



# Sustainability potential of a redevelopment initiative in Swedish public housing: The ambiguous role of residents' participation and place identity



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## ABSTRACT

During 1965–1974 one million dwellings were built in Sweden, most of these financed by state housing loans and available for renting. Although most of these 850,000 apartments are considered decently maintained about 300,000 are considered in need of thorough refurbishment. This is a great opportunity for technological innovations, contributing to energy saving and climate mitigation on a broad scale. However, many of these estates have also been associated with spatial segregation, social exclusion and related challenges. The empirical focus of this article is on an attempt by a municipal housing company to approach the residents of a multi-family housing estate with a redevelopment scheme expressing a will to combine social, ecological and economic qualities under the brand “My Green Neighbourhood”. Drawing upon data describing the initial phase and the dialogue activities undertaken during the planning phase, and the residents' reactions the study is conceptually framed by an eclectic approach inspired by the spatial triad of Lefebvre, Relph's notion of place identity, and Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation, including references to some related, recent works. Considering a common picture of municipal, multi-family housing in Sweden as a “success story” the case study is of relevance in the wider context of coping with the challenges of sustainable urban development. It is concluded that projects like this have a potential to decrease energy consumption substantially, as well as contributing to long-term financially sound management by housing companies. However, when it comes to social aspects of sustainability the picture becomes more complicated. First, most sitting tenants would have preferred a change in terms of proper maintenance and modest improvements. Second, most of them will not return to their apartments after rehabilitation, partly due to rising rents. Third, the position of the tenants was not very strong, instead planning rather had a tokenist bias. Fourth, the local government's social mix strategy has to be questioned on theoretical as well as empirical grounds. Despite these and other critical observations, My Green Neighbourhood should not be disregarded as just one more in a never-ending parade of low impact ad hoc projects. Up-scaling the experience of this and similar running projects would represent a substantial contribution to urban sustainable development, at least in terms of energy saving. Finally, to understand the complexities of a redevelopment planning process it is concluded that decisionmakers have to be very observant of the different time perspectives linked to the structural positions and interests of the various stakeholders, for example a building company's desire to make short time profits through major reconstruction, sitting tenants' demand for sustainable maintenance and cautious refurbishment, local politicians' wish to create another social mix in the area, and a public housing company's attempt to reconcile the views of different actors.

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## 1. Introduction

Lefebvre's challenge to researchers to uncover the production of space is amenable to the in-depth analysis inherent in the case-

study approach [...] Practitioners should perhaps reflect that their representations of space may well be crucial components in making places 30 or 40 years from now. (Leary, 2009, p. 208)

The potential and willingness of individuals and households to change their attitudes and behaviour towards sustainable consumption and lifestyles are issues increasingly raised in policy and research, as illustrated by concepts like “ecological citizen”,

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“political consumer” and “moral agent” (Gustavsson & Elander, 2013a; Hobson, 2013; Spaargaren & Oosterveer, 2010). However, green values and attitudes, and a willingness to change one’s consumption behaviour, do not come out of nothing. Therefore a long-term change in behaviour requires substantial support from public and private institutions that are open for dialogue. This brings attention to the role of global, national and local authorities in environmental governance.

Considering the complexity of sustainable development in all its aspects there is not, and could not be, one ultimate governance fix for tackling the challenges of climate change and other environmental threats. What we have, and must live with, is a patchwork of partly overlapping assemblies, located at different levels and sectors, and thus representing different spheres of authority. Government institutions establish links to the parallel structures of informal, voluntary associations such as social movements and environmental associations, as well as individuals, households and for-profit companies (Betsill & Bulkeley, 2006; Hooghe & Marks, 2003; Lidskog & Elander, 2012; Ostrom, 2010). Although participation and deliberation within the framework of representative institutions could be supportive in the struggle for a low carbon dependent, sustainable society, these mechanisms may also be, and are, indeed, being used for counterstrategies, boosting economic growth and an ever-increasing excessive consumption in the Global North. Nevertheless, and disregarding a backlash of the post-Rio hype for global climate change mitigation and adaptation,<sup>1</sup> there is no lack of local initiatives in favour of creating low carbon, sustainable neighbourhoods and cities, as signposted by terms like eco-cities, low-carbon cities, sustainable cities, zero carbon cities, green cities, etc. (Joss, Cowley, & Tomozeiu, 2013). Widening the perspective to sustainable development in a broader sense the picture shows that “hundreds of urban sustainability ‘projects’ have been initiated across the world” (Turcu, 2012), even that probably an underestimation.

The empirical focus of this paper is an attempt by a municipal housing company in a Swedish city to approach the residents in one part of a multi-family housing district with a redevelopment scheme expressing a will to combine social, environmental and economic qualities under the brand “My Green Neighbourhood”. Considering the area’s socially vulnerable, multi-ethnic and stigmatized character, the company wants to increase residents’ participation, and identification with the area, and at the same time change their behaviour in a climate friendly direction by constructing energy saving and other ecologically motivated measures. In addition the initiative is also intended to be crucial for the company’s business strategy to offer high quality, affordable rental dwellings to future residents. Marrying these social, ecological and economic ambitions in one and the same redevelopment scheme is a formidable challenge raising intriguing questions for policy and research. Notably, similar initiatives have been taken also by a number of other municipal housing companies in Sweden, although not yet studied in depth (Delegation for Sustainable Cities, 2013; Gustavsson & Elander, 2014). Although particular focus is laid upon aspects of participation and formation of identities in the neighbourhood our intention is to locate the analysis in the broader context of three-dimensional sustainability.

### 1.1. Contributions of the study

Aside from the case-study in itself and its potential value as a basis for future redevelopment of the estate, what are the more

general contributions of this article? Arguably, there are at least four such contributions. First, the topic as such relates to the global political challenge of responding to and mitigating the consequences of climate change. Post-war, multifamily housing estates of the kind in focus are commonplace in most European countries, they were built at a time when CO<sub>2</sub> reduction was not an issue, and with technologies not adapted to this aim. Considering the volume of renovations needed in this massive housing stock eco-technological investments have a huge low carbon potential. Even detailed analyses of rather small pilot projects with this orientation may thus contribute to learning processes locally, nationally as well as across national borders. For example, the public housing company ÖrebroBostäder is one of 31 members in the European Housing Network (EURHONET), including social housing companies in England, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden and The Netherlands. In total the network comprises about 1 million tenants, 700,000 dwellings and 6000 employees. The current Vice President of the network is an Assistant Manager [direktör för affärsutveckling] of ÖrebroBostäder (EURHONET, 2014).

Second, although climate mitigation is one crucial indicator of ecological sustainability, the wider scope of this discourse also include social and economic components as commonly illustrated by three overlapping dimensions of sustainability. Thus, it has become commonplace to raise these dimensions as a visionary reference when housing companies, local governments and related actors proclaim retrofit projects (see for example the 98 projects subsidized by the Delegation for Sustainable Cities in Sweden; Delegation for Sustainable Cities, 2013). My Green Neighbourhood is an illustrative example of how this triple challenge is tackled in policy and planning.

Third, and closely related to the previous points, the international reputation of Swedish housing policy in general, including the Million Homes Programme (1965–1974) as a “success story” (see Section 4 for references) makes the Swedish experience of particular interest. Public housing companies are organized in the Swedish Association of Public Housing Companies (SABO) with approximately 300 member companies managing some 725,000 dwellings all together. This housing sector represents almost 20 percent of the total housing stock in Sweden and half of the rental sector. Every seventh Swede lives in public housing (SABO, 2014). The city in focus (Örebro) has a long standing reputation as a showcase of post-war multi-family housing (Egerö, 1979; Elander, 1991; Strömberg, 1984). Expectations may thus be raised on My Green Neighbourhood as a forerunner from which other cities and housing companies may learn.

Fourth, in terms of theory the approach is an eclectic blend of elements borrowed from Lefebvre’s triad of space, Relph’s place identity framework, and Arnstein’s application of participatory democracy to planning. Inspired by these frameworks we construct an analytical tool designed to describe and interpret the multidimensional challenge of sustainable neighbourhood development. This kind of approach is not unique in case studies on processes in urban settings, where, for example Lefebvre’s triad is often referred to as a conceptual point of departure, and as an interpretative framework (see for example de Haardt, 2010; Dunn, 2012; Kipfer, Saberi, & Wieditz, 2012; Leary, 2009; Teelucksingh & Masuda, 2014; Watkins, 2005). Without referring to Lefebvre, Davison, Dovey, and Woodcock (2012) lean on Relph’s rather similar framework in their analysis of place identity in East London. Although our ambition is *not* to make theoretical elaborations of these three strands of theory per se, but rather to use a combination of them for analysis and interpretation of our observations, in the concluding discussion we highlight time as one crucial dimension when it comes to understanding retrofit planning and implementation of multifamily housing. This has not been a very common theme in the context of Lefebvre’s spatial

<sup>1</sup> Well illustrated by the dismal reactions post COP 15: “Hopenhagen” became “Flophenagen” as bluntly formulated by one critic cited in Blühdorn (2011, p. 36).

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