

Whose Sustainable City? Making and Unmaking of Spatial Injustice in Swedish Planning

Docent lecture, Burcu Yiğit Turan

Swedish cities are among the most segregated in Europe. At the same time, they are planned and designed under the banners of sustainability, safety and social cohesion. How can both be true?

For decades, urban planning and landscape architecture in Sweden have promised green, safe and inclusive cities for everyone. Yet inequalities between neighbourhoods have grown, and they follow a recognisable pattern. Areas where many residents have immigrant backgrounds are described as unsafe, segregated or in need of fixing, and are densified, policed, disinvested and stripped of green space, or of vegetation for surveillance, and public services. Meanwhile, newly developing 'attractive' affluent inner-city areas, or homogeneous villa suburbs on the urban fringe are held up as the model of a good and safe place to live, provided with infrastructures and generous landscapes, and new ones are planned in their image. This contradiction calls for analytical light on how racial bias operate in planning and design, re-materialise segregation and inequalities?

In this lecture I ask how racial ideologies shape the seemingly neutral concepts that guide city-making, such as sustainability, segregation, and safety. Drawing on case studies, Uppsala and Malmö, including critical document analysis, and interviews with planners, residents, social workers and activists, I show how these concepts can work as coded language. Without anyone naming race, they quietly order which neighbourhoods are treated as problems and which as ideals, and who is imagined as belonging in the future city. This happens not only in the rhetoric of the far right but also within planning that speaks of inclusion. I also show that the people living in the neighbourhoods labelled unsafe define safety very differently. For them it means a secure job and home, schools and clinics that stay open, places to gather, green spaces that are not subjected to erasure, and being treated as equal members of society rather than as suspects. Their perspectives point towards a different way of planning cities.

Finally, I outline where my research is heading. As climate adaptation becomes a central task for cities, the same ideological patterns risk being built into who is protected and who is left exposed. They also risk reproducing the very dynamics, sprawl and resource use, which contributed to climate change in the first place. Understanding how planners, designers and communities can recognize, resist these patterns, and imagine alternative ways of planning, is essential if sustainable cities are to be sustainable for all.