Chapter 10.

In Search of *Homefull* Neighborhoods: Safety and safeness beyond the home

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Abstract

The production of *Homefull* cities requires more than simply the provision of accommodation for those experiencing homelessness. In this chapter, Joshua Levy, Chiara Valli and Kristina Grange explore the social relations at a neighbourhood level that can constrain or promote *Homefullness* for those in temporary accommodation. They do this through the case study of an emergency accommodation for women in Gothenburg, Sweden, whose move into a residential area prompted NIMBY ('Not-In-My-BackYard') protests from local residents and attempts at building bridges across social divides. Here, Levy, Valli and Grange focus specifically on the ways in which a discourse of safety and safeness has come to dominate urban politics in Sweden and argue that the production of *Homefull* cities requires a radical shift with regard to whose rights to safety and safeness are valued at the neighbourhood scale.

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As geographers and urban planning scholars, we propose that achieving a true sense of *Homefullness* must involve unpacking ideas often associated with home – such as a sense of belonging, acceptance, safety and security – and extending them beyond the home and into the local neighbourhood. To truly achieve *Homefullness*, which from our perspective is a state of ontological security in one's local environment, we need to start striving for radically equal neighbourhoods where social difference is welcomed and the distribution of social rights is not dependent on an individual's economic stake in the area. As such, the production of *Homefull* cities requires more than simply the provision of accommodation for those experiencing homelessness.

In this chapter we explore the social relations at a neighbourhood level that can constrain or promote a *Homefullness* for those in temporary accommodation. We do this through the case study of an emergency accommodation for women in Gothenburg, Sweden, whose move into a

residential area prompted NIMBY ('Not-In-My-BackYard') protests from local residents, but also attempts at building bridges across social divides. Here, we focus specifically on the ways in which a discourse of safety and safeness has come to dominate urban politics in Sweden and argue that the production of *Homefull* cities requires a radical shift with regards to whose rights to safety and safeness are valued at the neighbourhood scale.

Processes at the urban scale are key components in the reproduction of marginalization (or inclusion) for people living with homelessness. The extent to which marginalized groups fall victim to processes of gentrification, urban sanitisation and revanchism has been well documented for a number of decades now (Smith, 1996; Mitchell, 2003). Crucially, people in homelessness and facilities to host them are often met with resistance from local residents fearing neighbourhood decline. The NIMBY phenomenon is a common form of local bottom-up backlash against municipal efforts to place locally unwanted land uses or services, including homeless shelters. The set of arguments put forward by NIMBY movements typically acknowledge the public importance of such facilities, but advocate against the proposed location, often seen to threaten the safety, economy, and socio-spatial order of the local community. These are forms of 'spatial gatekeeping', '...wherein people determine who does or does not belong in a particular space, often resulting in the material exclusion of already marginalised people' (Gent, 2022, p. 140).

The Scandinavian context has not generally been associated with the most visceral forms of revanchism seen, for example, in the Anglophone contexts, in which the criminalisation of homelessness through public space ordinances (Mitchell, 2003) has frequently been reinforced by media campaigns demonising people in homelessness, portraying them as drivers of neighbourhood decline (Smith, 1996). At the same time, more progressive discourses in the Swedish context have been shown to sometimes conceal similar punitive undercurrents (Levy, 2022), leading to urban interventions that have been characterized by Thörn (2011) as 'soft-policies of exclusion'. A central element in the ways in which these subtler forms of exclusion play out in the Swedish context is related to the increasing influence in discourse and policy of the Swedish concept of 'trygghet'. This concept, which lacks a direct English translation, means

something similar to ‘safety’, but implies, beyond a lack of physical danger, a more diffuse emotional sense of security. In this chapter, when using an English translation, we therefore borrow the distinction sometimes made in behavioural psychology contexts between safety (as the lack of a direct threat) and safeness (as a felt experience of comfort and security) Urban planning, policy and policing in Sweden have in recent years converged around a shared vision in which ‘trygghet’ is prioritized as a right for urban citizens (Sjöberg & Giritli Nygren, 2021). In the context of Gothenburg, Sweden, Thörn (2023) has argued that ‘trygghet’ has become such a successful mobilising concept that it has all but replaced the concept of ‘equality’ as the focus of political mobilisation at the urban scale. Importantly, the hegemony of ‘trygghet’ as a mobilising concept has cemented a discursive dichotomy in which urban safety finds its ontological opposite not in physical danger, but rather in *fear* (Hutta, 2009).

There are positives to be found in this discursive shift whose roots can be traced both to feminist struggles for a right to the city (Listeborn, 2016) and to the spread of the ‘broken windows’ theory, which (not unproblematically) asserts a causal relationship between people’s *experiences* of minor disorder in a local area and increased crime rates. However, there is a risk in motivating urban interventions on subjective experiences of safeness and fear rather than actual crime statistics, not least when it is usually the safety and safeness concerns of middle-class, white residents which find most platform and influence (Pain, 2000). These risks are amplified considerably when urban governance is driven by public-private partnerships such as Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), which traditionally work to promote urban regeneration while invariably overrepresenting the interests of certain local actors, such as home-owners and private companies, over others.

This is of course not to say that the urban safety fears of more privileged groups cannot be legitimate. However, fear is not only produced by direct threats to safety, but it is also socially produced through the categories we assign to social groups, which can be disassociated from the actual risks they pose to safety. This can often be the case with people experiencing homelessness or addiction, as well as with specific racial, ethnic or religious groups (Listerborn, 2016; Pain, 2000; Sjöberg & Giritli Nygren, 2021). The irony here is that it is often those groups who live under the most direct threat of violence in public spaces (such as women wearing hijabs

or unhoused women) who, rather than being prioritised in urban safety interventions, come instead to be represented in media discourse as a major source of insecurity for others (Listerborn, 2016).

In response to this paradox, researchers in the Swedish context have called for a 'repoliticisation' of the safety discourse (Listerborn, 2016; Sjöberg & Giritli Nygren, 2021) in an attempt to redefine who is counted in the 'everyone' for which 'trygghet' is perceived as a right. Listerborn (2016) suggests that Rancière's (2003) seemingly simple call for a foregrounding of 'radical equality' provides fertile ground for this repoliticisation, in which equality at all times is understood as a *presupposition* rather than a goal to be reached as an outcome of democratic processes. This forms our theoretical starting point for the case study presented in this chapter, in which we examine how differential rights to safety and safeness are being distributed in Gothenburg, Sweden.

In what follows, we introduce the case study of Alma, an emergency accommodation for vulnerable women who live in homelessness and co-morbidity: i.e. with mental health and/or addiction problems. It is the City of Gothenburg's only emergency accommodation specifically for women. The accommodation opened in 2001 and has since been located in several locations in the city. We aim to show how conflicts have arisen and solutions have been sought by the municipality to provide a viable and sustainable location for Alma. We focus here on Alma's most recent move to the gentrifying neighborhood of Gamlestaden, and namely on the competing rights of different residents to safety and safeness in the neighbourhood. This ongoing case study highlights both challenges and potential ways forward when trying to build *Homefull* neighbourhoods in a modern, neoliberal city.

The case of Alma in Gamlestaden

Before October 2023, Alma was located in Gothenburg's Högsbo industrial area. This area, not designed for residential use, saw Alma housed next door to a much larger emergency

accommodation for both men and women with co-morbidities. Together, the two accommodations had over 90 places. Alma's proximity to the mixed shelter concentrated socially vulnerable individuals in a small area near a motorway and cemetery, with poor traffic connection and dimly lit walkways, enabling unobserved drug sales, violence, and sex work. During this period, there were cases of sexual assault and a well-reported murder. A consulting investigation commissioned by the City of Gothenburg suggested relocating parts of Alma's operations. Media coverage (Svensson, 2021; Vasell, 2021) and the mixed shelter's closure (IVO, 2021) increased pressure on politicians to move Alma (Grange, 2024). As such, city officials began searching for a better location for Alma, culminating in October 2023 with Alma's move to a renovated former elderly care home in Gamlestaden.

Gamlestaden is a densely populated district located quite centrally and currently undergoing a massive redevelopment plan by the municipality that will double its population. The current top-down gentrification of Gamlestaden builds on a relatively turbulent recent history of this post-industrial area, in which a discourse framed around 'trygghet' has played a central role. To fill the vacancies in the working-class stock left by de-industrialisation in the 1970s, the municipality allocated high numbers of social benefit recipients and newly arrived refugees in the area. By the 1980s-90s, Gamlestaden was characterised by a high concentration of unemployment and first-generation immigrants. Civic disturbance, drug dealing, gambling and motorcycle gang-related crime started to rise, fuelled by a high housing vacancy level and socio-economic segregation, which attached to the neighborhood a 'disgraced reputation as insecure and wounded' (Göteborgs Stad, 2006, p.10). In 2001, the largest municipal housing company in the area, *Poseidon,* was asked by a private security consultancy company to initiate an association of local property owners in collaboration with the Police (Kusevski et al., 2022; Valli & Hammami, 2020). This was inspired by international models of Business Improvement Districts (BID) of public-private partnership for local governance. With the vision of making Gamlestaden more 'safe, secure and attractive', the BID-like association 'Real estate owners in Gamlestaden' engaged in improvements of public spaces and, crucially, efforts to change the area's demographics. A goal of the partnership was to increase the real estate values by improving 'trygghet'. The objective was pursued in part by actively decreasing the number of

residents with low socio-economic status in the municipal housing company estates (Holmberg, 2009).

This approach was given an even stronger platform in 2018 when ‘Real estate owners in Gamlestaden’ was transformed into Sweden’s first formalised BID – although there is no official BID law in Sweden (Valli et al. 2024) – incorporating both public municipal and private actors. Interestingly, Sahlin (2010) discusses how ‘trygghet’ has been connected to the double thread of real estate values and the attempt to dilute the presence of marginalised residents in Gamlestaden. Given this particular history and the background of local mobilisations towards a specific interpretation of ‘trygghet’ that explicitly displaces marginalised groups, it is perhaps not surprising that the decision to locate Alma in Gamlestaden raised reactions and concerns.

Navigating the initial tensions surrounding Alma’s move

The news of Alma’s move to Gamlestaden was initially met with vocal resistance from local actors in the area. For many of the residents in the immediate area, the news that Alma would move to Gamlestaden came as a surprise when an article with critical voices was published in the local newspaper Göteborgs-Posten in October 2022 (Pettersson, 2022). In the article, representatives from the BID criticized the move, pointing to the apparent lack of an impact analysis when choosing a location, and the fact that the district had historically had a high proportion of socially vulnerable households. The administration of the City of Gothenburg on the other hand emphasised in the same article that Gamlestaden could offer the women a safer environment in a regular residential area with good public transport, and in a building with only seven rooms per floor for a calmer and more secure environment than in Högsbo. Some Gamlestaden residents subsequently started a petition that generated around a hundred signatures, with the message that the improvements sought for the women at Alma would come at the expense of the ‘trygghet’ of other local residents and their children. In the petition, reference was made to previous residences for people with addiction problems in the area, which apparently had led, among other things, to break-ins in storage rooms, violence in the neighborhood and needles found on playgrounds (Boenden på kvarteret Vitlingen, 2022).

A large number of emails were also received by the City of Gothenburg from concerned Gamlestaden residents. The vast majority of these followed the traditional lines of NIMBY argument: that vulnerable women need to live somewhere in Gothenburg, and that it is good that Alma exists, but that Gamlestaden was not the right location for the residence. The reasons given were among other things, that the district historically had had many homes for the socially vulnerable, that there were ongoing drug sales in the area (which would be bad for Alma's residents) and that the area had undergone a positive development that was now at risk of being reversed (Göteborgs Stad, 2022). City of Gothenburg officials responded to all submitted comments, in part stressing practical measures to reassure residents that the building's inner courtyard would not be accessible to Alma's residents and that security guards would be on site around the clock. However, City officials also attempted to reframe the discussion by stressing that this move was primarily being made for the increased 'trygghet' of Alma's own residents. It should also be noted that discussions on local community Facebook groups also revealed support for Alma's move amongst a number of Gamlestaden's other residents at the time, although it was only the negative responses that found their way into the media, and which were articulated in the petition and emails sent to Gothenburg officials.

In the time leading up to Alma's move, the municipal Social Services department had been leading a program under the name 'Mutual Benefits' with the aim of creating more inclusive environments for socially marginalised people in the city. A key aim in this project was to redress the City of Gothenburg's perceived failure in existing 'trygghet' projects to provide equal footing to the 'trygghet' of marginalized groups (Socialförvaltningen Sydväst, 2024). A decision was made to expand the project to include Alma, in an attempt to build trust in the new location and to avoid a situation that could force it to move again.

The first task for those working with this program was to respond to the fear and anger that some local actors expressed about Alma's imminent move. A number of meetings were organised to allow local residents to air concerns and to learn more about the shelter. This approach was

grounded in the belief expressed by project leaders that preconceived fantasies about living near shelters for socially marginalised groups tended to be based on social fears that are rarely vindicated in reality (J. Levy, personal communication, June 19, 2024). This contact was subsequently formalized in the shape of regular 'trygghet' meetings at Alma where local residents and their representatives were invited to discuss problems as they arose. The initial community meetings after Alma's move became public knowledge have been described by informants from the BID and the City of Gothenburg as heated affairs, but also as a positive first step in developing a better sense of understanding in the local community and in easing the initial tensions (J. Levy personal communication, September-October, 2024).

Another important aspect of the 'Mutual Benefits' program involved trying to create an environment for the residents of Alma that felt 'homely', in stark contrast to the sterile, institutional feeling described at the previous incarnation of Alma in the industrial area. An improvement was already somewhat guaranteed by the new residential setting, but as a Gothenburg municipal employee noted, a concerted attention was also paid to refitting the building in a way that would balance the need for certain institutional necessities (such as certain doors and drawers that could not be opened by the residents) with an interior design that could provide comfort, peace and a sense of home, even if the residents were not expected to live there for extended periods of time (J. Levy, personal communication, August 29, 2024). Examples of this included ring-fencing money for aesthetic features often deprioritised at emergency accommodations, such as internal and external Christmas lights. The reason for this was highlighted by one of the leading figures in the Mutual Benefits project, who stressed the importance of creating a feeling of home for the residents whilst also breaking with the implicit tradition that group housing for people experiencing homelessness is recognisable from the outside as invariably being the least attractive building on any street (J. Levy, personal communication, May 21, 2024).

One Year in Gamlestaden: Competing claims to safety and safeness

In the immediate months after Alma moved to Gamlestaden, the efforts outlined above seemed to be working well. Those working at Alma repeatedly stressed how much better the residents reported feeling in the new location. As one employee at Alma put it, '…the new location is just so much nicer. It feels, sort of, homely and cozy, not like living in… well more like a prison' (J. Levy, personal communication, August 7, 2024). Disturbances to other local residents relating to Alma were also rare, and many local actors reported that (as the Mutual Benefits leaders had projected) the situation had not been at all as many had feared. The lines of communication that had been set up between local actors, residents, and those working at Alma allowed for minor disturbances to be addressed quickly, which was perceived as a positive thing by actors on both sides (J. Levy, personal communication, September 2, 2024). Indeed, in contrast to the situation in the industrial area where the women were extremely exposed and isolated in the surrounding areas, those working at Alma reported a sense that the 'eyes on the street' (Jacobs, 1993) provided by neighbours in Gamlestaden who sometimes called during disturbances outside the residence, provided a vital extra layer of security for Alma's residents, many of whom are fleeing, if not still involved in, violent relationships.

Unfortunately, the rosiness of this initial period hit a setback in the summer of 2024. With the warmer weather, Alma's residents began to spend more time outside in the surrounding area and the number of incidents reported by local residents increased sharply. These incidents were in large part tied to an increase in the number of men loitering around Alma, albeit often not at the behest of the women living there (J. Levy, personal communication, January 15, 2025). These incidents were mostly minor disturbances; people shouting in the street, increased loitering and littering in local gardening patches and other such signs of disorder. However, a couple of more serious incidents were reported by local residents, including break-ins, although both local police and those working at Alma have stressed that these incidents have sometimes been tied to those living at Alma without proof (J. Levy, personal communication, November 20, 2024). Regardless of this, an increased sense of discomfort amongst local residents led to calls for more regular 'trygghet' meetings at Alma, as well as calls by other local residents for increased surveillance and control of the activities of Alma's residents. These calls have been framed predominantly as a response to a decreasing sense of *safeness* amongst local residents, and

occasionally with reference to the potentially damaging economic effects that an increasing ‘disorder’ in the area could produce (J. Levy, personal communication, September 12, 2024).

The increased tension brought a renewed fear amongst those involved with Alma that protests by local residents could eventually lead to Alma having to move again. Alma’s staff have increasingly been forced into making difficult decisions regarding who can be provided accommodation , balancing the security of these women with the concerns of the neighbouring residents. Importantly, it is often the actions of men who seek out certain women at Alma, who by acting in ways perceived to be disorderly or threatening by neighbours, also threaten the delicate relationship between Alma and its neighbours. The impossible choice for those running Alma has then become one between prioritising the right of certain women to live at Alma (who may be there partly as a result of unhealthy or violent relationships with these men), or the security of the shelter itself and the rest of the women it helps should tensions with neighbours jeopardise Alma’s continued presence in the area.

Concluding reflections

In November 2024, a representative from Alma used their platform at a public ‘trygghet’ meeting organised by BID Gamlestaden to stress that Alma should be understood as a ‘trygghet’ *solution*, rather than a ‘trygghet’ *problem* for Gamlestaden (J. Levy, personal communication, November 13, 2024). In doing so, she was implicitly echoing Rancière’s (2003) call for a recognition of radical equality with regard to whose rights to safety and safeness are recognised as a starting point in discussions about ‘trygghet’. Taking Rancière's call for radical equality seriously in this case would then involve tackling the discursive and structural inequalities which prioritise the safety and safeness concerns of some residents while silencing others. This is especially challenging when institutions like BID Gamlestaden, which have the resources and platform to be seen and heard in the political and public arenas, naturally give voice to the concerns of local property owners over those in temporary accommodations like Alma.

The platforms for dialogue that have been established between Alma and other local actors may have been an important first step in this direction. But whether Gamlestaden can become a stable, *Homefull* environment for Alma in the years to come may depend in large part on whether critical voices in the area can accept a trade-off that potentially impacts the perceived *safeness* that the BID has worked to promote in recent years. Another useful step might involve bringing the voices of those local actors who have supported Alma's move to Gamlestaden to platforms where they can be heard equally loudly as the more critical voices. Most importantly, the voices of Alma's residents themselves need to be heard so that a genuine political arena of discussion can be established in which to challenge the dominant norms which inherently prioritize some residents' rights to safety and safeness over others. We believe that this case study, with its focus on how differential rights to safety and safeness are reproduced outside the walls of a home, demonstrates some of the challenges and potential ways forward with regards to establishing truly *Homefull* cities which extend beyond the mere provision of accommodation for those experiencing homelessness.

Note

What is presented in this chapter is results of the early stages of the Formas funded research project 'Women in Social and Structural Homelessness: Dialogues on Responsible Housing Provision and How Social and Geographical Exclusion Can Be Addressed' (reference number 2023-00129) in which a number of women living with unstable housing conditions in Gothenburg will be interviewed. Presented here are the results of an initial study of public records relating to Alma and as well as eleven interviews with local actors working at Alma or in the surrounding neighbourhood.

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Part III

Communities of Possibility