Structural change, cultural heritage and place

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Abstract

In the last few decades, many cities have experienced structural change with deindustrialisation and public closure as a result. Strategies for regeneration include investments in infrastructures for production, consumption and communication. The transformation process results in deteriorated urban environments, and a change in the use and understanding of the urban landscape. The article discusses structural change and infrastructure planning, and its consequences for cultural heritage and the sense of place. We take the theoretical position that an understanding of place is crucial for sustainable heritage management, and that cultural meanings are generated through a combination of people – place interactions in time and space. Empirical findings are based on a case study of infrastructure planning and heritage management in the town of Söderhamn in northern Sweden. The analysis shows that the planning and management refers to space rather than to qualities of place. A tentative model is presented to draw attention to the importance of comprehensive analysis of investments in infrastructure and its consequences for cultural heritage.
Keywords: structural change, cultural heritage, space and place, urban transformation, infrastructure planning.

1   Introduction

In the last few decades western economies have left the industrial society and entered a postfordist society. In short, globalisation, European integration, increased mobility for individuals and firms, de-industrialisation and a growing importance of service-sectors, such as entertainment, culture, tourism and education, have altered the nature of urban and regional economies. The construction of place is also a characteristic of urban transformation in many contemporary cities and towns from being centres of production to being centres of consumption [1]. As a consequence of this, many Swedish cities and towns

have experienced a harsh structural change of the urban economy, leading to loss of industrial jobs as well as public closure, e.g. closing of military bases and hospitals, and, hence, a decreasing population.

The societal development is stressed by various public, as well as private, initiatives to develop infrastructures for production (e.g. investments in the education system and re-location of public institutions), communication (e.g. investments in roads, railroads and mobile telephone systems) and consumption (e.g. development of internet-based shopping and establishment of external shopping centres). In particular, investments in various infrastructures aim at city regeneration and regional integration, i.e. linking cities closer together through integration of local labour-markets.

The transformation of society has in many cities and towns resulted in deteriorated urban environments, including built environments losing its use and function, e.g. housing areas, industrial structures and public institutions. Investments in various infrastructures furthermore transformed the urban structure. Thus, the transformation of the urban and built structure most likely is followed by a change in the direct and indirect use, as well as in the perception and understanding of the urban landscape.

From this point of departure, we discuss in this article prevalent infrastructure planning and management, and its consequences for cultural heritage and the sense of place. Hence, the question raised in the article is how to take cultural heritage and place qualities into consideration in infrastructure planning. It is our contention that a deeper understanding of place characteristics is crucial for sustainable infrastructure planning and heritage management.

2 Theory of space and place and cultural heritage

The complexity of space and place issues, within current structural change of urban and regional economies, calls for a wider definition of cultural heritage. In urban management a fundamental task is to understand structural change in society and its consequences and meanings, and to use that knowledge to positively shape present and future urban structures. Hence, it is also a question of seeing cultural heritage and identity as important parts and elements in the overall urban management, including infrastructure planning. In order to do that we need to understand better the intricate relation between space and place.

The relationship between space and place is complex and ambiguous. Space and place are two terms that are often used interchangeably by society at large. Despite that, an important distinction between the two concepts is necessary. We can look at space as an overall system of places. Hence, places are aggregates of permanent objects connected by causal relations that are independent of the subject and are arranged in space and time [2].

The concept of place is closely connected with human actions and the sense of time directly affects the sense of place. If time is conceived as flow or movement, then we can look at the place as pause, where quality and intensity of experience matters more than simple duration [3]. Place attachment occurs the moment a person distinguishes a place from a space [4]. We can then say that

relationship between space and place, i.e. creation of sense of place, can only be accomplished when space feels thoroughly familiar to us, and then and only then it becomes a place [5]. This is closely knitted to the feeling of identity. Steele [6] recognizes that the major components of identity have been found to be:

- *Physical Features and Appearance* - The actual physical structure of a town. The reality of its buildings, landscape, cultural heritage, climate and aesthetic quality.
- *Observable Activities and Functions* - How a town's people interact with it, how their cultural institutions have affected it, and how the buildings and landscapes are used.
- *Meanings or Symbols* - More complex aspect, primarily the result of human intentions and experiences. Much of a town's character will be derived from people's reaction to its physical, social, cultural and functional aspects.

Identity and the sense of place in any town represent a specific and concrete segment of the spatial continuum filled with meaning and history. A sense of place entails both a positive affirmation of identity and a regressive closure to what lies beyond the divide of the known and unknown (the 'inside' and 'outside'). Space becomes a place when community, its individuals and all people who give form, name and history to space, seize upon its abstract and open-ended formlessness. Place is a historically relative human creation that defines itself against an alien exterior space: transformation, nature, foreign culture or something else unknown [7].

The dialectic relation between space and place manifests itself with particular intensity in smaller towns where in the past it was meaningful to describe the human everyday environment in terms of stable places, such as market places, work places, transportation nodes, neighbourhoods, or houses. But we live in a different world now, a world permeated by digital technologies and transport infrastructures where ubiquitous information, mobility and access to a range of intangible products are essential. In a more mobile life, we tend to free ourselves from the more stable-immobile structures [8]. Simultaneously in those cases there is a tendency towards a loss of attachment to place. Even in a globalising mobile world a sense of place is of real importance in people's daily lives because it furnishes the basis of our sense of identity as human beings [1].

It is important to acknowledge how place occurs and ultimately the significance of place attachment *vis-à-vis* the cultural heritage context. At the same time, the urban transformation of the place in the larger sense of structural change, allows for a more complex analysis. For example, the relationship between the places of human settlement and the unbounded space of everyday activity could be deeply troubled by the effects of urban transformations in space. This could trigger destructive processes that affect the public and private realm, space and place. Analogous degenerative phenomena can be observed in economic changes that lead to labour fragmentation with diminishing population and demographic imbalance, threatening the future viability of long established town settlements.

3   Heritage management and infrastructure planning in Sweden

Two perspectives are essential for understanding infrastructure planning and heritage management in Sweden. On one side, there is a sector planning responsibility of independent boards and agencies with specific goals and objectives, as well as means for their own fields of activity. In particular, road and railway planning are performed as such sector planning, but also cultural heritage management as carried out by the National Heritage Board in conjunction with regional bodies, i.e. County Boards and County Museums. On the other side, there is a comprehensive urban planning responsibility of city and town councils. In urban planning various public and private interests must be balanced against each other, in areas like housing, transportation, conservation of heritage, real estate and business development. Hence, in planning practice it is necessary to co-ordinate different kinds of planning and make priorities between various sectors interests, e.g. railway planning and heritage management, as well as between the sectors interests and comprehensive urban development planning objectives. However, there are no clear guidelines how to weight and co-ordinate different public planning objectives.

   In general, the heritage management sector emphasises the future existence of especially important objects and areas with historical value. Thus, it is organised, and includes a way of working, that primarily applies to the management of specific objects and well-defined areas [9]. Heritage management has traditionally focused on legal regulation and economic incentives (like loans and grants) as means of control [10] and, hence, been based on an assumption of a monolithic and rational public planning [9]. However, it has been recognised that various sector and development perspectives include conflicting directions regarding the management of the urban environment. Interaction and negotiations among various stakeholders, including private interests, are today the prevalent method in planning, leading to informal decision-making [11]. Under these circumstances, traditional means of control appear to be means used in negotiations, rather than having a self-adjusting effect.

4   Case study – Söderhamn, Sweden

The empirical part of the article is based on a case study of infrastructure planning and heritage management in the town of Söderhamn in the northern part of Sweden [12]. The case study is based on analysis of planning and heritage management documents, interviews with urban planners in Söderhamn and heritage management officers at the regional level, as well as direct observations.

   The town of Söderhamn was founded in the year 1620. According to the National Heritage Board the central part of the town is of national interest for its historical values, including the historical town plan, wooden architecture, and cultural buildings and districts from late 19th and early 20th century.

Due to the development of forest and sawmill industry Söderhamn became one of the most expansive industrial centres in Sweden in the second half of the 19th century. However, during the course of the first half of the 20th century the sawmill industry declined, leading to unemployment and a decreasing population in Söderhamn. The late 1940s saw the start of a new expansive period, with the location of new basic industries, including in particular LM Ericsson, and an expansion of the public sector, including the location of an air base in 1945.

Nevertheless, the development from early 1970s and ahead has been characterised by structural change of the urban economy with the loss of workplaces in both the private and the public sector. The population has decreased from 32000 inhabitants in the mid-seventies to 27000 in the beginning of 21st century. During the course of the 1990s Söderhamn has experienced several initiatives that have changed the local infrastructures for production, consumption and communication. These changes include the closing of the air base, the opening of an external shopping centre and the construction of a new railway and a railway station outside the town. Put together, these initiatives have dramatically altered the urban structure in Söderhamn (figures 1 and 2).

4.1 The opening of an external shopping centre

In the late 1980s discussions about external shopping facilities in Söderhamn was initiated by private interests. The largest exploitation discussed involved a proposal for a hypermarket right next to the main country road (E4) passing the town. The initiative came from the consumers' cooperative movement. In conjunction with the proposal the intention was to close down the cooperative department store in the town centre. An assessment of various plans for external shopping (made by a consultant on behalf of the town council) showed that if all pronounced plans were carried out it would lead to decreasing retail sales figures in the town centre by 15-20 percent. Furthermore, the external hypermarket would attract other retail interests in the town centre to relocate. Hence, this specific establishment was expected to drain the town centre on shops, as well as have an influence on the retail trade structure in the region, at least in the long run. Within the external development area no cultural heritage values were identified, and, hence, the establishment was not considered to have had any impact on the heritage.

In the end, the town council allowed the hypermarket and its establishment lead to the closing of the department store in the town centre. During the course of the 1990s further initiatives were made for more shopping facilities close to the hypermarket. The late 1990s saw the rise of an external shopping centre in Söderhamn. The external centre thrust the traditional shopping district in the town centre to a new competitive situation, and, thus, led to various initiatives in upgrading the attractiveness of the town centre.
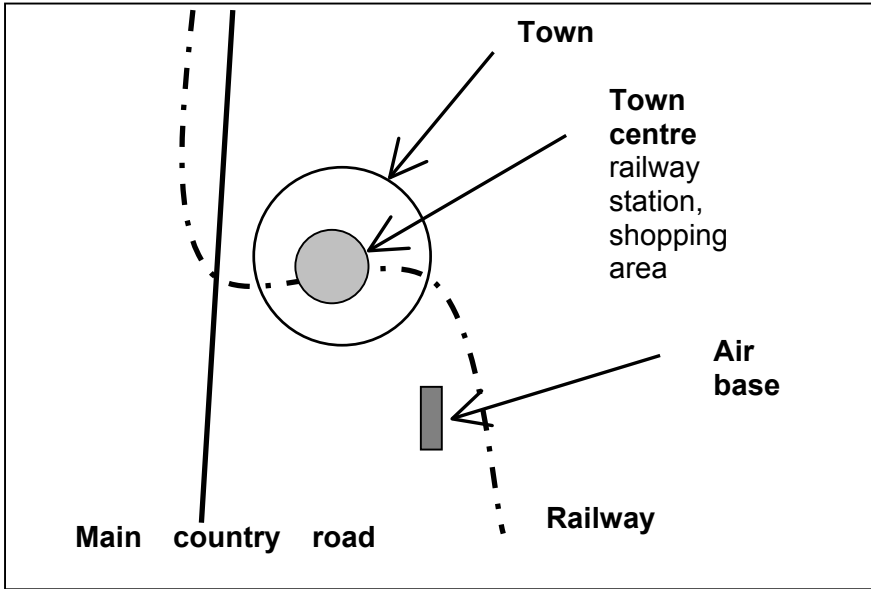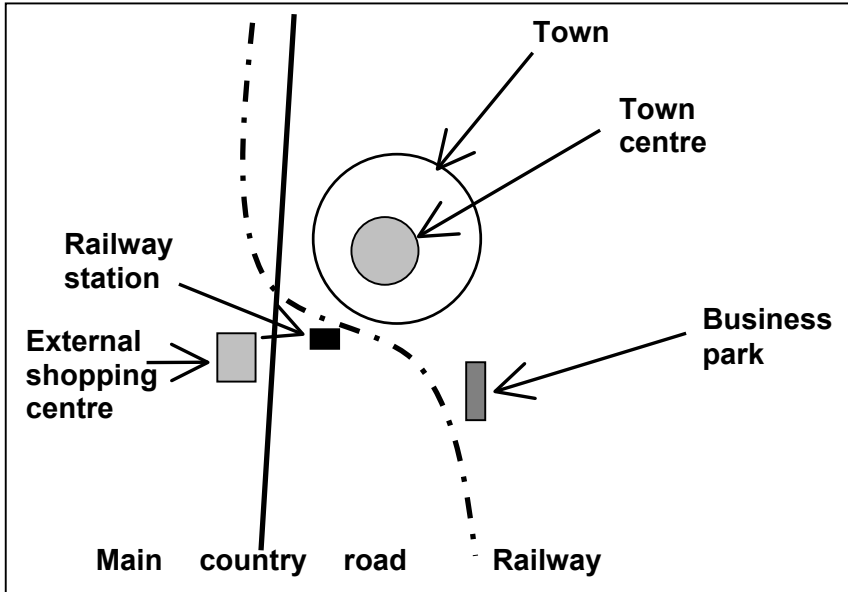
Figure 1:   Söderhamn before the 1990s.

Figure 2:   Söderhamn in the beginning of 21st century.

4.2 The closing of the air base

The air base in Söderhamn was, as noted above, established in the year 1945. Fifty years later it was the workplace for almost 500 people, and one of the largest employers in the town. Thus, the air base was considered of great direct and indirect importance for the local economy. For these reasons the town council was very eager to provide for its future development, and adopted a comprehensive development plan for the air base area in August 1995. Nevertheless, in December 1996 the national parliament took the decision to close the air base, as part of a new national defence strategy. The base was expected to have been phased out by the year 1998.

From that point of departure, the town council had to rethink the development plan of the air base area. The closing of the air base left approximately 70000 square meters of premises empty, in addition to an already quite large range of existing empty premises in the town. This was considered as a threat for draining other work areas in the town. In particular, it was noted that the premises could not be used for shopping, considering the newly established external shopping centre and the town centre. The new plans for the area included the keeping of the airport and a long-term development of a business park for firms with strong logistics needs, as a replacement for the air base. The course of events was not considered to have any significant importance for identified cultural heritage in the area, as well as in the town as a whole.

4.3 The construction of a new railway

The railway was first established in Söderhamn in 1860. It was relocated within the town in 1885, closer to the town harbour. The railway became a physical barrier in the city, but gave also the town a distinct identity with the track partly on a viaduct close to a square outside the town hall. The viaduct and various buildings around the marshalling yard were in the 1980s identified as having a substantial conservation value. The railway station was designated as a national monument in the year 2000.

In the late 1980s and during the course of the 1990s the National Railway Administration started to plan for high-speed trains, which presupposed rebuilding the parts of the railway passing Söderhamn. The town council expressed early a positive attitude to this development, since it was expected to contribute to a wider local labour market. In order to prepare for faster trains the Railway Administration proposed that existing railway through the town centre should be substituted with a new railway south of the town, including a new railway station outside the town towards the external shopping centre. The development was, according to the Railway Administration, not expected to have any significant impact on the cultural heritage in the town centre. On the contrary, it was expected to improve the urban environment, e.g. reduction of noise from passing trains. In October 1993 the Railway Administration took the decision that the new railway and station should be opened in January 1997.

The decision put a great deal of pressure on the urban planning. To assist in the development the town was expected to contribute with several detailed

development plans. Hence, time restrictions forced the town council to neglect necessary comprehensive considerations in the planning. This was most apparent concerning the future development of the existing marshalling yard, and in particular the railway viaduct in the town centre. During the planning process, due to economic and technical reasons, it was decided that existing rail tracks should be removed completely. The relocation of the railway thus resulted in a large empty area in the core centre of the town.

However, in the early stages of the process planning considerations were foremost directed to the question of how to visually connect the new station with the town. It was later in the process that issues of future development of the existing marshalling yard and conservation activities concerning the old railway in the town centre were first stressed. From the perspective of sector heritage management, i.e. the County Board, it was important to keep at least one track in the town centre, even if it was not in use, and to preserve the viaduct. However, at first neither the town or the Rail Administration or the heritage sector was willing to take the costs that were associated with such conservation activities. For the town, keeping one track was first perceived as a restriction for future development of the area concerned. After series of negotiations a compromise was reached, in which one track was kept and the viaduct was proposed as a national monument and as a foot and bicycle path for future use.

5   Analysis and discussion

The initiatives for the projects discussed above were all, more or less, taken by development interest outside the local community and the urban comprehensive planning. In that sense, the implementation of each project was decided on independently. However, they were clearly linked, and affected each other. Moreover, the projects coupled together have contributed substantially to the changing of the urban structure in Söderhamn, and, hence, how the town, and in particular the town centre, is used and understood.

This is especially true when considering the establishment of the external shopping centre and the location of the new railway station. Apart from the fact that some shops in the town centre have relocated or closed down, these new facilities have evidently affected the town centre. Peripheral places in the town centre have become even less attractive, and real estate and retail interests in the centre, thus, have taken action to upgrade their locations. This led to rebuilding and transformation of building structures, and privatisation of public space. Furthermore, the new railway station is perceived as an anonymous place in the middle of nowhere, not giving travellers a sense of place. Simultaneously, since the railway area in the town centre lost its function, the area is also perceived to have lost its true meaning. Hence, the rail track that eventually was kept is necessary for the future understanding of the historical meaning of the area. However, the development can be summed up, by saying that the town centre in much has changed from an everyday living space into an environment reserved for special occasions. Thus, the town centre, as a cultural heritage has become a backdrop for a festive scene.

The location of the railway station, as well as the external shopping centre have contributed to the fragmentation of space and left a physical gap that demanded new built structures. However, the empty railway area in the town centre and the partly empty air base must also be accounted for, when the future development of the town is discussed. It seems that a competitive situation between different development areas in the town has occurred. However, with a decreasing population the need for more developments are not likely in the near future. Moreover, if the conditions for expansion had been at hand, new developments would likely contribute to a further displacement of the urban structure in Söderhamn, considering the location of the railway station and the shopping centre.

These projects are examples of economic and social entropy in which the usual path that leads from the indefinity of space to the specificity of place is actually reversed. In Söderhamn and Sweden for that matter, traditional ideas of belonging, attachment and locality are also increasingly challenged by the economic and social consequences of globalisation and spread of new information technologies as well as concrete urban space transformations. The strong sense of local identity that characterises small country towns is diminished by the realisation that remote and faceless non-local forces increasingly shape the way we live.

A tentative model is presented in figure 3, aiming at a contribution to a further understanding of how investments in various infrastructures impact and affect the urban cultural heritage, and, hence, the qualities of places. Investments in infrastructures are basically long-term investments, and must consequently be assessed in a long-term perspective. Furthermore, infrastructures localised in space have a spatial distribution, and, hence, an influence on the tangible and intangible aspects of the surroundings. In sum, the assessment model should encompass the following aspects:

- FEATURES: The physical appearance (tangible aspect) – The use, perception and experience of the environment (intangible aspect)
- SPACE: Directly affected areas – Indirectly affected areas
- TIME: Instantaneous (short-term perspective) – Process (long-term perspective)

The impact on each of the aspects listed above must also be valued. Hence, from the same infrastructure investment, one aspect might be affected in a positive way, whereas, at the same time, other aspects might be affected in a negative way. The various aspects can be combined in different ways in the analysis.

The case study shows that current infrastructure planning comprehends consequences for tangible aspects of the heritage in areas directly affected by development. However, intangible aspects of the heritage and indirectly affected areas are neglected. Moreover, the planning is concerned with short-term consequences, not taking into account heritage in a long-term perspective. Hence, heritage management within infrastructure planning is concerned with space rather than with place.
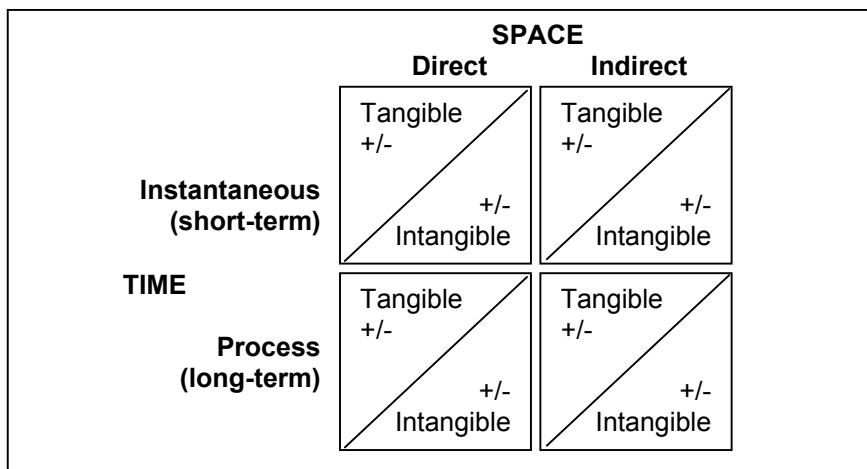
Figure 3:   Infrastructures impact on cultural heritage.

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