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Participatory landscape planning in the welfare state: an action research process with young people from low-income urban areas

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Sustainability, welfare and landscapes of complexity

The urban landscape has the potential to play a significant role in the transformation to future sustainability and welfare of today's crisis-ridden societies. Especially in the affluent parts of the world such as the Northern European welfare states, state representatives claim to aspire to welfare and sustainability (Nordic Council of Ministers 2019). The urban landscape in a welfare state holds promises to cater to its citizens' wellbeing, the recreational, social, cultural, and economic goals they might wish to pursue. Simultaneously, welfare states are arguably under strain to live up to their names, as many citizens experience a hollowing out of key functions and deepening inequalities.

The urban landscape is also a site of new contestations to balance ecological pressures with (also) economic, social, and cultural needs. While steeped in complexity, multitudes of actors and interests, urban planning becomes an important lens for negotiating what future sustainable landscapes look like, and how they are to contribute to the welfare, especially of the most marginalized citizens. The task calls for what Sennett (2018 p. 302) has noted as 'a certain kind of modesty' for urban planners: "living as one among many, engaged by a world which does not mirror oneself". This task holds both a potential and a challenge in cities with wide cultural diversity, and deep patterns of segregation.

The Project and its questions

In the young, diverse, and fast-growing city of Malmö, in southern Sweden, an action research project is taking place where researchers have engaged with local young people to build alternative visions of the future urban landscape. The aim is to build visions that enrich and challenge those which currently materialize in policies, planning documents, and practices of landscape- and welfare professionals.

The young people participating in the research project live in low-income areas (or 'vulnerable areas' in the municipality's sense), and are likely to be familiar with the effects of socio-economic inequality, as well as territorial stigma (Wacquant 2008). They have agreed to engage in a participatory experiment conducted on their terms, to offer their insights and help to investigate new potentials and possible relations between citizens, scientists, and landscape- and welfare professionals.

The goal is explorative: how can youth from low-income areas participate in shaping a future sustainable urban landscape in a welfare state in crisis? What perspectives, interests and priorities related to landscape and welfare need to be minded? How do they relate to each other? And what problems and potentials arise for new collaborations? We try to bridge the different experiences, knowledge and perceptions related to the urban landscape and welfare practices to find collective definitions of key aspects, as well as potential answers to some of the challenges that arise.

Critical Utopian Action Research

Inspired by a strain of action research developed especially within the Scandinavian countries (Nielsen & Nielsen 2016), we work within a critical-utopian framework, centred around a series of future-creation workshops with the young people. While the researchers provide the initial title, facilitation, and a few democratically oriented procedural rules, the youth substantially decide the direction and content of the project-work.

The frame consists of three main phases (rarely progressing in a linear way): critique, utopia, and realization. In the first two phases, the researchers gather keywords on collective note-taking papers, arrange voting-sessions for key priorities, and facilitate aesthetic exercises to explore key topics. In the realization part, the participants and supporting researchers take experimental actions, initiatives, and interventions to find out if the social reality can come closer to the utopian visions they have decided on.

The researchers ensure the democratic ground rules and that everyone is heard throughout the phases. Meanwhile, the main analytical approach is for the researchers to distinguish openings and closures encountered for the participants, as they take on new actions and responsibilities related to their experienced welfare (or lack of it) in the urban landscape.

Theoretical points of departure

While the frame of critical utopian action research initially inspired the research project, the study has progressed finding relevant theoretical insights in related fields, especially de-colonial theory, to unfold both internal challenges and apparent absences and invisibilities in the engagement process.

Action research and situated social learning

The future-creation workshops in action research (Nielsen and Nielsen 2016, Tofteng & Bladt 2020) aims to both create an analytical and embodied critique, and a utopian vision for the future. It consists of a collective process to analyse the structuring factors of a participant-groups' everyday lives, to critically investigate the 'lifeworld' in a phenomenological sense (Mortensen 2013). The

participants are then encouraged to develop sketches of a future-in-the-making, and to take concrete steps to work the current social reality in better alignment with these, inserting the specific topic in a larger discussion of ‘how do we want to live?’ (Nielsen and Nielsen 2016).

This goes somewhat beyond conventional approaches to youth participation, which has met severe limitations especially in engaging with marginalized groups of young people, as Bladt and Percy-Smith (2021) describes. The conventional approaches remain accountable to institutional- or policy goals, and falls short in addressing the social problems participants often experience. Rooting participatory approaches in participants’ everyday life serves to centre young people as agents of change and opens further possibilities for non-hierarchical collaboration between citizens and institutional actors (ibid).

According to Bladt and Percy-Smith (ibid. p. 282), young peoples’ participation in everyday, informal arenas can create a ‘situated social learning’ that makes the process “more meaningful for young people and more effective in terms of initiating transformation in their lives.”. This last point is of specific importance when dealing with marginalized groups, whose participation in further societal processes is likely to hinge on certain immediate gains.

De-colonial perspectives in the global north

From the perspective of alternative theoretical and analytical approaches such as de-colonial theory (Mignolo 2007, Grosfoguel 2007) and epistemologies of the south (Santos 2009), participatory action research projects entail ways of democratizing not only the city and the physical planning of it but paths towards the democratization of knowledge beyond our understanding of it.

Accordingly, youth participatory action research (YPAR) in this sense is more an epistemology than a methodology, since it breaks with the subject-object research binomial to give space to a subject-subject study. (Alatorre Frenk & Merçon et.al. 2014; Bladt & Percy-Smith, 2021). This aligns also with ethical-theoretical stance built into critical-utopian action research, with Skjervheims notions of a non-reifying engagement practice (1971) to avoid turning research participants into passive populations, or as Negt calls it ‘managed people’ who are incrementally losing autonomy, living in modern state structures.

These points do not imply ignoring factual elements of power in research, but rather a modification and distancing from the so-called extractivist methodologies (Miguez 2021) that perpetuate the hierarchical and traditional way of legitimizing and producing knowledge. From these vantage points, the research has been designed to systematically nurture openings for alternative ways of knowing and understanding the urban landscape.

Workshops: whittling towards a common understanding

For over a year an interdisciplinary research team has invited for bi-weekly future-creation workshops, hand in hand with a group of 38 young people in total (though with very varying numbers throughout the year) aged 12-20. The researchers documented the initial brainstorming about the most pressing issues that young people identify in the country (Sweden), their city (Malmö) and in their specific neighbourhoods (Sofielund and Hermodsdal).

The project began with a title workshop and inspiration-excursion to a place where local citizens get a space to freely create and actively engage in the making of the place itself: Pixlapiren in Helsingborg. In addition to being a fun activity, this turned out to be a necessary starting point for the participants and researchers to get familiar with terms used in relation to the urban elements that we actually looked at. Researchers used a number of terms that the young people did not recognize and engaging with the experimental urban space enabled us to get more clarity on our different ways of referring to the urban landscape.

What the researchers in so many words understood as 'landscape', the youth themselves referred to, and elaborated on, as 'urban environment' (*Stadsmiljö*). This became a good gathering phrase for the important aspects the participants pinpointed in their everyday lives, and the for example societal aspects that researchers brought up. The researchers helped facilitate a collective brainstorming and analysis where the participants identified the most significant elements structuring their experience of the urban environment, and reached an agreement on the main problems they wanted to address. The two themes identified and elected as most important priorities by the participants are: (1) feeling judged and lacking freedom to be who you are, and (2) uneven standard of joyful urban environments across the city (or 'nöjessegregation' as the youth themselves have coined it).

Action - starting from the lifeworld

In the later stages of the thematic workshops, the participants further developed suggestions on how to engage in a transformative practice and realize their ideas for a different urban environment. A smaller group of participants (N: 16) developed concrete proposals, and elected to pursue further actions to create a sustainable future, by firstly working towards equality in the urban landscape.

The realization stage takes the shape of three specific projects in progress:

1. Open recreation yard

Among the young people's utopias was to have 'an open recreation yard you cannot be kicked out from.' This idea was a seed to the project of starting a recreation yard where one could be one self; everyone is treated respectfully and decides over his or her own life. Adults should have the role of supervisors, not leaders who pretend to know exactly what young people need.

The rules at this new place would be respect, good and equal treatment to everyone regardless of their identity. The place should also be protected from negative influences instilling criminal behaviour, violence and bullying.

This group has moved on to creating a test-event for their own neighbourhood youth, experimenting with assuming roles of the welfare-professionals they wish for, and the practical circumstances of taking a new initiative. The next steps involve meetings with municipal and other local actors to explore pathways ahead.

2. Triathlon

Addressing an uneven standard of joyful urban environments across the city or 'nöjessegregation' is the goal of this project.

This group of youth identifies differentiated living standards and disparities across the urban landscape that have an impact on young people's access to entertainment alternatives. Their goal is to give more people the opportunity to try something new. As a means to provide this possibility, the group is planning an activity-day including a mix of three different sports: table tennis, Go-Kart and Bowling. People aged 16-20 who grew up in low-income areas are the target since they are likely not to have the financial capacity to access the activities planned. From the group's perspective, this initiative helps society by increasing leisure in marginalized areas of Malmö and facilitating the integration process of young people who live there.

3. Youth jobs and health care

Young people working within this project are mainly concerned about economic segregation in the urban landscape. The idea is to reduce segregation connected to the uneven distribution of tax money and acknowledge the geography of economic segregation itself (framed as existing lower income depending on where in the city one lives). This project aims to 1) convince the municipality to give all young people the opportunity to enter working-life by creating and offering more job opportunities and 2) give the opportunity to young people aged 15-20 to practice physical activities without being limited by their financial capacity.

A "wellness grant" (*friskvårdsbidrag*) shall be awarded to young people in Malmö. By doing so, other issues such as criminality could be addressed indirectly since young people would have access to a safe environment off the streets.

Searching for engagement between plural pursuits

Already at this stage, it is clear that the youth's own analyses point in different directions than the now-overarching 'sustainable planning' of local and national authorities, which often focus on creating economic value and developing technical landscape-solutions to urban challenges. The participants' own analysis of their livelihoods in the urban landscape reveals some of the felt effects of

structural inequality and shows how a lack of joy and consistently facing prejudgements based on cultural and ethnic background structures their experience of living in the city.

A participatory approach that works on the young people's own terms and is meaningful to them thus shows a clear order of priority: **we need to find ways of addressing inequality and its felt effects in new practices and approaches to sustainable transformations of the urban environments.** The clarity of these young people's analysis sets some of the crucial welfare practices front and centre in future planning; for equality of leisure, recreation, and a sustainable entry to working life. This prioritization beckons a dialogue with the sustainable planning professions, if this is to make sense to key groups of citizens, such as young people from low-income areas, and to uphold its promises of social sustainability.

Our work continues, and we hope in a series of research workshops with the young people, landscape-, planning- and welfare professionals to explore challenges and possibilities.

Can a setting where the youth's lifeworld context comes front and centre help to generate that necessary *modesty* in the planning- and welfare professional practice (Sennet 2018)? Can the youth keep on nurturing an increased autonomous voice and active responsibility for their common affairs in the urban environment? Can their spatial, recreational, and socio-economic equality-pursuits be integrated in a wider sustainable planning horizon?

Arising from this project, these are guiding questions for envisioning future cities' sustainable welfare landscapes.

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