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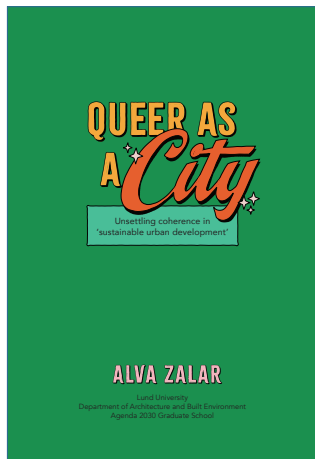
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Photo, front cover: Magnus Rönn

Photo is describing a Lumen Prototype from an exhibition 2024 at Louisiana in Denmark called *The Living Structures*. The exhibition is the first in a new series 'Architecture Connecting', spotlighting the evolution of architecture in an era of climate crisis and the social, cultural and political challenges this reality poses.

**PHD REVIEW:
QUEER AS A CITY: UNSETTLING
COHERENCE IN SUSTAINABLE
URBAN DEVELOPMENT
BY ALVA ZALAR**

REVIEWER: JANINA GOSSEYE



I recently had the pleasure to read Alva Zalar's PhD dissertation, *Queer as a City: Unsettling Coherence in Sustainable Urban Development*, after having been asked to take on the role as "opponent" in Zalar's doctoral defence, which took place at Lund University (Sweden) in September last year. The dissertation consists of 304 pages, which are neatly laid out and subdivided into nine fluently written chapters. The overall aim of the work is twofold: First and foremost, it seeks to set out a theoretical framework for understanding how architecture and urban design sustain normative orders, as well as the possibility to "queer" these normative orders. Or, to put it differently, to make room for difference within the prevailing normativity of our built environments. Second, the dissertation seeks to contribute to scholarship on sustainable urban development (SUD), with particular emphasis on the tensions that exists between the three pillars of "sustainable" urban development: ecology, the economy, and social aspects. In the thesis, the argument is made that in sustainable urban development, the social (and to some extent the ecological) pillars are often subjugated to the demands of economic sustainability.

In the second chapter of the thesis, Zalar offers an overview of existing scholarship on SUD, with a focus on the tension between “sustainability” and “development”. Zalar points out that “sustainable development” is a paradox of sorts, as it seeks to reconcile two perspectives that are fundamentally oppositional: environmental justice on the one hand, and an economy of growth on the other. Building on the different interpretations of SUD that have emerged from the 1970s to today, Zalar clarifies how the term is approached conceptually within the context of his dissertation, explaining that its three cornerstones are understood to be: First, sustainable land use, which is related to ideas of the compact city and the preservation of land beyond cities for agricultural use; second, sustainable mobility, which often results in transit-oriented developments; and, third, smart infrastructures and buildings, which through the implementation of technology, conceptualize the residents of SUD projects more as consumers than as citizens. In this chapter, Zalar also points out that Sweden is a particularly fruitful location for conducting research on SUD. Quoting the writings of Anna Hult (2017) and Rolf Lidskog and Ingemar Elander (2012), Zalar writes that today “Sweden ... has become recognized as a global frontrunner of SUD whose expertise is ‘exported’ to other contexts such as China” (p. 38).

While the second chapter of the dissertation provides the necessary background for the second aim of the dissertation, contributing to scholarship on SUD, chapters three and four are related more closely to the first aim. Chapter three carefully unpacks the theoretical framework that helps readers understand how architecture and urban design sustain coherent orders of normality, while chapter four provides the theoretical scaffolding for understanding what a queer approach could offer as a method in architecture and urban design; how it might unsettle such coherence.

In the third chapter, Zalar argues that coherent orders of normality are produced through processes of foreclosure, meaning that the formation of coherence depends upon successfully and rigidly excluding the incoherent. Incoherence here is understood as everything that is positioned outside that coherent order. Incoherence is thus not an alternative order but a conceptualization of what does not fit into the order. Drawing on the work of Judith Butler, Zalar argues that coherent orders are sustained through support structures, which can be both tangible – the built environment is one such tangible support structure – but also intangible: Think, for instance, of urban policies. Zalar points out that infrastructures or support structures form networks that facilitate particular actions, functions, uses, and even entire ways of living, and argues that it is particularly important to link the perspectives of coherence and support. Because in linking these two concepts, you find that what is supported appears coherent, and what is coherent receives support.

The result is the creation of a “coherence corridor”. In this thesis, Zalar looks for ways in which support in built environments might be redistributed towards the incoherent and the non-normative. This is where the queer approach comes in. In the fourth chapter, which also sets out the methodological framework adopted in the research, Zalar explains that in this dissertation, “queer” should be thought of less as an identity and more as a movement of thought, or a language that constantly poses an alternative to accepted (“normal”) forms of thinking and knowing. Here, part of the primary aim of the dissertation is clearly stated. On page 71, Zalar writes: “The goal of this study is to make a small contribution to a long tradition of queer and feminist criticality in the architecture field, primarily by formulating a queer theory of architecture and (sustainable) urban development based on the combined perspectives of normativity and distribution of resources.”

To bring the two stated aims of this dissertation together – understanding normative orders and the potential “queering” of these normative orders on the one hand, and the ambition to contribute to scholarship on SUD on the other – Zalar introduces a SUD project as a case study: Hyllie, a district of Malmö, a city located in the south of Sweden. Chapter five sketches a brief history of Hyllie – or Hyllievan – which was initially proposed for modernist development in the early 1970s. The first residents, however, did not move in until 2014, many years later than originally planned. The area is currently still under development and is expected to support 25,000 residents and 15,000 workplaces by 2040. Zalar argues that from the early 2000s, a shift occurred in Hyllie’s urban development history. From the turn of the millennium, sustainability increasingly became a core concept in Malmö’s comprehensive planning. This meant that Hyllie had to do a U-turn. Because, when sustainability was increasingly pushed to the fore as the new key concept in Malmö’s urban development, several of the architectural materializations of what Zalar calls the “entertainment city” were already in the making in Hyllie, including a large shopping centre, an arena, and a skyscraper. Hyllie was thus confronted with reconciling its past development with its future “sustainable development” goals. Zalar concludes this chapter with the speculative idea that Hyllie’s further expansion could be fundamentally disrupted, and proposes using the concept of queer failure – which is facilitated through coherence glitches – to activate ways of thinking about difference by disrupting the expansionist status quo in this SUD district. The following three chapters – numbers six, seven, and eight – focus on three specific aspects of Hyllie’s “sustainable” urban development: mobility, shopping, and identity-formation, and how they might be queered.

Chapter six makes the poignant argument that the transport infrastructure in and of Hyllie is designed to facilitate commuting and tends to support those who pay and those who have citizenship (in the EU). Zalar points out that in Hyllie, “sustainable” mobility seems to be more about

diversifying forms of transport than about replacing certain modes of transport with others with a lower climate impact. She also refers to the fact that in Hyllie, the hierarchies of whose movement is prioritized seem closely related to which movement contributes to a growing economy. Zalar here puts forward “reflexivity” as a tool for (re-)considering the broader unequal effects of the mobility coherence that has taken shape in Hyllie, and suggests that a redistribution towards walking and cycling could occur if the overall need for mobility were to be reduced by shifting the mobility coherence away from commuting.

The seventh chapter argues that “activity” in Hyllie has primarily facilitated different forms of consumption and focusses for the most part on the Emporia shopping mall located within this SUD project. This focus on consumption, of course, has to do with the fact that before it turned towards sustainability as an identity, Hyllie was well on its way to becoming an “entertainment city”. Returning to the hypothesis that coherent orders are sustained through support structures that facilitate particular actions, functions, and uses, while prohibiting others, Zalar points out that in Hyllie, the Emporia shopping mall is an important component of a sequence of support that produces a coherent consumption corridor. Or, put differently, consumption has become a primary purpose and driver of the entire urban development project. Interestingly, in this chapter Zalar introduces some work that she has done with students as part of two courses taught at the School of Architecture in Lund to demonstrate how the architecture of the Emporia shopping mall could provide transitional support for spaces to change, along with a diversity of uses. In their work, the students have paid attention to the small indications of coherence glitches that would enable Hyllie to move away from its original programming, which gave rise to this coherent consumption corridor that the infrastructure of the SUD now continues to maintain.

In the eighth chapter, on “curated identity and nostalgic visions”, Zalar demonstrates how Hyllie’s identity is imagined through planning-political visions that are mediated through architectural design and enacted in everyday life. In this chapter, Zalar again incorporates student work and, building on this work, points out that Hyllie is deliberately positioning itself as separate from the Million Programme developments surrounding it, even though it has excellent connections to other SUD areas in the Öresund Region. This cultivated separation that exists between Hyllie and its surrounding areas results from a lack of design strategies to support integration with the SUD project’s immediate surroundings – in a bid to reinforce the “unique” identity of Hyllie’s SUD. Zalar argues that rather than seeking to distance Hyllie – both literally and figuratively from the older Million Programme areas surrounding it – emphasis should be put on the fact that Hyllie is part of the city and that interdependency exists between this SUD project and the areas surrounding it. This, Zalar argues, would make the vulnerability of Hyllie visible, in a good way.

This plea to make Hyllie’s vulnerability visible – by showing, for instance, that it is very much dependent on and related to the areas that surround it – is one of several instances in which the dissertation makes “latent queer opportunities” in Hyllie visible. Ultimately, as Zalar explains in the concluding chapter, the work is thus also about unveiling vulnerability as part of a more processual perspective on support, whereby the most dominant spaces, buildings and geographies, which appear non-negotiable, are revealed to be *de facto* negotiable, meaning that alternative realities are possible.

Zalar’s “Queer as a City” is a compellingly optimistic piece of work. It dares to imagine the possibility of other urban futures that break away from the normative coherence corridors, which I largely accept, even if (sometimes) begrudgingly. Accordingly, many of the questions that sprung to my mind when reading this dissertation resulted from the schism that exists between Zalar’s optimism and my own cynicism. Questions also arose from my predilection for architecture and urban history, whereas Zalar’s work fits more comfortably in the field of architecture and urban theory – even if we both ground our research in feminist theory.

One musing that arose when reading Zalar’s work had to do with the relationship between the terms “coherence corridor” and “path dependence”. The latter term, which is not used in the dissertation, places greater emphasis on the influence of history – on how things develop over time – than the former one. I began thinking about path dependence when reading about the contemporary popularity of SUD in Sweden – with a strong slant towards economic sustainability – in chapter two. It made me wonder if this contemporary approach towards SUD might have grown out of the kind of welfarism that has been promoted in the country since the early twentieth century. As Helena Mattsson and Sven-Olov Wallenstein (2010) have convincingly argued, since the 1930s, deep entanglements have existed in Sweden between consumerism and the (quite literal) building of the welfare state. Think, for instance, of the development of ABC suburbs around shopping centres. I therefore began to wonder if the infusion of social sustainability with a strong dose of economic sustainability in Swedish urban development is new, or if it has instead been cultivated over the course of decades. And, if this is the case, what “coherence glitches” could unsettle such a deep-seated path dependence, which has taken shape over almost a century?

A related question that emerged has to do with the agency of architecture and urban design to deliberately and consciously redistribute support towards the incoherent and the non-normative, given the strong financialization of contemporary built environments. In Zalar’s dissertation, the built environment – Hyllie in particular – appears as a support structure

that sustains certain coherence corridors. For instance, the presence of the Emporia in Hyllie ensures that residents' free time is (often) spent roaming the climate-controlled corridors of the shopping centre bathed in soothing Muzak music. However, following fieldwork observations at the Emporia, Zalar notes that "kids ... enact resistance toward the coherent orders of a shopping mall simply by staying in place there and temporarily inhabiting certain locations at the mall", adding that "while there may not be support for incoherence, there is at least a less rigid reinforcement of coherence in different places" (p. 190). I might go a step further and argue that such an unintended use of the shopping centre is itself a "coherence glitch". While the space was not conceived with this glitch in mind, its actual physical manifestation does not prevent it from occurring. What *does* stop the glitch from occurring is society's enforcing of the coherence corridor, of the "proper" use of space. According to Henri Lefebvre, "every society ... produces ... its own space" (1974, p. 31) This brings me to the penultimate question that cropped up in my mind when reading this work: To "queer" the city, does architecture and urban design need to change, or rather society proper?

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