RESEARCH ARTICLE

Empty space, open space. Claiming, reaching and remembering common ground in urban squats. Haga in the 1980's

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ABSTRACT: This study focuses on the memories of and narratives about house squatting projects in the late 1980's, in the Haga neighbourhood in Gothenburg (Göteborg), Sweden by a group of people that came to be known as *Husnallarna*. This period is critical in terms of constituting a break with an earlier period in Swedish history, defined by social democracy, which came under pressure of strong forces of neoliberalism. One conclusion of the paper is that a group of young people, belonging to a counterculture, rebelled both against the modernist conforming political culture of the welfare state and an expected gentrification, partly by adopting and adjusting to the heritage status of an urban neighbourhood. This heritage status became a part of the identity of the group, and conserving tradition became an act of rebellion, as well as a commoning practice integrating the squatters in the neighbourhood. The study makes use of present-day social media and interviews with activists/squatters.

KEYWORDS: Collective memory, Commoning**,** Commons, Counter culture, Heritage, Squatting, Sweden, 1980's

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1. Introduction

This is a study of relations between counter culture – more specifically a group of young house squatters – and heritage, as well as of the commoning practices they created and participated in. As Shaw (2005, 149)

states: "Alternative cultures have a curious relationship with place. Their activities are evolving and elusive, but unless they exist solely in cyber space, they need space." Haga in Gothenburg, Sweden, is the place where the relationship between counterculture, heritage, commons and place will be unpacked in this article.

Haga is an urban neighbourhood of historical symbolic importance, and present-day touristic value. It has also been the site for great controversy. It is an example of an inner-city area that has constituted an important physical space for alternative cultures. (Thörn 2019, Ighe 2019) In the case of Haga, a partially successful preservation of the built environment, and a renewal in terms of building new housing followed by a gentrification process, put an end to Haga as an actual space for alternative culture around the mid 1990's. The importance of the struggle during the 1970's to preserve the built environment by local activists is well documented. (Andersson, H. Ejderoth-Linden, S. Tegnér, L. 2009) Eventually it became the largest single project of preservation of an urban neighbourhood in Swedish history. Its status as heritage is thus incorporated in national as well as local discourses and planning practice. This article explores the memory of lost space, a history more or less invisible in the current, well-kept streets of Haga, by returning to the 1980's, where a group of squatters resisting demolitions and gentrification, trying to preserve practices and spaces of commoning, also became signs of that gentrification, through the up-graded value of heritage, the past and the inner-city.

The article addresses the following questions: What are the memories and narratives of this counter culture and their time as squatters in Haga? What was their relation to the specific local identity and heritage status of the urban environment they moved around in? How did their actions and practices relate to political conflicts regarding the area?

2. Historical setting and important concepts

The historical setting is the 1980's, a decade that is understood against the general backdrop of the Swedish post-war welfare state and modernist 'social engineering'. I would furthermore like to position this study in the period in Swedish urban history that Forsell (2020) has called the "post-industrial interregnum" of 1975-1990, a period in-between the heydays of planned modernization and the neoliberal marketization, Forsell (2020) calls it "housing capitalism", that would follow.[1]

2.1 Squatters connected to the world

House squatting in Sweden during this period constituted what Brink-Pinto & Ericsson & Nyzell (2016) and Polanska (Polanska 2019), (Polanska & Wåg eds. 2019), calls "contentious politics" where the act of claiming is central and relations to governmental bodies often are involved. Especially from a historian's point of view, this emphasizes a parallel and more confrontational strand in collective protests of Sweden during the 20th century, compared to an often-assumed social consensus. Polanska places this concept in relation to the action of using buildings authorization: house squatting. Polanska furthermore argues that this is especially relevant in Sweden, where the social movement concept seems less suitable, due to lack of examples of longer sustained squatter movements. If there is one place in Sweden where the concept of

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[1] Martinez (2020) and Vasudevan (2017) give a wider context for what is both a varied and dispersed set of movements around the world. For Sweden see Polanska (2019) and Polanska & Wåg (2019).

social movement has strong relevance in relation to house squatting, it is Haga during the 1970's and 1980's. But, as Polanska has emphasized, the primary social movements of Sweden were not important actors in squatting during the post-industrial interregnum. My understanding of the actions of the squatters are in line with them being inherently political, as opposed to the non-political social movement approach taken by Carle (1991) in an article using media sources on squatting in Haga during the period in question. Pries (2019) has recently argued that the lack of longer sustained squatting projects in Sweden during the period can be attributed to the fact that social democratic dominated cultural policies by and large agreed on the need for cultural centres, that were generously provided by local governments, that co-operative strategies from the squatters side were most successful and that there was thus few squatted houses that could serve as organizational bridges when the neo-liberal era changed the scenes. Less successful and sustained than many European counterparts, contentious politics through squatting did take place, and transnational inspiration from for example Denmark and West Germany were obvious (Ericsson 2016, Ighe 2017, Thörn 2013, Wåg 2019). Squatting activists were in the 1980's also engaged in resisting the surge in far-right and neo-nazi activities in Swedish streets as well as targets for that violence. (Kåks & Wabäck 2017) The continued resistance to the far right among squatters has also been pointed to as an important and transformative experience when anti-fascism became more pro-active in the 1990's (Bink-Pinto & Pries 2017). It is furthermore possible to connect several of the urban squatting projects – not the least their conservational ambitions – to the alternative culture projects built in or directed towards the rural parts of Sweden, which also points to ties to previous and parallel forms of place-related alternative activism. (Ekberg 2016, 85). This article is however focused on the local and place specific dynamics of Haga as a case.

2.2 Squatters connected to a place

The contentious politics concept primarily captures the external direction and relations of the activists, but in this article, I will aim to describe actions, perceptions and concepts of belonging, sharing and commoning between them. In this, I will use the term common ground, in line with how Stavrides (2020) explains it, as "a more or less temporary accomplishment" and as something "created by the direct involvement of those engaged in becoming commoners." (Stavrides 2020, 2, Stavrides 2016). The commons can also be seen, especially through the works of Elinor Ostrom, as a connection between property and the institutions that create and sustain property relations. Via scholars like Hardt and Negri (2009) the concept was directly connected to social and political resistance of the present-day era.

I will also relate to what Thörn (2012) calls the the place politics of open space and defines this as : "(a) the construction of a distinct place identity, that is, a cultural identity representing a relatively well-defined material space; (b) an emphasis on the openness and publicness of the particular place; its character of a place-bound public sphere. This means that place politics of open space involves a strong overlap between the occupation of a material public space and the formation of a counter-public sphere." In the following I will use the concept open space very literally, but the theoretical aspects of place politics of open space are well functioning in order to understand the case at hand.

Heritage, often cultural heritage, is something that society, from local level to states and the international level, engage in. This refers to the traces of the past in the present, and its management. Following Rodney Harrison (2013) we could distinguish between official and unofficial heritage, where the official heritage is defined by legislation and according formal management, and unofficial heritage, which is regarded as heritage by larger or smaller groups of people, but lack the above-mentioned official status. As such this article addresses how counter culture activists viewed and interacted with the declared official heritage in

Haga, but also how their own memories constitute a kind of unofficial heritage. Furthermore, heritage is often viewed as a common good for the community, global or local. It can also be argued to be a sort of common in itself, as González (2015) argues in line with Hardt and Negri.

3. Methods

The research questions above were derived through a reading of digital source material (see below) as well as from previous research, and further explored through interviews. The interviews in their turn consisted of two individual interviews, from which a somewhat modified set of questions were developed for a final (focus)group interview with four people. (Della Porta, 2014)

All interviews were made in Swedish and then transcribed in full. All translations to English are made by the author. As an author, I am trained and active as an economic historian. However, I was also an activist and house squatter in the social milieus studied here, which provides me with access to people and networks and private memories.[2] A published talk I gave at a conference as a teenager (Ighe 1989) can be found among the references of researchers as Carle (1991) and Polanska (2019), and my name can be found in media sources of the time – but it is neither my own narratives nor memories that forms the basis for this study.

3.1 Digital collective memories

The digitalisation of communication and culture has led to the gathering and interactive display of a lot of *collective memories*, meaning the memory shared by a community or a group (Zamponi 2013), as online resources and in social media. People who once shared a physical space now meet virtually, and share photos and stories about the past as well as queries of what paths people's lives has taken. Facebook groups are used by people as a collective storytelling, and have also developed into digital archives, containing scans of photo's, newspaper material, old flyers etc. I have used relevant Facebook groups as sources of information (see Mosca 2014) and manifestations of memory, and also to recruit informants.

Husnallarna was the name used to define this specific local movement of squatters, active in Gothenburg in the later part of the 1980's and the beginning of the 1990's.[3] A Facebook group called "Husnallarna forever!" emerged in January 2009, initiated by one of the former squatters. The short description of the group said: "A group for us who did our best in the 1980´s and 1990´s to help nice old houses in Göteborg". The naming of and description of the group was probably done without much reflection, but is nevertheless telling. Husnallarna's activities were about houses, it was about defending a specific form of built environment, often considered as heritage, and it is now something belonging to the past. Through this Facebook-groups name and networking potential, the activist group Husnallarna is thus in a way re-invigorated. Related to the Husnallarna group on Facebook are also the groups "Mosters", named after a

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[2] As for the selection of informants, the first two were chosen directly by me, based on knowledge of the two persons continuous active presence in the relevant time and space. The focus group was in contrast self-selected as a result of me making an open call for informants to the study in the Facebook group" Husnallarna forever". Another researcher, without personal experiences from the events, was present during the focus group interview.

[3] In Polanska (2019, 41) the group's name is translated to both "House Bears" and "Those who steal houses", as "nalle" as a noun means "bear" or rather "teddybear". But as a verb it means taking something without permission. Maybe "House snatchers" would be a working translation. The name was coined by a couple of activists during one specific action in 1985 (Ighe 2019, 135), but was embraced as a common label both by activists and the press during the later half of the 1980's.

café, and "Sprängkullen", a community centre and concert hall, run during more than a decade by progressive political and cultural activists. In 2019 a group with the name "Vi som bodde i gamla Haga" (We who lived in old Haga) emerged, which gathers both people who were born and raised in the working class communities in the area long before the renewals of the late 1980's and 1990's as well as people from the alternative and counter cultures in question. This group, through its more open definition of belonging, creates even more of a meeting place between memories of people from quite distinctive groups. A typical entry to a Facebook group like the above mentioned could be: "Do you remember event X?" "What became of person Y?" "What happened to Z?" "Once all this was so important to me!" People also share their own personal archives of photos from past activities, or links or scans of newspaper articles, movie clips, posters and flyers from past events of relevance etc. A Facebook group like this turns into a small, informal museum, and some of the former activists to archivists. Related to this is also a group called "Vårt 80-tal", a Stockholm centered Facebook group, which is also manifested in an edited book (Kåks & Wabäck eds. 2017).

4. Haga - a space for alternatives and counter culture

Haga was for a long time a neighbourhood characterised by a strong working-class presence. It was in the 17th and 18th centuries a suburb that gradually came to be a part of the inner city. Most of the buildings that were at stake in the process under scrutiny here were built during the later 19th and early 20th century. During the post-war era, Haga was regarded as one of few Swedish inner-city "slums", due to the run-down conditions of its old buildings. Thörn (2013) shows how the discourse of "cleansing" ("sanering") was strong in urban planning and specifically in relation to Haga since the 1930's and up to the 1980's. But, as Martins Holmberg (2006) has shown, it was not a static discourse. A different set of perceptions of Haga had by the 1970's ended up in a re-evaluation of the area, where its character as historical heritage was established, and in one form or another, came to be preserved. The public discourse on Haga moved from an understanding of the area as being: "old and ugly" to "old and nice". Martins Holmbergs rich and multi-layered analysis shows a complex interaction of academics and public management behind a conspicuously unified discourse on Haga as a working-class area. In her wordings: a geography of conservation.

The actual materialisation of this re-evaluation was during the 1980's still in the making. One could talk about a sort of halted development from the viewpoint of city planning and real estate development, where conservational authorities on national level, local government, real estate owners and builder's interests interacted. The crucial decision defining what would become of what was left of Haga's built environment was taken in 1984. Not surprisingly there was a long process before the area in its new shape was finalized. The process of conservation was on-going in the political and administrative spheres, but not visible in the streets. In this post-industrial interregnum (Forsell 2020) where the stigmatized "old and ugly" area was not yet fully managed by urban planning it was still open to social experiments as the collective of Vidblåin (Ekberg 2016) but also to a new round of squatting projects.

What faced the activists and residents of Haga in the 1980's was not really the question of preservation or not, but the question of what kind of preservation, and the preservation of what. The activists of the 1970's had more or less concluded a long struggle, and to some extent succeeded in their aims. (Andersson, Ejderoth-Linden, Tegnér, 2009) But urban- and real estate development takes time, during which the social space of Haga continued to attract alternative cultures. Individuals and groups gathered in the area, through the ready access of empty or cheap premises, and certainly also because it had a well-known, perpetuated history of alternative culture. Squatting appeared as the result of individual as well as collective action. The

open spaces in Haga in the 1980's had a clear political aspect. However, alongside the alternative culture and a very visible transformation through clearance, and at times fires as well as general decay, the process of reshaping Haga had commenced. (Thörn, 2013)

4.1 Empty houses – open space

The original morphology of Haga, with closed blocks containing inner yards giving semi-public spaces for the inhabitants, but still with streets with workshops, shops and other public facilities, used to host a multiplicity of coexisting functions. Pictures from Haga in the 1970's show many signs of workshops, of people walking and of cars, both parked and driving through. The same streets have in the 1980's changed drastically. The traces of the process of clearance were obvious. Haga was increasingly an area consisting of more or less visible empty spaces, the most visible ones being the cleared sites where houses used to be, results of demolitions. Less visible was the empty or claimable spaces inside houses. However, I am suggesting that they both were important aspects of Haga as a space for alternative lifestyles and cultures. In fact, In the 1980's, underground, semi-underground, non-profits and what could very loosely be labelled as the informal sector had taken over parts of public and private life in the neighbourhood. Emptiness and openness have different connotations, where *emptiness* could be considered as a more negative concept – a state that it is legitimate to change, to transform. *Openness* is often a positively charged concept, an opposite to the closed and restricted. Different actors may at one and the same time perceive the same space as either empty or open. And they will draw different conclusions from this.

4.2 The squatters

The discursive construction of Haga was by the 1980's, according to Martins Holmberg (2006), "the old and nice". Did the activists and squatters embrace this? Were they affirming or rejecting the heritage status of Haga? Were they indifferent to it? If not, did they make *use* of it? The alternative culture in question here - in the 80's often enough more aptly described as counter culture - had many faces. The people and groups under scrutiny here were directly connected to and participating in house squatting projects. The squatting history of Haga in the 1980's can in extreme shorthand be sorted into two periods: The first half of the decade there were several not clearly linked occurrences of squatting for the purpose of creating activity/community houses (*allaktivitetshus*). The second half of the decade marks the emergence of the above-mentioned "Husnallarna" which meant that the squatting projects was communicated and perceived under a more unified label than before. They were also to a greater extent addressing housing issues and took the form of live-in occupations. This later wave was also much more consciously using and participating in discourses on history and heritage.

Prujit (2011) talks about different configurations of urban squatting. He constructs the following ideal types: *Deprivation based squatting*, *Squatting as an alternative housing strategy*, *Entrepreneurial squatting*, *Conservational squatting* and *Political squatting*. The closest fit for the squatting projects of the first half of the 1980's in Haga would be *Entrepreneurial squatting*, with the primary goal to establish community houses, rather than housing. But, none of these projects lasted very long, or led to any long-term establishment of a community house or the like. However, this had happened earlier, with the occupation of *Hagahuset* in 1971, which after being legalised still is a community centre today, and it was also important for the development of the aforementioned *Sprängkullen,* an important centre for music still in the early

1980's (Thörn 2013). The latter half of the 1980's and the very beginning of the 1990's saw several house squatting projects in Haga, which can be placed partly and foremost in Prujits configuration *Conservational squatting*, which engages participants against demolitions and restructuring, but with some flavour also of *Political squatting,* with a rather strong element of building alternative social structures, or what Prujit calls counter power. It should be noted that one could use a fourth of Prujits configurations to understand another feature of Göteborg at this time, present in Haga, but also in some other similar areas; that is *Squatting as an alternative housing strategy*. The existence of this was also affirming the possibility for the squatters to get a sense of community which was connected to the larger area of Haga, and not only in the distinct houses perceived as "squatted". In all these configurations, we will find processes of commoning.

5. The informants and their narratives: Memories of presence

Two initial interviews with key-informants, one woman and one man, were made before selecting and summoning a smaller group of four people as a focus group. The two first interviewees both spent a lot of time in Haga during the 1980's, good parts of the time as residents, but also even before that, as young people spending much of their free time in the neighbourhood. They were both involved in the squatting of houses, and both left the city during the 1990's.[4]

The character of the group interview is necessarily and deliberately different.[5] The selection process was different and the questions were not identical, but still designed to bring out reflections over the same themes. In the group interview the interactions between the interviewed informants becomes important and creates both a process of consensus building (which can create some risks of conformity in the stories told) but on the other hand also a conscious critical scrutiny of each other's narratives. In this case the latter clearly happened, probably because the informants knew each other at the time in question and all had a pre-understanding of events, their timing and their causes. The group consisted of four people: 3 women, 1 man. They all live in or close to Gothenburg today, but the woman who live in a close smaller town has also spent long time living in other places, during the 1990's. The squatted houses mentioned during the interviews and experienced by the interviewees were: *Ungdomshuset*, *Mellangatan*, *Sabeln* and *Kruthornet*. The period treated in the interviews ended with the forced evictions through police actions of Sabeln in 1987 and Kruthornet in 1988.

The findings from the individual and the group interviews will be treated together in the analysis. Some striking similarities in how the informants describe their relation to Haga as an open space and to the heritage discourse was found. Findings from the interviews will be sorted under the two headlines: *Memories of presence*, where statements about the sense of space are gathered, and *Reflections over the past* where informants' responses to questions about the importance of Haga as a historical place is treated, but also more direct or indirect references to heritage. Further subcategories will be used under those two overarching headlines, to facilitate the analysis. Needless to say, all the narratives come from an ex-post perspective. But, this concerns a common past, which to a greater or lesser extent has been the object for storytelling and recapitulation among the informants and other persons that were in the same circles. All the informants were of similar age, and the same amount of time had passed when these narratives were gathered, which creates a comparability between them. The narratives are attempts to build and sustain a collective memory of a shared past, and here used as a source to this collective memory.

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[4] Katrin, female, born 1966 (henceforth referred to as Interview 1), Peter, male, born 1966 (henceforth referred to as Interview 2) . Both these interviews were made by phone, recorded and transcribed.
[5] Henceforth referred to as Group interview.

5.1 Home

Engaging with the question: "Describe what the place Haga meant to you in the 1980's", the two individually interviewed informants soon used the word "home", even about their first encounters with the area, before they were actual residents. One of them, Peter, stated that Haga itself felt like home. "It became sort of a special community, because of us living as we did, it was the place you were in, and if you went outside Haga, then you weren't really at home anymore".[6] The other informant, Katrin, started with talking about how she didn't feel at home where she grew up, but stated that "Haga felt as home", and then characterised this feeling in a somewhat peculiar way: "Yes /…/ A bit like I feel when I come to a big city and you just aren't noticed, you are one among many, I felt like that like in a positive way that you feel at home because like, you aren't strange and you are like an immigrant or whatever and that was how I felt in Haga".[7] In both cases they are comfortable with speaking about the whole area of Haga as a common unit, that more or less in its totality could be viewed as "home". During the interview Katrin recalls that her ten-year older sister, who lived in a collective in Haga, first introduced her to Haga. But she sticks to that her own connection went through the punk community: "I would know that everyone would be there /… / it wasn't Haga as such I wanted, but that there was music and record stores and that. /… / it was just a place from the beginning, but it grew and became like a whole world with all the things to be found there, cafés, the demolition sites, night open places, like - everything".[8]

In the group interview Nadja said that she saw Haga as a complete environment, which she entered when it was already "half destroyed". But she stressed that it was her home, "really my home" and ascribed that to the political project that the squatters had in common: "compared to other homes it was this thing with the social aspects, you had something else in common, a squatting in common ...", it was "not only a dwelling or a home, but in the middle of one's political agenda".[9]

5.2 Memories of presence: Returning

The question: "What is your first memory of Haga" resulted in quite different narratives in the group interview. Two of the informants had early childhood relations to Haga, whereas the other two both had their first contacts as teenagers in the mid/latter half of the 1980's. Lena stated that she wouldn't know what her first memory was, because she grew up in Haga. Her story about childhood in the area grew to be a kind of super-narrative to the others in the group, creating among other things a strong division between Haga in the 1970's to Haga in the 1980's. Lena also spent some time in foster care in the Swedish countryside, and as a first memory she gave an account of the impressions she had when *returning* to Haga.[10] The memory points to phenomena that stands in stark and by no means only positive contrast to her brief experience of country life: Busy street life, porn shops, pubs, laundries, drunks, cars and the toilet placed out in the common staircase. Lena also, very early in the interview makes it clear that she thinks that her childhood, where

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[6] Interview 2
[7] Interview 1
[8] Interview 1.
[9] Group interview.
[10] Or, to Andra långgatan, right across one of the streets demarcating Haga. Lena and her mother later moved in to Haga "proper" (Group interview).

children often were brought to parties and social events and she had many encounters with drugs and alcohol, gave her a firmly sceptical attitude towards drugs.

The other informant who had a childhood connection to Haga, John, stated a bit ambiguously that he didn't remember his first memory of Haga. This was because he has been *told* about his early years living in and close to Haga, but then moved away from Gothenburg with his mother. This original story about living the early years there, and having a father there, with whom he lost contact, had an obvious importance for his return to Haga in the 1980's, as a 20-year old. John shows a sense of having been taken away from this place. And he even gives an exact date for his return to Haga, in late 1986. He got a lift to Gothenburg with a relative, travelling from Copenhagen with the intention to proceed to Stockholm. He was let off in the west outskirts of Gothenburg: "so I took the tram /…/ all the way to Järntorget and I stood there and tried to like understand Haga, to find it".[11] He went directly to the squatted house at Mellangatan - and stayed in Haga for years.

Two informants who made a rather direct first entry to Haga at the time of to the squatted house on Mellangatan, of whom one, Nadja, came from the countryside and the other, Cecilia, from an affluent villa suburb, tells about very positive first memories. Nadja came to Haga and directly in to the squatted house at Mellangatan together with her sister and a friend. "We were curious about the whole thing with squatting and punk culture and I think we immediately decided that we were going to stay, so there were some blankets and mattresses and we had a room". /…/It felt very welcoming and it was just OK to be from the countryside and to be somewhat corny and just move in. So, we did it." Cecilia was introduced to Haga through doing a school internship for just a couple of weeks at PAX, a book café run by the peace movement. She describes coming in to the city and specifically Haga as an enormous sense of freedom "a revelation, really, to come here /…/ it was freedom, unbelievable." Cecilia didn't actually move in to one of the squatted houses, or at least did not officially move out from her parental home, but stayed in the environment throughout the late 1980's.

5.3 Haga as distinctly different

The squatted houses were the main pull factor for three of the informants from the group interview to come to Haga, whereas for the two individually interviewed informants it seems as if participating in and initiating squatting projects were their way to consolidate and deepen their already established presence in the area, since the first years of the 1980's. Basically Haga was by then established as the centre of punk culture in Gothenburg in different ways: through concert venues, record labels, record stores, cafés and book cafés and (more or less) private apartments and homes. The long-term house squatting projects of the second half of the 1980's was not exclusively dominated but still initiated by young people from this sub/counterculture. Finally, for Lena who grew up in the neighbourhood, her engagement in squatting (which she in the case of Mellangatan was as one of the primary initiators to) had the obvious motivation to save the landscape and environment of her childhood.

Nevertheless, all informants keep stressing *the area as a whole* as what had a clear demarcation line towards the rest of Gothenburg, rather than the squatted houses as such. As Peter said: "all of Haga was like a reserve for weird characters. Not even a janitor [vaktmästare] was just an ordinary janitor, because he was also like 'a janitor from Haga'"[12] Peter furthermore contrasted his own view on Haga with that of his parents: "If you entered Haga it felt safe and nice and cool, and known. Even if many thought the opposite, that it was

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[11] Group interview.
[12] Interview 2.

like very rough, and shady. My parents thought of it as semi-criminal and a lot of junkies running around. And I guess it was. But it felt so nice anyway. It was like *nice* junkies that lived in Haga somehow, you painted that picture because for some reason you were just so happy to be there."[13] The distinct character of Haga was also mentioned and developed in relation to other contemporary environments of squatted houses: John, who arrived in Haga on his way from squatted houses in Copenhagen and aiming to go to a squatted house in Stockholm – both environments thought of as rougher - said that he perceived a greater playfulness in Haga, where laughters were always close. "And Haga was like the biggest playground in town. I mean hello – a whole neighbourhood full of empty houses."[14]

5.4 Freedom - The playground

The concept of freedom echoes through the interviews, in numerous configurations. It is worth to reflect over the fact that all the informants in this study were young during the years in focus. Part of the sense of freedom ascribed to Haga as a specific place should be interpreted as the sense of freedom many young people seek, and in some cases feel, when and wherever they start to establish themselves outside the environment where they grew up. However, this is not a sufficient explanation. They all give quite clear examples on how Haga offered them a specific and unique form of freedom. In some examples this is explicitly related to and put in contrast to their original communities. Katrin and Cecilia who came from villa communities on the outskirts of the city very clearly said that they were uncomfortable and felt very restricted in their home communities - even to the extent not really wanting to call these communities home. To them Haga was offering freedom and relief from those restrictions. Peter, brought up in a neighbourhood of ordered and stable working class (Högsbo), underlines his own strong feeling of freedom: "a place where things weren't ordered, it was more like complete chaos in many ways and that disorder has always inspired me somehow to … well I see possibilities with, with a half-finished wall, it became something to continue working on."[15] He also contrasted this with the well-kept, straight-lined flower plantations in the area he grew up in, and underlined that after the years in Haga he couldn't really imagine going back there, or moving to a neighbourhood that didn't offer freedom of this sort. He has ever since had his principal base in Skogsnäs, an alternative-culture commune in north, rural Sweden.[16]

Freedom is articulated as the absence of some of the rules that would have been respected in other neighbourhoods, be it traffic regulations or rules for public order. Cars were parked in strange places, underground clubs popped up and then disappeared. The possibility to move around in environments that had been left behind, in attics as well as in empty flats and the demolition sites. There was a practice going on in Haga where people helped each other to find empty flats to live in, as a sort of implicit squattings – meaning they were not openly displayed with banners, petitions or political demands. Rather these served two other purposes: Keeping the houses inhabited, countering the trend of more and more empty flats when the landlords decided not to give new leases, as well as distributing places to live for people who wanted to live cheap – and in Haga.

Freedom is often exemplified in the narratives in ways that can be interpreted as *access to open space*. Freedom was also in all these narratives expressed as "tolerance" for or "acceptance" of non-conformity.

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[13] Interview 2.
[14] Group interview.
[15] Interview 2.
[16] Skogsnäs is analysed in some detail in Ekberg (2016) and the arrival of squatters from Haga recorded, p 112. Several of the urban squatters took the same or similar paths, something also mentioned in Bratt (2012) and Ighe (2019).

Several in the focus group tell about the tolerance they felt towards themselves as non-conform, but all also give examples on how the community was tolerant to others: Children with dysfunctional families, alcoholics, social misfits.

Lastly, the narratives give us an almost poetic feeling of mystery and space possible to explore. Despite its small stretch on the map, the informants tell about Haga as offering an on-going adventure, Haga as a veritable playground. The constant occurrence of the unexpected was also interpreted as freedom. John said: "There was a few years when I was constantly looking for something new, over and over and over again. And then you [I] came to Haga. And things are new all the time, everywhere, even if you went to sleep in your own bed and even in your own house. It was like a little Klondyke. New things happening all the time."[17]

The parts of the narratives that don't stop at simply mentioning the sense of freedom briefly, but also explores and exemplifies what they call freedom will eventually touch on the negative sides that this freedom may be associated with. In terms of relations between people and an exceptional openness, Lena tells of how highly she values that she as very young was allowed to be out late in the streets and inner yards, speaking to lots of people: "My mom allowed me sit out until midnight talking philosophy to a trans person and a god-knows-what, alone at 11 years old. No problem, there was nothing to fear." On the other hand, in direct connection to this Lena also says that she did learn to avoid those who should be feared: "Some people you should just avoid, just change street, you learned that early."[18]

This freedom has a connection to what was here initially mentioned as an openness of space. Cecilia said, making a more direct association also to the built environment as such: "You had sort of an ambivalent feeling – this loving to be in Haga because of being free, away from everything else, conventions and the like. At the same time, it was sad, exactly because everything was just left behind and abandoned there."[19]

5.5 A meeting point over generational boundaries

Polanska (2019, 97) has shown that squatters in Sweden often have been portrayed as young, something that can be used as belittling in a general discourse. Our informants here were young, but what were their contacts with other generations? There were not very many direct contacts on group level between the foremost actors of the 1970's and early 1980's fight for preservation, Hagagruppen and the later 1980's activists Husnallarna. But there were a few links on the more personal level. And the narratives here tell us that there were important links between the young and/or relative newcomers and the older, experienced residents. One could call these instances of learning, even though it didn't happen in any formalised way. John says that as he sees it, a young person usually meets one older person or mentor at a time. But in Haga such relations were established to many people at the same time, which he labelled as: the old squatters from Hagahuset in the 1970's, "old hippies", and the people that ran and frequented Solrosen (a co-operative restaurant). "when they realised that you, or we, belonged to the good guys, that we were on the same side, we got so much in exchange from them. Information, but also… I mean it wasn't just the pans filled with food from Solrosen to Mellangatan that saved us in the middle of the winter".[20] He also made a comment on that it was possible to learn things even from the local junkies. These instances of learning and sharing should also be seen as a strong component in how a process of commoning takes place.

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[17] Group interview.
[18] Group interview.
[19] Group interview.
[20] Group interview.

One theme around which consensus was built, particularly in the group interview, as a signifier of a very positive value in Haga as an environment, was the many meetings over generational boundaries. Nadja said: "It was a natural contact between generations. Like there was no such divide, but a natural mix of generations. That was very good."[21] The stories of learning from older activists and other Haga dwellers mentioned above are of course a part of this. The informants don't really move to report on the perceived absence of generational boundaries in further detail, or to analyse *why* this was positive, rather they establish that it was, and that in their perception Haga was special in this aspect. The informants really felt that they were living in a society where there were observable and socially upheld boundaries between generations. They saw the transgression of these boundaries as a positive thing, maybe even somewhat subversive. It was an expression of counterculture in itself. Through this, squatters were invited to the commoning practices of Haga, a process that connected their houses with the larger environment. For young people, in or just past their teens, interaction with older adults that is not hierarchically constructed, would certainly often serve as a means of integration, and also give the sense of recognition. The interview with a former squatter in Stockholm by Bratt (2012) points to a similar sense of value coming from intergenerational relations, and so does a conversation published in Kåks & Wabäck (2017). Older adults indeed were present, and interaction between generations was important.

5.6. Demolition as aggression. The symbolic power of the excavator

Excavators had a practical as well as a symbolic presence in Haga and in the debates over the area. As stated earlier one could divide the conflicts over the built environment and its future into several periods, where different discourses were dominant at different times. (Thörn 2013, Martins Holmberg 2006) The radical vision of a *cleansing* of Haga could very well assume a more or less total demolition of the old houses, whereas a vision of *preservation* of Haga could range from a total moratorium in demolitions to a selective preservation of fewer buildings based on criteria of quality and/or historical interest. Either way, the excavator would be the tool for progress, or for destruction. There is a TV-programme that was produced during one of the squatting projects of interest here, Sabeln 1986-1988. In this programme, which was a documentary show about current events, several young squatters were interviewed. The main interest of the interviewers seems to lie with the squatters' attitudes towards waged work, and the show is some kind of exploration of their expected anti-social lifestyle. Some other "outside" people are also interviewed, to give their view on the squatters and of what they think is going on inside the walls of the houses. Much can be said of this, but at this point I will pick up just a few lines that were said regarding the excavators. The TV-team chose to use pictures of excavators working their way through the demolishing of a Haga house. One of the young squatters then reflects over the fact that he has heard of people saying that squatting is just symbolic, hopeless acts. And further he states, that the demolitions at some level is symbolic too. I think that this is something we could develop on in our understanding of the events and the motives behind the squatters as well as behind the political or other interests that wanted them to leave the houses. Through direct contacts with the official sphere or interaction with visiting people in "open house sessions" in the squats or through political debates it became clear to the squatters that there was a resistance against the preservation of exactly the environments they thought themselves to be guarding.

In the narratives here, several of the informants speaks about the demolitions as something they felt very negatively about. However, demolitions – and thus the practical work of the excavators – were of course

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[21] Group interview.

absolutely needed to create the open spaces that has been given a central position in this article. Lena's mentioning of demolitions are many, it is a part of her whole childhood narrative, and she lived in and among so-called *rivningskåkar*, which literary meant houses-to-be-demolished, a concept that thus had the anticipated future – or rather lack of future – of the houses clearly inscribed in them. She said "And then you saw houses being demolished where my friends had lived. Where you had been playing. It's just not OK."[22] When Cecilia makes a longer, general reflection over a historical gradual improvement of the economic situation and following improvements in housing standards, Lena responds: "But here, it felt like an assault", a statement that Cecilia confirms. Lena further recalls "There was excavators outside your… We were in school and you could hear how they bombed houses; I mean how they blew them up." The use of "bombed" is a slip of the tongue that the informant instantly corrects, but it is obviously telling regarding her feelings towards the demolitions going on. She mentions specific houses and addresses where houses were blown up and demolished.[23] All in all, as conservational squatters (Pruijt 2011) these activists showed strong, almost conservational care of specific details, but also tell the story of how watching an area being cleared/demolished can be perceived as watching violent aggression.

6. Discussion: Reflections over the past

Whether the young activists in Husnallarna were fully aware of it or not, they were a case of a group resisting gentrification, at the same time as they were a part of the signs of the same gentrification, a part of the vanguards, together with artists, students etc. Not much in this study says that they were conscious about this at the time. In the group interview, a strong storytelling occurs, where several of the informants paint very clear images of causal relationships in order to explain historical events, not the least in underlining a perceived divide between the 1970's and 1980's.

Each one of the informants tells about a strong affection for the built environment, both in its details and as a larger structure. They learned how to work the systems of heating and plumbing. They learned how to renovate windows and to keep other parts of the buildings. In this sense they worked in the direct tradition of predecessors like the activists in Hagagruppen, at times practically guided by people from that environment. It still stands out as somewhat strange that this group of young people, most of them with a strong identification with punk culture and its very articulated rebellion against tradition should feel so strongly for precisely tradition and history?

6.1 Conserving tradition as an act of rebellion

My proposal is that we can understand this through Haga's status as a "slum" and "old and ugly" well documented in Martins Holmberg (2006) and Thörn (2013) and also visible in the narratives of the informants. It was also a matter of resisting the hegemonic discourse of modernisation, where social democracy had made a strong impact on – or joined forces with – urban planning, and was in many ways a kind of natural political opponent.

The resistance towards "the system" was a very strong feature of punk culture in general. It was articulated in music and lyrics, in aesthetics and fashion and in political actions. The house squatting projects made it possible to express all of that in one unified context. But it seems safe to assume that the strong

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[22] Group interview.
[23] Group interview.

feelings for the architectural tradition and the old working-class culture represented in Haga that the informants share would not have developed at any given time and place. Rather, it was triggered and enhanced by a combination of the openness and the long-standing territorial stigmatization of the area. The openness allowed for a gradual penetration of the area, a claiming of open space - be it in or between houses. Where many young people who are drawn to and form counter cultures would find their physical space in the margins of public spaces – like in parts of shopping malls, parking lots, school grounds in the evenings and so on – this area was possible to claim on so many different levels, at all times of the day. To live in and in very practical terms claim and care for Haga were obvious acts of resistance against the reshaping of the area. Conserving tradition became an act of rebellion.[24] Moreover, resisting the cleansing and demolitions meant an active questioning of the very system and principles for valuation of houses and of urban space. As such, the activities in this study all took place in that post-industrial interregnum of the 1980's Sweden (Forsell 2020). After this, a period of "urban renaissance" and a development of housing capitalism takes place. This led to different logics and different principles for valuation. Neoliberalism came to overtake the housing policies of the welfare state.

6.2 Concluding remarks: Open space and common ground

This study shows that the squatters in Haga in the 1980's developed a very strong sense of connection to the place itself. Although part of a counterculture they were not outsiders in the area at the time – on the contrary they were very much integrated. In fact, the openness, by some seen as emptiness, in Haga made it possible to claim it as a "home" and use it as a common. It is important to note the strong feelings of "home" connected to not only one house, or a specific flat, but to the neighbourhood.

Pruijts configurations are useful – but confronted with interviews and individual life stories the configurations may be seen as possible stages in a squatter's life and development, rather than as projects easily distinguishable from one another. The fact that Haga was the arena for different forms of squatting during a considerable period of time, also allowed for an identification with the area, and an increasing focus on heritage. This study suggest that this was driven by two main factors: 1) The identification with the area as such, which also meant some level of awareness about its history; 2) The perception that conservational squatting was a meaningful activity in terms of the relations with the surrounding world: both with other people and groups in Haga and with the wider community. In addition, it seems as if this was a fruitful strategy towards media, as shown in Carle (1991) It is however less clear that framing the activism as "conservational squatting" was successful in relation to the local government. Rather, it seems as if the messages concerning the housing situation, especially for young people, was the one that was heard and gained some response (Thörn 2013). This is probably consistent with how the local government perceived their priorities: social problems were their business, even if brought to the table by unruly squatters (see also Pries 2019, even if the argument he makes refer more to cultural policy) and additionally the process of conservation of the area was already a done deal.

Husnallarna had a sense of the heritage status of Haga. They lived in it, used narratives of heritage for the purpose of preserving it, but were not the principal agents in establishing its preservation, that was an accomplishment by activists and professionals of the 1970's. The interviews in this study, as well as the

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[24] It would also probably be very possible to actually connect this to a turn in the cultural history of punk – where the British anarcho-punk scene was making a political turn, emphasizing anarchy, peace and DIY. Ian Glasper. 2014. The Day the Country Died: A History of Anarcho-Punk 1980-1984 (Oakland: PM Press) The main importer of Crass records to Sweden, A-records, was a non-profit based in Haga and had a direct connection to the environment under discussion here.

online sources, nevertheless testify about a strong sense of having saved something, by creating and during a limited amount of time upholding common ground in what is really a prime example of where we often draw lines and fences: In urban areas and in the case of real estate property. Activists utilizing areas viewed as *empty* and redefining them to be *open* thus created very practical commons. Also, the interviews tell about the value of intergenerational contacts with activists from an earlier period. It was the social environment and counter culture that was saved for some time, rather than the buildings.

The relationships to a local government dominated by the social democratic party is a significant part of the case (Thörn 2013). The squatters needed to defend their commons (the houses and the neighbourhood) as well as their commoning (their practices) from the planned logic of the welfare state, but lost their case rather to the forces of neoliberalism. The squatting projects in this study were part of a bigger transnational scene. (Vasudevan 2017, Wåg 2019) In that sense they constituted a subculture of urban activism and political culture that historically was a part of the late twentieth century urban developments, where commoning practices were forms of resistance strategies. But they were also very clearly part of a specific tradition of commoning in Haga, deeply rooted in its own specific place.

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