

Article

Tales of the Suburbs?—The Social Sustainability Agenda in Sweden through Literary Accounts

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Abstract: Sustainable development has become increasingly influential. In light of environmental concerns, the social dimension of sustainability is now encompassing a growing number of concerns. Together with more traditional hard concepts, including basic needs, equity, and employment, soft themes, such as greater wellbeing, are becoming significant. The present paper compares qualitatively these theoretical themes with the concrete, lived experiences of inhabitants within deprived suburbs. To do so, a framework for understanding social sustainability is proposed, and then applied to analyze three literary accounts of residents within Swedish suburbs. The three accounts are analyzed through the lens of critical discourse analysis. The results indicate that employment and functional infrastructures did not prevent the stigmatization of these residential areas. Important social and cultural segregations are occurring, supported by the physical organization of urban space. Using biographical accounts incorporates subjective and emotional perspectives usually left aside in the context of urban development. These allow a better understanding of the complex realities of these suburbs and could therefore help urban developers to better grasp the complex and predominantly culturally oriented set of challenges confronting the establishment of socially sustainable communities.

Keywords: social sustainability; urban renovation; discourse analysis; Sweden

1. Introduction

Over ten days, in May 2013, Sweden experienced a series of arson car fires and unrest among the youth in Swedish suburbs. The suburb of Husby, outside Stockholm, was believed to be the starting point of the riots. Husby is a neighborhood of concrete high rises, constructed at the end of 1960s as part of the “million program”. This program aimed to provide a million new dwellings to respond to the needs of Swedish society at the time. By now, Husby, along with other “million program” areas, is in serious need of renovation. Such renovations aim, not only to refurbish these areas, but also to ensure compliance with environmental sustainability goals, such as the EU 20–20 plan for reduction of climate-harming greenhouse gases [1]. However, these riots may not only be caused by the obsolescence of the buildings, or the lack of environmental concerns; Husby is also haunted by social issues, such as high levels of unemployment and poverty [2].

The case of Husby is far from atypical. Whereas a large portion of European suburbs created in the post-war period require now physical renovation, many also face important social problems, such as segregation, unemployment, unrest, and criminality; these problems also need to be addressed. Local and national governments are struggling to solve these issues, but results are, so far, not entirely successful. In Sweden, Andersson *et al.* [3] have demonstrated, for example, that the three successive waves of anti-segregation policies initiated by the state have failed to deliver the expected results. They also explained why many immigrants, after being placed in dispersed settlement programs, moved to immigrant dense areas in the large cities’ suburbs. Furthermore, Andersson and Bråmås [4] have shown how the inflow of weaker and more marginalized residents in these areas, and the outflow of better off residents, reproduced the distressed character of the neighborhoods. Malmberg *et al.*’s findings indicate [5] that high levels of residential segregation have high rates of riots, measured here by the number of car burnings.

To answer these problems, urban planning tends to focus on economic, environmental, and architectural solutions, to the detriment of social concerns [6,7]. Renewal projects should include social sustainability goals, such as reducing disparity and segregation between rich and poor areas, or increasing community cohesion. However, focusing on the functional provisions of employment, social infrastructure, and leisure facilities has not proved so far to be enough for rehabilitating deprived neighborhoods [3,5,8]. The consultation and participation of inhabitants in defining more adapted solutions is one possible solution. However, many urban regeneration projects have tended to reduce inhabitants to a statistical category [9,10]; in addition, many projects limit these inhabitants’ contributions to controlled participation [6]. Often, it is mostly adult representatives who participate; such participation runs counter to the age profile of the suburbs [8,11]. Finally, such participation often focuses on the quality of the existing area and its potential improvements, as perceived by the inhabitants, but rarely inquiries about the role played by the suburbs in people’s lives [8,9]. Inspired by works made in organization studies, we propose, here, taking a qualitative approach [12] to look at literary accounts to get a closer insight of how life in these suburbs is interpreted by their residents. By literary accounts we mean popular literature productions and not scientific analysis. Contrary to traditional academic production presenting systematic and organized data and analysis, popular literature plays on interpretations and emotions [13]. Following Hassard *et al.* [13] we believe that

these literary accounts can inform us about life in these suburbs. The aim of the paper is therefore to answer the following question:

- Can literary accounts contribute to our understanding of deprived areas and contribute to develop social sustainability?

The paper discusses how the inhabitants experience life in their suburbs and their city, and which features are associated with different spaces. Problems and issues are collected through three books; then, they are compared to the dimensions of social sustainability communities, as defined by researchers in the academic literature [6,14,15]. The context of the study is a Swedish development program, the “million-program”, and the resulting neighborhoods’ needs for transitioning into sustainable communities. During the years 1965–1975, 70,000 dwellings were completed annually to reach the one million new dwellings target, so as to address a housing shortage. The suburban areas created under that program are receiving current attention in terms of policy and resources in an attempt to enable a sustainable renovation. We use critical discourse analysis [16] to examine three inhabitants’ accounts providing insider’s views: Alakoski’s autobiography “October in Swedish Deprivation” [17] presents her own childhood in the neighborhood of “New Fridheim” in Ystad, Southern Sweden. Olsson’s novel “No child’s land” [18] tells about a teenager growing up in the suburbs of Gårdsten and Bergsjön, and her discovery of the city center of Göteborg. Though fictional, the story is inspired by the author’s own childhood and adolescence in the area. “I am Zlatan” [19] is the biography of Zlatan Ibrahimovich, and tells his story as an immigrant boy breaking out of the suburb environment in Malmö and becoming a football star. The analysis of the three texts has been created iteratively [20] by combining a theoretical framework of social sustainability with the descriptions taken from the novels. The empirical contribution of the article consists of information about deprived neighborhoods gathered outside of the renovation context. Contrary to what happened in renovation projects, the production of this information is not guided or framed by urban planners’, architects’, or researchers’ interests. Beyond the opinion of inhabitants on their living spaces and possible improvements, the stories reveal and account for the role played by these areas in the inhabitants’ lives [7]. They provide qualitative insights on everyday life in these areas, glimpses of understanding the particular social order among youngsters, information concerning access to spaces and context that is otherwise difficult to obtain [13,21,22]. The theoretical contribution insists on a contextual and process-based understanding of social sustainability. Critical discourse analysis acts as a sensitizer for the character and content of the discourse, and the juxtaposition of these stories with social sustainability themes also add new and complementary aspects to take into consideration.

The paper is structured as follows. After the method section, a theoretical framework is outlined, focusing on the elements of social sustainability related to renovation of deprived suburbs. This is followed by the presentation of the three accounts and their residents’ views. These are then analyzed and discussed through the prism of the social sustainability framework. Finally, a conclusion points at further perspectives.

2. Method

The overall theoretical, empirical, and analytical approach is interpretive sociology, actively seeking the interaction between empirical findings, analysis, and theory [20].

The theoretical framework uses predominantly the work of Colantonio and Dixon [15], and adds contextual elements from the Swedish approach on social sustainability [6,23]. The choice of three texts is not the result of a planned process. It was during the reading of these books, that we found striking similarities with the issues identified in our on-going work on sustainability. Nevertheless, the books present similarities: they were published in 2012 and provide a parallel account of adolescent stories taking place in one of the “million program” areas. Though situated in different suburbs and in different decades, the books offers commonality in the way they describe life in “million program” areas and the role played by these spaces in the protagonists’ lives. In doing so, they underline common issues and challenges encountered by inhabitants. We could have added other novels, but the material provided by these three texts proved to be very rich already.

The adopted approach parallels works that use fiction to inform other social researches [13,21,22]. While using literary accounts as sources is not a mainstream method, it has been used fruitfully in organization studies (see Rhodes [24,25] for a review) and development studies [21,22]. Czarniawska-Joerges and de Monthoux [26] suggest that reading fiction is a means to better understand the “realities” of organizations as it incorporates subjective and emotional perspectives together with more rational and logically organized accounts often found in traditional academic writing. Another example is Knights’ and Willmott’s [27] use of four novels to discuss power and inequality in organizations, or Hassard and Holliday’s analyses of novels and films to represent discourse on organizations [13]. Focusing on the condition of production the authors claim that the strength of fiction accounts is that the full energy of people’s lived lives is included in the narratives of the phenomena, as contrasted to the drier, clinical, and distanced scientific genres [13]. For Boje *et al.* [28], one key contribution of narrative research is the attention it focuses on temporal issues as it involves the unfolding of a story of events and experiences over time. By doing so, it informs on the processes taking place in the depicted situation and can render both the paradoxes and complex causal relationships inherent in the events to be analyzed [23]. Finally, Lewis *et al.* [21,22] argue for the role of fictive literature in the broader discourse of a phenomenon, in their case development studies, claiming that it provides valuable complementary knowledge to traditional academic knowledge.

To extract information on the suburbs from the three novels, we use critical discourse analysis. Discourse is a particular way of talking about and understanding the world or aspects of the world [28]. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) studies texts to reveal the discursive sources of power, dominance, inequality, and bias [29,30]. It examines how all types of text, written, spoken, and materialized, are maintained and reproduced within specific social, political, and historical contexts [28]. Whereas early CDAs tended to focus on the texts alone [31], later versions extended the focus to communicative interaction, and tried to understand the production and consumption of text, including the relation to an audience of a text [29,30]. Fairclough’s approach [32] understands discourse as a social practice that both reproduces and changes knowledge, identities, and social relations, but which is also shaped by other social practices and structures. Accordingly, discourse is in a dialectical relationship with other social dimensions. Social structures are the result of social relations, both in society as a whole, and in specific institutions, and consist of both discursive and non-discursive elements [32].

According to Fairclough [16], the analysis of text involves three stages. First, there is the description, which is the stage concerned with the formal properties of the text. Second, the

interpretation stage, is concerned with the relationship between text and interaction; this stage is concerned with seeing the text as a product of a process of production, and as a resource in the process of interpretation. Moreover, sentences and text can serve several purposes. Thus, a multifunctional perspective is needed. Fairclough [16] suggests that sentences in a text are analyzable in terms of their representations, relations, and identities. The representational aspects are realized through meaning and forms. These aspects reveal possible relations to social practices and can involve a particular (re)contextualization of these practices. Explanation is the last stage. This stage concerns itself with the relationship between interaction and social context, with the social determination of the processes of production and interpretation, and with such processes' social effects. In this paper, we are confined to the first two steps: description and interpretation [16].

Sheyhislami [30] (p. 13) has a series of proposals for using CDA, and we utilize the following:

- Texts acquire their meanings through a dialectical relationship between texts and social subjects; writers and readers always operate with various degrees of choice concerning access to texts and means of interpretation.
- Linguistic features and structures are not arbitrary. They are purposeful whether or not the choices are conscious or unconscious.
- Power relations are produced, exercised, and reproduced through discourse.
- All speakers and writers operate from specific discursive practices that originate from special interests and aims, which involve inclusions and exclusions.
- Discourse is historical in the sense that texts acquire their meanings through being situated in specific social, cultural, and ideological contexts, as well as in time and space.

Summarizing critical discourse analysis' views language and discourse as a social practice through which the world is represented, involving the exercise of power and domination.

It follows that there is no "right" single interpretation, but many, as both authors and readers are actively participating in the creation of meaning. However, the question of validity may still be raised. A validity criterion often associated with discourse analysis is fruitfulness; the criterion focuses on the possibility of production of new knowledge and how the specific analysis may foster new types of thinking or action [33,34].

Similarly we argue that the three texts are informative concerning the context and the situation of some of the "million program" areas, and therefore can contribute to the development of the social sustainability agenda in Sweden. Consequently, the themes of social sustainability have served as a framework for analyzing the novels, and have contributed to the selection of specific examples [16]. We have listed in the three novels all the references concerning the actions, places, and spaces that are related to the suburbs, either physically or metaphorically. These references were then compared to the social sustainability dimensions. The comparison has served to select the examples, which contributed toward an understanding of these dimensions. In selecting our examples, some of the major subjects of social sustainability, such as environmental sensitivity or thriving, as well as some subjects concerning economics, such as the prospect of a flourishing and diverse local economy, have disappeared as these concerns do not appear in the three novels. Out of the list of matching themes and examples, we have kept the most discussed. When not otherwise indicated, selected quotes are translated by the authors of the article from the Swedish originals.

However, even though we argue that this analysis contributes to the discussion on social sustainability, we also recognize some of its limitations:

The first limitation is related to the strong personal approach the texts represent [21,35]. The selection of events and their presentation is beyond the reader's and the researcher's discretion. Secondly, Alakoski, Olsson, and Ibrahimovic are all exceptions in their neighborhoods and see themselves as such. Their social ascent both limits and enables the value of their accounts [35]. The stories present a common narrative: although the protagonists faced a deprived childhood, they eventually succeeded and moved upwards on the socio-economic ladder. The accounts may stress the difficulties of childhood in order to make their achievement even more exceptional. In that context, the suburb could be used only to reinforce the precarious aspects of their childhood. However, their portrait of these areas is more complex. The authors are appreciative of some of the neighborhoods features; Ibrahimovic especially shows attachment to his the place [19]. Second limitation, all three authors look back to periods in the past, whereas the upcoming transition of the "million program" is a contemporary process. Alakoski [17] is addressing the time gap by using manifest intertextuality [16] between the contemporary commentary of political manifesto types and the biographical accounts of her youth; however, these more politically engaged narratives have not been taken into consideration for the analysis. Third, compared to the aspirations of critical discourse analysis, it is a limitation that the present argument uses text only in the analysis, and does not include discursive practices; *i.e.*, the article does not consider how the readers receive and interpret the texts used here. In conclusion, the claims of our analysis are very modest, and would not support any generalizations; we find, nonetheless, that the results of the analysis are very informative and stimulating.

3. Theoretical Framework

The following develops a theoretical framework based on the concept of social sustainability in urban renewal.

A number of approaches to sustainable community development have been mobilized to understand the development of cities. Such approaches include systems theory/engineering [36–38], neoliberalism [10], cultural/sociological theories [39], sustainable transition theory [40,41], and integrated multiple perspectives [6,15,42].

Social sustainability is a contested term as diverse interests are inscribed in it [6,42]. Even if most contributors connect social sustainability to environmental and economic sustainability, in light of the Brundtland report, a plethora of different understandings persist [6,15,23,43]. Different authors provide definition and alternative perspectives. Colantonio and Dixon [16] (p. 8) show how a number of interests and communities are in tension when shaping the concept of sustainability including the following:

- Property-led physical approach, where a retail-led or mixed-use scheme is expected to have a multiplier effect [44];
- Business driven approach, which emphasizes the importance of underserved markets, particularly in inner city areas;
- Urban form and design perspective, which highlights the importance of the relationship between sustainable development and urban form;

- Cultural industries approach [45];
- Health and wellbeing perspective; and the
- Community-based, social economy approach.

Depending on the perspective taken, the social dimension may be studied in terms of gentrification [46], social exclusion [47], social capital and networks [48], empowerment [48,49], access to employment [43], or reduction in violence [50].

Building on the multiplicity of these perspectives, Colantonio and Dixon [15] argue for a comprehensive understanding of social sustainability and suggest that social sustainability:

...concerns how individuals, communities and societies live with each other and set out to achieve the objectives of development models that they have chosen for themselves, also taking into account the physical boundaries of their places and planet earth as a whole [15] (p. 8).

The authors [15] (p. 21) add that social sustainability should be “interpreted as a socio-historical process rather than an end state”. This position views socioeconomic development as an open-ended historical process, which partially depends on the human imagination [51]. By using a contextual definition, Colantonio and Dixon [15] (p. 33) draw on the Bristol Accord concerning social sustainability and propose the following eight characteristics of a sustainable community, here grouped under social, spatial, and economic dimensions:

- Social: active, inclusive, and safe; well-served; fair for everyone
- Spatial: well-designed and built; well connected; environmentally sensitive
- Economic: well run; thriving with a flourishing and diverse local economy

However, notably, the presented concept carries internal tensions and contradictions. Vallance [42] discusses a similar understanding of social sustainability, but thoroughly elaborates on how these social aspects tend to get into conflict with (bio-physical) environmental concerns, such as higher cost of energy savings solutions and limited financial resources of the inhabitants. Drawing on a large array of authors, Goldschalk and Land [52] present a number of these conflicts involving all the dimensions of social sustainability. In contrast, some also argue that these conflicting dimensions, if addressed, can be “bridged” and the quality aspects “maintained” [42] (pp. 347–348).

The chosen understanding of social sustainability also insists on the contextualization of the agenda [6,15,51]. This position encourages a close-up investigation of the Swedish context and its specific debates [6,23]. Olsson [23] suggests understanding social sustainability along two main dimensions: welfare and problem-solving capacity. The welfare dimension consists of a justice and a satisfaction element. Drawing on Sachs [51], justice is further conceptualized as equity, democracy, and diversity. The problem-solving capacity of a society depends on its various social systems and how these tackle societal challenges [19]. It relies on individual initiative, cultural values, and control mechanisms within politics and societal institutions. Olsson mentions segregation as a key problem in Sweden, but downplays the possible exclusion mechanisms. Boström [6] also discusses the situation in Sweden; his understanding of social sustainability distinguishes between content and process. In terms of content, he refers to 15 dimensions, and in terms of process, to seven. In his description of process, he includes cultural diversity, community attachment, and identity, as well as social recognition.

To summarize, social sustainability is a multifaceted concept that should be viewed in a contextual and process-based manner. Both generally and contextually, the concept carries internal tensions and contradictions. Whether a neighborhood is socially sustainable or not in the Swedish suburban context can be discussed using Colantonio and Dixon's social and spatial dimensions, in conjunction with Olsson's idea concerning problem-solving capacity, and Boström's contributions regarding identity and community attachment.

The aforementioned characteristics of a socially sustainable community are then compared to deprived neighborhoods, as depicted in these three novels. The comparison serves as a kind of assessment tool; the problems encountered in the everyday life experiences of these areas are evaluated in light of social sustainability concerns. The themes covering social and spatial issues have been slightly reorganized to simplify the presentation of the three stories:

- Social themes include the level of activity, safety, education, the quality of services, inclusivity and fairness for everyone, and identity and community attachment.
- Spatial themes include the neighborhood's quality of design and construction, and the extent of connections between the center and periphery.

The economic and the environmental dimensions are not presented, as there are very few, if any, references to them in the texts.

4. Literary Accounts from the Deprived Areas

This chapter presents the selected material to discuss the social sustainability challenges described under social and spatial issues. It opens with a short description of the three books.

Alakoski's "October in Poor Sweden" [17] combines multiple genres and mixes biographical material (*i.e.*, a diary of a month of her life in 2011), with large flashbacks concerning the years of her youth. She also refers to contemporary political commentary and cites other authors and researchers. The biographical part is directly quoting a number of texts, such as medical records of her parents' hospitalizations. All these writings are compiled into diary form, and cover the month of October, 2011. Alakoski was born in 1964 and was educated as a social worker. She has written several successful novels [53,54]. She spent her youth in the southern Swedish town of Ystad (known through the "Wallander" television series) in Nya Fridhem, a 60-apartment quarter composed of two stories townhouses situated in the city (around 1.5 km from center).

Olsson's "No Child's Land" [18] tells the story of Miira, a Finnish girl living with her parents in a suburb close to Gothenburg during the 1980s. The story covers her adolescence from ages 8 to 16. The author uses an aggressive style; short chapters describe striking events. She mixes Gothenburg's dialect with Finnish expressions and created her own language. Although the work is a novel, the narrative is autobiographical. The chosen period corresponds to the author's own childhood (Olsson was born in 1973), and the novel's setting is author's childhood suburb: Gårdsten. Gårdsten was created as a new dwelling 13 km away from the Gothenburg city center and has around 7800 inhabitants.

"I am Zlatan" [19] is the biography of football star, Zlatan Ibrahimovic. Born in 1981, he lived his childhood and adolescence in Rosengård. Rosengård is a suburb of 21,000 inhabitants 3 km away from Malmö's city center. Ibrahimovic kept contact with the city during his international career, he bought

there one of the most expensive houses in the best area of the city. The book is written by Lagercrantz, a well-established biographer [55]. Lagercrantz organizes Zlatan's life story in accordance with the long interviews he had with the football player. Even if some episodes can be rather harsh, the book presents a rather sympathetic picture of the main character.

Below, the three stories are presented and structured according to a social sustainability framework and its incident themes; we focus on whether the stories echo and/or contrast with the dimensions listed above.

4.1. Social Issues

The first criterion of the social dimension is an *active* community. This is down-sized to the family and describes its situation. The books present three families whose parents are active on the job market. However, these are difficult, low-paying jobs that do not prove to be sufficient for supporting the families' needs.

Alakoski's [17] parents were employed, but faced heavy burdens associated with alcoholism, domestic violence, and drug addiction. She describes, successively, her mother's four suicide attempts, her father's alcoholism and his placement in a rehab center, and finally, her own placement in a foster family: "A chance that my parents were drunkard or they would have noticed that I was stuffed with nicotine" (age 13) [17] (p. 44).

Miira's father worked at a car factory, and her mother was employed as a cleaning lady. As a teenager she had a side job and earned some money by helping the caretaker cleaning the premises; she nevertheless stole to get herself clothes and books.

The Ibrahimovic family had also issues to deal with. The parents were divorced. His father was a concierge and his mother worked 14-hours a day as a cleaner to support Zlatan and his many siblings. The kids were getting in all kind of troubles (e.g., one of his sisters became a drug addict). Consequently, the family attracted the attention of social services. Zlatan was sent to live with his alcoholic father, who spent most of his money drinking. The empty fridge is a recurrent theme in the book and Zlatan remembered the pain of being hungry. The lack of financial resources was especially evident when the kid was spending time with his Malmö FC mates, who came from other parts of the city [19] (p. 89):

"But I could not measure up with my mates; 'Come along Zlatan, we take a pizza, a burger, we go and buy so and so'.

'Ah...later I am not hungry, I pass'...

I tried to linger around it and be tuff anyway. I didn't manage."

Zlatan Ibrahimovic tried to hide his poverty from others [19]. However, his pride did not prevent him from stealing his mates' equipment in the locker room. Pilfering for him was routine. The boy used to shoplift and borrowed any bicycles he would feel convenient to: he even accidentally stole the bike of one of his trainers.

Safety is another of the dimensions of a socially sustainable community. The stories reveal a strong feeling of insecurity as violence in many forms was occurring.

Alakoski's mother got beaten on several occasions by her husband [13]. The author provides among others a copy of a police report [13] (p. 59):

PROMEMORIA POLISEN YSTAD 74.05.22 (Family ALAKOSKI)

“Wednesday May the 22nd, at 19:15, a daughter (Susanna) of the family has reported a fight between the father and the mother. The daughter was deeply distressed and crying.”

Susanna had just turned 10. Both her parents were successively hospitalized in a psychiatric ward. Outside the family, her friends, especially the boys, were becoming addicted to drugs and growing up into small-time criminals. One friend ended up as a murderer.

In *No Child's Land* [17], Miira sent a bomb threat to her school, witnessed a teenager getting beaten to death, set fire to a forest, and faked a fire alarm in her school. As part of her job, she had to clean an apartment after the suicide of the tenant whose last days seemed to have been quite awful. There were blood and human fluids on both the floors and the walls. Miira also found some of the “tenant's teeth planted in a flower pot like seeds” next to the body of a bloodless kitten [17] (pp. 303–304).

Zlatan was confronted with physical violence both at home (his mother hit him regularly with a wooden spoon), and outside (he fought with his teammates in the yards). He also threw bricks or eggs at car windows. Zlatan's destructive actions also related to behavior on the football field and threatened his career as an upcoming football player. After a head-butt that sent one of his teammates to the hospital, the teammate's father began gathering signatures to exclude Zlatan from the team [19] (p. 87):

Things started smoldering amongst the Swedes. Their parents wanted me out of there, and I thought for the thousandth time, I don't give a damn about them...Some idiot father of somebody in the team with a petition ‘-Zlatan must leave the club’ it said and all kinds of people signed that thing. They smuggled it around saying ‘Zlatan doesn't belong here. He's got to be chucked out!’...The coach Åke Kallenberg just stared at the paper. ‘What kind of ridiculous crap is that? He tore it apart’.

Miira and Susanna also behaved self destructively. The girls destroyed, both intentionally and unintentionally, offers and services that were provided for them. The most painful self-destructive behaviors were when Miira dropped out a language school in England and Susanna dropped out of high school.

The quality of services criterion is evaluated here by looking into education and social services. Unfortunately none of the three stories provided a positive description of the schools. The school officials showed little initiative or attention for the children they were charged to educate.

In seventh grade, Miira's curriculum was split into “common” and “special” tracks. The pupils were supposed to choose themselves [18] (pp. 199–200):

“Pekka (the teacher): ‘You, who think you are good, choose ‘special’ and those that know you are bad choose ‘common’. ‘Special’ is difficult and ‘common’ is easy’”.

Miira...was not in doubt, made the cross at “special” in both topics.

‘What did you choose?’ she asked the girls. ‘Common’ they said simultaneously. Jaana lowered her eyebrows and looked at her as if the answer was given, the question unnecessary. ‘Didn't you?’

‘Na.’ She turned to the boys and asked the same question. ‘Special’ they all said.

However, in Gårdsten, the school tried to get the parents involved in their children's' education by developing systematized weekly feedback, which the parents had to sign [18] (p. 85):

Haggan, the teacher gives the following written notice for the parents of Miira:

“Miira is very hardheaded and difficult to call to order; talks loudly; argues always against us, but does in the end as we say”.

Miira destroyed the teacher's report, and speculated that the parents would never know. Her conflicted relations with school were only transformed with the arrival of a substitute teacher that paid attention to her and encouraged her.

School did not sit well with Zlatan either. He was so good at math that his teachers assumed he must have been cheating. Although his grades were fairly decent, he was attached a private teacher to cope with his chaotic behavior: “A private teacher, just for me. It made me furious. Clearly, I was not an angel but you cannot make an example out a child. It is not possible. ...this specific treatment is following me and I don't feel good about it”...Zlatan wondered if such treatment had made him stronger in the long term, but in the short term: [I] “was destroyed.... [I] was the child with the private teacher following him everywhere. Do you think is it reassuring?” [19] (pp. 59–60).

The boy had neither the patience nor the self-discipline to put much effort into learning. For a while, he kept going to school because of the free lunch there. However, he eventually gave up altogether and concentrated on football.

The assistance provided by social services is another aspect of a well-served, socially sustainable community. The three accounts do mention an abundance of services, such as individualized support, social services, specific schools for ethnic minorities and for kids with specific needs, and rehabilitation centers. However, the intent behind the provision of such services was not always realized, and sometimes, such aims collided with the people they were supposed to help.

Olsson [18] provides quite a few examples of social services for the children. For example, Miira was chosen to be part of a summer program where Gårdsten's kids were sent for holidays to wealthier families. Because she was chosen by the social service after having broken a window, she saw the holidays as a punishment, and not as a reward. She “did not feel selected; she felt rejected” [18] (p. 57).

The community in Rosengård also provided help and services: “I was a small kid. I had a big nose and a lisp and had to go to a speech therapist. A woman came to the school and taught me how to say “S”, which I thought was humiliating” [19] (p. 24).

Alakoski [17] (pp. 37–38) describes how her brother “flees into abuse” of drugs and alcohol for thirty years. “He cost society” a lot. However, “then the miracle came”: a social worker, Thomas, cared, and made a difference by dragging the brother out of his addictions.

Social services decided that Zlatan's father would have custody over him and his sister [18] (p. 47), “The environment at Mum's was regarded as unsuitable, not really because of her. I've got to say...but it was major thing, being judged unfit by the world and Mum was absolutely devastated...”. However, the boy was staying at his mother's and the sister moved to the father's. Five months later, more investigations by the social services were undertaken and then the boy went to stay with his father and the sister to the mother. However, the boy feels quite alone at both places.

Inclusivity and fairness for all is another important dimension of social sustainability. However, the three books indicated both social and ethnical segregation:

Money problems influenced all three characters. Susanna refused to go to birthday parties or to the movies with other children because she could not afford birthday presents or the price of a movie ticket.

Miira was 10 years old when she was sent to a wealthier family for the summer holidays. There, she felt totally out of place [18] (pp. 60–61): “She was clumsy there. Like an elephant. She did not know where to go, how to walk, or what to say”. She was trying to find things that she could be better at relative to the family kids, but they disregarded her attempts and laughed at her. “She wanted to scream, but she couldn’t. Her manners did not work her”.

Both Alakoski and Olsson are describing the segregation felt by the Finish minority in Sweden:

...In the bus, I was sitting with Jaanas, mom, and other Finns. All Finns went to Gårdsten. They lived there. The Finnish association was there, as well as the social club house, which Dad contributed to, and where he and the other Finns exercised, bathed, and partied. In Gårdsten, there were even special school classes for Finns, which taught in Finnish [18] (p. 26).

Olsson [18] (p. 85), on the other hand, described about eighty national groups living in the neighborhood. They did not relate much to each other, and each had the strong sense of belonging that characterized the aforementioned Finnish minority.

However, whereas Miira had to fight against her Finnish identity, for the Swedes, she was just different. Due to her black hair and blue eyes, she was hailed as a: “Fucking Gypsy” by a mother and her child in a city bookshop [18] (p. 130).

There is a strong contrast in Zlatan’s biography between the situation within Rosengård, where apparently there was almost no ethnical segregation, and the situation outside of the suburb. “In Rosengård we had different council estate neighborhoods and no estate was worse than any other well the one we called the Gypsy estate was looked down upon). But it wasn’t like all the Albanians or Turks stayed together in one spot. It was your estate that counted, not the country your parents had come from.” [19] (p. 82).

Zlatan’s experience in Malmö football club is very different:

There were a couple of foreigners there,...Otherwise, there were just regular Swedes, including the kind from the posh suburbs. I felt I was from Mars: not only because my dad didn’t have a big fancy house, and never turned up at the matches. I talked differently...I learned one important thing is those years. If a guy like me was going to get respect, he had to be five times better than Leffe Persson or whatever their names were. He had to train ten times harder. Otherwise he did not have a chance. Not on this earth! Especially not if he was a bike thief [19] (p. 59)!

Identity and community attachment is the last of the social dimensions. All three narratives concern families that had moved far from their homelands to seek work or flee from war. Olsson’s and Zlatan’s parents showed long-lasting feelings of displacement, and listened to music from their homelands with nostalgia (Finland and Bosnia). Zlatan referred to “papa and his Jugge music”, *i.e.*, Yugoslavian music [19], while Olsson refers to Finnish and Russian music, Finnish grilled sausages, as well as other symbols of Finnish culture [18]. The parents followed the development of their countries through national TV [19], and participated in associations of fellow citizens with the same background [18].

This situation had consequences for their children [19] (p. 39): “Swedish TV was nothing to write home about. It just did not register. I was 20 years old before I saw my first Swedish film, and I didn’t have any clue about Swedish heroes or sporting figures, such as Ingemar Stenmark or anyone else.”

However, the second generation’s socialization progresses in a manner different from their parents’. They appear to build their identity not so much on their country of origin, but more on the areas they live in. The areas become the reference center in terms of behaviors, language or clothes to the point of Zlatan making up the slogan “you can take a boy out of Rosengård, but you can never take Rosengård out of a boy” [19] (p. 62), which is now proudly and officially printed on the front archway at the mouth of the tunnel leading to Rosengård”.

4.2. Spatial Issues

The spatial dimension of social sustainability refers to the quality of constructions (*i.e.*, whether they are well designed and built), as well as their connection to other parts of the cities, (*i.e.*, whether such constructions were well-connected with the rest of the city).

The construction quality of the suburbs is rarely described in the books. Only Alakoski described the apartment qualities. The installation in Nya Fridhem is described as a fantastic improvement in living standards. Alakoski and her family felt lucky to be part of the first wave of inhabitants. The houses were newly built, with warm water, a central heating system, and a fitted kitchen.

In the three stories, indoor descriptions referred more to furniture and decoration, rather than to the physical properties of the buildings: Miira was quite happy for her room, which she had cozily furnished and decorated. However, she is confronted with a ragged home when visiting a friend:

The plastic flooring had darkened more than at her place...the walls were bare and nicotine yellow...Vera had no gay poster. Not a single poster, not even wallpaper. The concrete walls were painted blue. The windows were without curtains, and in the narrow bed, there was no bedspread; the quilt was piled up in the foot end. She felt ashamed because she had a crocheted bedspread, thicker quilts, and clean sheets, and because she had three little tables, while Vera only had one [18] (p. 109).

The quality of the suburb area received more attention in the stories.

Alakoski, after seeing her family dissolve in problems, accuses the space (*i.e.*, both the building and the area) for contributing to the decay of her family. She characterizes the building blocks that constitute the neighborhood of Nya Fridhem in Ystad as “pigsties” referring to where pigs would be placed in a farmhouse.

In No Child’s Land [18] (p. 25), Miira describes Gårdsten (literally the Stone Yard) in Gothenburg as following:

... this place is called Gårdsten because the places are covered with asphalt, and the high rises, with concrete. There are stones everywhere and the faces are as hard as stone.

She focuses on the deprived milieu of the suburb, and describes how bored teenagers shared the desolate public squares and stairs cases with alcoholics and drugs addicts.

When Zlatan traveled between his parents’ apartments, he would have to walk home through a dark tunnel, under a major road [17] (p. 53): “A number of years earlier, my dad had gotten mugged and

badly beaten up there. I often thought about that... In the same area, there is a railway line and a highway. There is also an ugly alleyway and a few bushes and tow lamp-posts: one just before the tunnel and one right after. Otherwise, it was dark with really bad vibes. ...Thus, the lamp-posts became my landmarks; I would run like a mad man between them with my heart pounding..."

Both Mira and Zlatan focused on the contrast between feeling at home in their respective suburbs, and their sense of alienation when visiting other parts of the city.

Zlatan's experience of Malmö is reduced to his own area, because he does not know the rest of the city:

"...but I had no idea where the football stadium was, or anything else in the city for that matter. Malmö might not have been far away. But it was another world. I turned seventeen before I went into the city center, and I knew nothing of the life there" [19] (p. 86).

Dress codes, behaviors, attitudes, languages, and everything else seemed to be different outside of the suburbs:

When Miira and her close girlfriend took the bus, to get to the center of town, she felt her body language changing and becoming stiffer:

I looked at the people. They were a shitty lot. Most of them were snobs. The snobs were smarter and boasters and grown-up minis that had become older... The jeans fitted perfectly on the snobs. Slimly. They had waist-length leather jackets with shoulder pads, and some of the leather jackets had fringes. Their hairdos were fresh; they had hair finely sprayed highlights done at the hairdressers. Their makeup was like those of models'; the lips were elaborately painted with lipstick or gloss, without glitter. They moved their hands smoothly. She looked discreetly down at herself. The college pants were not a perfect fit. No clothes were a perfect fit on her. They were floppy..." [18] (p. 125). "In Gårdsten, nobody moved their hands smoothly. There, they hung down from under arms as if the wrists had disappeared [18] (p. 126).

Zlatan is aware that his clothing and body language was "screaming Rosengård", but felt uneasy trying other types of clothes [17] (p. 92): "I tried different looks, nothing to do, my appearance always said that I came from Rosengård".

These above extracts are some examples of what can be found in the three stories. They are now being discussed in relation to the social sustainability dimensions.

5. Three Tales through the Prism of Social Sustainability

The following chapter discusses the aforementioned social sustainability characteristics as presented in the books and compares their interpretations to others more traditional production of knowledge on the same issue. After a themed cross-cutting discussion, the chapter concludes with a reflection about the method we utilized.

Connecting deprived suburbs with social problems is unsurprising. However, some of the examples presented in the stories may provide a more nuanced understanding of these issues.

If having an active community is a prerequisite for social sustainability to flourish, being employed may not be sufficient for supporting one's family; the parents jobs described in the books do not

provide enough income to cover the family's basic needs. Moreover, the conditions of the parents' employment, such as long hours, hard labor, and low social standing contribute to the decay of families. Parents overwhelmed and exhausted by the various tasks and sometimes their addictions neither participated to events, such as school meetings or football matches, nor helped their kids to do their homework; they basically left their children on their own. Zlatan, with his divorced parents, and Susanna, with her destabilized family, suffered in particular in these situations. Besides the disinvestment of their parents, the lack of financial resources prevented them from taking part in other children's or teenagers' activities, and consequently marginalized them. The three characters all described how shoplifting and stealing became something one did to compensate for the lack of resources; however, these activities also provided excitement in life, and were a way of obtaining some kind of revenge on a society that they felt had failed them. Poverty in suburbs is an issue well documented by statistics: metropolitan suburbs in Sweden have a child poverty rate of 40%, Zlatan's Rosengård and Olsson's Bergsjön have the highest in the country [2]. Ethnicity background and unemployment increased drastically these figures. What the narratives show is however that even with employment these situations were precarious. This precariousness affected the whole families' lives, not only in term of access to goods and services, but also in term of parents' investment and support to their children leading the children to define their own strategy of surviving including stealing or dropping school.

The three characters evolved in a world of violence, whether it was physical, psychological, societal, or even symbolic: domestic violence and street fights, seeing one's parents collapsing, being singled out as unfit or deviant, being segregated for both ethnic and socio-economic reasons, being confronted daily with drugs addicts, alcoholics, and psychologically ill neighborhoods—these encounters all but precluded the creation of a safe community for these teenagers to grow up in. Moreover, self-destructive actions, conscious or not, which were carried out by the main characters, threatened their very chances of growing out of these deprived neighborhoods. Where friends, brothers, and sisters developed into criminals and drug addicts, the main characters also occasionally destroyed their own potential; as underlined by Alakoski, life seems to arbitrarily select who can escape from these harsh conditions [17]. However, as described in their accounts, these children do not know better, and don't have any other role model to follow. No surprise that their expressed their frustration by throwing stones to cars or windows, or send bomb threats to their school. There is a clear correlation between riots and deprived neighborhoods [5]. However, the riots covered by the media are only the top of the iceberg. As described by Schierup and Ålund [56] they are many more expressions of the distrust felt by the inhabitants of the suburbs and how they may express their frustration of being segregated and excluded. The literary accounts show a continuum between the different forms of violence coming from the family, the institutions, as well as within and outside the suburb. This created a fertile background for emotional, probably unconscious and non-rational behavior of rebellion and destruction.

One place where the children could find a role model was school. However, the three accounts focused on the norms imposed by schools. Schools were willing to help their pupils, but tried to do so using coercive tools that were repelling to them. According to the authors, schools showed no trust, and came off as patronizing: not corresponding to the zealous pupil, Zlatan's good results in math could only be explained as cheating by his teachers. Schools teachers also showed no faith or ambition

on the behalf in their children. For example, Olsson describes how teachers exercise mechanisms of segregation between Finns and Swedes, as well as between boys and girls, which appear to have a serious impact on not only the education of the youngsters, but also their sense of opposition to the system that the teachers came to represent. For example, the Finnish children were streamed into special classes, where their Swedish language abilities remained less developed compared with their native Swedish counterparts. Creating opposition is also the result of the many initiatives taken for Zlatan or Susanna by their respective schools. Social heritage is thereby reproduced rather than broken; this is also expressed in the choice of (no) education. In this sense, the public institutions are not above or outside the discourses, but a contested terrain within. There is research showing that there is a higher school segregation in regions with a large visible minority population [57] and that young people living in deprived metropolitan areas have twice as much risk to be neither in education nor employed, between the age of 16 and 25, than in the rest of the country [57]. The three narratives account for the context and the process of segregation happening in the school. The children capacities were ascribed more to their origins than their own individual potential. The repetition of these judgmental situations provoked a disinvestment of the school by the children.

The three stories show a plethora of society's provided services. They recurrently give examples of extra resources offered to the inhabitants, although these inhabitants were not able to exploit these possibilities. The offers do not match the social culture of the residents. Especially for the three teenagers, these offers often participated in their stigmatization as those unfit for society. Such services seemed to remind them of their weakness or failure; they consequently ignored or even fought against the provision of such services. There is a clash between a "good will" discourse from the providers and a discourse of "us *versus* them", which views all institutions as parts of an adversarial system. Thus, if the welfare and problem-solving capacity described by Olsson [23] are present in terms of social systems and institutions, their application in relation to each specific situation seems to miss the target. When problem solving capacity [23] is finally mobilized, it appears to build on civil society efforts, and even upon the work of individuals: examples include Zlatan's coach disregarding a petition, Alakoski's brother being saved by a social worker, or Miira being encouraged by a temporary substitution teacher.

As a parallel to the failure of services, various mechanisms of segregation are strongly accounted for in all three stories. The inhabitants in the three suburbs were mostly foreigners, and the Swedes living on the premises belonged to the lowest socio-economic classes in Sweden. The social services and schools, as previously described, exacerbated to these feelings of segregation. To both Zlatan and Olsson, the use in their books of a particular language, saturated with slang, also underlines a cultural, discursive segregation. The paternalistic treatment of minorities, e.g., such as the Finnish, confirms the findings of Kalonaityte [58]. Anderson *et al.*'s study reveals that, by 2009, in the Göteborg area, the social hierarchy of immigrants features Somalis, Iraqis, and Ethiopians as the most exposed groups, whereas assimilated Yugoslavians and Finns, as a group, have experienced improvements in their lives [8]. However, beyond segregation, the three teenagers felt both singled out and excluded. Ethnic and socio-cultural markers are very difficult to get rid of, and time and again, examples are given of exclusion related to physical appearances, language or behaviors. The stories contrast with Olsson's work [19]; Olsson recognized segregation in Swedish society, but disregarded its exclusionary aspects.

In the three books, the differences between how generations perceived their respective situations are highlighted. The parents are still very much attached to their former country, but their children are building on different sources to develop their own identity; sometimes the children even voluntarily excluded references to their parents' origins for example by giving up their mother tongue. This process led to the development of a local and contextual identity (e.g., Zlatan's Rosengård identity). This identity is at the same time the result of the socialization of different populations living in the area; such socialization enabled a feeling of belonging. As demonstrated by Andersson *et al.* [3] migrants tends to gather sooner or later in the large metropolitan suburbs with other migrants, the stories presented here give an insight of the reasons and advantages for this population to do so. At the same time, this process also constituted a barrier to adopting other norms and habits active in other parts of Swedish society, and created a gap between the culture of the suburb and that of outside. Moreover, because such socialization derives from a sense of belonging and comradeship with their friends, the children of these suburbs stood in a rather precarious relationship with respect to drug and alcohol abuse, as well as with unemployment and criminality. As already depicted by Marsh *et al.* [59], there is a social order in play amongst the youth groups, which, apart from comradeship, encompasses an "us against them" mentality *vis-à-vis* authorities and in-built criminal elements. Where the narratives presented "class travel" [17], *i.e.*, how they became different from the rest of their friends, we recognize that such travel can only occur by trading and shifting identity and culture elements.

The physical surrounding contributes to this feeling of isolation of the suburb from the rest of city. The area of Rosengård is actually surrounded by railways and highways that create a cut in the urban territory, which is both physically and symbolically difficult to cross. Miira loathed the physical surrounding of Stengård. For Alakoski, the identity attributed to her quarter is enough to create segregation and distance, and serves as a marker of poverty.

Mirroring their own areas are of course the city centers. Both Zlatan and Miira describe their stirred up feelings of entering the center of town. It was a foreign experience for them. Rosengård's distance from the center of Malmö is 4 km, and Gårdsten has a relatively good public transport connection with the Gothenborg center (which is around 13 km away). However, the feelings of cultural difference amongst the teenagers were strong. The feelings encompassed the sensation of being different in terms of language, clothing, gestures, behaviors, or resources. The youngsters' incursions into the city center appeared to reinforce their feelings of exclusion. The cultural assignment of meaning to the distance from the center of town, and the accompanying sense of exclusion, cannot be measured in the number of kilometers or bus and tram connections. The distance experienced should be seen as symbolic and cultural; this is also discussed by Andersson [8] and Boström [6]. The three stories focus on the difficulty the characters faced when moving from their original suburb to other parts of the city, and consequently, to other parts of society. The difficulty they all expressed underlines the distance between their own surrounding and the rest of the society; they felt excluded and stigmatized as coming from the lowest part of society and carrying along all the prejudices associated to this provenance. It was easier to stay inside of the area, where codes, habits, and rules were well-known, than to be confronted and often disqualified in the unknown parts of the city.

The three accounts provide an impressive list of problems. Nevertheless, there are countervailing elements showing how the main characters are precariously building their future. Alakoski's, Olsson's, and Ibrahimovic's accounts are very personal and involve love stories and the social network is

described as very important for the main figures (e.g., they shared their scarce resources, such as cigarettes and alcohol). This solidarity and friendship should prevent us from seeing the youth as only anarchic, disruptive, and blindly violent [59].

In light of Colantino's and Dixon's dimensions [15], the novels emphasize the importance of the softer aspects of social sustainability [15], such as leveraging social capital and changing local cultures.

When reading and analyzing the text according to the framework of social sustainability, it appears, time and time again, that even if many of the features related to a socially sustainable community are present in the stories (e.g., employment, social services, and good public transport), such features are not enough to erase the feelings of deprivation and exclusion. These observations are in many aspects similar to the results of more traditional academic researches. However, the analyses of the literary accounts give an in depth insight of how the different issues occur through time and allow an emergent view of the processes at stake. Similar to the work of other narrative studies, the incorporation of subjective and emotional perspectives contribute to a holistic insight of the characters of deprived areas. It deepens the comprehension of the various exclusion processes and illustrates how these processes reinforce each other. In doing so it gives the reader an insider view of the realities accounted for by the residents.

Creating sustainable cities in all three dimensions, economic, environmental, and social, appears to require an unusually broad, orchestrated set of efforts and resources. The city councils and a range of other players have continually, over the last thirty years (at least), launched public initiatives to handle the issues (or perhaps to simply make it appear that "that something is being done" and create legitimation). Currently, both Göteborg and Malmö have a whole range of such initiatives; one example is "Bergsjön 2021" an initiative to renovate a deprived neighborhood outside of Gothenburg [60]. Colantano and Dixon [15] refer to local experiences throughout cities in Europe and claim to find examples of social sustainability improvements in neighborhoods. Törnquist *et al.* [61] are advocating for mixed housing, though Andersson claims that experiences of mixed housing are, thus far, an under-researched area [3].

Critical Discourse Analysis has acted as a sensitizer for the character and content of the discourse and has spurred sensitivity for the possibilities and limitations of the genres of novels, biographies, and borderline mixtures to contribute to trustworthy knowledge [34]. Alakoski [17] especially uses intertextuality, and mixes present and past, biographic elements and political commentary, in telling several stories (i.e., on contemporary poverty, on the experiences of the author, as teenage girl with her parents, and more).

6. Conclusions: Tales of the Suburbs

This paper intends to look at literary accounts as contributing to the understanding of deprived areas. Most of the descriptions found in the stories match the already identified problems of these areas. But the stories contribute to our understanding of how these issues occur following individuals over a long period of time, the analysis of the different segregation and exclusion processes as well as their superposition acting as reinforcement of each other allow understanding of how solutions provided by society are turned down by the same people who should benefit from them. They underline the distance between the social and political structure, and the institutions and the public

they want to address. They stress the difference of situations for the successive generations of immigrants and how the second generation is trying to build an identity and culture that fit with their own surroundings, and which stigmatize them in other parts of the cities. The approach adopted here has enabled contributions focusing on literary accounts based on the contextualized, lived experience of former inhabitants. It provides qualitative narratives predominantly on non-social sustainability, in the deprived neighborhoods. Moreover, the narratives and our analysis juxtaposing them with social sustainability dimensions reveal a less fairy-tale like account on contemporary Sweden in deprived suburbs, which is also supported by other sources [2–4,61].

The accounts call for people in charge of urban transformation to better understand the complex and largely culturally-oriented set of challenges for establishing social sustainability. Changing configurations of space may contribute to changing this situation, and reducing the possibility of exclusive and antagonistic identities forming but actors engaged in developing these areas have to be aware of the complexity of the segregation processes at stake. They will have to invest more time and rigorous sets of improvements to enable acceptance, and to commence a journey towards social sustainability.

Sweden is usually at the top of rankings measuring welfare and the egalitarian aspects of society; but similar to some of academic work carried in these suburbs, the narratives analyzed show a less rosy depiction of the situation in the country. We can remind ourselves that tales, such as those told by H.C. Andersen or the Grimm Brothers, can be rather unpleasant but usually have a happy ending. It would be great if these tales of the city could help even very modestly for this to happen for the deprived suburbs.

Author Contributions

The contribution to the article is respectively of 60% for Buser and 40% for Koch.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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