



The nature of running: On embedded landscape ideals in leisure planning



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the importance of urban and peri-urban forests for development and planning for fitness running in Sweden in the 1960s–early 1980s. By doing so, it questions the conception of running as being independent of specific places and as an activity which does not interact with the landscape. The paper first describes the early development of fitness running in Sweden, which was facilitated by the establishment of illuminated tracks, locker rooms, parking spaces, etc., in forests and parks, investments which still affect where and how running is performed. The location of these facilities can be taken to reveal the importance of certain landscape ideals within planning, in particular the idea of the forest as the *natural* place to run. The case study of leisure planning in the city of Malmö (1960s–1980s) is then used to illustrate the materialization of the national forest ideal and the establishment of infrastructure for running. The paper concludes with a discussion on the forest ideal and argues the need to challenge an embedded division between nature and culture in future planning for recreational running.

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1. Introduction

“... we need some form of escape, and running can provide it both by physically removing us from that serious world and more importantly by mentally removing us from it. ... Leaving behind the briefcase, cell phone, and car keys, we detach ourselves from the ‘real world’ and enter a special space and time.” (Reid, 2007; p. 118).

Running has been marketed in the popular press since the 1960s as an individual fitness sport requiring no equipment but a pair of shoes (Latham, 2015). The argument that one can jog almost anywhere is a cornerstone of the movement and its ideology (see Bowerman and Harris, 1967; Fixx, 1977; Sheehan, 1978/2013; Bean, 2006/2009). Another key argument frequently put forward is that running is “in our nature”, so if only we step out of our habits and leave the decadent technologies of modern life behind, there is a possibility of the healthy bodily experience of what we were born to do (Bean, 2006/2009; Gotaas, 2009; McDougall, 2010; Åstrand et al., 2011; Whalley, 2012; see Plymire, 2006 and Bajić, 2014 for a discussion). Contemporary popular writings on running add to the image of a single person (typically a man) experiencing/exploring his own body (or “true nature”) while running and providing accounts of the landscape in scenic or tactile terms. In

these stories the landscape is climbed or struggled through, but *never altered*: the interaction is never more than ephemeral (Austin, 2007; Murakami, 2008; McDougall, 2010; Sörlin, 2011; Lorimer, 2012; Whalley, 2012). Consequently, in the bestseller *Born to Run* by McDougall (2010), the members of the Mexican Tarahumara tribe are singled out as the ultimate runners; not only do they live in a remote and almost inaccessible valley, but we are told repeatedly that their trails are barely visible. Thus, according to these popular stories of the runner, the ideal runner has left the realm of modern society and entered nature – yet leaves no traces and plays no part in the making of nature, but is merely a tourist who will soon make their way back to the car and modern society (Plymire, 2006; see also Ryan, 2002 on the “no impact” ideal in sports).

The story of the ideal runner who leaves no traces on the land epitomizes the modern idea of nature, according to which nature is clearly set apart from culture and yet a source from which inspiration, recreation and natural resources can be retrieved (Cronon, 1995; Whatmore, 2002). As William Cronon illustrates in his seminal critique of the modern framing of nature and wilderness, such a divide is highly problematic:

“Only people whose relation to the land was already alienated could hold up wilderness as a model for human life in nature, for the romantic ideology of wilderness leaves precisely nowhere for human beings actually to make their living from the land. ... We thereby leave ourselves little hope of discovering what ethi-

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cal, sustainable, *honorable* human place in nature might actually look like.” (Cronon, 1995, pp. 80–81, original italics).

As Cronon also illustrated, historical studies can facilitate reinterpretation of the relationship between nature and culture. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to critique the idea of the independent runner by revealing embedded nature and landscape ideals in leisure planning for running in Sweden. The importance of the urban forest (as a substitute for nature) is particularly highlighted.

Leaving aside its ideological impedimenta, the importance of fitness exercise in our contemporary sedentary society has been argued for more than half a century (Bolling, 2005; Yttergren, 2012). Regular fitness running prevents stress and other lifestyle diseases (Schnohr et al., 2005; Chakravarty et al., 2008; Gerber and Pühse, 2009). No less important, it is a popular everyday activity and therefore requires a certain degree of attention from the fields of geography and planning. A questionnaire-based survey of 1792 Swedish inhabitants concerning their recreational activities showed running (defined as jogging or trail running) to be second on the list of activities that people would like to do more of during the week (Fredman et al., 2008b). In that survey, 36 percent of respondents reported having been running at least once in the last twelve months and 23.4% at least six times (Fredman et al., 2008a). Considering that lack of time is mentioned as the main obstacle to greater outdoor activity, improvements in the facilities for fitness running (e.g. urban trails for running) could play an important role in improving public health. This paper argues that such improvements require elucidation of taken-for-granted and embedded infrastructures and nature ideals in order to reinvigorate and improve the urban condition for fitness running.

This paper focuses on the nature ideals in leisure planning, leaving body ideals (and the conceptualization of the running body in relation to nature) for other studies. The importance of nature or landscape ideals within fitness exercise and sports has received limited but increasing attention within research (see for instance Butryn and Masucci, 2009; Eichberg, 2009; Howe and Morris, 2009; Lorimer, 2012; Bajić, 2014). While auto-ethnographic studies of running developed as a strong theme within geography (e.g. Lorimer, 2012; Hockey, 2013; see also Bajić, 2014), the discussion on the interplay between the landscape and the runner remains mainly implicit, and (largely due to the nature of the auto-ethnography) historical accounts of the geography of fitness running are rarely included. However, a few exceptions, of importance for this paper, should be mentioned. Bale (1994, 2004) offers general notions of the history of running (with particular focus on running as a sport) and its landscape ideals. Latham (2013) provides an American and New Zealand perspective on the history of jogging, although with few comments concerning landscape or nature, whereas Qviström (2013) draws out the early history of the campaigns for fitness running in Sweden and its dependence on a landscape ideal with forests and undulating terrain (see also Schantz, 2008).

1.1. Material and method

The first part of the paper traces the ideological baggage of fitness running in Sweden, with special emphasis on the forest ideal embedded within national guidelines for leisure planning in the 1960s and 1970s. This tracing is based on an analysis of policy reports and key publications by the main actors for fitness running at the time. Thus, the paper captures the formal discourse concerning outdoor exercise, including the official guidelines. The guidelines are not only interesting due to their formal status, but also because they were actively used in local planning, as the case of Malmö illustrates.

In the second part of the paper, the case of Malmö City is used to illustrate the realization of national guidelines in the 1960s–1980s. Malmö is singled out for closer examination for two reasons. First, the city is situated in the most southerly part of Sweden, in a setting which differs substantially from the ideal landscape embedded in the national guidelines for running facilities. Large plains with intensive agriculture surround the city, with forests (and an undulating terrain) a car journey away (Fig. 1). Second, Malmö is the third largest city in Sweden and if any municipality had the capacity to develop its own strategy for leisure planning, it would have been a large city with sufficient know-how and economic resources. Thus, Malmö offers a critical case (Flyvbjerg, 2006): it is the least likely municipality to keep to the forest ideal when planning for recreational running. Therefore, the case is of special interest and provides a more general understanding of leisure planning beyond Malmö.

The study of Malmö is based on analysis of formal documents and strategies of the local authority, from the initial discussions on running tracks in the late 1960s to the formulation of a strategic document for running facilities in Malmö in 1979. Annual reports of *Malmö Idrottsstyrelse* (Malmö Board of Sports) 1966–1971 and its successor *Malmö Fritidsnämnd* (Malmö Board of Leisure) 1972–1982 were examined to gain an overview of development of outdoor exercise facilities. In addition, the minutes from regular meetings of these two boards (1966–1982) were studied, focusing on paragraphs discussing running trails, fitness centers, or the specific places where such trails were located. The minutes are usually very concise and only a few offer insights into discussions on the location, design, and investments in running trails. The handful of occasions on which the boards elaborated upon this matter are described below. Further studies of the minutes from *Malmö Fritidsnämnd* meetings from 1983 to 1987 did not reveal any entries regarding the topic, nor did later documents reveal new investments in fitness running (*Malmö Stadsbyggnadskontoret*, 1984; *Malmö Stad*, 2001). The period 1966–1982 is therefore crucial for understanding the current infrastructure for running in Malmö.

2. Running in the forest

The ideal of walking in the forest in order to recreate one's body and mind by encountering a *natural* setting/movement can be traced back to the Romantics, notably to Rousseau and Thoreau (Edensor, 2000; Amato, 2004). In Sweden, hiking and strolling in the forest have been marketed since the late 19th century, with the Swedish Ski and Outdoor Association (*Svenska Skid- och Friluftsförbundet*, SSOA, *Sörlin* (1995) emphasizes the strong bonds between ideas of a healthy body and the ideal of wilderness (see also Eichberg, 2009). These ideals would be embedded within planning in the 20th century. With the emergence of leisure planning in the late 1930s, the focus on protecting shores and forests in peri-urban settings for outdoor recreation came to be further emphasized, whereas for instance the open landscape and urban environments were largely dismissed. These patterns are still to be found in the landscape and in contemporary planning (Qviström, 2010).

The forest was proposed as a place not only for leisure, hiking, skiing, and orienteering, but also for long distance running. Gösta (Gösse) Holmér was employed as the main coach for *Friidrottsförbundet* (the Swedish Amateur Athletic Association) between 1925 and 1958, and wrote several textbooks on exercise, which made him the main mentor of elite runners during this period (Yttergren, 2012). When describing his version of interval training, *fartlek* (speed-play), Holmér emphasized the rhythm of the running, but also the idea of restorative nature. His description includes not only

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