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How do we live our lives?

How do we want to live in our homes? Towards an architecture for sharing.

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Abstract:

How we want to live our lives is not an individual matter; it is a collective matter. Our basic human needs are the same whether we are poor or rich and whatever the colour of our skin. The focus of this paper is how we can meet our human needs more sustainably in the context of domestic life, and how the design of future homes can support more ingenious and convivial resource usage. Of particular importance is the notion of sharing resources. During a pilot study I used the method of shadowing to explore how individuals of different circumstances in Sweden meet their needs in the domestic setting, as well as their experiences of and thoughts on the sharing of resources. Early findings indicate that sharing needs to be easy, and that sharing with people you know is more comfortable. The research should provide insights for urban planners and architects planning new residential neighbourhoods.

Key words: *Sustainable, Solidarity, Domestic life*

1 Introduction

Even if all humans have the same basic needs we live our lives in different ways, and how we live has changed over time. Immigrants come from different cultures and have other ways of living than the existing housing market supports. It is difficult for an Arabic family to find an apartment that is big enough for the whole family, in the Swedish context such would be termed an extended family, and would not live together (Karl-Olov Rydå, Allbohus, Societal Housing Company, Alvesta 2014).

50% of all Swedish couples divorce (www.scb.se). This creates new demands for housing as the children normally split their lives across two different homes. How can a residential plan accommodate this new way of living?

By trying to understand how people live their lives it may be possible to create living spaces that support lives as they actually unfold, as supposed to a standard.

In 2014, I conducted a pilot study to try to understand how people in small households live their lives. I used the method of shadowing and shared their lives over 24 hours.

Since the 1980s the core value of 'how to live a life' has totally changed, at least in Sweden. Roland Paulsen, sociologist, has in the book "Vi bara lyder" from 2015 (We just obey my translation) investigated the strategy of the Arbetsförmedling ('Job centre' the Swedish public agency, which facilitates matching between jobseekers and employers). The Swedish population has never been richer than it is today. The productivity of each employee has increased dramatically. In the former Swedish society this resulted in higher wages or fewer working hours. Today the reverse is true. People who live in Sweden work longer hours and get less paid. Whereas in 1995 Sweden had the lowest income discrepancies in the OECD, today the country is at 14th place. (Paulsen 2015)

The efficiency diminishes the amount of working places and renders more people unemployed. Inequality in society increases. According to the book Spirit level (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010) a more equal society creates a better society in terms of wellbeing. Poor people are more ill and need more care. Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) also state that segregation creates less solidarity and empathy among people.

Originally an architect, I have been involved in developing new residential areas. In my opinion, when architects develop a new housing area they usually seek to oblige the wishes of the politicians or constructing companies. Segregation is one result of that.

Instead such architectural developments could be an opportunity to imagine the home in new ways. In a seminar at Linnaeus University, Sweden, in September 2015 I met the artist behind the project "Let's Play Home", Malgorzata Markiewicz. In Poland, according to her, a home is where you have yourself and your thoughts. I believe the home is more than a shelter for the individual, her family and her things. A home could be a place where people have the possibility to meet and take care of one another, to share stories and life. Sharing is for me one of the most important issues in a more sustainable epoch. To share is partly to leave the consumption era and try to live differently. I enjoy sharing. In my home city of Växjö I am part of a car pool system. A lot of cars are available and I do not need to be responsible for the maintenance. In Växjö there is a gardening project where the city provides a plot and all citizens can join to grow things together. Thirty people work

there in their spare time, also inviting anyone who is interested for different festivals. How can architecture be a way to create and support new way of living?

Our resources are finite. In the Swedish radio program “Sommarpratarna” (Summer speakers *my translation*, the 12th of July 2015) Johan Rockström, Stockholm Resilience Centre, uses the analogy that we act as if our planet suffers from a cold when in fact it suffers from severe cancer. It gets more and more important that industry and society at large, especially in rich countries, take the responsibility for how global resources are used.

2 Background

The optimal home for a Swede is now explored and built on Hemnet, a marketplace on the Internet for selling and buying housing. Architects Tham and Videgård used the data from 200 millions Swedes displaying their housing preferences through 200 million clicks across 86 000 housing objects. The architects interpreted the choices into an optimal living space, “Hemnet-hemmet” (the Hemnet-home *my translation*). The result is a house of 120 m², 4 rooms and a kitchen, built in a modernist style painted in the Swedish traditional façade colour, Falu red. It would cost 2,8 millions Swedish krona (approximately 300 000 Euros) to build.

It is obvious that this house is not for everyone. Housing used to be a political matter, today it is just a matter for the market. Several groups of people are excluded from a housing career or property ladder. Boverket (the National Board of Housing, Building and Planning *website translation*) points out that housing is a central part of people’s lives. To have a dwelling that suits your needs and is comfortable is crucial for the ability to have a life that is functional and fulfilling. Young people, the elderly and asylum seekers have difficulties in finding a place to live.

Swedish households have changed with single occupants replacing nuclear families. According to Peter Hinderson, Byggindustrin (the Building Industry society *my translation*), in 2013, singles constituted 60 % of total households in the capital of Stockholm and 50 % in Sweden overall. Bi Puranen, from the Institute of Future Research, describes, at a seminar held at White Architects in 2013, how Swedes are taking the international lead in the development towards individual autonomy drawing on 30 years of research. This obviously affects the way we want to live our lives and our housing preferences.

3 Pilot

The initial sample constituted of people familiar to me, so that I could test and develop method and questions in a 'safe' setting. During 24 hours I followed three people very closely and observed how they behaved and what they did, also asking them questions about their thoughts about sharing and diversity. The method is called shadowing, is used for fieldwork and is described by Barbara Czarniawska in the book "Shadowing and other techniques for doing fieldwork in modern societies", 2007.

The study was conducted with individuals of different circumstances and preferences:

- Barbro, 80 years old, semi-retired, lives in a house she owns in the Swedish countryside.
- Otto, 51 years old, lives with a partner in a rented apartment in a city and works at for a company that provides ergonomic office solutions.
- Karin, 24 years old, lives in a student apartment in a university town in the south of Sweden.



Barbro, 80, lives in a house she owns in the countryside. Retired but runs a small business.

Sharing for Barbro is not that easy. She describes how being older means she has become used to a particular way of life where sharing is not an obvious choice.

She enjoys having a car of her own, but carpools with friends to some events. When Barbro goes to the city she takes the bus, but she uses her car to shop for food in the village.

Barbro runs a business where a car is acquired. Barbro eats on her own most of the time, but occasionally invites family and friends round for dinner. Barbro is not interested in cooking with the neighbours, but she likes baking and will give them bread and buns

sometimes. Barbro enjoys being on her own and would not like to share her house with a non-family member. If she had lived closer to her best friend maybe they would have shared more in the every day life, such as dinner and possibly a car.

When the farm was still running, her family shared a combine harvester with the neighbours.



Otto, 51, lives with a partner in a rented apartment in a big city. Employee.

Otto lives in a rented apartment owned by a societal housing company. Tenants share laundry facilities and a garden. Otto expresses that sharing is a political matter where people have different points of view: “For a right wing person it is often the case that they think: I have worked for this and have the right to own many things”.

The apartment constitutes 70m² in an 18th century house. Otto also owns a summerhouse in the south of Sweden. He feels that it would be easy to share houses with someone else. Although Otto lives in a city with a well-developed transportation system, he owns a car, as this is required for his work. Most of the time dinner is cooked and eaten at home and Otto and his partner invite friends round a couple of times a month. Otto often eats on his own as his partner frequently works a nightshift.



Karin, 24, living in a student dormitory in a university city. Student.

Karin explains her views on sharing: “The norm tells us that you can live in a commune when you are young and maybe old, but in midlife you are supposed to show the world that you have the capability to have a job, family and a house of your own”.

Karin always uses the bicycle in her everyday life and for longer distances she uses trains. She loves living at walking distance to everything and is happy to be without a car.

Karin lives in a student dormitory with eight other people. They have coffee together every Sunday after cleaning their shared spaces, but don't share meals on a regular basis. To live communally is OK for Karin. She knows many people that have short-term 2nd hand leases and experience that it is very difficult to feel settled at home when you know that you are moving soon. Sharing kitchen and laundry facilities works very well, but Karin would not be comfortable sharing a toilet or shower.

6. Conclusions

How we look at sharing seems to differ according to age, political stance, but also normativity and social heritage. It is very clear that the individuals I shadowed would share more if there were opportunities to do so. For instance, Barbro describes how she would be willing to share a car if it were possible to do so with close friends. Otto would like to share dinners with others if it were easy to make it happen. I think that the ability to share is the key. If a system is well functioning, easy to understand and use, it will be used. A carpool for instance needs to have an easy system and also to be close to the home.

The method of shadowing individuals offers so many more insights than an interview. Spending time with a person in this way provides a continuous context. It is possible to see how an individual interacts with other people, spaces and resources in different situations. The study I have described is early exploratory work and has yielded a series of insights. For example, whereas on this occasion I used photography as means of documentation, I believe sketches may offer a more dynamic as well as less intrusive means. Shadowing brings the researcher very close to the individuals whose lives she is trying to understand, and I now understand that it takes time and practice to develop the role of the researcher in a situation that can feel like chatting with a friend. I noticed my confidence and skills growing even during these three instances. My most important insight is that I should have used my skills as an architect more. To talk together with pen and paper, making sketches together, would have allowed me to prompt visualizations of scenarios in real time, and the possibility to discuss and develop the outcome immediately. This will form part of the next stage of the research, as will a clearer focus on tangible proposals that support sharing in the home.

In addition to the small study in Sweden, I have also documented individuals' life at home in different countries: students in Hong Kong, China, and Bangalore, India, a couple in Santiago, Chile. I am looking forward to making the issue of sharing in the domestic life international. Of particular interest to me is to gain understandings of how much, and what type of space individuals feel entitled to in different countries and context.

This research should contribute to finding other, more sustainable, ways of living in our homes than we have today. Architects need to start making new forms of living spaces that offer something different than a villa or a three-room apartment. Such new dwellings would make it possible to people to live a life that works in their every day life, and as this unfolds over time. This would form part of creating more sustainable solutions for the individual as well as for society.

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<http://www.scb.se> Statistics Sweden

<http://www.boverket.se/> the National Board of Housing, Building and Planning