

AN ESSAY ABOUT NOTHING

FREDRIK TORISSON

INTRODUCTION

On the windswept farmlands outside Malmö, a series of high-rises notoriously keeps failing to materialize. This short essay is about that series of high-rises; it presents a hypothetical logic that explains why high-rises are successively proposed in the barren fields. The fields in question are located between where Malmö blends into its level surroundings and the head of the Øresund Bridge rises out of the landscape. The bridge connects Malmö to Copenhagen on the other side of the Strait, the two cities forming an international conurbation. On either side of the bridge, new city-forms are rising out of what previously were pastures and farmlands; the main Danish development project is called Ørestad, while the Swedish counterpart is known as Hyllie. In the larger conurbation, these developments are strategically located, both in terms of the cities of Malmö and Copenhagen, but also with regard to Copenhagen Airport. Together, these projects currently constitute Scandinavia's largest urban extension project by a good margin.

Both Hyllie and Ørestad are nodes in what one day will constitute the inter-connected chain of nodes that makes up the vision for the Øresund regional conurbation.¹ Ultimately, both Hyllie and Ørestad represent an urbanity aimed at the illustrious creative class, which, in the case of Hyllie, is allegedly deliberately segregated from the 1960s council estates that make up the immediate context.² In extension, one could understand Hyllie and Ørestad as prototypical for the Scandinavian post industrial new town as they are, or will be; urban entities in their own right. There can be little doubt that these are altogether different beasts than the new towns of the second half of the last century: both developments are centered around gargantuan high-end shopping malls, and their character is decidedly neoliberal, whereas in Hyllie for instance, private flats will outnumber rental flats by 70/30 percent.³ Hyllie is both a later and less ambitious development than Ørestad. Construction has been picking up pace since the completion of the rail tunnel that connects the station at Hyllie to central Malmö, and since the completion of Emporia, the shopping mall outside the train station. Hyllie will eventually contain 9,000 residences and approximately the same number of workspaces.

One piece is however conspicuously missing: the coveted landmark high-rise, the antenna to connect Hyllie to the flows of global finance while bestowing the area with a certain “metropolitanism” essential to a city still anxiously searching for form and identity.

THREE HIGH-RISES

The story of the high-rises begins in 1997. To much local bewilderment, the Norwegian developer and hotel entrepreneur Arthur Buckhardt presented plans for a 261-meter-tall hotel—Scandinavian Tower—designed by the architect Gert Wingårdh and located precisely in the middle of nowhere. The preconditions were that Buckhardt would be able to construct the hotel to open in connection with the completion of the Øresund Bridge. By May the following year, the projected height had increased to 301 meters; by July, it was 317 meters, and by September 325 meters. The last increment was allegedly intended to trump the Eiffel Tower’s new and slightly taller antenna. Local politicians were almost unanimously in favor of the project. The high-rise became a part of the planning for the area in 1999, and is included in the comprehensive plan the following year. It has since failed to materialize in any of its proposed shapes.⁴ The regional governing body was torn, with experts in opposition and politicians in favor. The project was delayed, and eventually a new criterion was set up: the tower would only be constructed if it could be completed in connection to the completion of the rail tunnel to central Malmö, then estimated to be in 2005. Ultimately, the rail tunnel was delayed and the plans for Scandinavian Tower were scrapped in 2004, after generating well over 600 newspaper articles⁵ and engaging authorities on local, regional, and national levels.⁶

The next high-rise to occupy the imagination and the bureaucrats in Malmö was Malmö Tower, a 180-meter residential tower with rented flats proposed by Annehem, a real estate developer and manager founded the year before. The high-rise was the subject of an international invited architectural competition including architectural offices as Coop Himmelb(l)au and Snøhetta. The winning proposal was designed by C.F. Møller and was presented with media fanfare at the MIPIM in Cannes 2006. The height was soon increased to 216 meters. Quoted in the local newspaper, the CEO of Annehem, Peter Strand, motivated the height increase as necessary for higher architectural quality and as compensation for the tower’s slenderness, in order to make the economy sound (!).⁷ Annehem was originally owned by a small group of financiers, including two local politicians.⁸ The company was introduced on the stock exchange in May 2007, an introduction that made substantial profits for all the original owners who had procured shares at a much lower price than the introductory offer.⁹ Soon after the introduction, the company started expressing

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doubts regarding the economic feasibility of the project itself, and it was eventually scrapped. The CEO motivated the cancellation by stating that they had learned that costs increase at a more rapid rate than height when it comes to skyscrapers.¹⁰

At this point, a third incarnation of the high-rise was presented by Annehem in late 2007, called Point Hyllie. Do note the dwindling height and ambition that can be traced through the name changes, from Scandinavian Tower, to Malmö Tower and eventually Point Hyllie. The same architects, C.F. Møller, designed Point Hyllie, and the completion date was set to 2011. The project comprises four phases, the first two of which are lower office buildings of 5 and 7 stories respectively, completed in 2010 and 2012; a 65-meter-tall residential tower, now reconfigured to a hotel and currently under construction; and the fourth phase, the 95-meter high-rise, was originally conceived as ownership flats with a completion date of 2011 and now projected as offices with a completion date of 2017—it remains to be seen if this is realistic. In October 2008, Annehem sold out most of its other real estate holdings and divided the takings among the owners, while finance for the Point Hyllie project remained uncertain. Soon after, Annehem was taken over by PEAB, another local real estate developer; today, it continues to operate as a subsidiary of PEAB.¹¹

IN SEARCH OF ANOTHER LOGIC

Why do these non-materializing high-rises repeatedly resurface on the fields of Hyllie? Why are the proposals automatically assumed to have a gravity around which the rest of the planning can orbit?

Come to think of it: Why would anybody want to build a high-rise in the middle of nowhere?

None of the projects have been sold by logic. Instead, the rhetoric has been strange, focusing on emotional arguments, regional machismo, or simply making no sense—for example, one local politician, Carl-Axel Roslund, was quoted stating that only women questioned the viability of Scandinavian Tower.¹² The lack of economic logic can to a certain extent be explained by the unprecedented situation of the construction of the Øresund Bridge and the rail tunnel under Malmö—there was no way of knowing how the situation would evolve; hence, there was a certain openness to arguments that otherwise would have sounded very odd indeed. On the surface, we are dealing with a series of attempts at constructing a high-rise in an ultimately rural setting, and as there was no logic to support the construction, they inevitably failed.

Hypothetically—and this is a purely hypothetical argument—one could, however, take a different view. What if we suspend judgment for a moment and suppose that these proposals were not failures based on the simple failure to materialize, but instead highly successful simulations of proposals for high-rises?

Without challenging the sincerity of any of the above-mentioned proposals, this essay will

speculate around the hypothesis that the failure to materialize is not a failure, but instead a basic part of the modus operandi of post-industrial architectural production.

Whether or not they are actually produced through simulation is of no concern, as it will have no effect on the end-result. If we, in the spirit of this, consider these proposals not as straightforward architecture proposals but as simulations of proposals, this will produce an entirely different understanding of what has and what has not been happening on the fields of Hyllie.

In order to elaborate on this, I will borrow a fragment of the theories of Jean Baudrillard from *Simulations and Simulacra*.¹³ Simulations are imitations of real-world processes, in this case the proposal of a high-rise. A simulated proposal for a high-rise would be one where the proposing party has no intention to actually realize the high-rise. Society and law are, according to Baudrillard, inherently unable to deal with simulation, as this would create a plethora of issues. Instead, Baudrillard claims, order will in most cases treat simulation as the real thing, what he refers to as the “Strategy of the Real.”¹⁴ Using a fake hold-up as an example, Baudrillard points out the impossibility of arguing in the face of the law that it was a simulation of a hold-up rather than a real hold-up. The consequences of the hold-up will be real as reality and simulation become intertwined and ultimately inseparable. In short, order (i.e., the dominant power) will use the strategy to “reinject realness and referentiality everywhere, in order to convince us of the reality of the social, of the gravity of the economy, and the finalities of production.”¹⁵

In terms of the simulation of the proposal for a high-rise, this works the same way: no matter how simulated a proposal may be, how unreal or unrealistic it is, it acquires a certain level of realness as it is introduced into planning, and this realness can neither comprehend nor afford to address simulations.¹⁶ The situation in Hyllie is exacerbated by the fact that nobody could accurately predict the effects that the completion of the Øresund Bridge would have on the local economy, which in turn produced an uncertainty that opened up the field for unorthodoxy in terms of real estate economics. A project that in other places would have been dismissed as ludicrous became perceived as potentially possible as the situation was not-yet-quantifiable due to the “known unknowns,” as Donald Rumsfeld would have put it. The effects of the simulations themselves were equally unpredictable. As simulations acquire a sense of realness, there is no difference from the real thing, and they may still produce the conditions of their own materialization. The proliferation of the famed Bilbao-effect is a similar way of exploiting something not-yet-quantifiable and the uncertainty in the differentiation between the real and the simulated it produces.

Regardless of whether the simulated high-rise in this case materializes, its acquired level of reality affects the real, material world around it.

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This is a peculiar and contradictory existence, where the real (or as Baudrillard would have it, simulated) governmental agencies address the high-rise proposal as a real process, and if their work is real, the high-rise proposal is real. The contradiction of the high-rise as at the same time real and unreal opens up a “wobble room,” or a room to act, and it is this room that the projects, if understood as simulations, exploit very well.

Looking at the three proposals above as simulations rather than actual proposals, they make a lot more sense. They all produce effects in what we consider ‘the real’ that are beneficial to their respective creators, in terms of publicity and buzz, in terms of building credibility and a reputation for progressive action in advance of the introduction on the stock exchange, and, in the last case, in terms of ultimately making itself viable—as Georg Simmel wrote in the beginning of the last century: “[S]peculation itself may determine the fate of the object of speculation.”¹⁷ *Again*, this is a speculative essay, and I am not suggesting this is the case in Hyllie; rather I am suggesting that it would not matter if it were. The purpose of this essay is instead to test a logic that holds that it would make sense to propose high-rise after high-rise in what is effectively an empty field.

The high-rise is not the only building type where the process can be simulated.

The particularity of the high-rise is rather its more extreme effects, making the type superbly suitable for simulation.

There are more governmental agencies involved in the planning process, which serves to make the proposal more “real” than other forms of simulated proposals.

There are more people affected, making the effects of the simulated proposal more profound and enhancing media attention to the “real” process of these governmental agencies; and finally, a high-rise proposal, real or simulated, is an extended process due to the aspects above, meaning that it has longer time, more exposure and more real-ness than any other simulated proposal.

The “wobble room” offered by the simulated proposal has been used very explicitly by the artist Sophie Warren and the architects Jonathan Mosley and Robin Wilson in the project *Planning for Utopia*, described in the book *Beyond Utopia*.



The hoarding on the site indicates that there is a certain amount of simulation going on. The text reads: "Quality Hotel View, Point Hyllie, opening here 2015."

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Quality Hotel View, Point Hyllie
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pointhyllie.se



Annehem



This image is accompanied by images of a high-rise, while the hotel under construction is in fact the smaller building, which is barely visible behind the high-rise in the image just to the left of the text. (Photograph by Fredrik Torisson.)

Planning for Utopia had the ambition to generate a proposal for a high-rise in Smithfield, London, and to introduce that proposal into the planning process. The aim here was to “establish a critical dialogue with these institutions and find new sites of productive tension between the ‘real’ and the ‘fictional’.”¹⁸ The simulated proposal becomes what Robin Wilson refers to as a “critical tool with which to speculate and reveal the limits of our present ‘reality’ and its systems.”¹⁹ The proposed content of a building was deliberately kept vague; a *vertical common*, and the discussion on what this could actually be was part of the project itself. The outcome of the project is presented in a screenplay, where the interactions (fictional or real) with the planning authorities are recounted. One specific episode involving “Organisation B” (played by CUBE—the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment) involves a challenge to the real nature of the project: whether a project is real or a simulation appears to be dependent on whether or not there is a specified client for the project. When there is no client, the project is deemed not real and consequently cannot be reviewed. Although unpredictable, London does not have the condition of not-yet-quantifiable necessary for the simulation to enter into the planning system in the first place.

One could argue that the simulated proposal for the high-rise, with various intentions, is in fact a type of architecture central to the production of the twenty-first century city and rather than failures, the series in Hyllie represents an essential part of the prototypical post industrial Scandinavian city, a theory made viable by the plethora of seemingly illogical proposals for high-rises in every major city in Sweden in a never-ending cascade, dutifully reproduced in design blogs and magazines. The simulated proposal for a high-rise finds its logic as a highly functional instrument of speculation, in all senses of the word. If the proposals for the high-rises in Hyllie are considered simulations, we end up in the postmodern hall of mirrors once again.

The proposed high-rises are not simply images of dreams that never materialized, they have an added layer, they have become the images of images of dreams that nobody had.

These high-rises were then not dreams but images of what somebody thought the dream might be or should have been. In that sense, the simulated proposals are simulacra of dreams, copies of dreams that never existed as dreams—copies without an original, as Baudrillard presumably would have put it. The imprints of the successive proposals remain in both the planning documents and the architecture that was produced in accordance with the plan that the high-rises would be constructed.²⁰ These would then in themselves be reflections of what their creators thought the aspirations of Hyllie could be—and these may paradoxically produce their own conditions for existence and ultimately materialize.

NOTES

- 1 For one version of this vision, see BIG's Loop City project. BIG, *Loop City—Live 3-d version*, film (Copenhagen: BIG, 2007), accessed June 4, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jems0eyKSdw>.
- 2 Guy Baeten, "Normalising Neoliberal Planning: The Case of Malmö, Sweden," in *Contradictions of Neoliberal Planning: Cities, Policies, and Politics*, eds. Tuna Tasan-Kok and Guy Baeten (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), 21–42.
- 3 Ibid., 31.
- 4 City of Malmö, *Översiktsplan för Malmö 2000* (Malmö: City of Malmö, 2000), accessed June 4, 2014, <http://www.malmo.se/Medborgare/Stadsplanering--trafik/Stadsplanering--visioner/Oversiktsplaner--strategier/Tidigare-oversiktsplan/Oversiktsplan-for-Malmo-2000.html>.
- 5 As a comparison, in 2003 another spectacular (though far smaller) project designed by Frank Gehry was presented in the area. This project generated (using the same search engine that includes most Swedish newspapers) a total of 14 articles.
- 6 Including Länsstyrelsen (The County Administrative Board), Riksantikvarieämbetet (the Swedish National Heritage Board), and many others.
- 7 "Nytt torn ska slå torson med 26 m," *Sydsvenskan*, December 24, 2006, 12.
- 8 "Storbyggarna på hyllievång Del 2 Grundarna täljer guld," *Sydsvenskan*, August 5, 2007, 7.
- 9 In the article above, the Swedish newspaper *Sydsvenskan* estimates that the profits of the chairman of the board come to a minimum 70,000,000 SEK.
- 10 "Så blir Hyllie Malmös hetaste stadsdel," *Aftonbladet*, November 20, 2007, 4.
- 11 "Fastställd utbytesrelation i Peabs erbjudande till aktieägarna i Annhem Fastigheter," PEAB, accessed June 5, 2014, <http://www.peab.se/Om-Peab/Press-och-media/Pressmeddelanden/Pressreleas1/?pid=429638>.
- 12 "Planerad jätteskrapa omstridd ny symbol för Malmö," *Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå*, February 27, 1998.
- 13 Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, trans. Mark Poster (Cambridge: Polity, 1988).
- 14 Ibid., 177.
- 15 Ibid., 179.
- 16 Planning does however often try to weed out simulations, such as the proposal for a 585-meter-tall high-rise brought to the table between Scandinavian Tower and Malmö Tower by Carl Torsten Bernerstedt, where the project financing was considered highly uncertain; it was politely refused.
- 17 Simmel quoted in Fredric Jameson, "The Brick and the Balloon: Architecture, Idealism and Land Speculation," *New Left Review* 228 (1998).
- 18 Sophie Warren and Jonathan Mosley, *Beyond Utopia 5*, Surface Tension Supplement (Berlin: Errant Bodies Press, 2012), 14.
- 19 Ibid., 15.
- 20 In order to analyze the imprints, one need only to glance at the 1994 *Brostaden*, the original comprehensive plan for Hyllie after the bridge based on a much lower density, which was replaced as Buckhardt proposed Scandinavian Tower. Malmö Tower was part of the competition context for both the square, Hyllie Stationstorg, and appears repeatedly in the winning proposal *Fagus* by Sweco Architects. "Fagus," City of Malmö, accessed August 12, 2014, <http://www.malmo.se/download/18.5d8108001222c393c008000156316/1383646839911/fagus.pdf>.
Furthermore, Malmö Tower was referred to as a point of reference in the land allocation competition for the residential area and illustrations appeared throughout the competition brief. City of Malmö, *Vision och förutsättningar kring markanvisningar: Hyllie* (Malmö: City of Malmö, 2007), accessed August 12, 2014, <http://www.malmo.se/download/18.76105f1c125780a622880005254/1383646908795/Hyllie+markanvisning.pdf>.