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Sustainability and Preservation of Industrial Heritage in Stockholm: Dialogue or Conflict?

Over the last few decades, many European cities with significantly growing populations have undergone transformations, leading to the redevelopment of old industrial areas. A key characteristic of this development has been the demolition or repurposing of old industrial premises to create high-priced residential or commercial properties. Following this trend, Stockholm has experienced rapid changes that have had various consequences for the city's character, functionality, and identity.

This text focuses on post-industrial development and the preservation of Stockholm's industrial cultural heritage. Although Sweden has general state regulations concerning cultural heritage preservation, development projects in post-industrial districts are significantly influenced not only by national policies but also by local preservation practices and the differing visions and objectives of various stakeholders.

The officially constructed and promoted identity of a city has a significant impact on both the preservation of historical and cultural monuments and the self-identity and well-being of its inhabitants, as well as on international visitors' perception of the place. Unfortunately, city municipalities often pay little attention to the historical identity of a place, such as its industrial heritage, and instead opt for "empty" slogans to guide urban development. For example, Stockholm has been branded as a "world-class city" ("världsklass") or "The Capital of Scandinavia." These definitions have been questioned from different perspectives and in various contexts. This form of municipal marketing suggests an attempt to position Stockholm as a "World City," a term used by Doreen Massey in *World City*, where she highlights the importance of focusing on a place's local identity.

One crucial aspect of sustainability in construction projects is preserving the uniqueness of a place and its history. The concept of sustainability extends beyond being merely "carbon neutral" or "climate positive." Sustainability also involves valuing and maintaining what already exists—embracing circular economy principles rather than the ideal of perpetual economic growth. The historical dimension of sustainability emphasizes preservation over demolition and erasure and remembering over forgetting.

From the perspective of critical discourse analysis, sustainability can be seen as an "empty signifier"—a term that gains meaning through its use in different contexts and practices. Therefore, the discourse on preservation has the potential to shape the meaning of "sustainability" and influence how the concept is applied in urban development.

To illustrate this, I examine the discourse surrounding the preservation of industrial heritage in Stockholm. The city has a rich and diverse industrial history, significantly shaped by the Industrial Revolution. The key question is: How is this heritage being handled by city developers, politicians, and other stakeholders?

In *Industriminne: Stockholms stad och län – en industrihistorisk exposé*, Jan-Bertil Schnell notes that significant manufacturing activities existed in Stockholm as early as the 17th and 18th centuries (e.g., Kungsholmen's glassworks, Rörstrand, and Tumba paper production). In the 19th century, Stockholm followed the global trend of rapid industrial development, establishing major companies such as Alfa Laval, AGA, Electrolux, Alfred Nobel's AB Nitroglycerin, and LM Ericsson. According to Schnell, by the mid-19th century, Stockholm had become Sweden's undisputed economic capital with a strong industrial identity.

However, Stockholm's general development plans—such as *Översiktsplan för Stockholms stad* and *Vision 2040 – ett Stockholm för alla*—do not appear to address the city's industrial identity or its potential benefits for promotion and development. This situation is common in Sweden, with some exceptions, such as Norrköping, where local decision-makers have actively used industrial heritage to promote the city internationally.

The city's official presentation often pays little attention to expert knowledge about its past. Instead, city branding tends to use simplified narratives rather than engaging with the complexity of history. Slogans and marketing campaigns are shaped by current political and business agendas, which shift with changes in leadership, rather than by long-term planning and concerns. This raises questions about the sustainability of current development projects in Stockholm's post-industrial areas. Development projects that ignore, misinterpret, or exploit historical narratives and material cultural heritage cannot be considered truly sustainable. It is therefore essential to define clear criteria for cultural sustainability in post-industrial redevelopment and establish standards for industrial heritage preservation.

Although the preservation of industrial heritage has been debated since the 1960s, decisions in this field are still often influenced more by personal opinions than by professionally defined preservation guidelines. Furthermore, Sweden's segmented system of *K-marked* buildings is not always well suited to the complex preservation needs of industrial areas or the city's industrial identity. It also lacks clear guidelines for maintaining the industrial character of a district.

The preservation and redevelopment of post-industrial areas involve multiple perspectives and competing interests. Synchronic discourse analysis (SDA) provides a useful method for examining how the Stockholm municipality, private developers, and other actors engage with the city's industrial history, how decision-making takes place, and what consequences these decisions have for cultural heritage preservation. It also helps analyze the role that historians and other heritage specialists play in this process.

SDA has been used by scholars such as Heike Oevermann and Harald A. Mieg to study urban transformations and conflicts, offering strategies for bridging the gaps between stakeholders and resolving conflicts based on shared values. SDA highlights that different participants in a conflict—such as municipalities, developers, historians, and activists—have their own concepts, objectives, assumptions, and values. The method has proven useful not only for describing conflicts over post-industrial development but also for proposing solutions.

Through discourse analysis, we can investigate key questions such as:

1. What expert communities and organizations exist in the field of industrial history?
2. How do they influence official decision-making and construction practices?
3. What conflicts exist between historians and planning practitioners, and what common values could help bridge them?
4. What preservation practices are most sustainable, and what factors influence sustainable decision-making?
5. How can national standards for industrial heritage preservation be improved?

My research would like to examine inconsistencies in the decision-making process and implementation of industrial heritage preservation, exploring possibilities for more effective practices.

SDA can also help analyze how priorities are set in Stockholm's post-industrial property development, focusing on questions such as:

1. How is historical knowledge considered in city planning?
2. How is industrial heritage defined?
3. What networks are formed around industrial heritage preservation?
4. Which aspects of industrial heritage are prioritized for preservation (e.g., architecture, interiors, equipment, landscapes, social history, or industrial pollution)?
5. What practical solutions exist for preserving industrial history?

During the last decade, many international studies have focused on the redevelopment of post-industrial cities (Ferm & Jones; Power and Co; Zimmermann; Savitch; Cucca & Ranci; Carter; Marshall). The study of the rebuilding of industrial areas has often centered on the economic potential of industrial aesthetics. The notion of *industrial cool* was coined to describe this trend (Willim). Another aspect, widely analyzed by critics of neoliberal urbanization, is spatial justice in redevelopment projects. This has been addressed by many postmodern political geographers (David Harvey, Dolores Hayden, Edward Soja, Neil Smith, Miguel Robles-Durán, etc.) and can be related, among other things, to the problem of gentrification in post-industrial areas. Yet another aspect of this theme is the aesthetics of industrial areas and the development of the tourism industry around them. There is a growing trend of visiting industrial ruins and old industrial areas (e.g., Liverpool; Chernobyl). The attraction of old industrial areas has been explored by many international scholars, such as Tim Edensor in *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality*. The theme of industrial tourism is a well-researched subject and is reflected in academic journals such as the *Journal of Heritage Tourism*.

In Sweden, the concept of *industrial cultural heritage* has been discussed primarily in the museum context (through various projects at Nordiska Museet, Tekniska Museet) as well as by *Samdok*, a network for cultural-historical museums established in 1977 to facilitate cooperation on contemporary history and collecting, including industrial heritage. More recently, industrial history has been studied from a regional perspective, particularly in the Baltic Sea region, as seen in publications such as *Industrial Heritage Around the Baltic Sea*, edited by Marie Nisser, and regional research projects like *Baltic Urban Lab*, which explores the reuse of brownfield sites in the Baltic Sea region.

The discussions initiated by *Samdok* inspired the publication of books such as *Industriarvet i samtiden*, which examines the definition of industrial cultural heritage. This volume challenges the view of industrial heritage solely from a material perspective. It argues that the immaterial aspects of industrial life, such as the social and cultural experiences of industrial society, should also be preserved for future generations. The book's authors propose three perspectives for studying and preserving industrial cultural heritage. The first is the descriptive perspective, which focuses on documenting the social and cultural phenomena, organizational structures, ideas, and values developed by industrial society. The second is the preservation perspective, which involves selecting objects deemed worthy of preservation as cultural heritage. The third is the narrative perspective, which examines how industrial history changes over time and how interpretations of industrial cultural heritage evolve.

The volume also raises the issue of inclusion and exclusion in historical narratives. Maths Isacson explores this idea in his article *Det föränderliga industriarvet* in the same volume, arguing that industrial heritage is more than just "abandoned, partly ruined but architecturally interesting older buildings." He points out that a single place can encompass multiple stories and environments simultaneously.

Although Stockholm can be considered a post-industrial city, its post-industrial development has not yet been the subject of extensive academic attention compared to the many international research projects focusing on cities such as London, New York, and Liverpool, where post-industrial development and heritage preservation have been key topics. A study is needed to complement existing knowledge of Stockholm's industrial history with an analysis of how industrial heritage preservation is organized and managed in the city.

Case studies could focus on post-industrial redevelopment projects in the Stockholm region, such as Kvarnholmen, Lövholmen, and Slakthusområdet. These projects demonstrate a shift from older redevelopment approaches, such as the transformation of the industrial district near Älvsjö in the 1980s, when industrial heritage preservation was not a priority, leading to the demolition of older buildings from the early 1900s. In more recent projects, there is a visible intention to preserve the industrial appearance of building facades and to monumentalize industrial heritage through public design (e.g., a playground designed to reflect the district's industrial history). At the same time, historically significant industrial interiors continue to be destroyed, often without proper documentation before demolition. As a result, elements of industrial history that could at least be preserved through media, video, or photographic documentation are disappearing without adequate archival efforts.

Thus, it is necessary to examine the decision-making process and routines, as well as the use of the concept of sustainability, which determine how industrial cultural heritage is preserved—or destroyed. What influences decision-making, what are its consequences for industrial heritage preservation, and why is proper archiving not always organized?

My preliminary study of official urban development documents published by Stockholm Municipality, along with test interviews with municipal employees (Stockholms Stad, Nacka Municipality), revealed a limited interest in preserving industrial heritage within the broader vision for Stockholm's regional development and branding. Each post-industrial district was addressed separately, and there was no standardized practice or policy for preserving post-industrial heritage.

The preliminary study also shows that Stockholm's industrial identity—largely neglected in the 1980s, 1990s, and even the early 2000s—now appears to be attracting some attention. However, sustainability is rarely the real objective of this renewed interest. Instead, the focus tends to be on the marketing potential and commercial value of old industrial buildings. These objectives influence demolition and reconstruction practices, shaping decisions about which historical environments are preserved and which are considered unworthy of conservation. For instance, industrial machinery and interiors are often demolished, whereas architectural elements have a better chance of being preserved—though certain building types, such as silos, remain at high risk of demolition.

Although some changes can be seen in how urban planners and property developers approach the preservation of industrial identity (e.g., the redevelopment of Slakthusområdet in Stockholm), many questions remain regarding preservation practices.

These include the conservation of interiors, the continuation of established social life connected to an area, and the documentation of demolished buildings and environments. The concept of sustainability should not be left solely to decision-makers, politicians, and commercial developers. It should be shaped and developed by cultural heritage professionals and activists to become more dynamic, comprehensive, and multidimensional.

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