THEESIS BOOKLET

JENNY ANDREASSON, CRITICAL STUDIES DESIGN STUDIO, FALL SEMESTER 2012
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Sections of everyday spaces (working title) or Confronting spatial hierarchies (working title)

>>A threshold understanding of spaces between urban and rural
>>Questioning the hierarchies of urban/rural spaces
>>What can a community space in rural Västergötland do to alter the rural/urban binaries?

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Master Thesis, autumn 2012
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Introduction: setting the scene

I am interested in the hierarchies of spaces in Swedish national discourse in general, and the dichotomy between urban and rural specifically. I want to question the binaries urban/rural that is also connected to modern/traditional and VIDAIRE stereotyping, and to look into modes of resistance to this. I will work with the site around Naums byggdegård, a community space located in rural Naum, Västergötland. This byggdegård is located only a kilometer away from my childhood home, and I intend to use my personal story of early on feeling the power relation of different sites as a feminist method and design tool. Being a byggdegård, Naums byggdegård is also connected, run by, a local association, Naums byggdegård-förening.

Sweden as a country as a large percentage of rural areas, but as Sweden is a very centralized country (due to great eager to become modern) the rural areas in Sweden are largely defined by the rural areas. Sweden in her dissertation Madeleine Eriksson, human geographer at Umeå University, talks about a hierarchy of spaces in the Swedish national discourse. There is an unequal relation between rural and urban spaces in Sweden, and the celebration of urbanity in Sweden at the moment increase the binary urban/rural. It represents the urban, in contrast to the rural, as modern, inhabited by progressive, mobile and creative people, in politics, science, media and popular culture (p. 2). The rural is being represented as different and may then be signified as the “other”.

Eriksson has studied representations of Norrland (a largely rural northern part of Sweden) and writes: “In the reproduction of difference, Norrland is fixed and defined by those with the power to generalize.” (p. 11) i.e. defined by spaces with higher status, so in the hierarchy of spaces Stockholm has the power to define Norrland. She continues to talk of how rural spaces are being represented as marginal and weak. Her dissertation also investigated the consequence of the representations that are stereotyping rural areas, and says it has real political, economical etc consequences for people living in rural areas. She contines: “The representations of the other is about marginalization and subordination,” And it matters how things are represented because: “... representations are not mere mirrors of the world. They enter directly into its fabrication” (Gregory, 2004:121 (p. 3)

Eriksson writes that the issue of the representation of the weak rural areas of Sweden are becoming more pressing and more politically...
tese, as there as been a shift of focus on the weak and sick in Swedish society. She writes “A greater pressure is being put in individuals and places” often by rhetorics in the use of “utanförskap” otherness, and is justified in terms of a increased international competitiveness. This is what is at stake! This is why this is important issued now! And architects whould be involved!

When it comes to architecture there is on top of this a hierarchy of taste that is connected to class, (and education). Eriksson writes about how people in rural areas are targeted with mechanisms where the dummer, more racist, more sexist, uneducated, non-modern part of ourselves is projected on them. In an architectural discourse this is also connected to taste. The modern, progressive, creative people living in urban areas are prepresented as having good taste, and keeping up with the latest trends, while inhabitants of rural areas are prepresented as having bad taste, not following trends.

Mattias Qviström, researcher in landscape architecture, has written extensively about fringes and margins between city and country, and attempts to “reveal continuous relationships between rural and urban activities at the urban fringe, and thus blur the notions of a former clear cut boundary between city and country.” (Qviström, 2005).

During the last years we have learnt that people are increasingly moving into the cities all over the world. The cities are then to hold the solution of our sustainability, and our social, economical and democratic issues. The question of food production becomes an interesting one, we ask ourselves if we can move production closer to, or into, the cityies, to make it more local, and therefore more sustainable. But then what about the people still living in the countrysie, in the small towns and villages, in the suburbs and so on? This is where a lot of our production of food, timber, and energy, among other things takes place today. These are real everyday spaces for a large amount of people in Sweden, seldom taken into consideration when speaking of sustainable development.

Growing up in the countryside of Västergötland Sweden, this dichotomy of urban and rural clashes with my understanding of how spaces are actually perceived in peoples everyday life. I believe the binary division of rural and urban is a simplification that has little to do with how the inhabitants of Sweden actually live their lives. In my experience, people constantly move between different places, being urban, suburban, rural, small-town etc. It can for instance be a movement

“A greater pressure is being put in individuals and places” by the use of the rhetorical term ‘utanförskap’, ‘othering’ in contemporary Swedish political discourse. (Eriksson)

Spatial hierarchies are intertwined with issues of class and taste.

“reveal continuous relationships between rural and urban activities at the urban fringe, and thus blur the notions of a former clear cut boundary between city and country.” (Qviström)
from one’s house in the countryside, to one’s work in a city. The movement gives these sites a quality of being un-fixed, un-stable. In my studio projects “Lyssna på bussen”, made in the spring of 2012, I worked with these kind of unstable sites. I focused on a bus line in southern Stockholm, which enables people to move between very different types of suburbs, all playing important parts in their lives.

This dichotomy of the urban and the rural becomes problematic, both because it is a simplification, omitting many important every day spaces I believe architects should be concerned with, and also because it has an inherent hierarchy of space and power. Urban spaces seems to be higher valued than rural spaces, spaces in smaller villages, towns, and suburbs, when looking at economy, culture, and power relations etc. Speaking of power and influence, the city also has connections to democracy, in terms of political implications in public space. The city can be said to be the place where people can make their voices heard, this is where they can enter the street to protest. These implications is something I wish to further explore, reading among other books, Catharina Gabrielson dissertation Att göra skillnad from 2007. I want to further understand political significance in spaces not specifically urban. In the course the Logic of Sensation (KTH School of Architecture, spring 2012) I for instance started to investigate the rural institution of Bygdegården as an important social and political space in the countryside of Sweden.

In my thesis project I want to investigate what I can do as an architect, what role I can take on, to elevate those important everyday spaces, neither urban or rural (or both?) in the practice of architecture and in our build environment. I aim to work towards a threshold understanding of spaces from urban to rural.
Statement of intent (research question)

This thesis project aims to move towards a threshold understanding of urbaniity/rurality and everything inbetween. It aims to question the countryside as the spatial ‘other’ (Eriksson - (re)productions of a periphery), where the larger cities is at a position where they influence representations of other places a part from them selves. As Sweden is a country adapting willingly to the modern project, it has become very centralized, giving certain spaces power over others. I want to deal with the hierarchies of spaces in Swedish national discourse. How are the ‘other’ spaces being valued? What does it do to the people who live there, and to the spaces produced there? What resistance are there to these stereotypes?

I believe everyday spaces are important, and I will focus on rural, semi-rural (etc!) in this thesis project. They are important because this is where a majority of the population in Sweden live their lives, even though they are represented as marginal in the dominant culture.

I believe that life goes on precisely in the inbetween everyday spaces in the hierarchies of space and power. In the everyday, ugly, beautiful, boring, stimulating spaces where most people in Sweden spend their days and lives. It is time that architects become concerned with what happens there.

How can I through an architectural project investigate the threshold understanding of rural and urban and all of the sites/fields inbetween?

How can I make the social, political and economic hierarchies of everyday spaces visible through my project?
When thinking of sites for my thesis project I am interested in the idea of working with several sites, located on different places on the threshold scale of urban-rural.

Movement and time aspects are crucial for the understanding of the everyday spaces of my thesis project, as I am starting to see that several spaces/sites are connected in some kind of network of everyday movement in an ordinary day in life. I will investigate this further through, among other things, Michel de Certeau’s writing on ‘spatial stories’ in The Practice of Everyday Life.

In my latest studio project I worked with a series of sites along a busline in southern Stockholm, to put emphasis on the movement as producer of a particular suburban space. The series of sites were connected to each other by the everyday movement people engaged in by riding the bus, taking them to different destinations in their daily lives.

In terms of working with sites I have been looking at the book Architecture and field/work by Suzanne Ewing et al. The book suggests to look at field instead of site and describes field as having “more fluid qualities, and unfixed conditions suggestive of contemporary networked conditions.” (Ewing, 2011, p. 4) I hope to learn more about how field can be described as connected in these networked conditions. In the text “Blighted” from the same book, Igor Marjanovic and Lindsay Stouffer describes field as “revealing clues to its past and present through a plethora of found objects. Beneath the muddy grass is a set of old letter blocks; against the brick wall an armchair; hidden in the bushes a pair of headphones. A surprising richness is discovered. This site that initially seemed blighted is revealed as a record of memories and objects.” (Ewing, 2011, p. 162)

I find this way of looking at field encouraging, because then all sites have possibilities, (hi)stories and qualities. Not least the everyday spaces that are not so visible in our dominant culture, and that I want to focus on in this thesis project. I want to argue that the forgotten or hidden everyday spaces of suburbia, rurality etc. etc., are crucial in peoples lives. Naums bygdegård is in a way a marginal space, and this way of looking at site or field might help me find its potential ans possibilities.

I would also like to briefly investigate the historical context of rurality and these other threshold spaces. When did our culture first make up the binaries of city and countryside? I will look into
the age of the enlightenment to see how the view on humans has developed and changed, how our societies constructed difference between body and mind, nature and culture etc. What consequences does these historical shifts have on contemporary life in these spaces today?

When looking at these non-, or semiurban to rural spaces, nature, landscape and vegetation becomes important factors. During my education in architecture I have had a parallel interest in gardening, landscape and growing things, and I see this thesis as an opportunity to explore that side of the architectural practice. Vegetation and gardening connects me to the countryside, and to my childhood, growing up in a family dedicated to non-toxic farming in the early 1980’s.

In trying to identify these sites or fields for my thesis project I have started to read the book Urban Wildscapes edited by Anna Jorgensen and Richard Keenan. Urban Wildscapes talks about precisely marginal (urban) spaces where vegetation grow on its own permissions, and where a wide range of human activities take place. Can these wildscapes be looked upon as possibilities for new or alternative uses and practices, and are these wildspaces found more often in the non-, or semiurban to rural spaces at focus in my thesis project? Is there a scale of possibilities to be mapped along the threshold of urban-rural? In the article “Väntans landskap: om studier av stadssanden och dess morgondag”, in Nordic Journal of Architectural Research vol. 18, no. 3, 2005, Mattias Qviström writes about landscapes on the fringes of our cities, and how we need to understand them as important and complex everyday spaces.

During the autumn semester of 2011 I worked with the typology of the bower, a landscape element often used in traditional Swedish cottages, in a project called “The Bower of Confessions”. I used it as a hidden space for rituals. It was located at the fringe of the property of a multifamily country house in Gibbenäs, Sweden.
Possible site: Naums Bygdegård

>> A specifically rural community space, run and owned by Naums bygdegårdsförening, the association of Naums bygdegård. Located in rural Naum, Västergötland.

>> Existing (partly decaying) structure on site. Can this be transformed, modified, turned inside out, extended, decreased?

>> Existing programme of the community space, including for instance a large space for dancing, partying etc, kitchen, seating area, stage, backstage.

>> The building is currently being used by the community, mainly an pensioner group that organize dancing every other week. Occasionally the bygdegård is being used for weddings and other events. This coming autumn the pensioner group has not booked the bydgegård for dancing. Activity will decrease.

>> Through the association and the users of the space it has a connections to people inhabiting the Västgötland countryside.

>> The community and users are agents. How can they, and do they act? How can I use their stories, and my own in my thesis? “Choosing the margin as a space for radical openness”m about coming from one place, moving to another, but still going back to the margin and using it as a site of resistance. Resistance against what? The hegemony of the urban middle class?

>> The Bygdegård Movement has a connection to the agricultural associations from early 1900’s onwards.

>> Naums bygdegård is in an urgent need for renovation, but there is a lack of money. Every year the association gets a grant from the municipality for maintenance (30% of their maintenance costs). To apply for the grant they need to send in protocol from annual meeting and an annual report. The future of Naums Bygdegård is uncertain.
Naums bygdegårds location in Naum

Naums bygdegårds location in relation to Vara

The site of Naums bygdegård

The landmark of “lagerhuset”, a gran elevator and silos located in the town of Vara.
Sketch plan with basic functions

The Bygdegårds position in Naum.

Naums relation to Vara.
How does Naums bygdegård relate to my theme of the hierarchies of spaces? (Everyone knows that there is something called Folkets Hus, but not bygdegård?) By looking at i would “uplift” this to an interesting community and theme for architects. They are part of a living countryside...

Naums bygdegård is decaying due to lack of money and decreasing usage and community involvement. Can I make a project where the structure is being supported where it is needed, so that it can still be used throughout its decay? And after decomposition, can the bygdegårds rise again when the times change and people start moving back to the countryside due to crisis (ex. Greece).

Program and brief:
Questioning the hierarchies of rural/urban by looking into the social space of Naums Bygdegård

Current activities in Naums Bygdegård.
About the bygdegård movement

Bygdegårdar are community spaces specific to the countryside and smaller villages of Sweden. The information about Bygdegårdar in this coloring-in-book is largely build on my personal experience, growing up near several bygdegårdar in the Swedish countryside, and on the state funded investigation from 2003 on community spaces, ‘Allmänna samlingslokaler - demokrati, kultur, utveckling’ (SOU 2003:118).

The movement of building bygdeårdar emerged in early twentieth century rural Sweden from grass-root movements of different kinds, such as agricultural associations and rural youth associations. The population of the countryside needed spaces for a multitude of activities, including the holding of board meetings for the different existing associations mentioned above. Material for constructing these buildings was often donated from people in the area or reused material, and the construction was made collectively by volunteers. Some bygdegårdar were also re-appropriations of already existing buildings. (Bygdegårdarnas Riksförbund, 2012)

Today, Bygdegårdar are used for, for instance, different kinds of parties, weddings, youth discos, and annual parties for the community members. It is also used as spaces for different kinds of sports and cultural activities, and for study circles. Sometimes they contain smaller meeting rooms for groups of teenagers or small associations, and they can also serve as polling stations in national and regional elections. The spaces are run by volunteers from the community.

From early twentieth century and onwards, the bygdegård movement grew all over Sweden and began to take on the form of an institution, as individual bygdegårdar organized themselves in a national association of bygdegårdar. In 1942 the Swedish state voted for subsidies for maintaining, and constructing new, community spaces in Sweden (SOU 2003:118). The state then gained a certain control over the stock of existing spaces, and over the construction of new ones, through the formal applications necessary to receive funding. At the same time as the Swedish state appreciated and elevated the spaces of the bygdegårdar, it also used an already existing infrastructure of self-regulating community spaces to gain control over mechanisms that “educated and civilized” the inhabitants of the Swedish countryside. Reading Tony Bennetts text ‘The exhibitionary Complex’ gives an insight of how the state in the disciplinary society, still present at this time in history, might have worked to regulate and order its inhabitants. Bennet writes about how the phenomena of the exhibition played a crucial role in educating and
self-regulating the public, transforming them from *populace* into a population. Bennet writes: “Museums, galleries and, more intermittently exhibitions played a pivotal role in the formation of the modern state and are fundamental to its conception as, among other things, a set of educative and civilizing agencies.” (Bennet, 1995, p. 66) He points out that the state had an indirect, but very strong, influence over the institution of museums and exhibitions.

In reading the bygdegård movement as an institution, the text ‘Panopticism’ by Michel Foucault on the mechanisms of disciplinary societies, has been key. The institution of the bygdegård can be said to have a disciplinary power over its community members, as there are social and factual rules on how to behave in it. The effect of this disciplinary power can also be argued to spread out to all parts of the society, according to Foucault’s writing on how power relations distribute themselves by the panopticism of every day. Small tactics of discipline, executed by partners in positions of power, operates on the “underside of the law”, and have a large influence on ordering the community (Foucault, 1991, p. 223).