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‘Can we Mec the Municipality?’ Emerging voices of young people in a segregated urban landscape

Frederik Aagaard Hagemann

Department of Landscape Architecture, Planning, and Management, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU), Alnarp, Sweden

ABSTRACT

This article details the failure and success of an action research project that experiments with foregrounding young people’s perspectives in visions of future, sustainable, urban landscapes in Malmö, Sweden. In a range of future-creation workshops, the author, an assistant, and 34 young people aged 15–20 from two low-income neighbourhoods developed analyses, visions, and concrete change proposals for meaningful interventions in Malmö’s urban environment. The primary contribution is the young participants’ analyses of the subjective experience of a segregated urban landscape, the facilitation and contextualisation offered by the action researcher, and the integrative visions and actions that arose. The open-ended approach allowed participants to accentuate both diverse experiences and gathering points (such as a shared metaphor). The article highlights the discursive limits encountered by participatory processes related to urban landscape planning, as well as the methodological openings offered by critical utopian action research to experiment with overcoming these limits.

KEYWORDS

Action research; urban landscape; democracy; young people; segregation

Landscape democracy: setting the scene with reluctance

There is a near-total silence among the young people in the meeting room, as the researcher–facilitator writes “Sustainable Urban Landscapes of the Future—According to Young People in Malmö” on a long piece of paper stuck to the wall. As the rustling of the pen over the paper settles, the brief glances from the young participants quickly turn down towards phone screens or disappear inside the hoods of jackets. Despite substantial encouragement and insistence that the content of the project is for them to define, the young participants seem reluctant to engage. When prodded, one asks “Landscape…what?” and another declares she is “tired of sustainability”, as she had been part of a sustainability-related project before and it had not seemed relevant to her at all, and she got nothing out of it. They have been invited from two nearby neighbourhoods to help work out alternative visions for what the future of the urban landscapes they live in might look like. As the researcher–facilitator realises that this was never going to be the title of a project that the young participants could feel ownership over, the meeting turns into a collective brainstorming of what could be a title of a project related to the built and natural environments that these young people inhabit. When they discuss elements of their lives around the streets and parks and squares, along waterways, under trees, and in buildings in their neighbourhoods, participants agree to call it their “urban environment” (stadsmiljö[1]), and are suddenly alive with ideas. With this new term and some further remarks about what could be key themes (“safety!”, “mental health!”, “having fun!”, “clean water!”, etc.), all 34 young people sign up to participate in a series of workshops over the coming year.

CONTACT Frederik Aagaard Hagemann frederik.aagaard.hagemann@slu.se

Around the world, attempts at greening urban landscapes have produced forms of exclusion and marginalisation (Anguelovski, Connolly, & Brand, 2018; Gulsrud & Steiner, 2019). Despite profound efforts to improve social sustainability and highlight environmental justice at the highest policy-level, Anguelovski et al. (2018) argue that current agendas for 'greening' the urban landscape often risk locally unwanted land use, and fosters more disengagement between citizens and planners and practitioners. In Malmö, where the research project in the above vignette takes place, agendas for a more green and sustainable city have been shown to prioritise economic growth and technical landmarks, while patterns of segregation go mostly unmentioned (Holgersen & Malm, 2015). The city is Sweden's youngest, but the outlook on life and living environments (and even life expectancy) varies markedly, depending on which area you grow up in (Salonen, Grander, & Rasmusson, 2019). Meanwhile, expressive agendas for sustainability have materialised in visually enticing and affluent areas close to the coast such as Västra Hamnen, which has become the new mascot for green planning in Malmö with its green roofs, innovative stormwater solutions, and energy-efficient housing, all of which blend seamlessly into the urban lives taking place there (Jönsson & Holgersen 2017). Broader visions of social sustainability in this region have been shown to falter when faced with private landownership and development agendas (Baeten, 2023), leaving a more diverse public deliberation about key priorities in future sustainable urban landscapes largely absent. Greening agendas for the urban landscape in Malmö and elsewhere fail to foster broad democratic deliberation and action, and remain confined to functionalistic, technical planning and policies, which risk perpetuating current social sustainability problems posed by segregation and other societal challenges (Rutt & Gulsrud 2016). A more inclusive democratic process for deliberating and planning future urban landscapes needs to start with key interest groups—such the young people above—who must live the longest with both the consequences of and answers to the multiple sustainability crises faced by society.

In contemporary scholarship and professional practice, landscape is a key nexus for understanding the interaction of natural and human life (Görg, 2007), not least in cities, which provide an ideal microcosm for understanding socioeconomic drivers of change, and the way human lives and nature are inscribed in them (Elmqvist, Alfsen, & Colding, 2008). The European Landscape Convention states that 'landscape' is an area shaped and perceived by people (Council of Europe, 2017). In this sense, landscape points to something which people have in common, which should help to ensure everyone's wellbeing (Egoz, Jørgensen, & Ruggeri, 2018). Egoz et al. (2018) emphasise how understanding differences in political power and social- and economic capital are fundamental to a democratic engagement with landscape. How the meaning of, and common interest in, the landscape is established—and by whom—are contested questions which span deeply subjective and large-scale societal experiences and interests. In the Swedish context, young people are broadly considered an 'unruly' and often problematic group in state- and market-led agendas for urban- and landscape development (Dikec, 2017; Pries & Qviström, 2021). Pries and Qviström (2021) show how visions of leisure planning and welfare landscapes to address also young people's needs have appeared, and gone, in different historical moments, and how it is likely that broader social ideals for urban landscapes remain elusive for large groups of citizens.

Combining the words 'landscape' and 'democracy' helps materialise social processes into concrete questions about shared living environments (Egoz et al., 2018) Thus, the notion of 'landscape democracy' have helped underline the landscape as an important and tangible democratic arena for practicing rights and freedoms in public deliberation. In Europe, there has long been a strong emphasis on public deliberation, consensus-building, and the procedural elements of democracy, while increasing attention in later decades has been paid to elevating marginalised experiences and voices that are typically repressed in the public sphere (Fraser, 1990). This is also reflected in scholarship on spatial planning, where Knudtzon (2018) has noted how conventional liberal understandings of democracy and participation become 'too thin' when pluralistic and contradictory interests are at stake (p. 13). She argues for the need to experiment with and include more transformative approaches to in-depth democratic deliberation on basic spatial priorities.

This would entail new and varied responsibilities for planners and practitioners to facilitate deeper democratic processes, and wider recognition of the effects of inequality and marginalisation (Friedmann, 2011). Young people are a key demographic for exploring new democratic processes and ways for practitioners and citizens to take collaborative action on key democratic priorities for a transforming city. Young people stand at the edge of full, formalised citizenship rights (Bourdieu, 1993), but are often neglected as an interest group (Johansen, 2016), and remain peripheral in decision-making processes regarding their own living spaces (Percy-Smith, 2015). Participatory processes with young people therefore offer rich potential for exploring alternative means of democratic collaboration between citizens, practitioners, and scholars.

Young people's struggle for participation in public space is on the rise in policy agendas and has been increasingly well-described in research (Walther, Batsleer, Loncle, & Pohl, 2019). Bruselius-Jensen, Pitti, & Tisdall (2021) demonstrate both new opportunities arising in young people's participation in a European context, but also how austerity policies and structural inequality keep large groups of young people locked into trying to get by, and largely preclude the possibilities for young people to effect change. Conventional participatory frameworks and procedures fail when it comes to engaging with young people who have experienced marginalisation (Bladt & Percy-Smith, 2021). Other procedural factors also inhibiting meaningful participation for young people include tokenistic processes and a deficit-oriented perspective that makes their participation conditional upon the young people participating in a way that is exclusively defined by adults (Pohl, Batsleer, Loncle, & Walther, 2019). In short, young people rarely have a substantial say over processes or outcomes, and are considered in need of education by adult professionals before their input can be taken into consideration. While citizens' involvement and participation—for example in public hearings and consultations—has become an increasingly important priority in landscape planning, the focus remains mostly procedural and allows for continued expert-dominance (Calderon & Butler, 2020). This limits young people's chances of developing a sense of citizenship in relation to urban landscapes, and risks leaving the people working with landscapes and the young people who inhabit them increasingly irrelevant to each other. An inclusive agenda for sustainable landscape transformation needs to bridge the practical and experiential gaps between municipal decision-makers, planners, investors, and those who live with the effects of segregated cities and socioeconomic inequality. The open and explorative question tackled by this paper is how collaborative planning processes for sustainable landscapes can become relevant in the context of young people's lives. Inspired by critical action research, the paper explores methodological arrangements, which allow sustainable urban landscape transformation processes to come into dialogue with citizens' own deliberations over problems and visions for the future of their living environments.

Action research and landscape democracy from the margins

Social theorists have long argued against participatory approaches that pre-determine citizens' roles, arguing that the result is a 'managed' and 'passive' citizenry who only fulfil predefined roles dictated by experts and practitioners (Sennett, 2003) and fail to address fundamental questions of inequality in participation in the public sphere (Fraser, 1990; Sennett, 2004). Scholarship concerning young people's participation has developed framework understandings such as youth-adapted 'ladders of participation' (cf. Botchwey, Johnson, O'Connell, & Kim, 2019; Hart, 1992) which can serve as critically reflective tools for scholars and practitioners considering methodological choices and limitations. Meanwhile, emerging approaches grounded in young people's participation have adopted radical democratic and transformative stances which, for example, foreground conflicts and protests, or begin by exploring young people's experiential horizons and own analyses of problems and priorities in their lived contexts (Walther et al., 2019; Bladt & Percy-Smith, 2021). Youth participatory action research and critical utopian action research have provided in-depth perspectives and action in renewing basic democratic

institutions; especially in social, educational, and cultural work (Bladt & Percy-Smith, 2021; Percy-Smith, 2015; Tofteng & Bladt, 2020).

Action research projects have strived to allow problem definitions that appear in everyday life enter into dialogue with more generalised concerns, and develop citizen capacity to take on increased responsibility for common affairs—a democratic task, which mainstream society largely neglects at the expense of limiting citizens to consumers, clients, or users of particular services (Svensson & Nielsen, 2006). Starting with what Nielsen and Nielsen (2016) call 'the basic democratic question of how do we want to live?', Critical Utopian Action Research (CUAR) has been established as a methodology that experiments with deepening democratic processes by introducing terms of social learning and imagination as essential for democratic renewal and sustainable transformation (Egmose et al., 2020; Paaby, Nielsen, & Nielsen, 1988).

CUAR has found relevance in experiments with democratic governance of nature (Nielsen & Nielsen, 2006), participatory processes with marginalised young people (Tofteng & Bladt, 2020), and in overcoming conventional obstacles to democratic participation to envision transformative change with young people in marginalised life situations (Bladt & Percy-Smith, 2021). These examples have shown methodological pointers for a systematic, analytical engagement with 'prefigurative political engagement', which Waterman (2018) ties to democratic landscape citizenship. Inspired by CUAR, this study consists primarily of a range of future creation workshops (Paaby et al., 1988) and thematic workshops (Bladt & Nielsen, 2013) leading to concrete change proposals and interventions led by the young people taking part in the process. Following a progression from critical analyses and the generation of utopian ideas followed by an action-oriented realisation phase, the future-creation workshop (FCW) format (Jungk & Müllert, 1987) has proven to be a fruitful space for maturing everyday life experiences and ideas, and providing 'free spaces' (Bladt & Nielsen, 2013) where the power hierarchies structuring influence in society can be paused.

The experiment explores how substantive or radical democratic dimensions (Calderon & Butler, 2020; Castiglioni & Ferrario, 2018; Jones, 2018) of democratic participation can be facilitated in landscape planning with citizen groups. Nielsen (2024) underlines this potential in CUAR by drawing lines from Bakhtins' theory of dialogue and space for plural voices to Negt's theory of democratic learning. Spaces with plural voices necessarily contain conflict, if it allows the substantial difference between individuals and their particular life experiences to be expressed. Deeper democratic deliberation that aims to lift plural voices depends on what Nielsen and Nielsen (2016) call a 'capacity for tolerating ambivalence' between individual and collective (and ultimately societal) expressions of problems and priorities. They argue that a substantive social imagination and alternative, democratic visions for future scenarios can only arise when participants can express—and start to address—central ambiguities and problems in their livelihoods. Furthermore, the open use of language is crucial, as authoritative words in professionalised discourses can act as tools of top-down power with people who have not had a chance to make them their own (Nielsen, 2024). Language and key terms in collaborative work can, on the other hand, acquire new meanings to the people involved, and provide new forms of autonomy and control over one's own life conditions when kept open for deliberation among the participants (Nielsen, 2024).

These conceptual tools have been central to the development of future-creation workshops as an action research methodology (Egmose et al., 2020; Jungk & Müllert, 1987; Paaby et al., 1988), consisting of three primary dimensions: critique, utopia, and action, along with a few procedural rules which are discussed and negotiated in an initial collaboration contract. The purpose of the various phases and procedural rules is to collect individual experiences that eventually form collective and democratically negotiated analyses of the phenomenon in question. This serves as a common basis for taking action towards realising the stated utopian ideas. Nielsen and Nielsen (2016) describe how these steps encourage participants' 'social imagination' that can mature hopeful and creative—but also negative and ambivalent

subjective—experiences and form collective ideas for change and action regarding the common affairs of society; i.e. the urban environment. The following section describes how the process and outcomes were developed and negotiated in collaboration with the young participants in this study, and the methodological and practical arrangements that arose during the process.

Future-creation workshops: critique, utopia, and action

> …A few weeks into the process, the researchers' introduction of a workshop was followed by a hesitant silence from the participants, until one of them declared: "it is impossible". While the researcher wrote this on the wallpaper as the first, critical keyword/phrase, the assistant asked whether the participant could elaborate briefly on what he meant. He looked around and explained that it was "impossible for us to change anything" in relation to the urban environment we had been discussing at the initial meeting.

The exclamation above is of course a very understandable reaction, both given the somewhat unusual situation of being offered a space to talk more holistically about the young participants' lives in society, and how they relate to the urban environment. This central ambivalence never left, but as the workshops progressed through critical and aspirational discussion of their urban environments, the young participants eventually developed concrete change proposals and started bringing them to life. The section below details the context and specific methodological arrangements that applied to the young people's work with the possibilities and impossibilities in taking on increased responsibility for their urban environments.

For over two years (Oct. 2021–present), a PhD student and a research assistant have been engaged with a group of 34 young participants aged 15–20 in Malmö, Sweden to explore the possibilities and barriers for them shaping their urban environments. Over the course of the project, the 34 quite different young participants have been involved to varying extents, but in all cases, more than once and in key analytical moments. We held bi-weekly workshops for more than a year, with everything from 2 to 25 participants showing up, and the work on realising their change proposals is still ongoing, with around 16 young participants actively involved. The workshops have played out in multiple locations, primarily in- and around the neighbourhoods of Seved and Hermodsdal, where most of the participants live. The neighbourhoods are relatively close, but both are characterised as low-income (socioeconomically vulnerable, in municipal wording) and experience territorial stigma (Shahrad, 2023; Wacquant, 2008). Both neighbourhoods also have a lack of services such as libraries or other public facilities where meetings might take place. Several of the female participants remarked that it might be hard for them to be allowed by their parents to go too far from their homes and schools, especially if the meetings were to extend into the evening, so finding a place and time to meet have at times has been an almost insurmountable obstacle. Several meetings have been outside, occasionally held in a falafel restaurant, but often in more institutional spaces where the researchers could lean on previous contacts to gain access.

The analytical workshops detailing critiques and utopias all followed a basic structure, beginning with a brainstorming session involving thematic processes where key themes were distilled from the initial spectrum of keywords and phrases written on the wall. This happened in an open discussion where the young participants located which key experiences and ideas were (at least somewhat) shared by more people in the room. The verbal character of these workshops was contrasted by interspersed aesthetic exercises, such as sketching and small pantomime plays to investigate aesthetic and embodied aspects of the points they brought up. Several smaller walks in the surrounding neighbourhoods, and spontaneous mappings of amenities and discomforting factors contributed to participants' reflective processes.

For each phase, the young participants went through rounds of voting to elect which critiques and utopian ideas they considered the highest priority. Out of the elected themes, a

rough (but also acute) utopian vision for their urban environment arose. In the following discussions, the vision was turned into change-proposals and actionable steps that the young people could start taking themselves, with some support from the action researcher and assistant—primarily to arrange meetings and ensure analytical consistency with the critiques and utopias the young participants had themselves established. In the later, action-oriented workshops, the researchers tried to encourage the participants to gradually take more ownership over the meetings themselves. In dialogue with the young participants, the researcher's role gravitated from one of facilitation to increasingly taking on supporting roles (Svensson & Nielsen, 2006), and especially as acting as 'project memory'; i.e. asking questions about the initial critiques and utopian visions as the change-proposals took shape and started being put into action. This methodological approach serves to both open up the basic conceptualisations of landscape as more than a discrete, tangible, objective unit of analysis, but rather as a democratic field of deliberation, conflict, and negotiation in a dialogical process with young citizens.

Findings from the limits of a landscape discourse

Urban landscapes and environments take on distinct meanings in different social groups, and with the group in question, the term 'landscape' had no apparent meaning at all, hampering meaningful engagement with a theoretical or professionalised agenda. The young participants' resistance to being drawn into a more focused and expert-driven discourse of 'landscape' is underlined by the edgewise and fragmented way the environment enters into the participants' work and considerations. As they showed the researcher around their neighbourhood, there was no place to sit down and discuss things or plan their actions. There were no welcoming green spaces, and when asked about specific sites, the young participants complained about traffic noise, the lack of outdoor furniture, and just looked abjectly at the concrete and barren grass of the inner yard of an apartment complex where some of the young participants live. The latter is, according to them, 'ugly, shitty, and boring', but was nevertheless chosen as the best place to sit down for a bit. Halfway through the meeting, the young participants decided we had to leave, because someone was glaring at us from a third story window, making them uncomfortable. Out in the street again, we stood in front of an abandoned industrial complex that now holds a go-kart track and a huge, paved parking area right in front of the building block where they live. Without exactly walking a mile in their shoes, the practical obstacles to something as simple as sitting down and talking about something outside in their neighbourhood served as a powerful reminder of the central ambivalence the young participants had expressed from the start. The acute alienation from the local landscape, and their own willingness to try to move beyond it and create something relevant and meaningful out of a seemingly irrelevant project prompt became only more elaborate in their conceptual, as well as practical and action-oriented experiments.

'Segregation of joy' and freedom to be oneself

After the initial brainstorming sessions and investigative exercises, the young participants discussed and elected the two critical themes they thought were most central and important. The first theme considered 'being judged by your background/appearance instead of by who you are' (empirical material, 2022[2]). This critique applied to urban environments ranging from schoolyards, to streets, parks, and even when going shopping (although some disagreed that in this case it felt less so). A few cited experiences of being kicked out of school and loosing access to the yard and opportunities to meet with friends that they knew. Others talked about how it was uncomfortable being out in public space because they almost always felt judged by the

people in that space by their look or behaviour. In a small pantomime play, the young participants acted out how one girl walks through the city while others walk up to her and put post-it notes on her jacket saying things like: 'troublemaker', 'criminal', 'poor', 'Muslim', 'terrorist'. The girl then walks away, crying, and as she exited the stage, all the post-it labels fluttered off her jacket, in an unintentionally poetic moment that the young participants did not fail to remark upon. When discussing this exercise afterwards, they discovered how there was nowhere on the stage—i.e. in the urban environment—where she could just be herself—she had to disappear for the labels to go away. This led them to discuss spatial aspects of what they had initially described more in purely social terms, and to notice the lack of places where they felt free to be themselves.

The other main critique considered the 'unequal standard' of different neighbourhoods, including infrastructure such as the state of bike lanes, schoolyards, and spaces for outdoor recreation and activity in general. Participants were concerned, as they saw other parts of the city undergoing renewal and becoming more attractive and nothing really happening in their neighbourhoods. They discussed, and showed in their pantomime play, how unfair it feels when seemingly more tax- and investment money goes to already well-off neighbourhoods while they witness disrepair and a lack of basic services and opportunities to have fun. They also described how these problems compounded and how many felt unsafe moving about in public spaces. Overall, they agreed that there seemed to be a large mismatch between needs in various urban environments, and the available resources to alleviate them. The discussion also returned to the large building complex housing the go-kart centre in one of the neighbourhoods—a complex none of them had ever been inside. When the researchers joined the group discussing this critique in depth, they explained that they shared experiences of a lack of access and exclusion, often with money as the mediating factor but also prejudice and location, and they had been reminded about the word 'segregation' that had been previously brought up. Looking at how they expressed this critique they had agreed that, for them, segregation had to do with the opportunity to find amusement, and to feel joyful in their lives, and especially while out in their urban environment. The combination of a more technical concept (segregation) and the common vernacular Swedish word for amusement (*nöje*), allowed them to unite their lived experience with broader understandings of structuring factors in their urban environment.

Visions of a city and a safe place

The utopia workshops played out over several instances, with very little participation in most, but after several attempts, most of the active participants had taken part and had the opportunity to contribute. The utopian themes that crystallised pertained to finding space in which one could feel 'free to be oneself' as well as mobility and easier access to places of education, jobs, affordable homes, and getting to feel joy and amusement in one's life. The utopian ideas matured from suggestions about everybody having guns, and total schoolyard privatisation, or making all of Malmö into a shopping mall, as the young participants discussed these proposals with each other. When prodded a bit about locating the utopias in the urban environment, two key ideas seemed to gather their perspectives. The first idea sprung from the utopian vision that everyone should feel free to be themselves somewhere in the urban environment, and not feel judged, but respected. Tangibly, the young participants envisioned 'an open indoor/outdoor recreation yard where you cannot get kicked out' and immediately formed a project group to start taking concrete step to make this idea reality. The second idea took an encompassing approach to making the urban environment accessible, and resulted in proposing an activity day that would offer young people from socioeconomically vulnerable neighbourhoods a chance to experience joy and amusement in different urban environments both active and outdoors, but also usually less-affordable, indoor activities like bowling and go-karts.

The open recreation yard

Opening a recreation yard in this environment was no small feat for the young participants. Their jaws dropped when they first arrived at the one feasible location (which did not require rent or an organisational number) we could find in their neighbourhood. It was an area around abandoned car garage offered to the group by Växtverket, a local NGO working with urban nature pedagogy and green space development. It was littered with construction materials, and the young participants declared that it could only be 'a catastrophe' to try to open a recreation yard here. After fifteen minutes of despair, they decided to try to make the most of it and engaged in a flurry of activity to clean- and tidy up the space for their opening event. A good ten hours later, they had successfully concluded their opening event, and were dancing around with vacuum-cleaners declaring it was 'the best day ever'. They had not just worked hard to create a welcoming space, but also been accomplished professionals both organisationally and pedagogically in running the day's event. They had made plans and budgets, advertised, given speeches, and arranged games and creative sessions as well as food and snacks and other entertainment for the 20+ young people, mostly from their own building blocks, who had shown up. The exact number of participants was a little hard to gauge, and several times throughout the opening event the young participants discussed and adjusted how to open the rolling gate to the area should be in order to be both welcoming, but also create a protected space where they could help others be more themselves and not face prejudice and exclusion. The experiment with this threshold related both to the painful experience of feeling unwanted in public spaces and simultaneous searching for a free space to 'be oneself' and feel safe, but also became an explicit symbol for the difficulty in- and desire to take responsibility for more than their own lives and create something lacking in Malmö's urban landscape.

The activity day against segregation of joy

The other change proposal was a recurring activity day that could counteract the segregation of joy and amusement for young people who normally have little access to the majority of free-time activities offered by Malmö's urban environment. The first experiment with this took the form of an activity day. Around 12 young people had been identified and invited via local grassroots groups (TiF, ZigZag). Their eyes widened as they walked into the sport- and recreation facility and they saw the trollies you could take to carry around various sports equipment. One of the participants asked, almost indignantly, whether 'this was what rich kids do on weekends'. The young project team experimented throughout the day with taking leadership, allowing more free activities, and after handing out prizes for participation at the end, they collected input from the participants. These underlined, not just the joy of having finally accessed the elusive but imposing go-kart facility and having had fun there, but also how the project team had made everyone welcome with equal parts respects and encouragement, which had excluded no one. Both the actions the young people took, and the phrasing and framing of them as actions to pursue a world without the 'segregation of joy' captures the struggle over words. The activity day became a wider learning experience, as the young people increasingly took charge by combining lived-in and professionalised discourses and created a concept that broke with existing barriers to pursuing a joyful youth in Malmö. The continuation of the activity day is, however, up for debate. While the concept was considered solid and successful in the initial trial, the dependency on further funding and actors with resources is a daunting factor, in addition to the strain that up- and out-scaling put on their daily lives to find time for meetings and developing proposals. Ultimately, the idea and need for support and funding begs central questions that are yet to be addressed about whose responsibility it is to address the underlying issues with mobility and equal access to the amenities in the urban environment.

A conflictual experiment and a gathering metaphor

Several times over the years, the work broke down completely. Central frustrations related to questions of gender and prejudice, and differing perceptions of safety and ability to be oneself and feel joy arose. The discussion gravitated, often in conflicting ways, around how much prejudice you face depending on the colour of your skin, or how much stigma different cultural backgrounds faced, or the different kinds of insecurity girls and boys felt in urban environments. In some cases, the researchers intervened, and reminded participants that we can not expect to have perfect and immediate solutions ready in the room to the diverse and important problems they brought up. These conflicts evidently showed how broader social tensions also arise in smaller, protected democratic processes, and eventually how the young participants found ways to handle the ambivalence they felt about working together. The researchers provided some methodological answers to breakdowns in the process that mostly consisted in dividing the group into subgroups that could find common ground and expression to then take stronger arguments to the larger group. In a creative use of a metaphor, the young participants themselves eventually ended up showing a more profound answer to the challenges with conflicting senses of identity and experiences with prejudice and powerlessness.

The central ambivalence around the change proposals' 'impossibility' arose again when the researchers proposed that it was time to present the project ideas to a wider audience and see whether there might be ways to begin constructive dialogues with relevant authorities such as the municipality to find support for larger-scale change. In the initial project design, this would start with a research-workshop where the young participants presented their analyses and change proposals to municipal practitioners, academics, and representatives from local interest groups. However, they considered this format too daunting, and the initial contact was cut short several times, as they refused to reach out to anyone outside the project team.

After one such meeting, the researchers and young participants walked to a nearby Burger King, where the young participants had requested a workshop-dinner (as we had had for all meetings that spanned afternoon and evening). The researchers suddenly found the young participants laughing and joking about someone who talked about having 'mec'ed' the school to get time off. None of the researchers understood what it was to 'mec' something, but the young participants explained how it meant to turn something that seemed adversarial to your advantage. At the next meeting, the word came up again, and to the young participants' collective joy, one participant loudly explained that he was going to 'mec' the municipality for everyone. The metaphor gathered the perspectives that they had at times forgotten that they shared, and gave them a joyful boost of confidence that diminished the uncertainty they felt about contacting local authorities to discuss their visions and change proposals for the urban environment. Instead of setting up a formal research workshop, the young participants decided to set out conducting their own experiments with the change proposals, and then to contact a few stakeholders at a time who might be able to contribute to their continuation.

Since then, initial dialogues have been started with relevant public institutions, and the recreation yard has, for example, secured a less 'catastrophic' venue for their next experiments with the help of the municipality's leisure-time office and a local library. The activity day idea has also been pitched to two local grassroots organisations, but the proposals and discussions at this point have mostly centred around concrete requests for support and collaboration. Any further engagement with relevant practitioners has been hampered by slow responses, as well as by the continued reluctance from the young people involved. However, the ongoing collaboration and engagement from the young participants evidenced that at least some level of mutual relevance has been established. The deliberations and actions pertaining to the future of their shared urban environments have been spurred on from its difficult outsets.

Landscape democratic deepening and ambivalent engagement

The young people's analyses included visual aspects of their environment, such as the industrial complex and parking lots they stare at every day; the perceived ugliness and disrepair of their neighbourhoods; and their sharp contrast to other parts of town, to sociocultural and political aspects of access, exclusion, and prejudice. These are determined not just by 'objective' factors of what is located where in the city, but by economic, cultural, and deeply subjective factors such as the painful experience of living in front of an entertainment complex for young people that you have never had a chance to set foot in. Following through on these analyses, participants developed their own articulations and alternative change proposals. As with their problem articulations, the change proposals do not mirror conventional understandings of landscapes or sustainable transformation. There are no particular visions for green structures or outdoor space preferences that lend themselves to climate change adaptation, no pertinent request for street trees, raingardens, or a biodiversity-rich urban meadow. The young participants' rejection of the landscape term, when taken seriously, led them to a relevant, collaborative project. In this, they point out how places to meet and feel freedom to be oneself without prejudice do *not* currently exist. They also evidence how segregation hampers them from accessing the possibilities for amusement, entertainment and feeling joy, which other young people can access. Castiglioni & Ferrario (2018) point out the importance of engaging with the immaterial elements of landscape, like the shared experiences and feelings that drove the young participants to establish a new conceptual place in an abandoned car garage, to evoke the democratic potential of landscape. The open recreation yard became a poignant, if fleeting, critique of the cultural, political, but also spatial preconditions that play into the experience of marginality and segregation, but also a utopian answer in that, at least for a while, a place existed where they did not feel wrong, and could not be kicked out.

These findings confirm Pries and Qviström's (2021) analysis on the fragmented character of Swedish landscapes' contributions to young people's welfare, but also add nuanced understandings of the methodological implications and developments for democratic and inclusive transformations of urban landscapes. Theorists and practitioners in landscape democracy have taken great strides in delineating democratic theories, framings, and procedures—especially by focusing on conflict and protest, and in urban settings often by emphasising the spaces to gather for demonstrations, political protests, and movements that insist on preserving citizens' interests in urban landscapes in contrast to those of the state and the market. Finding places where 'subaltern counter publics' can form, seem a prerequisite for deepening landscape democratic engagement. The last few decades' advances in democratic theory and action research demonstrate some possibilities to engage with currently muted and alienated experiences, what Calderon and Butler (2020, with reference to Chantal Mouffe) consider 'the antagonistic dimension of landscape'. The ideas of free space and ambivalence tolerance in CUAR shows pathways for muted, subaltern experiences to not just be articulated, but to become guiding lights in participatory processes with people pushed to the margins of a wider democratic discourse around landscape.

The participants' critiques and utopian sketches constitute a shift in the discourse at the micro level, where they took responsibility for defining key problems in- and visions for their urban environments. This contrasts participatory approaches in urban green spaces, which conceptualise citizens as merely users or customers receiving services in the form of solutions within externally defined criteria. The discursive shift allowed a situated, critical and utopian landscape analysis to appear. While more radical theorising of landscape democracy tends to emphasise the access to open spaces to gather and protest (cf. Jones, 2018; Yigit-Turan, 2018), the acute need for a public place to feel oneself expressed by the young participants indicates the need for more protection for those who experience marginalisation. The

fieldwork presented here demonstrates instances of both intergroup- and state–citizen differences (Calderon & Butler, 2020) which the work of the young participants expressively clarify and counteract. Over the course the project, these differences have flared up, softened, and given way to a range of openings. In Fraser's theorising of subaltern public spheres (1990), the need for initially protected forums for marginalised life experience to be expressed is crucial, and in the landscape context, these might require spatial equivalents, as evidenced in the negotiations around how open the rolling gate to the test-venue of for the recreation yard should be. While expressively organising a temporary space for young people 'to be themselves', the participants' newfound sense of freedom and responsibility for young people's place in the neighbourhood was at odds with the rest of the world outside, which could only cautiously be invited in and trusted to live up to the different social organisation of this place.

The reluctance of the young participants to engage with professionals and institutions working with their immediate living environments points to the difficulty in merging the experimental, democratic deepening with existing practice. The relation to adult professionals and formalised systems of urban landscape planning and governance, and the difficulty in achieving meaningful dialogues with practitioners, have been a continuous and contentious thread in the collaborative work. While action researchers can act as a democratic broker, as numerous action research projects evidence, it is uncertain what a scalable model for action research engagement might look like. A final difficulty therefore concerns the often temporary and fleeting character of the processes. A few pointers can be found in the idea of a 'permanent workshop', as a more stable structure for experiments on the democratic renewal of society (Bladt & Nielsen, 2013), and systemic action research experiments with scaling numerous simultaneous in-depth local processes towards systemic change (Burns, 2014). Meanwhile, a key character of the CUAR engagement is the in-depth process in local situations where societal dimensions in individual- and small-scale collective horizons can be explored in their given contexts. Such reality checks are crucial for a nuanced, democratic discourse that allows shifts in priorities that reflect diverse interests to occur; especially in a landscape planning discourse which is often structured at larger scales (cf. Görg, 2007).

In this project, we have yet to explore sustainability- and landscape aspects that extend beyond the sociocultural horizon immediately foregrounded by the young participants. In their experiments with 'Mec'ing' the municipality, the young people in this project have provided valuable insight to how meaningful work can be performed at the limits of a landscape discourse in a segregated urban society. The change proposals might not detail immediate solutions to the urgent sustainability problems Malmö and cities around the world are facing. What they do show are alternative priorities and answers to 'what needs to be sustained?' (Egmose, 2015), or whose landscape is to become transformed into something greener (Castiglioni & Ferrario, 2018). In the larger organisational and institutional realities where planners and practitioners around urban landscapes finds themselves, facilitating processes which allow for deeper democratic dialogues and alternative answers to the predominant policies might seem a distant dream. However, when given space (both literal and discursive), and a few analytical tools for stimulating democratic learning, the young participants in this study shifted a localised discourse on 'urban environments' back into relevance in their everyday life horizon, and showed potential to turn those *impacted by* into those *involved in* planning the urban environment. If landscape is to be more than a realm for those who develop disciplinary knowledge and professionalised practice around it, and become a basic democratic entity that engages everyone in deliberation and action around local and regional social–ecological development, such open forms of participatory processes show promise in raising pertinent questions that bridge the abyss that often arises between professionalised discourse and the lived experience of urban landscapes.

Notes

1. All Swedish–English translations were made by the author.
2. Empirical material gathered from 2022 to 2024 by the author and Ingrid Altamirano, accessible by contacting the author.

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Informed consent

The participants' informed consent was acquired in the first information meeting where they signed up for participating in the workshops. A written form was provided, but as several participants seemed somewhat confused by this, I also brought up the key elements in open discussion, including anonymity and assurance that no sensitive data was to be gathered. This resulted in a collective note-taking paper, restating in simple terms the basic tenets of GDPR, explanations of how data was to be handled and published, the promise from the researcher to handle their input respectfully, and only pass on information that the participants agreed to. This process was presented to the University's legal team (SLU Juridik) who concluded that no further ethics approval was needed, given the data gathered did not include sensitive information and was of general public interest. As the project progressed and further research activities such as experiments in public space was included, verbal consent of parent and guardians of participants under 18 years of age was also acquired. Given the extensive time period that the project is running, the participants' have been periodically presented with the key research data and interpretations, and asked to confirm their consent to publishing the analyses and descriptions of events during the workshops and experiments.

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Notes on contributor

Frederik Aagaard Hagemann is a Ph.D. student and action researcher with a background in philosophy and human ecology. His research interests include sustainable landscape transformation as a democratic process, and marginalisation as a lens for understanding societal relationships with nature.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [FAH], upon reasonable request.

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