PROBLEMS AND OPPORTUNITIES IN A LARGE SCALE SUBURBAN HOUSING ESTATE.
– The case of Råslätt, Jönköping, Sweden.

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11.1 Introduction

In 1965, in order to remedy an increasingly difficult lack of housing, the Swedish Parliament decided that one million new apartments were to be built within ten years. The program was called ‘the million dwellings program’ and its goal was bold and politically controversial. Never before had so much been built in such a short time.

The million dwellings program had only been in progress for a few years, however, when a critical debate was sparked off. Public criticism was massive and was not only aimed at the physical design of the buildings but also indirectly towards the people who lived in them. Living in one of the program’s most identifiable areas became socially stigmatising, and all those who could move away did so.

Dissatisfaction with the million dwellings program’s large-scale suburban areas was directly reflected in the number of apartment vacancies. This number rose quickly, especially in the municipal, non-profit stock. In 1975, the Government appointed a committee to propose solutions for suburbs with turnover problems (SOU 1979:37). These were the first governmentally initiated and financed pilot projects in the million dwellings program’s problem-ridden areas. But they were not to be the last.

20 years later the million dwellings program’s large-scale suburban neighbourhoods have once again ended up in focus for community planning. The background is formed by the research and commission of enquiry reports of recent years which show that there is increased polarisation between those estates in the urban landscape which are pleasant to live in and those which are least attractive; this is where the poor of society live, many of them with an immigrant background. Thus, once again strategies for change in the million dwellings program’s areas are being lively discussed, along with the experiences that earlier renewal measures have provided (e.g. Olsson Hort, 1992; SOU 1995:142, Öresjö, 1996b; Bohm & Khakee, 1996:1; SOU 1997:118).

11.2 Råslätt - an illustrative example

Råslätt, a large-scale suburban area in a medium-sized municipality, Jönköping with about 105,000 inhabitants, is an interesting example of the development in Sweden that is related above. The area is rather typical for the most problematic part of the million dwellings program. It is owned by a municipal housing company and consists of thirty similar 6-8 storey
buildings with a total of 2,657 apartments, surrounded by an extensive area of fields and woods for walking and recreation. The first house was finished in 1968, the last in 1972.

The area is divided into a southern and a northern section joined in the middle by a complex containing a shopping centre (1972), a medical and social care centre (1974), a church (1975) and a recreation building, which is integrated with one of Råslätt’s three schools (1975). Besides the centrally-located recreation building, there are two youth centres, each about 500 square metres (built 1971 and 1972) a soccer field, a lighted track and a sports field (1974) plus a special section divided into small, individual garden plots (1976).

In 1973 when I started up my thesis-research in Råslätt, 4,719 inhabitants lived there. The area had a demography, which was very typical for these type of large-scale suburbs, built up during the million dwellings program.

- the inhabitants were young, younger than in the rest of the municipality
- the proportion of households headed by a lone parent were significantly larger than in Jönköping as a whole
- it was a low-income housing area
- 21% of Råslätt’s inhabitants were immigrants compare with 4% in the whole municipality

It should also be noted that the area in the beginning of the 1970s was characterised by threatening gangs of teen-agers, large drug problems, great mobility and social unrest. The percentage of children in need of help, who were registered with the Social Service Administration was significantly higher in Råslätt than in the rest of Jönköping.

Simultaneously, a sudden stop in population growth in the municipality had changed the housing shortage to a surplus of apartments. As could be expected, a low-status area like Råslätt was the hardest hit. In 1973, the first year I visited the area, 24% of the apartments were empty, which is the highest rate in Råslätt’s history.

Råslätt was one of the 13 million dwellings program-areas, which were parts of the said government-induced pilot projects aiming at improving the situation in housing areas with lease-problems. In particular, Råslätt was also chosen, because the government committee wanted to closely monitor the substantial investments among others in the leisure and cultural sector previously made by the City and municipal housing company. These investments in the leisure and cultural sector were also the reason for my choice of Råslätt as object for my thesis-research.

The basis of my thesis was to examine in various ways the concept of leisure and cultural activities localised in housing areas, a concept very much discussed in Sweden during the 1970s. Even if this concept was not completely new, bearing a clear relationship for example to the community centre idea in the 1940s, the existing knowledge concerning its practical consequences was rather insufficient.

Based on several and different kinds of empirical studies I could resume that the social climate in Råslätt had undergone a positive development, which means that in the last part of the 1970s considerably better conditions existed than were found in the beginning of the decade. This amelioration must be viewed with the relatively large expenditure of time, effort and money made by the municipality and by the municipal housing company in mind.
One of the contributing factors to this improved situation in Råslätt was the growth of leisure and cultural activities localised in the housing area. This growth had been aided by the following conditions

- access to various types of localities for neighbourhood activities
- access to employed personnel who could support, initiate and organise the recourses which exist in the area
- regional tradition
- a new type of ‘social mobilisation’, that is, people who are affected by changes in the society try themselves to find a new identity and a new way of interact. Thus, these people use leisure as an instrument for change.
- the function of leisure time as ‘a last resort’: the character of Råslätt as a ‘problem area’ might probably have influenced the municipality and the municipal housing company to support various initiatives that have been taken both by the inhabitants of Råslätt and by individual public employees.

(Öresjö, 1979)

The positive development spiral, which I had noticed during my thesis-research, was also evident in a comprehensive mapping of all leisure and culture activities, that I carried out 1979-1980. The number of associations had grown as well as the percentage of the inhabitants engaged in social life of the housing area (Öresjö, 1980). This development continued during the 1980s according to the sporadic contacts I had with people in the area. The city and the housing company made continuous actions and programs. Slowly but steadily the image of Råslätt changed positively. Råslätt gradually changed from an area, which by the local media was refereed to in negative terms into the image of a housing area with continuing progress and go.

11.3 Råslätt’s process approach as an alternative to large-scale rebuilding projects

Even though Råslätt never has been free from social problems, both tenants and staff felt that Råslätt was on the right course during the 1980s. A well-organised and well-managed suburban housing area seemed to grow up with comprehensive commercial and societal services. The negative image from the 1970s faded gradually. Simultaneously Råslätt was given a new physical appearance by painting the buildings in daring colours and refurbishing the gardens and parks.

It was this image, which in the early 1990s, made me planning a new research-project in Råslätt. The objective was to raise and high-light the opportunities of a process-minded community development that creates a positive development spiral in a problematic suburban housing estate. I wanted to emphasise this approach as an alternative to the large-scale rebuilding projects as was tried in many housing areas during the 1980s with a view to attract more middle and higher income people to settle in polarised areas. Research on such large-scale rebuilding projects had showed quite clearly that this was not a practical avenue, from either an economic, social or ethical perspective. (Johansson et al, 1988; Carlén & Cars, 1990; Jensfelt, 1991; Johansson, 1992; Ytterberg, 1992; Ericsson, 1993; Öresjö, 1993)

Economically, most large-scale rebuilding projects turned out very costly without succeeding in attracting household with more money and resources. If the tenants before the renewal
were afraid of crime and vandalism, afterwards their fears were how to afford to stay in the area.

*Socially* these revitalisation projects also caused the relocation of undesired and problematic households to other neighbouring housing areas, which then assumed the role image of being the least. This generated in turn the need for extra support and actions in these newly affected areas – the problems had just been moved around.

From an *ethical* point of view, this is a question of respect for an individual’s home situation. When housing companies or planners are running a renewal program, they must be aware that they are tramping into the most profound domain of human beings, theirs homes. No matter how well-intentioned the programs are, they may cause unintended consequences for those involved. To be forced to leave one’s home and abode against one’s will is an extremely humiliating situation. ‘Why do they move us like animals? Don’t they know human beings have feelings?’ was one of the responses given in a large-scale rebuilding project (Salonen, 1997).

### 11.4 New difficult situation in Råslätt

Råslätt as a positive example of step-by-step renewal proved being a truth with modification. Råslätt during the 1990s was something quit different than Råslätt during 1980s. After more than 15 years of positive development, of course not without problems, Råslätt was now facing a negative turn. One of the roots of this downward trend was a new and very complicated immigrant situation. This was emphasised by residents in Råslätt who were interviewed during spring, 1994. The change began about 1990, and reached its peak during 1993, with 600 refugees joining the over 50% immigrants in the area. ‘Råslätt was like a big refugee camp. People left the area in panic, and they were the stable tenants, who had lived here long’ as one interviewee described the situation. She continued reflecting over the growing dilemma of immigrants: ‘It’s a pity what happened, because Råslätt was well on the way of becoming a pleasant area. The problem families disappeared, and it became more easy and peaceful.’

In a similar way another tenant describes the development in Råslätt from the early 1980s: ‘Everything was super. People moved in and there was queuing-up for apartments. In 1989 everything was leased. Since then it has slumped..........Stable tenants since many years are now moving out. The number of immigrants are growing. When the old stock leaves the Råslätt-spirit disappears.........I will leave next year when my son finishes school. When the stable leave others take over and then the process runs fast.’

More precisely the following had happened: During the early 1990s the number of non-leased apartments in Råslätt increased like in rest of the country. The housing company chose, like they did in many other large-scale housing areas with lease-problems, to co-operate with The Immigration Board in creating refugee camps. It reached the peak during 1993 with 600 refugees in the area, which became a very prominent element in an area of 4.400 residents of which already more than 50% had immigrant background from about 40 different nations. The situation which then occurred in Råslätt did not just influence the opinions of the native Swedes, but also the naturalised immigrants who came to work in Sweden years ago and were well established in Råslätt and integrated into the Swedish society. These immigrants and especially their children now experienced a completely new situation.
‘The difference between my and my children’s situation is that in those days there were ordinary Swedish families in Råslätt. I was in their homes and had Swedish friends. My children have not.’

It seems that during the 1970s and early 1980s nobody looked at foreigners as immigrants, which is evident from the interviews I conducted with youths being raised in Råslätt. Neither the native Swedes nor the ‘second generation immigrants’ made such a distinction.

‘I had only Swedish friends. I never thought of myself as an immigrant. I was a Swede with Yugoslavian background. But when more and more of the native Swedes left Råslätt, I started to realise that I was an immigrant.’

‘Previously I never thought of immigrants in those terms. They were few and well-integrated. Up to mid-80 it was OK. But in 88-89 it turned. In 83-84 you noticed if there was a coloured kid in the playground. Today you notice if there is a native Swede. We have got too many immigrants in Sweden!’

‘Many of my friends were from Yugoslavian. They soon learned Swedish and we spoke Swedish. Today almost all are immigrants in Råslätt’s sporting club and Swedish is not spoken in the changing room. When I grew up there was no problem with the immigrants. The problem then was Swedes who caused troubles.’

To be a native Swede in Råslätt in the 1990s is to be deviant. This causes feelings of loneliness and isolation, according to several of the persons interviewed. But there is another very important consequence, which one of the interviewed immigrants pointed out; there is no Swedish society in Råslätt as a reference group, which in turn creates a distorted image of Swedes among the new immigrants. ‘They never meet ‘ordinary’ Swedes, as those Swedes still living in Råslätt do not represent the everyday Swede.’ (Öresjö, 1996a)

Living in an immigrant area, such as Råslätt has become, creates a special and difficult situation both for native Swedes and immigrants from different periods, whether they came to work or as refugees. Råslätt is rapidly becoming an area, which is likely to be marginalized and pushed to the periphery, accentuated by a poor economy and high unemployment rates. In order to off-set such an evolution, the municipality and the housing company started a comprehensive project-program in Råslätt during 1996. It was directly controlled by the City Commissioner and was focused on increasing employment, improving knowledge of Swedish and rebuilding of the shopping centre. The outcome of this program will be studied in my further research in Råslätt.

11.5 ‘Swimming against the tide’

A team led by Anne Power of the London School of Economics have studied twenty of the most unpopular council estates in Great Britain between 1980 and 1995. The results are presented in a report with the striking title Swimming against the tide. Polarisation or progress on 20 unpopular council estates, 1980 -1995. It is concluded that even though estate populations were already seriously disadvantaged when this study began, by the 1990’s social polarisation had increased significantly. Greater concentrations of young people, lone parent families, and minority ethnic groups created new issues for residents and managers. Yet, the
introduction of intensive, estate-based housing management with increased tenant involvement had led to dramatic improvements in environmental conditions and staff and resident morale. Over the 1980’s, most of the estates were able to maintain and build upon the improvements, through further decentralisation, greater resident participation, and local and central government investment in physical regeneration. In other words: Wider social and economic pressures pushed the most disadvantaged - often unemployed, lone parents, people from minority ethnic groups - to the most marginal areas. The polarisation was mitigated by upgraded conditions and local support. But, and this is important, these types of estates need permanent local management if marginal communities are to work (Power & Tunstall, 1995).

The same dual perspective must be applied when discussing the development over time in Råslätt. Råslätt is no dreamland, and will never be anything approaching this. It is an estate that acts as a regulator in the housing market and where new problems are always round the corner. But through good local knowledge, flexibility, versatility of approach, listening to, and respect for, the residents, it has been possible through the years to keep trouble at arm’s length and to create optimism for the future during a period of almost fifteen years.

In a retrospective study I have described and analysed the positive processes taking place in Råslätt during more than one decade. As a base material for the study I have used the many evaluation reports covering the various types of renewal programs and improvement efforts realised in Råslätt as well as other documents and background material in writing. Interviews with about 20 key-employees working in the area completed and detailed this material. Finally around 25 tenants, living for a long time in Råslätt, were interviewed. They represented both still living in the area and those who had left, as well as natives and immigrants, youths and elderly people.

I found that the strength of the method which over a 15 year period had created a very positive development spiral in the estate lay in the ability to apply a process approach. Attempts were made all the time to overcome the problems, which seemed to be just round the corner, by creating new and positive countermeasures and development possibilities on the basis of the local conditions in the estate. In this process approach different types of projects activities played an important part. Because working in a project involves both a challenge and a demand to do something out of the ordinary, which creates a kind of mental preparedness. But even in project work there must be a long term perspective if each project is not to become just a passing phase.

In my report I discuss the working method at Råslätt in terms of series of locally based measures in order that I may succeed in describing the rehabilitation strategies applied over a period in a specific suburban housing areas of the Råslätt type. I have asked myself whether the projects carried out are connected to one another in a obvious sequence like pearls on a string, or whether they were imposed on the estate from above and perhaps only left disruption behind. It is namely striking how well the ‘strings of pearls’ metaphor describes the work at Råslätt. The experiences gained were made use of in ordinary work or in new projects in a very constructive way. They became like pearls on a string around which different forms of co-operation developed, both among the different authorities and the municipal housing company and also among the residents.

11.6 Some examples of improvement efforts
The first special project in Råslätt began in 1972 and was directed to gangs of young delinquents in the area. The latest project completed (in my research report) dealt with a similar problem, but in a radically different situation. This time it concerned a gang of Arabic-speaking youths and their parents. Between these two projects there was a wide variety of experimental and development efforts, many of which became permanent. Today almost nobody remembers how revolutionary some of these projects were considered at first. For example, moving medical and social care to Råslätt involved co-operation between government agencies. This was brand new for Sweden in 1974, something most common today in all large suburban areas.

Turning to tenants’ participation, one good example is the creation of a mini-farm. The tenants erected all the buildings and took care of the animals during evenings and holidays. After ten years it is now threatened by the fact that the most active tenants are moving out of the area.

Another example of engaging the people in Råslätt was the “user appraisal for citizen participation.” This method was initially developed by the Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR) and gives good opportunities to develop improvements, step by step and in dialogue with the tenants.

Step 1: The tenants participate and formulate the problem areas to be covered by user appraisal.

Step 2: The user appraisal forms are distributed to all households to be completed.

Step 3: The points and views from the user appraisal forms are collated and processed before returning them to all households.

Step 4: The tenants are engaged in discussions on appropriate measures and actions.

11.7 There is no panacea

In 1993 it was obvious, as already is described, that Råslätt was again facing a very difficult situation, perhaps a turning point. This does not mean, however, that the method applied at Råslätt should be rejected. What must be done instead is develop knowledge relating to the problem situation which now prevails, and which is by no means unique to Råslätt, and to act accordingly.

Greater knowledge is thus needed at both macro and micro level. At macro level in order that the strong socio-economic forces which all the time constitute a threat to the estates should be understand. At micro level in order that it should be possible to work constructively with the new problems now being faced. However, perhaps the most important lesson drawn from my research in Råslätt is the knowledge that there is no panacea, which once and for all solve the problems in the most unpopular estates. It is like swimming against the tide. Despite this circumstance it is possible to create positive development spirals, which is demonstrated by the Råslätt-case. A continuous and alert approach to community work is fundamental as new problems and perils constantly are just around the corner.
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