

Spaces of flow and coincidence

Residential stairs and passages in the time of mediated interaction



Slab blocks of three floors, each containing a number of stairwells, make up most of Swedens housing areas of the 40's and 50's.

On the stairs

Fascination and degradation

What kind of space is a stairwell?¹ How do we use stairs and what do they do to us? Through the 20th century history of residential housing, the stairs stand out as one of the most neglected spaces from an architectonic point of view. Treated as a mere functional space, allowing transportation of people and furniture and a safe escape in case of fire, the stairwell and adjoining passages were always targets for saving dwelling space and building costs. However, in fiction — novels as well as movies — stairs and corridors are often portrayed as exiting, poetic, dramatic and problematic spaces where human life is driven to an extreme.

One explanation to this discrepancy between practices of building and design on one hand, and the accounts of writers on the other, has to do with professional perspectives. The stairs of multi-family housing are apparently not perceived by modernist planners and designers as articulate and important *places*. In the old days, staircases in residential buildings for the bourgeois class were designed to allow polite and respectful encounters among neighbours. Today, it is only in important public or business buildings, where a certain monumentality is at stake, that staircases become cherished objects of design.

Fiction writers, however, discover in the residential stairwell a fascinating world: impres-

¹The stairs referred to in the paper are *stairwells*, or to be more precise: *stairwell units* (Sw: trapphus-enhet), chiefly of 20th century multi-family housing. A stairwell unit contains a number of flats reached by a common stairwell and adjoining passages (entrances, lifts).

sions of lives hidden behind doors, random and deliberate encounters, polite conversations and friendly chats, ambiances of safety and fear, of concern and dereliction. In his book *La Vie — mode d'emploi*, Georges Perec gives his account of the stairs as a neutral space that belong to all and none, where fragments of private lives leak out from behind the closed doors of the flats and where people find themselves compelled to move to get in and out, sometimes running across each other. Closeness and distance, familiarity and reserve seem to coincide. That is why, according to Perec, the staircase remains an anonymous, cold, almost unpleasant part of the house. Perec makes evident the significance of the stairs, but as we see, being significant does not necessarily means being harmonic. His description hints at another explanation of the negligence of the stairs. The stairwell may represent a space too awkward to deal with, that designers prefer not to become engaged in. (Perec 1996)

What Perec discovers, I would argue, are the effects of the disciplinary efforts of industrial society that developed most of all towards the end of the 19th century. These efforts were directed against local social intercourse becoming too intimate and intensive, on one hand threatening the family, on the other fostering a solidarity that could undermine the institutions of society. The modernists, however, turned against this all too obvious bourgeois attempt to civilize the working class by controlling people's use of space, but still despised the traditional local solidarity and familiarity that was the target of bourgeois reformers (Karlsson 1993). Modern man was supposed to be a citizen, not a villager. When building the new welfare society, the close neighbourhood was not on the agenda as an arena for informal relations and mutual support. On the level of the stairwell, transportation and evacuation were perceived as solid concepts, that lent the design process an air of science. Efficiency and economy became overpowering criteria for the design of stairs in multi-family housing as traffic areas exclusively.

Place-bound meets distributed: The changing patterns of residential sociality

Our time is characterized by a noticeable indetermination concerning the forms and contexts of peoples daily interaction. On one hand, the development of communications, physical transport as well as electronic transmission of information, has dissolved and transformed the place-bound communities of traditional life. On the other, ideas of small communities still linger on as a retrogress utopia.

The increasing availability of transportation and electronic media is intertwined with a process of societal change that have liberated people from being totally dependent upon the local world (Schiefløe 1990) This process, that started centuries ago, is one of the central traits of modernization. It involves that emerging tension between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, the study of which became the *raison d'être* of the disciplines of sociology and anthropology.

People today share their time between many contexts apart from the habitat: workplaces, schools, gyms, day nurseries, shops and supermarkets, not to mention pavements, railroad stations, bus stops and motorways. Some of these tend to be brief experiences for the individual participant. The last decades have seen a radicalisation of this process. With the growth of Internet, virtual worlds are emerging, that may add to or substitute parts of this polycentric network of significant places. The mobility of society appears to increase, largely due to changes within the business world. New information technology is turning the home itself into a centre of global communication. The opportunity of mediated real time interaction emphasizes the ambiguity of local and global in home and neighbourhood.

But the development towards a diminishing local solidarity is not unconditional. Still people

walk the same old stairs, stop and say hello to each other and seem to appreciate good relations to their neighbours. They are markedly vulnerable towards disruptions of their social environment. For the unemployed, the residential realm offers a potential arena for solidarity and cooperation. New information technology in addition to new trends within business life provide opportunities to change the habitat into a workplace, thus reconnecting what was split up geographically during industrialism. A growing number of small households of one or two people may increase the significance of the intermediate zones of residential areas, as arenas of unconstrained relations among neighbours. Among these transitional spaces are the stairs of multi-family housing.

Research performed in Swedish housing areas of the 40's and 50's² made visible the important role of stairwell interaction within the local context. The significance of allowing people to stay put when residential areas are modernized appeared in phenomena like the informal care and mutual help between neighbours, the safety of being known, the exchange of local information and the forming of local opinions, and, last but not least, the opportunity of leisurely socialization. All these phenomena seemed to emanate from the stairwell unit. As the stairs do not primarily represent a formal social organization but is rather an agglomeration of homes, random encounters in and around the stairwell must be perceived as an important driving force behind the development of the informal bounds that may be found there. The routines of the stairs involve relations of care among neighbours and towards the stairs as a common space. This care for the stairs as a place is seldom reflected in practices of residential stairwell design.

One of the effects of the modernization, that western society went through during the previous century, was that local involvement turned into a matter of personal choice (Giddens 1991). It was no longer mandatory to take an interest in local affairs or even to show a minimum of amenity towards neighbours. Today, the social strings that attach people to their neighbourhoods are more or less voluntary. Apparently, not even the return of work (in the form of teleworking) to the context of dwelling is bringing back the integrated, place-bound life forms of traditional society. This has important implications for the intermediate spaces of residential environments: The less that social intercourse means being part of a common local culture, the more important become random encounters for the development of informal bonds. In this paper, I want to argue that the design of intermediate spaces has become crucial to help supporting forms of local social intercourse that are adapted to the informational society. In what way can the design of residential stairwells benefit to the development of social sustainability in housing, of a vivacious grass-root society?

To promote a sustainable society and, at the same time, to manage problems of housing a growing population in overheated urban areas, increasing the density of the urban web appears to be one possible and necessary means. In a dense city, the spaces where grass-roots society is reproduced must be efficiently designed. Perhaps can the loss of free space in residential environments be partially compensated for by the skilful design of roomier stairs, entrances and corridors, simultaneously increasing the opportunities of noncompulsory social inter-

²The paper is based upon studies of housing renovation performed by the author together with Eva Öresjö (reported in Öresjö 1988; Wikström 1986, 1988, 1992, 1994, 1999; Wikström & Öresjö 1991) and Cecilia Henning (reported in Wikström & Henning 1996, 1998) and research about home-based teleworking in cooperation with Bill Michelson and Karin Palm Lindén (reported in Palm Lindén, Wikström & Michelson, 1997; Michelson, Palm Lindén, & Wikström 1998; Wikström 1996; Wikström, Palm Lindén & Michelson 1998).

course.

What will follow is a discussion about the socio-spatial potential of the stairs, ending in a few ideas about the design of stairwells and passages. Based on studies of peoples experiences of housing renovation and home-based teleworking, the spatiality of the stairs will be scrutinized. Modernization of housing areas and teleworking in the home are examples of circumstances that threaten or challenge well-established patterns of living — and also make respondents motivated to reflect upon these patterns.

In the flux of local and global

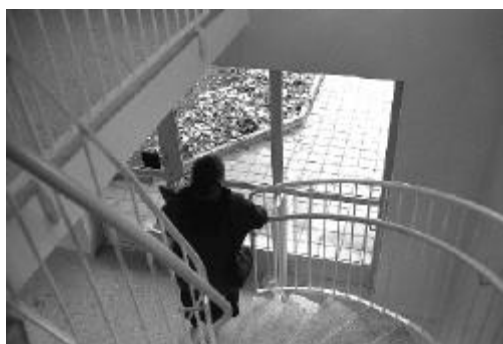
Residential mobility questioned

My interest in residential stairs origins in the research experiences of homes being threatened by urban renewal. The evaluation of renewal processes in a number of Swedish housing areas made me aware of the immense significance for people of home. Contrary to the view of the planners, these homes were not easy to move somewhere else. People were not prepared to pack their things and furniture and start a new life in another flat. In a very concrete way, many of the inhabitants were attached to the environment, to neighbours and neighbourhood. Their homes where implaced, being parts of a local context. As an antithesis to the planners' lack of understanding of the local aspects of dwelling, I wanted to clarify the importance of hoe.

During my studies of peoples homes, I found that the stairs of the multi family blocks to be essential for the understanding of the attachment to place characterizing many of the homes visited during the study. The stairs, or to be more exact, “the stairwell unit” is a type, i.e. a unit of an architectonic typology. On one hand it is a physical organization that is repeated in various ways to form buildings. On the other it is the locale of certain social practices, e.g. neighbouring. Trying to reach an understanding of the uses of stairwells made me aware of the multifarious aspects of lived space.³

Stairwell architecture

As an intermediate space, the stairs connect the home and the world. The stairs are far more than a traffic area or a fire escape. They embody the dual meaning of intermediate space. On one hand, as the periphery of several individual homes, the stairwell is a space for interaction with neighbours. On the other, as an extreme outpost of public space, it connects the inhabitants with the world around.



The stairs of new built Åhuset

The fact that the stairwell constitutes an ambivalent social space is paralleled in its architecture. The (folded) spiral of the stairs limits the field of vision, normally to one floor at a time.

³Lived space, in German *der erlebte Raum*, is a concept of phenomenology, focussing the experiences and actions of the body-subject as fundamental for our access to the world (Bollnow 1963, see also Wikström 1994).

As a *cul-de-sac*, the stairwell may cause almost claustrofobic experiences, contrasting to the safety behind the door of one's flat. The use of staircases, elevators and corridors to increase the thrill of detective stories is not a coincidence. The stairwell is characterised by a strange tension between intimacy and anonymity, driven to an extreme when a neighbour opens his door and discloses his private sphere.

Acting and interacting in this intermediate space, we make use of all our senses. Sounds and smells, for instance, are extremely important for the experience of the spatiality of the stairwell. Walking up the stairs, hearing helps us to recognize the people we are about to meet before actually seeing him or her. The smell of cooking from a flat may tell us that the neighbour is home, but also gives us hints about his or her lifestyle and culture. Using our full sensorium, we widen the horizon of our presence beyond the bend of the stairs, beyond the closed doors and through the walls.

One lesson to be learnt from the stairwell is that people continuously experience a spatiality that is extremely complex and changeable. Thus architect's bias for visual space is challenged in favour of a space that is multi-sensuous. This meaningful and praxis-related space, this common lived space of dwelling, is better described using the term place. The initial question must be rephrased: What kind of *place* is a stairwell? And we must look deeper into that complex and controversial concept.

Place is not a container of the social

In his book *The Fate of Place*, Edward Casey describes place as being created through the continuous activities of people, as events. Unlike the closed container of Aristotle, place is characterized by being open and in a state of dynamic interplay with other places.

Place remains something that surrounds, but no longer as an airtight, immobile, diaphanous limit. It is the event of envelopment itself. (Casey 1997, p 339)

The concrete presence of the place-event is always transcended by a mediated presence. Thus, place is not absolutely defined by, for instance, the walls of a room. The concept of place embraces material space with its structures and subdivisions, but should not be confined to ideas of physical structures or containers. The presence of embodied human actors is fundamental. But also their absence: appearing in meaningful traces, statements and sediments of human life and culture. Thus place is an event of interpretation and participation, of common creation. Place is much more dynamic than we tend to think, it is recurrently regenerated by people's interaction.

According to a stereotypical conception of home, the world expands concentrically around the private habitat in circles that become more and more public, a movement from the local towards the global. This since long criticised picture of the home being surrounded by half private and half public realms is finally bereaved its credibility by the information society (Waldenfels 1985). Along with the development of information technology during the 20th century and especially during the last few decades, the home is turning into a centre of global communication and a node in a polycentric network of interaction. The availability of mediated real time interaction makes the world no less (probably more) present at home than in any of the other nodes where our daily movements take us. Home is at the same time local and global, private and public. What does this mean for stairwell interaction and experience? The consequences of the "wired" home for the intermediate places of residential environments have yet to be scrutinized.

On the stairs — the attractions and nuisances of staircase interaction

Renovating the People's Home

The residential areas mentioned here are results of the Swedish neighbourhood planning of the 40's and 50's, the People's Home era. They represent an informal and popular architecture, which was debated in England as “New Humanism” or “New Empiricism” (Frampton 1980). With the application of traditional forms and sensuous building materials — saddle roofs, brick walls, wood panelling, craftsmanslike details — this architecture contrasts with the white walls and the abstract clarity of the early modernism or functionalism. Generally, the buildings are slab blocks with three or four storeys and tower blocks with four storeys or more. The buildings are subdivided into units, comprising flats with internal access from a common stairwell. Since the nineteenth century, the “stairwell unit” is the architectonic type that was (and still is) predominant when constructing blocks of flats in Sweden, just like in many other European countries.⁴

In the 40's and 50's, flats of two or three rooms and a kitchen were considered large enough for families. When my study was carried out, the same flats were occupied by couples and single persons. Now many of the inhabitants were middle-aged or elderly people, who moved in when the areas were new, and whose children since long had left home. Young people moved in when flats were available, but normally moved on to larger dwellings as soon as they had children. Although the flats had “modern” equipment and were well maintained, they were in some respects worn and out of date. Kitchens, bathrooms and accessibility for handicapped among other things did not fulfil the requirements of the authorities. The owners, public (Sw. *allmännyttiga*) housing companies, foresaw problems with attracting new tenants. Only the inhabitants themselves were relatively satisfied. However, renewal projects, aiming at modernization of the flats and upgrading the grounds, were initiated. The negative response from many of the tenants was a shock for the planners and the people of the housing companies.

Many inhabitants, especially those who had been living in the areas since the early days, experienced modernization as a threat to their calm and safe life in well-known surroundings. The promised improvements were not enough to balance the negative response of these people. Their reaction revealed emotional ties to home, neighbours and neighbourhood that, at first, appeared strange and out of date in the context of residential areas that were products of modern neighbourhood planning. In some cases these bonds seemed to be so strong, that breaking them would lead to disaster. Other inhabitants, however, had weaker ties to home and neighbourhood. For some young people, the flat seemed to be just a place where they slept and stored their belongings.

The strong attachment to home and neighbourhood emanated from decades of stairwell socialising. When renovating the buildings, strongly attached tenants were not satisfied being offered flats within the same housing estate. To many of the interviewees, feeling at home was synonymous with knowing one's neighbours on the stairs and in the house and to feel safe with them. When organizing protests against the plans of the housing firms, the stairs and not the housing estate as a whole became the starting point of local activism.

The people, that I interviewed, were only in exceptional cases forced to move permanently.

⁴When no other references are made, the text is based upon my doctoral thesis *Mellan hemmet och världen* (Between the Home and the World, Wikström 1994).

Among those who were, some experienced a great and definite loss. Most of the inhabitants, however, were vacated only for a few weeks. Their stories about how they handled the worries, disturbances and changes of the modernization process gave an abundance of information concerning their relations to home.

The attempt to spread this knowledge to politicians, property-managers, planners and architects turned out to be very instructive — for us as researchers. When we told about old people's strong ties to their homes, about social networks being concentrated around stair-cases and informal care among neighbours, many of them were provoked. Why these negative and sometimes aggressive reactions?

In my opinion, it was the fact that people were attached to certain places — instead of moving freely on the housing-market — that was awkward to those working with renewal of residential areas. It was our pointing out the importance of the implacedness of people's everyday lives, that was new and provocative to planners and others. A concept of home, which is strongly related to place, demands as a pre-requisite a completely new way of planning for renewal and modernization.

It became evident that home was something complicated, “irrational” and at the same time very important. Home, in the sense people in the residential areas used the term, obviously did not exist in the minds of planners and builders. This lack of understanding of the meaning of home explains to a certain degree, why the renewal processes in two of the areas led to conflicts.

Aspects of home

When asked about what home and sense of home (Sw: *hemkänsla*) meant to them, most people, as expected, started talking about their dwellings. That was where they found warmth, safety and comfort. Some of the people interviewed described the sense of home as the satisfaction of having a safe place to return to. Their homes appeared to be centres, from which their images of the surroundings were built up. At the same time the homes were points of departure for movements in the world around which that opens up just because home is situated there.

Autonomy or self-determination appeared to be one of the most valuable features of home. However, the important thing was not excluding others but rather controlling one's own home area. In many interviews people stressed the word “we”. Home was described as a common, mutual creation of space. Creating space in this sense meant, among other things, to organize and furnish the home. The design of the flat was mentioned as important for the comfort of home. People's belongings, the furniture and other things, were often associated with the sense of home. The personal belongings carry memories, and thus makes it at all possible for people who choose or are forced to move, to keep their sense of home. The pointing out of memories underlines the importance of the routines of daily life. Home was described as sequences of events: to come home and lock the door, to make coffee and watch TV together. These activities, however, leave traces in the walls of home, also in a mental sense.

Stairwell community?

Home and sense of home were mainly associated with the private realm. Neighbours and neighbourhood, however, were also important — in a negative and a positive sense. The importance of a calm and safe environment was stressed, i.e. the absence of neighbours that disturb the peace or intrude on the privacy of home. However, when asked more directly, the vast majority of the interviewees gave evidence of relations to neighbours and local friends

that were seen as important and sometimes vital. Here we have the neighbours who help each other with little things like pushing in the daily newspaper (in the mailbox) when one of them is away; the ones that have time for a chat when running into each other in the stairs; the neighbours that react, when somebody does not come and go as usual; the persons that always are well-informed about the plans of renovation, or even have connections into the administration of the housing company; the elderly people, who always introduce themselves to newcomers and give hints about what is expected from them as neighbours; and, finally, the ones that take part in meetings of the tenants organisation, and help organising local activities.

We must not believe that this community is boundless. A small number of interviewees seemed to have minimal contacts with their neighbours. Of the others, many stressed the importance of keeping contacts and neighbouring on an appropriate (Sw: *lagom*) level. When inquired if she could ask her neighbours for help with little things, one woman said: "That's no problem. We have a neighbour on the next floor who will help us. But that doesn't mean that we run up and down the stairs all day long!" The easy and candid relations (shallow or deep) around the home were maintained by simple means. This informal way of defining private space from common — of defending the autonomy of home — seemed to be vital for a good spirit among neighbours.

Stairwell gossip and modern man

When, during the fifties, the stairwell was brought to the attention of the planning debate, it was in a negative sense. As a place of gossip and neighbourly intercourse, it was pointed out as a threat towards the sanctity of home and family — and towards fostering responsible, broad-minded citizens (Sax 1989, Hanssen 1978). But even since the beginning of the century, the solidarity of the close vicinity was disregarded in favour of the larger neighbourhood unit and society at large (Karlsson 1993).

Especially women were pictured as guilty of unrestrained neighbouring. It was fascinating to meet women of the studied housing estates of the 40's and 50's that were eager to inform me that, although they knew other families on the same stairs, they were not running to each other all the time. The discipline implanted by the newborn welfare state still seems to persist. But in spite of these efforts, the women (in most cases housewives) became the network builders of the neighbourhoods, creating connections between families. In the 90's, this was still reflected in the local culture of the studied environments.

For a long period, Swedish sociologists were blind for what has later been labelled "the small neighbourhood" (Olsson 1991, 19###) It seems as though stairwell intercourse was not considered worth noticing in a modern welfare society (Dahlström 1951, Gillwik 1975, Erikson 1977). Definitions used ruled out those primary processes of social interaction that really make up the basis of all societies: the implaced intersubjectivity of groups of people. This also meant disregarding the processes of regionalisation involved in peoples common creation of place in favour of social data "contained" in the more or less fixed regions of administration, in this case housing estates. Ethnologists and anthropologists, however, with perspectives that are more life-world and less system oriented, were always occupied with communities based upon local traditions and informal organisation.

The leftist critique, during the sixties, of western society and its repressive state apparatus, boosted the propagation among social scientists of the ethnologists' grass-roots perspective. The increased use of qualitative methodologies moved the focus of interest from the changes within large cohorts of the population towards everyday life and doings of people in diverse contexts. In public debate, not the least among architects, local community and solidarity got a

lot of attention due to this new trend of social research. It is ironic that in Sweden, it was an ethnologist, Åke Daun, that felt obligated to balance what soon had become a romantic view upon neighbourly intercourse and cooperation. Based upon studies of a suburban area in Stockholm, Daun described distant friends and relatives as far more important than neighbours in the lives of the inhabitants of Vårberg (Daun 1974). Local social intercourse was first disregarded, then overrated and then, possibly, is accredited a more dispassionate evaluation.

These short notes about the public and (inter)disciplinary debate on local social life are a necessary background to the results of the studies I carried out together with my colleagues. The fact that we found attachment to the close neighbourhood to be essential, did not exclude relations to friends and relatives being equally important. Also, local attachment did not mean involving all neighbours, rather there were separate patterns of relations within the same setting. Nor does attachment to the close-to-home environment exclude other settings, be it within the residential environment or at any of those nodes making up the polycentricity of daily life. It is not a question of either-or, what is at stake here is a complex of partially independent contexts of social interaction. So, as I will discuss below, 1) neither is the local world the only or even the most important for the inhabitants, nor 2) is this local environment an all embracing unity from a socio-cultural point of view.

Local community and local contexts

At first sight the three residential areas appeared to be homogenous, socially as well as culturally. For example, very few of the inhabitants belonged to ethnic minorities. Most of the inhabitants were working-class. However, in the course of the study a number of ways of living and dwelling were evidenced. Five ways of dwelling were identified: The *participants*, the *reserved ones*, the *busy ones*, the *outsiders* and the *turned away ones*. (Wikström 1994, pp 140-144)

These different ways of relating to home and neighbourhood are connected to patterns of polycentricity (Waldenfels 1985). Everyday routines include the presence in many places away from home — work, school, day-nursery, shops etc. — and moving between these places: a network of significant places. People's presence or absence — their daily trajectories — in the intermediate spaces around the dwelling are crucial for their possibilities to attach to the place where they live. However, the biographies of the individuals, especially concerning the place and its people, are also important for what they can make out of their presence. Giddens uses the term presence-availability for the combination of co-presence and availability in a social as well as physical sense (Giddens 1984, pp 118-126). Being known by your neighbours generally makes you more available for interaction.

The circumstances of mutually independent patterns of living and dwelling made it obvious that the residential areas did not constitute local communities. While the local community (as an ideal type) is completely enclosed in a common concentric space, modern dwelling is characterized by a multitude of separate communities (or networks) sharing the same time-space. In the settings of my study, local relations appeared to be important, although they were seldom deep or intense, nor did they make up more than a small portion of the everyday life of the respondents. The concept of *weak ties* (Granovetter 1973, 1982) appeared to be relevant when characterizing the relations between neighbours. However, still this is a reminder that modern society to a large extent is dependent upon social relations emerging from the recurrent presence of people in certain settings. Thus home is connected to neighbourhood through a routinized interaction that occurs outside the private realm. These relations — to people and places — are uniquely local, i.e. are established and maintained as a

result of implaced human interaction.

It became evident that local community had to be substituted by another concept that includes the tensions of modern society between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (Asplund 1991, Otnes 1991). Thus, I want to reject the use of *local community* for habitations in modern, urbanised society. The term is relevant within traditional societies, where local interaction and interdependence dominate. Not even a limited environment as the stairwell may be seen as a unified community in the sense that the term local community tempts us to think it. I prefer to regard neighbourhoods in urban society as composed of several overlapping *local contexts*. Giddens' concepts of routinization and regionalisation make it possible to outline the meaning of local context. In the short-lived or more permanent regions that emerge in the use of intermediate space for interaction, local contexts are established. Compared to traditional local communities, local contexts are limited and partial. Local contexts only include portions of the individuals everyday life, such as home, work, school etc. The members of one local context always take part in other local contexts. The same physical setting can hold several more or less independent local contexts.

For "the participants", and to a varying degree for other inhabitants, neighbours were important. Neighbour relations is here more or less synonymous with contacts in the same stairs. These relations on one hand offer informal resources, on the other are kept on a level that secures the privacy of home. Having developed during decades, relations to neighbours and neighbourhood are extremely vulnerable to changes. Being uniquely local, they are sustained by the routines and regions of the stairs and those areas closest to the house. It is my belief that not only the safety and the neighbourliness of the stairwell unit as a limited locale, but also the spirit and the local culture of larger neighbourhood depend on the survival of these "weak" ties between people.

Neighbour relations on the stairs in old and new housing

The stairwell rather than the building as a whole was the important setting for casual local interaction. In the three residential areas studied, contacts between inhabitants were primarily developed within the stairwell unit. A study of one of the houses that were modernized revealed networks among neighbours that involved most of the pensioners and a few of the younger inhabitants of the house but were limited to any of the three stairwells. Neighbour relations involved everything from having coffee together and sharing the daily newspaper to impromptu conversations on the stairs. Most pensioners had lived in the same flat between 10 and 40 years, whereas the younger households mostly had moved in during the last 10 years (Öresjö 1988, p. 52-68). The result suggest the time of residence, but also possibly the daily time available to spend in the neighbourhood and the historical fact of belonging to a certain generation as important factors behind neighbour relations. In one case, the existence in itself of a stairwell solidarity seemed to be important, when two of the old women developed a "motherly" relation to a young immigrant man.

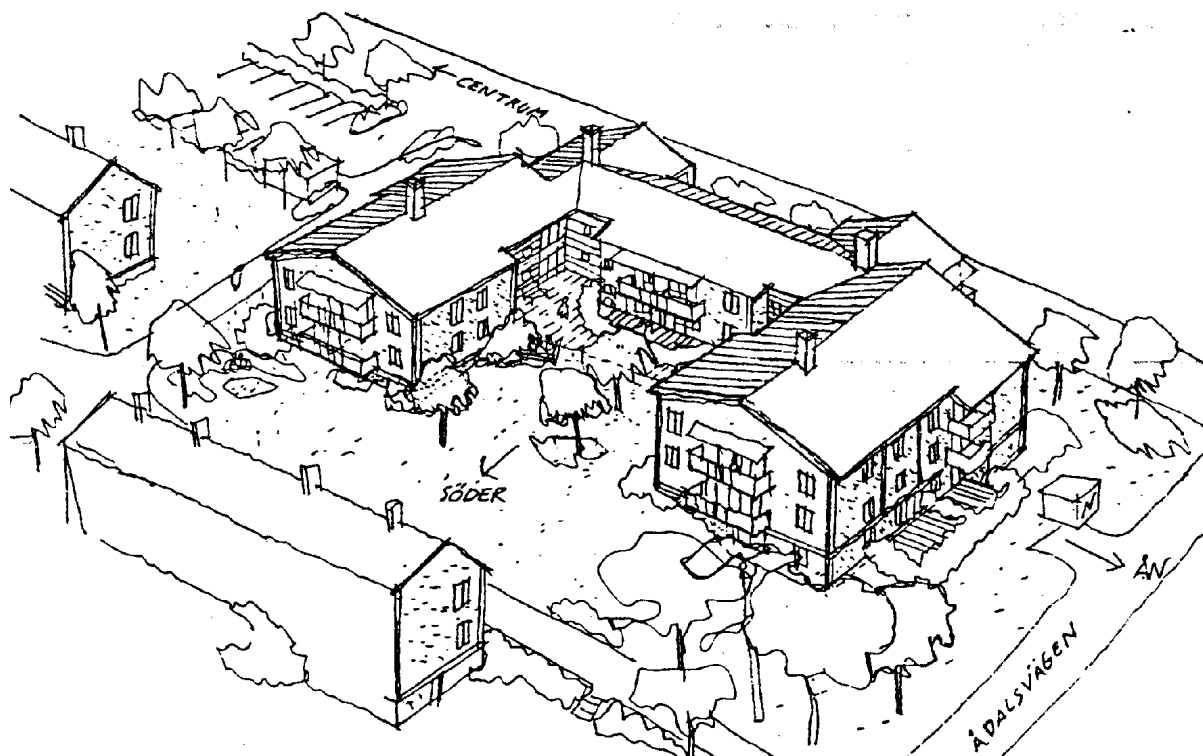
After a long time of residence, one would perhaps expect that the effects of haphazard encounters on the stairs would fade away. Then the social networks would be more evenly distributed within the house and, maybe, the neighbouring buildings. However, just a couple of neighbour relations crossed the borders of the stairwell units (ibid.). The results of the study support the idea that intermittent random meetings are important not only to initiate contacts

between neighbours but also necessary to nourish those contacts.⁵

The old inhabitants of the house were struck hard by the renovation. A small number of them returned after the long building period only to find a radically changed environment where almost none of the old neighbours had moved back. Only fragments of the old network remained in the house that now contained flats connected to a corridor system, a single staircase and a lift. Most of them lost an anchorage of life that, according to Eva Öresjö's interviews, was crucial to them (Öresjö 1988, p 64)

The planning and building of the new *Åhuset* ("The house by the river") in Fröslunda, another housing area from the People's Home Era located in Eskilstuna, gave a golden opportunity to study how neighbour relations are developed from the day of moving in. Here, the special design of the stairwells, with a small laundry on each floor, supported the development of informal relations among neighbours.

The inhabitants of *Åhuset* expressed a restriction concerning socialising with neighbours. Of course, they wanted some exchange with their neighbours, but many of them wished to avoid the intercourse becoming too intense. A middle aged woman feared the thought of a lively exchange. She was pleased with the kind of limited contacts she already had: "You say hallo and talk for a while". She did not ask neighbours for help, but preferred turning to friends and relatives, some of them living in the neighbourhood. "*Lagom är bäst*" (What is appropriate is best), an elderly lady said. For her, it was important to know who were living in the house, but



Åhuset was built as a supplement to the 50's housing area of Fröslunda, introducing a new concept of comfort and community and still adopting in some sense to the architecture of that setting.

⁵Apart from that, *former neighbours* may be people that we say hallo to or even stop to talk to when we meet them in the street. If we actively keep in touch with former neighbours, it is correct to say that they have become our *friends*.

she was also anxious about keeping a certain distance. Most of the interviewees had developed relations similar to those of these two women. None of them wanted to live anonymous lives, ignoring their neighbours, but all seemed to strive for a strict separation between their private spheres and the realm of the stairs.

In Åhuset, there was a clear correspondence between the two stairwells and two separate networks of neighbour relations. Connections had developed almost exclusively among neighbours on the same stairs. The contacts between the two parts of the house were rare and often presupposed that people knew (about) each other from before. Some of the informants emphasized that they had very vague ideas about who were living in the other part of the building. “It is like two separate houses”, one woman commented. “We don’t know anyone in the other staircase”, told an old couple, where both man and wife seemed well informed about the neighbours on their own stairs. The few exceptions from this general picture were either acquaintances from earlier in life or persons known due to special occurrences, for example meetings during the planning process. As the possibilities to observe who are going in or coming out of the other staircase were limited, it took a long time to tell persons living there from visitors. Albeit the encounters with neighbours of one’s own stairs were sparse, it was possible to connect a face to the flat and the name on the door.

This example shows that stairwell neighbour relations, when circumstances are favourable, may develop in quite a short time (in this case: 2-3 years). The everyday presence of the active pensioners gave them opportunities of making each other’s acquaintance. Probably the special design of the stairwell (see below) and the circumstances of the actual projects (which included meetings with groups of future tenants) promoted this development.

Spatial determinism?

In both cases, the results suggest that spatial organisation, such as the concrete form of the stairwell, is extremely important for neighbours getting to know each other, and thus for the development of local contexts. Does this mean that there is a spatial determinism at stake here? Is the social life of the neighbourhood completely determined by the material structures of the built environment? To argue that would be to simplify something that is complex and open-ended. There still are cultural and individual aspects involved in the choices people make when deciding whether or not returning a greeting or to stopping for a chat, whether to enter the stairwell space when hearing a neighbour going down the stairs or waiting till it is quiet again. Rather the result is an argument for the routinised and “economic” character of how material artefacts and structures are taken into use in everyday life. As a tool of transportation, the stairs allow us to reach that flat on the third floor without even reflecting about it. As inert matter, the stairwell structure hinders us from passing the doors of flats in neighbouring stairs on our way home.⁶

⁶Cecilia Häggström (1996) prefers the term *utensil* rather than tool for things that are used to order our being, like buildings or dwelling. She differs between three kinds of taking-into-usage by which the thing may appear as either *incorporated utensil*, *open possibility* or *inert matter*. The open possibility of the stairs is really what this paper is about: a free space for performing the popular art of stairwell interaction.

The wired home and its neighbourhoods

In the discussion about a sustainable society, local community or rather local contexts attract much attention: A sustainable development is said to depend upon society's functioning on the local level. However, new technology and new patterns of interaction create new forms of spatiality. Local, concentric space of corporeal action and experience is challenged by a space that can be described as *interregional*, *polycentric* and *multilocal* (Waldenfels 1985). One field where local space coincides with virtual space is computer-aided work. From a sustainable society perspective, the prospect of an increasing number of people working at home makes it important to analyse the consequences of this development for local interaction in the home and neighbourhood.

Research on the impact of communication technology on local interaction is sparse. The older informants of the housing renovation study pointed out the car and the television as crucial for the decay of local social life. Time spent in the neighbourhood decreased during the 60's, when every home got a TV and holidays were spent taking trips by car. This development also coincided in time with the inhabitants' children growing up and leaving home, removing one important reason for spending time in the near vicinity of home. However, the lives of the younger families with children, appropriately labelled "the busy ones" in the study, were characterised by the constant lack of time. The increasing speed of society was commented on by one of the pensioners, who remembered how the small talk in the locker room before and after work vanished during the 60's.

The study *Workplace at home* (Wikström, Palm Lindén & Michelson 1998) gives some hints about how relations to neighbours and neighbourhood are affected by teleworking at home. The interviews took place in quite different types of neighbourhoods: in the centre of a big city, in the suburbs, in small towns and in scarcely populated areas on the countryside. The situations for the teleworkers varied a lot depending on where they lived. One teleworker might be quite anonymous in the suburbs, another living comfortable in the centre of the city, well known by neighbours, and yet another having become the local "IT-expert" in the countryside.

Depending on in what type of surroundings people lived, the significance of their teleworking differed. For some young men in Stockholm it represented being involved in the development of new ways of living and working. Some of the teleworkers on Gotland also took part in experiments on new ways of organizing employed work by teleworking. For others, it could mean making a living based upon an ancient rural patterns of life. Still others, in all sorts of environments, found teleworking to be a practical contribution to their ways of managing the trajectories of daily life

Working at home

Home as a place for work is not a new phenomenon. From a home point of view important experience may be found in older forms of homeworking. Industrialism was preceded by the unity of working and dwelling of peasant society. At least among people of the older generation there are those who still remember the traditional, rural forms of life that lingered on in the Swedish society until the middle of the 20th century. In the medieval town, activities like crafts and sales often were attached to the dwelling, a phenomenon which still may be found in small towns. Home industry, manufacturing for a remote employer, was common before factory work became the rule, but has also occurred much later. In our time, teachers, child-minders, small businessmen, and liberal professions constitute groups with a long tradition of

working in their dwellings.

However, in western industrial society the division between employment on one hand and dwelling and leisure on the other has characterized everyday life of large groups of the population. Starting with the bourgeois family, a new conception of home spread to all classes of society. Home would represent privacy and family — ideally a peaceful and safe refuge from the demands of work and public life. This is the prevalent societal context in which teleworking presently occurs: “Telecommuting emerges in a world where home and work is constructed as spatially separate, dichotomous, and gendered realms of social life” (Aitken & Carroll 1996).

Thus, the introduction of paid work in the home (with or without the use of telecommunication) is often described as problematic. Several researchers stress the complex of problems related to home becoming a place for paid work (Ahrentzen 1992; Gurstein 1995 among others) Feelings of social isolation and entrapment are problems for some homeworkers, others feel invaded by clients or business partners. Teleworkers, especially women, may not be respected in their professional roles, but become identified by others with the domestic work nature of home (Ahrentzen 1992).

Although some men spend a lot of time at home, they express little emotional attachment to the home (Gottlieb 1988). For others, however, home represents an important refuge from work life. Working at home, offers them more control over their lives. But teleworking is problematic for men that find that their expectations of home and work are not compatible, and that home no longer functions as a refuge from work life (Aitken & Carroll 1996). Has the fact that work life has entered the private sphere affected the ways our home is experienced by the women and men of our study?

Teleworkers' sense of home

The manifold meanings attributed to home shown by previous research (Després 1991; Dovey 1985; Lawrence 1987; Wikström 1994) were confirmed by our study.

Women and men alike appeared to view home as a place where one feels comfortable and at ease. The home is the base of the family, the centre of life, to which one always returns. The fact that home had become the place where part of paid work was carried out did not essentially change these emotions. It is rather striking how little the teleworkers ideas of home differ from those of the tenants discussed before. One would think that the quite different ways of life of the teleworkers would give way to other pictures, other conceptions.

Many of the men described home in contrast to work. It is a place where one can relax and be private. Thus home was depicted as the opposite to work although their teleworking made it a place for work. With this view of home, one would expect teleworking to be experienced as more problematic than what is suggested in our interviews.

The women stressed the importance of living in an environment that they are in charge of and have formed. It is their order, their taste and personality that prevail. Some of the women used metaphors related to active places where a lot of people come and go, where people are busy doing things they like: a centre, a workshop, a base camp, a place created by people together.

At large, the women were more verbose and suggestive when trying to describe what home is to them, while the men often seem to be at a loss for what to say. However, this cannot be taken as a corroboration of men being less emotionally related to home. The emotions that the men finally expressed about their homes were just as strong as those of the women. Both women and men stressed autonomy, safety, rest and control, although home now had become

a place for employed work. But it was among the women there were hints of another home ideal, a home evolving from human interaction, communication and work. However, the neighbourhood was seldom mentioned spontaneously by interviewees as an aspect of home and the sense of home.

The revival of the neighbourhood?

Teleworking is sometimes connected to almost utopian thoughts of a lively residential area or countryside, as a means to win back to the neighbourhood all the qualities that got lost through the urbanisation process of the last decades. Planners dream that teleworking would bring more life to the suburbs during the day and help to stop depopulation and give new stimulation to scarcely populated areas. For the teleworkers themselves, the neighbourhood would compensate social interaction with colleagues at the office, by being a lively and social place with lots of people around. Such expectations find little support in the findings of research (Ahrentzen 1989, Gurstein 1995).

According to our interviews, many residential estates are empty and deserted during daytime and the teleworkers themselves are absorbed by their work. One advantage with teleworking, also a motive for some of our respondents, is not to get disturbed by colleagues, but many teleworkers missed the spontaneous daily contact with colleagues. Several studies tell about the feeling of isolation and entrapment that the neighbourhood and the outdoor surroundings of the dwelling hardly compensate for (Ahrentzen 1989). With one exception, the teleworkers of our own study did not complain about isolation. Still none of them were active in the neighbourhood during their working-day.

Still, the neighbourhood might be important for the teleworkers. Living in a place where neighbours are friendly and may help each other in everyday matters was an important quality, much appreciated by some. In return the teleworker might contribute to the neighbourhood, as a local resource, the person who knows a little about computers or helps by sending an e-mail. In residential areas they may become guards against intruders, since the mere presence of people in an area during daytime might be a step towards a safer environment. However, one might doubt how much the teleworkers really are aware of what goes on outside their workplace (Ahrentzen 1989).

Living anywhere or becoming attached?

For most teleworkers, working only part-time at home, the area of choice of where to live was limited. They were dependent upon the possibility of comfortable commuting. Occasional meetings with colleagues and clients, sometimes on short notice, forced them to live within the region of their regular workplace. Depending, among other things, on the kind of environment where they had chosen to live, these teleworkers had developed more or less intense relations to their neighbourhoods. Others spent most of their working-time in the home. Those persons sometimes accepted to have a long distance to the premises of the employer for visits a few times each month. A small number of teleworkers were engaged in professions without local attachment, such as well-established consultants with a widely spread group of customers. These had the opportunity to choose their abode freely, with no regard to their work life.

The ways the teleworkers became involved in their neighbourhood differed. For one group of respondents, the neighbourhood was just the place where they live. They may become involved locally, getting to know their neighbours and making local friends, but basically the close environment was not a part of their occupational activities. Others, however, were attached to their neighbourhoods also through their work. They were involved in cooperation

with people of the same region and these connections were important for making a living. For the first group, teleworking offers the opportunity to live where they like (within certain limits). For the other, teleworking is a means of surviving and prospering in a place where the workers already are involved socially and economically.

The relation between teleworking and housing mobility is a complex one. On one hand, teleworking allowed some of the informants to stay put in the places they were attached to, on the other teleworking appeared to encourage lifestyles that were extremely mobile. But the increased freedom involved enables people to make choices: for teleworkers it is no longer inevitable to move in order to get a new job. And the ambulatory work life may be combined with a rooted home life.

Teleworkers in the neighbourhood: Always busy but still a resource

The main contribution of the teleworkers to their urban neighbourhoods is the mere spending time there during daytime, when the place otherwise might be left empty. In rural areas they often contributed to the local community by their professional knowledge and routine, and by possessing technical equipment. Having good neighbourly contacts was important in the countryside, and the teleworker was expected to share his or her time with the locals.

The rural teleworkers seemed to be the most successful in combining their skills in using global networking technology with developing and supporting local patterns of making a living, their own as well as others. There was evidence of a rural networking, partly based upon traditional community ties, which promised to be beneficial to local employment and cooperation. However, the combination of rural ways of life and the kind of performance-oriented behaviour demanded in the corporate world certainly involved problems.

In modern suburbs, where local intercourse is more related to the household situation, for example having children in the same age, neighbour relations were less important than in the countryside. The suburban teleworkers did not wish for general socializing with neighbours during work time. Rather than neighbours, they missed their colleagues during daytime, for chatting and discussing work matters. The benefit of having neighbours was often described as the opportunity of exchanging help and support, in an environment where “you mind your own business” most of the time.

In the urban context, teleworking primarily seemed to offer an opportunity to organize home-life in a less fragmented way. Life within the household may become more comfortable and less stressful with employing the possibility of temporal flexibility associated with teleworking. The experiences and reflections of our interviewees did not suggest the suburban or central neighbourhood to become a place for socializing during working-hours. Thus, if not keeping up strong professional bonds to colleagues, e.g. by dividing the work-time between home and office, the urban teleworker, contrary to his or her rural counterpart, risks becoming isolated at least from a work life point of view

New and old in the century of the telephone

After this sightseeing in the world wide web of teleworkers it is time to return to the stairs. The comparison between the neighbourly intercourse among tenants in residential estates of the People's Home Era and the local activities of new avant-garde of distributed work does not allow us to draw very distinct conclusions. Although there are hints of the “new” patterns (represented by teleworkers) to be less neighbourhood oriented than the “old” (the tenants of People's Home areas), the picture is not clear. There was for example evidence of teleworking being supportive of locally oriented modern rural cooperation. In urban residential surround-

ings, opposite to rural districts, teleworking did not seem to nurture local involvement. It rather added to other technology driven practices that points people in other directions than towards the local setting. But the contrast between the two worlds described above (home-life in housing areas of the 40's and 50's and home-based teleworking) makes it possible to reflect upon the fate of stairwell intercourse in the time of mediated interaction.

To avoid any misunderstandings it must be emphasized that both “worlds” belong to a society, where the use of information technology is routinized and deeply involved in the structuration of that society. The 20th century has been called “the century of the telephone”!⁷

The stairs as a place for human encounters

Who is coming down the stairs now? There we had this and that. We recognized their steps on the stairs and all that. But then, sometimes one got mad. One came down in the laundry and the floor was dirty, and people hadn't cleaned up. So it had its drawbacks, too. But there was always someone that told something nice on the stairs. No one here. No, there isn't. And what I miss most of all are my neighbours. Her, on next floor, Andersson, and then Bengtsson. I miss them. (Old women after having moved from her old neighbourhood, Wikström 1994).

Simple spatial logic?

The role of the stairs as a setting for networking among neighbours is striking, taking into consideration the scantiness or even harshness of its design. How is this possible? The stairwell is generally not a place people voluntarily make for, but which they rather are forced to pass to get in or out (as in Perec's description). There is an inexorable logic of intermediate space that makes residential stairwells, workplace corridors and daycare entrance halls places of random encounters. Socially, they are also places where people meet other people that (one way or the other) matter to them. Known or not, the people met here are always “relevant” (unlike strangers encountered in public space). The spatial logic of these spaces is at the same time a social logic.⁸

But the residential stairwell has its specific properties. If you ignore rare exceptions, like jumping out from windows or balconies or climbing fire escapes, stairwells are blind alleys: There is always only one way in or out, and this “determinism” of the stairs must be dealt with. The only chance to avoid an unpleasant encounter is a humiliating retreat back to the flat, or worse, going outside or down in the basement. The discomfort of having neighbours that one experiences as irritating, unpredictable or even dangerous, is partly related to the spatial form of the stairs as a *cul-de-sac* that forces people to meet and pass close to each other. Even encounters with friendly neighbours may be experienced as too cramped when the choice of keeping a distance is missing.

Of course, the existence of a lift changes this situation: the blind alley is substituted by a loop, a certain spatiality cleverly exploited in many thrillers. According to my interviewees, the

⁷At the moment of writing, I cannot find the source of this quote. Sorry!

⁸For the study of complex spatial structures, theory of architecture is deeply indebted to the provocative work of Bill Hillier and his colleagues (Hillier & Hanson 1984, Hillier 1996, for a critique, see also Palm-Lindén 1992 and Kärrholm 1999). Using their ideas, it would for example be possible to compare the relative socio-spatial properties of each flat. I deliberately avoid going further into that discussion here.

newly installed lift caused them to see less of their neighbours, but also gave the opportunity of avoid some of them. Thanks to the lift, you can “pass by the problems”, as one of them expressed it. But you also miss opportunities of random encounters another told: “What happens is that you meet in the entrance. But that’s not the same as before, when you walked up and down the stairs all the time”. The lift introduces a choice: Should I walk up the stairs, passing all the doors of my neighbours or should I let the lift transport me directly to my own door?

Flow and coincidence

Being designed to meet requirements of transportation only, the typical residential stairwell is a *narrow space*. Meeting in the flight of stairs, two normally built persons may pass each other without problems, as long as they are not carrying bags, boxes or furniture. There is appropriate space for most everyday situation, but not more than so.

In residential housing with lifts, the degradation of takes a crucial step further: Shrinking the width from the general 1.2 metres to 0.9 (normal when there is a lift) or even 0.7 metres (in the extreme case of installing a “narrow lift” within the stairwell space) causes definite problems for two people to pass each other. The result is a staircase design that does not encourage using your legs for moving just a couple of floors up or down.

The landings and the entrance on the ground floor are generally where people randomly stop and exchange a few words. But when two or more persons meet in these spaces, they become obstacles for passers by, thus creating awkward situations where people are forced to physical closeness. They also get in the way of those who want to get in or out of their flats — doors normally opens outwards, that is: towards the landing. Thus the sociality of coincidence always interferes with the flow of transportation. One may wonder, whether this only is a condition that hinders the development of neighbour relations, or if — in some backward way — it may stimulate stairwell sociality. Is the efficient tool for transportation also a good tool for socialising? The experiences of Åhuset imply something else (see further on!).

Staging of the senses

Another property of the residential stairwell is the *abrupt transition* between private dwelling and the (more or less) public stairwell. Visually, and in terms of spatial accessibility, this is an on-off situation: Either the door is open or it is closed. Or is there?: An old lady in one of the 40-50's housing areas employed a visual strategy. When she heard somebody passing by on the stairs, she opened the door slightly to see if she could have a chat. This was a behaviour that she felt was accepted on her old stairs, but that she would not dare to try in the house where she was vacated during the construction period (Öresjö 1988, p 57). Except for peeping through the chink of the door, there is no chance of catching glimpses of people on their way upstairs or downstairs — or for passers-by to observe if neighbours are at home.

Walking the stairs is often like moving through an empty and quiet tunnel that winds upwards or downwards. The lack of visual overview and the existence of door offer possibilities of drama. But it would not be true to describe the stairwell as a labyrinth. For that, the spatial layout is far to simple.

However, the *screening-off* (of closed doors and space hidden behind the turn of the stairs) sharpens other senses like hearing (as in the quotation above) or smell. A woman remembers her childhood in the 50's:

Mum was always at home, there was meals and cookies and all that. Very nice and cosy! It smelled from fish on the first floor and meatballs on the second, so you knew exactly what Pelle and Kalle

and all the others had for dinner!

On the stairs, one moves extremely close to people's private territories. Just a door and a threshold separates the private dwelling from the more or less public stairwell. When neighbours on the same floor opens their doors at the same time, the look straight into each others flats. The stairwell, the doors and thresholds are tools that people use to control their mutual relations, tools of sociality and not just of transportation.

The thinness of the stairs as a place

Frequencies of passages play an important role for local contexts. Today, the residential staircases in Swedish housing areas must be described as thin places, in the sense that they are empty most of the time. This thinness of the stairs means that people can walk them many times without meeting neighbours or visitors. Thus all activities that increase the frequency of passing through the stairwell will increase also the chances of meeting someone.

The story of the gradual thinning of common realms under industrialism is well known. For multi family housing it is a story about modernization in terms of a more comfortable life where all necessary services of dwelling are delivered directly to the flats, no longer forcing people to go to the common water tap or the earth-closets on the backyard or to the basement to collect coal for heating or kerosene for lightning. It is also a story of informal care among neighbours and relatives being taken over by the authorities: the school, the daycare centre, organized leisure time activities, homes for the elderly and so on. The increasing wealth diminished the need to borrow sugar from the neighbour's or using their telephone. The double development of privatization and socialization meant fundamental changes of the spatiality of neighbourhoods.

At the end of industrial society also temporal patterns are dissolving. The clock time rhythms of industrial civilization, painfully internalized by generations of westerners, are replaced by less strict, more flexible demands focussing upon results rather than presence on the workplace. Now the set temporal patterns of everyday life are slowly disappearing. However, being part of culture and integrated into personalities, they will linger on for some time: Although granted full freedom of scheduling their work, teleworkers found it awkward to deviate from office work hours and would be embarrassed to be found out taking time off for shopping in the afternoon. But gradually the new imperative of being flexible is incorporated. For the neighbourhood a blurring of time-space regionalisation may be expected, diminishing people's chances of meeting fellow workers or schoolmates on the way out or home, thus making the stairs an even thinner place.

Information technology and local contexts

In one of his short stories (*Ett halvt ark papper*, written in 1903), August Strindberg describes the short life together of a man and a woman. After the death of his young wife, the husband strolls around in the empty flat, finally stopping in front of a piece of paper by the telephone in the hallway. He reads the telephone numbers scribbled there: to the employer, the flower shop, the jeweller's, the butcher's, the opera, the chemist's, the doctor and finally the undertaker (Strindberg 1963). Strindberg describes the home of the young family by examining its links to the world around. He reminds us that information technology — in the form of the telephone — has been a part of western everyday life for more than a hundred years. (Wikström 1995)

This historical perspective may help stabilizing the discussion about how the new, computer based communication is affecting peoples lives. Although there are voices that tell us about

informational society as something fundamentally new (see Castells 1998), we must not forget reflecting upon how electronic media has been involved in the development of the ways of live that we find in today's society. In community studies covering the last century, we find evidence of a wide range of local patterns of interaction and solidarity. All these ways of living were more or less involving (or at least affected by) the use of electronic media (something which has not been thoroughly studied). In western society we can look back upon about a 100 years of telephone experience, 80 years with the radio as a part of daily life and 40 years of watching TV.⁹ What will follow is a very speculative approach to the future of local context and the sociality of the stairs in particular.

Not only was the media like the television recognised by my respondents as an important factor behind the decline of local intercourse, another medium, the telephone was according to some of them used as a supplement to face-to-face encounters when organizing resistance or mutual help during the renovation process. During summer, one old lady managed her role as a spokeswoman of her neighbours by using the phone in her summer cottage. But the telephone was typically an individual medium, mostly used for calling the housing companies complaining about matters. The stairwell based local contexts were basically contexts of random encounters and chats among neighbours. Nuances are important: In the dominant spirit of non-interference, calling somebody up means a much stronger intrusion than letting small-talk about the weather unfold into a discussion about common matters. To make a phone call (or using most other media) one must have a certain reason. Bodily presence allows a wider spectrum of interaction, from glances, smiles and nods to agitated discussions, from the subtlety of unfocused interaction to the direct involvement of focussed interaction (Goffman in Giddens 1984, pp 70-73).

The hacker and the nomad in the neighbourhood

In the debate about computer-based communication there is a general understanding that life in the information age will be "a life on the screen" (Turkle 1995). The computer nerd and the hacker has already become archetypes of lives spent in front of the computer monitor, tapping the keyboard and clicking the mouse. There is another character though, favoured by post-modernism, that still is relevant: the nomad.¹⁰ The life of the (post)modern nomad has very little to do with the place-bound mobility of the traditional nomad. Nomadism in our time is dependant upon modern transports and communications. We tend to forget that the new information technology opens new possibilities, not only of becoming immersed into virtual worlds through the screen, but also to access information and establish communication anywhere in the world.¹¹

⁹This does not mean anything like a complete coverage: In the 50's most people had a radio but not everyone had a telephone of their own.

¹⁰Early in his writings, William Gibson, who might be called the Jules Verne of the informational age and who invented of the term cyberspace, outlined the extremes of the hacker and the nomad. Where the first, while conquering foreign virtual landscapes, is artificially kept alive in an intensive care situation, the second is carrying a brain implant which allows him or her to access immense databases of information while moving freely in the concrete landscape (or to be remotely controlled while invading hostile territory).

¹¹although the Swedish North Pole expedition in 1999-2000 made us aware of the limitations. During the trip, the two participants lost their communication due to the closing-down of the too expensive Iridium satellite-based mobile phone network.

Where being a hacker means spending time at home by the computer, being a digital nomad implies using communication tools that are portable, mobile, wireless, light-weight, hand-held etc. Most of the home-based teleworkers of our study were hackers in the sense that their equipment was stationary. Having a special workroom or using a corner of the livingroom or kitchen, their place of work was fixed once the computer was installed and attached to the net. A few of them, however, brought their laptops to the room that suited them for the moment: it might be the kitchen, the garden or (at least on one occasion) on a park bench by the sea (not to mention the work done during travel, in trains and hotel rooms). One woman refused to use the computer for filing the tenants of the small, family-owned real estate business she managed together with her husband. She put her binders and her mobile phone in a basket and brought it with her while raking together the autumn leaves of her garden, always available for tenants, caretakers and craftsmen. In the near future, with the ongoing convergence of computing and telecommunications, those binders probably are becoming obsolete.¹²

The hacker does not have to move physically to chance between work and leisure activities. One of the teleworkers interviewed made a “mental log-out”, continuing to use the network resources of his employer (a software developer) in a more playful way. For work, shopping and leisure, the hacker “goes out on the net” without even coming close to the entrance of his or her dwelling. But that does not necessarily make the hacker a “homebody”: Interacting with people or manipulating data in other places, his or her intentionality is directed elsewhere. Among the teleworkers interviewed we found those who became completely absorbed by their remote work, but also those who took breaks, carrying out domestic work or being available for family members. The potential of the hacker lies in to what degree he or she is not only physically present but also available for contacts in the residential environment.

The nomad, on the other hand, is not likely to be physically present in the residential area. He or she does not have to wait at home for phone calls, faxes or e-mail, but is free to move anywhere (within the range of the mobile network). This mobility involves transferring between the home and the surrounding world, thus passing the transitional zone of the stairs. But what kind of presence may be expected of those passings-through? Will not the nomad be occupied with her or his little gadgets? The nomad may be frequently present, but what a distracted presence it will be! For the hacker and the nomad alike, the craving signals the global seems to drown the murmurs of the local..

To end these speculations, neither the hacker nor the nomad may be expected to be present and available in the transitional realms of residential environments. As far as I can see, not much in the development of information technology or in its expected use seems to support the intermediate realms as places of socialization and sustaining local contexts. But, on the other hand, neither the absence of the hacker or the distracted presence of the nomad should be taken for concrete patterns of behaviour: As archetypes they point at extremes of information age spatiality, and, as such, they do not empty the possibilities of actual space-use patterns evolving in the intermediate zones of residential housing, that is: on the stairs. The history of stairwell sociality has taught us that it is important to stay aware of the manifold ways in which (information) technology change daily living.

¹²What I am referring to is new technology, like WAP, that turns the mobile phone into a small computer with Internet access.

The design of the stairs

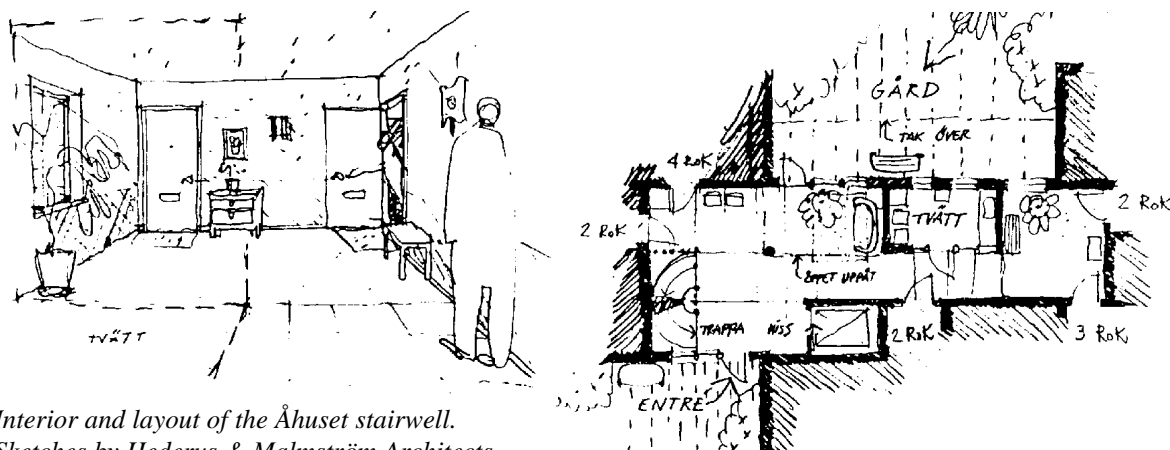
A politics of the invisible?

The experience of People's Home period housing areas points out the stairwell as an extremely important built form supporting and housing local contexts, and that in a time when non-interference was made a legitimate pattern of behaviour. There is nothing grand or heroic about what goes on in the stairs. This low-key sociality was never linked to ambitious programs of societal change, it was invisible — or rather: made visible only in its negative aspects of gossip and interference. A political program requires expectations of causality: To legitimate expenses for the measures proposed, politicians and planners has to point out their expected effects. The informal sociality of local contexts is hard to put in cogent political slogans. When the close neighbourhood has been made a concern for planners and designers, it has always been related to organised forms of communal living such as collective houses, managed by the inhabitants themselves, or service houses for the elderly, administered by authorities.

An example of stairwell design

This was also the case when designing *Åhuset*. According to the program, the designers had a sceptical view upon the development of a solidarity where neighbours are important for each other. However, “social networks” were mentioned as a theme in developing the layout. Far more than places for random encounters, the program expressed ideas of the stairwells being taken into use in a conscious way by the tenants together. The result of our studies suggest that the authors were, on one hand, too pessimistic regarding the informal neighbourly intercourse, and, on the other, too optimistic when hoping for a deliberate communal use of the stairwell space.

The design of the stairwell was important for achieving the objectives of the project to support neighbour relations. The idea was not to force the tenants to into a communal life that they did not want, but to offer certain opportunities of spontaneous encounters. The light and roomy design was supposed to make the stairs an attractive place, making the inhabitants proud of their house, encouraging people to meet, and also allowing them to furnish parts of



*Interior and layout of the Åhuset stairwell.
Sketches by Hederus & Malmström Architects,
Stockholm*

it. The roominess was also motivated by the objective of making the entire building easily accessible for handicapped people. A small laundry with glass walls placed on each floor was supposed to help neighbours getting in touch with each other more frequently. Doing one's

laundry was seen as a legitimate reason for socialising. It should be mentioned that ideas of designing the entrances of the individual flats to make the separation between private and public less strict and abrupt were discussed during the planning process. Due to financial limitations, these ideas were not tried out as a part of the final layout.

Interviews with inhabitants of Åhuset do not allow us to state that the special design really did support the development of contacts among neighbours. Many of them told that they often stopped and talked to their neighbours, but as we know, this was the case also in housing with ordinary stairs. Some of the interviewees mentioned that the spacious stairwell made it easy to meet. However, primarily it is our observations that support the impression that the actual design sustains neighbourly interaction. During our visits, we experienced how easy it was to meet, to stop and exchange a few words, without becoming an obstacle for passers-by. The physical proximity between flats is less extreme than in an ordinary staircase, which might make encounters with neighbours less forced. The roominess of the hallway allows a certain distance, diminishing the risk of abrupt encounters. During such small conversations, other neighbours tended to appear on their way to the laundry or to the basement. The postman or the cleaning woman also contributed to making the stairwell less thin as a place.

The idea of a stairwell, that — in a broad sense — is appropriated by the tenants, is admirable. It seems, though, that the designers had underestimated the difficulties of introducing another stairwell culture than the ones we know from most rented housing. Characteristically, the inhabitants expressing ideas of a more active use of the stairs were former homeowners from areas with detached housing and accustomed to deal with common matters. Those coming from rented housing were already socialised into not expecting anything out of the ordinary from the stairs, it seemed. The furnished stairwell is a phenomenon that one finds first of all in collective housing, that is, in context where people consciously are developing alternative ways of living. Thus, it is not enough to make space available to create places of common interaction. Together with others described above, the example reminds us that culture (and cultures) is an extremely important aspect of creating places. Also in the sense of having certain meanings for people and being related to routines and traditions, the stairs is always a place.

Designing for the unplanned

In the paper, I have pointed out the *significance* of the stairs as a place of low-keyed neighbourly intercourse, and argued for this almost invisible sociality as fundamental for the development of local contexts and of place-related, not media-driven, cultures. I have not discussed this grass-roots level of interaction in terms of democracy. Neither have I touched upon the relation between spontaneous, informal interaction and formal organisation in the neighbourhood.

I have described some of the *problems* related to the concrete form of the stairs that stand in the way for a safer and less forced interaction and given examples of better solutions. I have mentioned the importance of cultural patterns, but only hinted at problems related to conflicts between different stairwell cultures (ethnic, inter-generation or tenant-landlord related).

Finally, I have given some hints about the potential dynamics of the stairs, where not only material design but also practices of management and sustaining a “lagom” sociality are at stake. Design here means designing for the unplanned, that is: not only for the flow of transportation but also for the coincidence of events.

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