves as the primary object of nostalgic sentiment and “Gothenburgness,” in the north of Sweden, for instance the mining town of Kiruna, a 1970s’ nostalgia may well exist, referring to the period when the town—in a region that has historically been marginalized as an internal colony—became more populated and vivid thanks to influx of (Swedish and immigrant) workers. Although the narratives of the capital tend to have nation-wide influence through literature and media, it would be an interesting topic for future studies to challenge the proposal of the 1950s as a national nostalgia, attending to nuances of local nostalgias and their forging of place, imagined communities, and loss.

Importantly, local nostalgias are not to say they are a shared sentiment among the population—nostalgia is always partial, divisive and dependent on who you are. This includes a class dimension. A certain type of the 1950s nostalgia—one with references to functionalist architecture and design icons—is more popular among a cultural middle-class. This was palpable to me as I entered art school at a young age and repeatedly encountered teak furniture, String shelves, and 1950s’ porcelain in the

homes of fellow students. Another type of 1950s nostalgia—a US-inspired rockabilly style including the so called *raggare* subculture centered around (primarily but not exclusively) American cars is more popular among working class and not least nationalists. Researcher of media studies and popular music Melanie Schiller writes about the seemingly apolitical nostalgic aesthetics of Swedish music artist Peter Jezewski, describing his political “dog whistling” to the radical right (Schiller, 2023). In this, she refers to musicologist Christopher Ballantine’s assertion on genres and styles as bearers of ideologies: “Smuggled along with them are lifeworlds and ideologies relating to value, but also to social pragmatics such as race, class, and gender” (Ballantine, 2020, p. 260).

Nonetheless, in a Swedish context, the 1950s is not equal to other decades. It is meaningful in a different way than, for instance, the 1940s or 1960s, as well as other decades in that it is more often subjected to *chronostalgia*. To take an example of how the 1950s figure in an everyday context, I refer the reader to a handwritten protest sign from Bagarmossen (see Fig. 25).

The sign says, “We don’t want this ugly billboard in our beautiful ‘50s center.” Possibly the word “‘50s,” written with small letters, was squeezed in between the lines afterwards as a punch to the argument. What I argue is that the term is not likely to be exchanged with 1940s, 1960s, 1970s, or 1980s center; neither is it likely that just “our beautiful center” is an argument enough, but that the originality of being a 1950s center is considered particularly valuable. Furthermore, it is being dichotomized with the billboard, beautiful/ugly, authentic/artificial, local/global. While here, the “beautiful 1950s’ center” is in opposition to the multi-national advertisement billboard of Clear Channel; in the case of the signage system manual discussed in Chapter 4 it is presented as the counter to the typical working-class suburb and racialized shops.

Gospodinov’s concept of *chronostalgia* not only conceptualizes a longing to inhabit an idealized past, but also the crafting of a model of it, as the first part of his novel tells the story of a home for Alzheimer’s patients, where the rooms are designed to remind of a specific decade of the patients’ choice. The social and political functions of the crafting of a 1950s’ nostalgia can be theorized through the work of researcher in international relations Gitte du Plessis’ research on Danish welfare state nationalism and xenophobia, which employs philosopher Slavoj Žižek’s concept of “national Thing.” Plessis’ work allows me to center specific



Fig. 25.  
Empty advertising billboard in Bagarmossen,  
with handwritten note on it.  
Photo: Sara Kaaman, 2022

ideas of “enjoyment” in relation to 1950s’ nostalgia, which I discuss as a framework built on a specific notion of Swedishness that relies on “coziness” and related concepts and legitimizes a vaguely defined but strongly practiced strategy of hand-picking shopkeepers and designing public space.

“Swedishness” has increasingly come to constitute a state related to *feelings* rather than *citizenship*—in the current political landscape, demand for “Swedish values” and the imperative “to feel Swedish” is increasingly central to the understanding of nationality, thereby destabilizing citizenship as a ground for Swedishness. In her article “Danish Demarcations: Welfare State, Middle-class Nationalism, and Xenophobia,” (2015) Gitte Du Plessis attends to how nationality is tied to particular fantasies by analyzing Danish welfare state nationalism and xenophobia employing Žižek’s concept of the “national Thing.” Her analysis applies to a Swedish context, as the Nordic countries share some characteristics (in this case particularly, the interwoven combination *Nordic exceptionalism* and *nationhood* that is also tied to *the welfare state*).

The core argument of the concept of the “national Thing” is that *enjoyment* is what holds a community together. Žižek argues that nationalism cannot be reduced to an understanding of symbolic identification as that overlooks something *real*; thus he argues that nationalism is held together through a set of practices—and, more importantly—a belief that the enjoyment of those practices is constituent of who we are. The “national Thing” is bound to how a community “organizes its enjoyment” (Žižek, 1993, p. 201) through foods, celebrations, language, aesthetics, etc. However, the “national Thing” is not simply a set of elements of a specific tradition but rather the shared belief in self-constituent enjoyment of those elements—the enjoyment resulting from such practices and beliefs. “A nation *exists*,” Žižek argues, “only as long as its specific *enjoyment* continues to be materialized in a set of social practices and transmitted through national myths or fantasies that secure these practices” (Žižek, 1993, p. 202). Further, the “national Thing” appears as “only accessible to people belonging to the community, the others are unable to grasp it, yet they constantly disturb it” (du Plessis, 2015, p. 16). Immigrants, especially when practicing their othered enjoyment, are seen as disturbing, or even stealing, the enjoyment of the Danish. The logic of “theft of enjoyment” is embedded in the desire of “a coherent Danish state free of antagonisms ... encapsulated in the Nordic Model: free market capitalism in a homogenous, equal society of happy people that all enjoy a middle-class status” (p. 23). Such

desire inevitably leads to racism, through a return to the imagined frictionless society demanding exclusion of the foreigner.

Drawing from researchers in urban studies and political sciences Lasse Koefoed and Jacob Torfing, du Plessis argues that in a Danish context, the welfare state in itself is a national Thing: “In the Danish case, the welfare society isn’t perceived as the state per se, but as ‘us’, a ‘community of identity’” (du Plessis, 2015, p. 11). She shows examples of how the idea of “feeling” in a certain way is being connected to Danishness. “To integrate into Denmark, it is thus not enough to know how to behave as a Dane, one must know how to enjoy like a Dane. As an editorial in the national Danish newspaper *Berlingske Tidende* outlines, one has to *want* to be a Dane and one has to *feel like* a Dane” (du Plessis, 2015, p. 20). Similarly, the recurring concept of *50-talskänsla*, which I translate to “sense of the ‘50s” while it literally means “50s feeling,” can be understood as a container for enjoyment, a national “Thing” and, by extension, what du Plessis identifies as *middle-class nationalism*.

The “sense of the ‘50s” is ultimately employed as a design concept to bring about a consistent and legible atmosphere in the public space—as opposed to a multivocal and diverse—that can work as a success-story in place narratives and place branding. The concept is employed through practices of handpicking and removal, which, in combination, seek a homogenizing sensescape or atmosphere that is not articulated as being based on a “sense of the ‘50s” but rather other related concepts that ultimately differentiate between an enjoyable and cozy atmosphere and aesthetics and atmospheres and aesthetics that are not enjoyable and cozy, implicitly defining others as “wrong.”

## Distinction-Making Practices

I will now show how *chronostalgia* and the “national Thing” are operationalized and translated into practice. Broadly, these practices can be described as “distinction-making.” The nostalgic ideal, often referred through adjacent concepts like “coziness” and the like, works to mark the place as distinct from others. Below, I highlight three different themes or strategies in this process, namely: talk about “atmosphere” or “vibe” as branding; the hand-picking of shopkeepers as a restoration of a lost utopia; and, lastly, erasure or removal.

### Not Like Other Suburbs: Atmosphere as Branding

The aim of creating a “sense of the ‘50s” in Hökarängen seems very close to the idea of well-being for the patients of Gospodinov’s Alzheimer’s home. When I asked interviewees, especially the formal representatives, which of the interventions proposed within the urban renewal projects were the most significant, they tended to point out the signage system manual and the illuminated signs:

I actually think it had a *huge significance*. Because that’s what was visible. It was so very visible, *I mean there are things that I will talk about in all eternity*, just the fact that we replaced the signs in the center to neon signs for each business. It was so obvious. That *something happened*. So, I think it meant more [than other parts of the renewal project].<sup>38</sup> (Informant 6)

When I asked this interviewee to elaborate, wonder if he meant that they have for instance a function for navigation, he responded:

38 “Jag tror faktiskt att det hade en enormt stor betydelse. För det var det som syntes. Det syntes så väl, jag menar det finns såna saker som jag kommer prata om i all evinnerlighet, bara det att vi bytte ut skyltarna i centrum till neonskyltar för varje verksamhet. Det var så uppenbart. Att det hände nånting. Så jag tror att det betydde mer.”

Well, in part, maybe a little, but not much. It is *rather the image of the center*. The signage program itself is very important so that we do not miss things and so that we do not end up in *something else* again—where we were, before Hållbara Hökarängen started. ... But the most important thing is just to keep track of it so that it does not *get out of control* and become *something else* that then in my eyes messes this up—the *big trademark that it is, the old style*.<sup>39</sup> (Informant 6)

This quote is a clear example of how the “sense of the ‘50s,” here referred to as “the old style,” is thought to stand in opposition to and push back a “something else” and seen as a form of branding, a “trademark.” Given the excitement and conviction in the interviewee’s response, he is notably inarticulate about the *something* that happened and the *something else* that could get out of control. The talk of “clutter” or “mess” invites a cross-reading with the progress logic and value hierarchies of the dichotomizations in the signage manual (see Fig. 21 on page 215), in which low status or vernacular shops are suggested to be replaced by inner-city type of shops.

A recurring narrative in the interviews revolved around the cultural and historical importance of the pedestrian street in Hökarängen’s center, which is described as “the first” pedestrian street in Sweden, Scandinavia, Europe, or even the world. While the planning and function of the pedestrian street is considered a failure and an explanatory model regarding why the center does not function ideally as a commercial place—this is pointed out by several of the interviewees as well as in the report that informed the formulation of the Sustainable Hökarängen renewal project (Koch and Borén 2009)—it is repeatedly brought up as an argument for the importance and value of Hökarängen. In response to the question “Why do you think that Stockholmshem chose to make this investment at all and why in Hökarängen?” one informant replied:

I think it was so obvious that the center, this pedestrian street that is supposedly Northern Europe’s or Europe’s first pedestrian street ... it was a piece of internationally known architecture and there was something a

39 “Nja, delvis, lite kanske, men inte mycket. Det är snarare bilden av centrum. Skyltprogrammet i sig är ju jätteviktig så att vi inte missar det och så att vi inte hamnar i nånting annat igen där vi var innan Hållbara Hökarängen startade. (...) Men det viktigaste är ju bara att hålla koll på det så att det inte skenar iväg och blir nånting annat som då i mina ögon kladdar ner det hära, det stora signumet som det ändå är, den gamla stilen.”

little special really about Hökarängen. Then it had a history with drug abuse and crime and so on and still there were some rough-and-tumble on the square, particularly obvious in the center—it was heading in the wrong direction, there were many empty premises and it was all messy, so I think that's why.<sup>40</sup> (Informant 6)

This argument implicitly suggests that if it wasn't for the architectural history, or the neat story about the unique pedestrian street, the social problems would not have been reason enough for the housing company to make efforts and investments. In this regard, the quote implicitly suggests that there is a distinction made between this center and other suburbs.

Similarly, the reasoning in Bandhagen also departs from a distinction in character, anchored in architectural qualities.

When you come to Bandhagen you should see that you come to a 1950s center.

When you are here, you should know that it feels, you should see architecturally, that it is a 1950s center.

It looks like this, and we keep it that way.<sup>41</sup> (Informants 1&2)

But here, the focus is not on a narrative anecdote or an idea of cultural importance as with the pedestrian street in Hökarängen, but on atmospheric qualities and that the historical identity should be experienced and sensed—a logic that is echoed across all interviews. The formulation “you should know that it feels” further marks that it is not only about a subjective feeling but rather a cognitive understanding of the atmospheric quality—a consciousness about the distinction. You don't need to actually *feel* anything to have an affective experience, as long as you know and can intellectually

40 “Varför tänker du att Stockholmshem valde att göra den här satsningen överhuvudtaget och varför just i Hökarängen?”

Jag tror att det var ju så uppenbart att centrum, den här gågatan som lär vara Nordeuropas eller Europas första gågata alltså... det var ju ett... internationellt känd arkitektur och det fanns nånting lite märkvärdigt egentligen med Hökarängen sen hade ju en historia med missbruk o kriminalitet o så som fortfarande var besvär med nere på torget, det var stökigt och skrikigt o så där, ä det var så uppenbart i centrum, framförallt i centrum, att det var på väg åt fel håll, det var mycket tomma lokaler och det var stökigt så jag tror att det var det.”

41 “när du kommer till Bandhagen så ska du se att du kommer till ett 50-talscentrum”

“när du är här ska du veta att det känns, man ska se arkitektoniskt, att det är ett 50-talscentrum.”

“det ser ut på det här sättet och vi behåller det så.”

register that this is a particular kind of spatial environment.

As these examples show, the interview material witnesses a belief in building on an already existing, atmospheric “sense of the ‘50s” which must be seen in the light of the 1950s as tightly connected to the idea of a lost authentic Sweden. The problem with this 1950s ideal, though, is that it effectively obscures other fantasies or preferences about enjoyment, and other atmospheres, as it proposes consensus and homogeneity by means of its tight connection to a specific idea of a national past. One of the interviewees clearly articulated their belief in atmospheric qualities as a winning concept in the competition with bigger shopping centers, in this case speaking of the development of Hökarängen versus the neighboring Farsta. The terms “coziness” (*trivsel*) and “vitality” (*livet*) are affective concepts that can be understood to indicate a particular kind of enjoyment that can be ascribed to the small scale and well-designed center in competition with the bigger and more commercial nearby center that implicitly serves as the opposite of such atmospheric characteristics:

But really, how well is Farsta center doing? It is much closer, emotionally; it’s not at all far, but it still feels like *coziness wins* in some way. It is *vitality that wins over commerce*. That *societal development is moving in the direction of Hökarängen*.<sup>42</sup> (Informant 8)

Hökarängen is thus described as “enjoyable,” while Farsta implicitly is suggested to be the opposite. Notably, the interviewee suggests that society is developing in a direction that benefits the atmospheric qualities that he prefers, which is interesting in itself as it evidences a confident middle-class perspective. This belief, articulated based on one’s own preferences and lifestyle, is also echoed by one of the interviewees in Bandhagen:

After all, this is what you call an “ABC center,” so you would shop and do everything in your immediate area. Then it [the ABC planning ideal and/or local shopping] disappeared. But I think, or my feeling is, that it will come back. That people start, with environmental thinking as well,

42 “Och så tycker man också såhär, amen styrkeförhållanden, Farsta var ju såhär så tungt liksom när jag flyttade hit, de hade Clas Ohlson vi hade bara Järnman, liksom sånt. Men amen hur bra går det för Farsta centrum nu då. Det ligger ju mycket närmare känslomässigt att det är ju inte alls lika långt till Farsta men det känns ändå som att trivseln vinner på nåt sätt. Det är livet som vinner över kommersen. Att samhällsutvecklingen går åt Hökarängens håll.”

that they will want to shop closer. *Going on my own experience, I do a lot of shopping here.* Since I work all the time in the city, I don't even want to drive. So, I walk down and shop and then I walk home. So, I think, now I don't know if everyone does it, but I think more and more people want to shop in their local area. And that would be great.<sup>43</sup> (Informants 1&2)

The importance given to the so called “sense of the ‘50s” is tightly connected to consumption and for how it can be experienced from a subjective middle-class lifestyle horizon. It is legitimized by the argument that it fits into the contemporary moment and the future—it is trendy:

We also have a generational shift, from having an older population to younger people coming, who like that the center is a retro center, a 1950s center. But at the same time, we have to find out who to rent out to for it to be attractive.<sup>44</sup> (Informants 1&2)

The feeling of what it could have looked like when the area was new in the ‘50s.

It's a bit hip with these ‘50s areas.

The ‘50s is particularly exciting for the youth and young people.<sup>45</sup> (Informant 4)

The “sense of the ‘50s” is thus not necessarily based on the originality of the place in terms of planning, architecture, and spatial qualities, but rather the atmospheric qualities, activities, and aesthetics, as perceived and experienced by certain bodies. In this regard, the “cozy,” “vital,” and “trendy” “sense of the ‘50s” can be read as a form of “national Thing,” a sense of enjoyment that reproduces its own belief in itself.

43 “Det här är ju vad man kallar för ABC-centrum så man skulle handla och göra allt i sitt närområde. Sen har det försvunnit. Men jag tror, eller min känsla är, att det kommer tillbaka. Att folk börjar, i och med miljötänket också, att man tänker sig att man vill handla närmare. Om jag utgår från mig själv, jag handlar jättemycket här. Eftersom jag jobbar hela tiden i stan, jag vill inte ens köra bil. Så jag promenerar ner och köper och sen promenerar hem. Så jag tror, nu vet jag inte om alla gör det, men jag tror det blir mer och mer folk vill köpa i sitt närområde. Och då är det ju jättebra.”

44 “vi har ju också generationsskifte. Från att ha haft äldre personer, till nu yngre personer som kommer, som gillar att centrum är att centrum är ett retrocentrum, ett 50talscentrum, men samtidigt måste vi hitta vem är det vi hyr till för att det ska vara attraktivt.”

45 “känslan hur det skulle kunna ha sett ut när området var nytt på 50-talet.”

“det är lite hippt med de här 50-talsområdena.”

“just 50-tals är spännande för ungdomar och yngre personer.”

In all three cases—Hökarängen, Bagarmossen, and Bandhagen—an optimism and belief are expressed in the future of the small local centers. The “winning concept” is repeatedly attributed to the atmospheric and sensorial qualities, how it feels to shop, or whether the center or mall figure feels accessible or desirable in the opinion of the interviewees themselves or the younger generations moving in. Less or no attention is paid to other groups in society or to financial, social, or political dimensions in the reasoning. There is an overall absence of structural analysis while the affective reasoning is very central and present.

### **Handpicking and the Restoration of a (Failed) Utopia**

An important ingredient in the creation of the sensescape of the “50s” center is the handpicking of shopkeepers, similar to niche strategy and chain-free zones. The guiding force in the handpicking strategy, as will be shown, is to render the center distinct from neighboring centers, which are described as “commercial” and “privatized,” obscuring and making implicit that the opposition to the desired 1950s aesthetic and original planning ideal also implies an othering of those centers and performs a longing to a lost frictionless imagined community.

All interviewees seem convinced that there partly is, and will increasingly be, a renaissance (“return”) of the 1950s’ local suburban center—sometimes called “ABC-centers”—and that people will, in the future, be more drawn to or even realize that they have to do their shopping locally, for social and environmental reasons. Given this, an active and consciously driven strategy—most often described as “50s” but that could overall be framed as atmospheric, sensorial, or niche—would be a successful way to make the local center attractive in order to compete with the nearby bigger shopping centers. The idea of a once existing successful community, which later turning into a failed utopia but can still be reinstated, is a repeated narrative in the interviews. One of the interviewees describe the utopian neighborhood planning and the political visions for building suburbs like Hökarängen to include not only services but also cultural venues—pointing out that the original plan was to build a culture house where the discount store MatDax is located—and later assert that with an aging population and competition from the inner-city, vacant spaces became signs and signals of failure:

And then every empty shop window was a failure. It was a sign that you live on the loser side. Which has been the case all along, this utopia has, after all [failed], this was the most infamous suburb in Stockholm. But it [the shop windows] was like a clear sign [of failure].<sup>46</sup> (Informant 8)

According to him, this sign of failure was the starting point for the local association to investigate what could be done, which later led to the urban renewal project. Across all three studied cases there is a strategy of hand-picking shopkeepers to match the desired atmosphere; this is similar to a “niche” strategy, although in the interviews it is never labeled and named, but approached more intuitively—for example, in Bandhagen, interviewees described how they navigated the situation partly based on a conviction that the shops (at the time) couldn’t be replaced by internet shopping, and partly merely based on a “feeling”:

And then there was the issue of how we can make Bandhagen attractive. And we also quickly realized that we cannot compete with H&M, or similar (large) counterparts, because it is not that kind of center. But then we thought that we have to compete with the kind of businesses for which you have to go to the street. And then there is, for example, the pharmacy: this was already on our list from the start, as it wasn’t there when we started working.<sup>47</sup>

I wanted us to have a vegetarian restaurant, it was something specific, then I had thought maybe a shoemaker. Now I don’t know how viable that is, but that’s my feeling.<sup>48</sup> (Informants 1&2)

Another dimension of this intuitive handpicking is related to a generational shift, which in turn is tied to class and income levels. The two interviewees both witnessed a discussion in the property management board

46 “Och då var varje sånhär tom, tomt skyltfönster det var ett misslyckande. Som var tecken på att man bor på loser-sidan. Vilket har varit fallet hela tiden, den här utopin har ju, det här var ju det mest illa beryktade förorten som fanns i Stockholm. Men det var liksom ett tydligt tecken.”

47 “Och sen var det hur kan vi göra Bandhagen attraktivt. Och vi insåg snabbt också att vi kan inte tävla med H&M, eller såna stora, eftersom det inte är ett sånt centrum. Utan då tänkte vi att vi måste tävla med såna verksamheter där man måste komma till gatan. Och då är det tex apoteket, det var en av de vi hade redan i första listan, som inte fanns när vi började jobba.”

48 “jag ville att vi skulle ha en vegetarisk restaurang, det var nånting specifikt, sen hade jag tänkt mig kanske skomakare. Nu vet jag inte hur gångbart det är, men det är min känsla.”

(Bandhagen center is owned by the housing association HSB run by a board of residents) about their proposal of handpicking a barber, which led to a collision between younger and older generations:

The elderly people have lived [here] since our apartment buildings were built. They were workers—today, no one with that kind of salary who can buy an apartment here. So, we are starting to see that there is a difference financially. Without us thinking and working that way [supporting income differences or increased housing prices]. So, I haven't done that [contributed to such development]. For example, we had a small discussion within our board when we let a barber come to us, and then some wanted to keep certain types of people, but then we said that times are new, young men cut their hair like that.<sup>49</sup> (Informants 1&2)

The pharmacy, vegetarian restaurant, and barber are examples just to show that the handpicking strategy consists of a variety of arrival points and arguments rather than a fixed set of objectives, goals, or decision-making strategies. In the example above, the “younger” generation of decision-makers in the housing association argue for such shops, against the wishes of retired residents with lower incomes and working-class backgrounds, legitimizing their ideas by arguing “times are new,” essentially regretting class differences but disacknowledging their agency and legitimacy.

The undefined strategy is perhaps best understood as *an opposition to an imagined antithesis*. Bandhagen is repeatedly described by the interviewees in contrast to the neighboring example of Högdalen,<sup>50</sup> where the formerly publicly owned center was sold a series of times to venture capitalist companies

49 “De äldre personer som har bott sen våra lägenheter byggdes. De var ju personer som var arbetare, idag är det ingen med sån lön som kan köpa en lägenhet hos oss. Så det börjar ju bli hos oss att man ser att det blir ekonomiskt sett en skillnad. Utan att vi tänkt och jobbat på det sättet. Så det har jag inte gjort. Vi hade t.ex. en liten diskussion inom vår styrelse när vi lät en barberare komma till oss, och då tyckte man det här att man gärna ville behålla vissa slags personer, men då sa vi att det är nya tider, killarna klipper sig så.”

50 Högdalen was one of ten local centers in Stockholm that were altogether sold from the municipal property company Centrumkompaniet to British venture capitalist company Boultonbee in a much-criticized deal in 2007. In 2011, it was first sold to Centeni/Royal Bank of Scotland and only a few months later to the Finnish company Citycon who introduced a pink visual identity which manifested a new mall-like identity to the local center together with raised rents for the shopkeepers. This shift resulted in harsh criticism against Citycon and a, in Sweden first-of-its-kind, shopkeepers' strike in 2013 in collaboration with the local neighborhood organization Linje 19. The interviews were done a few years after these events, and when Högdalen center was still owned by Citycon. In 2021 it was again sold and is currently owned by Niam.

and experienced a recent transformation to a more mall-like scenario:

They are completely desperate there about how it turned out.<sup>51</sup>  
(Informants 1&2)

The table below shows the vocabulary used by the interviewees in Bandhagen to contrast these two centers against each other.

Högdalen	Bandhagen
Modern (Modernt)	50s overall atmosphere modern [shops] (50-tal [övergripande] moderna [verksamhetstyperna])
Flashy (Flashigt)	Amateuristic (amatörmässigt)
Glass ceiling (Glastak)	Signs, lanterns (skyltar, lyktor)
Renovate (Renovera)	Restore (restaurera)

Fig. 26.

A similar approach is also expressed in Hökarängen, where the local center is instead compared with the mall in Farsta primarily but also on more general terms put in contrast to privately owned centers:

Damn it, this [Hökarängen's center] is somehow unique in Stockholm—in that regard, if you think of what has happened over time [privatizations and selling-offs]. OK, Boulton, Centrumkompaniet, all those things [private center ownership companies], that's just a dog's breakfast. (Informant 8)<sup>52</sup>

The “sense of the ‘50s” strategy is consequently presented with rhetorics of anti-commercialism; nevertheless, it is questionable whether a local, isolated niche strategy or chain-free zone can function as an adequate and forceful response to such a big structural issue. In their study of the Norwegian city

51 “De är helt förtvivlade där över hur det blev.”

52 “Fan, det här [Hökarängens centrum] är på nåt sätt ett unikum i Stockholm, på det sättet, om man nu tänker på vad som har hänt under tiden. OK, Boulton, Centrumkompaniet, allting sånt [privata centrumägare] som ba' fullständig moras.”

of Bergen, human geographers Kari Anne Klovholt Drangslund and Ståle Holgersen describe one such (isolated, chain-free zone) strategy, commenting that it “may be a focus for social and moral mobilization, but it is likely to leave the underlying forces hidden” (2008, p. 168). The chain-free zone, niche strategy or in this case the “sense of the ‘50s” is better understood as place-branding—which cannot be claimed to be anti-commercial.

In Hökarängen, Bandhagen, and Bagarmossen, handpicking is a practice of *chronostalgia*: an act that evokes a future based on an imagined lost utopia. In the end, this “strategy”—which is not articulated as a retail strategy at all, but rather presented as the result of a series of intuitive decisions and ways of operating—boils down to be more an idea about a consensus surrounding an enjoyable atmosphere. The idea of the 1950s as a “national Thing” is central here, and the distance it produces from larger commercial centers is explicitly a distancing from commerce but implicitly a distancing from cultural expressions that challenge the notion of an original Swedishness. In this regard, the nostalgic 1950s narrative and concept of “sense of the ‘50s” functions as a form of “interior frontier” (Anzaldúa, 1991; Balibar, 2002; Nail, 2016; Yigit Turan, 2021), based on nationalist and racializing ideas about origin and belonging. Handpicking is, however, not only about the mere selection of new shopkeepers, but also about making sure that both the new and the existing ones contribute to establishing the desired atmosphere through the design of practices, activities, and shopfronts, and to add to the nostalgic narrative as a move away from the image of a stereotypical racialized suburb. This is illuminated by the talk of “moving outward” from the shop premises, and “contributing” to the center. Nevertheless, what may seem to be about a contribution to the common is in practice an injunction to subscribe to a very specific, very homogenous common, not an invitation to negotiate difference. Similar to the way that “anti-commercialism” constitutes a position to establish oneself as distinguished from nearby suburbs, the talk of “contributing” works to legitimize that some are invited, supported, rewarded and others excluded, eliminated—an erasure of antagonism and contribution to a whole.

Related to this is a recurring theme of advances and failures that are attributed to individuals. On one hand, it is inherent to the format of interview that interviewees may reflect on their own and others’ roles and experiences; on the other hand—as the quotes show—the individuals are tightly connected to how the renewal projects were undertaken and accordingly seem to have become either celebrated or blamed. This

can be understood as an effect of the lack of analysis, political will and organized structures for long-term management of suburban public spaces, and (as has been addressed in the Background on page 25) the consistency of suburban politics that proceeds through temporary projects initiated and/or led by individuals (Hertting, 2006; Léon, 1999b; Velásquez A., 2005). It also connects back to the reading of the suburb as dream *and* nightmare, and as an object for projections and make-overs (Kings et al., 2018). It is worth noticing that across all interviews I was never referred to any steering group or strategy or other structure for managing or articulating visions for suburban centers, even when I asked about this directly. The talk of individuals, in the coming section, must be read against this background.

### Good and Bad Players

One could expect that for a property owner running a renewal project with the objective of vitalizing an area suffering from vacant spaces, renting out spaces would be a question of quantity and numbers. But the interviews show that the interviewees were rather preoccupied with individual shopkeepers, both in positive and negative senses—either seeing them as “contributing” to the imagined ideal atmosphere of the center, or as destroying it.

In one of the interviews with representatives of the urban renewal project in Hökarängen, it became particularly clear that even though the goal of the project was described to be increasing the number of rented spaces in general, some businesses are valued more than others. Earlier in the interview, the informant pointed out that sustainability was particularly important, defining this term as “long-term” presence—i.e., that businesses remain in the area. Even though the recruitment of a pharmacy and health center as important businesses for the public good are mentioned by the interviewee, three businesses—a restaurant, a brewery, and a bakery—are highlighted as particularly important, regardless of whether they were long-lasting or not.

What meant a lot was that these three people were so damn energetic, and they were seen and noticed and it was like, *it was almost as if the individuals, more than the businesses, made an impression*. And these are the kind of people you long for when you work with things like this. It is basically *very much a personal issue*, how things become successful and noticed. And they are three very colorful people.<sup>53</sup> (Informant 6)

I asked for clarification about what kind of attention was referred to and valued in this case and he explained that it was media attention, and that the restaurant chef was award-winning, and the brewery considered “perhaps the hottest” in Sweden during those years. Then I asked in what way media attention is beneficial for Stockholmshem, and the response point towards the effects in terms of measurability of the increased attractiveness of the area:

For Stockholmshem, the effect of these three, which I argue have contributed a lot (...) is that they [Stockholmshem] get an area that they can clearly prove is much more attractive than it was before we started the project.<sup>54</sup> (Informant 6)

These accounts reflect a relationship, not articulated in the interviews, between the different temporalities and qualities of the long-lasting services and the impression-making personalities—the latter were, if not more valued, then at least more attended to, and the handpicking is admitted to be a highly personal issue. The idea of individual shopkeepers’ visibility and impression was reflected in Bandhagen as well.

One recurring topic in the comments about shops and shopkeepers was a movement outwards from the shop to the exterior of the public space. Rather than focusing on the interior, or the movement inwards (entering a shop, for example)—which is a surprisingly absent topic, given that it is a precondition for shopping—attention is paid to how the shopkeepers manifest their businesses in the window, right outside the shop, or even in relation to the square or environment in general, how they “contribute”:

Shops that exist can turn *outwards*, [this is] how one can create safety.<sup>55</sup> (Informants 1&2)

I think it made a big difference when the girl who has the flower shop moved in, because she is some kind of flower shop *decorator*, she is very

verksamheterna nästan, som gjorde avtryck. O det är ju såna människor som man längtar efter när man håller på med sånt här. Det är ju i grunden väldigt mycket en personfråga hur, när saker blir framgångsrika och uppmärksammade o ah. Och det här är tre jättefärgstarka personer.”

54 “För stockholmshem så blir ju effekten av de här tre som jag då säger har bidragit jättemycket men med annat också sammantaget som har gjorts, ehm, så blir ju effekten för stockholmshem att de får ett område som de påtagligt får bevisat är mycket attraktivare än det var innan vi startade projektet.”

55 “verksamheter som finns kan vända sig utåt, hur man kan vara trygghets-skapande.”

*talented*. She has kind of *moved out* [onto the street], I mean she also *moved her puppy out there* for a while, very cute, it was lying outside. She arranges things nicely and there is so much love in it. I think some others have also started to place out a chair or something.<sup>56</sup> (Informants 1&2)

I think it's really nice when the barber sits *outside* and drinks his coffee, it's like, it's a different feeling, you cheer on each other; it's something, it's a different quality than when it's just "now we shut down and close up for the day."<sup>57</sup> (Informants 1&2)

Your shop window should look nice, it should be lit. And it should be *clearly visible so that you see the interior*, what kind of business it is.<sup>58</sup> (Informants 1&2)

The performances of coziness, exemplified by sleeping puppies and drinking coffee outside the shops, is thus implicitly portrayed as a move away from the stereotypical unsafe and quiet suburb environment. The people running the flower shop and the yarn shop were referred to as individuals rather than businesses ("she" or "the girl"), and are described as "driven," "very good," and "very nice." It was appreciated when businesses decorated the façade and the shop window, or even better, "moved out on the street". The interviewees in Bagarmossen also wanted to emphasize their work with handpicking and the importance of individual shopkeepers:

we took it a little easier in Bagarmossen [compared to the renewal project in Hökarängen]. We tried to listen, sat together in different groups and discussed what the best thing to do here was. In Hökarängen more focus was placed on producing a lot very quickly, to rent out as much as possible, you didn't really think through what the appropriate business was.<sup>59</sup> (Informant 4)

56 "Jag tror det gjorde väldigt stor skillnad när den tjejen som har blomsteraffären flyttade in för hon är nån typ av blomsteraffärdekoratör, hon är jätteduktig. Hon har liksom flyttat ut, alltså hon har också flyttat ut sin hundvalp ett tag, väldigt gulligt, den låg utanför. Hon gör så fint och det finns så mycket kärlek i det. Där tror jag att några har börjat sätta ut nån stol eller nånting."

57 "jag tycker det är jättenice när barberaren sitter ute och dricker kaffe alltså det blir, det blir en annan känsla, man hejar på varandra, det blir nåt, det blir en annan kvalitet än när det bara blir, nu drar vi ner o stänger för dan, så."

58 "ditt skyltfönster ska se trevligt ut, det ska vara belyst. och väl synligt så att man ser in vad det är för typ av verksamhet."

59 "Vi tog det lite lugnare i Bagarmossen. Man försökte lyssna in, man satt mer

In Bagarmossen, there was talk about a need to “wake up” some of the shops/shopkeepers:

You need to *wake them up* a little.

Maybe just to *wake them up* and [tell them] you can actually change a little.<sup>60</sup> (Informant 4)

This shows that the makeover not only concerned new, handpicked shopkeepers but also demanded that existing ones change their presence to match the new visions for the area’s atmosphere and identity, and to actively signal—in a way that was legible from the viewpoint of the property ownership—that they were willing to align with the desired atmosphere.

In both Bagarmossen and Hökarängen, the interviewees made clear distinctions between “good” and “bad” shops and shopkeepers:

We want people to populate the square. We have been responsive and listened in order to be able to find a *good player*. We haven’t always succeeded but we have succeeded quite well I think, we have a *good restaurant* and some *small cozy cafes*, but are still facing challenges, and as I said it can take time, it also depends on who is sitting on the premises today—is it a *good business*? So we also analyze what exists today—how does this player work? *Does it contribute or is it negative* for the area? Do we need to work with that tenant to have them rethink, in order to get a *better business*? If it is *very negative* for the area, then maybe we have to *try to get rid* of that tenant.<sup>61</sup> (Informant 4)

I asked how they assessed how much or what a business “gives” or “gives back” to the center, and was told in response, “We are not very good at

tillsammans i olika grupper och diskuterade vad är bäst just här. I Hökarängen var det mer att det skulle produceras mycket väldigt snabbt, man skulle hyra ut så mycket man kunde, man tänkte inte riktigt igenom var det här rätt verksamhet.”

60 “man skulle behöva väcka dem litegranna.”

“kanske just att väcka dem och du kan ju faktiskt förändra litegrann.”

61 “vi vill att folk ska befolka torget. vi har väl varit lyhörda och lyssnat in för att liksom kunna hitta en bra aktör. det är inte alltid vi har lyckats men vi har lyckats ganska väl tycker jag, vi har fått in en bra restaurang och några små mysiga cafeer, men vi har fort utmaningar, och som sagt det kan ta tid det beror också på vem som sitter på lokalen idag, är det en bra verksamhet, så att vi analyserar också det som finns idag, hur funkar den här aktören, tillför den eller är den negativ för området, behöver vi jobba med den lokalhyresgästen för att få den att tänka om för att få en bättre verksamhet. är det sånt som är väldigt negativt för området då kanske vi måste försöka bli av med den hyresgästen.”

seeing and measuring it,” and provided with a reference to surveys among shopkeepers and tenants. “Bad shopkeepers” were described in following words: “Create insecurity,” “unrest,” “plague,” “big boil,” “does not give anything,” “boring shop windows,” “never customers,” “no positive effect on the area,”<sup>62</sup> reflecting a pathological and epidemic terminology that ultimately is a dehumanizing and stigmatizing use of language (cf Molina 1997 on social hygienism in modernist urban planning).

The big grocery chains Ica and Coop were described as “difficult” to influence, but were not seen a problem for this reason—“they are on the other hand good at making sure that it should look nice and tidy and that signs and such are good. So, it is not a disadvantage for the area, they lift the area.”<sup>63</sup> But the big discount store Matdax in Hökarängen, which attracts a diverse and low-income clientele, was never mentioned in this way and has a rather ghostly presence in the talk around attractivity.

One of the “bad” businesses is described as follows:

There we have not really succeeded (sigh). I cannot go into any special details but ... some we need to develop more, Lilla bagis for example is a very good player for the center but they are too crowded and need a bigger space, they are good to work with, but as I said some are far too crowded and need to grow and some are located in too big spaces.<sup>64</sup> (Informant 4)

Without me asking, reasons are described as to why the business does not work:

it may have little to do with *nationalities*, you see it from your own perspective, and then you think it’s perfect, “it’s a perfect job for me,” but for us maybe you should have a little more activity in the shop for it to give good effects for the area ... it is both a home and an occupation for them, *they may come from another country*, yes, and you spend the whole

62 “skapa otrygghet”, “orosmoment”, “förpestar”, “stor varböld”, “inte ger nånting”, “tråkiga skyltfönster”, “aldrig kunder”, “ingen positiv effekt på området.”

63 “de är ju å andra sidan duktiga på att se till att det ska se snyggt och prydligt ut och att skyltar och sånt där är sjysta. så det är ju ingen nackdel för området de höjer ju området.”

64 “där har vi inte lyckats riktigt (suck) jag kan inte gå in på några speciella objekt sådär men. och vissa behöver vi utveckla mer, lilla bagis tex är ju en väldigt bra aktör för centrum men de sitter för trångt och behöver större, de är bra och jobba med, men som sagt vissa sitter alldeles för trångt och behöver större och vissa sitter för stort.”

day there, you live there and almost inhabit this space, but it does not bring in that much money. The economics would not work for *us*, if we had such a space; for *them*, it is more of a place to be, and you get some money, you can pay the rent and food and accommodation. But we see that there is a greater opportunity to develop the business.<sup>65</sup>

Had it been a more commercial American company, they would never have worked like that, they want commerce and it is perhaps too much in the other direction, but to find a *middle way*: to get some speed on the business but still be able to have it and live around and inhabit this very space. As I said, it's about getting them to *change their profile a bit, change the business a bit, perhaps to increase sales*.<sup>66</sup> (Informant 4)

The “us” and “them” in this case does not only refer to a housing company versus tenant relationship but is also a reflection on cultural differences assuming a difference between white majority-Swedes or Westerners and immigrants. Thus, the “change” that was spoken about must be understood not only as a change of business strategy but an integrationist demand for abandoning cultural practices—seen as the wrong type of “coziness” or atmosphere—to please the preferences of a normative white middle class and uphold a homogenous landscape instead of a truly diverse one. Unfortunately, the integrationist approach makes center facilities management an arena for imposing majority values and certain cultural practices onto minority populations or subcultural practices and audiences and regulate real diversity. This is a central issue of the concept of “sense of the ‘50s” as framework for urban renewal.

There was also talk of a “middle way” between the commercial grocery store and the family-driven immigrant restaurant, but that middle way was

65 “det kan ha lite med nationaliteter att göra tror jag, att man ser det utifrån sitt, och så tycker man att det är perfekt, det är en perfekt syssla för mig men för oss kanske man ska ha lite mer aktivitet i lokalen för att det ska ge bra effekter för området (...) det är både ett hem och en syssla för dem, de kommer kanske från ett annat land, ja, och där är man hela dagen, man lever och bor nästan i den här lokalen, men det drar inte in så mycket pengar. Ekonomin för oss skulle ju inte funka om vi hade en sån lokal, för dem blir det mer att det är ett ställe att vara på, att finnas där, och man får lite pengar, man klarar sig ungefär så att man kan betala hyran och mat och husrum. Men vi ser att det finns en större möjlighet att kunna utveckla verksamheten.”

66 “hade det varit en mer kommersiell amerikanskt bolag så hade ju de aldrig jobbat så utan de vill ju ha kommers och det är kanske för mycket åt andra hållet, men att hitta nån medelväg att få lite fart på verksamheten men ändå kunna ha det som och leva kring och bo kring just den här lokalen. det handlar som sagt om att få dem att ändra lite profil, ändra lite på verksamheten kanske för att öka omsättningen.”

so vaguely described that it functions as a rhetorical figure obscuring that, in reality, it is about a very particular way. Rather than a scale of commercial success, it seems like what was described as a “middle way” in fact constitutes a package—including a charismatic shopkeeper and nostalgic atmosphere—which would make a business part of the distinction-making and ensure it conformed with the instructions given in the signage manual discussed in chapter 4, where such nuances are made explicit in the instructive photos of “good” and “bad” shopwindows. The distinction-making “middle way” can be compared to the concept of “inbetween spaces” proposed by human geographers Crewe, Gregson, and Brooks (2003) to describe markets that need to argue for their value as differentiated from the suburb second-hand market on the one hand and mainstream inner-city shopping on the other hand, and which do so by employing high levels of cultural capital, including nostalgia.

Within the interviews, shops with “personality” (cf Karpik, 2010) were desired and celebrated, and stories of individual shopkeepers and their characters were offered as successful examples that contribute to the atmosphere of the center. The other side of the same coin is that some shops and shopkeepers were defined as problems because they were considered too private: they were basically *too personal*. This poses questions about who determines the right balance of personality, highlighting that very particular forms of expression, aesthetics, and beings are wanted.

### Nostalgia Through Erasure

In the creation of a specific identity and the making of distinction, erasure is a mechanism and the lesser vocalized partner of the practices of highlighting and handpicking. Erasure and (colonial) amnesia go hand in hand with selective memory. Before presenting how the concept of erasure or removal was reflected in the speech acts of the interviewees, I will share examples that serve as a reminder that media plays a role in consolidating notions of the suburb as a stage for People’s Home nostalgia, and that such nostalgia is not monolithic.

The practice of erasure in creating coherent narratives and idyllic places is illuminated in the 2020 photographic series *Bullerbyn* by artist Daniel Hoflund (see Fig. 27). Bullerbyn is a fictional village of children’s book author Astrid Lindgren and has come to represent the

image of a nostalgic rural Swedish idyll. With this series, Hofflund interrogates national identity and narratives through the production of stereotypical perceptions of Sweden in literature, film, and television. Hofflund's photo series depict the village of Sevedstorp in Småland where the film adaptation of Lindgren's *Barnen i Bullerbyn* (The children of Bullerbyn) was staged—today a popular tourist attraction where the village residents make efforts to keep the image intact. He comments on the nostalgic preservation of an idealized landscape by painting green squares on the photos, to cover details that clashes with the nostalgic image. The paint, Chroma Key Green, is used in cinema and television productions for special effects and to manipulate images (Hofflund, 2023). Hofflund employs this reference to film post-production techniques to address erasure in mediated representations as well as on-the-ground spatial practice of the villagers. This can be paralleled with the case of Hökarängen, in mediation and on-site.

In the 2014 television production *Bokcirkeln i Hökarängen* (the book club in Hökarängen), the famous poet Kristina Lugn, known for her “kitchen sink realism,” lead a reading group with local residents in Hökarängen, representing “ordinary people,” over six episodes. The combination of lead figure and place is not a coincidence. In an obituary, journalist Göran Greider wrote about Lugn that “it feels as if she always existed, just like Systembolaget [the alcohol monopoly] and Posten [the Post service monopoly]” and described the backdrop of her poetry as an “eternal *folkhem*” (Greider, 2020).<sup>67</sup> According to the producer of the TV series, the intention was to “maximize the 1950s aesthetics” and create a staging guided by the principle “if Kristina Lugn was a house” (Olavi Linna, personal communication with author, January 3, 2024). The way Hökarängen is staged in this television production is an example of the People's Home nostalgic narrative produced and reinforced by film and television. If “Bullerbyn” is the rural, pre-modern version of an idealized image of the Swedish national identity, then “Hökarängen” is the (sub)urban modernist version. And such preservation, or construction, of a clichéd image, also includes acts of obscuring or deleting elements that remind of a complex reality.

67 My translation. Original quote: “Trots att jag själv bara är drygt tio år yngre kan jag känna det som om Lugn (född 1948) alltid funnits, på samma sätt som Systembolaget eller Posten gjort det. Men när vi nu genomlever en tid när Systembolaget och Posten inte längre finns på samma sätt - och Expressen inte ens längre är största kvällstidningen - ja, då är det som om de ironier som genomsyrat hennes diktning blivit än mer frikopplade. Fonden för hennes poesi tycks förbli något slags evigt folkhem - med en smak av både instängd högborgerlighet och ensamstående fattigdom - som hör till en svunnen tid.”



Fig. 27.  
Daniel Hoflund, *Bullerbyn* 2020  
Acrylic (Chroma Key Green) on Cprint, 17×25,5 cm



Fig. 28.  
Stills from *Bokcirkeln i Hökarängen*, Sveriges Television 2014.

In some passages in the TV series, the camera hovers over the local center of Hökarängen on a dark autumn evening, highlighting a glowing landscape of illuminated signs. Like the Chroma Key Green overpaintings of Daniel Hoflund, the high-contrast cinematographic technique here obscures elements that clashes with the People's Home nostalgia of an image of a postwar suburb. The stills depict static shots of Hökarängen's center by night, using imagery with high color contrast highlighting the landscape of colorful illuminated signs (see Fig. 28). The bright yellow ads in the shop-windows of the tobacco and betting shop have been manipulated into black and white, to melt in with the background.

The Chroma Key Green erasing details and the color contrast highlights are useful to think with, as the erasure, selection, and amnesia evident in them are also active mechanisms in both the concept of "national Thing" and the strategies of handpicking and micro-management addressed here.

When answering my questions, representatives of the housing company seemed to often return to the idea that urban renewal is a *laboratory of removal and replacement*. Some talked about it as nothing problematic, while others voiced a more critical, self-reflective approach. This is one of few, if not the only, example throughout the interview material where the 1950s nostalgia is reflected on critically as a concept that should not legitimize removal of later influences, only to fall back to the argument that the architecture "radiates" a sense of the 1950s:

It was a criticism in Hökarängen, or something like that, I don't know how much it influenced that they wanted to create the '50s character. There was something that wasn't purely 50s, but something that has grown since the '50s in Hökarängen. And that's the thing, I think it's important there, you have to take into account what has changed over time. *You can't remove the development either*, because it has been shaped by the people who live there. ... we started from Bagarmossen and not from the fact that it was the '50s. So, our interest was to create something that ... because it was built in the '50s, fine, but then people have lived in the '50s, 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s, and 2000s. So that somehow, it's like, "But we'll keep the Bagarmossen feeling." Then there's this ... architecture ... I'm thinking it kind of *radiates 1950s or so in its design*, fountains and so on, and the public square feel.<sup>68</sup> (Informant 5)

The interviewee also discusses the supply of restaurants in Bagarmossen, negotiating the concept of removal with the concept of handpicking and highlighting, here verbalized as “supplementing,” advocating that it is important not to remove existing shops, an argument that between the lines tell of a normative practice of doing so:

I’m very happy that we’ve got a type of restaurant that’s a bit more like this when you can go and have dinner or brunch. It’s a little more like this, quite nice. But at the same time, it’s possible for most people to eat there. So, I’m glad *we could just supplement*. Because in a center it is important that everyone should be able to enjoy themselves and come here. And so we kept Caprese [a pizzeria], that is still there, and Sherlock [a pub], until now—now, they are gone, unfortunately. But they have been able to remain and we have had these little pubs left, *we have not removed them*. So, it’s also a lesson: it turned out that *it wasn’t about removing things, it was about supplementing*. For those who frequent these pubs—yeah, they do so because they enjoy themselves there, so then they [the pubs] must be there. If we have a restaurant, maybe people, others who don’t hang out at the pub, will meet on the street by the square. So, *this very thing of not removing things* is very important to understand.<sup>69</sup> (Informant 5)

He made a point about not *removing* shops but rather *supplementing* the existing selection. However, the rhetorics also pointed towards an active act of keeping—“and we have kept X until now,” and later “we haven’t taken

50-tal utan nåt som har vuxit fram sedan 50-talet i Hökarängen. Och det är det där, jag tror det är viktigt där, man måste ta hänsyn till det som har förändrats över tid. Man får inte sudda bort utvecklingen heller, för det har formats av de som bor där. (...) vi utgick från Bagarmossen och inte från att det var 50-tal så. Så vårt intresse var att skapa någonting som ... för det byggdes på 50-talet, fine, men sedan har ju folk levt 50-, 60-, 70-, 80-, 90 tills 2000-talet. Så att någonstans är det så här ”Men vi ska behålla Bagarmossen-känslan”. Sedan är det här ...arkitekt...jag tänker att det utstrålar någon form av 1950-tal eller så i sin utformning, fontäner och så vidare, och torgkänslan.”

69 “Det är jag jätteglad att vi har fått in en typ av liksom restaurang som lite är mer det här när du kan gå och kaka middag eller kaka brunch på kvällen. Den är lite mer så här, lite fin så. Men samtidigt så, det finns möjligheter för de flesta att kunna gå in och äta där. Så jag är glad att vi kunde just komplettera. För i ett centrum är det viktigt att alla ska kunna trivas och komma hit. Och så att vi har behållit Capresen som finns där och Sherlock fram tills nu då, nu är de borta tyvärr. Men att de har kunnat finnas kvar och att vi har både haft de här lite pubarna kvar, vi har inte tagit bort dem. Så det är också en lärdom, det visade sig att det handlade inte om att ta bort saker, utan det handlade om att komplettera. För de som är på de här pubarna – ja, men de är ju där för att de trivs där, så då måste de finnas där. Om vi har en restaurang så kanske folk, (andra som inte hänger på puben och restauranger) så möts de på gatan vid torget. Så just det här att inte ta bort saker är jätteviktigt att förstå.”

them away.” This way of operating was described as a result of a “lesson” previously learned in Hökarängen, although it was not articulated in this interview what was removed or not there. However, a few minutes later, he talked about the importance of removal, so that it became clear that what he first addressed was mainly about the annulment of shop contracts, and not about removal in general—on the contrary, he explained that he strongly believes in the importance of removal of certain elements.

Then bars, overall, I think you must work very hard to get rid of window bars. I think bars add nothing positive at all for people passing by. They neither provide security nor ... they rather create insecurity.<sup>70</sup>  
(Informant 5)

Nostalgia and the “sense of the ‘50s” is, to a large extent, about *erasure*, even if it’s not necessarily talked about openly in such terms. To some extent, this is articulated, though, as in the talk about “bad businesses” and the bad aesthetic influence of window bars and how they needed to be removed to evoke a feeling of safety and vitality. Removal has to do with more than just safety, though—it is about which stories, aesthetic ideals, and cultural practices are privileged and which are overshadowed or remain unknown, in a landscape that—possibly unknowingly—favors homogeneity before diversity.

70 “Sedan galler, överlag, jag tror man ska jobba stenhårt för att få bort galler. Jag tror galler tillför iingenting positivt överhuvudtaget till folk som passerar förbi. Det ger varken trygghet det ger snarare otrygghet.”

## Conclusion

Drawing from Gospodinov's concept of *chronostalgia*—an obsessive nostalgic relation to past decades, which informs his novel *Time Shelter*, in which European countries hold referendums on what decades to “return” to—the 1950s can be understood as Sweden's *time shelter*: a nostalgia constitutive of the national identity and the locus of Swedishness as imagined community (Anderson, 1991). The nostalgic 1950s narrative can, when operationalized in a context of urban renewal, be read as a form of “interior frontier” (Anzaldúa, 1991; Balibar, 2002; Nail, 2016), based on nationalist and racializing ideas about origin and belonging. The “enhancement of the sense of the ‘50s” is not primarily based on the originality of the place in terms of planning, architecture, spatial qualities, but rather atmospheric qualities, activities, and aesthetics that are perceived and experienced by certain bodies based on a fantasy of past times. In this regard, the affective categories “cozy,” “vital,” and “trendy,” and “sense of the ‘50s” can be read as a form of “national Thing” (du Plessis 2015, Žižek 1993)—a sense of enjoyment that reproduces its own belief in itself and excludes other forms of enjoyment. Throughout the interview material, the studied cases are constructed in opposition to neighboring suburbs along binaries that render the case study suburbs as progressive and as having particular atmospheric and sensory qualities. This portrayal is, further, constructed in opposition to an anti-thesis in the idea that some areas have lost their coziness and homeliness to commercialization, larger scale developments, private actors, and “modern” attributes. The “sense of the ‘50s” effectively functions as an umbrella to prove that the studied cases can be distinguished from their neighbors—they are simply not like other suburbs; they are something particular, unique, more authentic, and enjoyable.

The creation of a *chronostalgic* time shelter in the name of the coziness of “national Thing” is operationalized through a set of practices identified through the rhetorics of the interviewees. These practices are distinction-making and combine highlighting and erasure of elements in the public space. They include a belief in atmospheric qualities as branding, which can be seen in the handpicking of shopkeepers and the strategic removal of shops and elements in public space to evoke a nostalgic vibe.

One of the strategies to distinguish a place from its neighboring areas is the imperative of individuals to “contribute” to the nostalgic narrative. The moving outward beyond the boundaries of the shop window is presented as a form of contribution to the common and community, but in practice it is a very specific, homogenous common that is the aim of this movement, with very specific rights and wrongs, and dos and don’ts, rather than an invitation to negotiate difference in public space. This imperative is, however, not understood as authoritarian or problematic by the interviewees, but rather as a caring engagement and taking of responsibility for public good. The rhetorics of “contribution” legitimizes that some are invited, supported, and rewarded, and others excluded or eliminated—an erasure of antagonism serving the idea of a whole.

One perspective that is absent is an initiated and serious discussion of the challenges faced by Hökarängen, relationally, structurally, and politically, and how these challenges are reflected in or differ from those faced by other suburbs. As opposed to such an approach, the interviewees are busy with the construction of a particular identity for the studied suburbs, departing from an isolated understanding of place—a strategy that is formulated based on the individual place’s unique conditions and room for action on a local level. The interviewees would see their “sense of the ‘50s” strategy as a pioneering act of resistance and innovation and a model for others to follow; they view their visions as aligning with, or preceding, societal tendencies moving in the same direction, positioning them as *avant-garde*. The strategy is perhaps best understood as formulated, or acted out, in opposition to its imagined antithesis.

Repeatedly, the immediate neighboring suburbs are brought up as examples to distance oneself from: Hökarängen in contrast to Farsta; Bandhagen against Högdalen (Bagarmossen lesser so since they do not have retail competition in neighboring suburbs). Rather than addressing a general tendency of small-scale businesses and shopping areas being competed out by larger actors, and the social, financial, demographic, infrastructural, and, in the end, political dimensions of it, the interviewees distance themselves from the suburbs where such processes have played out and present themselves as somewhat anti-commercial. The strategy of creating a “sense of the ‘50s” is, however, better understood as place-branding—which cannot be claimed to be anti-commercial. In this regard, the concepts of a 1950s atmosphere and a unique place identity serve to communicate that this particular suburb is not like other suburbs. It is not

stigmatized, racialized, commercialized. Thus, the self-claimed progressive approach stands in contrast to one of solidarity with other low-income, stigmatized, and othered suburbs that structurally are all victims under the same suburban politics.



by Mapping the Unjust City  
(2020)

Like all maps, *centrumkartan.org* is inherently partial and inherently incomplete. The result of a collective attempt to make visible property ownership in local centers, this map employs a familiar navigation structure—namely, Stockholm's metro map.<sup>1</sup> As part of the collective Mapping the Unjust City, I have been engaged in co-mapping the financial ownership of Stockholm's centers since 2015. Using a variety of workshop and exhibition formats, we have collected data in order to investigate and interrogate the concepts of rights, ownership, and publicness in public space. As an interactive online tool, *centrumkartan.org* was able to make visible the temporal and spatial relationships that define financial ownership. We designed the map so that users could sort Stockholm's centers based on the decades in which they were initially privatized, or click on a company and see a list of the centers that they own, thereby connecting centers through their current financial owners or the year they left public ownership. This was yet another way of *counter-mapping*—of renegotiating

1 For a more thorough background to this work, see, for instance Mapping the Unjust City, Thoughts on Representations of Ownership. *Parse Journal of Artistic Research*, 8. 2018.

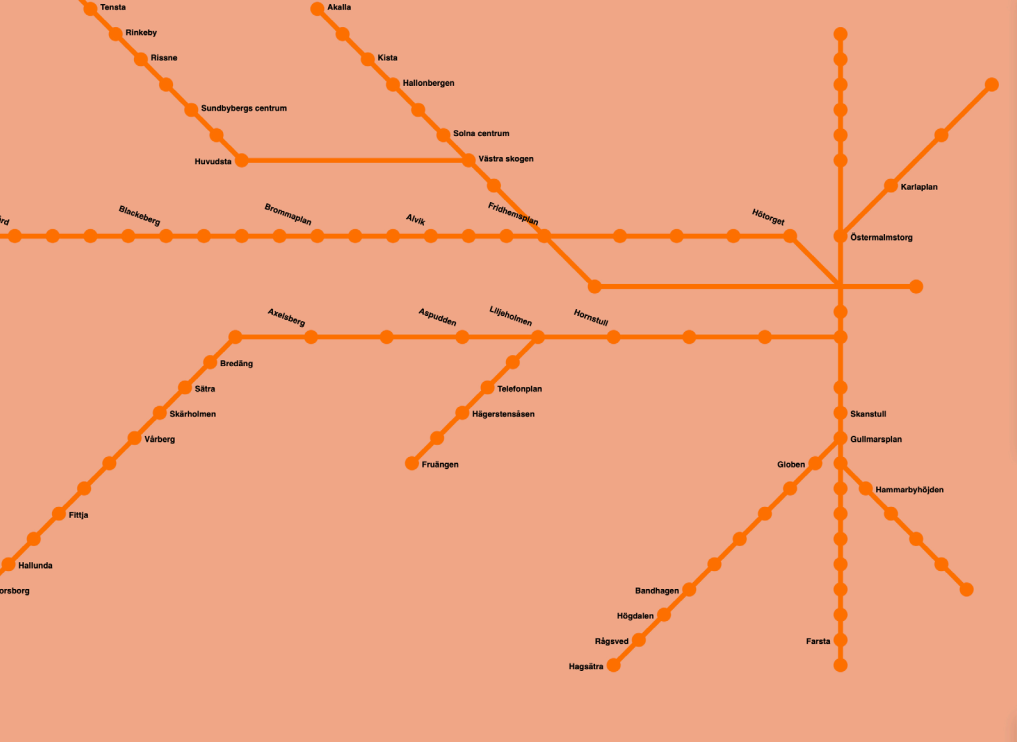
proximity and distance, in time and space, and of proposing connections between places that are not necessarily thought of as connected (cf what economic geographer John Allen calls “topologies of power,” in Allen, 2016). Gathering data from Stockholm’s municipalities and the National Land Survey, media clippings from both financial newspapers and local newspapers (which tend to present very different perspectives), and edited accounts authored by the project group, *centrumkartan.org* combined diverse resources to create a series of short stories from a situated citizen-researcher’s viewpoint.

The work of Mapping the Unjust City oscillates between a focus on almost ungraspable global financial structures and on their effects on granular, local experiences and conditions of life. While a lot of research is being done into both housing and public space, there is a lack of academic or artistic research attending to the specificities of local centers and their social, political, and cultural role in a Swedish urban context—especially as contested sites.

*centrumkartan.org* was originally designed to function as a platform for workshop-based participatory research—to share and produce knowledge while at the same time collecting data through interaction with a variety of groups and perspectives. This plan was, however, interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and this work largely remains to be done, with the exception of a few experiments. Thus, *centrumkartan.org* should be perceived not only as an existing online tool for the collection and dissemination of data, but also as the beginning of an open-ended continuity of mapping activities.

While the present doctoral research project focuses on the three suburban centers of Hökarängen, Bandhagen, and Bagarmossen, which are each located on one of the three southbound green metro lines, in a further aesthetic move intended to renegotiate established topologies and mental geographies, *centrumkartan.org* does not show the colors of the individual metro lines. While my research centers around a mu-

municipal housing company and a private housing company (specifically, a resident-driven housing association), *centrumkartan.org* provides an overview of the landscape in which my research project is situated, and a reminder of the increasing number and diversity of property owners in Stockholm, which now include remote venture capitalist companies and short-term owners. Within this landscape, my research may serve to contribute a thicker and deeper understanding of those three stops on the map. Essentially, *centrumkartan.org* is a container to which more testimonials, formal and informal research, art works, and more can be added, thereby continuing the counter-map's investigation and negotiation of the histories of Stockholm's local centers as shared dwellings and meaningful places.

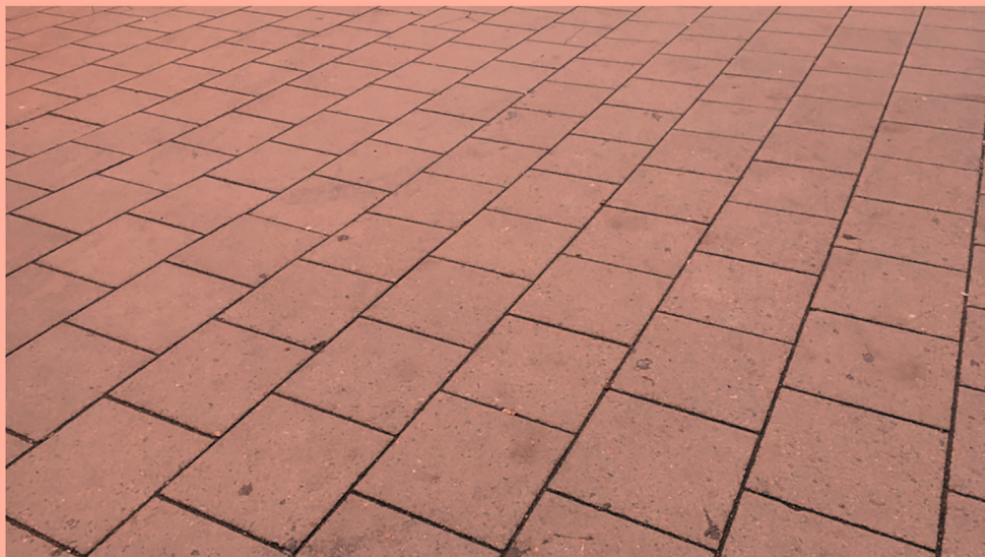


Filter

- Publicly owned
- Privately owned

- Ongoing sale
- Sold 2020s
- Sold 2010s
- Sold 2000s
- Sold 1990s
- Sold 1980s
- Sold 1970s
- Sold 1960s



# Hökarängen Stockholmshem

## CENTER INFO

## STOCKHOLMSHEM

Västertorp

Midsommarkransen

Hökarängen

Örnsberg





## Chapter 6

**Towards a conclusion**



In the final stages of working on this thesis, I found myself in a newly built playground in central Stockholm, designed as a miniature world inspired by the Stockholm Exhibition of 1930.<sup>1</sup> My daughter first explored the miniature houses, built in an early functionalist style, and then the tiny cement truck and crane, which had been placed there in reference to the origins of the Swedish postwar era and its housing boom. As I stood among the other parents, in the eerie midst of what was supposed to be a “cozy” nostalgic atmosphere, and looked at my child—a person of the 2020s rumbling around in a brand new 1930s miniature—I thought to myself: this scene is beyond even those imagined by Georgi Gospodinov.

Mentioned earlier in this thesis, Gospodinov writes of a “time shelter”—an amnesia clinic, offering custom-made, historically themed rooms to its patients—as a way to reflect the longing European nations have for “their” pasts. In his fiction, the referendums that nations hold regarding which period to return to are, however, separate from the act of designing of the clinics. In contemporary Sweden, though, such a separation is harder to make out, as what author Douglas Coupland terms “legislated nostalgia” (1991) becomes increasingly literal. The longing for the past and the celebration of golden ages are manifested without excuse in the urban environment and can be seen in everything from playgrounds and cafés to urban renewal projects.

One striking example of this tendency is the “Sweden house,” a pre-approved housing typology in the form of a stereotypical red cottage, exempted from a number of regulatory requirements—currently the subject of an investigation launched by the government at the initiative of the far-right nationalist party Sweden Democrats. The stated aim of the program is to stimulate the construction of privately owned single-family houses within an aesthetic register that is claimed to be “Swedish.” I wonder, at such a moment, whether a 1930s nostalgia playground would have been possible some years back, or if it is a 2020s thing. Are increasingly distant and provocative nostalgias becoming acceptable, and complexities smoothed over, as a

1 The playground referenced is the Tessinparken playground in the district of Östermalm, inaugurated in 2024. The theme was developed based on a request from the citizens. The playground is designed by Lekplatsbolaget, a company specializing in miniature playgrounds with a historical and nostalgic style. Five years earlier, in 2019, another thematically related playground was built in the same district—Krubbands lekplats on Linnégatan, designed by AJ Landskap AB in collaboration with sculptor Johan Ferner Ström and artist Tor Svae. There are many more playgrounds with historical and/or nostalgic references—these two are newly built ones in Stockholm with a theme of “early functionalism.”

result of years of normalization of homogenizing concepts of the nation and national community? Apart from the absurd yet real example of the “Sweden house,” there are many other *restorative nostalgias* in circulation, many of which are less identifiable as nostalgias: these include the preference for idyllic terraced houses (*trädgårdsstad*) and the perimeter block city (*kvartersstad*) in contemporary urban planning, and new political orientations towards the demolition of late modernist housing, to take only two examples, from the local landscape, of the “global epidemic” of nostalgia (Boym, 2001).

In this thesis, I have spent time “reading the signs” of 1950s nostalgia, as it played out at its peak in the 2010s. Specifically, I have focused on how that nostalgia manifested in imaginaries surrounding three Stockholm suburban centers and the urban renewal projects addressing them. In this concluding chapter, I would like to highlight some of the insights gleaned from such a reading. The main argument made throughout the thesis is that *nostalgia*, when it is employed in the context of urban renewal, works to create *distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984). This means that nostalgic narratives and ideals in urban renewal help produce value hierarchization between places.

One central mechanism of distinction-making nostalgia is the way in which it ascribes affective qualities to a place, directing attention towards particular qualities and, specifically, aiming to create sensescapes that can be described as “cozy” or “trendy,” which are also presented as both benevolent and indisputable. I have theorized this mechanism through the “National Thing” (du Plessis, 2015; Žižek, 1993), a concept that describes the sense of enjoyment that is connected to an imagined community reproducing a belief in itself that excludes other forms of enjoyment. In the studied cases, I have shown how the “enhancement of the sense of the ’50s” operates as a design concept that is a “National Thing,” centering a correct, “Swedish” type of enjoyment and working to form a discursive “interior frontier” (Anzaldúa, 1991; Balibar, 2002; Nail, 2016) based on nationalist and racializing ideas about origin and belonging. What makes the “National Thing” possible, I demonstrate, is a dominant integrationist approach rooted in a “culture of wholeness” (Teschfahoney & Grip, 2007) and a will to smooth out differences in favor of the sameness of majority culture. This goes hand in hand with a dominant concept of public space as a frictionless “living room” (Thörn, 2011; Gabrielsson, 2006) and imperatives towards (cozy) consensus that oppose understandings of public space as a site of differences.

292      Within the interview material, I have identified several distinction-making practices. One is the *hand-picking of tenants* for

retail spaces. This, I have shown, occurred when property owners favored businesses (such as cafés and shops) that fitted into the desired 1950s-scented small-scale atmosphere, while simultaneously support was given to existing businesses to adapt to the aesthetic profile. Another strategy that I have highlighted was *design by erasure*, whereby elements that violated the idyllic image were removed. These practices, I have argued, are central to a selective nostalgia that highlights certain memories and perceptions (those thought to be connected to the 1950s) while suppressing other aspects of a place's history and present.

Another central mechanism of distinction-making nostalgia is related to the divisiveness of nostalgia and more precisely located to the value hierarchization of *distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984). As the study has shown, the studied cases were branded as “cozy 1950s” centers in opposition to neighboring suburbs that were consequently described as “less interesting” and “less progressive.” *Progressiveness* was thus connected to the People's Home political project and the welfare state, which were the object of the nostalgia. In such circumstances, nostalgia operates as a container of binary “dream—nightmare” and “utopia—failure” narratives—in this case, regarding the Swedish suburbs, in relation to which it has been used to render early and high modernist suburbs as “utopian” and late modernist suburbs as “failures.” Throughout the interview material, I have shown how the studied cases were attributed progressive, atmospheric, and sensory qualities *in opposition to* neighboring suburbs that had “lost” their coziness and homeliness as a result of commercialization, large-scale development, private actors, and “modern” attributes. Implicitly, there is also a racializing dimension here. The “1950s feel” served as an argument for distinguishing the studied cases from their neighbors: they are simply not like other suburbs, they are something special and unique—something more authentic and more enjoyable. In this regard, progressiveness takes on a comparative quality and suggests competition between places. The thesis has argued that the “progressiveness” often attributed to People's Home nostalgia should be understood in the light of Nordic exceptionalism and colonial amnesia—where Sweden avoids confronting the country's colonial heritage or acknowledging the role that immigration has played in the history of the welfare state in order to maintain the self-image of a tolerant and idyllic nation. As a consequence of this idealization of the 1950s, any additions after the 1950s risk being seen as less progressive, more unsafe, and as something to be discarded. This, I have argued, neglects

the multiple cultural expressions and practices that are inevitably part of the Swedish suburban landscape, rendering them illegitimate, and hindering them from rightly belonging to the place and “Swedishness.” This is particularly important in a contemporary political and discursive landscape, where racialized suburbs and neighborhoods built in the 1960s, 1970s, and later are subjected to increasing stigma.

These mechanisms of distinction-making nostalgia should be understood as a reminder of the lack of progressive potential in what Boym defines as restorative nostalgia. Any object of the romantic shimmer of nostalgia must be read against its antithesis, what remains “impossible nostalgia” (Mack, 2021). As cultural theorist Mark Fisher warns, “modernism is now something that can periodically return, but only as a frozen aesthetic style, never as an ideal for living” (Fisher, 2009, p. 8); author Owen Hatherley echoes this sentiment in asserting that as much as modernism originally was against ornament, today “modernist buildings are made into ornaments” (Hatherley, 2017, p. 29). We need, as such, to be careful on the one hand not to let nostalgia result in an imagination of the urban as purely aesthetic, and on the other hand not to dismiss late modernist neighborhoods as useless or threatening.

The aggressive renovations, lack of maintenance, and threatened and completed demolitions of recent years have naturally led to reactions from citizens, but these reactions have not necessarily extended to include stigmatized, late modernist neighborhoods. The engagement for careful renovations through initiatives such as Renoveringsraseriet (the renovation rage), or protests to preserve heritage-listed houses, not to mention populist ultra-nostalgic movements like Arkitekturupproret, often stay within the framework of ideas about architectural quality or beauty, which are limited to certain styles and eras that leave late modernism behind, which is particularly worrying given the demolition politics which is on the doorstep as a so-called “anti-segregation” measure, with inspiration from Denmark. In this regard, nostalgia does not have a progressive potential but rather forms an obstacle as it creates a devastating divide, by making certain demolitions “grievable” and others not, along lines of class and racialization.

The 1950s nostalgia that this thesis has addressed can today, in the mid-2020s, seem more or less dated. It took shape in the early 2000s and peaked in the 2010s, only to then fade out or possibly become “normalized” background noise. In the political landscape of today, the idea of a loss of Swedishness has become a well-established

assumption, causing a variety of desperate political attempts at reinstating “Swedish values.” This shows that nostalgia and distinction have temporal dimensions—they shift in expression and are not static in their aesthetics or the technologies by which they are operationalized. In this regard, divisive nostalgias, distinction-making practices, and their intersections, call for continuous attention and study. As Boym asserts, nostalgia comes in many variations and with many nuances. Despite these differences, though, a shared grammar exists, which calls for attention to be paid to *nostalgias*—with an emphasis on the plural form—beyond the most explicit, extreme, or already known forms. Nostalgics do not necessarily understand themselves as political subjects, and nostalgias are not necessarily understood as political—on the contrary, nostalgia is often embedded in and activated through the most everyday-like and taken-for-granted. This thesis offers an in-depth analysis of *one* type of nostalgia but essentially proposes that serious attention be paid to—in particular—the seemingly most banal, innocent, and taken-for-granted cultural expressions and imaginaries.

Another important point that can be drawn from this thesis relates to positionality and positional recognition, matters which are of ethical and methodological significance but which have also had a bearing on the onto-epistemological perspectives in the study. A central concept here is “professional vision” (Goodwin, 1994), which I have employed in order to highlight the role of institutionalization in granting legitimacy to certain perspectives or voices. The positionality of the signage system analyzed in Chapter 4—a document produced by professional practitioners, which clearly manifests their gaze and problem formulations—as well as the perspective from which most interviewees speak, namely that of property ownership, thus emerge as crucial. The concept of *professional vision* has been employed to illuminate questions of whose problem formulations are represented, and how certain expressions, activities, ways of being, and cultures come to be seen as problems, obstacles, or subjects of improvement by design, rather than legitimate and acknowledged differences or conflicting interests.

Positionality is also central to the methodology as the research is carried out based on a “dig-where-you-stand” approach (Lindqvist, 2023 [1978]). The present work has been undertaken from a double situatedness which has positioned me at the intersection between long-term resident and professional designer—researcher. In this regard, my professional vision as a graphic designer has been employed in at least two ways: firstly, to carry out a reading that has unpacked how design and

its discipline-embedded values and legacies are reflected in urban renewal processes, and secondly, in reflections upon how designers' professional vision and the designer's role can be renegotiated and practiced in reparative artistic initiatives. A discipline-critical perspective has been central to the work, which has aimed to attend to the inherent violence present in design and the disciplinary biases that affirm those already in power and normative positions, which, I argue, obscure a multiplicity of positionalities and the power dynamics related to the authority and agency of the designer. In this, I refute a mainstream belief in design as an innocent or benevolent "problem-solver".

My double-sided approach demanded the invention of a methodological framework that I describe as "paranoid-reparative" (Kosofsky Sedgwick, 2003). By integrating artistic interventions (*reparative*) with traditional discourse analysis (*paranoid*), the thesis has developed a method wherein critical analysis has been performed hand-in-hand with a practically engaged and reparative design practice. This framework—enabled by my double role as resident and researcher/designer—demonstrates a way of conducting research from within a place rather than approaching it from outside. The methodology has built upon Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theoretical reasoning, showing how a dialectical approach combining the paranoid and reparative approaches can be operationalized. The result is a situated research practice that both offers a critical examination and contributes with on-site, entangled, 1:1 engagements in the local community. In the thesis, the latter have been presented in a series of interventions framed as *reparative interstices*, a term that is deliberately chosen to highlight the interstitial character of the engagements and to argue for the interstitial as a meaningful margin, powerful position, and a site to be acknowledged and valued. The reparative approach is not solution-driven; it does not propose that individual practitioners and their engagements to be held responsible for "mending a broken world." It especially does not intend to put the weight of that mending on the shoulders of those who are subjected to injustices.

The interstices include a counter-mapping of Stockholm's suburban centers, a project in a citizen-driven neighborhood archive, a collage poster series highlighting media narratives, a guided walk renegotiating the local history of a place, and a photo series offering a methodological reflection on situatedness. These interventions all vary in format and volume but are interconnected and are the results of practice as a situated resident-designer/researcher. In the artistic field, site-specific work

and approaches have become a norm, as a result of a development accompanied by an imperative of mobility, and, paradoxically, a subsequent interchangeability of place, whereby artists and designers become itinerant temporary agents (Kwon, 2002). Instead, the present research calls for, and has enabled, a design practice based on local perspectives and engagement, meaningful entanglements, accountability, and a temporality beyond the temporary. The series of reparative interstices offer a variety of negotiations, experiments, proposals for a design practice that does not build on the creation of distinction but rather engages in a landscape where things are allowed to exist side-by-side and simultaneously in their complexities.

To conclude, the thesis offers a detailed study of how 1950s nostalgia has been used in three Stockholm suburbs, and shows how nostalgia acts as a tool of distinction to elevate certain places—at the cost of devaluing others. It demonstrates that the seemingly innocent affective characteristics such as “coziness” or the “everydayness” of the urban landscape carry ideological charges. The enhancement of the “sense of the 50s” that I have studied did not primarily occur through planning, architecture, and spatial qualities but rather through atmospheric qualities, activities, and aesthetics that are perceived and experienced by certain bodies and are based on a fantasy of bygone times.

Overall, this study contributes to deepening understandings of how nostalgia, distinction, and methodologies such as the “dig-where-you-stand” approach and the paranoid-reparative framework work to (re)negotiate distances and proximities in time and space—and as such to draw and redraw interior borders and shape social imaginaries. In line with Svetlana Boym’s warning that “unreflected nostalgia breeds monsters,” the study exposes the overlooked exclusionary mechanisms at work in nostalgia and suggests that such mechanisms be taken seriously despite tendencies to view nostalgias as innocent and banal. Simultaneously, the study echoes, and follows, bell hook’s call for a “struggle of memory against forgetting,” inviting collective memory work and vigilance around the making of connections, visibility, legibility, authority, agency, and legitimacy. The thesis encourages those active in academia, design, urban planning, and beyond to question and renegotiate the notions and narratives that surround the urban and suburban, and their public spaces, social imaginaries, and imagined communities, in the pursuit of imagining otherwise. In this, it advocates for the creation of more just and less homogenizing environments in the future.



## Svensk sammanfattning

### Bakgrund och syfte

Denna avhandling behandlar framväxten av nostalgiska designstrategier i efterkrigstidens svenska förorter ur ett tvärvetenskapligt perspektiv med utgångspunkt i urbana studier och designstudier. Mot bakgrund av den pågående estetiseringen av Sveriges stadsmiljöer undersöks hur vissa förorter föreställs och omgestaltas genom stadsförnyelseprojekt som syftar till att omprofilera dessa områden. Särskilt fokus ligger på nostalgins sociala och politiska funktion i dessa processer. Avhandlingen argumenterar för att nostalgi används för att skilja vissa förorter från andra, stigmatiserade och rasifierade sådana genom att framställa dem som historiskt rotade och därmed genuint "svenska". På så vis bidrar nostalgiska narrativ till att placera vissa förorter närmare en idealiserad svenskhet, samtidigt som de skapar en distans till andra förorter med lägre status.

Det empiriska huvudfallet är Hökarängens centrum i södra Stockholm och stadsförnyelseprojektet Hållbara Hökarängen (genomfört 2011–2015). Därutöver studeras två närliggande förortscentrum, Bagarmossen och Bandhagen, i relation till huvudfallet. Genom att följa hur idéer och praktiker från Hållbara Hökarängen migrerat till och utvecklats i dessa områden belyser studien hur konceptet sprids och anpassas till olika platser.

Syftet med avhandlingen är att blottlägga de till synes oskyldiga designingreppens innebörd. Genom en kritisk granskning av hur nostalgi används som verktyg för platsmarknadsföring och identitetsskapande ifrågasätter studien stadsförnyelseprojektets anspråk på autenticitet och progressivitet. Den visar även hur designpraktikerna bär på starka sociala och politiska implikationer, där inkludering och exkludering styrs av estetiska narrativ. Avhandlingen bidrar dessutom till en omförhandling av formgivarens roll och föreslår en reparativ metod för designpraktik, grundad i en "gräv där du står"-ansats (inspirerad av Lindqvist, 2023 [1978]) där den lokala kontexten och forskarens dubbla roll som boende och yrkesutövare står i centrum.

### Teoretiskt ramverk

Avhandlingens teoretiska ramverk förenar tre huvudbegrepp – *förorten*, *distinktion* och *nostalgi* – och är förankrat i designforskning, urbana studier och minnesstudier. Förorten (särskilt den svenska efter-

krigsförorten) konceptualiseras som en projektionsyta för drömmar och mardrömmar, där utopier och misslyckanden spelas upp. Här finns starka kopplingar till Étienne Balibars idé om hur samhällen konstruerar inre gränsdragningar: genom att internalisera nationella gränser i det sociala medvetandet skapas inkluderande respektive exkluderande rum inom staden. Sådana föreställda och praktiserade skiljelinjer i stadslandskapet utgör en grund för nästa begrepp.

Pierre Bourdieus term *distinktion/åtskillnad* (Bourdieu, 1984) används som en utgångspunkt för att förstå design av offentliga rum som en social markör – en praktik allt mer inriktad på att skapa atmosfäriska upplevelser. Avhandlingen intar här ett perspektiv där design betraktas som något vardagligt snarare än något extraordinärt. Således avläses denna som en spegling av de sociala föreställningar och imaginära värden som omger den.

Det tredje nyckelbegreppet är *nostalgi*, som i denna kontext ses som splittrande till sin natur och starkt kopplat till föreställningar om nationen. Särskilt behandlas den svenska 1950-talsnostalgin – en folkhemsnostalgi knuten till välfärdsstatens glansdagar – vilken ramas in som en form av ”skuldfri hemkomst”, alltså nostalgi som kolonial amnesi, för majoritetssamhället. Denna nostalgi är inte oskyldig eller neutral, utan snarare ett uttryck för välfärdsnationalism och ett selektivt minne som tenderar att exkludera erfarenheter av migration och mångfald. Således argumenterar avhandlingen för att nostalgins skimrande bild av det förflutna upprätthåller en bias mot nationen (”svenskheten”) och osynliggör dem som inte passar in i denna berättelse.

## Metod och material

Metodologiskt kombinerar studien diskursanalys med platsavhängiga konstnärliga interventioner. Diskursanalysen har fokuserat på tre huvudsakliga materialkategorier:

- 1) Ett skyltprogram framtaget av arkitekter för bostadsbolaget Stockholms hem inom ramen för projektet Hållbara Hökarängen (vilket avhandlas som ett nyckeldokument för platsens estetiska visioner).
- 2) Intervjuer med företrädare för fastighetsägare och centrumförvaltare i de studerade förortscentrumen (både kommunala och privata aktörer, samt representanter för lokala föreningar).

tioner kopplade till förnyelseprojekten (t.ex. pressmaterial och utvärderingsrapporter).

Analysen av detta material har genomförts med ett särskilt metodologiskt ramverk som benämns paranoid-reparativ läsning, inspirerad av queer-teoretikern Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003). Detta angreppssätt innebär ett dubbelt förhållningssätt: att å ena sidan göra en "paranoid" kritisk närläsning för att blottlägga underliggande maktstrukturer och dolda budskap i diskursen, och å andra sidan ägna sig åt en "reparativ" och konstruktiv praktik där konstnärliga ingripanden används för att omförhandla narrativen. Genom att växla mellan dessa lägen möjliggörs en fördjupad förståelse av materialet samtidigt som alternativa sätt att läsa och påverka de studerade diskurserna prövas.

Metodvalen präglas av författarens dubbla roll som "boende-professionell" (forskare och formgivare) baserad i området. En "gräv där du står"-ansats (Lindqvist, 2023 [1978]) har tillämpats, där den lokala kontexten och egna erfarenheter aktivt integreras i forskningsprocessen. Exempelvis har personliga anekdoter använts som ett sätt att situera kunskap och reflektera över forskarens roll.

Utöver den formella diskursanalysen integreras i avhandlingen fem reparativa interludier eller mellanrum – praktiska konstnärliga projekt som löper parallellt med de teoretiska kapitlen. Dessa mellanrum fungerar som undersökande öppningar där teori möter praktik, och har hjälpt till att förankra och testa forskningens idéer i verkliga situationer. Mellanrummen består av ett arkivprojekt (återaktivering av det lokala Hökarängsarkivet genom insamling av butiksskyltar och utgivning av ett kommenterande häfte), en serie kollageaffischer för en friteater (sammanställningar av lokala tidningsurklipp som synliggör nostalgidiskursen i söderförorterna), en stadsvandring i Hökarängen (för att utmana krononormativa tidsuppfattningar och belysa platsens mångfacetterade historia), en fotografisk undersökning av skyltfönster (som metodreflektion över forskarens blick som boende) samt medverkan i ett digitalt kartprojekt, *centrumkartan.org* (som visualiserar ägarförhållanden för Stockholms förortscentrum längs tunnelbanan och placerar studien i ett större sammanhang). Dessa konstnärliga inslag har berikat analysen genom dialog med boende och utövare, och understrukit att forskningsprocessen inte är linjär utan sammanflätad med det levda livet i fältet.

## Resultat och analys

Ett centralt tema är hur design och estetiska grepp används för att konstruera en platsidentitet som differentierar förorten från omgivande områden. I Hållbara Hökarängen manifesteras detta genom ett nostalgiskt tema som vill "förstärka 50-talskänslan" – något som genomsyrar såväl projektets fysiska ingrepp som dess retorik. Analysen av skyltprogrammet – ett dokument som fungerar som designanslag och -manual – visar att detta dokument fungerar som en diskursiv artefakt där professionella föreställningar om urban estetik kodifieras. Skyltprogrammet "sätter platsen på kartan" genom att formulera riktlinjer för hur Hökarängens offentliga rum ska utformas: exempelvis uppmuntras retroinspirerad butiksfasadskyltning som anspelar på 1950-talets formspråk. Denna iscensättning av en 50-talsatmosfär positionerar Hökarängen som en autentisk och trivsamt plats, med underförstådda kopplingar till innerstadens idealiserade kvarterskänsla.

I skyltprogrammets retorik identifieras ett genomgående binärt tema där öppenhet kontrasteras mot slutenhet ("transparens" vs. "opacitet"). Här framställs öppenhet – i form av exempelvis inglasade butiksgallerier, synliga verksamheter och välkomnande miljöer – som ett moraliskt gott ideal. Denna betoning läses kritiskt i avhandlingen mot bakgrund av klass och rasifiering: begreppet öppenhet kopplas till medelklassideal och en "vit" svensk gemenskap, medan det underförstått kontrasteras mot slutna eller otrygga miljöer som ofta tillskrivs stigmatiserade förorter. Nostalgimotivet tolkas i linje med Svetlana Boyms begrepp "återställande nostalgi" – en form av nostalgi som vill återskapa ett idealiserat förflutet. Det nostalgiska temat anspelar på autenticitet och hämtar inspiration från det förflutna för att göra vissa egenskaper hos platsen dominerande. Som sådant verkar det för att förankra förorten i välfärdsstatens folkhemsprojekt och en föreställning om autentisk svenskhet – samtidigt som man undviker tydligt nationalistiska inriktningar och istället förstås som progressiv. Därigenom differentieras området symboliskt från "andra", lägre värderade förorter (som byggdes senare, under miljonprogrammet, och ofta framställs som problematiska).

Sammanfattningsvis visar kapitel 4 ("How to Put a Place on the Map") hur platsvarumärket Hökarängen byggs upp genom design: att anspela på historiska formspråk och nostalgiska narrativ blir ett sätt att ge området en utmärkande identitet och höja dess status. Men det är en identitet som bär på underförstådda exkluderingar – genom att definiera vad som är "äkta" och "önskvärt" skapas samtidigt en gräns mot det som

anses avvika från denna norm.

Kapitel 5 ("Not Like Other Suburbs") lämnar idéplanet och går vidare till den praktiska implementeringen av ovan nämnda strategier. I intervjuer med fastighetsaktörer och lokala föreningsföreträdare synliggörs hur koncepten från skyltprogrammet och projektplanerna översatts till konkret handling i de berörda förorterna. Informanterna beskriver en medveten strävan efter att profilera Hökarängen, Bagarmossen och Bandhagen som unika och framåtsträvande förorter – i kontrast till angränsande områden. Här blir distinktionen explicit: de studerade förorterna framhålls som varandes särpräglade, autentiska och till och med progressiva miljöer – och "inte som andra förorter".

I en stadsförnyelsekontext kan det nostalgiska konceptet läsas som en form av "inre gränsdragning" (Anzaldúa, 1991; Balibar, 2002; Nail, 2016), baserade på nationalistiska och rasifierande idéer om ursprung och tillhörighet. Förstärkningen av "50-talskänslan" sker inte primärt genom planering, arkitektur och rumsliga kvaliteter, utan snarare genom atmosfäriska kvaliteter, aktiviteter och estetik som uppfattas och upplevs av vissa kroppar, och som är baserade på en fantasi om svunna tider. I detta avseende kan de affektiva kategorierna "trivsel", "levande" och "trendig" läsas som en form av det Gitte du Plessis (2015) och Slavoj Žižek (1993) kallar "nationell sak" ("National Thing") – en känsla av njutning som reproducerar sin egen tro på sig själv och utesluter andra former av njutning.

Genom hela intervjumaterialet konstrueras de studerade fallen i motsats till angränsande förorter längs binära linjer som tillskriver de studerade förorterna progressiva, atmosfäriska och sensoriska kvaliteter. Denna skildring är konstruerad i motsats till en antites – idén att vissa områden har förlorat sin trivsel till följd av kommersialisering, storskalighet, privata aktörer och "moderna" attribut. Underförstått finns här också en rasifierande dimension. "50-talskänslan" fungerar som ett argument för att de studerade fallen kan särskiljas från sina grannar – de är helt enkelt inte som andra förorter; de är något särskilt, unikt, mer autentiskt och njutbart.

I intervjumaterialet identifieras flera praktiker av distinktionsskapande. En är aktiv handplockning av hyresgäster till centrumens butikslokaler, där fastighetsägare favoriserade verksamheter (som kaféer och butiker) som passade in i den önskade 50-talsdoftande och småskaliga atmosfären. Samtidigt gavs stöd åt befintliga näringsidkare att anpassa sig till den estetiska profilen. En annan strategi var "design genom radering", vilket innebar att element som bröt mot den idylliska

bilden plockades bort. Detta illustrerar en selektiv nostalgi som lyfter fram vissa minnen och föreställningar (1950-talets formspråk) medan andra aspekter av platsens historia och samtid förträngs.

För att teoretiskt förstå den upplevelse som skapas i Hökarängen, Bagarmossen och Bandhagen, introducerar avhandlingen begreppet *kronostalgi*, inspirerat av romanförfattaren Georgi Gospodinov. Detta begrepp sammanför *chronos* (tid) med nostalgi och avser en längtan till och besatthet av att återskapa gångna tidsperioder. När boende och besökare kliver in i dessa nostalgiskt designade miljöer erbjuds de en slags temporär fristad i det förflutna – ett rum för njutning som svensk, där man kan känna samhörighet genom gemensamma referenser till en svunnen folkhemstid. Denna atmosfäriska kronostalgi fungerar sammanhållande för dem som inkluderas, men förstärker också gränsen mot dem som uppfattas stå utanför den nationella gemenskapen.

Intervjuerna avslöjar att distinktionstänkandet genomsyrar diskursen: Hökarängen och de andra fallen beskrivs konsekvent i binära termer gentemot ”andra” förorter. De egna områdena framhålls ha en särskild stämning, trygghet och kreativ anda – ofta kodord för medelklassig attraktionskraft – något som grannförorterna anses sakna. Till exempel uppfattas de studerade förorterna som ”progressiva och välkomnande” tack vare sin trivsamhet, underförstått i motsats till närliggande områden som beskrivs som mindre intressanta. Genomgående används ”50-talskänslan” som ett paraplybegrepp under vilket dessa förorter kan marknadsföras som unika, genuina och mer njutbara än andra stereotypa förorter.

I avhandlingens slutdiskussion (kapitel 6, ”Towards a Conclusion”) betonas ett antal huvudpoänger, där den viktigaste är att nostalgi – som ett resultat av sin splittrande natur och partiskhet mot nationen (Boym, 2001) – skapar *åtskillnad* (Bourdieu, 1984) när den används i stadsförnyelseprocesser. Detta innebär att nostalgiska narrativ och ideal bidrar till värdehierarkisering mellan platser, i det studerade fallet mellan förorter i södra Stockholm.

En central mekanism i den åtskillnadsskapande nostalgien är tillskrivandet av affektiva kvaliteter till platsen, såsom trivsel och trendighet, och uppfattningen av sådana egenskaper som välvilliga och obestriddliga. Denna mekanism teoretiseras här genom begreppet ”nationell sak” – en idé om njutning nära kopplad till en föreställd gemenskap, och därmed bidrar till att skapa ”inre gränsdragningar” (Anzaldúa, 1991; Balibar, 2002; Nail, 2016) som bygger på nationalistiska och rasifier-

ande idéer om ursprung och tillhörighet. Det som möjliggör ”den nationella saken” i detta fall är en övergripande dominerande integrationism som utgår från en ”helhetskultur” (Teshahuney & Grip, 2007) och en vilja att utjämna skillnader till majoritetskulturens likformighet, vilket går hand i hand med uppfattningen om det offentliga rummet som ett friktionsfritt ”vardagsrum” (Thörn, 2011; Gabrielsson, 2006) – i motsats till idén om det offentliga rummet som en plats för skillnad, konflikter och förhandlingar, utan imperativ om trivsel och konsensus.

En annan central mekanism är förståelsen av platsen som ”progressiv”, vilket har en komparativ kvalitet och föreslår konkurrens mellan platser, där vissa förstås som ”i framkant” och andra som mindre intressanta. Avhandlingen argumenterar för att den på ytan ”progressiva” glans som ofta tillskrivs folkhemsnostalgin bör förstås i ljuset av nordisk exceptionalism och kolonial glömska – där Sverige undviker att konfrontera sitt koloniala arv eller erkänna den roll som immigration spelat för välfärdsstatens historia för att kunna behålla sin självbild som en tolerant och idyllisk nation. Föreställningen om progressivitet sammanfaller också med föreställningar om den modernistiska förortens binära spänningsfält mellan drömmardröm och utopi–misslyckande, där den tidigmodernistiska eller ”vita” förorten står för det förra och den senmodernistiska eller rasifierade för det senare.

Dessa mekanismer för distinktionsskapande nostalgi bör förstås som en påminnelse om bristen på progressiv potential i vad Boym definierar som ”återställande nostalgi”. Föremålen för nostalgins romantiska skimmer måste läsas mot dess antites, det som förblir en ”omöjlig nostalgi” (Mack, 2021), vilket gör sig påmint i ljuset av den rivningspolitik som är på tapeten, där bostadsområden byggda på 1960- och 70-talen stigmatiseras och aggressiva åtgärder som rivning föreslagits som lösning på sociala problem, med inspiration från Danmark.

Avhandlingen erbjuder en närläsning av en typ av nostalgi och dess specifika kontext, men vill påminna om att nostalgier – med betoning på pluralformen – kan se ut på många olika sätt. Nostalgiker förstår sig inte nödvändigtvis som politiska subjekt, och nostalgier förstås inte nödvändigtvis som politiska – tvärtom är de ofta inbäddade i och aktiveras genom det mest vardagliga och förgivettagna, varför just de senare förtjänar noggrann uppmärksamhet. 2010-talets 50-talsnostalgi har redan börjat avta eller normaliseras till bakgrundsbrus. Samtidigt har det offentliga samtalet i dag (2020-talets mitt) fyllts av andra former av

nostalgiska rop på återgång till ”svenska värderingar” i politik och kultur. Detta understryker att nostalgi och åtskillnad/distinktion är föränderligt över tid och att deras uttryck skiftar beroende på samhällsklimat.

En annan av avhandlingens huvudpoänger är av metodologisk karaktär, som också har bäring på de onto-epistemologiska perspektiven i studien, nämligen frågan om positionalitet. Ett centralt begrepp i studien är den *professionella blicken* (Goodwin, 1994) som aktualiserar det institutionellas roll för den legitimitet som förlänas ett visst perspektiv eller en viss röst. Detta belyser tyngden i det skyltprogram som analyseras i kapitel 4 – ett dokument framtaget av professionella utövare och som tydligt manifesterar deras blick, samt det perspektiv som de flesta intervjupersonerna talar från, nämligen fastighetssidans. Forskningen utförs utifrån en gräv-där-du-står-ansats (Lindqvist, 2023 [1978]) och i en dubbel roll i skärningspunkten mellan mångårig lokalinvånare och professionellt utövande formgivare. Därigenom används den professionella blicken som grafisk formgivare på minst två sätt: genom den utforskas hur design används i stadsomvandlingsprocesser och hur den kan praktiseras i reparativa konstnärliga initiativ.

Ett av avhandlingens bidrag är den metodologiska innovation som utgörs av det paranoid-reparativa ramverket. Genom att integrera konstnärliga interventioner med traditionell diskursanalys utvecklar avhandlingen en metod där kritisk analys och praktiskt engagerad design går hand i hand. Detta ramverk – möjliggjord av författarens redan nämnda dubbla roll som invånare och formgivare – demonstrerar ett sätt att bedriva forskning inifrån platsen snarare än utifrån. Metodologin utvecklar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's teoretiska resonemang genom att visa hur ett dialektiskt förhållningssätt (paranoia och reparation) kan operationaliseras. Resultatet är en situerad forskningspraktik som både granskar och bidrar till förändring i det undersökta lokalsamhället.

Sammanfattningsvis erbjuder avhandlingen en detaljerad studie av hur 1950-talsnostalgin används i tre Stockholmsförorter, och visar hur nostalgi blir till ett åtskillnadsverktyg för att höja vissa platser – med bieffekten att andra nedvärderas. Den påvisar att även ”trivsamma” och vardagliga stadsrum bär på ideologiska laddningar.

Avhandlingens övergripande mål har varit att svara på ett estetiskt-politiskt landskap där nostalgi ofta tas för givet som något positivt. Genom att synliggöra de ”osynliga händer” (aktörer, värden och förgätna historier) som formar våra vardagsmiljöer, uppmanar studien till ökad medvetenhet och ansvarstagande. I linje med Svetlana

Boyms varning om att "obearbetad nostalgi föder monster" blottlägger studien nostalgins förbisedda exkluderingsmekanismer och inre gränsdragningar. Samtidigt ekar bell hooks uppmaning om "kamp för minnet och mot glömskan" som manar till kollektivt minnesarbete och vaksamhet kring synlig- och osynliggörande. Avhandlingen uppmuntrar därmed verksamma inom akademi, designpraktiker, stadsbyggnad och planering att ifrågasätta och omförhandla de föreställningar och narrativ som omgärdar staden, dess offentliga rum, och föreställda gemenskaper i strävan efter mer rättvisa och mindre homogeniserande miljöer för framtiden.



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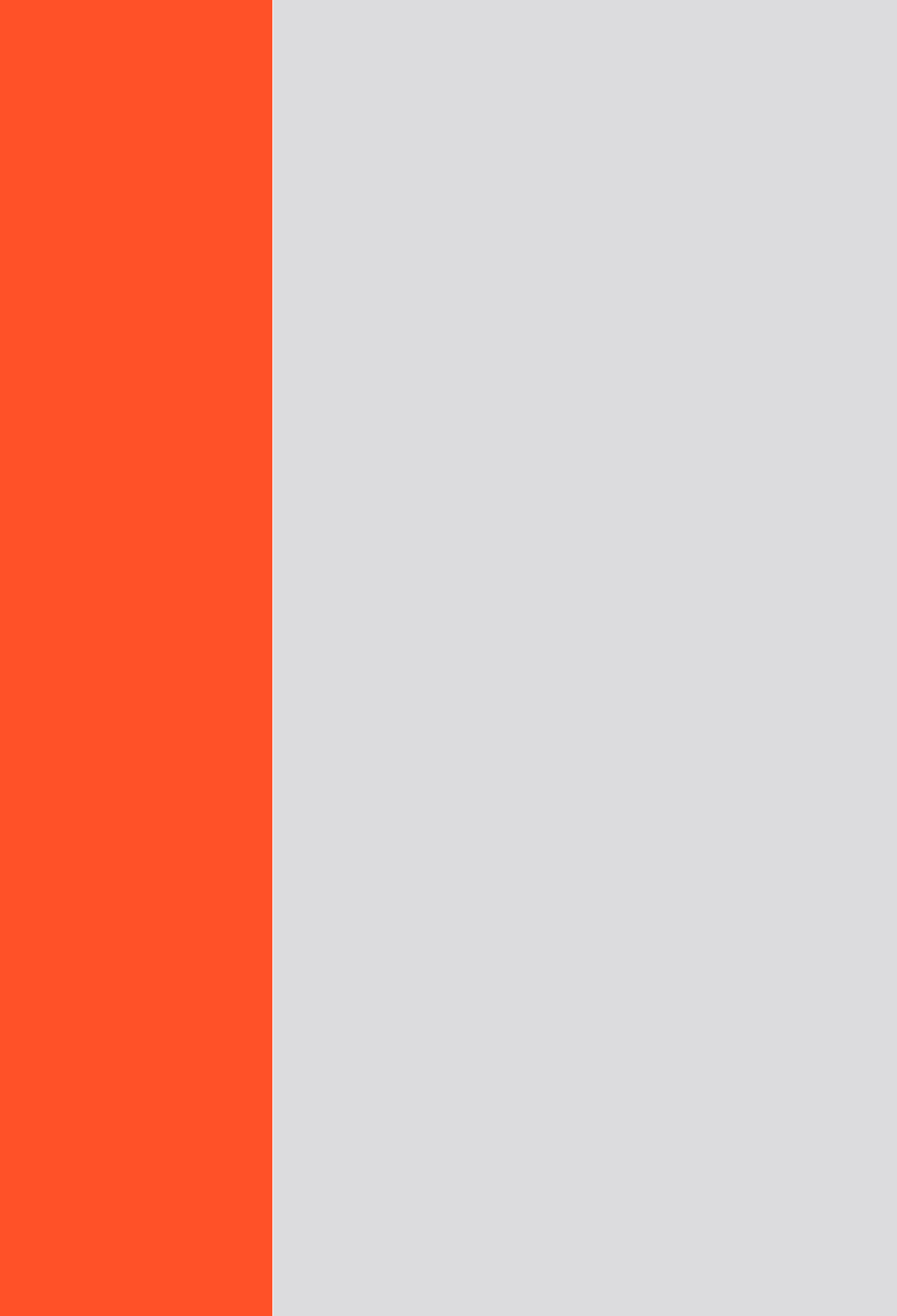
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