

Ulrika Söderström

*Kulturarv som resurs i socialt hållbar
stadsutveckling: En gestaltad livsmiljö för
framtiden*

*(Cultural Heritage as a Resource in Socially
Sustainable Urban Development: A Designed
Living Environment for the Future)*

Doctoral dissertation in Archaeology
Department of Archaeology, Linnaeus University
Dissertations No 537/2024
Linnaeus University Press
Växjö 2024
340 pages
ISBN: 978-91-8082-189-6 (print)
ISBN: 978-91-8082-190-2 (pdf)

Reviewed by Bodil Axelsson 

Ulrika Söderström's thesis is situated at the intersection of cultural heritage and urban planning. It explores how contract archaeology can contribute to the creation of sustainable future cities – something that is not (yet) happening on a significant scale. The thesis can therefore be said to examine a phenomenon through its absence, and consequently more general claims on heritage are a key research interest of the thesis. The relationship between

Department of Culture and Society, Linköping University, Sweden
bodil.axelsson@liu.se

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons 4.0 International licence (CC BY 4.0) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

heritage and socially sustainable cities is examined both retrospectively, and to some extent speculatively, exploring ‘future consciousness’.

The thesis’ research context is heritage conventions and practices, as well as relevant international heritage research. From this sounding board, Söderström emphasizes the difficulties of achieving democratic participation and conceptualization sustainability. To investigate these challenges, Söderström develops a multi-theoretical analytical framework. First, social sustainability is defined as the creation of socially just cities, including equal rights to public space, recognition and preservation of diversity, and democratic participation in the management of common resources. To analyze participation, Söderström draws on Arnstein’s (1969) ‘ladder of citizen participation’, a theory that provide a way of assessing participation, rather than explaining it. The third theoretical framework modifies Smith’s (2006) theory of authorised heritage discourse (AHD) and adds institutional theory. Convincingly, the author argues, following Pendlebury (2013), that heritage discourses vary even within heritage management, and that versions of AHD are also practiced by urban planners and policy makers. Understanding the institutions involved therefore requires accounting for actions informed by laws and regulations, as well as professional norms, values and shared beliefs. The final theoretical underpinning comes from the field of futures studies. Future literacy, according to this perspective, can create an understanding of how decisions, actions and developments today will affect the future. When implemented as future awareness, future literacy provides opportunities to test alternative decisions and adjust established courses of action to mitigate the risks of failure and unexpected challenges.

The first two empirical chapters set the scene for three case studies. Chapter five analyzes documents to show the ways in which heritage management is intertwined with a range of policy areas. The analysis also looks at the recent Swedish policy on architecture, form and design (Regeringskansliet 2018, Prop. 2017/18:110), and its potential positive impact. Chapter six approaches urban planning through a survey of public servants in urban planning offices in 19 municipalities and interviews with four public servants in this area in three municipalities.

The following chapters (7–9) deal with three very different cases that beneficially shed light on the aim of the thesis. In the Caroli district of Malmö, old buildings were demolished and redeveloped in the late 1960s in a top-down process guided by the norms of modernization. Today, efforts are being made to create an attractive living space by making use of the remaining heritage. But according to Söderström, the futures envisioned both then and now seems to have been already squandered. The second case study is the block Valnötsträdet in Kalmar. Here there are two legacies: archaeological excavations of medieval remains and hospital build-

ings from the late nineteenth century. The redevelopment of the latter has contributed to the gentrification of the area. The former resulted in a public art installation in support of Kalmar's preferred medieval identity.

The third case study is Kiruna, a city well known for the ongoing relocation caused by the activities of the mining company LKAB. Here it seems difficult to imagine a future that is not determined by mining. Söderström emphasizes how the built environment from the early mining days, the 'model town', has been chosen to represent memory and identity. As a result, the process tends to exclude both the views of the Sami population, and the intangible 'spirit of Kiruna'. Two recent archaeological investigations of the area before the mining town was built were also not taken into account in the planning process. Söderström acknowledges the artistic and architectural design of the Mining Town Parks, a recreational area with temporary installations. In particular, the design of a dismantled building block Ullspiran bridges the past and the future, and is discussed in terms of Caitlin DeSilvey's (2017) concept of 'palliative cultural heritage practices'.

In the conclusion, Södergren emphasizes the contradictory relationship between the Cultural Heritage Act's focus on the preservation of the built heritage and the forward-looking objectives of the Planning and Building Act. The implementation of the former often leads to normative practices that lock in the value of heritage in ways that may not support social sustainability. Participation of the public in urban planning processes is not yet taken for granted. Current practices seem to be based on an understanding of preferred pasts and futures chosen by institutions. Enduring heritage values such as belonging and community are widely recognized, but can also lead to socially unsustainable gentrification. Without taking into account lived experiences and developing future literacies, heritage values risk closing off equitable futures.

Söderström's thesis is written within the Graduate School in Contract Archaeology (GRASCA) at Linnéus University. It relies on a pragmatic mix of methods and materials. However, the use of social science methods in a context of archaeology raises some questions about travelling methods. The concept of triangulation is invoked as a way of validating the sources. But, in the case studies, it seems to me that the sources are used for different purposes. And in the case of Kiruna, there are at least a couple of studies that could have nuanced the conclusions regarding the positive response to the design of the dismantled building block Ullspiran (Boyd 2023), or the public conception of the planning process (López 2021). If this had been a social science thesis, one would also have expected a discussion of the representativeness of the two web surveys and the interviews.

That said, the many qualities of this thesis outweigh these methodological remarks. Its structure is clear, the text is easy to read and well argued.

The analytical framework serves its purpose throughout the work, and Söderström makes productive use of her diverse material. The extensive analyses of official documents such as government investigations, legal texts, policies and guidelines are impressive. The selection of cases is highly beneficial, and the case studies emerge as analytically sound, compelling narratives. There are also some interesting discussions on the role of design for conveying heritage that could be developed in future research. Overall, the thesis argues for more socially inclusive, participatory, future-aware planning processes, including archaeology and design, and offers its analytical model as a tool to achieve this goal.

References

- Arnstein, S.R. 1969. A Ladder of Citizen Participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*. Vol. 35(4), pp. 216–224.
- Boyd, E. 2023. Memorialisation and its Denial: Slow Resistance through Derealisation in Kiruna, Sweden. *Journal of Political Power*. Vol. 16(2), pp. 158–176, doi:10.1080/2158379X.2023.2251110.
- López, E.M. 2021. *Transforming Kiruna: Producing Space, Society, and Legacies of Inequality in the Swedish Ore Fields*. Uppsala Studies in Cultural Anthropology, 62. Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.
- Pendlebury, J. 2013. Conservation Values, the Authorised Heritage Discourse and the Conservation-Planning Assemblage. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*. Vol. 19(7), pp. 709–727, doi:10.1080/13527258.2012.700282.
- Regeringskansliet. 2018. *Politik för gestaltad livsmiljö*. Prop. 2017/18:110. <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/proposition/2018/02/prop.-201718110> (Accessed: 15 December 2025).
- Smith, L. 2006. *Uses of Heritage*. New York: Routledge.