



Culture, Growth and Green: Negotiating Flagship Projects at the Periphery

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Abstract

This study explores the socio-spatial dynamics surrounding the creation and perception of Sara kulturhus, a flagship cultural centre in Skellefteå, Sweden. While initially being framed within a discourse of urban attractivity, the project later became entangled with narratives of green transition following the establishment of the Northvolt battery factory, which came to influence meaning-making. Drawing on interviews with local actors within the local cultural scene and an analysis of municipal documents, this study describes this process. The study demonstrates how the cultural centre became a site of negotiation between commercial and independent cultural values – celebrated as a symbol of progress yet criticised for centralising cultural resources and marginalising grassroots initiatives – while also revealing strategic rebranding efforts aimed at aligning with green transition objectives. Additionally, it reveals gendered concerns surrounding rapid industrialisation and the perceived role of culture in mitigating emerging social tensions. Ultimately, the study illustrates how flagship projects in peripheral regions are shaped by evolving discourses, local identity, and broader political-economic transformations; particularly how a discourse on ‘green transition’ stretched far beyond the industrial investments.

Keywords: flagship projects, place attractiveness, green transition, cultural growth, cultural centres, peripheral areas



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Introduction and Aim

In 2015, the decision was made to build Sara kulturhus (Sara cultural centre) in Skellefteå, a small city in Northern Sweden. Named after the celebrated local author Sara Lidman, the building was envisioned as a vibrant cultural hub. Its design included spaces for both local and touring performances, complemented by a hotel and restaurant. Several key cultural institutions, such as the city library, an art gallery, and the regional theatre, were also planned as permanent residents within the building. Construction began in October 2018, and Sara kulturhus officially opened its doors in September 2021. Like many municipalities seeking population growth (e.g. Billie & Nyborg Storm 2021), the project carried high hopes for the future. From the planning stage, Sara was embedded in a discourse of urban attractiveness, framed as a means to “create attractivity” and “increase visitor numbers” to the city (Skellefteå kommun 2012: 28). As with most Northern Swedish municipalities, Skellefteå aimed to grow and shed the lingering image of stagnation built up over four decades of decline (Eriksson & Hane-Weijman 2017).

The need for rebranding intensified after 2017, when Skellefteå secured the Northvolt battery factory – a major green investment expected to generate over 3,500 jobs and drive rapid in-migration. This shifted the rationale for Sara kulturhus, from being primarily a cultural and growth initiative to becoming increasingly aligned with investments in ‘green industry’, commonly framed as part of a broader ‘green transition’. Skellefteå could now position itself as a forerunner in the green transition and could (and did) also take the mega-factory construction as a promise of population growth (Eriksson, Lundgren & Liliequist 2024, Eriksson, Lundgren, Eriksson 2025), with the new cultural centre reframed as both a response to and a reason for the city’s transformation. The scale and speed of industrial change amplified Sara’s symbolic role, embedding it in discourses of green transition and urban renewal.

This paper aims to explore how meaning was constructed around Sara kulturhus, arguing that the building became a key site for negotiating identity, power, and urban transformation. By foregrounding the tensions in this meaning-making and analysing how different discourses intersect with local hopes and concern, as well as with socio-spatial dynamics, the study reveals the contested nature of cultural production in urban redevelopment. It particularly demonstrates how values and expectations tied to the parallel process of a green transition were mobilised beyond the industrial sphere, partially displacing earlier framings of Sara kulturhus as a symbol of threatening centralisation and cultural commercialisation. Empirically, the analysis draws on interviews with arts and cultural practitioners, cultural officials, and organisers, as well as Sara’s self-presentation, and relevant municipal documents.

Theoretical Points of Departure

The approximate simultaneity of two major developments in Skellefteå – the opening of Sara kulturhus and Northvolt's establishment of the mega-battery factory Northvolt Ett – created a dynamic context that made the city an interesting site for study (Näsman et al. 2023), since it introduced a shifting context that interviewees drew upon to construct new layers of meaning. Both processes were used in the city's place marketing as symbols for something new to come – promises of change. Hetherington (2007) introduces the concept of “imaginary of regeneration” to analyse the desires accompanying urban rebuilding, particularly after dramatic events. While his focus is on post-crisis reconstruction, we contend that the concept is equally valuable for understanding cities experiencing gradual yet profound transformation. Its emphasis on cultural imaginaries, such as desires, dreams, and fears, offers valuable insight into how actors within the local cultural scene interpret and make sense of urban change. To fully grasp this sense-making, it is essential to consider that Skellefteå belongs to a region with strong self-identity as a place left behind economically, politically and socially, an identity against which new imaginaries emerged (Eriksson et al. 2024). While Skellefteå does not meet Pike et al.'s (2023) criteria of being ‘left behind’ in material terms, the perceived need to prove itself in relation to more urban areas remained a powerful and productive narrative.

Skellefteå municipality's linkage between building a new cultural centre in the magnitude of a ‘flagship building’, and linking aspirations for future growth to this establishment, is far from unique. Since the influence of Landry's *The Creative City* (2008) and Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002), creativity and ‘creative industries’ have become central to urban planning and economic development. These ideas align with place-branding strategies and the use of ‘flagship projects’ such as architecturally ambitious cultural centres or sports arenas to boost visibility, attract investment and stimulate tourism (Billie & Nyborg Storm 2021, Miles & Paddison 2005). In this context, culture and creativity are not only valued for their artistic merit but also seen as drivers of growth and recognition (Arvidsson 2019).

While often praised for their promises to revitalise urban areas, flagship projects have also drawn criticism for advancing entrepreneurial and neoliberal agendas, fostering gentrification, deepening social inequalities, and commodifying cultural spaces (Harvey 1989, Peck 2005). This paper engages with Harvey's (1989) critique of such high-profile developments, which often serve as symbols of urban regeneration. Harvey argues that these projects are typically shaped by political-economic interests rather than the needs of local communities, with benefits accruing mainly to tourists and mobile elites who consume culture without contributing to the place's long-term well-being. To understand the enduring appeal of these contested projects, we argue that it is crucial to explore the discursive entanglements that sustain their allure.

Although scholars debate whether discourses of creative cities and urban attractiveness can be meaningfully adapted to small and midsize cities (e.g. Waitt & Gibson 2009), we consider it crucial to explore the empirical case of Skellefteå as a small city in the Swedish North. The specific circumstances of Skellefteå as the place for major developments underscore the need to emphasise that processes of urban regeneration always operate “within networks of uneven power relationships” (Waitt & Gibson 2009: 1244). In times of neoliberal restructuring, flagship projects certainly become desirable not only for urban but also for rural and peripheralised areas that are struggling to increase their populations to secure tax revenues and keep economy viable and welfare services at acceptable levels. Such places may therefore be prone to invest in discourses of attractiveness given that they possess the relevant amenities (Lawson, Jarosz & Bonds 2010).

To understand the dynamics, we analyse Skellefteå’s cultural scene – the physical, social and symbolic space in which Sara kulturhus was envisioned, debated, and constructed – as a ‘field’ (Bourdieu 1996), where interviewees negotiate positions in response to the municipality’s rebranding efforts aimed at attracting investors, tourists and new residents (Skellefteå kommun 2012). These efforts gained urgency with the arrival of Northvolt, which intensified demands for rapid in-migration and a larger workforce across sectors. We thus interpret the cultural scene as a field in transition, where ongoing processes are negotiated, contested and re-signified (Broady 1998). The planning and construction of Sara kulturhus, alongside Northvolt’s industrial establishment, catalysed both anticipated and contested shifts in the local cultural landscape, affecting perceptions of cultural value, sectoral hierarchies and spatial imaginaries. As Sara kulturhus entered the scene, previously stable positions were disrupted, and Skellefteå’s cultural landscape was perceived as being redrawn, both figuratively and literally.

Throughout the analysis, we employ the concept of discourse to underscore the shared processes of meaning-making around specific topics. This approach emphasises that urban transformation is not only about physical changes, such as a new building, but also about how these changes are rendered intelligible through language. The concept of narrative is treated as closely related to discourse, and the concepts are, in many cases, interchangeable. Both concepts refer to frameworks through which meaning is constructed and communicated, influencing how social realities are framed, understood, and legitimised. While discourse generally denotes a broader system of meanings and practices, and narrative often refers to a more structured storyline within that system, both concepts emphasise that meaning-making is contingent, negotiated, and subject to change (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). Discourses and narratives are identified by tracing recurring patterns of meaning-making, focusing on how certain ways of speaking and representing phenomena were manifested in the empirical material.

Methodology

The primary material consists of interviews with eleven participants, including cultural practitioners, organisers, and officials from cultural institutions in Skellefteå. Two interviews were conducted in pairs with participants sharing similar roles or connections. The interviews took place in 2023, at a time when Sara's role and significance in Skellefteå's cultural landscape remained somewhat unclear following its inauguration during the Covid-19 pandemic. This timing meant that conversations reflected both optimism and uncertainty about what the new cultural flagship would ultimately represent for the city and its diverse stakeholders.

Interviewees were recruited through open invitations to local cultural workers and institutions, such as theatres, museums, and venues, and supplemented via snowball sampling (Fägerborg 1999). We aimed for diversity in cultural expressions, gender, and age. However, reflecting the sector's gender distribution, the sample included eight women and three men. Although Skellefteå is a relatively small city and many interviewees occupy multiple roles, our participant group is not fully representative of the cultural sector. Including more perspectives could have offered additional insights into how the city's new cultural centre is perceived. Overall, we consider the composition of the interview group sufficiently representative for the purposes of the article, as it includes voices and perspectives from both grassroots and more established cultural actors.

The interviews were conducted as semi-structured conversations (e.g. Fägerborg 1999), allowing participants to reflect freely on their thoughts and experiences in relation to Sara kulturhus, Skellefteå's transformation, and the Northvolt establishment. Questions were adapted to suit each interviewee's professional role, though many participants held multiple positions within the local cultural scene and spoke from varied perspectives. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and pseudonymised.

The paper also draws on municipal cultural policy documents, Sara kulturhus' website, the local tourist website and local news media representations to contextualise and exemplify the meaning-making taking place within the interviews and illustrating their broader scope. These materials illustrate dominant discourses shaping the idea and planning of Sara kulturhus, and exemplify how culture is understood, valued and legitimised.

In a first analytical step, the material was inductively divided into broad themes based on content (cf. Braun & Clarke 2006), such as hopes about what would be gained and fears of what could be lost. In the interviews, we could see how the new cultural centre and the ongoing industrial establishment were repeatedly made significant for how the interviewees discussed the role of culture, the ongoing urban transformation and the municipality's support and expectations of the cultural sector in Skellefteå. In a second step, we focused on how paradoxes,

tensions, and expectations were conveyed or implied in the interviewees' narratives and experiences, which variously linked Skellefteå's urban transformation to the ongoing industrial establishment. In what follows, we first account for the way the investment in, and the construction of Sara kulturhus was legitimised, and then analyse the interviewees' critique and negotiations. In the subsequent sections, we discuss how the discourse of 'green transition' came to be articulated with Sara in different ways.

Flagship Territorialisation

When Sara kulturhus opened in September 2021 it became an unmistakable symbol of change, attracting attention both nationally and internationally. Representatives of Sara kulturhus and the municipality were quick to capitalise on this visibility, constructing a 'success narrative' for Skellefteå municipality that forcefully countered criticism of the large and economically risky investment in culture. Sara's CEO Anna Jirstrand Sandlund proudly declared to the media that, thanks to Sara, "All eyes are on Skellefteå" (Norman 2024). The success narrative also resonated in the interviews. "It's visible, in the world!" said Linda, a professional actress, with evident pride, noting that people from across the globe now come to Skellefteå to see the magnificent building.

In both examples, the cultural center is valued primarily as a flagship building and a symbol, while the cultural content it houses is rendered secondary. This symbolic emphasis is further reflected in marketing materials from Sara kulturhus and Skellefteå municipality, where the striking architectural structure is described as "Västerbotten's new beacon" (visitskelleftea.se, 4 Sept 2024). Consistent with common flagship strategies, the building's height and design are foregrounded: it is repeatedly highlighted as "one of the world's tallest wooden buildings," standing 80 meters tall with 20 storeys (sarakulturhus.se, 25 Aug 2024). On Sara's official website, the centre is primarily framed as an architectural prominence and secondarily as a hotel, while cultural activities are notably absent from the description.

In many ways, Sara kulturhus resembles the type of urban symbol that has been described as intimately tied to urban economy and strategies of gentrification (Zukin 1995), constituting a core element in cities' efforts to reinvent themselves (Gottdiener 1997). In this sense, flagship buildings embody an intriguing paradox: they aim to compete but also strive for similarity. As Andersson (2014) points out, while such buildings can be critiqued for being de-territorialised and merely mimicking global branding practices, their success often depends on territorialising processes. These processes involve the promotion of spectacular buildings by local actors, supported by investors with territorial connections, engagement with the local business community, and alignment with local tradition and values.

The latter is certainly true for Sara kulturhus, named after celebrated author Sara Lidman, who lived and situated her novels in the region. Notably, when announcing the name of the new cultural centre, six words in the spirit of Lidman were emphasised as important constituents with strong rural and local associations: ‘the village’, ‘the word’, ‘solidarity’, ‘consc-sense’ (an amalgamation of the Swedish words for conscience and sense), ‘the resistance’ and ‘the body’. The words create a powerful performative self-description (sarakulturhus.se Sara, 02 Dec, 2024) that roots Sara kulturhus in the local area both physically and culturally.¹ Under the heading “Local heroes” on the website, the involvement of Skellefteå’s citizens in the building process is recognised, both as interested members of the public and as active contributors to textiles and the 70 homemade cushions for Kulturtrappan, a large staircase and seating area in the centre’s entrance. It is emphasised that the building materials are sourced from named locations in the local area and that the construction “continues in the city’s old wooden building tradition” (sarakulturhus.se, 25 Aug, 2024). The choice of materials, the explicitly named and localised places and people, and the alignment with traditional building techniques are not only integrated with the local geographical context but also foster a sense of belonging to the area’s history and community.

Local connection is also closely articulated with *sustainability*, a theme emphasised in the competition programme. On the Sara website, sustainability emerges as a key marker of meaning: the building is described as “climate-smart,” and related concepts such as “climate wisdom,” “renewable energy” and a low “climate footprint” recur throughout the self-representations. These narratives align Sara with Skellefteå municipality’s broader vision of becoming a sustainable city (sarakulturhus.se, 25 Aug, 2024) as well as with broader discourses of ecological responsibility. This discursive flexibility became particularly significant in the context of the Northvolt investment: despite operating in distinct domains, culture and industry, Sara kulturhus and Northvolt are symbolically intertwined within a narrative of inevitable climate transition that signals progressiveness and positions Skellefteå as a pioneer. Such storytelling can be understood not only as a strategy to counteract local feelings of marginalisation (cf. Pike et al. 2023), but more significantly, as an effort to reshape Skellefteå’s image and brand. While this shared imaginary reinforces both the municipality’s rebranding ambitions and the perceived value of culture, the promotional framing of Sara kulturhus suggests it functions more as a branding flagship than as a genuine hub for cultural practice. Consequently, actors within the local cultural scene experience a paradoxical positioning: symbolically empowered, yet practically displaced.

¹ The words were included after they were suggested in a debate article by the Sara Lidman Company (Ek, Jäderberg, Larsen et al. 2013).

Sibling Rivalry and Regional Competition

The decision to build a cultural centre must also be understood within the broader context of regional resource distribution and neoliberal aspirations (cf. Husu & Kumpulainen 2019). It reflects a logic of competition shaped by decades of state withdrawal from peripheral areas and the increasing responsabilisation of regions to generate their own growth (Harvey 2006, Eriksson, Lundgren & Liliequist, 2024, Eriksson, Lundgren, Eriksson 2025). This logic situates regions within dominant growth discourses (Holdo 2020), compelling them to compete for limited markets and funding (Lockie et al. 2006). Interviewees frequently referenced this competitive framing, positioning Sara kulturhus in relation to similar cultural flagships in Northern Sweden, such as Väven in Umeå (inaugurated during its 2014 tenure as European Capital of Culture) and Kulturens hus in Luleå (inaugurated January 2007). These comparisons reflected a kind of sibling rivalry among Northern cities – particularly between Skellefteå and the county capital Umeå, but also Luleå, a university city further North. Despite a rich tradition of indie music and theatre, Skellefteå had long struggled to compete culturally, lacking major venues and sizable audiences. The construction of Sara kulturhus thus became a desired argument in this regional rivalry. As Marlene, a representative at Sara kulturhus, described the earlier situation:

Previously, Skellefteå residents had to consume [culture] away from home. You had to go to Umeå, you had to go to Luleå. And I know Luleå ran advertisements here in Skellefteå [that said] “Welcome to your nearest concert hall – it’s in Luleå!” because it was a few kilometres closer than Umeå [laughter].

Against this backdrop, actress Mia described Sara kulturhus as a game changer: “The house wasn’t built yet, but I said to people that in the future it will be you from Luleå who’ll need to come to Skellefteå for theatre – and they said, ‘no, I don’t think so’ [laughter]. But that’s how it is now!”. Municipal planning documents similarly frame the centre as a new source of pride, placing it alongside earlier success stories such as Skellefteå’s championship-winning hockey team and the gold discoveries in Boliden in the 1920s. With Sara, Skellefteå is poised to become “as well known for its culture as [it is for] its gold and hockey” (Bäckström Zidohli 2013: 5). This shift is further evidenced by prominent artists increasingly choosing Skellefteå over Umeå for tour stops (e.g. Thorén 2023). Lars, a politician and former cultural organiser, proudly noted: “Now we get the concerts too, and the cultural exhibitions we’ve been missing for years”. In these examples, the cultural centre’s capacity to host large-scale performances is positioned as a new cultural asset, challenging hockey’s dominance as the town’s defining symbol and reinforcing Skellefteå’s cultural capital.

Further, interviewees' satisfaction was often connected to spatial identity and meaning making, and it was clear that there was enjoyment in the narratives about Sara as a landmark outshining the venues of neighbouring cities. This type of enjoyment has been described as the feeling when sustaining a desire (Glynos 2001). The feelings of satisfaction connected to sibling rivalry showcased an important aspect of the way that competition was present and 'gripped' subjects. In the interviews, it engaged an enjoyable battle in which a 'win' resonated with a history of attributed spatial identities and proved a both successful and enjoyable transgression of those identities: "Before we were a left behind place, now we excel," "Before *you* were the place to go, now *we* are," and so on. But the enjoyment found in statements about 'sibling rivalry' did more than just emphasise successful local identity and compete for which neighbour is more successful – it worked as a joyful way of supporting and *depoliticising* the broader and ideologically invested logic of competition, which is generally characterised as driven by policy directives and economic incitements, and intimately connected to neoliberal politics (Harvey 2006). When evoked in relation to 'sibling cities' it was experienced as playful and innocent rather than a part and consequence of political decisions.²

A Field in (Urgent) Transition: Worries, Critique and Rumours

Although part of the municipality's plans since 2012 and described as wanted and needed by a majority of the interviewees, in the early days of the new cultural centre, Sara was met with loud discussions among local organisers and performers in the media (e.g. Samuelsson 2021, Runevad Kjellmer 2021, Rönngren 2021). Critical voices argued that "cultural activities are being downgraded in favour of commercial interests" (Samuelsson 2021). Amid what is often described as 'convergence culture' (Banet-Weiser 2011) and the entrepreneurialisation of arts and culture (McRobbie 2004), a sense emerged that something was on the verge of being lost. Consequently, efforts were made to distinguish between 'authentic' and 'commercial' cultural expressions. This critique and the associations of Sara kulturhus with commercial interests still lingered on by the time of the interviews and the interviewees expressed that they were deeply critical of viewing culture as a driver of growth. They opposed this view both on principle, and out of fear

² Enjoyment related to sibling rivalry also extended beyond municipal policy and interviewee perspectives. In Umeå, humorous stickers appeared featuring Sara Lidman's face on black metal icon Varg Vikernes' body. Referencing church burnings associated with Vikernes and the building's wooden design, the image conveyed both admiration and threat. It symbolised Skellefteå's rising cultural status while questioning the substance of that recognition, reducing Sara to a vulnerable structure and sidelining its cultural content in favour of symbolic visibility.

that it would undermine their own positions and sideline those that did not wish to conform to commercial criteria as well as less well-known local art forms. Paradoxically, the efforts to root the new building in the local community were also criticised for overlooking existing cultural practices. While praised as inclusive, the reliance on voluntary contributions – e.g. in Kulturtrappan – was seen to undermine the value of professional textile and craftwork in the municipality.

The criticism conveyed mixed signals regarding the *valuation of local culture* in ways that provoked discomfort among local artists. Not only did it address the feeling of being neglected in the decoration of Sara, but it also reflected a broader critique of the perceived tendency to overlook local culture, which Sara was seen to promote. Hence, on the one hand, interviewees were pleased and proud that the municipality had chosen to invest in the cultural sector and shared the hopes of the cultural plans that Sara kulturhus would attract attention. On the other hand, they were concerned that the culture being valued was mainly focused on major commercial national and international acts. Jessica, a freelance actress, argued that politicians did not fully understand and value the power of non-commercial culture and “what a *free* cultural life contributes to a city’s cultural life.” Although many interviewees generally agreed on the possible benefits of a cultural centre for Skellefteå, Harvey’s (1989) criticism of flagship projects echoed in the interviews. Interviewees feared that the high rental costs for space in the new building might result in the cultural centre holding greater symbolic value than practical function as a meeting place and venue for cultural events, which became a source of concern. Jessica was not convinced that more and bigger events is automatically synonymous with the local cultural life strengthening its position:

Someone said that “Oh, Skellefteå has become so rich,” or that we’ve got such a “vibrant cultural life now” with very big artists coming here and there are big concerts and so on. But then again, yes, there are many artists who come here, but is that what constitutes a rich cultural life?

There were insinuations that building expensive cultural centres would incorrectly suggest that communities were ‘investing in culture’, while in practice they were investing in a building. One of the interviewees ironically commented the news about the city of Skellefteå recently had advanced in the rankings of municipalities’ cultural contributions per capita through the establishment of Sara kulturhus, “if you look behind the figures – if you’re a gloomy person [laughter] – then you think that yes, that money will be used to pay the building’s rent!” Pernilla, holding a key position at a cultural institution, also reflected on the purpose of a cultural centre:

It's not necessary to have a new cultural centre, the necessity that exists is to have premises for culture. Frankly, you have to be a damn rich municipality if you're really going to have a new cultural centre. /.../ Because you tie up a lot of resources in a property. But then again, it's true, everything that's been said about [Sara] has a signal value. It has drawn attention to Skellefteå.

Some of the interviewees also brought up criticism about access and how the premises at the cultural centre could be used. Västerbottensteaterns operations began relocating to Sara in 2021 and completed the move in autumn 2023. The transition, however, was not without challenges (see e.g. Rönngren 2021). Actress Linda commented:

If we are to be there, we really must be *allowed* to be here. Because it was such a deal that you wouldn't be allowed to rehearse, you wouldn't have time, you would have used the premises too much. It's like completely absurd stuff.

Karin, active in a local arts organisation, voiced concerns about unequal access to Sara kulturhus, describing a perceived hierarchy in the allocation of exhibition space, where minor actors were consistently placed last in line. Her critique reflects a broader sentiment that cultural practice risks being overshadowed by the building's role as a symbolic flagship, underscoring how Sara came to embody multiple identities: a physical structure, a cultural hub, and a powerful symbol. Interviewees also expressed concern about the impact of Sara kulturhus on existing cultural spaces. For example, the relocation of the city library was seen as detrimental, with librarians reportedly reduced to receptionists, and the library space reduced in size. Symbolically, the demolition of Rivhuset – a DIY cultural venue located across from Sara kulturhus – was highlighted as a significant, and symbolic loss for alternative and youth-oriented culture in Skellefteå. Though originally intended as temporary and already decided for demolition, Rivhuset had become a valued space, particularly among young people, and its removal was widely perceived as a direct consequence of Sara's development. Interviewees expressed concerns about alienating younger citizens by demolishing Rivhuset, which contradict municipal goals to support youth engagement and cultural diversity (Skellefteå kommun 2015/2022, 2020, 2021). Local musician and programme manager Aron reflected:

It would have been incredible, just imagine if [Rivhuset] had been allowed to remain next to the cultural centre as some kind of symbol that it can coexist.

Emma, a cultural worker and politically active in the cultural sector, similarly argued:

I think about what Rivhuset meant, it was so incredibly important for the grassroots and their re-growth. /.../ I think it's scandalous that they didn't let it continue to grow. Because it became kind of symbolic that they demolished the building next to Sara.

The demolition came to symbolise a broader shift toward municipal control and commercialised culture, displacing grassroots initiatives, and the realisation of the new urban image thus became symbolic of the conflicting interests and negotiations for power among the different actors in the field of culture (cf. Broady 1998: 14). The case illustrates how cultural flagship projects can generate tensions between institutional and independent cultural expressions, while also sustaining a fantasy of coexistence. It further suggests that understandings of local needs – and, indeed, of what counted as local – were crucial to how Sara was perceived.

Green Discourse: Rumours, Concern and a Sense of Urgency

Since the concrete effects of Sara kulturhus were still unknown at the time of the interviews, leaving interviewees in a state of insecurity, support for their criticism was often found in rumours. In the interviews, they worked as power tactics (Nycyk 2015) to persuade others to take their worries seriously. Hence, expressions such as “It’s been said that” or “We’ve heard” often preceded the more detailed rumours about upcoming change, making the volatile nature of the imaginary of regeneration visible (Hetherington 2007). Especially, rumours related to the ‘green investments’ surfaced in the interviewees’ narratives, creating reasons to suspect upcoming changes in relation to the expected in-migration of workers to the battery-factory. Aron expressed his suspicion that the establishment of Sara as a flagship for culture would imply more radical changes than the building itself. He recalled earlier municipal statements of intent to promote co-utilisation of premises and argued that similar tendencies were evident in the ongoing urban transformation. This raised concerns that diverse cultural actors and activities might increasingly merge into larger clusters, with Sara positioned as the central hub. He further expressed worry that existing cultural venues could come to be perceived as outdated or resistant in Sara’s shadow, potentially placing them at risk of closure or demolition, as illustrated by the experience of Rivhuset. In the area where his current rehearsal studio was located, there had recently been closures of other services to make way for other needs in the transforming city: “We have heard that a school is to be built here”, he said, expressing concern by rhetorically asking what other buildings that might also be sold off. Aron’s speculations were fuelled

by ideas about the impending ‘green transition’ and the potential consequences it might bring:

Is the municipality going to sell off premises? Will housing be built there on those areas? Because housing will be needed if you’re going to get this big in-migration, jobs and everything.

What began as a discussion about the effects of Sara kulturhus on the local cultural scene became intertwined with considerations of what the Northvolt investment would entail and how the municipality would respond to the expected in-migration and increased demands for housing and services. While the goals outlined by Skellefteå municipality in 2015 were ambitious, they still envisioned growth at a relatively moderate pace. The new development strategy of 2022 confirms that this has not been the case. Instead, it acknowledges that “a development that would normally take forty years will be realised in ten. At most” (Skellefteå 2030: 3). The ongoing transformation provided interviewees with a more general sense of urgency (Lundgren & Nilsson 2023). This spurred uncertainty about how to position oneself in relation to Sara, coupled with anxiety that adopting an overly critical stance might risk being left ‘behind’:

There’s a lot that must happen in a short time and there are risks involved in that. It’s not entirely conflict-free in situations like this... transformations. So, you just have to be... I think I’m talking about this *tension*, that you have to “be in the game.” Because it doesn’t feel like you can just go like: “well, it’s going to be fine anyway.” There are risks! You don’t want to end up being left in the lurch (Aron).

The fear of being sidelined or forced into unfavourable shared arrangements intensified when articulated with the Northvolt investment. The urgency these investments generated sharpened the tension between perceived risks and the imperative to “be in the game” – echoing the neoliberal dictum that “there is no alternative” (Neocleous, 2013: 4, Lundgren & Nilsson 2023). This aligned with the general rhetoric of local policymakers at the time and contributed to downplaying critical voices (cf. Eriksson, Lundgren & Liliequist 2024). Interviewees felt caught between the risks associated with the investment and the potential consequences of rejecting it. With Northvolt’s arrival, the municipality’s population growth targets suddenly gained concreteness, and the policy objectives appeared within reach. New workers were indeed coming to Skellefteå, bringing new concerns, but also, as will be discussed, new ways of legitimising Sara kulturhus.

Greening the Relevance of Sara

Plans for Sara kulturhus predated the 2017 industrial investment decision in Skellefteå. Early planning documents made no explicit reference to the 'green transition' later associated with the battery factory; while they emphasised 'sustainability', their discourse primarily centred on 'attractivity', highlighting objectives such as 'creating attractiveness', a 'better living environment', and improved 'conditions for culture and growth' (Bäckström Zidohli 2013: 5). Sara's own self-descriptions also draw on definitions of sustainability that focus on the building's construction, energy use, and climate footprint (sarakulturhus.se, 25 Aug, 2024). The association with a 'green transition' appears to have emerged only in the wake of climate-oriented industrial investments linked to Northvolt. Despite this, the investments are sometimes symbolised as an important *reason* why the cultural centre was needed in the first place – as if the industrial investments preceded the cultural centre. In an article in Scan Magazine, Anna Jirstrand Sandlund, the CEO of Sara kulturhus, is quoted:

The city has become a meeting point for leading industrial companies that are paving the way in the green transition, and we needed a cultural hub to match that expansion (Norman 2024).

In her narrative, Jirstrand is pushing the view that Sara is built to add balance to the city, which is constructed as *already* at the forefront due to the industrial investments. It does not seem that she sees culture as the driver of growth and city attractivity as in accordance with discourses of attractivity, but it is evident that her image of an attractive city includes a venue for culture. Similarly, in an article from 2021, it is stated that:

Three years after the Northvolt establishment was announced, the municipality has already started building a 20-storey wooden cultural centre (Säll 2021).

Here, the construction of the cultural centre appears closely linked to the Northvolt investment. After its opening in 2021, Sara is sometimes referred to as a hallmark of an already 'green' ambition:

– We want to contribute to a society where we can offer people a good living environment and where, at the same time, our industry and new business establishments become part of our green transition. Sara kulturhus will be a kind of hallmark of our ambition to create a place that is imbued with sustainability from all perspectives, says [Municipal Director] Kristina Sundin Jonsson (Editorial Team 23 April 2020).

It is reasonable to assume that the establishment of Northvolt – widely celebrated in the media (e.g. Eriksson, Lundgren & Liliequist 2024)– helped catalyse the conceptualisation of a ‘green transition’, into which Sara was subsequently incorporated. In an article about Skellefteå’s journey “from depopulation area to green key player” it is stated, opposite the quoted articles above, that culture was an important factor for Northvolt’s choice of Skellefteå. In the text, the chairman of the municipal board recalls the negotiation with Northvolt: “We told them about Sara kulturhus, and in some way that came to be decisive for Northvolt to think there was a reason to move here” (Pogorzelska 2021). Hence, Sara is ascribed meaning interchangeably as the *response* to having already landed the ‘green mega-factory’, and as a *reason* that the ‘green investments’ ended up in Skellefteå in the first place.

Matching the Green Industrial Expansion

Discursive influences of the ‘green transition’ on meaning-making around Sara were also evident in the interview material. Marlene, a representative of Sara kulturhus, highlights the cultural centre’s societal role, rather than its physical form or symbolic status. While she acknowledges that local cultural offerings remain important for overall place attractiveness, her framing diverges from municipal policy, which foregrounds relevance for the general public, tourism, or capital investment. Instead, Marlene directs attention to the emerging workforce at Northvolt, a group that is repeatedly referenced in the material and stereotypically depicted as predominantly male industrial workers, often recruited internationally. She argues that a vibrant cultural scene could help counteract what she calls the “fly-in/fly-out syndrome,” where many workers experience social isolation.

Including the figure of the fly-in/fly-out worker illustrates how discourses of the ‘green transition’, in which this figure repeatedly appears, entered and shaped the debate about Sara kulturhus. In the early discourse surrounding the battery factory, the fly-in/fly-out worker was typically framed as a *risk* associated with the Northvolt establishment, while the ideal employees were imagined as highly skilled Swedes who would relocate to settle in Skellefteå (Eriksson, Lundgren & Liliequist 2024). When articulated with Sara kulturhus, the fly-in/fly-out worker is rather evoked as someone whose needs must be met and who constitutes a potential and important new resident. In that sense, the advocacy for investment in culture merged the arguments of the discourse of ‘green transition’ with the discourse on ‘attractiveness’ even closer. For Mia, a local actress, Sara made Skellefteå attractive, and as such a reason for Northvolt’s fly-in/fly-out workers to decide to settle:

If we’re really going to talk about the challenges that Skellefteå faces with this industrial development – people must *move* here! And why do

people move somewhere? [...] Just look at what it looks like in the world,
people live where things happen!

Sara kulturhus is thus made significant not only to attract people in general, but to provide the ones who worked at Northvolt with cultural experiences and entertainment. The argument is far from Florida's (2002) vision of the creative city's goal of creating growth through attracting the 'creative class'. Rather, culture is seen by the interviewees as a tool to attract the very workers that Florida's vision has been thought to exclude (e.g. Peck 2005, Flew 2012). Initially, the notion of international fly-in/fly-out workers represented a *challenge* to the dream of Northvolt workers contributing to local demographic growth, since they were not expected to stay (Eriksson et al. 2024). By the time of the interviews, however, this group was also imagined as a *possibility* and *responsibility*, contingent on successful efforts to encourage settlement. The fly-in/fly-out worker further embodied the figure of someone likely to suffer from the lack of settlement and family proximity, which the expression of "fly-in/fly-out syndrome" captures. While acknowledging the difficulties, the engagement with fly-in/fly-out workers introduced a new and significant challenge for the cultural sector – positioning it not only as a key actor in Skellefteå's transition from industrial town to cultural hub, but also as part of the broader effort to ensure a *just* green transition (Barca 2024, Eadson & van Veelen 2023). The lack of such efforts, placing the social burden on workers, has been repeatedly demonstrated (e.g. Barca 2012). In that sense, the discourse of 'green transition', which included the ideas associated with fly-in/fly-out workers, became drawn into the narrative about Sara such that it provided the cultural centre with an urgent and important task. No longer just a cultural or growth initiative, Sara was legitimised and made valuable through its perceived social relevance to the needs of incoming workers.

Hopes and Gendered Fears

Sara kulturhus, and the web of meaning woven around it, came to intertwine and embody two key discourses: a discourse of 'urban attractivity', which was present from the early planning stages, and a discourse of 'green transition', present from ca 2021. Despite the differences, the two discourses became entangled in the meaning-making around Sara through the similarities in the ways they organised hopes for the future. As such, the building came to respond to the identified needs for transformation both globally (green transition) and locally (urban transformation). The Northvolt establishment was itself associated with strong hopes that, aside from the national goal of becoming a fossil-free welfare state (de Leeuw & Vogl 2024), were quite similar to the hopes connected to the policy-goals of urban transformation. Both harboured hopes for establishing the region as an

attractive place with in-migration and new jobs.

Such hopes for the future constituted an ‘imaginary of regeneration’ (Hetherington 2007), a beatific narrative suggesting that if only certain paths were pursued, such as constructing a cultural centre or investing in a battery mega-factory, a better future would inevitably follow (cf. Glynos & Howarth 2007). It was a narrative that repeated a desired transformation from ‘left behind’ to ‘key player’, and from masculine-coded industrial town to attractive and more gender-neutral cultural hub.

The latter found strong support among interviewees where the identification as a masculine-coded industrial town was described as the “most unattractive thing there is” and that, in the light of the expected in-migration of primarily male workers to the Northvolt factory, it is “culture that we need to build on in order to attract women here too. And families!” (Ella, musician and study organiser). The interviewees’ narratives were partly formulated against media reports that warned about the effects of a rapid influx of predominantly male workers and that represent a fear that the market for prostitution and crime would increase (e.g. Lindstedt 2021, Torp 2023). Such fears no doubt framed the interviewees’ feelings, and provided proof that masculinity could become dangerous if not tamed by society and culture. Thomas, who worked at a study association with a particular focus on culture and music, emphasised the gendered aspect of the expected in-migration when concluding that “most of the people who move here are men. They participate and create less culture.” Many interviewees identified culture and community as solutions to such problems, but, as Thomas phrased it: “if we think that culture is the solution, how are we going to reach them?”. His concern reveals taken-for-granted assumptions about both masculinity and social class, implying that male work migrants associated with the working class were not expected to engage with the cultural centre independently.

Gender also played a part in the meaning-making around the ‘green transition’ as such. Due to the sudden association between ‘green transition’ and ‘industrial ventures’, traditional associations between ‘green’ and ‘soft’ values such as concern for the climate and opposition to industrial exploitation were challenged. Instead, the front figures of the green transition had indeed been men, and the ecomodern narrative through which the investments were conceptualised also had strong masculine associations (Hultman 2016, Eriksson, Lundgren & Eriksson 2025) – not least because of the expected gender of the workers.

Against this backdrop, Sara kulturhus became the answer to one of the fears that were connected to Skellefteå as both an industrial and perceived ‘left-behind’ place *and* a city in the forefront of green transition: the fear of the masculine. As a left behind place, masculinity along with working class associations had long been identified as part of the problem (Eriksson 2010, Karpestam & Håkansson 2021).

Now, the feared masculinity also came to comprise both what has been called 'industrial modern masculinity', closely associated with Skellefteå's orientation towards industrial work, and 'ecomodern masculinity' associated with the idea that climate change can be fixed with technological innovations without the need for lifestyle changes (Hultman 2016). As a counterbalance to a threatening masculinity, the flagship Sara paradoxically became associated with the 'softer' values of culture. This association was paradoxical because Sara had previously been linked to a 'hard' definition of culture as driver of growth, contrasting with valued notions of 'free' or 'autonomous' culture.

Concluding Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the socio-spatial dynamics that shaped the creation and perception of Sara kulturhus as a new flagship monument: how flagship projects are both legitimised and criticised on the basis of contextually dominant events and discourses, and how they find their way into people's everyday worlds. Such projects are intimately associated with urban areas, but we demonstrate how they can become desirable also for peripheralised areas (cf. Lawson, Jarosz & Bonds 2010).

The factors that triggered change in the cultural field were twofold. First, the decision to build Sara initially caused concern centred on the perceived instrumentalisation of culture as a vehicle for economic growth, worries what this might mean for local cultural life and practitioners. Although Sara gradually became a source of pride – symbolising both cultural ambition and urban renewal – criticism persisted, particularly the concern for Sara's role in centralising cultural activities and creating competition. Second, Northvolt's mega-scale industrial investment in Skellefteå brought a shift in focus where Sara's sustainable construction became articulated with the industrial 'green transition' – particularly the expected rapid and male-dominated international in-migration of workers to the Northvolt factory.

On the one hand, the prospect of the battery-factory fuelled rumours that important cultural venues might be demolished to make way for urgently needed housing and schools for incoming workers. This prompted businesses and venues to safeguard their autonomy and possibly reinforced a sceptical attitude toward the new workforce. On the other hand, the development also introduced new ways of legitimating cultural activity, as a means to mitigate other perceived risks associated with worker in-migration, such as criminality and social isolation. In this context, the ambiguous feelings surrounding the cultural centre's associations to culture-driven growth, professionalisation and middle-class sentiments appeared to be resolved. Importantly, however, both processes reinforced Sara's connection

to middle-class identity and positioned the middle class as central actors in a ‘just transition’, while largely overlooking the agency of workers themselves.

Not only Sara kulturhus but also the image of Skellefteå was affected by the competing discourses that portrayed the city, on the one hand, as a hub for of culture and creativity, and on the other, as a centre for green transition and industrialisation, each producing distinct imaginaries of regeneration (Hetherington 2007). Yet processes of urban regeneration always operate “within networks of uneven power relationships” (Waitt & Gibson 2009: 1244) and these discourses unfolded against a backdrop of dominant geographical imaginations (Gregory 1995). One of the more significant imaginations against which new narratives emerged was that of a ‘left behind place’ (Pike et al. 2023) – *feelings* of marginalisation and the need to prove oneself. Such feelings were partly constituted by long-standing perceptions of peripheralised areas in Northern Sweden as ‘backward’, closely associated with masculine ideals and activities (Eriksson 2010, Eriksson, Lundgren & Liliequist 2024) and reinforced by assumptions of a general local lack of education and professional competence (Nilsson & Lundgren 2015, Sjöstedt Landén, Ljuslinder & Lundgren 2017). This dynamic surfaced in interviewees’ accounts, where concerns about urban normativity intertwined with a sense of ‘revenge’ against stereotypes, thereby partly reinforcing the city’s self-image as a left-behind place. However, and interesting from a perspective on gender, the masculinity that was sometimes seen as part of the peripheralised position also permeated the imaginary of regeneration – at least the one situated within a discourse of green transition and industrialisation. Here, Sara and its initial embeddedness within a discourse of attractivity and culture had other values to offer.

Our findings suggest that meaning-making around Sara was dynamic rather than fixed, shifting with prevailing discourses. They reflect a tension within the cultural field, where symbolic capital is allocated to cultural institutions and practitioners, but where the autonomy of culture remains uncertain (cf. Bourdieu 1996, Broady 1998). Initial fears of centralisation and cultural commercialisation following the establishment of the new cultural centre were evident and perceived as threats to the local culture, which was strongly associated with small-scale authenticity. Yet these concerns evolved as Sara became linked to the investments in Northvolt’s green batteries. This articulation both reinforced anxieties (through anticipated impacts of in-migration on the cultural scene) and challenged them (by reframing Sara within narratives of a ‘just transition’, positioning culture as a resource for incoming workers). The debate surrounding Sara kulturhus provides an empirical illustration of the ways in which green investments are embedded within discursive formations that exert influence well beyond industrial domains, and vice versa: how cultural projects can be strategically framed to fit evolving municipal goals. In this context, Sara came to exceed the concrete functions as

a cultural centre. Supported by the discourses of ‘urban attractivity’ and ‘green transition’ it became part of a means to break loose from geographical imaginations providing leverage for new imaginaries of regeneration (Hetherington 2007).

Afterword

In recent months, the situation in Skellefteå has shifted dramatically once again, following Northvolt’s bankruptcy and its subsequent acquisition by the American battery manufacturer Lyten. While this development is significant in its own right, leaving many workers unemployed with limited prospects of staying in Sweden, it also starkly contrasts with the findings presented in this article, which capture the perspectives of cultural workers during a period marked by optimism and high expectations surrounding the new large-scale industrial initiative. Given the impact that the discourse of ‘green transition’ came to have on how Sara kulturhus was comprehended, a key question now is whether the cultural centre will continue to embody buzzwords such as ‘green’ and ‘sustainability’, or if other values will come to the forefront.

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