

## From Creep to Co-op: Research(er) Paying the Cost of Displacement?

By Joakim Forsemalm

### Abstract

As discussed by planning researchers Jalakas & Larsson (2008), in Sweden, societal issues such as social sustainability, urban life and gender fails to travel from comprehensive documents in the urban planning system to the legislative ones (i.e. the “detailed development plans”). This might, as this essay argues, have to do with the absence of “cultural brokers”, i.e a kind of translator of the narratives told in a particular society. Can researchers act as such translators – increasing the presence of cultural and everyday-life experiences in legislative planning documents? This essay discusses problems and possibilities with an ethnography engaging with/in society.

**Keywords:** Urban planning, ethnography, cultural planning, cultural broker.

## Introduction

In 1980, sociologist Carol Weiss published a study in *Science communication* where she interviewed 155 high-rank officials in federal, state, and local mental health organizations about their use of social science research. It became evident that only a very limited number of those officials (seven percent) used research knowledge in an explicit way, that is in a manner where sources and references could be identified (Weiss 1980). Another fifty percent claimed to have research as a general knowledge base, meaning that research knowledge, as Weiss defines it, *creeps* into policy deliberations. Since 1980 the use of research has become more evident in the field of urban planning and city development in a more broad sense – at least at a superficial level. Richard Florida’s theories of how tolerance, technology, and talent are important to attract the “creative class” (to increase the amount of good tax payers) are evident in visions for urban development around the world (Florida 2002). One example of this is the new comprehensive plan for Gothenburg city, in which Florida’s “3T”-model is explicitly used as “facts box” in a section of business development. However, to underline the findings of Weiss, no Floridian vocabularies are visible at the end of that section in the comprehensive plan where objectives for land use are stated (Översiktsplan för Göteborg 2009: 71f).

As discussed by planning researchers Anita Larsson and Anne Jalakas, this is a widespread problem in urban development and planning. It is one thing to have ambitions in policy-making and visionary documents such as comprehensive plans. It is another to actually apply these ambitions at the stages of urban development that determine the actual physical production (i.e. the *detailed development plan*, which is the only statutory document in the Swedish planning system, all other documents are merely advisory). In their research on how Swedish municipalities employ agendas of equality and gender in planning, Jalakas & Larsson have shown that these issues fail to reach the statutory levels of planning – thus having no real effect on how urban environments are being structured and re-structured (Jalakas & Larsson 2008). What, then, can an ethnologist do if not even a frequently touring “research star” like Florida, heavily cited in various newspapers, popular press and scientific articles, can make it to “last base” (i.e. the detailed development plans)? What possibilities do these perspectives offer? What particular skills come with the ethnological competence that might make people’s everyday lives more obvious in plans for urban development?

In this article, I discuss a case in which a particular method is used to map everyday life in a single-house commuter suburb in the Gothenburg region. It is about narratives being created, told, and used to produce a common baseline for development. After a brief introduction to the geographical location in focus, as well as the networks conducting community engagement and development, I will present excerpts of the process – including my own work – before concluding how being

not only there as a researcher, but right in the middle of everything, seems to increase the presence of everyday life aspects in urban planning.

## The Case: Floda

In an on-going project in Floda, a handful of local stakeholders – real-estate and landowners, various associations, and the church – have joined together to develop this community around some key values. Instead of being regarded as a typical “bedroom community,” in which the nighttime population is significantly larger than the daytime population (cf. Olsson & Vilhelmsson 1997), the community wants to be associated with *health* and *sustainable food*. These were the baseline values expressed at a meeting kicking off the project in April 2012. The background was that two local entrepreneurs and real-estate owners in particular had obtained some key properties in the community center – the Floda Square and the abandoned tannery factory. By doing so, possibilities to turn Floda from a society of problems (drug dealing, violence, etc.) into one in tune with recent sustainability discourses were opened up. During approximately the last decade, a series of networks have been formed in Floda, all with the aim of joining forces around issues such as tourism and destination development, culture, and public health.<sup>1</sup>

Floda is located at lake Sävelången, right at the mouth of river Sävån, being one of several streams connecting a greater northeastern part of the Gothenburg region with the Kattegatt Sea. The green woods and numerous lakes in the district, combined with good access to the Gothenburg labor region by both commuter train and car, make Floda a point of interest for many middle-income families with kids in search of a place to dwell.

The first network was formed in 2001. *Floda Nova*, an “association of associations”, was formed to co-ordinate the associations in the community, but also to save the bankrupt sports center, important for many young athletes. Some ten years later (2010), *Nääs & Co* saw the formation of a network of tourist destinations around Floda to increase awareness and develop new ideas to attract more visitors to the Nääs Castle, Nääs industries (being transformed into a hotel situated right at the edge of lake Sävlången), and other historical environments. Soon enough, as discussed above, some local entrepreneurs bought key properties in central Floda, and by March 2012 these entrepreneurs had acquired two thirds of the land stock in the central parts of the community (around the lake and river). Several businesses have started, the most important one being an accountancy firm. In the *Nääs & Co* network, the actors went overseas to benchmark development possibilities. Soon, there was a palette of ideas for community development. Yet, the municipality was scarcely present (although they had been conducting urban planning and also participatory workshops with the community) in a process that was due to have effects on the physical structure of the community. By the time I started to work within the process, this was about to change. The mu-

nicipality wanted to conduct an architect competition for central Floda to get in tune with the local entrepreneurs, and fulfill some of the municipality ambitions of a denser community, an increased population, and thus an increase in tax base. Furthermore, Lerum municipality (to which Floda belongs) has the ambition to become Sweden's leading environmental municipality by 2025. Obviously, this is a context with many high ambitions.

## **Naming and Framing in Floda**

I was engaged in this project as a consultant with a theoretical and empirical knowledge of everyday life and narratives in urban development. During the first meeting with the entrepreneurs who were in need of my knowledge and experiences, one of the key entrepreneurs said, "we have hundreds of ideas, but with which should we commence? We don't know if ours match what the citizens need and want, we need your help."

After the meeting, we took a walk between the project facility (in the local bank office, actually in the vault) and the tannery, a distance of some three hundred meters. During this walk the most important sites and estates of the community were visited. All of the involved actors were introduced by the two leading entrepreneurs, who gathered the group to discuss ideas and organizational strategies for re-development. In my case, I was introduced as a "Doctor of Ethnology," "a specialist when it comes to urban life," as one of the actors put it. This walk was not a one-time occasion. As soon as a new actor (i.e. change agent) was enrolled into the process, or if a temporary guest was present, who might have been asked to join a meeting to contribute with certain knowledge, *the walk* was conducted to present significant sites and people to the participants. During my first twelve months in the process, there have been around ten such walks of "naming and framing" (cf. Czarniawska 2004). Naming refers to the sense that these walks were occasions to tell the "story" (of how the association of associations was formed to jointly manage the sport center; how the local square and the tannery was bought and so forth). I.e. of how and why this re-development had begun and what values might guide the process onwards. Naming the important actors in this way was a matter of trust and responsibility; being defined as in charge of some part of the greater whole made those involved feel valuable. Framing concerns how these walks were also occasions to test the story; how do different ideas come across to this group? How do others receive these ideas? What do they in turn add to this frame, to the narrative with which to demarcate a plausible trajectory for the Floda future?



Garveriet and Floda square, the two most important stops at the narrative walk  
Photos by Linnea Carlsson

Of course, “doctor of ethnology” is not how I present myself very often (although I do use the title if the implied academic credentials appear to make people more attentive to what I will discuss). On one occasion, some months into the process, I was interviewed about how I professed myself and what I do in Floda. The local newspaper asked about the parts of the process that involved citizen participation, being my field of expertise and responsibility. In answer to one of the journalist’s questions about who was really responsible for the whole process, I declined responsibility. I said that, “I’m only a hired consultant in charge of Cultural Planning.” The following week, during yet another walk with a new actor to be enrolled into the process, one of the key persons made a humorous, yet correctional remark, introducing me to the newcomer. “You know, Joakim is very special. There are many consultants possible to hire, but he’s quite unique, being an ‘ethnological doctor.’ How many can say that?” This was not a point meant to amuse (although it did create laughs), but directed to me in particular: “don’t forget that you are important in this process, that you have your responsibility in it.” My academic background and affiliation was used in the walks, to give the process I was managing particular importance. Here, I was not only “a consultant,” but also someone that knew what he was doing. Of course, this meant that the process, in particular the part of it that concerned the participation of the public, generated certain expectations.

I was engaged in this case of sub-urban development because a particular method had been picked up by the entrepreneurs as suitable for a process of citizen participation. *Cultural planning*, developed some decades ago by urban sociologist Lia Ghilardi, has been in use around the world to locate the “soul” or “cultural DNA” of a place. This is a method of mapping cultural resources in a community: charting ideas, people, networks, buildings, places, and processes. It is a tool with which one can generate a big picture of the possibilities and problems of living of and in a place. Defined by tourist researcher Melanie Kay Smith, “cultural planning aims to transform physical space and is technically about the way in which governments or planners integrate cultural resources into the everyday lives of people” (2010: 12). Knowledge about citizens’ everyday lives and how these lives affect urban environments in terms of needs for housing, travel and leisure is seen by urban planners as “social sustainability” and is increasingly on politicians’ and various civil servants’ minds (cf. National Board of Housing, Building and Planning 2010). Reading Larsson & Jalakas, it is obvious that there is both a need for someone to *write culture* (Geertz 1973), i.e. to more tangibly account for the every-day lives of people in urban environments, and to structure and interpret these accounts. The every-day life of people living, working, and associating in Floda needs to be written and readable for the architects about to enter a competition concerning new constructions in the central parts of the town, as well as for the urban planners and the building committee politicians. Not least for the local entrepreneurs.

## Planning with Culture

The work of writing the everyday life cultures in Floda began with a qualitative questionnaire, asking just short of one hundred persons how they experiences everyday life in the community. What places were people using and why? What were the significant qualities of life? What could they do themselves to make Floda a better community? How could they explicitly engage with the process of urban development (beyond being consulted about a more or less finished suggestion at the end of a design process)? The questionnaire was handed out during several public events, such as the Spring Festival (eg. a local festival to meet the spring) or during church meetings. Along with the questionnaire, local business and association representatives were gathered to express needs and ideas. Also, young people were competing with each other about the “best new idea” for Floda in an “innovation camp,” arranged in cooperation with Ung Företagsamhet (“young enterprising”). Another method used was the study circle, where 18 citizens explicitly *wrote culture* in assignments that required them to describe the every-day life in this society. Some of the participant expressed themselves through photography (see below). All these activities were later collected and the every-day life narratives of Floda gathered in a printed booklet. Primarily, this was targeted to the competing architects. In this competition, a distinct objective was included that concerned theses narratives. In the end, the winning competitors expressed the values collected in visual ideas for new places, indoors and outdoors, but also as an increased access to the highly appreciated – but inaccessible – Sävelången stream.



“Everyday-life in pictures” Photo by Alf Ronnby

After this part of the development process was completed, and as the local actors were waiting to see how the work should be organized in order to move from sketches to plans and then to a built environment, I organized a weekly seminar series. The idea was to keep the discussions going but also to increase the level of knowledge amongst the actors involved. These seminars gathered between 10 and 150 visitors, including various experts as researchers, benchmarking examples from other municipalities in the region but also well-renowned national examples of development projects characterized by cooperation.

At time of writing this article, the municipality and the local stakeholders are discussing how to organize the work of fulfilling these architectural ideas into actual buildings and environments. Through the explicit use of Jalakas and Larsson's research findings in these discussions, I have been stressing the importance of a long-term commitment to the ideas gathered from the citizens we have worked with. This includes the need for someone to recount the citizen's needs and wishes all the way to the *res judicata* of the detailed plans. This context is only one example of a knowledge void in a Swedish planning system, increasingly characterized by ambitions and objectives that have to do with quite different ontologies than those inherit by definition in *physical planning*. This is a space waiting to be claimed by ethnographers and others. As O'Dell & Willim point out when they discuss how to claim such places, "the ethnographer must combine interview and observation techniques [...] with managerial skills and competencies not usually associated with ethnographic work" (2011: 7). By a "switch in register" (O'Dell & Willim 2011b), i.e. by applying methodological skills as well as ontological and theoretical competence gained through research, I can make materials become "convincing." In both this example of doing applied ethnography, as well as in other cases where I work with knowledge of the everyday life of geography, using texts alongside images, photos, maps, and charts increase the possibility of setting a new frame for urban development. This is a frame in which peoples' lived experiences, rather than general urban development ideals such as "densification" or "mixed-use city," make the difference for lives in urban environments. Maybe this "switch in register" towards ethnographic juxtapositions might open up a "small change", paving the way for changing the bigger picture (cf. Hamdi 2004)?

### **Co-op: Doing Research with/IN the Community**

As an ethnologist, one has the ability to, as sociologist Les Back puts it, record the life passed in living, to listen to complex experiences of people's lives (Back 2007). The longer I work in this field of urban development, both as a researcher and a consultant, the more I have moved from a typical urban studies-inspired critical reading of policy formulations, planning documents and public discourse around planning projects, to a position of using research knowledge to fill a



knowledge void, situated right in the middle of theory and practice. During the last couple of years, municipalities – having the planning monopoly as at least a potential policy instrument – have been paying more attention to the social aspects of the three sustainability dimensions (although, as discussed by Dempsey et al. (2011), conceptual confusion occurs and “social sustainability” is less frequent than for instance “social capital” or “sustainable community”). This has opened up a need for tools and approaches with which to record and analyze the everyday life experiences of citizens, associations, business and politics in cities, regions and municipalities. Having developed some such methods of my own (one being the “Everyday-life mapping”) and trying out others available in various geographical contexts and planning scales for some years (like Cultural Planning), I have become reflexive in regards to what competence *ethnology* contributes with in processes of urban transformation. To me, the critical perspective inherent in urban sociology (i.e. for instance the works of Zukin, Harvey and the likes) is difficult to translate into practical processes of urban transformation. The ethnologist wants to *be there*, and I find it almost impossible to be there and *distant* at the same time.

The appointed trust, as discussed earlier, made me think about the value of the profession and the theoretical toolboxes with which I could manage the *social dimension* in urban planning and development. As discussed by Hartmann:

researchers in construction management constantly refer to the applied nature of their discipline in scholarly publications by highlighting the benefits of their conducted research for the industry. Yet, practitioners often find it difficult to access the relevance of the generated knowledge for their every-day working practices (2013: 25).

This, Hartmann argues, is the result of construction management research being overtly positivistic and generalized – whilst the actual processes of construction is complex by nature. It is likely that researchers occupied with urban everyday life would claim a similar stance. And my experience after seven years of consulting is that urban planners need interpretation of research findings – i.e. someone making research findings *usable*, tangible. What they need is a *cultural broker* (cf. Mosse & Lewis 2006), someone with access to important knowledge (the everyday lives of people in the city, in this context) *and* skills of how to use that knowledge to direct the planners and politicians to certain decisions and methods. This gives ethnography an intrinsic possibility to:

bring fresh insights to the social processes of policy, offering ‘methodological deconstructionism’ that draws attention to the nature of policy language (or discourse) that reveals how particular policy ideas – governance, participation, civil society, fair trade or gender equality – work to enroll supporters (Mosse & Lewis 2006: 15).

Referring to Latour (2000), Mosse & Lewis actually pinpoint the ethnographic task of describing how complex realities of actors and actions, of needs and ideas, of desires and hopes intertwine in (urban) development processes.

Hartmann argues for the ethnographer becoming a “broker” in a particular process: “In other words [ethnographic researchers] become community members with defined roles.” (2013: 128). In the case discussed in this essay, I position myself – and am positioned by others – as the “tiny viewer” (cf. Simon 2010), the observer of the very localized processes *and* the narrator of the everyday-life in Floda. Is it a problem that I am schooled in the art of writing culture (cf. Marcus 1973), but also bred by a discussion concerned with research reflexivity that characterized Swedish ethnology during the 1990s and onwards (cf. O’Dell 1999)?

It might be, if your stance is that it is important for research to keep its distance from the object of study to maintain *objectivity*. But, if it is important that the knowledge produced within research becomes a part of society in a wider sense, it might instead be problematic to stay *too* detached from the object(s). The participation described in this essay could be discussed in terms of transgressing the formal linear planning process, it is a “boundary interaction” (Leino 2012), a social interface from which a community of practices arise to produce mutual learning (Wenger 1998).

In the introduction to the English translation of Michel Foucault’s perhaps less known work – *Death and the Labyrinth* – James Faubion describes Foucault’s writing style as mimicking that of Raymond Roussel. Roussel was a poet whose perception and descriptions of common artifacts such as a souvenir pen were expressed in a series of poems. These poems amazed Foucault so much that he wrote a book about him. As Faubion comments, Foucault liked Roussel’s work to the extent that he almost “seems to dissolve into Roussel” (Foucault 2004: xi). What if you, in your ambition to account for the everyday-life of a particular context and in using that very field’s own vocabularies in the attempt to “stay on the ground” and not jump to conclusions. (cf. Latour 2005), become part of that field or context? For Jane Simon, writing a commentary article on Foucault’s passion for Roussel, there is no problem if you really want to take part (in the lives affected by urban planning, in my case), because “what could be more proximate than dissolving into a subject” (Simon 2010: 10)? Is it possible to be close and yet critical?

Critical proximity is possible – in varying degrees of nearness – when seeing and reading, looking and writing are placed on the same level. (...) Proximity as a practice of looking is a form of scrutiny crucial for critical practice.

(Simon 2010: 19-20)

In my practice as a consultant, some problems have emerged more evidently than others. One thing is peoples’ distrust in public dialogues in general (cf. Strömberg & Forsemalm 2012). Since this is the primary procurement in my practice as a consultant, it is important to build a credible environment around public dialogues and stronger connection between these and the policy they set out to guide. The more I step away from academic objectivity and distance to engage in processes in which I am involved, the more trust I gain – and possibilities. One possibility

obvious to me is to stay in the processes for a longer period of time, making it possible for “social issues” to stick better to processes of urban physical planning.

I do not want to be a creep. I want to get in on the action and use my research competence – foremost the ability to create qualitative knowledge usable in and for policymaking and real urban planning. I want to be an agent in this community of practice. And if that means being less welcome in research communities, than that is, to paraphrase Bruno Latour, the full cost I am willing to pay (Latour 2005). However, I don’t think this move is particularly costly, after all there are research centers already, such as Mistra Urban Futures in Gothenburg, based on a *transdisciplinary* approach (cf. Doucet & Janssens 2011), where relations between research and practice is created. Discussions such as the ones addressed by O’Dell & Willim, as well as Graffman and Börjesson’s (2011) constructive considerations upon the use of ethnographic tools in business settings, point towards an interesting future for “creepy” ethnographers in search of a new relation.

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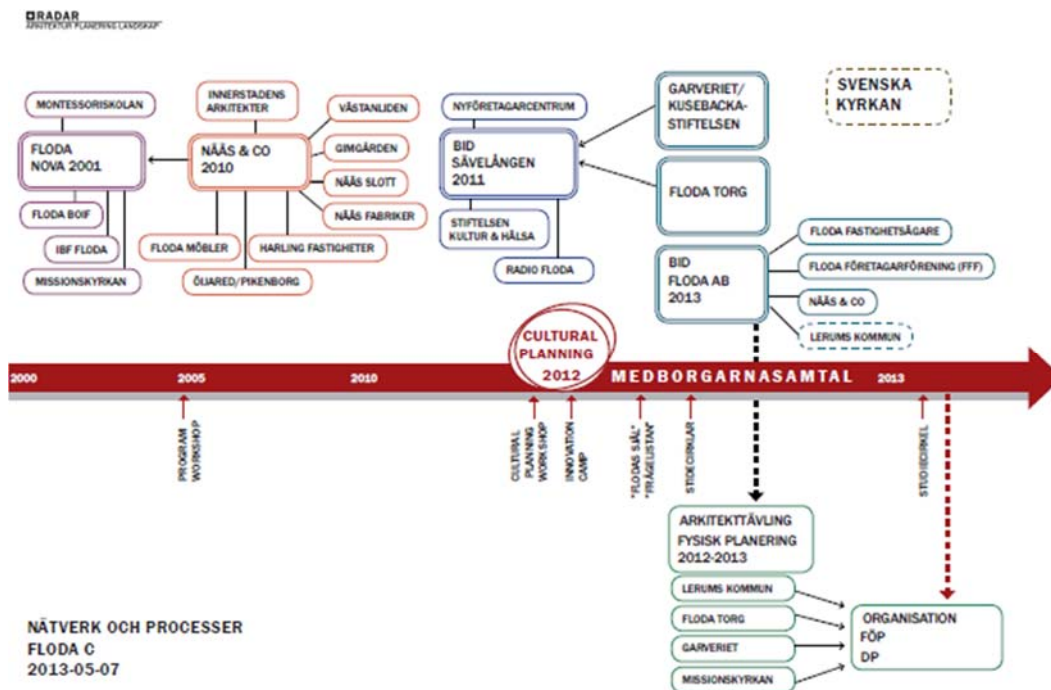
## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See the appendix for an image overview.

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Appendix: Actors, networks and processes in Cultural Planning in Floda