

# “Imagining the ideal city, planning the gender-equal city”

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Abstract: Focusing on imaginaries of the ideal city is an important method to illustrate the power of ideas, imaginations, representations and even visions, and how these dimensions influence the way cities are organized and lived. In this paper we argue that a current and important city imaginaries in a Swedish context, is connected to and presented as the gender equal city. Here; the gender equal city becomes the symbol for the open, tolerant, bustling, safe city, a city aiming to attract the middle and the creative class. However, at the same time the imaginary of the ideal, gender equal city are highly ambiguous. This ambiguous will be discussed throughout this paper.

Based on present planning projects in Sweden, we will in this article study how imaginaries of the gender equal city is presented, filled with meaning and used in place marketing with the overall ambition to discuss the possibilities and pitfalls of what we call the gender equality planning strategy. The aim of the paper is to discuss the possibilities for changing gendered power relations, as well as other power relations related to class, race and sexuality. The material consists mainly of two case studies with a focus on planning projects aiming at creating equal cities, such as improving accessibility in public space, gender aware analyses of the city's symbols and decorations etc., and includes analyses of interviews, policy documents and media reports. The theoretical framework draws on the discussion of politicization and de-politicisation (Mouffe 2005) in relation to neo-liberal forms of rule where place-making and place-branding are rationalities that risk moving conflicting dimensions in society outside both planning and politics overall.

The imaginaries of the ideal public space in a Swedish context is often connected to ideas of gender equality, i.e. gender equality becomes a central ingredient in the sustainable city. This can of course be connected to that Sweden is often regarded as 'the good example' regarding issues of gender equality and women's positions and situation in society (cf. Rönnblom 2011; Magnusson et al. 2008). But to translate this imaginaries of the gender equal city into practice has proven more difficult. Friberg and Larsson (1997; 2002) and Friberg (2006) describe the difficulty of integrating feminist theory in planning theory as it requires the adoption of a gender perspective and challenges the gender-neutrality of the planning process. We therefore see a separation between long-term project to equalize power relationships between women and men, and short-term measures to change the experiences of place that can be described as only treating the symptoms and not the 'real' problem of societal power relations related to gender, race and sexuality. One way to concretize this has become to discuss the vision on a gender equal city in terms of safety, where women's insecurity has become one of the most obvious example of inequality. A powerful discourse has developed concerning the importance of safe cities particularly for women. We therefore argue that when the imaginations of the ideal city in Sweden are translated into practice in the planning of the gender equal city, the imaginaries of the safe city becomes both the starting point and the vision for the future.

## Introduction

There is no one narrative of a city, but many narratives construct cities in different ways highlighting some aspects and not others. (Bridge and Watson, 2000:14)

There is not one imaginary of the ideal city, but rather many, sometimes conflicting powers of ideas, imagination, representations and even visions of the ideal city. In this paper, we begin with an understanding that visions of the good city are largely defined by the values of the dominant or hegemonic group and legitimated by planning discourses and documentation (Gunder 2005). This, Gunder (2005) argues, risks leading to the failure of the democratic process because the issues at stake are pre-shaped and “technically” determined and the type of rationality that is used only allows for a limited range of “preframed” dreams of what constitutes the “good” city (or region) (Hudson and Rönnblom submitted). We also believe that contemporary understandings of societal problems often stand in the way of open or “free” articulations of visions of the good city (ibid).

The city, although it belongs to all, is also filled with both visible and invisible boundaries. And those boundaries are the result of yesterday’s spatial planning, including its norms and values. These boundaries affect our way of life, our way of being and moving in the city. Even today, urban planning tends to view women as either caregivers or victims (Larsson and Jalakas 2008: 23) The city itself can thus be seen as something to be conquered, to become a place where women can move freely and do not have to be protected.

In her book *The Sphinx in the City* Elizabeth Wilson (1991) addresses the gendered imagery of the city, and people’s everyday experiences of urban living. She argues that we wrap ourselves in the city “like a cloak of many colours as: a disguise, a refuge, an adventure, a home” (Wilson 1991: 159). In recovering the feminine imagery of the city, Wilson seeks “a new vision, a new ideal of life in the city – and a new, ‘feminine’ voice in praise of cities” (p. 11).

In this paper, we argue that a current and important urban imaginary in a Swedish context is connected to and presented as the gender-equal city, and we are interested in exploring how this kind of imaginary could work as a potential tool for change. The aim of the paper is to discuss the possibilities for changing gendered power relations, as well as other power relations related to class, race and sexuality, through analyzing imaginaries through local projects and initiatives. The material consists of a case study, the city of Umeå, with a focus on planning projects aimed at creating an equal city, such as improving accessibility in public space, gender-aware analyses of the city’s symbols and decorations etc., and includes analyses of interviews, policy documents and media reports.

In the next section we present our theoretical framework. Section three of the paper is a discussion of how we use imaginaries as a form of methodological tool. After that we present our case study, Umeå, and this is followed by an analysis of the empirical material studied. The paper ends with some tentative conclusions.

## Theoretical framework

This paper concerns the production of imaginaries and place. Our understanding of place is informed by the work of Massey (1994, 2005), and thus we perceive place as flexible, in process and constructed through power relations, where power is understood as relational and

productive (cf. Foucault 1980). The local is understood as not ‘only’ local but as constructed through understandings of the global, the national and the regional. It is of primary importance in this study to regard space and place as gendered, and Massey argues that this gendering of space and place both reflects and has effects upon the ways in which gender is constructed and understood in the society in which we live (Massey 1984: 186). Gender relations are thus constructed in and through space and place and, equally, space and place construct gender (Bondi & Davidson 2005; Listerborn 2007). The different constructions of space are also informed by how different power relations – age, class, race, gender and sexuality – interact together with the more explicit spatial power dimension. Thus, the city is conceptualized as both a physical place and an emotional space (Hudson & Rönnblom 2008). Through its space, its architecture, its social relations, and its gendered activities, the city produces and reproduces the structures of power in society. Certain ways of organizing and structuring the city are accepted as natural, as neutral processes, and in this way the gendered and racialized power relations remain hidden (Grosz 1996).

Consequently, cities take their shape through representations and the discursive practices that construct them (Bridge and Watson 2000). How cities are envisioned, represented and filled with meaning have an effect, and Bridge and Watson (2000: 7) use “city imaginaries to illustrate the power of ideas, the imagination, representations and visions in influencing the ways cities are formed and lived.” Images, narratives and discourses of the city can be presented in different ways, and these can change over time (Hall, 2003).

Thus, we believe that cities are produced in process and that these processes are permeated with power, i.e. that spatial planning in its various forms is essentially a political process in which the work is performed within political constraints. Under today’s neo-liberal rule the traditional division between politics and economics, driven by two different rationales (justice and capitalism) have melted together, and the capitalist rationale is a technology of rule that works from “... the soul of the citizen-subject to education policy to practice of empire” (Brown 2005). The market ideal has increasingly come to characterize what we call ‘public’, and this has, among other things, resulted in a development whereby political solutions (in terms of conflicts and oppositions) must increasingly give way to the ‘right’ solutions – i.e. a shift from politics to moralism (cf. Mouffe 2005, 2013). As Chantal Mouffe (1999: 752) argues:

What is really at stake in the critique of “deliberative democracy” that I am proposing here is the need to acknowledge the dimensions of power and antagonism and their ineradicable character. By postulating the availability of [a] public sphere where power and antagonism have been eliminated and where a rational consensus would have been realized, this model of democratic politics denies the central role in politics of the conflictual dimension and its crucial role in the formation of collective identities.

Hence, we would like to introduce a discussion of politicization and de-politicization (Mouffe 2005) in relation to neo-liberal forms of rule where place-making and place-branding are rationalities that risk moving conflicting dimensions in society outside both planning and politics overall. Is it possible for an imaginary of the gender-equal city to challenge these neo-liberal rationalities?

In her study, Johansson (2012) focuses on place branding through using the concept of the imaginary and arguing that place branding aims to present a sanitized, appealing image of a place, which then inevitably means selecting particular elements to put forward. In this way,

she is arguing that the complexity of a place and its social life, constituted by multiple identities, activities and representations, must be simplified and organized into a commodity. In constructing and putting forward a preferred image of a place, these provide a frame through which to 'read' the place at it is (Johansson 2012). Following Johansson's argument (2012: 3613), we think it is important to keep in mind "that this is an expression of a particular group, or groups, of imaginaries and hence it is always a political act that is intended to produce a particular effect", at the same time as it is important to also acknowledge that there are still cracks in the neo-liberal façade.

Nevertheless, we believe that it is important to understand imaginaries of the ideal city in a place-branding context as cities all over the world are today being encouraged to include activities that are designed to promote themselves and hence attract both investment and people. Pike (2013: 230) argues that branding is understood as a process that aims to create added value and meaning to branded objects (here places, cities). We think that place branding should be defined as the official imaginary and communications about a place, aimed at promoting and presenting the most favourable characteristics of the place (Andersson 2014). In addition, we argue that it needs to be understood in terms of power relations as this also involves processes of exclusion as less attractive aspects are left out of official communications. This is achieved, as Andersson (2014: 151) argues, "through continued maintenance of the place brand and activities of local elites trying to keep their 'brand promise' as providers of a clean/attractive/desirable place". In relation to our interest in processes of politicization and de-politicization, we also believe this analysis to be of importance, not least because we regard policies and practices of gender equality to be a field in which there should be the potential for the political but where there is a risk that the rationalities of branding may take over. Following Damyanovic & Zibell's (2013) argument, that planning the gender-equal city requires a more explicit consideration of gender in both how the planning process is conducted and its wider impacts, and that this means building an understanding of the different perspectives and interests, considering their sex, age and way of life as well as their ethnicity, social background etc., we also argue that there is a need for the political in order for gender-equal planning to challenge the prevailing order in society.

### **Methodological considerations – imaginaries as analytical tools**

The concept of the imaginary, as presented by Ricour (1994), tells us that it is not an expression of pure fantasy; rather, it is a projected image which is socially edited through discourse and narration (Johansson 2012). Imaginaries draw on what is already known. Within feminist research, scholars from different disciplines and approaches have elaborated on visions and ideals, not least in order to enhance feminist emancipation. One example is the feminist theorist Iris Marion Young, who has developed a vision of city life as a normative ideal (Young 1990). Hudson and Rönnblom (submitted), in their research on women's visions of the city, have developed alternatives to the constricting and discriminatory policies and development processes of the present. They have tried to find ways of "freeing the mind" through the presentation of transgressive alternatives in thinking about the constructions of women and men in urban development, i.e. to create what they call a "visions methodology". Hudson and Rönnblom focused on what a city that is a "good" place for both women and men might look like (Hudson & Rönnblom 2008) as they tried to capture women's visions of the city. They argue that one of the key advantages of the visions methodology is its potential to challenge the existing orders of the city and to imagine alternatives to the constricting and discriminatory spaces of the present. It needs to "transgress the structures and ordering of our present ways of thinking conceptualizing and theorizing" and allow us to think the

unthinkable (Sargisson 1996: 59). It is only by doing this that we can move beyond the confining and limiting boundaries of the past and the present.

In their study, Hudson & Rönnblom discuss the ability to imagine alternatives, and they promote the visions methodology as a way of doing this. In their conclusions, they also reflect on the pitfalls of their methodology and state that, despite all their efforts, there are still many difficulties in making people see beyond what is already there. We take this as being the same thing as what Ricour means with the imaginary; that it is always attached to the present, and for us that means that power is always there.

Why is it so important to imagine alternatives? Is it not more productive to address the problems that we see in society? In our view, focusing on imaginaries is a way of going one step beyond the problems of today while still acknowledging the present. In fact it could also be seen as a way of actually addressing the contemporary situation. In 1980, Hayden argued that most cities have been designed around the implicit principle that a woman's place is in the home and this leads to cities that constrain women physically, socially, and economically (Hayden 1980). And even though the positions of men and women have changed since the 1980s and gender-equality policies highlight the importance of both men and women taking part in all spheres of society, private as well as public, both the implementations of these policies and the prevailing gendered norms in society show how traditional understandings of women's and men's places in society still dominate. And in relation to the built environment, the physical space that we all relate to, that we produce and that produces us (Grosz 1996), we argue that this is especially relevant; that the built environment carries power relations that could be both difficult to grasp and difficult to change, due to its physical character.

But, although imaginaries are "closer to" the present than visions, the task of capturing them still remains. How is it possible to study imaginaries of, in this case, the "good city"? Inspired by critical policy analysis (cf. Bacchi 2009), we have chosen to study imaginaries in reverse. This means that we have focused on the actual implementation of policy through specific local initiatives and projects. The image of the equal city is complex and difficult to articulate. Therefore we have chosen to highlight various projects that aim to challenge and change unequal power relations in the city. By focusing on local attempts to change the city, we have the ambition of reading both the problem and the imaginary in reverse. In Bacchi's *What's the Problem Represented to Be? Approach*, problems are seen as produced within policy. Beginning with this understanding, we turn our attention to the implementation of policy through studying local projects that have the explicit intention of making the city "more gender equal". We regard these projects or initiatives as examples of both addressing problems articulated in gender equality policies, as well as, and here more importantly, articulations of imaginaries.

The empirical data considered here include newspaper articles, policy documents, reports, web pages and information leaflets concerning work aimed at improving different urban spaces, initiatives to work for a gender-equal city, etc. In the next section, the case of Umeå will be presented in more detail.

### **Staging imaginaries of the gender-equal city**

That Umeå is one of Sweden's most gender-equal cities also means that Umeå is one of the world's most gender-equal cities. (Nordic City Network. Webpage)

Umeå is the largest city in northern Sweden (120,000 residents). In official presentations Umeå is promoted as a gender-equal city, in a gender-equal country<sup>1</sup>. The image of the gender-equal city is manifested in several ways, *inter alia*: theme days about violence against women have been organized; efforts have been made to improve the safety of public spaces; gender issues have been explicitly considered in the physical urban planning; and fathers' use of parental leave in Västerbotten (the county of which Umeå is the capital) is the highest in Sweden<sup>2</sup>. Umeå Municipality has been working actively with gender equality since the mid 1980s and the municipality's overall gender equality goal is "to create the conditions that women and men should have the same power to shape society and their own lives" (Umeå Municipality 2014). There has been an administrative function for gender equality since 1989, a gender-equality committee consisting of elected politicians since 1994 and before that an equality committee since 1978. Today, achieving gender neutrality in all areas is a key priority for the municipality.

There is a strategy for gender equality which provides guidelines and starting points for the work to reach that goal. The municipality thus has an entrenched political ambition and an established support structure for gender equality. (Umeå Municipality 2013)

Today this means that a gender perspective is on the agenda for comprehensive plans, design issues and security aspects (Boverket 2010) and the clearly stated ambition is that "the municipality will be a proactive actor in the promotion of gender equality and has an important mission in promoting gender equality within the organization as well as in the society at large" (Umeå Municipality, 2011). Hence, Umeå also runs the "secretariat" for gender issues at the Union of Baltic Cities Commission and awards a gender-equality prize (instituted in 2014) with the aim of recognizing companies, organizations and associations working on gender issues.

Umeå Municipality has good potential to become an equal municipality. Gender does matter and it is therefore important to use gender glasses when we look at our operations and how we should develop our work in order to provide equal public services and be a driver for an equal society. It's about raising the awareness of the living conditions of girls and boys, women and men in our community. (Umeå Municipality's strategy for gender equality)

In public representations, Umeå is described as a tolerant city, as the city is often linked with "radical ideas" connected to the feminist movement, a political music scene and veganism. In contemporary Umeå there is also a wide range of new and alternative cultural, political and social movements. The feminist movement is regarded as strong and there is a vast range of social commitment to equity issues such as gay rights, gender equality and animal rights, manifested (for instance) in: an annual feminist festival; skateboard organizations for girls etc. Umeå has also been nominated as Sweden's most gay-friendly city for two consecutive

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<sup>1</sup> Sweden and its Nordic neighbours are world leaders in gender equality according to the 2010 Global Gender Gap Report, which is

<sup>2</sup> Parental leave is arguably more generous in Sweden than anywhere else. Parents are entitled to a total of 480 days paid leave per child. Both mothers and fathers are entitled to (and encouraged to share) it, with costs shared by the employer and the state. Every year the Swedish Confederation of Professional Employees (*Tjänstemännens Centralorganisation*, TCO) presents a 'daddy index' — an aggregate measure of fathers' share of all selected parent days and parental leave. If a father and mother share the parental leave equally the index value is 100. In 2010 in Umeå the value of the index was 50.2, compared to the national average of 40.9 (Orpana 2010).

years<sup>3</sup>. This image has been significant for the Capital of Culture year and the opening of a women's history museum in the city.

Thus, Umeå could be seen as a “good example” of the Swedish gender-equality narrative that is established in national policy:

Sweden's new government is a feminist government. Restrictive gender roles and structures must be combated. Women and men must have equal power to shape society and their lives. Only then can our society and every individual reach their full potential. (Prime Minister's Keynote Speech, October 3, 2014).

This quotation comes from the Prime Minister's Keynote Speech when introducing the new government in September 2014. It is an example of how Swedish gender equality has been presented during the last 20 years; that men and women shall have the same opportunities in all spheres of society in order for both the society and each individual to reach their full potential. Sweden has also been at the top of the UN's “ranking list” for gender equality for many years and gender quality has become a kind of “selling label” for Sweden (Towns 2002).

The position of women in Sweden has improved in recent decades, for example in relation to issues of bodily integrity and the fact that Sweden has what could be regarded as a radical policy on gender-equality issues, i.e. addressing gender in terms of societal power relations. At the same time, the image of “the gender-equal country” also makes it more difficult to address prevailing gendered inequalities. The hegemonic discourse of Swedish gender equality stands in the way (Sandberg and Rönnblom 2015). And an analysis of the implementation of gender equality shows that, when gender equality is transformed into the strategy of gender mainstreaming, the political ambition, i.e. changing gendered power relations, turns into administrative routines that leave the prevailing order more or less intact (Rönnblom 2011). The fact that Sweden is seen as “the most gender-equal country in the world” also means that Sweden stands out as a case of special importance in international scholarship on studies of gender equality and space. Sweden is often regarded as “the good example” regarding issues of gender equality and women's position and situation in society (cf. Rönnblom 2011; Magnusson et al. 2008).

Focusing on the translation of imaginaries of the gender-equal city into practice and on how the gender-equal city “is made” in a continuous process through the work with gender equality (Bacchi and Eveline 2010), here we will focus on the city of Umeå, the largest city in northern Sweden, as an overall imaginary of the gender-equal city. What kind of impact has “the gender-equal city of Umeå” had on policies, practices and projects in the city of Umeå?

A central starting point for the municipality's equality work is the European Charter for equality between women and men, which Umeå Municipality has signed. This is developed by European municipal and regional associations' Council (CEMR). (Umeå Municipality, webpage)

In Umeå, this work has taken the form both of integrating a gender-equality perspective into different initiatives, measures and projects (i.e. gender mainstreaming) and specific gender-equality initiatives. The municipality has worked with projects that focus on providing

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<sup>3</sup> The gay Internet sites Sylvester and Sylvia have named Umeå as Sweden's most gay-friendly city.

support to local government operations in their efforts to break down the overall gender equality goals in regular activities, new ways to improve participation in the project Gender Planning, etc.

We argue that Umeå is a clear “gender mainstreaming example”, where we can see that the municipality has been working (more or less) systematically with gender mainstreaming in different areas of the municipality, where today there are clear gender-equality objectives as well, which we will discuss in more detail below, and has worked with various types of projects where “gender equality is made”. This affects descriptions, initiatives and projects in the city and here we will present five projects that have both seized and “used” the imaginary of Umeå as a gender-equal city. They have simultaneously taken advantage of the space that this representation provides to convey a message and to promote change in that these projects are both part of an imagination of a gender-equal city and part of the staging of Umeå as a gender-equal city.

Another determining factor as to why Umeå is a good example for studying the translation of imaginaries of the gender-equal city into practice is that Umeå deliberately highlights how it uses the image of the city being “good at gender equality”. We will discuss this by focusing on how imaginaries are staged, done and performed through six different projects – divided into three groups – that illustrate how imaginaries are articulated, how they are utilized to create agency, and how they are used in the implementation of projects: 1) articulating the gender-(un)equal city, 2) practising the gender-(un)equal city and 3), performing the gender-(un)equal city.

### **Articulating imaginaries of the gender-equal city**

In this section we present two projects: The European Capital of Culture, Umeå 2014, and The Museum of Women’s History. We regard both these initiatives as articulations of the gender-equal city, i.e. that the articulation itself becomes a form of imaginary.

#### *The European Capital of Culture, Umeå 2014*

Umeå was one of the 2014 ECOCs. Being the Capital of Culture has been highlighted and discussed by municipal leaders as something that will strengthen and develop Umeå’s cultural profile. Eriksson (2010) argues that in order for Umeå to become the 2014 European Cultural Capital, the city was represented as northern, ‘alternative’, unusual and exotic, at the same time as it was promoted as a young, growing, cultural city with successful businesses. In the selling of the European Capital of Culture project and Umeå as a progressive city, the municipality argues that: “another part of a progressive cultural city is an active feminist movement” (Umeå Municipality, 2013 p.12). Umeå and gender equality became something that was highlighted in the bid to become Capital of Culture and in the making of the programme for the year.

Challenging Power is part of the Umeå Capital of Culture year and is all about challenging power relations, raising questions about norms and power in a structural context in order to bring about long-term changes, within and through culture. For example, it involves asking questions such as: Who has access to culture? Who is the culture practitioner and who is the consumer? Which

representations are portrayed in the performing arts, whose perspective is conveyed? (Umea2014, webpage)

It was admittedly a theme area without direct resources attached to it, but it is obvious that the theme should be seen as a clear symbol of the performance of the gender-equal city. Space was created during the year for norm-critical projects and places to discuss such questions as: Who has power over the music? and How can music challenge power and norms?

Riga, together with Umeå, is the European Capital of Culture in 2014. In relation to this, the Equality Committee has raised the proposal to develop and strengthen cooperation with Riga in the areas of gender equality and LGBT issues in 2014, as part of contributing to the Capital of Culture year's theme of challenging power. Contacts have been initiated primarily with non-profit organizations dealing with gender equality and LGBT issues in Riga. (Umeå Municipality, webpage, Jämställdhetsutskottets sammanträdesprotokoll)

We can see today that culture is increasingly being promoted as a "cure for all ills" in relation to cities achieving not only economic growth and urban regeneration but also social cohesion and inclusion (European Commission 2011) and those cities offering a vibrant cultural life are frequently identified as growth centres (Florida 2002). Therefore, Umeå Municipality actively worked with the European Capital of Culture year in 2014 in forming a vision for the future. And, as the example above shows, it used the image of Umeå as good at gender equality in the marketing of Umeå as well as in contact with others.

### *The Museum of Women's History*

In May 2010, the Left Party in Umeå filed a motion to the municipal council in which they requested that Umeå Municipality should work to establish a Women's History Museum. The museum was a requirement of the Left Party in Umeå in order for the party to agree to cooperate with the Social Democrats. The argument put forward for this project was that women's history is and always has been underrepresented in museums. The Left Party also argued that the opening of a women's history museum is well suited to Umeå's ambition to be a gender-equal city (Tamara Špirić, Umeå kommun, Motion, "Kvinnohistoriskt museum för framtidens skull!", 2010-04-07.). The Women's History Museum asks on its website why the museum was established in Umeå. The answer follows:

Gender equality and community engagement has long been important for people in Umeå. (The Museum of Women's History, webpage)

However, the project to establish a Women's History Museum has been marked by political disagreement. For example, in May 2014 the leader of the Moderate Party suggested that the proposed space of the museum should instead be allocated to Umeå tourist office. Nonetheless, the museum opened at the end of November 2014.

The ambition for the Museum is that it should not only be a place to make women's stories viable, but should also be involved in discussing what society should be like in the future. The letter of intent states that the museum's vision is for it to become a voice for the equal distribution of power and this in turn will help to overcome the norms and structures that restrict women's and men's opportunities to participate in society on equal terms (Umeå Kommun, Letter of intent):

Recently, Sweden's first women's history museum opened in Umeå. Apart from highlighting women's forgotten history, the institution will be a strong voice in the public debate – which is disliked by many conservative local politicians. (ETC.se, 2014-12-03, news article)

The ambition of the museum is hence to show the past to be shaping the future. As imaginaries draw on what is already known, the museum begins with the ambition to try to change what we know.

The Museum of Women's History discusses perceptions of gender & power, identity & history. It is a place for action, reaction, laughter and debate. We want to provide new perspectives on the past, illuminate the present in order to form the future. (The Museum of Womens History, webpage )

The ambition is to show that change is possible and to encourage action; however, what this change for the future should be is not directly made concrete beyond saying that it will be a more equal future. The imaginary presented is a more gender-equal future with an equal distribution of opportunities, power and influence between women and men, and the way to get there is to discuss gender, power and identity. The museum aims to do this by, for example, working norm-critically while focusing on examining and challenging notions of what it is to be female and male. They also state that the way forward is “to provide people with the tools necessary to identify and understand the norms, power structures, and structures that limit prerequisites, opportunities, and choices in all aspects of life – regardless of gender” (The Museum of Womens History, webpage )

The two examples discussed above illustrate how Umeå is represented as the gender-equal city and as the progressive city. This representation is used in the marketing of Umeå as a whole but also in order to promote a specific project. We see this as an imaginary of articulation of the gender-equal city: that the imaginary in itself is to articulate gender equality.

### **Practising imaginaries of the gender-equal city**

Being an attractive city has become increasingly important in the contemporary discourse of (economic) growth (cf. Anholt 2007) as place promotion has become a political strategy for municipalities (Mukhtar-Landgren 2009) in their work to promote economic growth. In short, we argue that being portrayed as a city with unequal opportunities for women and men is bad for city branding.

It is important that the city is clean and well looked after for its attractiveness. Littering has a powerful influence on how people experience the city they live in or visit. Security is an important factor for welfare and influences our quality of life. Security is a complex concept, it can be seen both in terms of actual security (crime statistics) and the lived experience of security. In Umeå there are citizens, above all women and the elderly, who avoid going out alone for fear of being attacked or assaulted, particularly during the hours of darkness. (Umeå Kommun, Ett rent och tryggt Umeå - åtgärdsprogram för Umeå kommuns utomhusmiljöer [A clean and safe Umeå – programme of measures for Umeå Municipality's outdoor environment])

Larsson and Jalakas (2008) argue that the ambition is for more gender planning, but it has been difficult to move forward. Studies have shown that it is difficult to transfer the general objective of gender equality into practical planning activities (Larsson and Jalakas 2008: 9). The authors believe that gender equality is thus at once *a priori* and difficult to relate to spatial planning. However, some of the knowledge acquired regarding planning to ensure equality of access and the safety of spaces has been implemented by city councils, housing companies and others to create urban environments (including those in Umeå) where people can be safe. To focus on physical planning from a gender perspective: it is all about asking questions about planning opportunities to meet both women's and men's experiences, interests and needs. The planning practices are characterized by diffuse discursive power (Larsson 2006), which can be visualized by the doing of imaginaries of the gender-equal city. The tunnel, *Lev*, and the planning of the park, *The Park of the Seasons* are two examples of how this has been manifested in the physical planning.

### *Lev – a city passage*

The city passage called *Lev* (Live) was opened in 2012, and has since almost become a landmark. The passage is close to 80 metres long and goes under a road and some railway tracks. This passage was planned with a gender perspective to ensure that it will be available to women and men at all hours.

The new city passage between the city centre and the neighbourhood Haga is an example of gender mainstreaming in physical planning. The architects have worked with space, height, daylight, rounded edges, gradual gradient, artwork and maximal transparency. Working with gender mainstreaming meant awareness raising on issues of safety, fear, violence and power in public spaces.

This approach resulted in a focus on the design of the passage; its openings are wide with plenty of natural light, it rises in the middle of the tunnel and there are rounded corners to enhance the lines of sight through the tunnel. In this way, physical planning of the city becomes a question of planning the safe city.

As the tunnel itself becomes a landmark, this work has been increasingly highlighted as a 'good example' by national actors such as the National Housing Board. And hence, it is a representation of Umeå as progressive city working to promote gender equality.

The municipality received funding to create a pilot study for how they would work to strengthen safety from a gender perspective in the tunnel environments for the future. They used gender mainstreaming as a method throughout the project and all stakeholders were invited to put ideas into practice. The physical part of the project focused on improvements in the form of light and sound design, the use of elaborate materials and thoughtful design of the tunnel's roof and walls. For two weeks, an experiment was conducted in which different sounds from nature were played in the pedestrian and cycle tunnel. Before and after this test about 400 people were interviewed about their feelings and perceptions of safety in and around the current passage. (the Swedish National Board of Housing, Building and Planning, webpage)

How can this be understood in terms of imaginaries of the gender-equal city? The entire work on the tunnel was to create a physical space where people feel comfortable to be and where the focus was on creating a place that is not perceived as frightening or insecure, but open and welcoming. This was done through the process of gender mainstreaming, focusing on all the involved actors who would participate in the work. The physical place, the tunnel, was the result, but gender equality was made in the process of getting there. An awareness of the fact that women perceive places as unsafe was included in the design and thus the ambition was that the place will be accessible to all. Attempts were made to reduce factors that can lead to the place being perceived as insecure and thus inaccessible. There was also a focus on participation in the process; thus, a way was found to challenge or at least visualize the power relations. The practices of increasing women's safety are of course intended to alleviate women's fear of violence in public space, but they also become a way of safeguarding the image of a safe and gender-equal Umeå. Practices for increasing safety thus become practices for branding Umeå (Sandberg and Rönnblom 2014).

### *The Park of the Seasons*

A newly launched project (2015), the Park of the Seasons aims to test new approaches to inclusive dialogue in the planning process and developing the design of play areas / venues from a gender perspective. In this project, young girls are highlighted as a target group. The project aims to develop new methods and is thus described as a continuation of other work started in Umeå (for example, the Lev tunnel discussed above) and this will mean a reappraisal of ideas and notions related to the city's public environment. This project is based on the policy formulation:

Everyone should be included – A sustainable city can only be built together with those who will live in the city. All planning should be guided by openness, democracy and equality. We will develop the city and the public so that everyone, men and women, children, youth and disabled, may be present on equal terms. This leads to a city for all. (Umeå Municipality, webpage, b)

Young girls, in Umeå as well as in the rest of the country, are underrepresented in the city's spontaneous athletics and activities. The project aims to develop a play area / meeting place and focus on women's and girls' participation in the city, and hence to work with both physical design and attitudes. This project builds on the municipality's previous experience regarding methods development and, as in the example above, this will result in the planning of a physical place that should be available to everyone in the city. However, it is the road to get there that focuses on participatory planning.

The project is divided into two parts, which are integrated: Development of methods for the design of procedures for an inclusive dialogue / planning process, and the physical design of the play area / meeting place. It is the first part of the project in particular, aimed at developing methods, that we want to highlight here, as this can be said to be where gender equality is made within municipal operations. The objectives involve, for example (Umeå Municipality 2014): “- An inclusive planning process of dialogue with the help of expertise from other areas of municipal operations and external actors, - Knowledge building around the work from a gender perspective in the internal planning within Umeå municipality.”

How can this be understood in terms of imaginaries of the gender-equal city? The physical place, as this is part of a park, is here used to bring gender-equality perspectives into the planning and, therefore, is a way of conducting gender mainstreaming. Here it is above all

about listening to others, who are underrepresented, giving their visions of their city, as was done in a workshop with young girls:

We fantasize and write down what we want to do in the city. What opportunities are there for girls to do what they want? Is there any place for that in Umeå? What would this place be like to enable our ideas / fantasies? Can we improve something on an existing site? (Documentation, workshops, The Park of the Seasons)

This project is one example of trying to overcome the difficulties in reaching out to the whole community, which are often recognized but have seldom been rigorously addressed, either in theory or practice. However, studies of events such as consultation meetings show that it is often quite difficult to engage people (Nyström and Torell 2009). In addition, a mounting number of studies have shown that some groups, notably women and ethnic minorities, have been neglected in planning processes (cf. Listerborn 2007). This implies that it may be difficult to engage citizens, or at least some groups of citizens, and to create interest in projects. Another way to view this problem is that interest may be low in some cases due to feelings (real or perceived) that real opportunities to exert influence are minimal. Hence, this project needs to be understood in a context within which ways to engage people are often raised by both planners and researchers (Listerborn 2007) and is therefore not unique of its kind. What makes this project interesting is that it so clearly takes as its starting point an imaginary of the gender-equal city. But the project does this without actually asking the questions: What impact does participation in planning have? How is participation related to decision-making? The difficulties and challenges are then found in translating this into practice, and the difficulties regarding all participatory planning are that it becomes a group vision of the city, without leading to real change and that it stops to listen to the voices without actually including the results in the planning and operations. This demonstrates the difficulty of translating imaginaries into practice.

### **Performing imaginaries of the gender-equal city**

One way of performing imaginaries could be described as displaying gender equality and inequality. Here we focus on two projects that focus on gender display as a way to portray power relations and representations.

*“Nobody puts baby in a corner”*

Public art can be a way of challenging, making a voice heard and as a forum to put forward a message. The public work “Nobody puts baby in a corner”, by Sisters of Jam: Mikaela & Moa Krestese, became for a time a landmark in Umeå city centre.

The art duo argues that statements are often carriers of strong values and signals, which make them very suitable for communication in public space, and that this quote from the movie *Dirty Dancing* should be understood as a symbol of equality, democracy and feminism. (Sisters of Jam, web page)

The municipality highlights this artwork, displayed on a building in the city, as:

“Nobody puts baby in a corner” encourages young girls and women to dare to take space, not letting the increasing violence limit their movements in public space. (Umeå Municipality, webpage, c)

In this way, the artwork becomes part of the making of the gender-equal city, a city where girls and women dare to take up space. At the same time, it could be seen as a way of performing the imaginary of the gender-equal city.

### *The gendered landscape of Umeå*

Since 2009, Umeå Municipality has worked with “The gendered landscape of Umeå”, which can be described as a gendered city tour of Umeå or a guided bus tour with gender glasses, in which roughly 500 external actors take part every year. During the tour, participants are guided through initiatives in the city aimed at improving gender equality, but some remaining challenges are also pointed out. Places highlighted include: the University, the football stadium, nursery schools that employ gender-aware pedagogy etc. This bus tour can be seen as a symbol as well as an actual project aiming to challenge the non-gender-equal city. It can be seen as clearly contributing to the formation of the place, at least for a certain time. The symbol becomes a way to stage gender-aware place making and hence a way to demonstrate gender mainstreaming practices.

The tour is a way of making the statistics in the report come alive and an innovative way of demonstrating the concrete effects of striving for gender equality. (Information brochure, “The Gendered Landscape”)

During the tour, successful changes and landmarks in the city were pointed out as well as remaining issues being illuminated. The tour operators argued that the purpose is also to underline the importance of gender in society and to show the results of long-term work with gender issues in Umeå Municipality. The bus tour is based on a report, “The gendered landscape of Umeå”, which shows how gender plays a role in the political and social landscape formed by Umeå Municipality, and includes results and comparative figures that illustrate women’s and men’s situation. This is about drawing attention to who gets what, and under what conditions within the municipality.

This tour has had a great impact and helps people to visualize the importance of the decisions and physical locations and the city as a venue for inequality and efforts to challenge norms and structures, completed work and remaining problems. (Umeå 2014: 14)

Thus, the bus tour almost becomes a symbol for the work carried out, and for the awareness among municipal representatives. The bus tour forms an evaluation of the work that has been done, and the work that needs to continue. In this way, the bus tour can be said to be a way of performing an imaginary of the gender-equal city, but even here the articulating of a gender-equal imaginary is as much about showing the inequality that still prevails, while it is difficult to articulate what a gender-equal vision is. It will be the good examples that will be the tools and the outcome of it. The bus tour is in itself described as a success and other cities are following Umeå’s example, organizing tours as an educational strategy. The bus tour is hence both a method and a way of performing imaginaries of the gender-equal city.

## **Paradoxical imaginaries – concluding remarks**

Promoting safety has become a recognized element of urban planning and questions have been raised about how spatial planning can contribute to preventing violence and insecurity (Koskela and Pain 2000, Listerborn 2002), not least in relation to issues regarding women's fear in public space. In a Swedish context, different actors have long worked with practical ways of achieving safe cities and, for example, safety audits have now become more or less standard procedure. However, these very same actors argue that measures such as safety audits, mapping and improving places with poor lighting and so on are insufficient and are only treating the symptoms rather than the 'real' problem of societal power relations related to gender, race and sexuality. We have called this contradiction the analytical-practice paradox (Sandberg and Rönnblom 2015) to illustrate the clash between these two contrasting discourses on gender and fear in public space. It can be summarized in terms of a separation between the long-term project to equalize power relationships between women and men, and short-term measures to change the experiences of places and perceptions of fear. It is an example of what Friberg and Larsson (1997, 2002) describe as the difficulty of integrating feminist theory into planning theory, as it requires the adoption of a gender perspective and challenges the gender-neutrality of the planning process.

In this paper we have tried to scrutinize practices of gender equality with the ambition of discerning the imaginaries in these practices and also to try to challenge the dichotomous understanding of the analytical-practice paradox. We are interested in discovering whether the imaginaries of local practices could also be seen as a potential challenge to the prevailing gender power order, even if these do not include explicit articulations of power.

In the case we studied, we found imaginaries in the form of articulations of gender equality, built practices of gender equality and performances of gender equality. We believe that they carry with them both neo-liberal practices of branding and also attempts at participation and articulations of power. The projects studied can be said to impose a staging of the image of the equal Umeå. They become projectified policies and hence a way to stage and create gender equality. They are a way to work, and to focus on the content, the doing and the results rather than on the documents. On the other hand, projectified policies always risk coming to an end when the funding runs out, without leaving sustainable traits in the organization. When discussing strategies of gender equality, gender mainstreaming is always put forward as the sustainable strategy, the argument being that in order to really make a change we need to mainstream gender (equality) into all policies and practices. On the other hand, gender mainstreaming tends not to challenge the prevailing order due to its inherent focus on inclusion. To include a perspective or a dimension means to accept the order within which it is to be included. In contrast, projectified policies carry the possibility of actually challenging the prevailing order, which also means that the project carries an imaginary.

By analyzing the case of Umeå, we want to illustrate how work can be continued when the documents have already been drawn up. All the policies are already there, and gender mainstreaming is also a self-evident strategy. What then becomes interesting is that projects are carried out in the name of gender mainstreaming. The projects become the practice. To follow on from Sara Ahmed's famous quote, we end up doing the documents instead of doing the doing. We believe that the case of Umeå shows that doing could follow the documents, and that the doing produces imaginaries of gender equality. But does practice necessarily mean political change? Does it mean that gender equality becomes politicized, in the Mouffe

understanding of the word? We argue that the three versions of imaginaries explored here carry different potentials for politicization.

We relate the first imaginary, articulating the gender-equal city, to the depoliticizing practice of place making and branding. Places have always been brands; hence, the reputations of places have always been managed and occasionally invented by their leaders. Anholt argues that cities are to a large extent actively engaged in the business of taking care of their good names. “A place-brand strategy is a plan for defining the most realistic, most competitive and most compelling strategic vision for the country, region or city; this vision then has to be fulfilled and communicated” (Anholt 2003: 214). As Umeå has a self-imposed place brand connected with gender equality, the different projects have been able to use this as a starting point (and perhaps also as a negotiating position).

The second imaginary, practising the gender-equal city, to a large extent illustrates the analytical-practice paradox. The ambition of creating a safe and inclusive city, through both the built environment and inclusive practices involving participation from different groups of citizens, is on the one hand a way of addressing the immediate problems, but, on the other hand, they also become part of the branding process of Umeå. When the projects are done the problems are also solved.

With the other two versions of imaginaries as the backdrop, we argue that the third, performing the gender-equal city, stands out as the one with the greatest potential for politicizing gender and equality, mainly – and paradoxically – due to the articulations of inequality inherent in this imaginary. Politicization needs articulations of conflict or different interests, and this could also be an imaginary. To be allowed to articulate questions of power and explicitly address inequalities is not least an imaginary in a time of neo-liberal rule where administration of “the right solutions” to a large extent has replaced competing articulations of interests, values and visions of “the good society”. In this way, problem representations and imaginaries can be seen as two sides of the same coin.

In sum, how can we understand the imaginaries of the gender-equal city? There is still a vision of a gender-equal future, but this is articulated through the demonstration of the inequality that currently exists. However, it is also about showing the way towards this desired future by including voices for change, for example, through the women’s history museum’s claim to be part of this change. In other words, all imaginaries carry traces of articulations of inequality. It is about creating tools for people to see the inequality. And the tools become a way of articulating the imaginaries of the gender-equal city.

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