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Feminist Urban Design Tools in Rinkeby
- an implementation experimentation

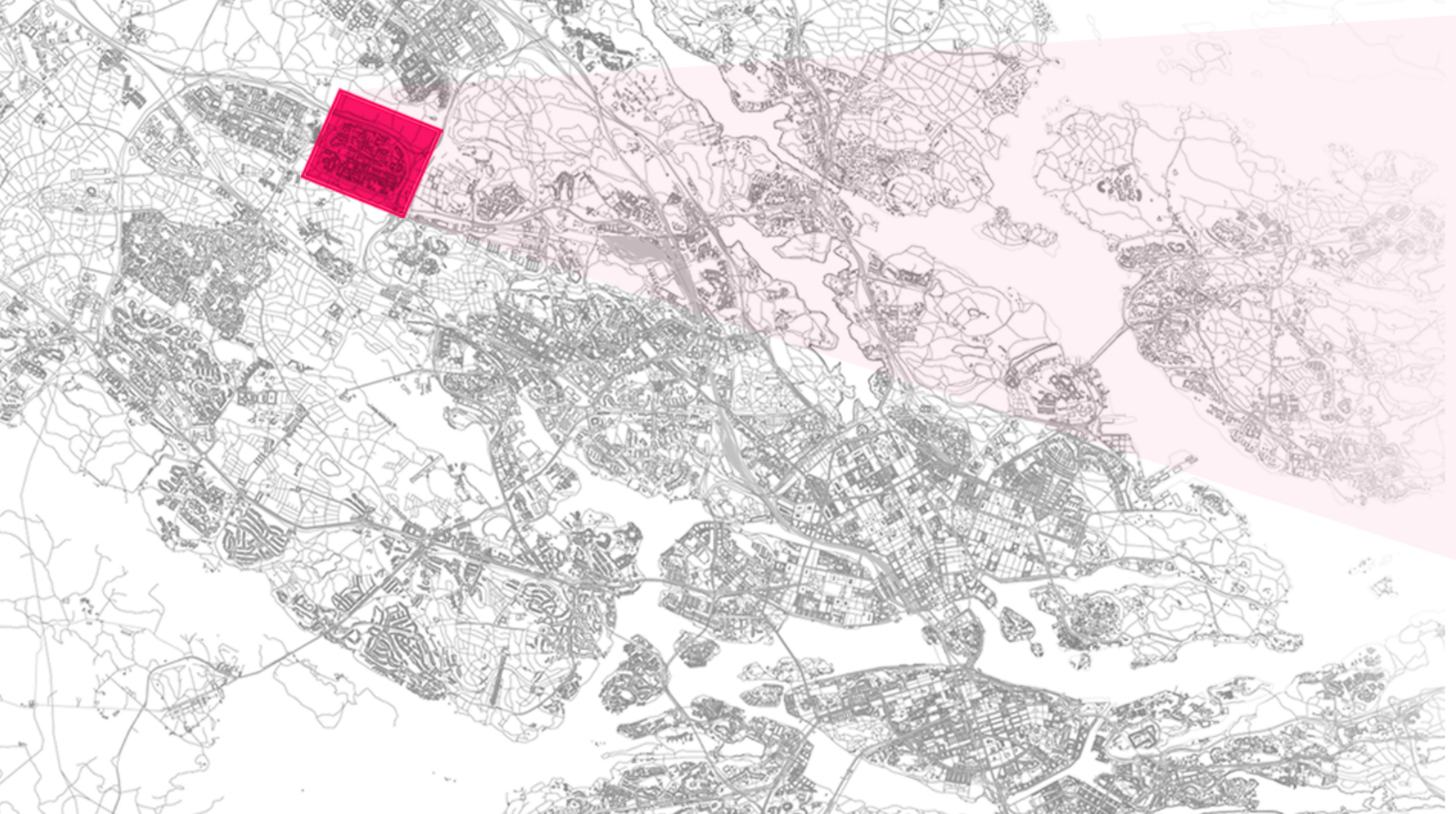
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by Marina Ziakouli



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Location

Rinkeby, Stockholm, with possible extensions – collaborations – multiplications (Skärholmen, Husby, Gottsunda)

Description

This project is set out to experiment with feminist tools in urban design. The problematique arises from a simple observation: men have been the dominant presence on Rinkeby square. It is not an uncommon phenomenon in many public spaces, in which a combination of factors contributes: the physical expression of a space, the invisible powers and dynamics at play, the societal structures as well as the variety of cultures and everyday habits of different people. This project started as a master

thesis and is now expanding the boundaries and means of the exploration of feminist questions in urban design. Which tools can a planner use in the creation or redefinition of urban public spaces to form more welcoming, inclusive and interesting environments for women to be in? How are these tools perceived by women and how would they work in real life? What effects do they have on the gendered urban life?

“The male dominance in Rinkeby Center is striking. Men are sitting and talking in the cafes, in small groups by the subway exits, in the mall and the organisations (...) After 20 o’clock in the evening when the last local supermarket is closed, only men are left and the woman who need to cross the square feel, if not unsafe, lonely.”

(Norra Sidan, April 16th 2011, p.5).

The area

Rinkeby is a typical million program area built in the end of 1960's – beginning of 1970's, presenting the characteristic planning ideals of that era: traffic separation and detached standardized buildings in open landscape, amongst others. Since then, different urban planning projects have reshaped the area and the latest urban development plans aim to give a more urban character to Rinkebystråk and Rinkeby allé as well as a renewed housing stock.

Over the years the area has received negative attention and has been depicted by media as criminal and unsafe. Today Rinkeby is in the police's list of particularly vulnerable areas (särskilt utsatta områden) in Sweden, that includes a total of 23 areas. Nonetheless, Rinkeby is a very lively place. Its heart is its square; a place filled with people, where one finds oneself when exiting the metro station. It is around the square that most activities and shops are concentrated and it is on the square that a large part of social life happens. A social life, though, that is dominated by men.

In Rinkeby, where 90,7% of the population is of foreign origins, in great contrast to the 31,1% of the Stockholm total, culture and origin with the particularities they present, play a significant role in habits, everyday life and power structures. Spatial segregation in Stockholm becomes apparent even through statistics about unemployment and average income. Women in Rinkeby earn approximately half as much as women in the Stockholm total. This increases dependency on their families, spouses and social bonds. It ties them geographically and in terms of choice of activities. In an area where many women are contested by the male gaze and need social alibis (as their children) to be in public spaces, social sustainability is at stake.

Target groups/communities

The research will focus on women that live and/or work in Rinkeby and possibly other suburban areas that share similar qualities with Rinkeby. Local communities and organizations will be also approached in an attempt to establish a contact with more women.

Methods

This project is based on the research done during my master thesis. The methodology included a range of different tools:

- On-site observations and mapping functions
- Research on feminist theories and practices
- Meetings and interviews with locals and different actors

During the thesis, the methods involved observing how people moved through the area, counting how many men/women were lingering on

the square, mapping the mediascapes around the issue as well as finding inspiration in precedent studies and feminist practices. Part of the methodology was to perform interviews with various actors. These were mostly aimed towards women that lived or worked in Rinkeby, users of the square, female associations and representatives. The end-product was a set of different tools used to explore what feminist urban design can entail.

Taking that product forward, this project will generate more ideas and opinions about the area in the form of interviews but also workshops. Expert knowledge and know-how will be extracted in meetings and discussions with researchers that have experience in working with such questions. The intention is to assess and evaluate the explorative proposal tools together with local women. Based on their knowledge and understanding of the public spaces, we will come up with possible adaptations according to what they experience, and then conclude together in processes, interventions and activities to test-use in practice.

Inspiration

Rosens Röda Matta – Rosengård, Malmö

An activity space was planned in Rosengård, Malmö. When it became clear that the spontaneous sports activities were mostly used by boys and men, the project shifted focus. The planners worked together with young girls and their wishes, and the result became instead a program filled with dance, culture and music shows, where the girls followed the project throughout.

Key tools: Process focused work, Participatory methods, Power delegation

The Playa – Jubileumparken, Göteborg

Mycket, an architecture and art collaboration, organized an event-based dialogue open to residents about the bathing culture in Göteborg. In the initial phase they focused on including groups that are often disregarded in urban planning processes. They identified problems like the need for separatist rooms for women, or women that need to be covered when they bathe or shower.

Key tools: Intersectionality, Cooperation amongst different organizations, Participation, Activity based

Genussmart Fritidsgård – Funkabo, Kalmar

Before implementing the changes, the youth center had an attendance of 90% boys and 10% girls. Through analyzing their environment, they could identify aspects which promoted a harsher boys-culture, and often made the girls uncomfortable. By changing the placement of the entrance to the center, the way the seating was organized and the placement of certain programs amongst others, that culture was disrupted. After the changes the percentage of girls had increased to 43%.

Key tools: Physical design choices, Gender de-programming, Gender education for the staff

(D)Järva Kvinnor – Husby, Stockholm

Svenska Bostäder in collaboration with the Royal Institute of Technology held a number of workshops with clear feministic convictions in autumn of 2015 facing a redevelopment of public spaces in Husby, Stockholm. Similarly to Rinkeby, the square in Husby has been dominated by men, and women feel watched, judged and unsafe.

Key tools: Process focused work, Participatory methods, Experiential mapping

Project phases

Since this project is based on a master thesis that has already been conducted, thus a fairly extensive research of the area has been done, my focus will not lay on starting from scratch, but enriching the knowledge I have. The estimated phases of the project are the following:

1) Listening and understanding: interviews with locals, focused on women, to gather needs and desires, problems and situations. Connections and ties to people and the area will be established during this step. Desired partners will be identified and a first contact will be attempted.

2) Expert voices: reading about feminist theories and projects is not enough; connections and meetings with experts on the field will be arranged. Desired partners will be identified and a first contact will be attempted.

3) Workshop: a workshop with the purpose of bringing together different women in order to map their needs and desires, to try-out activities and to get to know more about what “feministisk stadsplanering” means for them as well as the society as a whole. The tools extracted from the thesis’s research will play the role of conversation starters. They will be evaluated, assessed and even re-imagined. Complementary tools will be also at hand.

4) Intervention: at this point an implementation of an idea or a combination of suggestions will be attempted. It can include a temporary or nomadic construction, that could eventually become more permanent. An establishment of a habit or a tradition could also be the intention. This part highly depends on the results of the workshop as well as on possible additional funding.

5) Workshop second phase: possible activities and dialogues on site and along with the intervention will be arranged. This will test the durability and livability of the intervention as well as the community’s will for continued engagement.

6) Looking back – looking forward: in the end an analysis and evaluation of all results will be conducted, and all partial documentation will come together into a report in the form of a booklet or other byproducts. At this phase reconsiderations and reflections are expected. Continued dreaming and planning of a next step are hoped for.

Potential & Desired partners

There are currently no known collaborators. Possible partners will be identified and contacted. Such can include organizations (as Rinkeby Folkets Hus) or individuals that have roots in the broader area or are working on questions of equality. There is an aspiration of working together with a few individuals contacted through Rinkeby Folkets Hus, that can even function as gatekeepers.

There is also an intention to contact Stockholms stad or moreover architectural/urban planning practices that are in this timespan working in Rinkeby or are interested in these questions, with the purpose of a collaboration.

Co-funding

There are no other sources of funding at this point. Additional funding might be necessary in order to proceed with an intervention and will be sought for on a later phase.

Communication

Main communication goals:

- Attract and engage participants to interviews and workshops
- Raise recognizability that will ease the project implementation and help create a network
- Raise awareness on the issue of equality in public spaces
- Help create platforms for women's voices to be heard
- Spread knowledge on empowering tools that women can use themselves even after the end of the project

Possible communication tools:

- Continued participation in events like "Demokrati för unga kvinnor" in Rinkeby Folkets Hus, where contacts with possible partners as well as participants can be made
- Posters/flyers distributed in Rinkeby
- Open calls through social media groups and networks
- Own physical presence on the public space

Challenges and risks

Participation: One of the main challenges one faces when endeavoring on a project based on participation is participation itself. To get people to trust the idea and to want to be a part of it, is challenging. A risk, therefore, is to have low attendance at the workshop(s). This is where the gatekeepers can be proven valuable.

Language: A fundamental challenge, which in this communication and participation process is double, is language. On the one hand, the researcher – myself – has felt limited by the capability of use of the Swedish language, something that can hinder the communication with local people as well as organizations, or create misunderstandings. On the other hand, language is something that was identified as a barrier during the thesis work, as several women that were contacted in Rinkeby had trouble communicating in Swedish or English. This double challenge though can be worked through with the help of key persons and even serve as an icebreaker between researcher and local community.

The notion of giving back to the community: Possibly the greatest risk in any community engaging research is to end up using the local knowledge without offering back to the community. Involving the local community while researching a subject can lack reciprocity, giving great insider knowledge to the researcher whilst leaving the participants feeling used. In this case, the risk lies in a possible discontinuity of the project or a non-completion of an intervention that could be used by the local community (lack of funding can be amongst other factors). The appropriate weight needs to be put on giving some sort of tangi-

ble reciprocation in research outcomes. That can come in the form of self-empowerment tools as well as knowledge on urban planning issues and processes, or even an initiated contact with the officials of the municipality of Stockholm on matters that concern women in Rinkeby. I will also put my effort on identifying the zealous nuts that could then as natural leaders be the continuers of some form of this project.

White feminist savior complex: Supposing that the western understanding of feminism is the one and “true” feminism thus rushing to “rescue” the ones perceived by the middle white westerner as less privileged is dangerous. This research derives from my own imperfect understanding of the local voices but women’s individual voices shall not be co-opted and appropriated. Acknowledging this as a risk is an important start, but it must be ensured that it will not be forgotten throughout the research. I will listen as an ally without patronizing or leading their words. Intersectional feminism is a wise companion. The aim will always be to create a safe and empowering space for women to speak about their own experiences, needs and desires.

Cultural differences: Visits to and interaction with women in Rinkeby must be based on understanding, acceptance and respect of similarities and differences.

Use of public space: Ensuring a smooth run of the activities and intervention of the project means that additional permits might be needed to apply for.

Sustainability

Making sure that the community is empowered by the project

In this project, the aim itself is in its very basis to empower the local women's community in Rinkeby. Empowerment can come in various forms:

- Learning about urban planning processes and participation opportunities
- Creating safe spaces for women's voices to be heard
- Creating a network of friends and acquaintances, even a possible association (förening) carried on by the zealous nuts identified in the area
- Initiating a contact with the planning department of Stockholm stad, raising the issue of women's needs and desires in their processes
- Offering DIY tools for rethinking and reshaping the urban environment

This is, so far, my own understanding of what empowerment of the local community will look like in Rinkeby. It is my belief that new, diverse ways and tools of empowerment will come into sight, co-created by the cooperation with local women.

Consciousness Raising

To share the stories and ideas of the women in Rinkeby is to raise consciousness: our own, the men's that can become allies, the professionals' that never thought about gender in architecture, and the city's that sits on the tools to change the urban environment making it better for women, thus making it better for all. It is through a continued discussion that bonds within the local community will be created and the change will be facilitated. The more we, as a whole, talk about it the better we will eventually translate awareness into action.

Continuation – multiplication

After its completion, the project is hoped to travel. That means that either the outcomes i.e. the intervention, or the whole research can be repeated in areas with similar characteristics in order to extend the study, compare results and spread the knowledge produced in it. The methodology, toolbox and workshops will already have been tested, making it easier to create a package and plan accordingly for the next occasions.

More on that will be planned towards the end of the project. For a possible multiplication additional funding will be needed.

“We cannot all succeed
when half of of us are
held back“

-Malala Yousafzai