Re-encoding the Spectacle: Urban Fatefulness and Mediated Stigmatisation in the ‘City of Tomorrow’

André Jansson

Summary. This article presents an empirical study of the public re-encoding processes occurring after the spectacular Bo01 Housing Fair, the City of Tomorrow, hosted in Malmö, Sweden, in 2001. The fair initiated the reconstruction of a former shipyard and harbour area, creating a new post-industrial district. Due to economic and political scandals, however, the image of the new neighbourhood was seriously wounded. The fair was turned into a symbol of the ‘new economy’, which led to a media-driven stigmatisation of both the district and its early settlers. Taking Erving Goffman’s concept of fatefulness as point of departure, the analysis stresses the symbolic and social vulnerability involved in the transformation of urban landscapes. It is argued that this vulnerability increases as an effect of informationalisation.

In a media-saturated society, urban citizens may occasionally experience that the imaginative structure of their home territory is not primarily decided by social dynamics in the local setting, but through public mediation (news, films, advertisements, etc.). They may also find that the media discourses affect their own life-narrative and self-identity, their entire sense of belonging. This is especially true when it comes to the ghettoisation of urban ‘problem areas’. In this article, however, I will explore a quite different case of such mediated stigmatisation.

From May to September 2001, the city of Malmö, Sweden, hosted one of its greatest events ever—the Bo01 Housing Fair, also entitled The City of Tomorrow. Innovative architecture facing the recently opened Öresund Bridge should put Malmö ‘on the map’. The project also initiated the reconstruction of the former shipyard and harbour area Western Harbour (Västra hamnen), creating a new post-industrial district, containing both housing and business facilities. However, as the project became more and more marked by economic and political scandals, heavily covered in the media, and eventually ran into bankruptcy, the high-profile and spectacular appearance of the fair was turned into a negative symbol of the ‘new economy’, characterised by risk-taking and imaginary values. My aim is to trace the mechanisms involved in this re-encoding process and to clarify how the process eventually led to a stigmatisation of the early settlers in the City of Tomorrow—a typical middle-class group normally not affected by this kind of exposure.

My analysis contributes to the overarching discourse of post-industrialisation and points especially to the symbolic vulnerability involved when former industrial areas are
transformed into spectacular housing and office spaces. Taking Erving Goffman’s (1967) theories as a point of departure, I will argue that the social power of public spectacles, such as housing fairs and high-profile building projects, stems from their capacity to: create, reinforce and circulate a public sense of *fatefulness*; and, promote a (superficial) *solution* to the very same fateful moment. A fateful moment is one of high uncertainty and consequentiaility. The public spectacle may resolve some of this uncertainty if it manages to bring about a collective understanding of what on-going transformations are about, primarily in terms of temporal continuity and spatial coherence. It may thus operate as a cultural vehicle for the reproduction and renegotiation of social communities (see Dayan and Katz, 1992; Roche, 2000). At the same time, however, it holds a politically disintegrating potential—a capacity to catalyse energies that through mediation articulate and problematise competing power-fields within the project of modernity (see Couldry, 2003). The concept of fatefulness, I argue, is thus a good tool for understanding why, and under which circumstances, high-profile urban regeneration projects, such as The City of Tomorrow, run the risk of producing not only regional communion and pride, but also long-lasting socio-political traumas.

The Fair, the District and the Study

The Bo01 Housing Fair was much more than a spectacular exhibition. It was a crucial part of the political aim of transforming Malmö’s ambiguous identity. Malmö is the third-largest city in Sweden (about 265 000 inhabitants), located in the southernmost region. Previously a typical industrial, working-class city, the decline of traditional industries had called for a re-orientation towards more knowledge-based industries. The formerly glorious shipyard Kockums, which for many years dominated the Western Harbour area, had ceased to build ships in the late 1980s and, soon afterwards, the post-Fordist Saab car factory located in the same area became nothing but a historical parenthesis. During the early 1990s, Malmö lost approximately 25 000 job opportunities, most of them within the industrial sector. The identity crisis culminated (at least in a symbolic sense) in summer 2003, when the Kockums crane, which was the world’s largest of its kind and Malmö’s landmark, was exported to Korea.

The transformation of the abandoned industrial area in the Western Harbour was a step towards a post-industrial, or informational, socioeconomic structure. The housing fair should also contribute to the symbolic construction of Öresund as a transnational region, connecting Malmö and Copenhagen, Denmark—a region that according to the promotion campaign, should spark off ‘a new future’ (see also Berg et al., 2000). The Öresund Bridge, a huge infrastructural investment, was inaugurated in July 2000, less than a year before the opening of Bo01. Both the bridge and the housing fair should strengthen Malmö’s position as a node in the global network society. But they must also be understood as symbols of the globalism that saturates late modern politics and which was especially strong during the mid–late 1990s (Berg et al., 2002; Jansson, 2003a).

National housing fairs have been arranged on a regular basis in Sweden since 1985 (before that more occasionally). However, the Bo01 fair was unique in terms of both its size and its international scope. The plans of the housing fair began to take shape in 1996 and were supported by local and national governments, as well as the EU. The aim of the fair was above all to exhibit new technical solutions for sustainable urban development. The fair contained three interconnected sections: a housing fair (architecture and interior design—altogether 40 concepts), including an international section called ‘European Village’; a landscaping display; and, an art exhibition focusing upon questions of housing and urbanism. While the exhibition and certain parts of the outdoor environments were of a temporary nature, all housing facilities were to become part of the new neighbourhood. In total, about 350 housing units were built (500 planned) within the exhibition area. In the future, about 10 000 people will live in the Western
Harbour area and an additional 20,000 will work or study there, according to the local city planners. In this article, when discussing the neighbourhood, rather than the fair, I will predominantly refer to the City of Tomorrow (since no permanent name has yet been given to the former exhibition area). The term Bo01 refers primarily to the fair, while Western Harbour is the greater district (see Figures 1 and 2).

The present study is part of an interdisciplinary research programme called Culture,
Figure 2. Aerial view of the Bo01 housing fair. Source: Malmö City web-page (www.malmo.se).
Identity and Life Forms in the Post-industrial City (funded by the Swedish Research Council) which compares the social and cultural transformation of three formerly industrial cities in Sweden: Göteborg, Malmö and Norrköping. My analysis rests upon three empirical sources. First, I have examined the marketing material and catalogues published in direct relation to the fair. There were three catalogues (accompanying the themes mentioned above): Home—Stories at a Housing Exhibition; Outside at Bo01; and Vision: Art Exhibitions. My main objective has been to reveal the mythologies and ideologies surrounding the concepts. Secondly, I have studied the national press coverage of the Bo01 Housing Fair during the period from 1999 to April 2003. The analysis includes eight leading Swedish newspapers—Sydsvenska Dagbladet, Kvällsposten, Dagens Nyheter, Svenska Dagbladet, Aftonbladet, Expressen, Göteborgs-Posten and Göteborgs-Tidningen. In total, the material consists of 469 articles. Initially, I categorised the articles according to thematic patterns. As presented here, however, my conclusions are based on hermeneutic, contextualised readings, akin to discourse analysis, and have been discussed elsewhere (Jansson, 2003a). These two sources dominate the first part of this article, which focuses upon the public re-encoding of the housing-fair-as-spectacle.

Thirdly, I have carried out eight longer interviews with a diverse selection of individuals living (and in one instance working) in the former exhibition area (see Table 1). The interviews were conducted in autumn–winter 2003. I collected my informants partly through personal connections, partly through a local community meeting held in October 2003. Five interviews took place in the homes of the informants, while three of them took place in public settings. They lasted between 40 and 60 minutes, involving questions concerning life-biography, dwelling career, lifestyle practices and personal experiences of the fair, the neighbourhood and the media coverage. My informants are not representative of the Western Harbour population in any statistical manner. Rather, they are selected in order to provide a diverse pattern of social backgrounds and experiences—as will become obvious in the second part of the article, when we turn to the issue of mediated stigmatisation.

### Table 1. The informants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Occupation, Living Situation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Dentist, divorced and living in a condominium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbro</td>
<td>Early retired woman, previously cultural worker, living in a condominium with her husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erik</td>
<td>Computer engineer, living in a semi-detached house (co-habitant).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heinz</td>
<td>Cultural entrepreneur, living in a condominium with his wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerstin</td>
<td>Retired woman, previously manager in the public sector, living in a condominium with her husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nils</td>
<td>Retired man, previously in the construction business, living in a condominium with his wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrik</td>
<td>University student, living single in a rented student apartment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roy</td>
<td>Entrepreneur in the service business, working in the neighbourhood</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Note: All names are fictive.

Fatefulness as Public Spectacle

The Bo01 housing fair was not only about socioeconomic transformation. It was also about the alteration of Malmö’s imaginative structure—or, what in popular discourse might be called its ‘public image’. However, altering the image of a city is a notoriously difficult endeavour (see Jansson, 2003b). There is never one single image, or a cliché, but precisely a structured pattern of fluctuating interpretations. As Alan Blum puts it in his thought-provoking book *The Imaginative Structure of the City* (Blum, 2003, p. 34).
That is also to say that the imaginative structure of a city may only partially be understood in terms of its social and material structures. The latter two are related to the former as the object-at-hand is related to the object-as-phenomenon. At the same time, the city is for obvious reasons more than ‘just a sign’. Alterations in each of the structures are mirroring, responding to and provoking alterations in the others, creating a complex pattern of on-going material, social and interpretative processes. That is exactly what happened during and after the housing fair in Malmö 2001.

The Fateful Moment

From the above description, as well as from its very name, we may assert that the City of Tomorrow came to signify a fateful moment in Malmö’s history. As we will see further on, the notion of fatefulness provides a useful tool for understanding the often extraordinary social influence of public spectacles. The concept was introduced by Erving Goffman (1967) in his book Interaction Ritual and refers to the ambiguous emotional state that may emerge on occasions when the individual has to make a decision that seems exceptionally important or risky. According to Goffman (1967, p. 164), the fateful moment or activity is marked by being problematic and consequential. In phenomenological theory, the ‘problematic situation’ is described as a situation in which the individual subject has to reflect upon, or reconsider, certain parts of his or her taken-for-granted patterns of interpretation. While everyday life is by definition unproblematic, based on routinised modes of behaviour taking place in familiar settings, it might be interrupted by more or less unfamiliar, problematic, situations through which the individual gains new experiences. If the problematic situation is also interpreted as consequential—that is, involving aspects that are likely to have significant effects upon the future direction of the personal narrative—it means that the individual must try to find meaningful connections between future alternatives and established perceptions of the self and/in the world—that is, establishing a sense of continuity and coherence. Furthermore, the fateful moment is enhanced once it involves activities in a social or public setting—that is, on stage. As Goffman notes:

Social situations thus become opportunities for introducing favourable information about oneself, just as they become risky occasions when unfavourable facts may be established (Goffman, 1967, p. 168).

The leap from Goffman’s theory of micro social practices to the structural development of a city might seem to be a giant one. Yet, we cannot overlook the fact that both the experience and the discursive production of urban fatefulness largely have to do with the social psychological interplay between local decision-makers, the media and the public. There are indeed some striking similarities between Goffman’s ideas and how events unfolded in Malmö at the time of the housing fair. First, the city government and presumably a great share of the population had for a long time experienced a sense of loss, due to industrial decline, as well as an increasing uncertainty regarding the future. In the book about the fair, Ilmar Reepalu, the social democratic chairman of the city council, states that local politicians during the 1990s “had to realise that the era as an industrial city was coming to an end” (Reepalu, 2001, p. 8). In the fair catalogues, the organisers speak austerely about the dawn of a new era, defined as “Year 1”. And if one visits the web-page of Malmö City today, the industrial crisis is even viewed as an asset:

The closure of the Kockums shipyard presented real scope for the transformation and creation of a new district in the city—Västra Hamnen, the City of Tomorrow. Thanks to this structural facelift, the city has now once more renewed its ties with the sea (www.malmo.se).

Secondly, the political ambition of altering Malmö’s social, economic and imaginative structures demanded great economic and symbolic investments, whose future pay-off was
In contrast to many other exhibitions, the City of Tomorrow was not a privately run project. Since it marked the starting-point of a broader urban transformation, the local and national governments, both Social Democratic, were also eager to finance a significant share of the project via taxpayers' money. The abandoned industrial spaces in the Western Harbour were thus symbolically redefined as an object of political and entrepreneurial desire (see Zukin, 1982; Blum, 2003, p. 210). To paraphrase Walter Benjamin (1986; see also Gilloch, 1996), the ruins of modern dreams became the sites of a renewed phantasmagoria, whose creative energies the housing fair was supposed to set free. In order to make the exhibition as attractive as possible on a global scale, great resources were spent on cutting-edge architecture and spectacular landscaping, which demanded costly engineering and exclusive building materials.

Thirdly, risk was further enhanced due to the ambition of reaching world-wide exposure—putting Malmö on the map. Taking centre-stage in the global media space has much in common with the social performances of everyday life. An individual whose personality (true or fake) is exposed and gazed upon may reach either success or failure. And the greater the audience is, and the more spectacular the appearance is, the more far-ranging the consequences might be. In general, the same thing applies to major events in cities. Ever since the famous London Expo in 1851, and the Paris world exhibitions during the second half of the same century, ‘place marketing’ has been an integral part of modern history—a history in which the combination of technical rationality and spectacle has often been the path to commercial success (see Ritzer, 1999). But it is also a history in which a great number of events have failed due to economic and symbolic miscalculations, and in which the risk of such failure has increased due to hardening competition for public attention in the global ‘place war’ (see Robins, 1997).

Altogether, the City of Tomorrow may best be interpreted as an attempt not only to resolve a problematic, fateful moment, but also to reinforce fatefulness by means of a public spectacle. In other words, the fair was both producing and responding to fatefulness, providing an answer to a question it was itself exploiting. As Robert Merton once put it in a pioneering study of American media events

the very same society that produces a sense of alienation and estrangement generates in many a craving for reassurance, an acute need to believe, a ‘flight into faith’ (Merton, 1946, p. 143; see also Couldry, 2003, ch. 4).

The housing fair symbolises such a flight, providing precisely the sense of temporal continuity and spatial coherence that might resolve acute fatefulness.

The Spectacle and the Expo Citizen

I do not want to reduce the City of Tomorrow to a ‘media spectacle’ (Kellner, 2003) or a ‘media event’ (Dayan and Katz, 1992), since it would be to understand the phenomenon in a much too narrow sense. Due to its multi-structural appearance (material, social, symbolic), I prefer to speak of a public spectacle—a performed event whose meanings are negotiated through a variety of media throughout the public sphere. One may of course argue that the term spectacle is far from sufficient for capturing the complexity of a fair, especially since this particular fair was turned into socio-emotional home territories (see Morley, 2000). If we want to scrutinise the mechanisms that eventually led to the fusion of home territories and media space (see Couldry and McCarthy, 2004), however, it is precisely the fair-as-spectacle we must place at the centre of analysis. First, it was the spectacular appearance of the fair that generated public attention. Although the fair did not manage to attract as many visitors as calculated, it indeed generated and redirected a great deal of hermeneutic energy within the public sphere. This energy, as we will see below, was expressed in news reporting as well as in debates
around urban policy. Secondly, speaking of a spectacle is to articulate the fair’s ideological dimension. Following Guy Debord’s original writings, the fair-as-spectacle—in spite of, or precisely because of, its anxiously forward-looking appearance—epitomised “the prevailing model of social life” (Debord, 1967/1994, p. 13). The visions and concepts of the fair were presented and promoted in an era when the ‘new economy’ seemed to head for long-lasting, almost limitless expansion. Vast broadband networks were projected throughout the country; Sweden was said to take the lead in the global network economy and Kista outside Stockholm was described as the new Silicon Valley. Accordingly, the housing-fair-as-spectacle was “the celebration of a choice already made in the sphere of production, and the consummate result of that choice” (Debord, 1967/1994, p. 13). It was in the City of Tomorrow that the new, post-modern ‘IT class’ should find their homes. The following presentations accompanied two of the design concepts during the fair.

To live in Malmö as a European citizen means that you are close to airports, the continent and the big city but also the small town atmosphere near the sea, nature and quietness. Our family consists of business people with Europe as their working field. Back in the home in Malmö work has to be combined with leisure time in a natural way. To work undisturbed twenty-four hours a day becomes as natural as having vacation in the home. The children have moved out but often come by. Business associates and friends from different parts of the world arrive for shorter or longer stays (Warehouse 1—A Home in Europe—Catalogue 1, p. 14).

I imagine as tenants for a terraced house of 65 square meters with two floors:

First, Maja, thirty years old. Works full-time at Radio Rix as a media saleswoman, rarely on Saturdays and Sundays. . . . Maja is also interested in shares and has bought a lot of Ericsson shares. At the moment she is working on getting a scuba-diver certificate.

Second, Martin, twenty-nine years old. Works as a pilot for SAS after many years of technical education. . . . He likes good food and wine and enjoys cooking together with Maja. Martin’s interest in art is considerable and he frequently likes to visit galleries (The Simple House—Catalogue 1, p. 24).

The fateful atmosphere of the new economy was integral to many of the architectural concepts and was further reinforced by means of promotional representations. Housing should signify the new future. It should suit the presumed demands of the ‘IT class’ of the new economy—a viewpoint that was also reproduced in public discourse. As Fiona Allon notes in a study of the ‘smart home’, there seems to be historical significance to this informational perspective if the figure of the housebound housewife was most certainly the target for the discourses of “home modernity” which circulated in the mid years of the 20th century, then it seems that the double-income professional couple, the “symbolic analysts”, “knowledge workers” and info-elite are now the figures of smart domesticity in the twenty-first century (Allon, 2004, p. 260).

The new domestic figure that Allon discusses conforms to what I here will call the encoded ‘expo citizen’, which was discursively inscribed as the preferred settler in the City of Tomorrow (see Hall, 1980). There were of course certain variations between the housing concepts. But on the whole, following the grand narrative of the time, fair organisers and architects encoded the one figure that most effectively was supposed to signify the new future, supporting the desired imaginative structure of Malmö. As we shall see below, however, the visions of post-industrial, or post-modern, Malmö and its new entrepreneurs became stranded. The bankruptcy and unfulfilled promises of the housing fair coincided with the collapse of the new
During 2001, the economic and cultural climate was suddenly inverted. Formerly glorious companies were almost eliminated and, on a global level, the collapse was tragically manifested through the 9–11 terror attacks in the US (just five days before the closing of Bo01). In Sweden, a great public debate broke out, in which ordinary people—newcomers to the stock market who had invested their savings in the IT economy—were presented as the main victims. In a similar manner, local taxpayers were described as the victims of the Bo01 bankruptcy. Suddenly, the weak material underpinnings of the spectacle were exposed. The fateful moment that the fair had been constructed to exploit and resolve was actually stretched out.

The Media Narrative

Before I turn to the early settlers and their experiences, I will give a brief sketch of how the overall Bo01 story unfolded in Swedish newspapers from mid 1999 to spring 2003. My main conclusion is that the news story generated a kind of discursive boomerang effect (see Jansson, 2003a). Initially, the visionary fatefulness encoded by city planners and fair organisers saturated the news coverage. As the events unfolded, however, the catchwords of the place marketing discourse were re-encoded (Jansson, 2002, 2003b), transformed into a negative backdrop to the more dramatic socio-political events taking place in the local context. The story was told in very much the same way in all newspapers, although certain differences can be noted due to area of distribution and journalistic profile. If we overlook these variations, however, the general story can be divided into five main phases.

Phase 1. Visions, scandals and race against time. From mid 1999, when the Bo01 concept was presented at the Venice Biennale, until the opening in May 2001, there were three parallel stories being told. The first one articulated the visions and plans surrounding the project—the emerging transnational region and the transformation of Malmö (see Table 2, Extracts 1–2). The second story was about the fair’s leadership and its heavy, and indirectly tax-financed, expenditure on international representation. Through this critical examination, a fundamental socio-political conflict was inscribed. In the last few months before the opening, a third story emerged: would the expo be finished in time? This question gave a more intense pulse to the narrative and constructed the very opening day as the fateful moment par excellence. As it was, when the fair opened on 16 May, the environment was still rather messy and several houses and arrangements were not yet completed (among them, the Turning Torso and the European Village).

Phase 2. The opening. During the days before and immediately after the opening, the stories of bad leadership temporarily vanished from the agenda. Most of the reporting dealt instead with the content of the fair, spiced up with interviews with key actors in the project, as well as with the neighbourhood’s first settlers. A major share of the reporting consisted of reviews written by journalists or invited architects and designers. On 17 May, Sydsvenska Dagbladet published no less than nine review articles.

Phase 3. Absent visitors and social critique. As soon as the review articles had vanished from the agenda (and, due to the logic of news value, they did very rapidly), a new story took the centre of attention. It was the story of absent, or too few, visitors. In early June, the first indications of economic failure appeared; the audience had only amounted to half of what was expected. During the rest of the summer, this narrative dominated most of what was written about the fair. It also created a number of side-stories about overexpensive tickets, low accessibility to restaurants during nighttime and so on. There were also two other, and interconnected, stories planted during this phase—the story of the City of Tomorrow as a neighbourhood for only rich people, and the story of low sales figures. The lack of
visitors was thus supplemented by a lack of buyers and the general explanation was that the prices were too high. Accordingly, the impression was that only very rich people, or people already ‘used to’ extreme housing prices—notably, people from Stockholm or Copenhagen—could afford to live in the district. This generated a public image of the neighbourhood as an entity of its own, alien to the rest of the city both geographically and socially.

Phase 4. The bankruptcy. In late August 2001, the government of Malmö decided to
accept a SEK40 million loan to the Bo01 Company, rescuing it from bankruptcy. Nevertheless, on the fair’s closing day 15 September, the bankruptcy was a fact. It generated headlines and articles for several months, reporting on betrayed taxpayers, unpaid entrepreneurs, foreign art pieces that had been borrowed but could not be sent back to their owners and so on. While the exhibition area was discursively stigmatised as an unfinished, dirty area, scattered with left-behind rubbish, a ghost town with unsold apartments and no public life, the rhetoric of global place marketing and the new economy was referred to in an increasingly frustrated and sometimes outright aggressive way. This frustration can be understood in light of the overarching global master narratives during the same period. In the news articles following the Bo01 bankruptcy, the decline of the new economy and the 9–11 terror attacks were often mentioned as important explanations as to why apartments were still unsold (see Table 2, Extract 3).

Phase 5. Trials—and renewed visions. During spring 2002, not very much was written about the housing fair. But by the end of May a new drama was introduced—the accusations and subsequent trials against Ilmar Reepalu, Malmö’s social democratic council chairman, and the person ultimately responsible for the city’s economic investments in Bo01. The story ended in April 2003 when Reepalu was found not guilty. During this period, no other enduring stories were told about the exhibition, except for sporadic reporting on (un)sold houses and apartments (‘the Ghost Town’, see Table 2, Extract 4), and individual chronicles of the neighbourhood’s development. The relative silence was to some extent a reflection of the fact that not very much of journalistic interest happened in the City of Tomorrow. The lack of journalistic interest, however, might in turn be interpreted as a reflection of an overarching unwillingness to mention ‘Bo01’ by name. The event’s bad reputation, publicly diffused by the media, was thus reinforced through a very classifyfying act of non-classification—media silence as an accentuated form of stigmatisation. Successively, however, indirect reconciliation with the downfall of Bo01 was sought through a growing interest in the further development of Western Harbour, primarily Santiago Calatrava’s 53-storey housing complex, the Turning Torso, and the transformation of former docks in the eastern part of the harbour area. As these new visions emerged, the Bo01 discourse was applied as a contrast (see Table 2, Extract 5).

This narrative outline manifests the logic of news production. It manifests that media dramaturgy is primarily about capturing conflicts and moral dilemmas with a direct local relevance (see Altheide and Snow, 1979). It is also an example of how public spectacles are continuously re-encoded within the media sector. Their meanings cannot be predetermined. Nor do they automatically reproduce any clear-cut centres of power. For, as John Fiske (1996, p. 8) argues, since they signify “a point of maximum discursive visibility”, they are also likely to provide “a point of maximum turbulence”. From this perspective, the re-encoding process of the Bo01 fair must be regarded as remarkably explosive. Since the fair-as-spectacle did not manage to resolve urban fatefulness, its hermeneutic energies were redirected and the fateful moment rearticulated. From 2001 and onwards, the news media created a discursive nexus in-between globalism and localism, spectacle and politics, involving a haunting dissonance between expectations and disappointments, between imaginary and manifest values, between global visionaries and the betrayed ‘man in the street’.

The re-encoding of the fair thus manifests a journalistic struggle not only to create dramaturgy, but also (and at the same time) to re-establish continuity (a temporal logic of events) and coherence (a meaningful relationship between local and global contexts) during an extended moment of fatefulness. Turning the City of Tomorrow into a symbol of the global gambling economy based on phantasmagoria, which in turn had generated local political hubris, expressed as a lack of respect for the rights of ordinary citizens,
a meaningful dramaturgy was created. As we will see below, this inverted media image became even more pervasive than the fair-as-spectacle itself. The mediated and/or media-generated public fury did not only affect the minds and investors behind the Bo01 project (or behind the new economy at large); it also stigmatised the people who had decided to move to the new neighbourhood.

The Modern vs the Post-modern Ethos

In his discussion of fateful moments, Goffman (1967, p. 185) uses the word action to describe “activities that are consequential, problematic, and undertaken for what is felt to be their own sake”. An individual may experience action in many ways, taking chances of various kinds. But there is always a similar underlying logic to action itself. Goffman argues that an individual who participates in action does so in two quite distinct capacities: as someone who hazards or chances something valuable, and as someone who must perform whatever activities are called for (Goffman, 1967, p. 186).

The prototype of action might then be gambling in public casinos, where high bets are involved and the action takes place on a social stage. As with fateful moments, the thrill increases according to the levels of risk, according to the actor’s ability to control the situation and according to public attention. When it comes to gambling “cool dealers are said to be ‘able to handle the action’” (Goffman, 1967, p. 186)—that is, stay calm when the stakes go up.

While modern society is a society in which private and collective risks are effectively prevented by means of safety arrangements, information campaigns, insurances and so on, a parallel process points to the commercialisation of calculated risk. While Georg Simmel once described the ‘adventurer’ as a characteristic modern type, pointing out that the adventure involved an “extra-territoriality with respect to the continuity of life” (Simmel, 1997, p. 224), there is no doubt that action and adventure by means of commercialisation have become more and more integral to, or at least exploited within, everyday life. Goffman (1967, p. 188), for instance, discusses the tendency of using action as a sales argument within advertising. In more recent times, televised competitions and emotionally exploitative reality programming, as well as the rise of an industrial branch explicitly named the ‘experience industry’, indicate an accentuation of this trend. Some theorists, such as Ritzer (1999) and Clarke (2003), have presented even broader claims, pointing to the commonalities between gambling, casinos and consumer society at large. While gambling itself is partly being supplanted by a range of other risky leisure activities, the casino system provides, according to Clarke (2003, p. 12), “a near-perfect analogy for the consumer society”.

Taken together, these tendencies propose that the boundaries between action and everyday are getting blurred. Still, there are obvious limitations to the casino metaphor. Most important, the metaphor does not account for the deep social significance ascribed to most consumption practices. For example, few other decisions are as fateful, but also handled with such careful calculation and emotional involvement, as the decision to invest in private housing. The overarching goal is to find a place that can become a ‘real home’, something more personal, intimate and security-gaining than a mere household-container, yet not too risky an investment. As we look deeper into the case of Bo01, we will discover a conflict between the logic of the experience industry and the logic of local settlement.

The target group for the houses and apartments of the Bo01 housing fair were people prepared to invest money in a property whose future market value could seem a bit uncertain, at least in the short run. Furthermore, as noted above, many of the housing concepts were framed by the ideology of globalism, implicating lifestyles of mobility, cosmopolitanism and display, rather than of stability, local bonds and privacy. There are clear parallels to the liquid, and often
theoretically exaggerated, *post-modern subject* (see Bauman, 1996, 2000), whose identity is described as action-oriented and kept open for whatever new options might appear. The discursively encoded *expo citizens* were individuals prepared to “put their lives on the line”, as Goffman (1967, p. 182) might have had it. The target group was defined in terms of a mythology in which the distinction between action and everyday life had vanished altogether and in which fateful moments were thus the normal state and therefore not fateful in the original (modern) sense of the word.

Many of the anticipated buyers of the Bo01 estates vanished—if they had ever existed—along with the promises of the new economy. The many unsold apartments (about 10–15 per cent in spring 2004) testify to that. Correspondingly, among the dwellers I have interviewed, there is nobody who matches the characteristics of the ‘expo citizen’. None of my informants expresses a desire to put his or her identity ‘on the line’ or to escape the security and territorial bonds that a home provides. On the contrary, most of them stress, albeit in different ways, that the decision to buy an apartment or a house in the former exhibition area was an extraordinarily fateful and thoroughly calculated moment in their lives. The fatefulness stems from an integrated set of circumstances

1. The dwellers had to make great *economic investments*.
2. They felt uncertainty as to the neighbourhood’s social and cultural status—its *lack of history*, its completely *open-ended identity*.
3. They felt that the City of Tomorrow (in spite of its public failure) held great *symbolic power*, marking a turning-point in Malmö’s history—a “new future”.
4. They were thrilled by the neighbourhood’s *spectacular aesthetics*—extravagant architecture exclusively located by the sea.
5. Their decisions *coincided with other fateful moments* in their lives.

The first four circumstances correspond to the fact that the City of Tomorrow was built as an exhibition, creating and reinforcing a fateful moment in Malmö’s history. In other words, the informants’ experiences of fatefulness reflect the fatefulness spectacularised by the housing fair itself. The informants express that the spectacular and brand new urban landscape created a combination of fascination and social uncertainty. On the one hand, the transparency of glass architecture, the winding narrow streets and the proximity to wind and water establish an impression of *exposure* to both public scrutiny and natural forces. Several of the inhabitants also mention a strong sense of being an *early settler*; the thrill of being the first one to ‘discover’ and colonise an attractive piece of land. On the other hand, the fascination attached to early settlement involves deep consideration as to the future of the place. Moving to a district still under construction, in which social structures are yet to be established, leaving behind a secure home, is a fateful decision even without the spectacular appearance of this very townscape. It requires both *emotional and economic investments*—as well as a formula for making prioritisations. Several of my informants describe how they have tried to solve their ambiguities regarding the neighbourhood in a *functional* way, selecting a home which is *not too spectacular*

**AJ:** There has been a lot of discussion regarding exposure and so on . . .

**Kerstin:** Yes, but that is one thing we appreciate very much with this house—it is not *too modern* you know. Those with great panorama windows, they are also very warm. This apartment is warm too, because of its location in the southern corner, but we think it functions very well anyway. And we also enjoy having a view of the green areas as well as the sea.

Turning to the fifth circumstance, the fact that most of my informants simultaneously went through fateful moments of their lives
resonates with the other factors. Through this resonance, a strong sense of ‘starting a new life’ is created—just like the city of Malmö had tried to invoke the notion of a ‘new future’ among its citizens. Kerstin and Nils—for example, had recently retired and had sold their private houses in order to gain something more convenient. Erik had closely followed the evolution of the Bo01 project, collecting articles and participating in workshops, and finally decided to buy a small house with his new partner. Anna had recently gone through a divorce and wanted to start anew in a new district with brand new housing.

The reason to why I moved here is that I had a divorce, lived in a private house outside Malmö, and thus needed to sell it and move somewhere else. I had some previous experiences of living in Malmö . . . in three different places, all apartments. So I could identify with several areas in Malmö, but thought it would be exciting to try something new. It was also a relief to discover unexplored ground, so to speak, since I was in a rather sad mood after the divorce (Anna).

All informants (except for Patrik, the student, who had got his rental contract by coincidence) provide similar stories. They saw the emerging city as a space of social opportunity, maybe even, as Alan Blum suggests, making possible

as part of its topography of social situations—an imaginative structure of eventful and fateful action which promises the renewal of character (Blum, 2003, p. 279).

The anticipation of social renewal, however, does not imply that these early settlers wanted to gamble or that they shared the post-modern outlook invoked by the fair-as-spectacle. They were looking for a new home—in every sense of the word—and describe a situation whose nature corresponds with Anthony Giddens’ sociological contextualisation of Goffman’s notion of the fateful moment Since fateful moments, by definition, are highly consequential, the individual feels at a crossroads in terms of overall life-planning. Fateful moments are phases when people might choose to have recourse to more traditional authorities. In this sense, they may seek refuge in pre-established beliefs and in familiar modes of activity. On the other hand, fateful moments also often mark periods of reskilling and empowerment. They are points at which, no matter how reflexive an individual may be in the shaping of her self-identity, she has to sit up and take notice of new demands as well as new possibilities. At such moments, when life has to be seen anew, it is not surprising that endeavours at reskilling are likely to be particularly and intensely pursued (Giddens, 1991, pp. 142–143).

In the City of Tomorrow, this reflexive reconsideration of self-identity can be found both at a structural and at an individual level. Just as city planners and politicians in the late 1990s sensed they stood at a crossroads, so did many of the early settlers. Trying to establish a new household and a new life-stage, they could also take pride in becoming an active part of the transformation of Malmö.

The argument to be made here is that the settlers attain a typically modern ethos—an ethos marked by a strong faith in dutiful work and economic and technical progress, as well as in family values and the privacy of the home. In particular, those who have chosen the City of Tomorrow as the locus of their retired lives, seem to consider themselves worthy to live in relative abundance and comfort. Their ethos is thus spelled out in much the same way as Max Weber (1992) explained the worldly rationalism of the Protestant ethic. Progress and abundance are not merely turned into signs of worthiness, but become ends in themselves. Accordingly, the City of Tomorrow is not regarded as a post-modern spectacle. Among my informants, the City of Tomorrow is decoded as a continuation of modern progress, through which the
old must always be replaced by the new—that is, the improved.

AJ: Do you feel sad when they put down the Kockums crane?

Nils: Aaahh... I think we must be prepared for changes all the time. We just have to. We can’t go on digging for old bones and stuff like that for ever. They all look the same anyway and we have to look forward instead. Our history is well-documented, I think. In most areas we know what it was like before. ... That’s also why I think it’s so exciting they are now building the Turning Torso.

The nature of my material does not allow for any assessments of how ‘typical’ the modern ethos is among early settlers in the City of Tomorrow. Yet, it is relevant to consider the socio-emotional consequences of the fact that at least some, presumably ‘typical’, representatives of the population cannot identify with the (re-)encoded ‘expo citizen’.

**Mediated Stigmatisation**

Many of those who have bought houses and apartments in the former exhibition area are people with life-long savings, or people having made good profit from selling their private suburban house. Indeed, they are not poor. But nor do they match the prevailing image of the action-oriented ‘expo citizen’. Since the entire City of Tomorrow was stigmatised as part of the gambling economy, however, many of the early settlers state that they were implicitly encoded as responsible for the waste of public tax money—as individuals with extravagant lifestyles and a desire to exclude themselves from the rest of the city. Nils expresses a sense of being accused for a crime he has not committed.

I think they could have written in a more positive manner about the fair. “The prices were too high, it was only the rich who could afford to move in”, and so on... But they might perhaps have asked how these rich people actually had earned their money! It’s not sure that it has always happened in a fair way when they have gotten their silver. And it’s important for all people to earn some money, and those who write these articles are perhaps young, and one day they sit there with lots of money themselves and think in a completely different way, you know. I have experienced what it means not having any money. When we were newly-wed we had to count every goddamn penny, so I have been through it all, straight up, if you put it that way. And now we sit here during the last years of our lives, so to speak (Nils).

This quote underscores the presence of the modern ethos, stating that those who do good things in everyday life will also be rewarded. Nils does not exclude the fact that some other settlers in the neighbourhood might not be what he considers as trustworthy, dutiful citizens. But above all he criticises the journalists for not acknowledging the fact that most people in the City of Tomorrow, such as him, are actually worthy to live there. Thus, trying to justify himself, his argumentation stays within the same moral universe as the media discourse.

Nils’ media critique also reveals that his understanding of his new home-territory cannot be separated from his understanding of the media image. The result is a deep moral dissonance between the negatively re-encoded image of the ‘expo citizen’ and the self-image and ethos of the modern individual. The ‘expo citizen’ is associated with the extravagances of the gambling economy—an economy that clearly was not sustainable. Hence, it stands for a set of values that signifies everything that the modern citizen does not want to be—being affluent by chance rather than through hard work; living on others’ expenses rather than contributing to the common welfare. As the ‘new’ high-risk economy tore down the modern balance between individual freedom and responsibility, between liberty and...
equality, it also tore down much of its social legitimacy. Accordingly, none of the persons in my study wants to use the name ‘Bo01’ when they talk about their neighbourhood. As Anna sates, the negative associations of the Bo01 spectacle even stick to her person. Her explanation is that neither the media nor the broad public did manage to keep apart the new district and the scandals surrounding the Bo01 Company.

**AJ:** What’s your strongest memory from the fair?

**Anna:** After all, it’s the fair’s bankruptcy and that it took so much of the taxpayers’ money. And that the image that was provided [by the media] was that that money should not go to those living there, because they were . . . well, that the public money should be used in a different way. And I think it was all too easy for those not involved to . . . that they didn’t make a difference between what was the economy of the fair itself and what was the houses and the tenants and so on. I’ve experienced that when meeting people in other parts of the country, in Stockholm and other places, and you bet they’ve heard about Bo01, that scandalous neighbourhood! It’s very sad because that’s what’s remained in people’s minds. . . . I’ve noticed that it’s almost written in my forehead “she lives at Bo01”.

If you’ve said it once, then everybody knows. And I have two jobs and I guess everybody knows about it there, and then I’m not the only one in the staff who lives out here. But it’s something cool about it too . . . “How is it out there now?” “How do you get along?” “How many inhabitants are there now?” and so on . . . Every time I meet someone I don’t see on a daily basis the issue is raised.

Another interviewee points to the semiotic spill-over from the media image of the fair organisation to the arising townscape and social community.

I think they mixed up . . . I did the same thing; I never wanted to visit the USA during the Vietnam war, because I mixed up American politics with the American people. They did the same thing here; they mixed up the fair commission with the neighbourhood, and these are two completely different things, you know. The neighbourhood is unique, while the commission was not; it’s like most other commissions . . . One must not mix these things up, but I think the newspapers did; they measured everything and everyone along the same scale. The entire Bo01 received nothing but cruelty, whatever the subject was . . . Just look at that pier out there [pointing out of the window]; it’s unique, so beautiful! That’s something to write about! (Roy).

These oppositional readings do not only express the social semiotics of stigmatisation. They also express the particular public spatiality that emerges when a mediated spectacle weaves together with the social and material structures of a neighbourhood. Most of the early settlers were surprised by the heavy media coverage following directly after the fair. Their plans and calculations had not included the risk of finding their new home territory defined within media space, rather than by themselves—and, even less, finding themselves inside mediation, figuring as anonymous villains in a public debate marked by moral indignation and anger. We may conceptualise this spatial transformation in terms of the well-known triadic dynamic of spatial production, introduced by Henri Lefebvre (1974/1991; see also Harvey, 1990, pp. 218–221). We may then say that the imaginative structure, the spaces of representation (dreams and desires), that many settlers had projected onto their own life histories were distorted by means of how the representations of space were eventually constructed and circulated within the media system, thereby invoking a problematic relationship not only
between the subjects and the mediated representations, but also between the subjects and the material spatial practices of their life-world.

Arguing that the relationship between settlers and environment is perceived as problematic, involving a sense of uncertainty and dissonance, is also to argue that the fateful moments that produced many of the individual decisions to buy a new home were reinforced and extended by means of mediated stigmatisation. As the social status of the City of Tomorrow, its very right to exist, was publicly put into question, so were the decisions made by early settlers—that is, the settlers’ (allegedly often understood as the ‘expo citizens’) right to exist at that very place in that very moment. The mediated stigmatisation forced them to reconsider, if not reshape, their self-identity, rethinking the moral grounds of their social ambitions.

However, it also follows from my interviews that a psychologically convenient and therefore common way to manage the affective response associated with media-generated fatefulness (see Goffman, 1967, pp. 176–177) is “to seek refuge in pre-established beliefs and in familiar modes of activity” (Giddens, 1991, p. 142). Among my informants, such a refuge is the modern ethos, marked by technological optimism and faith in social progress. As Alan Blum puts it, this outlook implies that individuals act in worthy activities as if they are worthy

Thus, the irony of uncertainty (of not having a determinate and tangible solution to the ambiguity of self-worth) is dissolved in this attitude. The confidence displayed in worldly activities expresses the will to continue in the face of the lack of certainty and, so, an optimism towards the future based upon a sense of the consequentiality of the present. This suggests that the continuous display of confidence in worldly contingencies is redefined as true faith (Blum, 2003, p. 213).

Blum’s suggestion seems a reasonable one and resembles the firm optimistic perspective articulated by the inhabitants in the City of Tomorrow—as well as the myths of modernity

Anna: I think Ilmar Reepalu [the local social democratic leader] does a very good job, although I don’t support his party. I think he’s done many good things for the development of Malmö, transforming it from . . . making something good out of the fact that we no longer can remain an industrial city . . . I think he’s done the right things. It might also help his voters to understand this kind of project in the long run. But it may take a while before they get used to it.

AJ: Which are the associations of “Bo01” today do you think?

Nils: I think people associate it with . . . a kind of housing that . . . where I think most people talking and writing about it actually would like to live. Many people may perhaps not afford it—at least not yet. But many will in the future! And one day this neighbourhood and the new ones further north and around the docks will become the most popular neighbourhoods in Malmö. But of course everything takes its time.

Roy: I think it’s an extremely exciting and new Malmö that takes shape. And this new symbol, the Turning Torso; people have not yet realised what a cool thing this is. I thought, when they tore down the crane and built this up: now that’s the new Malmö coming up!

The optimism of these attitudes expresses something more than just a socially inherited way of coping with fatefulness and uncertainty. It underscores that the socioeconomic logic that produced the housing fair may be
perfectly incorporated within the modern master-narrative, articulated through the modern ethos. While there is clear evidence that social and economic processes today occur within increasingly post-industrial settings, and that the ideological superstructure also prescribes the expansion of such settings, post-industrialisation and its various modes of representation are sustained and negotiated within an even broader moral universe—the universe of modern capitalism. The public spectacle of Bo01 may thus be regarded as an extreme superstructural expression, enabled by means of contemporary media power, of the inherent and conflicting socioeconomic mechanisms of the modern project. In spite of its post-modern appearance, the fair foremost signified a fateful moment in modernity, rather than the advent of a new era.

This also suggests that the upper middle classes, stigmatised or not, are likely to maintain their dominant position, not only within the future transformation of Malmö’s harbour area, but within modern urban developments at large. As Blum puts it

The city is always the site at which the bourgeoisie take command, in part controlling the means of interpretation of collective purpose as a course of development (Blum, 2003, p. 209; see also Zukin, 1987).

So while the re-encoding processes following the fair underline the social and moral tensions involved in all forms of city planning, the same processes also represent an overarching hegemonic order. If we could single out a ‘true’ object of stigmatisation, it was not the early settlers, not even the new neighbourhood itself. The ‘true’ object was the ephemeral and anti-modern gambling economy, which these people involuntarily, due to the public need for finding a resolution to an extended fateful moment, came to represent.

Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to capture the public decoding and re-encoding processes that took place in relation to the Bo01 Housing Fair in Malmö 2001. It is indeed an impossible task to bring justice to the vast material (print media and interview data) underpinning my arguments. Yet, my ambition has been to bring about a not too simplified picture of the discursive positions articulated in response to the construction and promotion of the City of Tomorrow, thereby trying to grasp some of the social and political implications of the public spectacle. As Couldry argues

For any understanding of contemporary forms of power, we must look beyond the claims of order on which such forms of power rely, and concentrate instead on the conflictual reality with which they are entangled (Couldry, 2003, p. 74).

In a similar manner, I have looked upon how the hermeneutic energy of the housing fair-spectacle was redirected; how encoded values and images were re-encoded and dispersed in a moral universe, leading to a dissonant, even explosive, imaginative structure. For making sense of this explosiveness, I have found Erving Goffman’s concept of fatefulness extremely helpful. The main asset of the concept is that it points to the psychological mechanisms involved in all urban planning and decision-making. In other words, it is impossible to assess in any objective terms ‘how fateful’ a particular historical moment is for the future of a city. The point is that certain key actors, such as politicians, journalists and lobbying groups, may use a particular historical situation in order to induce a public sense of fatefulness by means of the media. Initiating public spectacles and/or urban (re)construction projects with strong symbolic meaning is a forceful way to reinforce fatefulness and to propose new ways for altering the identity and fate of a city. However, as this study has shown, the symbolic dimension of a spectacle can never escape its material underpinning. And the higher the stakes are, the greater the risks become—symbolically and economically. In the case of the Bo01 housing fair, a lack of market potential and a badly run organisation drove the entire project into bankruptcy, leading to a backlash.
for the already extremely vulnerable image of Malmö. A great public debate broke out and, as a consequence, the settlers of the new neighbourhood felt that they were stigmatised by the media. The fateful moment in Malmö’s history was thus not resolved, but reinforced and extended.

Then, what does this case study say about contemporary urbanity at large? I would like to stress two interrelated points. First, the City of Tomorrow is an expression of the ambiguities attached to the contemporary transformation from industrial to informational urbanity. On the one hand, the housing fair was an outcome of the politically perceived need to find new, increasingly symbolic means for prompting local creativity and attracting resources from the global context. On the other hand, while the association of urban policy and public spectacle reproduces the ideological paradigm of informationalism, it does not break away from the underlying logic of modern capitalism. It is still very much the mechanisms of the marketplace, in this case the material underpinnings of the public spectacle, which decide the fate of urban regeneration. The City of Tomorrow symbolised and exploited a fateful moment in Malmö’s history, adhering to the phantasmagoria of the new economy. But just as it was a socioeconomic crisis that triggered the symbolic identity crisis of Malmö, it was the economic failure and social policy of the fair that grounded the public re-encoding process.

My conclusion is that informational society does not in any profound way alter the relationship between material, social and imaginative structures of cities. I believe that many of the more sweeping claims regarding the spectacularisation (see Kellner, 2003) and liquidisation (see Bauman, 2000) of society must be put in question. However, due to the rapidisation of economic flows and an almost self-generating process of intensified public display, informationalisation clearly accentuates the symbolic vulnerability of places and regions. This also involves an accentuated social vulnerability of human identities. The City of Tomorrow is a unique case here. But it is not, I think, an exceptional case.

This brings me to the second point. Informational society is a society in which urban environments are increasingly mediatised. This means that urban policies and settings, as well as the very fabric of urban life, are negotiated within media space. Above all, people’s sense of being inside mediation is becoming an increasingly significant form of everyday experience, creating various new forms of existential liminality in-between material and symbolic realms. The liminality of mediation is by no means a new question in cultural studies. For instance, in his book Radio, Television and Modern Life, Paddy Scannell argues that media society is characterised by a ‘doubling of place’

Public events now occur, simultaneously, in two different places: the place of the event itself and that in which it is watched and heard. Broadcasting mediates between these two sites (Scannell, 1996, p. 76).

But this is only one side of the mediatisation of place. While Scannell’s ‘audience’ is understood as interpretative subjects who enter media space through their appropriation of ‘media texts’, the present analysis has identified a more dispersed audience, a public, entering media space involuntarily, merely in their capacity as social actors of a particular kind (in this case ‘early settlers’). Staging their own life-narrative, they become part of a performance they have not chosen and cannot direct. As the place-marketing discourse strives for increased urban exposure, the intersection of private life-worlds, home territories and media space creates something of a mirroring effect. Media images are now projected onto the subject’s self-identity, rather than the other way around.

This inverted form of media projection has normally been considered a property (or dilemma) of public persons and celebrities. But today we must also consider what it means that the mediated practices of seeing and being seen, or exposed, are becoming inseparable from one another throughout
society, and particularly in urban settings. As we have seen in this article, due to public mediation, the early settlers in the City of Tomorrow came to experience not only a ‘doubling of place’ in general, but also a doubling, and indeed a problematisation, of their own home-place. This problematisation, in turn, led to a ‘doubling of fatefulness’. The discursive turbulence around the City of Tomorrow reinforced and coalesced with the fatefulness that the settlers had already attached to their new homes. In extension, since the media images of the neighbourhood were at odds with the settlers’ self-identity, fatefulness was turned into dissonance—a sense of stigmatisation.

However, since media space (in its totality) crisscrosses the geometries of local and global forces, a place which is stigmatised at the local level does not have to be a loser in the global competition for attention and investments. Therefore, one of the challenges for urban studies in the informational era is to investigate at a broader scale not only which kinds of places and regions are represented in which ways, but also, and especially through ethnographic approaches, which social consequences this attention might lead to—locally as well as in global perspective.

References


