

The Stubborn Story of the Swedish Million Program

1 Original quote in Swedish: “Pappa till nya Norsborg är en dator.” Margareta Schwartz and Suzanne Sjöqvist, *Kvinnoliv, Förortsliv* [Women’s life, suburban life] (Stockholm: Gidlunds, 1978), 31.

In a scathing 1978 report about a modernist Swedish neighborhood located just outside Stockholm, journalists Margareta Schwartz and Suzanne Sjöqvist suggested caustically that “Norsborg’s daddy is a computer.”¹ There was no other explanation, they contended, for the neighborhood’s insensitively designed indoor and outdoor environments. Rather than living architects who would have paid attention to details, materials, and a human-scaled living environment, Schwartz and Sjöqvist attributed the designs to a non-human machine, underscoring how many new Swedish neighborhoods—intended as built utopias to fulfill mid-twentieth-century welfare state promises—had come to symbolize a heartless approach and the failure of postwar design and planning instead.

The report, entitled *Kvinnoliv, Förortsliv* (Women’s life, suburban life), appeared as one of many exposés published in the aftermath of the Swedish national housing project popularly known as the “Million Program,” which constructed over one million dwelling units across the country between 1965 and 1974. Today, Million Program neighborhoods are still widely presented in the media and in political speech as alienating, unnatural, and unwanted environments. When the areas built during this period are discussed in newspapers or in speeches leading up to national and local elections in the present, the results of architects’ designs are portrayed as unequivocal failures. Together with their racialized residents (largely migrants and their descendants), the “ugly” and “inhumane” architecture of the Million Program is blamed for a range of social problems, from unemployment to gang-related crime. This is a far cry from how they were initially envisioned.

From the 1930s, the political agenda to enact a Swedish welfare state—known as *folkhemmet* (the people’s home)—had heralded what was supposed to be a new modern era of hygienic, modern housing, and neighborhood infrastructure that would address urban squalor and overcrowding. By the 1960s, this welfare state had turned to ever higher speeds of architectural production to achieve these goals, with its apotheosis in the Million Program and related ideas of “rationalized” (machine-led) construction. Beginning during the period of the Million Program’s construction, however, journalists, academics, and the Swedish public alike increasingly conflated its modernist architecture and landscapes with social problems.

In this chapter, I examine several reports commissioned by leading newspapers or carried out as academic studies, and representative of a much larger oeuvre of exposés from the 1970s. All of them include interviews with the inhabitants and descriptions of the physical environment. Here, I look closely at three reports concerning the Stockholm regional suburbs of Tensta, Skärholmen, and Norsborg, all published between 1970 and 1978: during or shortly after the construction of the Million Program.

Reports like these entrenched links between modernist designs and resident's apparently miserable lives and, in their repetition and monolithic views, eventually provided a new order of interpretation for Million Program suburbs: a stubborn story. The causal links they made between (bad) architecture and (miserable) social lives entrenched them, a connection that persists into the present day. As Swedish journalists traveled to Million Program neighborhoods in the 1970s to uncover the salacious details of this national mistake, they thus created a new reality: while reporting on residents' unemployment, depression, isolation, and alcoholism, their representations became so powerful that they no longer merely "represented." When the narrative of "failed" Million Program designs took root, there was no longer room for interpretation. These words surpassed mere representation and evolved instead into world-making, a stubborn story that proved unchangeable.

In their book, for example, Schwartz and Sjöqvist explain how their study emerged from their own interests in the plight of women in new suburbs. As they explicitly blamed women's social problems on neighborhood designs, they framed a new reality: suburban women were not living in cities of the future but were trapped in an unfortunate prison made by architects whose hubris had produced unequivocally inhumane, unlivable environments.

Other authors made the revelation of suburban miseries in the Million Program a central feature of their work, such as Olle Bengtzon, a journalist for the newspaper *Expressen*, who wrote the article "Planerad stad eller nybyggd slum" (Planned city or newly built slum) as early as September 1965 and then made it a personal mission to draw attention to shortcomings in contemporary urban design. He became known as "the journalist that the authorities feared the most when he scrutinized their decisions."² In his writings, Bengtzon hoped to draw attention to the fact that living conditions for working class Swedes—predicated on earlier ideas of a People's Home offering its "welfare" to all—had not actually improved with the rise of the Million Program.

Notably, even though new neighborhoods were still under construction or had not yet had time for their trees to grow or subways to open, none of the reports' authors treated the neighborhoods as works in progress. Journalists and researchers presented half-finished housing and landscapes instead as final results, producing both immediate and enduring narratives of catastrophe. Bengtzon and his contemporaries often offered subjective descriptions and confirmed their pre-existing biases, yet their words evolved into accepted truths—a stubborn story. Far from being neutral, these initial descriptions continue to shape the way that Million Program neighborhoods are perceived today. Over the decades that followed, these portrayals became not just one version of events but the only story, one from which it was impossible to diverge. Ideas of failure and inhumane living conditions took root culturally, even though trees and bushes were simultaneously growing to leafy complements and shading playgrounds. This single stubborn story remained, despite renovations that added pergolas, pavers, and decorative entrances that began almost as soon as the initial construction projects ended, and despite the reverence for neighborhood designs that past and present residents have often articulated.

- 3 See, for example, Lars-Erik Borgegård and Jim Kemeny, "Sweden: High-rise housing for a low-density country," in *High-rise housing in Europe: current trends and future prospects*, ed. Richard Turkington, Ronald van Kempen, and Frank Wassenberg, Housing and Urban Policy Studies 28 (Delft: Delft University Press, 2004), 31–48; Claes Caldenby, ed., *Att bygga ett land: 1900-talets svenska arkitektur* (Stockholm: Byggnadsnämndens råd, 1998); Thomas Hall, ed., *Rekordåren: en epok i svenskt bostadsbyggande* (Karlskrona: Boverket, 1999); Lisbeth Söderqvist, *Att gestalta välfärd. Från idé till byggd miljö* (Stockholm: Formas, 2008).
- 4 Additional references include Eva Hedman, "A history of the Swedish system of non-profit municipal housing," *Boverket-Swedish Board of Housing, Building and Planning* 1 (2008); Thomas Hall and Sonja Vidén, "The Million Homes Programme: A review of the great Swedish planning project," *Planning Perspectives* 20 (2005): 301–28; Britta Roos and Hanna Gelotte, *Hej Bostad! Om bostadsbyggande i Storstockholm 1961–1975* (Stockholm: Länsstyrelsen i Stockholm, 2004).

BACKGROUND: A PEOPLE'S HOME WITH NO VACANCY

Critiques about the Million Program posited as truths also produced uncomfortable questions about Nordic welfare architecture more generally. During the mid-twentieth century, the Swedish welfare state expanded broadly under continuous Social Democratic leadership, which defined it, as noted, as "the people's home": a catchall term intended to signify the state's promises to care for its citizens and to boost their upward mobility and standards of living.³ In this spirit, the years before the creation of the Million Program were years of anticipation, defining an era of hope for the future and excitement about new living environments, with the Stockholm Exhibition of 1930 showcasing new designs and collaborations between the state and industry making distribution of these innovations increasingly possible.⁴

During the 1940s and 1950s, government-supported research produced housing and landscape standards that builders taking national loans were required to implement. It was not until the Million Program and its special emphasis on the notion of "rationalized" construction through cranes, however, that spreading these standards on a larger scale became possible. When planned in the 1960s, these scientifically planned neighborhoods represented a welcome departure from the squalor and overcrowding that defined Swedish housing up to that time. Into the mid-twentieth century, urbanization had outpaced the availability of the urban housing stock, which was already woefully low in quality and insufficient in quantity. The Million Program would erase these problems in favor of sanitary outdoor environments and spacious apartments with running water and modern appliances. It would house the new Swedish middle class.

As early as the late 1960s, however, optimism from government officials had already given way to whispers of suspicion in the general public: that the program had been a mistake. The brand-new neighborhoods included lovely new apartments, but the outdoor spaces, infrastructures, and other public and commercial services remained lacking or, in some views, were too prominent. And worse, the architecture might be "ugly." This intensified after the onset of the global economic crisis of the early 1970s, which reduced the need for new housing and made the ongoing construction of the Million Program appear an exercise in waste and illogic.

More information was needed, however, with visits to the neighborhoods needed to gather it. Journalists of the built environment like Bengtzon, feminist journalists like Margareta Schwartz and Suzanne Sjöqvist, and scholars from universities like psychologists Hans Gordon and Peter Molin sought to perform a public service—a warning and a call to action—by offering close descriptions of problems and the unhappiness of residents within individual neighborhoods. These reports represented the Million Program (and its "rationality") as an unequivocal mistake.

5 Olle Bengtzon, Jan Delden, and Jan Lundgren, *Rapport Tensta* (Stockholm: Pan/Nordstedts, 1970), 7.

6 Original quote in Swedish: "Till sist tröttnar man på att klaga. Det är kanske det dom väntar på." There is also an outset version of this quote earlier on the page where "sist" is replaced by "slut." Bengtzon, Delden, and Lundgren, 12.

7 Original quote in Swedish: "som hade hållt [sic] på i en timma och bara kommit halvvägs." Bengtzon, Delden, and Lundgren, 18.

1970: MISSING INFRASTRUCTURE —THE SUBURB THAT NEVER WAS

One of the first major accounts of the new towns of the Million Program was published in 1970 under the title *Rapport Tensta*, focusing on residents' struggles and dissatisfaction in the northern Stockholm suburb of Tensta. The suburb was one of several built around Järva Field, a former military training ground, with the master plan finalized in 1965, ground broken in 1966, and the first residents arriving in 1967. When the producers of the report—Olle Bengtzon (author), Jan Delden (photographer), and Jan Lundgren (interviewer)—arrived to the neighborhood, many sections of Tensta remained unfinished, and the subway had not yet been opened. This did not stop them from assessing the new suburb as a living environment, despite referring to this work as a "partial report"—perhaps suggesting that it is only addressing part of the project, an unfinished one—in the opening pages.⁵ Certainly, it is difficult to differentiate these objectives or to assess it as a snapshot of a neighborhood not yet finished because the report offers such a scathing critique of the neighborhood.

After a short introduction and a chronology of the neighborhood's construction, past and future, the authors turn to their interviews with Tensta's many dissatisfied residents. Each interview is provided a title taken from the interview material itself, with the very first example as "In the end, you get tired of complaining. Maybe that's what they're waiting for."⁶ Opening with such a quote quickly brings the reader into a dysfunctional space, both materially and socially; here, Tensta does not just have problems, but no one listens when you call to complain about them. This frames a discussion of terrible everyday lives in this brand-new suburb.

Most of the interviews in *Rapport Tensta* focus on the lack of "service," especially shops for food and clothing, as well as the lack of public transportation. Daycare serves as an especially controversial topic, given that its apparent absence meant that many women were forced to either stop working or to continue with daycare solutions in other neighborhoods, requiring automobile commutes.

The need for cars also controverted the promises made in the General Plan of Stockholm in 1952: a visionary master plan for the entire region of Stockholm meant to be described in the detailed development plans (*detaljplaner*) that took this vision into real spaces at the local level. A central feature of the 1952 General Plan comprised new suburbs and transit-oriented planning, enabling uncomplicated travel into central Stockholm at a moment's notice. Dissonances between idyllic depictions of modern public transit, copious green spaces, and immaculate new housing with optimal living conditions, along with the timelines for constructing infrastructural projects, ultimately served as sources of disenchantment. In Tensta, for example, some housing was available to residents by the late 1960s, yet the local subway station did not open until 1975.

For example, one 24-year-old teacher with two children, ages one and three, told the authors that she felt sorry for her neighbors who did not own cars, such as when she was walking toward the suburb's only shop and encountered a mother, likely carrying her shopping home, "who had been in progress for an hour and only come halfway."⁷ In her nuclear family, she explained, they have two

Front cover of *Rapport Tensta* (Tensta Report, 1970) by Olle Bengtzon, Jan Delden and Jan Lundgren, a reportage on the Stockholm suburb of Tensta, showing a boy playing in a precarious environment.

Woman walking in the Stockholm suburb of Tensta while still under construction, 1970, from *Rapport Tensta*.





People walking on a path in unfinished Tensta, 1970, from *Rapport Tensta*.



Child perched on a post in Tensta, 1970, from *Rapport Tensta*.

- 8 Original quote in Swedish: "Det var rena kraftprovet. Stackars de måste känka på sina ungar från den ena bussen till den andra varje morgon. Jag blev gnällig och tråkig och somnade så fort jag kom innanför dörren. Något familjeliv blev det ju inte tal om." Bengtzon, Delden, and Lundgren, 18.
- 9 Original quote in Swedish: "En människa där tyckte jag skulle ta tjänstledigt. I hur många år kan man undra?" Bengtzon, Delden, and Lundgren, 22.
- 10 Bengtzon, Delden, and Lundgren, 33.
- 11 Original quote in Swedish: "I sommar skall dom kanske ta en färgskalle på henne. Då får hon ligga inne i tre veckor." Bengtzon, Delden, and Lundgren, 33.

cars because both she and her husband work. She noted that the newspaper *Expressen* had asked her and her husband to experiment with leaving their cars at home for a week and taking public transit. She said, "It was a pure test of strength. The poor ones who have to schlep their kids from one bus to another every morning. I was whiny and dull and fell asleep as soon as I came in the door. Some kind of family life wasn't even part of the discussion."⁸

The lack of daycare is portrayed as even more vexing, and the officials responsible for its implementation are described as uncaring or ambivalent to the plight of the residents. For instance, a mother of two working in an office explained that she had thought she might need to quit her job owing to lack of daycare, but then she found a private solution with two women who live close by. She recounted a story of threatening the authorities that she would seek a divorce from her husband because of the impossibility of her situation, suggesting that she could then be "a catastrophic case" (*katastroffall*) instead (meaning a single mother)—a category that guarantees priority for daycare spots. The authorities tried to convince her otherwise, but "one person there thought I should take leave from work. For how many years, one wonders?"⁹ This unsustainable situation and its social implications accentuated how life in Tensta simply did not work for many residents.

But in this suburb, according to *Rapport Tensta*, designs do not only create inconveniences and social problems but are actually dangerous to your health—maybe even a risk to your very life. The story is stubborn. Accounts to support it include an interview with a 28-year-old housewife whose three-year-old child, Helene, fell "seven and half meters into blasted stone" when she and her siblings were left alone outside to play.¹⁰ The woman describes Helene's ongoing health issues resulting from this accident, including a recent epileptic seizure and her need to take continuous medication to alleviate the symptoms. Most dramatically, she says, "This summer, they might do a cerebral angiography [a very painful form of neuroradiology that was discontinued in the 1970s]. Then she will have to stay at the hospital for three weeks."¹¹

Further evidence of the hazardous conditions for those living in Tensta is provided in a multi-page photo insert in the middle of the report. The photographs shot by Jan Delden depict residents and the state of the project in various guises. One clear theme constitutes images of children in extremely precarious situations: a young child on a bicycle riding on rubble directly in front of a large bulldozer (featured on the cover), a young child balanced much too high on a fence with the weight of a crane perched uncomfortably right over his head, and a group of four young children kicking a ball inside what appears to be a parking garage. The perspectives Delden chooses in arranging these pictures—for example shooting the cycling child from an oblique angle that makes the bulldozer appear to be on a path toward him—accentuate the environmental dangers. The implied culprits are machinery like the bulldozer, as well as unfinished landscapes more generally, and from cars that could back out at any second. Vulnerable children are the implied potential victims of catastrophes (such as that befalling little Helene) that are just about to happen.

To be fair, *Rapport Tensta* does include some residents' voices cautioning that "people should wait until it's finished," and notes that

- 12 Original quote in Swedish: "Hon som arbetade där ville veta mer om den omgivande miljös betydelse för de mänskliga problem, vilka hon i allt större utsträckning konfronterades med i sitt arbete." Hans Gordon and Peter Molin, eds., *"Man bara anpassar sig helt enkelt!" En forskningsrapport om människor i Skärholmen* ["One just adapts, quite simply!": A research report on people in Skärholmen] (Stockholm: Pan/Nordstedts, 1972), 8–9.
- 13 Original quote in Swedish: "stå som representant för ett av de vanligaste anpassningsmönstren: En måttlig materiell anspråksnivå, låg kontaktnivå med andra människor, hög känsla av isolering och maktlöshet, låg stimulans i den dagliga sysselsättningen, resignation och passivitet." Gordon and Molin, 12.

some people believe in Tensta's potential. As in other reports I will describe below, however, these positive assessments are sprinkled throughout a report that highlights the potential for disaster and the inhumanity of it all: the buildings, the machines, the landscapes, the lack of service, and even the missing daycares that prevent mothers from working. Most residents interviewed explain that they plan to remain in Tensta for a few more years at most. Their eyes toward the future are eyes toward other urban and suburban environments where, at least as the authors are concerned, the residents are more in control of their public and private spaces and generally less at risk.

1972: DARING TO COMPLAIN —“ADAPTATION PATTERNS” IN SKÄRHOLMEN

The neighborhood of Skärholmen, built during the early years of the Million Program, was the topic of a report by a group of researchers from Stockholm University published in 1972 under the title, *"Man bara anpassar sig helt enkelt!"* (One just adapts, quite simply!). The report, edited by psychologists Hans Gordon and Peter Molin, investigated living conditions in this regional hub, which was designed in the earlier phases of the Million Program and officially opened in September 1968 with a triumphant ceremony that featured a speech by the Swedish prince. A main focus of Gordon and Molin's text describes how inhabitants of Million Program areas like Skärholmen have been forced to find ways to "adapt" or cope in order to live there, a theme that runs through all three of the reports.

The Skärholmen report grew out of an initiative from a therapist working in an advisory center within Skärholmen who "wanted to know more about the encompassing environment's meaning for human problems, which she was confronted with in ever greater extent in her work."¹² Gordon and Molin, affiliated with Stockholm University, explain that the area had already been critiqued widely, arguing that the only people who ever defended it were the building owners and urban planners.

Departing from the assumption that "adaptation" is necessary for living in a modernist suburb like this, the authors offer a scientific assessment of the various ways residents go about this. They present eight different "coping patterns," which are represented by eight different composite characters, each given a first and last name. The environment is presented as unworthy of human inhabitation.

In carrying out 58 interviews with their research group, Gordon and Molin explain that they have grouped responses into eight different "adaptation patterns." To introduce the eight categories, they begin with "Karin Lindgren," a pseudonym representing, they say, "one of the most common adaptation patterns: An inward material level of calm, low level of contact with people, high sense of isolation and powerlessness, low stimulation in daily activities, resignation, and passivity."¹³ It is notable that the number of people in each category diverges widely, with one category represented by one person, another by three people, and another by sixteen (Karin Lindgren's), yet the presentation of the categories on equal footing suggests opinions of equal significance.

The category "Ove Ström" (representing 13 others) has "a strong, open, critical attitude toward Skärholmen as a residential

- 14 Original quote in Swedish: "en stark, öppen, kritisk inställning mot Skärholmen som boendemiljö." Gordon and Molin, 17.
- 15 Original quote in Swedish: "steril, opersonlig och allmänt hämmande." Gordon and Molin, 17.
- 16 Original quote in Swedish: "De som vågar erkänna denna sin negativa inställning har ofta också ekonomiska garantier och en yrkesverksamhet som möjliggör dels ett kompenserande fritidsliv utanför Stockholm, dels en aktiv planering för att snarast flytta därifrån." Gordon and Molin, 17–18.
- 17 Original quote in Swedish: "Hon uppger sig trivas alldeles utmärkt. Strax efteråt framkommer att hon tycker vissa dagar är så pressande att hon inte ens orkar dra upp persiennerna." Gordon and Molin, 19.
- 18 Original quote in Swedish: "Precis som en romersk piazza med spelande fontäner och fullt av liv och rörelse. Vi brukar stå på balkongen på sommarkvällarna och njuta av den vackra vyn, blommorna prunkar i sina trälådor och fontänerna sorlar." Gordon and Molin, 20.
- 19 Original quote in Swedish: "Den finns tendenser till idealiseringar och en viss 'censurbenägenhet': man censurerar bort sådant som inte står i överensstämmelse med de egna värderingarna och föreställningarna." Gordon and Molin, 21.

environment."¹⁴ In this group, residents are better off economically than "Karin Lindgren" and express intentions to move away from Skärholmen as soon as possible, especially because of the perceived effects on their children of this "sterile, impersonal, and generally inhibiting environment."¹⁵ These complaining residents are characterized as exhibiting bravery in their candidness, with Gordon and Molin explaining that "Ove Ström" has more liberty to tell the truth because "those who dare to admit this negative attitude also often have economic guarantees and a working situation that makes, in part, compensatory leisure time outside Skärholmen possible, and partially [makes possible] an active scheming to move from there as soon as possible."¹⁶

Another type, called "Anna Roos," is treated more patronizingly. Gordon and Molin suggest that residents who had lived in urban squalor during the 1930s and 1940s gave themselves tunnel vision about their children having a better environment, forcing them to delude themselves about the quality of their new lives in Skärholmen. This character, "Anna Roos," begins with positive descriptions of Skärholmen and "states that she enjoys it very much" but then explains immediately afterward that "she thinks certain days are so crushing that she doesn't even have the strength to pull up the blinds."¹⁷

Notably, interviewees with positive view of Skärholmen are sandwiched in between the negative accounts and also depicted as deluding themselves. Their categories of adaptation are defined in one case (representing eight people) as "a let-go mentality" (*låt gå-mentalitet*), as though these residents are just avoiding the obvious. Another strategy, the researchers note, is defined by "idealizing" and "censorship tendencies." Thus, rather than listening to these residents' testimony and acknowledging the worth of their opinions, the editors provide alternative explanations for their views, such as "Eva Larsson's" description of Skärholmen Centrum as "just like a Roman piazza with playful fountains, and full of life and movement" with a "beautiful view" from her balcony of flowers and water.¹⁸ Gordon and Molin explain that the "Eva Larsson" type is a person who "censors away things that are not in agreement with one's own values and ideas."¹⁹

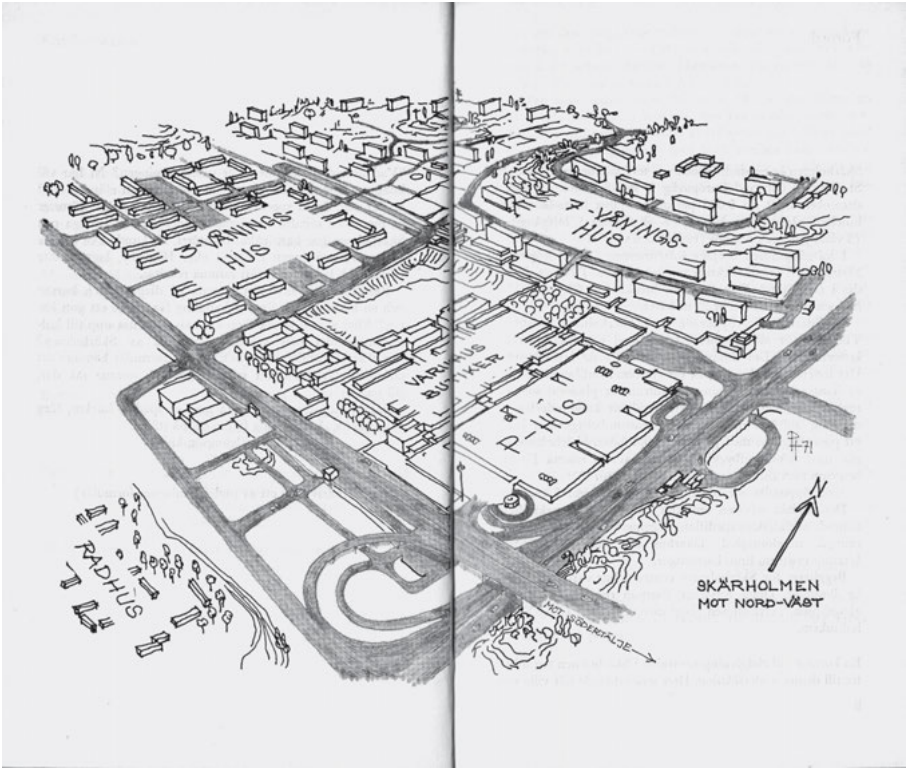
In editing *Man bara anpassar sig helt enkelt!* Gordon and Molin appear to have developed their categories prior to arriving on the scene. Their subjective and scientifically suspect "adaptation patterns" lead them to treat interview subjects as not in possession of the facts, "censoring" the truth, or too downtrodden to be able to comment. For them, the positive perspectives—of which there were many—were treated with condescension or skepticism. Presenting the "facts" in a research report thus became a way of solidifying evidence about what were increasingly understood to be wholly dystopian suburbs.

1978: THE STRANGE SOCIETIES OF NORSBORG

In the aftermath of the Million Program, which ended in 1974, the reports of catastrophe continued to flow, and it seemed that the public's appetite for salacious descriptions of suburban wastelands was insatiable. In the 1960s, a new *Botkyrkastaden* (Botkyrka

Front cover of the 1972 report *Man bara anpassar sig helt enkelt* (One just adapts, quite simply) by Hans Gordon and Peter Molin, investigating the Skärholmen neighborhood, built as part of the Swedish Million Program.

Plan of the town center in Skärholmen, from *Man bara anpassar sig helt enkelt*.



- 20 Original quote in Swedish (and notably the very first line of the book): "Förorten Norsborg 20 km söder om Stockholm är en cementplatta ovanför levande mulla." Schwartz and Sjöqvist, *Kvinnoliv, Förortsliv*, 5.
- 21 Original quote in Swedish: "När de första människorna kom till nya Norsborg fann de inget arv, inga fjödlärslov, ingen påbörjad väv. De fick börja om, det var nyss, det var för sju år sedan." Schwartz and Sjöqvist, 5.
- 22 Original quote in Swedish: "Pappa till nya Norsborg är en dator. Den räknade ut hur det skulle bli utan att lämna någonting åt slumpen." Schwartz and Sjöqvist, 31.
- 23 Original quote in Swedish: "Ville de vara hyggliga och ta hand om finishen och sätta lite piff? Om arkitekterna kände sig förnedrade och egentligen först ville gråta i sina mammors famnar och sedan tutta eld på hela projektet, så höll de i alla fall masken." Schwartz and Sjöqvist, 33.

City) was marketed as the wave of the future for the municipality of Botkyrka to the southwest of the capital. Here, the advertisements promised, "every child will have a tree to climb," and a new extension of the subway would connect several new neighborhoods to the center of Stockholm, offering short commuting distances.

By the mid-1970s, however, these dreams of the future had been tempered by a new spirit of pessimism about residents with social problems, unfinished transit, and, especially, the culpability of the modernist architecture and urban designs. The journalists Margareta Schwartz and Suzanne Sjöqvist, together with photographer Lars Nyberg, began to publish a series of articles about the neighborhood of Norsborg in the 1970s. In 1978, these were compiled into the report *Kvinnoliv, Förortsliv* (Women's life, suburban life) and published by Gidlunds, which opened with the line, "The suburb Norsborg 20 km south of Stockholm is a cement slab on top of living soil."²⁰ For Schwartz and Sjöqvist, a key interest was the plight of women who were left alone all day in suburbs like Norsborg, and how they coped with the spatial and social conditions in which they found themselves. For this reason, they chose a main character: unemployed, 33-year-old single mother Gun-Britt. Her story is central to the text, and, for the authors, her struggles symbolize how the physical environment simply never lets one catch a break.

Norsborg's architectural and urban designs are described as having erased the cultural heritage of those who farmed the land before the project was enacted. Instead, "When the first people came to the new Norsborg, they found no inheritance, no last year's leaves, no weaving begun. They had to start over, it was recently, it was seven years ago."²¹ The planning and construction of the environment is thus explained as an obliteration violating both ecology and history, leaving the residents, apparently, hapless in a disorienting, unhospitable environment with nothing left to guide them.

Describing the buildings and landscapes in Norsborg, the authors' sardonic and extended accounts of an imagined architectural design process that repeatedly suggests the absence of a human touch—a lack of care—in its creation. Instead of sentient human architects, we are told, this neighborhood was created by a computer "daddy" who "counted out how everything would be without leaving anything to chance."²² The speed of construction (five years) is then compared to another Swedish neighborhood of the same size, Halmstad, which, they explain took 500 years to develop. The architects are belittled as having arrived after the computer had finished its work. At this juncture, according to Schwartz and Sjöqvist, they were invited according to the following conditions:

Did they want to be polite and take care of the finish and add a little spice? If the architects felt humiliated and really first wanted to cry in their mothers' arms and then set fire to the whole project, they at least kept a poker face.²³

The authors thus portray these architects as both the only characters who could have saved this suburb from itself (if only they had replaced the "daddy" computer) and—at the same time—impotent, cynical fools who go through the motions of supporting the project for a commission that merely allows them to "add a little spice."



Woman pushing a stroller in Norsborg, 1970s, published in *Kvinnoliv, Förtorsliv*.

Construction workers in Norsborg, 1970s, from *Kvinnoliv, Förtorsliv*.



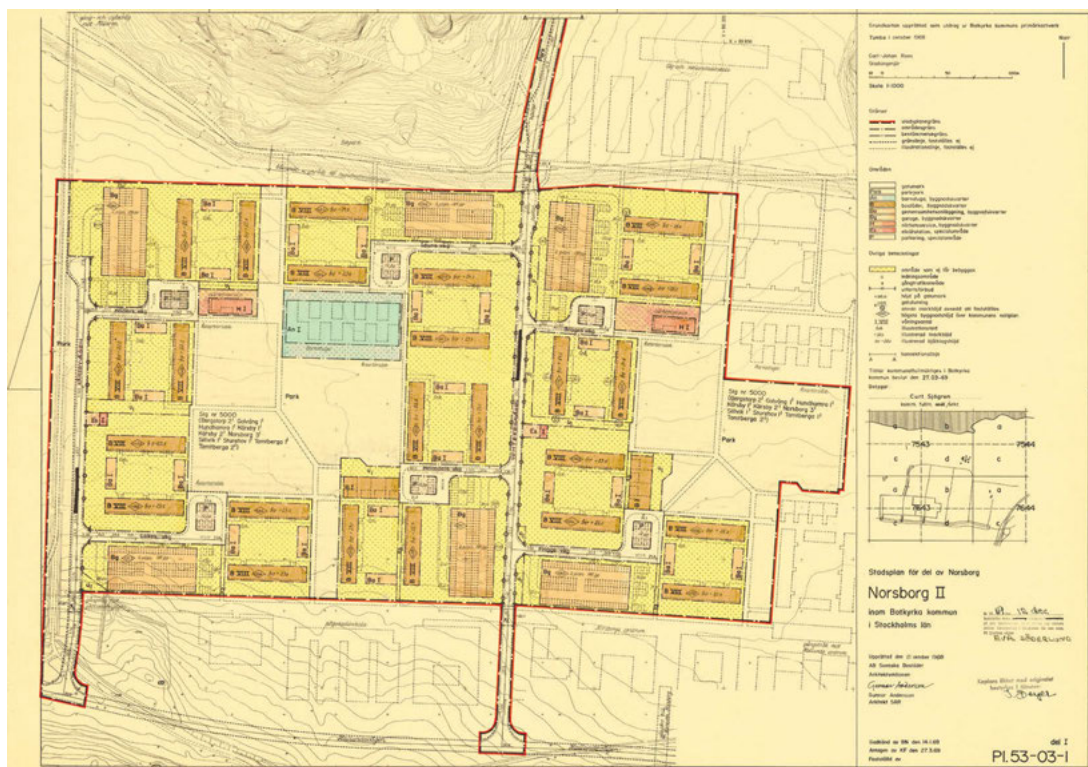
- 24 Original quote in Swedish: "Vi träffar ingen som själv varit utsatt för illadåd, men alla har hört talas om sådana, på omvägar." Schwartz and Sjöqvist, 38.
- 25 Original quote in Swedish: "Fru A i Norsborg har inte heller blivit antastad. Men hon har ju hört en del, så för säkerhets skull har hon tejpats upp ett foto av sin boxer på ytterdörren och en skylt med texten: 'Varning, hunden vaktar.'" Schwartz and Sjöqvist, 38–39.
- 26 Original quote in Swedish: "Varför skulle en gemensam mantalskrivningsadress vara en särskilt god grogrund för innerlig vänskap?" Schwartz and Sjöqvist, 22.
- 27 Original quote in Swedish: "'Känner du inte att det här är ditt kvarter och din gata? Nej, så känns det inte.'" Only the first sentence is presented in quotation marks. Schwartz and Sjöqvist, 26–27.
- 28 Original quote in Swedish: "I stället känner hon att hon blir nervös att bo i sådana här hus." Schwartz and Sjöqvist, 27.
- 29 Schwartz and Sjöqvist, 27.

The architecture of Norsborg is not merely said to be ugly, however. Over and over again, Schwartz and Sjöqvist tell us, fear of strangers deeply embeds itself in the concrete, with suspicions extending across courtyards and neighborhood boundaries. In fact, Norsborg residents say that the residents of the adjacent Million Program neighborhood of Hallunda are criminals; in Hallunda, they think the same of the Norsborg residents. In fact, the authors continue, "We don't meet anyone who has been subjected to crimes themselves, but everyone has heard about them in some round-about way."²⁴ This apparently pervasive fear is represented in the accounts of several residents. For instance, "Mrs A in Norsborg has not been accosted either. But she has of course heard a lot, so for safety's sake she has taped up a photo of her boxer on the front door and a sign with the text: 'Warning, guard dog.'"²⁵ The authors imply that fear of one's neighbors—especially for women alone—is a universal condition in the Million Program.

These critiques at the scale of urban design also identify the neighborhood as unable to foster neighborly contact and friendship, citing the problems that neighbors have had getting to know each other in a strange society where almost everyone is young and has children. Various residents are described as merely looking out of their windows at others and guessing about their ages or other qualities, of failing to interact with those living in the same building, and of generally being socially isolated. All of these ills are blamed on the design of the neighborhood and the lack of attention paid to the physical and social conditions needed to support such contact. With disdain and irony, they write, "Why would a common registered address create the foundation for a heartfelt friendship?"²⁶

But it is not just the outdoor spaces that have failed to become productive of neighborly contact. In their interview with Gun-Britt, Schwartz and Sjöqvist quote her as saying she only feels "at home" when she closes the door of her apartment. They then ask, leading her, "Don't you feel that way on your block and on your street?" The next line in the text reads, "No, it doesn't feel like that."²⁷ Yet this is not a quote from Gun-Britt. The statement appears without quotation marks, suggesting the authors are paraphrasing their interviewee but not providing direct evidence of her feelings. This is then followed by the statement, "Instead, she feels nervous about living in houses like these."²⁸ No specific quotations from Gun-Britt herself are provided to support this authorly analysis. To describe how she is "not so relaxed" and "restless" even inside her apartment, Schwartz and Sjöqvist's only quote concerns Gun-Britt's interest in renovating her apartment's interior design and how she would actually like to move to another apartment.²⁹ These assessments are meant to reflect the problems of Norsborg as a whole but sound, when taken out of context, similar to the dreams of remodeling and upward mobility shared by many people, like Gun-Britt, in their thirties or otherwise.

Again and again, Schwartz and Sjöqvist cherry-pick their quotations and elaborate their descriptions to support claims that seem to have already congealed prior to their arrival to the neighborhood. The tenor of the report seems to have been determined before any interviews were actually conducted, and before any architecture was experienced in person. *Kvinnoliv*, *Förortsliv*, one could argue, is an exercise in confirmation bias.



Plan of part of the neighborhood of Norsborg.



The sign outside an apartment in Norsborg from the 1970s reads: "Burglar alarm activated. Warning: All valuables are anti-theft marked and registered. From *Kvinnoliv, Förtrosliv*.

While we might simply understand this as dubious research or journalistic entertainment, the production of reports like these had lasting effects on how the general public—who often never visited the suburbs firsthand—understood these neighborhoods and their social and physical conditions during the 1970s. More alarmingly, the pattern of disparagement in these reports and the almost-immediate understanding of these landscapes and housing as failed products of architectural hubris produced a sense that no redemption was possible. Narrative snapshots were taken of architecture and landscapes in progress, places that were actually in the process of being finished. This static view removed any sense of a dynamic progression or ongoing development of and in the neighborhoods, either architectonically or socially. Schwartz and Sjöqvist suggested that Norsborg could never achieve the beauty, friendship, and everyday public life of older urban centers and thereby implicated the Million Program and its many new town neighborhoods across Sweden, at large.

CONCLUSION: A STUBBORN STORY

Was the Million Program a mistake? This Swedish national project that invested countless crowns and used wide swaths of unbuilt land to build new neighborhoods for modern citizens of the mid-twentieth-century welfare state, and the public wanted to know. Journalists of the 1970s set out for the neighborhoods of Million Program to find answers, with their excursions taking on the quality of a safari. The story they told proved to be a stubborn one.

In all three reports, the authors present only an anemic discussion about how these snapshots of 1970s life in Skärholmen, Norsborg, or Tensta actually represent an *early* phase for these neighborhoods. That they were new towns built from the ground up is presented as an act of violence or hubris, with even the five years of development for Norsborg compared with the 500 needed for Halmstad, being used to suggest that Norsborg can be judged upon its present—and future—merits at the five-year mark. The time that bushes and trees and flowers need to develop, for example, is completely omitted. The emphasis on the non-human designers and “rationalized” designs suggest how this may all be part of the plan. In this sense, the reports are both unequivocal and unforgiving.

Instead, the authors freely assess new suburbs in comparison with older neighborhoods—where trees may have been growing since the last century or longer, and where the fine tuning of urban designs over many decades have made adjustments to residents’ experiences—as a scientifically sound analytical act. Furthermore, when visual judgments of modernist designs and the welfare they promised are made, they occur *during* the construction of the Million Program or shortly after its construction, when vegetation was still growing and, in places like Tensta, active building projects were ongoing.

Nonetheless, investigators for reports about the early years of the Million Program were confident in their assessments. They suggested through their disparaging words that one could rightly expect Million Program new towns to become perfect specimens of

- 30 Margareta Schwartz went on to become an advisor to the national government on questions of gender equality. See "Till minne: Margareta Schwartz," *Dagens Nyheter*, April 27, 2021, <https://www.dn.se/familj/till-minne-margareta-schwartz>.
- 31 Mikko Joronen and Jouni Häkli, "Politicizing Ontology," *Progress in Human Geography* 41, no. 5 (October 2017): 575.

neighborhood living overnight and that anything less meant that the project at large was misguided and misanthropic: too "rationalized" in its designs made by probable nonhumans. In my interpretation, the writers presented problems in the neighborhoods as intrinsic to the designs, not as temporary hiccups nor as possible frameworks upon which a better future could be built. This "story" was not just one representation, but the only tale it was possible to tell.

Panning the results of the Million Program at the start thus entrenched them. These assessments became a stubborn story, rather than being merely analytical snapshots of a passing moment—that has since made it difficult for Million Program neighborhoods to be understood in any other way. At breakneck pace, journalists and researchers appraised life in half-completed Million Program neighborhoods. Melodramatic depictions (both textual and photographic) conveyed a hellscape of monolithic concrete housing blocks, deserted and dangerous outdoor spaces, eccentric residential behaviors and alcoholism, pervasive social problems and unemployment, women's feelings of depression and abandonment, a lack of infrastructure, and tedious landscapes. Authors of reports in the 1970s thus engrained this stubborn story for good; this Million Program was eternally beyond control.

Psychologists, ethnologists, journalists, photographers, and others all claimed an expertise in the analysis of social conditions, yet all of them included as evidence of the projects' "failure" lurid and often-incendiary subjective descriptions and portraits. They describe misguided architectural theories as materialized in inhumane (concrete) form and repeatedly highlight the struggles of people on the social margins.³⁰

In fact, since the 1970s, it has been next to impossible to impart any alternative or positive visions of these modernist suburbs. Today, the ontologies of the 1970s remain visible in the many calls for radical renovations of Million Program neighborhood infrastructures and housing blocks, which are always regarded as in need of intervention. More chillingly, some politicians and planners in Sweden and in nearby countries like Denmark have departed from notions of failure that leave demolition as the only solution to suburban problems, a new form of "ontological politics."³¹

Today, the 1970s reports themselves have largely been forgotten. Yet the authors' prose and choice of analytical frameworks were far from neutral or ephemeral. When their words and photographs demonstrated that compassionless machines and rationalized architecture had apparently defined a human life that was not worth living, these evolved into unruly ontologies. Such ontologies continue to color perceptions of Million Program suburbs into the present day, while circumscribing many decisions made about the futures of these neighborhoods and their residents. Suburbs in progress were treated as results forever, producing both immediate and enduring, obdurate narratives of catastrophe: a stubborn story.



Parking lot in Norsborg, 1970s, published in *Kvinnoliv, Förortsliv*.

Children playing in Norsborg, 1970s, published in *Kvinnoliv, Förortsliv*.



