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The Fragmented Neighbourhood and the Possibility of the Interstice

On the relation between home-making and public space

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In modernist neighbourhood planning, the suburban community was conceived of as a unit, with housing surrounding a neighbourhood centre, often including a park and a local school. The idea of the home was closely related to housing, and thus a good dwelling and good services were also associated with a good home. From the 1970s onwards, the discussion of home has, however, become more elaborate, and it has more and more also been seen as a related but distinct question. The practice of making home is complex, and recently it has been described from the perspective of multiple thresholds (Boccagni and Brighenti 2015; Brighenti and Kärrholm 2017). Home is not just what exists within the walls of our dwelling; it is produced as a pattern of overlapping tactics, appropriations and associations, and its borders shift depending on the circumstances or the perspective we take. Home gets its energy from peculiar domestic thresholds, such as gates, yards, community gardens, local stores, schools, parks and squares, and they are dependent on the hidden spaces and 'time machines' (or temporal thresholds) of garages, cellars and attics (Korosec-Serfaty 1984) where memories can be stored and forgotten only to be found again later on. Home making is a singular (it produces a home as different from all others) but complex and multifaceted process, and it can to a certain degree also be seen as a discontinuous process, both in time and space.

The place that we call home can differ from time to time, sometimes even from one moment to the next. Without denying the importance of home as a secure haven perceived from a centre, Boccagni and Brighenti suggest that:

domesticity could be reframed less as an accomplished state of things from within than as a processual and interactive endeavour from without – indeed, as a matter of thresholds to be crafted, enacted negotiated, and if necessary struggled upon. (2015: 4)

Whether we take the perspective 'from within' or 'from without', home is defined in relation to important places, memories, other neighbourhoods, and different kinds of communal, collective, social, public or private spaces. Different public spaces can indeed be domesticated to become appropriated and part of home (Mandich and Cuzzocrea 2015; Koch and Latham 2013). This complexity of home making is increasingly coming to the fore as the home and the neighbourhood no longer seem to be overlapping in the same ways as was expected during the modernist days. A simple relationship between geographical locality and home can no longer be taken for granted.

In Sweden, the modernistic and suburban neighbourhood units – many of them planned during the Million Programme Era, 1961–1975 – have slowly become densified and transformed over the years. This kind of transformation – and we are here more specifically referring to the area of Norra Fälåden in Lund which we now are studying – include the proliferation of borders, cracks and interstices inside the area itself. The identity of the area seems to be splintered into subareas or into 'areas of

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interest' that cannot so easily be geographically defined. Norra Fälåden is a typical Million Program neighbourhood built for 9,000 inhabitants during the years around 1970. In the wake of densification and expansion of the area from the 1990s and onwards, the tension between the different subareas seems to have increased. The number of inhabitants is now over 12,000, but the number of stores and services of the neighbourhood centre is slowly decreasing, the formerly public bath has been privatised and turned into a gym, and the neighbourhood magazine was discontinued in 1999 after more twelve years of service. The large annual neighbourhood festival is still there (Citroni and Kårrholm 2017), but according to the interviews we made,

people of the new subareas of the neighbourhood do not tend to visit it as much. The new services that have appeared have rather tended to locate themselves to the outskirts of Norra Fålåden, which means that

The suburbs used to be spaces where residual spaces and large in-between spaces of unclear use and ownership created both problems and opportunities

people from the rentals in the south of the area tend to use one shop, the students of the eastern part another, and the villa owners of the northern part a third. In short, local public spaces and services seem to have been dispersed.

Henri Lefebvre once noted how upper-class housing tends to mimic the city and its spaces, with the dining room acting as restaurant, the garden as private park, etc., whereas:

Proletarian housing, for its part, has the opposite characteristics. Reduced to a minimum, barely "vital", it depends on various "facilities," on the "environment", that is, on social space, even if this is not well maintained. (Lefebvre 2014: 5)

In a case such as Norra Fålåden, this difference in terms of what we perhaps can call public space dependency seems to have heightened. Here we have the newly built large villas of Annehem, on the one side, and the recent experiments of student housing with apartments of only 7 square meters, on the other. Furthermore, the densification of Norra Fålåden, just as of many other Swedish housing areas of the 1960s and 70s, seems to have been dealt with in an ad hoc kind of fashion, slowly filling plots and former parks with new housing, without any ideas about how to rethink and rescale public infrastructures and services. Public space dependency is of course different from person to person, from situation to situation, and from time to time, but it becomes a pressing and even structural issue as polarisation and fragmentation increase.

The suburbs used to be spaces where residual spaces and large in-between spaces of unclear use and ownership created both problems and opportunities (Wikström 2005). This has clearly changed. The latest big struggle and conflict over public space at Norra Fålåden concerned the main neighbourhood park and a schoolyard, both centrally located next to the neighbourhood centre. There, private developers wanted to build private flats in buildings up to twelve stories. Talking to the active group of the movement against this development, it became clear that it was the people of the rental apartments next to the park who were most concerned, whereas people from the new villas of the neighborhood were less engaged. This is of course no coincidence; the dense residential housing area next to the park have people living up to four families in one apartment, and so they are much more dependent on the public park for their everyday life.

Like most Swedish Million Program areas, Norra Fålåden was an area with a strong identity during its first decades, at times stigmatized, but still an area to which you belonged as a Fålådsbo (resident of Fålåden). Starting with the densification and polarization of the neighbourhood during the late 1990s, the area has however become fragmented and less distinct as a joint territorial appropriation for its inhabitants. The infrastructure of public space seems to have an important part to play here.

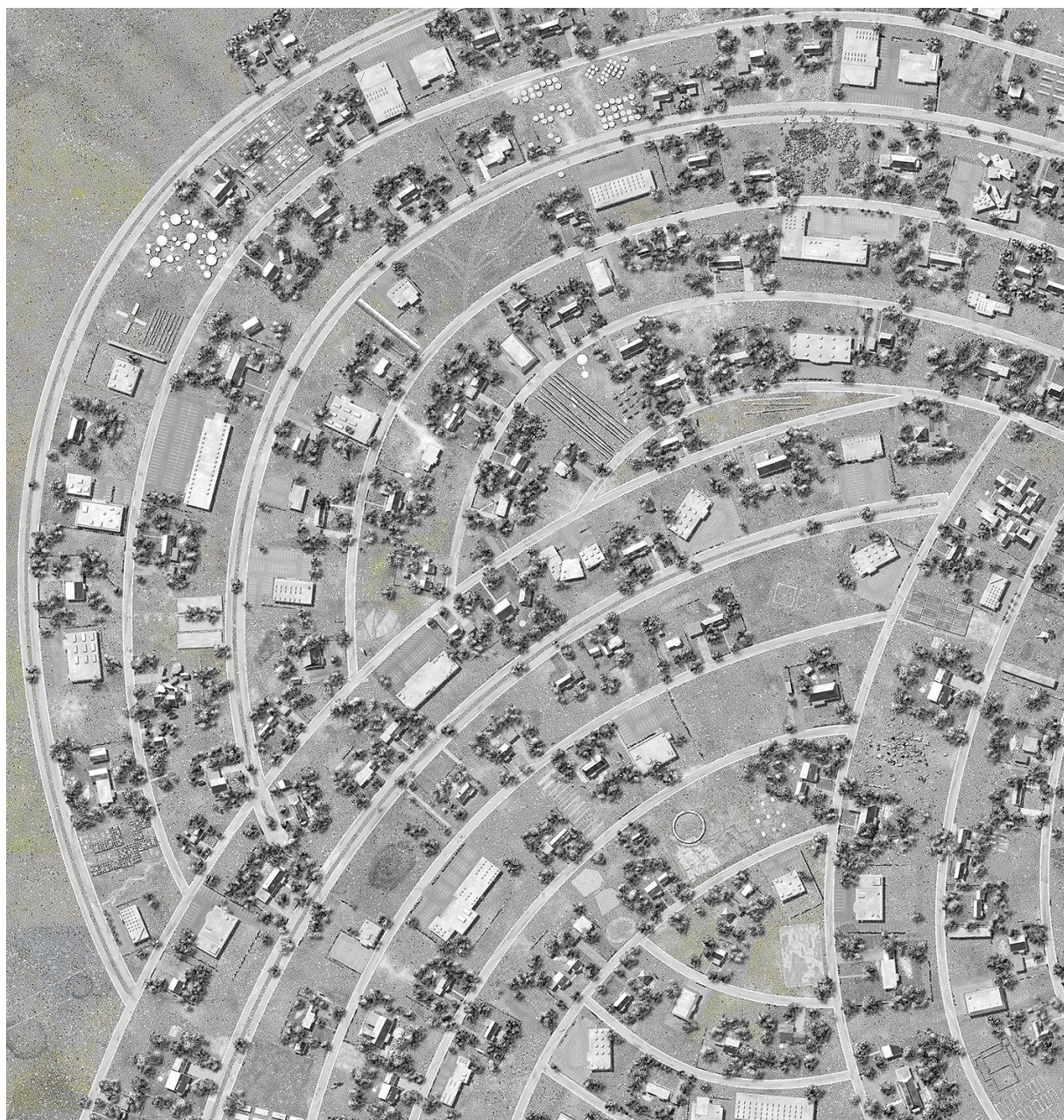
Even though people of Sweden in average have better living conditions today than in the 1960s, an increasingly uneven distribution of privatized space and services is ongoing, and the recent slow densification projects have a part in this trend. In times of urbanization and densification when public spaces tend to shrink, it is easy to forget that making a home is not something that is done within the four walls of a house or apartment.

Even though neighbourhoods may not play the same role today as they once did for modernist planners, the quality and accessibility of public space remains a key issue for all home makers. In fact, it has turned out that as Swedish average living standards increase, so does polarization and number of the poor (SCB 2015), and thus the issue of public space dependency and public space accessibility has a certain urgency. Access relates to localization, affordability, distances and social space on scales that, at least to some extent, overlap with that of the former neighbourhoods. The neighbourhood unit as a strong territorial actor might thus have had its day, but its fragmentation remains a problem. Not only because public space is a resource of increasing importance, but also because home making depends on flows between multiple territorial productions where the operational scales evolve and change; this means that a continuous rather than a fragmented set of spaces is crucial. To predefine these territories at certain scales, such as the dwelling, the neighborhood and/or one of its subareas, is thus a simplification that actually endangers the interstitial spaces and thresholds on which all homemaking in the end relies.

One way to re-open the discussion on making home in the suburbs, we suggest, could thus be to generate more discussion – as well as perhaps subsequently also experimentation – on the ways in which various forms of territorial continuity could be sustained. In essence, the interstice offers a spatial imagination that contrasts both with the “centre/periphery” model and with the “fragmented territorial islands” model. In this sense, an interstitial approach to suburban space could emphasise how, at various scales ranging from the household, through the backyard, the playground, the local street, to the whole neighbourhood, a number of continuous navigations and continuous wayfaring practices are possible. In offering a fresh perspective on the meanings of belonging, the interstice also emphasises the fact that public space is only possible through the convergent action of a plurality of actors and their agencies, and simultaneously, through a perspective of hospitality whereby multiple territorial productions are entertained in a convivial and joyous manner despite the various “irritations” that they might generate and cause reciprocally.

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Io Squaderno 46
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46

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Spatial Rights in Times of Austerity

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