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To cite this article: Erik Jönsson & Guy Baeten (20 Oct 2024): Whose visions for what land? Planning, power and property in a ‘new inner city’, Malmö 2004–2023, Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography, DOI: [10.1080/04353684.2024.2411219](https://doi.org/10.1080/04353684.2024.2411219)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/04353684.2024.2411219>



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Published online: 20 Oct 2024.



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Whose visions for what land? Planning, power and property in a ‘new inner city’, Malmö 2004–2023

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ABSTRACT

Based in interviews as well as analysis of planning documents and media coverage, this article scrutinizes the role of property in urban morphology by tracing two decades of attempts to redevelop Norra Sorgenfri, a partly deindustrialized area almost at the topographic centre of Malmö, Sweden. In this city, urban redevelopment projects are centrally placed within a hegemonic story of Malmö as shedding its industrial past to become a sustainability forerunner. This was the story that Norra Sorgenfri was inserted into, with initial visions underlining its potential as an exciting extension of the inner city. But in targeting this 45 ha piece of land, Malmö also planned to transform a landscape subdivided into a complex pattern of mostly private properties alongside some scattered lots of municipally owned land. Scrutinizing property in Norra Sorgenfri and how particular property owners have reacted to redevelopment efforts, we centre on the significance of this lack of municipal land. Rather than merely asserting *that* property matters, we thus strive to trace *how* property matters, to planners striving to realize visions for a future Malmö, to different land-owners in the area, to the unhoused seeking refuge on post-industrial land, and to the authorities tasked with removing them.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 7 June 2023
Revised 24 September 2024
Accepted 27 September 2024

KEYWORDS

Property; planning; Malmö; brownfield redevelopment; power

My point is that there are real costs in forgetting property, for property has not forgotten us. (Blomley 2005, 127)

1. Introduction

After previously turning former shipyards in the Western Harbour into what was referred to as ‘the Sustainable City of Tomorrow’ (Persson 2005), civil servants in Malmö in August 2004 began to craft visions for another partly deindustrialized piece of urban land: Sorgenfri Industrial Estate (*Sorgenfri industriområde*), or what from now on became known as *Norra Sorgenfri*. Instead of the emphasis on spectacular architecture and exclusive dwellings so pronounced in the Western Harbour (Holgersen 2017; Jönsson and Holgersen 2017), the idea was now to enable ‘a new form of sustainable urban development that moves away from the spectacular and focuses on everyday

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life' (Tran and Rydin 2019, 13). The ambition was to thereby deliver a 'new inner city to the inhabitants of Malmö' (Malmö 2006, 6. All translations by the authors), cumulatively building on how the area was already beginning to become a hotspot for sub-cultural creativity.

In targeting this 45ha piece of land located almost at the topographic centre of the municipality, Malmö however also envisioned thoroughly transforming a landscape subdivided into a complex pattern of mostly private properties alongside some scattered lots of municipally owned land. In 2008, when a plan programme (*planprogram*) for the area was published, Norra Sorgenfri consisted of 38 different properties owned by 27 different owners (Malmö 2008, 75).

Through depicting which properties were ripe for redevelopment (Malmö 2006, 16), initial municipal documents read almost as a guide for closing 'rent gaps' (Clark 1995; Smith 1979, 1987). But for many years, only parts of Norra Sorgenfri resembled architects' and planners' visions. Instead, new developments remained surrounded by billboards advertising office space or warehouses for rent, boarded-up buildings and empty lots covered by shrubberies and appropriated by a range of users, from the unhoused to graffiti writers and skateboarders thriving from how such a centrally located area could nonetheless provide many relatively hidden spots.

Meanwhile, once described as one of Malmö's prioritized redevelopment areas, Norra Sorgenfri has intermittently disappeared in Malmö's descriptions of its future (see for example Malmö 2018). As Holgersen (2017) underscores, Malmö municipality curates a hegemonic story of a phoenix-like rise; a city shedding its twentieth century industrial identity to successfully become a twenty-first century knowledge city. Within this story successful redevelopment projects function as key vehicles (Holgersen 2017), while the slow and grinding process of redeveloping Norra Sorgenfri fits more uneasily.

Our aim in this paper is to scrutinize efforts to remake Norra Sorgenfri in order to underscore the fundamentally important role of property in urban morphology. This means scrutinizing the 'shape and structure' (Mitchell 2012, 44) of an urban landscape. But it also means tracing how this landscape is shaped and structured by multiple, often competing, social actors seeking to create the kind of social and spatial arrangements most beneficial to them (Mitchell 2012). We particularly explore two interrelated questions (1) 'What role has Norra Sorgenfri's complex property ownership structure played in the partial transition from high-profile vision to a more mundane, slowed-down redevelopment process?', and (2) 'How have property owners' ways of relating to properties changed during, and sometimes as a result of, the redevelopment process?'. Thereby we want to illuminate the contradictions between Malmö municipality's visions on the one hand and property owners' on the other (Baeten 2023), underscoring the 'real costs in forgetting property' (Blomley 2005) for both academics striving to understand how cities are shaped and reshaped, and for the planners and politicians seeking to engineer Norra Sorgenfri's future.

Following international debates on property, wherein geographers have been prominent (Blomley 2004, 2005, 2013, 2016, 2017, 2022; Brahinsky 2020; Bradley 2023; Christophers 2019, 2020; see also Fawaz and Moutaz 2017; Hojer Bruun et al. 2018; Massey 1980; Rose 1994), and previous studies of Norra Sorgenfri (Baeten 2023; Persdotter 2018, 2019; Tran and Rydin 2019), we thereby seek to contribute to discussions on the ways that various actors strive to make private and public landownership work for them. In particular, we aim to contribute to a line of scholarship resisting the 'temptation to think of property through the ownership model as a conceptual and geographical space from which one is either inside or outside', to instead analyse property as a 'relational meshwork' (Blomley 2020, 39; see also Staeheli and Mitchell 2008). Doing so requires detailed empirically-grounded studies of how this meshwork simultaneously structures, and is remade through, concrete processes and conflicts (Blomley 2020; Cockburn et al. 2018).

Methodologically, our exploration is a case study: an attempt to scrutinize a phenomenon in context, with context 'one of those polysemic terms that means multiple things in geographical discourse' (Castree 2005, 542). It is simultaneously a study of property within the context of an urban redevelopment attempt in Malmö, and a study of urban redevelopment within the context of a fragmented property structure. Within a research project that initially had very little focus on questions

concerning property ownership, we gradually realized the emphasis Malmö put on that some 80% of the land in Norra Sorgenfri was not owned by the municipality (Malmö 2008). Findings from municipal planning material thus gave us a theme to explore in subsequent interviews, conducted 2019–2022.

For tracing property and urban redevelopment in a Swedish context, Norra Sorgenfri functions as an illustrative ‘extreme case’ (Flyvbjerg 2006, 229), for two reasons. First, the lack of municipal landownership contrasts remarkably with how such ownership (as a prerequisite for political control of development) formed a cornerstone of Swedish planning particularly from the mid-1940s to the 1970s (Blücher 2006). Second, the lack of municipal land so remarked in Norra Sorgenfri contrasts with how Malmö owned the land targeted in other early twenty-first century large-scale redevelopment projects, in Hyllie and the Western Harbour (Baeten 2012; Holgersen 2017). Acknowledging the ‘extreme’ nature of our case, we do not aim to generalize our findings to claim that this is how property ownership matters per se. But we *can* productively use ‘the force of example’ (Flyvbjerg 2006, 228) to reveal possible implications when planning authorities do not own the land, and to inspire others to ponder planning, power and property.

The article is built on thirteen interviews with fifteen interviewees: civil servants, those involved in redevelopment work in Norra Sorgenfri, and property owners. Interviews were complemented by planning documents, while we have also benefitted from the rich coverage of the project in particularly Malmö’s biggest newspaper, *Sydsvenskan*. In the next section we survey scholarship on property before introducing Malmö in Section 3 and Norra Sorgenfri in Section 4. In Section 5 we trace how property has mattered to attempts to redevelop Norra Sorgenfri and how property owners’ ways of relating to their land-holdings have changed over time. In the conclusion we summarize our argument to reconnect to what a focus on property can tell us about Norra Sorgenfri and what a study of Norra Sorgenfri tells us about property.

2. Remembering property

As several scholars have emphasized, the fundamental importance of property to policy and planning has frequently been overlooked. Blomley (2016, 601) for example argues that while ‘planning necessarily implicates property (either as a form of intervention or a means by which prevailing property arrangements are sustained), it adopts a curious strategy of denial. Planning, goes the logic, does not entail property but “land use”’. This shifts attention to the ‘use’ of the property rather than its owner; to things rather than people (Blomley 2017). Similarly underscoring property ownership as curiously under-acknowledged, Christophers (2019, 2020) centres on how the selling of public land, Britain’s biggest privatization since the 1979 beginning of the Thatcher era, is seldom given the attention it deserves, despite its far-reaching effects on UK planning. Partly this is because such privatization was not conducted through a single spectacular act, but entailed a kind of ‘death by a thousand cuts’ (Christophers 2019, 329) for public landownership.

But in the midst of such curious strategies of denial or overlooked yet far-reaching processes of land privatization, there are ample examples of both older (e.g. Fogelson 1986; Krueckeberg 1995; Massey 1980), and more recent work (Christophers 2019, 2020; Cockburn et al. 2018; Haila 2016; Olsson 2018; Persdotter 2018, 2019; Zetterlund 2022), that scrutinize property questions within planning. Moreover, ‘property’ is for good reasons since long centrally placed within Geography as a discipline, and crucial for theorizations of space elsewhere. Lefebvre (1991, 85) for example conceptualized space as a ‘social relationship [...] inherent to property relationships (especially the ownership of the earth, of land) and also closely bound up with the forces of production (which impose a form on that earth or land)’. In short, few statements can be more important to the fate of a piece of land than a declaration that it belongs to someone or some group. ‘To be legally “named” as owner [...] is to be granted considerable social powers’ (Blomley 2022, 21).

Property has also been central to landscape-geographical scholarship, whether that scholarship conceptualizes landscape as a ‘way of seeing’ enabled as a consequence of, and intended to justify,

particular property relations (Cosgrove 1988), or as a polity built on customary arrangements undone by state power and private property (Olwig 1996). Furthermore, while ‘Property’ did not have its own entry in the extensive *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* (Kitchin and Thrift 2009), the concept figured prominently in numerous entries therein, ranging from discussions on public space, maps, the geographies of liberalism and land rent. Particularly that last concept, ‘land rent’ deserves a short elaboration. In a capitalist economy the way that property matters is fundamentally shaped by how land-owners act to maximize the rent received – spurring gentrification by closing ‘rent gaps’ to put land under what from the standpoint of rentiers is its ‘highest and best use’ (Smith 1979, 543). Though we in this article centre on questions concerning property and political possibilities, that property is simultaneously an economic question must not be forgotten.

Drawing on previous scholarship, the purpose of this section is to allow us to build a foundation for our account of how property mattered within attempts to redevelop Norra Sorgenfri. In so doing, we anchor our account to three key facets within the literature. First, in line with the established critique of an ownership model, we highlight property as a social relation (Blomley 2004; Rose 1994; Staeheli and Mitchell 2008). Second, we centre on the planning effects of particular property relations (Christophers 2019; 2020; Massey 1980; Zetterlund 2022). And third, we centre on how property both has to be performed (Blomley 2013), and how it is made and remade through conflicts (Cockburn et al. 2018).

As Blomley (2005; 2016; 2017; 2022) has elaborated on for two decades, understandings of property as taken for granted or mundane should be supplanted by a focus on property as a crucial political question:

Property used to be a commodious category, that included related ideas of propriety, acknowledged a complex array of estates and interests, and enrolled a rich dramatis personae, ranging from Locke’s yeoman farmer to Proudhon’s murderous landlord. Now, however, property seems to signify something a lot smaller, familiar and frankly uninteresting (Blomley 2005, 125).

Precisely this point, that property should open up for exploring fundamental political and philosophical questions, sits at the centre of a critique of property-as-thing. Property is, in the words of legal historian Rose (1994), of an ‘intensely social nature’. An understanding of property as inescapably political *because* it is relational thus underpins our inquiry (see Blomley 2013; Cockburn et al. 2018; Haila 2016). Property, as Davies (2007, 2) argues, ‘brings into play an entire social order’. It is simultaneously an effect, ‘a construction of relationships between people’ (2007, 13), and fundamental in further structuring such relationships.

Our concern is however not property relations per se, but property relations’ entanglement with a contemporary redevelopment attempt. For planning and urban redevelopment strategies, a key determinant is whether land is publicly or privately owned. This is, to be clear, not the *only* distinction that matters. Massey (1980, 267–268) usefully categorized land ownership into three categories: (1) *former landed property*, where ‘the relationship of owner to land is not that of the purely capitalist, profit-maximizing type’, (2) *industrial landownership* where land ‘is owned because it is a condition of production’ and (3) *financial landownership*, which ‘operates completely within capitalist economic, profit-maximizing terms’. Thus the question of land-ownership ‘is a question not just of who owns, but also of what that ownership actually means’ (Massey 1980, 268). For Sweden, Zetterlund (2022) has translated Massey’s terms for a study of municipal landownership, thereby shedding light on the ways that different municipalities relate to and strategically utilize their land-holdings.

But acknowledging ownership rationales should not distract from how ‘any serious attempt to fulfil the stated aims of much planning legislation will require a change, not just in the rights and benefits attached to landownership, but also in ownership itself’ (Massey 1980, 269). Precisely such focus on ownership was crucial for Swedish planning throughout much of the twentieth century, premised as it was on putting ‘the general interest’ (*det allmänna*) above private property

owners' interests and on urban municipalities therefore purchasing rural land to ensure space for future urbanization (Blücher 2006). *Rosengård*, Malmö's most famous modernist suburb, was for example built on land that was previously a summer retreat for members of the wealthy Kockum family, acquired by the municipality to enable controlled urban expansion (Malmö 2024). However, at the turn of the millennium, shifts in planning legislation and a political turn towards a belief in the market meant that Swedish municipalities had instead begun to sell land to boost municipal economies (Blücher 2006).

Christophers (2019, 17) suggests that tracing such land privatizations is key to understanding neoliberalism, since 'what is truly original about neoliberalism is perhaps the privatization of public ownership'. Whereas 'financialization, market rule, economization and entrenched class power were no less material to liberalism than they are to neoliberalism [privatization] was not a significant feature'. Furthermore, landownership matters because it is a crucial democratic question. 'If the government disposes of public land, it disposes of the public power associated with it. There surely cannot be many government decisions that matter more in a democratic society' (Christophers 2019, 5). Landownership confers the power and privilege 'to play a meaningful part in shaping the economic, social and ecological development of communities of regions and even nations' (2019, 56). The obvious flipside is that others lack such power and privilege. The 'institution of private landownership deprives non-owners of influence over what is clearly a significant locus of power not just to make money but to shape our collective societies, economies, and environments'. Or, as Christophers puts it elsewhere:

Insofar as the future of a society is built upon the assets it comprises in the present, the owners of a society's assets have, almost by definition, the power to shape, or even dictate, that future, which is a matter of politics as much as economics (Christophers 2020, 400).

This succinctly summarizes the problems with disregarding property in research on planning (Blomley 2016; Fawaz and Moumtaz 2017). Doing so means disregarding a fundamental source of power.

And, to conclude with our third point of emphasis, emphasizing the relationality and political centrality of property opens up for examining the ways that property is performed, as well as the tensions and conflicts at its heart. Brahinsky (2020, 837) conceptualizes property as 'a story' in that we 'assign land and resources legal status, and we narrate this as ownership and power'. Thus she emphasizes the possibility of telling counter-stories to underline the 'countless alternatives about how to understand cities and our role in them' (Brahinsky 2020, 837–838).

But if property is a story, it should be added that hegemonic property stories are seconded by the state (Blomley 2022). Property-as-story is traceable in land registers and enforced by state authorities (for example police punishing trespassers). Property is also a story etched into the landscape, in the form of lines, hedges, walls, or fences (Blomley 2022). Such physical manifestations, as well as the way that property is buttressed by state authorities, follow from frequent lacks of agreement on what property owners actually own, and what ownership means for owners and non-owners. As Cockburn et al. (2018, 3) suggest '[c]onflict and contestation are [...] not only windows onto property relations but sometimes also the events that drive the transformation and development of property ideas, practices, and laws themselves'.

In one important sense, Brahinsky's focus on stories and counter-stories therefore pinpoint something crucial about performativity and property. Performativity entails openings and insecurities, a fundamental acknowledgement that things could be different. Butler (2010, 152–153) places 'the possibility of 'misfire' at the basis of performativity itself, arguing that 'performativity never fully achieves its effect, and so in this sense 'fails' all the time; its failure is what necessitates its reiterative temporality, and we cannot think iterability without failure'. Therefore, the terrain of property perpetually shifts, causing properties to internalize new relations (see Davies 2007, 126).

At the heart of enacting a particular kind of alienable property, sits struggles between abstraction and re-contextualization. 'The production of property entails a process of pulverization whereby

units (such as fish, ideas, genome, or land) are identified, bounded and detached, and thus rendered legible and actionable' (Blomley 2011, 206; see also Callon 2007). In a Swedish context this argument reminds of a well-established critique of how land is described as empty so as to become developable at the expense of those still in place, and to whom spaces rendered 'empty' are *places* they feel deep connections to (Despotovic and Thörn 2015; Von Schéele 2016; Zalar and Pries 2022). As Von Schéele (2016, 106) argues with direct reference to pre-redevelopment Norra Sorgenfri, those spaces in waiting that she calls the urban void are logical consequences of, and preconditions for, urban redevelopment: 'there needs to be gaps/holes/voids in the city, there needs to be undefined spots in order for new definitions to come in place. The development of a city demands "unused" land in order to grow'.

However, representing urban development in terms of the City and its other (the void) risks overlooking how when property covers all land, few space are left undefined and unused, particularly when holding on to land for speculative purposes is a prominent form of contemporary land-use (Christophers 2019). Schéele fittingly puts 'unused' in scare quotes. But the *idea* that particular pieces of land are un- or under-used is nonetheless often crucial to planning visions, making tensions concerning what land *is* a fundamental feature within planning conflicts (Jönsson 2014; Zalar and Pries 2022).

3. Introducing Malmö

Losing its shipyards, Malmö was at the end of the twentieth century one of many Global North cities struggling with de-industrialization. But since, the city has rebranded itself as a sustainability forerunner, and worked hard to ensure that particularly university students would supplant blue-collar workers (Holgerson 2017). With almost 350,000 inhabitants, Malmö is Sweden's third biggest city. It is currently also one of the country's most rapidly growing cities.

With the exception of six years (1985–1988 and 1991–1994) Malmö has for the last century been governed by the Social Democrats. The city has therefore been a prominent study object for scholars striving to first understand the strong position of this party in twentieth century municipal politics (Billing and Stigendal 1994), and later their impact on shifting urban development policies (Danestam 2009). This is a city where, in the decades after World War II, the symbolically most striking developments, notably *Rosengård*, were working class residential districts (Holgerson 2017).

But Malmö has since turned to what has been called 'neoliberal planning' (Baeten 2012) or 'social neoliberalism' (Pries 2017). Though Pries, following Savage's (2009) critique of 'epochalism', problematizes the idea of a clear break between periods, he nonetheless underscores how Malmö is 'often *seen* as typical of both social democratic urban policy and splintering neoliberal urbanism' (Pries 2017, 12, emphasis added). In a similar vein, Baeten (2012) argues that neoliberal urban development projects in Malmö do not constitute a clear break with social-democratic ones – but build upon these, reworking them to serve 'elitist desires'.

Like modern social-democratic planning, neoliberal planning is driven by an unbridled belief in economic growth and the possibility to build away the unwanted city of deprivation. They are both driven by an unmatched desire to build a *new* city, through large-scale, industrial, and impatient development. (Baeten 2012, 23)

In line with Christophers' emphasis on land privatization as *the* fundamental feature of neoliberalism, also Malmö's (fractured and incomplete) neoliberal turn was characterized by substantial land privatization. When a centre-right coalition in 1985–1988 sought to remake Malmö, the municipal Real Estate Department was where their programme was most successful (Pries 2017, 70–72). Pries chronicles how, whereas municipal income taxes were not lowered as much as the conservative-liberal Moderate Party had promised in their election campaign, and while bus fare hikes were stalled for years, the Real Estate Department, 'already steeped in economic practices' could, once the coalition ordered them to do so, immediately start selling of municipal land. Thus, even 'after

two years of selling off key real estate assets, the Real Estate Department [in 1988] banked on having a sizable 150 m SEK revenue stream from sales' (Pries 2017, 72).

There is previous work on land rent, the role of property and property owners in the early processes of gentrification in Malmö (Clark 1988). A focus on property and property owners has recently emerged also in research on the introduction of Business Improvement Districts as a planning tool in Sweden, for example BID Sofielund in Malmö (Bohman and Jingryd 2015; Kronkvist and Ivert 2020; Kusevski, Stalevska, and Valli 2023). However, much research on Malmö remains based in analysis of planning documents as well as interviews with municipal civil servants and politicians – and only occasionally with property developers and owners. This may partly be explained by the accessibility of interlocutors and their willingness to participate in research. But it nevertheless results in a situation where important questions about how established property structures influence development trajectories remain unasked, or where property owners are treated as mere background context rather than as actors with their own distinct visions (Baeten 2023). In either case, there is a clear risk to fall precisely into the trap that Blomley (2005, 2016) warns of, that of forgetting property.

4. Introducing Norra Sorgenfri

Having introduced Malmö we now turn to the area at the centre of our account. Determining what this area, Norra Sorgenfri, is depends on where one begins to tell its story (Figure 1). To planners articulating municipal visions and redevelopment plans more than fifteen years ago, Norra Sorgenfri was a suitable template for creating 'a new inner city' (Malmö 2006, 6). A redeveloped Norra Sorgenfri should allow forging connections between Malmö's established city-centre and eastern Malmö's single-family dwellings and modernist suburbs. Initial visions for such connections drew explicitly on Florida's (2002) celebration of the creative class' potential to enable desirable

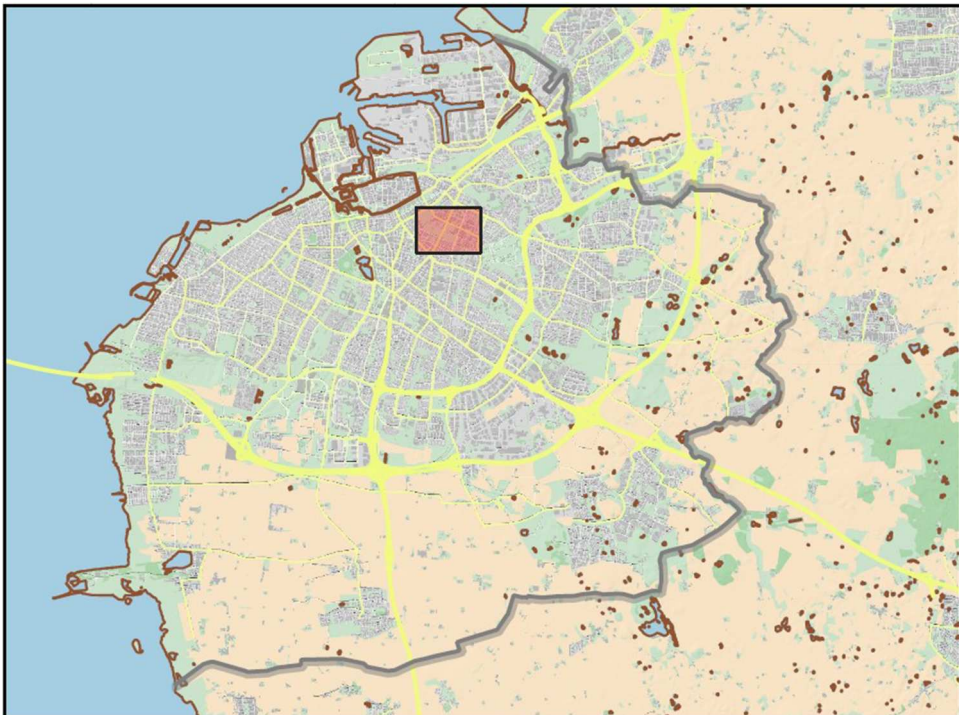


Figure 1. Position of Norra Sorgenfri within Malmö municipality Map by Morten Frisch.

urban development trajectories. Meanwhile, also inspiration from new-urbanist key figures such as Jan Gehl or Jane Jacobs was evident, if more between the lines (Pries 2024; Tran and Rydin 2019).

Building on previous work tracing perceived barriers and redevelopment potential in eastern Malmö (Malmö 2004), visions centred on creating an area exciting enough to attract residents from different parts of the city to congregate in Norra Sorgenfri (Malmö 2006). Integration in public space should thus counteract Malmö's well-documented residential segregation (Mukhtar Landgren 2008; Pries, Jönsson, and Negash 2024).

Public squares and streets belong to us all and give opportunity for meetings and conversations. Different groups of people can here coexist in the same place but for different reasons. Vicinity to 'the others' spur understanding and integration (Malmö 2006, 12).

These visions were two years later followed by a plan programme that continued to stress Norra Sorgenfri's inner-city potential, while emphasizing 'diversity', 'a small scale' (*småskalighet*) and 'variation' as keywords (Malmö 2008). Since, plans for public space (Malmö 2010), sustainability (Malmö 2015) and a raft of detailed development plans have followed.

Beginning the account at the turn of the century rather than at the turn of the millennium, Norra Sorgenfri would be something else entirely (and would rather go under the name *Mellersta förstaden*). An 1897 map of the area reveals the location of Malmö's workhouse, the epidemic hospital, some of its cemeteries and the gasworks (Figure 2). The land depicted on this map was Malmö's suburban peripheries, with facilities located here precisely because they did *not* belong to the inner city (Jönsson, Pries, and Negash 2024).

Much like today, landownership patterns were also then fundamental for determining what was established in the area, where land to a significant degree was owned by the municipality. Instead of a continuation of the kind of densely built residential districts that emerged in the neighbourhoods to its west (where land was more often privately owned), Sorgenfri therefore came to harbour a range of municipal facilities (Schlyter 2006). Alongside the aforementioned hospital and gasworks, Malmö's storage facility (*materialgård*), tram depot and a sewage treatment plant were all established here (Schlyter 2006, 8).



Figure 2. Mellersta förstaden in 1897. Map from Malmö Stadsbyggnadskontoret.



Figure 3. Norra Sorgenfri property structure, 2007. Map by Morten Frisch.

With the 1898 establishment of a railroad line east of Malmö, whose side-tracks connect parts of Sorgenfri to the mainline south to Trelleborg, the area became increasingly central to Malmö's industrial economy. Industries had since several decades been established more in the middle of Malmö, but the area today called Norra Sorgenfri became the city's first dedicated industrial estate. Malmö's primarily western winds moreover made land east of the city perfect for its most heavily polluting factories and facilities, ensuring that the stench would blow away from the city (Andersson 2017; 2021).

By the early twenty-first century most, if importantly not all, industrial manufacturing had since long left the area. Feelings of parts of Norra Sorgenfri as still not quite belonging to the city was foregrounded by Von Schéele (2016), who in her study of 'urban wasteland as political space' scrutinized one of the most well-known parts of the area; *Brännaren* (or rather *Brännaren 2* and 19), colloquially known as the Empty Lot (*Ödetomten*) or the plains (*Stäppen*, see Figure 3). This lot served as one of her examples of urban voids as 'spatial fragments of non-urbanity in the city, an *outside within*' and as something that 'becomes un-planned in relation to that which is conceived as well-defined and according to plan, in a conception of the City as an entity that is possible to plan fully' (2016, 24–26).

Notions of *Brännaren* as an outside within on a *national* scale surfaced in 2014, when so-called 'EU migrants' turned part of the lot into Sweden's biggest settlement for the unhoused. Environmental nuisance complaints concerning this settlement consequently linked 'intimate aversions and local concerns – especially concerns over open defecation – to anxieties about the integrity and security of the Swedish state as a whole' (Persdotter 2019, 159, see also p. 38f for a longer discussion on the term 'EU migrants'). This settlement surfaced once redevelopment efforts were well underway. But the way that debates on this space rendered houselessness in the area hyper-visible nonetheless came to contribute to the shape of the 'relational meshwork' (Blomley 2020) of property in Norra Sorgenfri.

5. Following property in Norra Sorgenfri

Above we accounted for Christophers' (2019, 56) emphasis on landownership as 'clearly a significant locus of power [...] to shape our collective societies, economies, and environments'. Though Swedish municipalities' monopoly on issuing legally binding plans (*Detaljplaner*) in combination with a raft of building codes and environmental regulations ensure public bodies' influence over privately held land – the core of Christopher's argument holds also for Sweden (Blücher 2006; Zetterlund 2022). Malmö municipality was, bereft of significant landownership, in Norra Sorgenfri much less able to shape the direction and rhythm of redevelopment compared to their undertakings in Hyllie or the Western Harbour, where the municipality owned much more of the land (Holgersen 2017).

The 2006 vision document and the 2008 plan programme were consequently followed by attempts to listen to and influence those property owners that the municipality needed to ally with in redeveloping Norra Sorgenfri (Interview December 2019; Interview February 2020). But for the municipality, successfully completing such negotiations proved complicated, contributing to that Norra Sorgenfri remains unfinished, and early ambitious visions unfulfilled (Baeten 2023). Despite the prominent position of urban redevelopment capacity in Malmö's self-image, those involved in the planning of Norra Sorgenfri have remarked that Malmö actually had little experience redeveloping areas currently in active use (Interview February 2020).

Throughout the twentieth century the property ownership structure of Norra Sorgenfri had been shaped and reshaped as the area evolved from suburban periphery to a dedicated industrial estate, and finally to an area combining both small-scale and large-scale industrial production with various post- and non-industrial uses (state authority offices, artist studios, import and export companies, etc.). The area's almost 30 different, and differently sized, property owners both had different kinds of historical ties to the area and different overall ambitions with their landownership (Malmö 2008).

Much erstwhile municipal land was privatized in 1991, when electricity supplier Malmö Energi was sold to Sydkraft for 2,3 million SEK (Billing 2000). This put *Verket* in private hands (Figure 3). Another property (*Spiralen 10*), in 1973 acquired as part of Malmö's strategy of supporting struggling companies through buying their properties (Holgersen 2017; Smitt 2007), was earlier sold during the late 1980s push to rapidly shed public land (Pries 2017).

Though Malmö issued redevelopment visions in 2006, few material transformations took place the decade thereafter. Partly this can be attributed to a general slowdown of construction following the 2008 financial crisis (though Malmö also thereafter styled itself as a city where construction work continued, see Holgersen 2017). But Malmö's lack of land in the area has been identified as a contributing factor (Tran and Rydin 2019; Interview February 2020). A stated ambition in the 2008 plan programme was to divide the area's large-scale blocks (Malmö 2008). Initially Malmö therefore routed proposed streets along existing property borders, with this regarded a fair distribution between different land-owners. But this meant that any redevelopments would necessitate complex coordination with several property owners, something which essentially stalled attempts to establish detailed development plans (Interview February 2020).

After the 2008 financial crisis Malmö could furthermore not do in Norra Sorgenfri what they had in the Western Harbour, which was to lower the price of land to retain developers' interest (Holgersen 2017). Symptomatically, the only lot where redevelopment efforts could therefore fairly easily translate into actual results on the ground was *Spårvägen*, the only bigger property owned by Malmö municipality (Interview February 2020; see also Figure 3). On this particular lot, the municipality *could* structure a process more akin to previous high profile redevelopments in the Western Harbour and Hyllie, allowing redevelopment without having to coordinate various property owners' ambitions.

Elsewhere in Norra Sorgenfri financial land-owners otherwise willing to invest were hesitant to proceed without knowledge about other developers' intentions; they were unwilling to, as one development company CEO called it, build a house on the prairie (Interview August 2022). Several CEOs stressed the importance of the municipality's ongoing coordinating efforts to eventually cut

through this developers' waiting game (Interviews August 2022). But they also underscored that their chief interest remained to put distinct 'products' on the market (such as architecturally well-defined apartments for young couples with children), regardless of the municipality's desire to implement specific visions (Baeten 2023).

Most of Norra Sorgenfri was in other words owned by actors who did not *necessarily* care about the nitty-gritty of Malmö's visions, or in some cases redevelopment efforts per se. As one of those working with the initial visions for the area stated:

Those that owned properties were very much [those] that had acquired a property in Sorgenfri as a package. They might have bought seven properties in Malmö as a package, and then they happened to include a property in Sorgenfri that they were completely uninterested in. So, they were passive owners. These were not developers, but more of caretakers that just held on to [their properties], and then some others. (Interview December 2019)

For many of these Norra Sorgenfri was not in any need of redevelopment. As one planner involved in early redevelopment efforts expressed the situation:

[These property owners] had old houses that they didn't have any loans on. They received their rents and didn't have to spend a penny on renovating the houses, so they made good money on this. They weren't property owners that were experienced developers, so they were very, very, hesitant to initiate anything at all (Interview February 2020).

For several property owners Norra Sorgenfri was already an area where they could collect sufficient rents. While their ownership was of a financial kind (Massey 1980), this did not necessarily mean that they considered redevelopment worth the effort.

Meanwhile, prominent industrial land-owners were firmly opposed to plans for turning Norra Sorgenfri into an inner city neighbourhood. To give an example of the challenges that followed, and that essentially set a public industrial landowner against Malmö municipality, we can point to how not long after a detailed development plan in August 2020 was decided for *Smedjan*, the state-owned pharmaceutical company *Apotek Produktion & Laboratorier AB* (APL) appealed against this plan in the regional planning and environment court (Mark och Miljödomstolen case 4764-20). To this company, residential developments and a school at the site were unacceptable, given how close the school would be to the company's production facility (Pernbro 2020).

5.1. Appropriations and evictions: stories from Brännaren and Smedjan

As the first visions for a future Norra Sorgenfri were published financial owners in the area could appear disinterested in their land-holdings. Large parts of two of the most centrally located quarters, *Brännaren* and *Smedjan*, were since long covered partly by ruins and emptied lots. North of *Industrigatan*, one of the neighbourhood's main thoroughfares, the land had been vacant since an old factory temporarily turned into studio spaces and a gallery burned to the ground in the early 1990s. South of the same street, a former office building was the only building still standing on the Empty lot (*Ödetomten*) (see Von Schéele 2016 or Persdotter 2019, for longer discussions). This to some meant that travelling through Norra Sorgenfri felt like temporarily exiting the city (Interview February 2020).

It is understandable why a 'void' could be passers-by's perception, even if the site was seldom empty. On this land, unhoused had for long found temporary or fairly stable refuge, while graffiti writers covered ruins with colourful pieces. Inspired by the famous DIY Burnside skate park in Portland, Oregon, local skateboarders had in 2004 on this land begun to build their own concrete obstacles, (Interview October 2020).

In several municipal documents, such appropriations were underlined as giving Norra Sorgenfri its distinctive identity. Filled in by grassroots action the 'void' could become a place-marketing resource, and an example of how the area was teeming with potential. In line with such a reading, the municipality's main document on public space (*stadsrum*) emphasized 'appropriation' as a

prominent feature in Norra Sorgenfri (Malmö 2010). Meanwhile, the 2008 plan programme utilized several photographs of DIY skateboard structures, underlining the importance of these kinds of spontaneous appropriations of land for Norra Sorgenfri's image:

Many international examples point to an area's increased attractiveness when it is claimed by artists and youths. Norra Sorgenfri has for example gained positive attention through the group of youths that has built a skateboard ramp on one of the stripped lots. Creative operations in the area creates points of attraction and affect the area's image and attraction as a future working- and living environment (Malmö 2008, 13)

A support for such actions was for long displayed also by the property owner of this part of *Brännaren*, with whom the skateboarders had an active dialogue (Interview October 2020). Since the late 1990s, this parcel had been owned by property magnate Per Arwidsson (through *Granen fastighet-sutveckling*, since 2017 renamed *Arwidsro*), who held that Norra Sorgenfri in the long run would become interesting from a property owner perspective (Westerberg 2015). Arwidsson thus represent one of the clearest examples of established financial ownership in the area. But concerning day-to-day management, *Granen* for long remained relatively inactive. They for example kept the gate to the lot open, citing both an informal parking spot and the skate ramps as the reason (Westerberg 2015).

However, emphasizing appropriations as adding attractions or a relative tolerance displayed by certain property owners should not distract from simultaneous tensions between counter-cultural appropriations emphasized in future visions, and other appropriations hard to fit within these. The latter would for example include the July 2003 attempt by six activists to turn an empty former office building at *Brännaren* into an activity house, a squatting attempt that was broken up by around 20 police officers (Levander 2003), or the above-mentioned settlement. From early spring 2014 to fall 2015, *Brännaren* became, as Persdotter (2019) accounts for at length, the site for Sweden's largest and most visible settlement for unhoused 'EU-migrants'. With an estimated population of about 250 people, this settlement became 'a proverbial *ground zero* in the public and political debate regarding the growth of makeshift and unauthorized tent encampments and settlements (*boplatser*) in the country' (Persdotter 2019, 117). To municipal decision-makers' and property owners' attempts to shape their landscape, one can thus add also unhoused people's. As journalist Erika Oldberg (2016, 19) described the 2014 establishment of the settlement:

This fall another city is built up here, admittedly small-scale, just like Malmö sketches in their future vision. But apart from that there is not much that corresponds to the municipality's plans. Now this is instead a polluted empty lot that has become a settlement for poor people from Romania.

While skateboarders building their own skate park fitted a willingness to emphasize spontaneity and creativity as urban-redevelopmental resources at the height of Florida's (2002) influence, Sweden's most famous encampment certainly did not. Unsurprisingly, both the municipality and property owners were much less accommodating to this camp. The first concrete ramp built on *Brännaren* had already long before this been demolished by one of the unhoused in the area, as a response to how skateboarders were allowed to remain at the Empty Lot even as the homeless were evicted (Interview October 2020).

Initially both the municipality and the property owner however found evicting camp-residents impossible. A legal eviction required evictees to be named and notified. This was understandably complicated when that population was neither formally registered as occupants, nor steadily present – at the site or in the country. Eventually, the municipality found a way around this quandary through relying on nuisance regulation (addressing littering and the property owner) rather than an eviction (addressing those living on the site as legal subjects) (Persdotter 2019). The settlement was thereby re-categorized as 'a mere nuisance and [...] the squatters to the status of bodies that needed to be moved in order to execute the correction order' (Persdotter 2019, 180–181). As Persdotter argues, squatters thereby 'in a sense [...] became legally reduced to litter'.

Refracted through nuisance law, complex social phenomena like the Sorgenfri camp are reduced to their basic material, sensory and spatial elements: noxious smells, smoke emissions, an ever-growing mound of garbage, overflowing porta-potties, open fires, or a leaky tent. (Persdotter 2019, 191)

Discussions on the settlement, like Persdotter (2019) emphasizes, moreover frequently tied together boundaries at various scales, entangling property and nationality. In December 2014, after being contacted by the municipality twice concerning littering on the site, the property owner had tried urging people to leave the site so that a new fence with a lockable gate could be put up. In so doing he emphasized a perceived unsustainability of the situation.

I think we need to calm down, it's mindless to take in more people than one can manage. We need to have housing and bring in people into society, one cannot live at empty lots, under bridges and all over. This is starting to resemble anarchy. (Cited in Mikkelsen 2014)

An eventually unsuccessful effort to enforce the property boundaries was thus linked to a fear of property *itself* as under threat.

What these short examples illustrate, and what Persdotter (2018; 2019) discusses at length, is how we throughout Norra Sorgenfri's contemporary history can trace not only a conflict between property owners and more spontaneous appropriations of urban space. Some seeming trespassers had property owners' blessing, while conflicts over the kinds of actors and activities that were welcome on the site pitted various kinds of appropriation against each other. Moreover, we do in Norra Sorgenfri not see the uncomplicated roll-out of an already existing property structure, complete with a state capacity to enforce it (cf. Blomley 2018, xiv). When first faced with the encampment, police authorities rather reasoned that 'the squatters might in fact have some legitimate claim to the site simply due to the fact that the owner had waited so long to take action on the matter (Persdotter 2018, 65), with chief operating officer Mats Karlsson assessing that since people had 'been there so long they have some form of occupancy right' (cited in Persdotter 2018, 65). Others than the legally defined property owner can in other words be 'named' (Blomley 2022) as having rights. And indeed, the squatters' claims *could* be placed in a tradition of groups arguing for the right to seize land considered unproductive or unused (Wolford 2010).

Rather than attempting to evict residents, early police operations were thus marked by deliberate inactivity. As one of the police called to the site in December 2014 to aid with the aforementioned gate replacement told a journalist, 'We do not want to do anything wrong, so we will not do anything until facts are known (cited in Mikkelsen 2014).

Though the Empty lot's owner for long accepted skateboarders building their own structures on his property, he has since stressed that 'we cannot have anarchy', or that the situation is beginning to 'resemble anarchy' (Mikkelsen 2014; Westerberg 2015). A similar focus on (re)establishing the rule of law was echoed in several editorials in liberal and conservative dailies, as well as in the business press (e.g. Engzell-Larsson 2015; Sydsvenskan 2015). To them, both the settlement and the police's initial inaction constituted unacceptable threats to an ownership model ideal (cf. Blomley 2004; 2020).

But as redevelopment efforts have continued to shape Norra Sorgenfri's fabric, and as a reaction to unhoused people's previous appropriations, we see attempts to have this urban landscape concretely reflect such an ideal. Where various groups had previously come and gone, temporarily making Norra Sorgenfri their actual or metaphorical home, 2015 displacements and thereafter a more thorough fencing in during the fall of 2019 ensured that the Empty lot for the first time was actually emptied (see Figure 4). Simultaneously, this urban enclosure ensured that the owner could now enact their property more as their sovereign realm. This is a process visible also in other parts of the neighbourhood.

Having been evicted from the Sorgenfri camp many unhoused 'EU migrants' took to sleeping in cars on parking lots around the city. One of these lots was in Norra Sorgenfri, close to the earlier



Figure 4. The Empty lot fenced in, April 2020. Photo by author.

camp on another piece of land owned by the same property owner. Thus, also this parking lot was in 2018 fenced in, with the sanctity of private property as the rationale.

It's up to the police and municipal authorities to make sure that private property is not violated. It's reasonable to demand that under rule of law [*rättsamhälle*], you can have your property to yourself (Arwidsson, cited in Westerberg 2018).

This property owner had thus gone from allowing certain appropriations to actively enclosing land. In the process, the properties were furthermore rendered useless for purposes besides future redevelopment, thus cementing a form of financial ownership where the (future) exchange value of the property was prioritized over (current) use values (see Massey 1980). Moreover, as Persdotter (2024) emphasizes, the settlement can in hindsight also be seen as a turning point for how houselessness is approached, legally and politically, at the national scale. The then government came to express a zero tolerance approach against 'illicit settlements' (*olovliga boplatser*), with the government-appointed coordinator for 'vulnerable EU citizens', Martin Valfridsson, urging the police to act more resolutely. Shortly thereafter, changes to the legal framework were initiated to enhance property owners' possibilities to evacuate settlements without having to identify who lived there (Persdotter 2024, 235–236).

5.2. From proposed park to fenced in industrial lot. The story of Degeln 4

... there were a couple of industries in the area that we in fact did not consider compatible with the development, and that were like a barrier. There we tried to fight. So it's not only [enough] to listen sometimes ... they were not happy about us, pharmaceutical companies who absolutely did not want any redevelopment of the area at all, for instance (Interview December 2019).

From the first visions onwards, a lack of parks and greenery in Norra Sorgenfri has been underscored (Malmö 2006). The redevelopment area is lodged between parts of the early twentieth

century inner city to its west, and across the tracks to its east residential developments with private gardens. The cemeteries and a small area of allotments are the only adjacent greenspaces. But within Norra Sorgenfri particularly two lots were at the time of the first redevelopment plans still partly green: the aforementioned *Brännaren*, and *Degeln*, located in the South-eastern corner of the redevelopment area. In the 2008 plans, one prominent strategy for tackling the lack of greenspace was therefore that the municipality should acquire a part of *Degeln*, then a fenced-in lawn, to turn this into a public park (Malmö 2008, 60–61).

A 2006 heritage investigation considered the buildings at *Degeln*, built for the pharmaceutical company Ferrosan in the early 1970s, to be without any real heritage value. But in its north-western corner some vegetation (such as pear trees and common lilac) from an old farm, Agneslund, remained. Here, the investigator saw more worth preserving, emphasizing that since this lot had remained undeveloped there was ‘a heritage value in maintaining the continuity and to preserve the greenery’ (Schlyter 2006, 16). In line with these evaluations, Malmö’ city planning committee in 2009 decided that the western half of the block should be turned into a park.

However, in striving to realize this decision, Malmö ran up against a form of industrial ownership (Massey 1980), where property owner QPharma had no intention of selling its land in Norra Sorgenfri. Whereas often described as a peripheral, deindustrialized and derelict area, a ‘void’ awaiting redevelopment, Norra Sorgenfri was for QPharma instead the platform for their future expansion. As its CEO in 2009 told journalists, being in Malmö allowed the company to be ‘in the middle of Medicon valley, and with proximity to the universities’ (cited in Bosson and Brundin 2009).

Malmö municipality nonetheless tried to push forward with park plans. But already a year after the city planning committee’s decision to turn the western parts of *Degeln* into a park the same committee revoked this decision. Qpharma could now instead build a new factory at the site. As this process was described in Malmö’s biggest daily, QPharma argued that the municipality’s comprehensive plan referred to *Degeln* as an area for retail and small scale industries, and thus

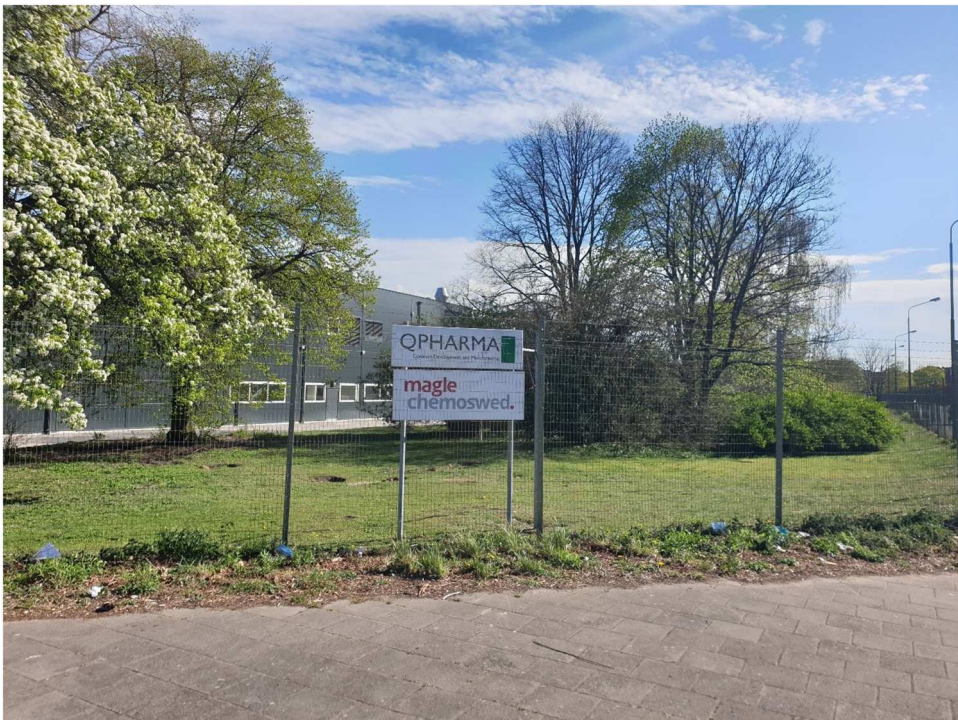


Figure 5. Public park-to-be, fenced in (Photo by author).

demanded that they should be allowed to build a new two story factory. ‘Without new facilities we wouldn’t be able to continue with the eight new products we have on their way’ (QPharma ceo Kenneth Skogholm, cited in Pedersen and Frennesson 2012). Faced with the promise of 20 new jobs, the municipality thus decided to radically reduce the proposed park’s size, leaving a mere 19 m broad strip along the road at *Degeln*’s western perimeter.

Despite protests from the liberal-conservative opposition, the red-green majority in Malmö municipality in September 2012 decided to buy this land for SEK 6 million. But due to budget restrictions, no attempts to remake the land were launched. Now municipal-owned, this land more than a decade after the purchase thus remains both undeveloped and inaccessible, fenced in as part of Sever Pharma Solutions’s (the new name of Qpharma) compound. A detailed development plan for turning the strip of now municipal land into park was published in December 2012 (Malmö 2013). But as of writing there has been no attempts to remake the land into a park, and the Detailed Development Plan expired in January 2023 (see Figure 5).

Also this episode tells us something important about urban redevelopment and property. First, the clash between QPharma’s visions for their property as platform for their further expansion and Malmö municipality’s plans for a park in an area in acute need of greenspace illuminate the centrality of land-ownership for who can, in Christophers’(2019) words ‘play a meaningful part in shaping [...] economic, social and ecological development’. It is an illustration of how ‘the institution of private property stands as an impediment to attempts to socialize the control of land in order to meet [...] collective needs (Fogelsong 1986, 21), or – to follow Holgersen (2020) – a vivid example of when a planning-political belief in communication comes up against a social reality where different interests stand against each other. Again; a crucial reason why Norra Sorgenfri almost twenty years after the first visions for the area’s redevelopment were published do not yet more resemble these visions is that it has indeed proved impossible to unite different kinds of property owners behind ambitious visions for Norra Sorgenfri as a vibrant extension of Malmö’s inner city.

6. Conclusions

The story of Norra Sorgenfri covers twenty years of attempted urban redevelopment. It is a story of urban planning, but also of much more. Property, as Brahinsky (2020, 852) comments is ‘the very bones of urbanism’, while Blomley (2020, 36) assert that we, under different terms, ‘all live inside the territory of property’. There is (conceptually or politically) no escaping property, and in Norra Sorgenfri we can follow how questions concerning property, in all its complexity, remains perpetually present.

Tracing efforts to remake this partly deindustrialized area into what planners and politicians hoped should become a vibrant extension of the inner city enables scrutinizing urban space as cumulatively shaped by municipal ambitions and state action, combinations of countercultural and more poverty-driven appropriations, as well as by established financial and industrial land-ownership (Massey 1980). It helps illuminate how the ‘relational meshwork’ (Blomley 2020) of property structures redevelopment possibilities.

A dearth of municipal land meant that Malmö planners in Norra Sorgenfri entered what was for them unknown territory for large-scale redevelopment, now having to negotiate with property owners with widely different positions on municipal redevelopment visions (Baeten 2023). In such negotiations, the municipality could not always get their way. What should have been the biggest public park in this part of Malmö is for example now a pharmaceutical company’s fenced-in factory grounds.

Tracing attempts to refashion Norra Sorgenfri thus offers a striking example of why we must never forget property (Blomley 2005), precisely because property matters for the crucial political-geographical question of who can shape the spaces today enabling or disabling future trajectories (Christophers 2020; Linklater 2013). Tracing the way that Malmö has navigated its lack of

land in this also allows us to contribute to scholarship on the political impacts of neoliberal privatization (Christophers 2019; Zetterlund 2022). While explicitly post-industrial redevelopment visions for Norra Sorgenfri surfaced in the early twenty-first century, the possibility of realizing these was partly determined already by how public land had been sold as part of attempts to refashion the city two decades earlier (Pries 2017).

Moreover, thinking about property through the lens of Norra Sorgenfri allows contributing to conversations on the way that the property is acted on, remade in and through conflicts (Blomley 2020; Cockburn et al. 2018). As municipal visions for a new inner city were launched, industrial landowners countered by reasserting that *their* vision for the area was continued industrial production. Meanwhile, the owner of much of *Brännaren* – whose ambitions aligned with Malmö municipality’s – instead ran into problems stemming from how his land had for long functioned as a kind of urban common appropriated by skateboarders, graffiti artists and the unhoused. For a year and a half unhoused so-called ‘EU migrants’ could here etch out a relatively stable existence, with state authorities initially refusing to evict them. This led to both the owner and liberal dailies lament a kind of ‘anarchy’ that was rather a sign of a social order where it is never *guaranteed* that authorities would seek to uphold an ownership model ideal, and where also those without formal ownership could initially be considered having occupancy rights. As Persdotter (2019) shows, such rights were however stripped of this population to now allow the Empty lot to be both emptied and enclosed, with parts of the adjacent *Smedjan* thereafter similarly fenced in. Thereby properties previously open to a variety of actors’ uses became enclosed spaces awaiting redevelopment.

In telling the story of Norra Sorgenfri we hope to have contributed to illuminate property as a ‘commodious category’ (Blomley 2005, 125), tracing not only *that* property matters, but more exactly *how* it can matter for thinking about urban planning, the morphology of urban landscapes, and power and political control in the production of space more broadly. Accounts of planning and urban redevelopment become richer and more useful when the fundamental importance of property is integrated. And accounts of property become richer and more useful when grounded in analyses of how property concretely both matters to, and can be reshaped within, particular processes. If property is indeed ‘the very bones of urbanism’ (Brahinsky 2020, 36), it remains crucial for Geographers to continue to scrutinize the various kinds of flesh added – both to illuminate the power today at play and to explore the potential of ‘misfire’ (Butler 2010), opening up for other ways of thinking and making cities.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments, as well as Maria Persdotter and Johan Pries for commenting on earlier versions of this article. Morten Frisch has been most helpful in helping us compile maps.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research was funded by Formas (Grant number 2018:0074). For the purpose of Open Access, the authors have applied a CC BY public copyright license to any Author Accepted Manuscript (AAM) version arising from this submission; Svenska Forskningsrådet Formas.

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