



LA CASA

ESPACIOS DOMÉSTICOS
MODOS DE HABITAR

ABADA EDITORES

LA CASA

ESPACIOS DOMÉSTICOS MODOS DE HABITAR

II CONGRESO INTERNACIONAL CULTURA Y CIUDAD
GRANADA, 23-25 ENERO 2019



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La Casa. Espacios domésticos, modos de habitar
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**Green Housing Dream.
De la igualdad social a la liberalización y el
deseo: Understenhöjden, 1989**
*Green Housing Dream.
From Welfare Equality to Deregulation and
Desire: Understenshöjden, 1989*

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Resumen

Tomando el primer desarrollo urbano ecológico construido en Estocolmo como caso de estudio, la comunicación expone cómo el colapso y transformación del estado del bienestar sueco así como la posterior liberalización de la vivienda, dio lugar al surgimiento de modelos de habitación alternativos que, independientes del mercado y de la protección pública, actúan como herramientas de emancipación. Se centra inicialmente en el estudio de la red de actores involucrados en el proceso cooperativo de Understenshöjden así como su estilo de vida colectiva y ecológica, para después analizar el objeto arquitectónico producido.

Palabras clave: habitar ecológico, emancipación, Understenshöjden, posmodernidad, cooperativa

Bloque temático: La casa: mitos, arquetipos, modos de habitar

Abstract

Taking the first ecological urban development built in Stockholm as case study, the communication exposes how the collapse and transformation on the Swedish welfare state period with its following housing deregulation allowed the appearance of an alternative and emancipative inhabitation model, independent both from the market and the public protection. It is focused first on the production process of the district by analyzing the network of actors involved on Understenshöjden cooperative and secondly, it analyzes the produced architectonic object.

Keywords: ecovillage, emancipation, Understenshöjden, postmodernity, cooperative

Topic: The house: myths, archetypes, forms of inhabitation



Figure 1: Image opening's event of Understenshöjden, May 1995, Stockholm
Source: Berg, Cras-Saar and Saar. *Living Dreams. Om ekobyggande. En hållbar livstill* (Uppsala (Sweden): Scapa, 2002)

In May 1995, Anna Lindh, the well-known Swedish politician,¹ Minister for the Environmental Affairs at the time, attended the opening party of Understenshöjden's new district. Together with the director of HSB —the biggest cooperative association in Sweden— in Stockholm Ulrik Fällman and the whole community of EBBA —the Housing Association for Organic Living in Björkhagen² celebrated the culmination of a long process of housing production after six years from its beginning in 1989. Understenshöjden (literally translated as Under the height of the stone) was about to be labelled as the first eco-district in Stockholm. With 44 terraced homes distributed in 14 buildings, a common house for parties and meetings, a shared kitchen, a laundry, an office, a playroom, a wood workshop space and a second hand shared warehouse, the new neighborhood was built as a manifesto of a community-based way of living and the possibility of an ecological habitat in balance with environment.

Although one could think that the opening's image shows nothing but a quotidian scene with regular people holding flowers attending an inauguration speech, it can also be interpreted as a glimpse to the state of art of the housing question during that time in Sweden. Politicians, representatives of housing companies and inhabitants as developers represent on the one hand, the shift towards private ownership after a massive privatization of housing companies; and, on the other hand, the opening to a new planning era in Sweden focused on environmental strategies.

After a decade of agitation of the so-called 'Swedish model' initiated at the end of the 70s, a systemic shift took place in the early 90s announced by the center-right government rising to power. A new and very revolutionary era for housing commenced through a series of deregulations by changing its previous condition of basic 'human right' to an 'object of desire' by commodifying them. As the researcher Helena Mattsson has recently pointed out, this shift is remarkably clear by contrasting two governmental reports: Solidarity housing policy from 1974 and A deregulated market from 1992. This communication examines Understenshöjden from its starting point in 1989 to disclose intricated links between 'domestic emancipation' and the 'market economy', and how a bottom up planning environment can be understood as a result of the new deregulated housing policy scenario.

¹ Anna Lindh was a social-democratic politician assassinated in a shopping mall in Stockholm in September 2003. Her controversial murder has been compared to Olof Palmer's crime in 1986 put her name into the international media.

² EBBA: *Boendeföreningen Ekologiskt Boende i Björkhagen*, is the acronym cooperative of inhabitants that started and developed Understenshöjden's district.

Understenshöjden was understood at the time as an experiment of ecological urban development, therefore the media put the focus on technical issues as energy consumption, recycling techniques and the use of construction materials ignoring the strong importance of its approach based on the commons within a context of housing deregulation. Using representations of ecovillage in the media, including newspapers, architectural journals and books, information collected after conducting interviews with inhabitants and conversations with the architect, Beng Bilén, the communication explores the relationship between the ecological and the domestic question in a wider perspective focusing on the link to a communal way of living. As David Harvey states, «the question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from that of what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire».³ According to this, the communication is divided in three reflections: collective desire, ecology and the paradox of bottom-up planning.

1. Collective desire

«when dwellers control the major decisions and are free to make their own contributions in the design, construction or management of their housing, both this process and the environment produced stimulate individual and social well-being. When people have no control over nor responsibility for key decisions in the housing process, on the other hand, dwelling environment may instead become a barrier to personal fulfilment and a burden to economy».⁴

The start of Understenshöjden «begins in 1989 when an architecture student (...) heard a lecture on ecological living and understood that the dreams she had long harbored could become reality». Interestingly, these idealistic lines are written on a pamphlet published by the HBS Stockholm about Understenshöjden's history. It explains the construction process—in its broadest way—as a fight-for-your-dream process started and pushed by a newly KTH graduated architect. The initiator of the 'green housing dream' was Mia Torpe, daughter of Ulla Torpe—Swedish writer, debater and teacher, important to the Swedish feminist spheres—and sister of Tjia Torpe—environmentalist politician involved in the Social Democratic party during the 80s and the Green Party afterwards.⁵ She initiated the process and, by word of mouth, people started to get involved.

In May 1990, the Housing Association for Organic Living in Björkhagen (EBBA) was founded as a non-profit housing cooperative. When the association applied for permits, it was advised by local political authorities to cooperate with HBS (Tenants Savings and Building Society)⁶, Sweden's largest 'housing cooperative' and SMÅA (Small Houses for Self-Building)⁷, a building commissioner and association that supports collective efforts for independent house builders. All together formed the cooperating committee, where future users were represented as full members and right-to-vote with evidently more power on the voting. Therefore, the aggrupation had a stronger level of autonomy than regular cooperatives in the country. Although Sweden has a long history of housing cooperatives which starts on the 19th century, some of the initial

³ David Harvey, "The Right to the City", *The New Left Review*, n°53 (2008): 23.

⁴ Definition of 'autonomy' on: John Turner and Robert Fichter, eds., *Freedom to Build* (London: The Mc Milan Company, 1972).

⁵ This information was obtained on an interview to Nils Soderlund, resident and architect, conducted and recorded in March 2018 in his own house in Understenshöjden.

⁶ In Swedish: Hyresgästernas Sparkasse- och byggnadsförening.

⁷ In Swedish: Småhus för Självbyggeri.

objectives⁸ were distorted since the postwar period and the strong housing deregulation shift on the 80s.⁹ The cooperative option represented at that time, one sixth of the housing stock and was based on “tenant ownership” (bostadrätt) indicating that the control over the property is something between tenancy and ownership. Two big corporativists/tenants association manage most of the of the offer —HBS10 and Riksbyggen— where the users pay their cooperative lease and the operating expenses in the form of an annual fee and wait until a house unit is offered. The holder of a cooperative lease has the right to use the dwelling while also a democratic share in the management of the housing cooperative. But the initial social compromise of this major cooperative model disappears here because the user has the right to sell its participation when desired, and at market prices, something that does not make a substantial difference to the private option.

In such a way EBBA was a special case, although the anti-speculative condition is not completely implemented and they act as an ‘attachment’ to HBS, this small-scale community benefited from an ample and strong autonomy already from its very starting point. Thus, inhabiting in a cooperative as Understenshöjden is understood as a political action of emancipation. Is the future community who instigated the real estate development outside any municipal or state planning as a search for a more ecological, democratic and affordable housing option. These ‘autonomous habitable action(s)’, as the British architect John Turner would define them, allow interesting innovations and produces impact both in the process and the final object.



Figure 2: Colective celebration in Understenshöjden, Stockholm
Source: HSB Stockholm. *The Story of Understenshöjden*
(Stockholm: HSB Stockholm, 1997)

⁸ According to the International Cooperative Alliance, founded in 1895, the cooperative principles are the following: voluntary and open membership; democratic member control; member economic participation; autonomy and independence; education training and information; cooperation among cooperatives and concern for community. Consulted on: <https://www.ica.coop/en/history-alliance>.

⁹ For a deeper understanding of the cooperative system and its history in Sweden consult: Bo Bengtsson, “Not the Middle Way but Both Ways—Cooperative Housing in Sweden”, *Scandinavian Housing and Planning Research*, n°9:sup2 (1992): 87-104.

The process of autonomy started by designing every organizational and management structures by the future inhabitants. Common to all EBBA member was that they were generally environmentally concerned and cared persons, but not extreme at any case.¹¹ Remarkably, a large number of persons who joined the association were professionals connected with the construction world —architects, urban designers, engineers. This fact apparently made the decision-making easier.¹² In order to facilitate the process, in February 1991, the commission divided the research and practical work in three ‘working groups’: health and home, finances and ecological living. Fourteen months after, in April 1992, the first draft for Understenshöjden’s ‘detailed plan’ was presented to the municipality of Stockholm. Between these dates, a string of assemblies, meetings, research trips and expert interviews took place for the EBBA group. The design process with the architect will be discussed further on the epigraph 3. Explorations made by the working groups would be taken into consideration on the group’s assemblies and decisions over design and ecological strategies would be taken. After that, on the cooperative committee with HBS and SMÅA —called SAK— choices were audited and, in the best case-scenario, approved. If not,¹³ the process would start again. And again. All the process was, of course, not the easiest nor the most optimal. But that is precisely the point of this kind of collective processes that, placed outside of the market logic, their central point is the creation of a strong connection between involved agents: communities, individuals and their actions and achievements.

2. Ecology

«Yes, the Architecture of civilization bears upon it the impress of the selfishness, vice, poverty and discord of that society. (...) Could the social subversion which now reigns, be reflected more faithfully than it is in present constructions? Association will have ITS ARCHITECTURE, and it will be an architecture of combination and unity. When men are associated and united, one vast and elegant edifice will replace hundreds of the isolated und miserable constructions of civilization.»¹⁴

At the end of the 19th Century, these words written by the Fourierist Albert Brisbane¹⁵ advocated to reshape the way of living from the ‘miserable’ industrial city to a more collective and self-sufficient scenario within the natural environment. Fourierists understood that form is a consequence to the society that inhabits it and therefore a different architecture shape must be created for diverse lifestyles. Understenshöjden’s main goal was an ecological and collective lifestyle as an alternative to the consumer society and the top-down housing policies developed

¹¹ From the conducted interviews.

¹² At the beginning, the EBBA group was more heterogeneous and involved people from different background. But while the process of decision making, some abandoned the project and were replaced from users on the queue list. The reasons were on the one the one hand, that the work required enormous time sacrifices and, on the other hand, the difficulty of predicting the final costs was high at that time because of the Sweden’s monetary crisis on the ‘91-’92. A group of 75 householders formed this list and took part, together with the 44 members of the cooperative, to the cooperative committee.

¹³ Most of the cases would be denied because of budget reasons. EBBA group was very ambitious on their designing and technical decisions.

¹⁴ Albert Brisbane, *Social Destiny of Man: or. Association and Reorganization of Industry*. (Philadelphia: C. F. Stollmeyer, 1840), 363. Cited on: O. M. Ungers, *Comunas en el Nuevo Mundo 1740-1971* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1978).

¹⁵ Brisbane was a north American philosopher that studied in Europe and imported Fourier’s ideas to the USA. We could start a genealogy of emancipative housing communities with the theories of Thomas More and ‘Utopia’ (1515) or Campanella and ‘The City of the Sun’. But it is two centuries later in the USA, when the utopic socialists put it into practice what authors as Owen or Fourier advocated.

during the welfare state period. Following the Fourierist logic, we will question if the alternative ecovillage has differentiating aesthetics and reflects a new lifestyle. How to make ecologic cities for and with citizens?

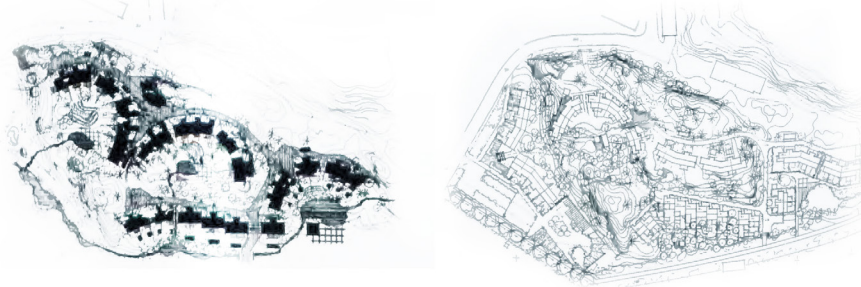


Figure 3: Sketches of the urban design process. Understenshöjden (1989-1995), Stockholm
Source: Bengt Bilén, architect

As response to the collective managerial model that the EBBA cooperative stated from the beginning, Understenshöjden was understood not as an isolated community but as part of the city's infrastructure and completely open to the public. This is particularly clear from the landscaping point of view, where the new ecovillage acts as a filter between the consolidated district of Björkhomen and the natural reserve of Nacka. The so-called 'Ecological Path', surrounded by fruit trees and in parallel to a stream, crosses the plot and makes an entrance to Nacka to the city, performing at the same time as a buffer and a windbreak to the adjacent sport facility.

Within the process of planning, the first steps taken by the architect Bengt Bilén together with the EBBA group were towards the natural soil plan and how to maintain of the previous natural resources as much as possible. After cataloguing existing trees and natural conditions of the plot —topography— some discussions were ensued between the group. Early they agreed on avoiding traffic in the area partly for reducing emissions and partly for children's security. This meant also that there won't be any space for private cars next to the houses and that the parking space would be concentrated on the western outskirts of the plot. The space was decided to be very limited, considering a future common car pool. A second consensus was about maintaining natural resources founded on the plot avoiding flattening the ground or cutting down trees. This decision was radically incorporated¹⁶ resulting an enormous constrain for the urban design. It was the level and nature of the soil what gave prerequisites for the location of the houses and paths within the area. Wiring and water supplies were laid out under the paths to prevent destroying the soil. As consequence of the oblige, the terraced housing buildings and the paths were inevitably disposed conforming five different 'sub-communities' named as the natural inhabitants on the context: Björklunden, Tallhöjden, Dammen, Odlingen and Gården (Pine, Heights, The Dam, Cultivation and the Farm).¹⁷

¹⁶ Only in unavoidable cases trees would be moved from its original location, but never cut down. In case of damaging trees, a fine was determined by the group. This self-insistence made that the built houses that took place was lower than planned.

¹⁷ These divisions are still active today and serve as decentralized neighborhood in terms of taking responsibilities within the community such as repairing and cleaning tasks but also organizational issues.



Figure 4: Final urban design plan. Understenshöjden (1989-1995), Stockholm
Source: Beng Bilén, architect

Energy-saving was another big consensus between the group. For achieving the energetic demand goal, devices were incorporated to the dwellings: the roofs were covered with solar panels—at least 7,5 square meters—the central heating was supplied with a furnace that burns waste-wood pellets, and the domestic hot water was fueled individually through accumulation tanks. Domestic water treatment was the biggest issue in Understenshöjden because innovative solutions appeared in order to perform it on site. Toilets were specially designed to separate solid and liquid waste. It allows gray and black water flowing separately by gravity to a biological plant treatment. Once there, they are treated in a sludge separator with UV filters to remove bacteria and afterwards stored in two different tanks. This recycled water is used in farms outside Stockholm. Waste is recycled on site too by pumping it to an upper dam. The water runs along the property through the stream placed next to the ‘ecological path’ and eventually emptied into the Baltic sea. The infrastructure allows, on the one hand, the oxygenation of the water and, on the other hand, performs as a communicative tool: the more water on the stream, the more the waste level is. Recycling and re-using were, of course, taken into consideration too. Warm composters are placed along the site, there is a room for gathering other wastes that will be picked up by the municipality and a common storage room is available for leaving items to other families to re-use or transform.



Figure 5: Bathroom nucleus built with brick walls. Understenshöjden (1989-1995)
Source: Mia Torpe

Building materials were also carefully selected taking special attention to the ones aging gracefully: wooden façades and floors, terra-cota roofing tiles, cellulose insulation, brick walls solving the humidity barrier, linsed oils, etc. Shaped in a neo-regionalist style, the houses are undoubtedly influenced by certain aesthetic nostalgia. Something characteristic of the times, with the boom of postmodernist style that shows up in the common facilities with symmetrical compositions on the façade, frontis, oculus, etc. Furthermore, this nostalgia can be read as a link back to the traditional Swedish cottages and cabinets both in form and materials, in opposition to the 'rational' modern blocks that dominated the construction landscaped since afterwar period.

We can still question if there is actually an aesthetic of ecology or we must just speak about ecological approaches. In the experimental case of Understenshöjden tree strategies were deployed: the first one regarding the preservation of natural means of the plot, questioning the asymmetric relationships between humans and non-humans and incorporating biologic wealth to the housing question; secondly, displaying self-energetic devices and infrastructures, mixing natural resources and technological progress to archive a sustainable lifestyle in terms of energetic demand; and lastly, incorporating recycling and re-using to everyday life.

3. The paradox of bottom-up planning

One of the most substantial challenges accomplished in Understenshöjden was questioning the traditional work of the planner and the architect. Although some of the future inhabitants of Understenshöjden were architects or urban designers, the commission was made to Bengt Bilén, an outsider architect employed by HBS. His professional responsibility was completely subverted here, shifting from the classical role of 'genius' that plans and envisions the future city to a new role as 'facilitator and mediator' in the context of participative planning. A displacement that resulted much more complicated than the previous top-down workstyle. Based on direct democracy principles, assemblies, discussions and meetings took place between the group allowing to get agreements on some topics. These agreements would be used afterwards as raw material for the architect and the process of decision-making.

Remarkably, EBBA group created a horizontal system that on the one hand, allowed user's participation within the design process and, on the other hand, included self-construction as a financial possibility replacing construction costs.

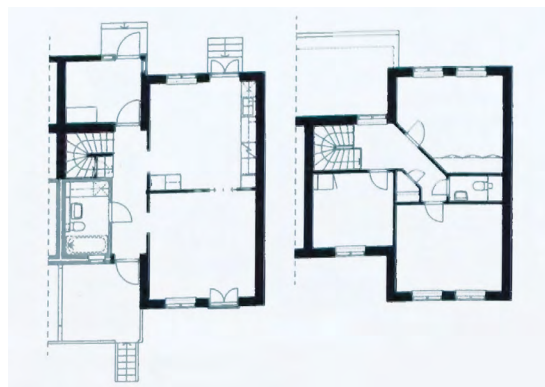


Figure 6: Basic two-stories typology. Understenshöjden (1989-1995)
Source: Bengt Bilén, architect

User's design. For simplifying the process, a basic terraced-house typology was projected as starting point. It was composed of two connected gabled volumes: a smaller one for the domestic equipment —such as access hall, stairs and bathroom— and a larger one with the living spaces —living room, kitchen and bedrooms. Taking the basic typology as basis, every user would tailor their own home by adding extensions. A list of modifications was created by the architect to make it easier: from extra bathrooms or rooms, verandas and porches to window's sizes, kitchen's layouts etc. This strategy resulted into a final vibrating volume of terraced houses, equal and different at the same time, containing a diverse range of typologies. None of the apartments was similar to the other in appearance and surface, varying from 100 sqm to 150 sqm. In order to make the 'customization' act possible, Bilén and the EBBA group decided to organize system of individual meetings. Every user or family would have an hour with the architect to modify, add or remove anything from the 100 sqm basic typology and depending on the changes the final cost would be higher.

Self-construction. To suit different financial situations, residents were given the option of 'buying' their house at three different levels of completion. The first one would be the 'turn-key stage' where the house is completely finished and the users just jumped when the construction work is done. The second is 'medium stage' where the constructor leaves the house with the structure, roofs and walls. The construction work is finished by the users by fitting kitchens, electrical and water facilities and performing all internal surface treatments: painting walls and ceilings, moldings, lining and installing doors and windows. The third stage is the 'framed and covered' where only the structure and the roof is completed, and the rest of the construction work would be self-constructed.

This new role for the architect, dealing with so many factors and the contingency produced by the users implies a radical change on the planning paradigm.



Figure 7: View of housing from the 'Ecological Path'. Understenshöjden (1989-1995)
Source: A. Gimeno Sánchez

Once the ecovillage opened in 1995 and the families started to inhabit their houses, Understenshöjden was showed in the media just as an environmentally friendly way of living. But, as we have demonstrated here, the district symbolizes a collective determination, a history of powerful and persistent implementation of community belonging to the city. Assemblies happen, maintenance working groups meet once per month, carpentry workshops, yoga classes, dancing afternoons and other activities for the community take place on a regular

basis. Understenshöjden teaches us how experimental models of community managed to give real meaning to the mistreated right to housing. As I said, they perform as emancipation tools because they don't depend from private developers or institutional protection but on its own initiative and capacity for self-organization.

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