

## Vippan Playground: Can a Local Meeting Place Survive in Neoliberal Stockholm?

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Fruängen is a functional Stockholm suburb, centrally planned in the 1950s and 1960s at the height of the social democratic building projects, and is positioned at the end of the red line of the metro system, approximately 20 minutes from the city center. Nestled in the south end of Stockholm, Fruängen bridges wealthy neighborhoods like Långbro Park, an upwardly mobile middle-class suburb, and poorer parts of the city, such as Skärholmen, which is a traditionally immigrant neighborhood with dense housing. There is nothing particularly special about this historically working class neighborhood on paper, except for its name, which means “the wife’s meadow.” All street names and areas are named after famous Swedish women: political activists, authors, scientists and more. Examples include Elin Wägner, Elsa Beskow and Hanna Rydh. Using women’s names for streets and new areas has made Fruängen a distinct location for its recognition of Swedish women’s history

There are approximately 6,000 residents in the district, with a range of Swedish and non-Swedish backgrounds, ages and incomes.<sup>1</sup> Most of the

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1) Available online at <https://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fru%C3%A4ngen>.

housing stock, in the form of privately-owned cooperatives, consists of small three-room apartments plus kitchens in low- to mid-rise apartment blocks clustered around shared courtyard spaces. Most of the outside space here, apart from balconies, is shared among residents, or is public parks. It is still a relatively affordable area of Stockholm, though gentrification is starting; housing prices have risen 39% in the last two years.<sup>2</sup> There are some social difficulties in Fruängen, for instance petty theft and public drunkenness, but little of the suburban rioting in the spring of 2013 occurred here.



**Picture 1.** The splashing pool at Vippan (Author's photo)

This local story focuses on how neoliberal governance combined with gentrification is impacting one of the main playgrounds in Fruängen, called Vippan. The park is a meeting space and an important micro-geography for the community. Vippan is a small section of the larger park

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2) Available online at <http://www.stockholmdirekt.se/nyheter/fruangen-snart-hetast-i-soderort/aRKoce!Tpf3n76KdvyR0mQ3mH1N1w/>.

district that runs throughout the east side of the community. It is surrounded by trees and walking trails situated in a ravine. It is not unusual to see deer, hares, hedgehogs or even the occasional fox. There is no road access to the park, and children are free to run and bicycle without any risk of vehicle traffic. Cycle paths circle the park, and there is a steady flow of pedestrians on their way to and from the Fruängen subway station, approximately five minutes away. The playground, itself around 6,000 square meters, is divided into 5 main activity areas: a small children's area, which is fenced to keep the toddlers safe; a large climbing gym and basketball court; a clubhouse with bbq area; a boule ball area; and a wading pool. It is thus designed to be both multi-functional and multi-generational. In rain or shine, daylight or the darkness of winter, Vippan playground is a local meeting place for school groups, nurseries and families. Rarely empty, this park is referred to as a "traditional park" in planning reports, and has special status in the park system.<sup>3</sup> There is swimming in the summer, and skating in the winter (see Picture 1; please note that all photos were taken without children visible as much as possible to conform with their right to privacy as advocated by the Unga Örnar). Crafts and sports are regularly organized, and a shed contains approximately 20 small bicycles and sports equipment available for loan at no cost (see Picture 2). There is also a winding racetrack for children to bicycle on. The sandbox is filled with toys and old pots from the recycling center. Meanwhile, a small playhouse has real furniture and household items. Families, friends and visitors to Fruängen from other parts of the city gather here to partake in the park services and planned activities. It is a multicultural space, so it is not unusual to hear English, Spanish, Mandarin, Thai or other languages regularly.

The park is not always a pleasant place, however. At night, groups of

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3) Stockholm City "Parkplan Hägersten - Februari 2008" (Park plan for city section Hägersten) Published February 2008. Available online at <http://www.stockholm.se/KulturFritid/Park-och-natur/Parker/Parkplaner/> .

teenagers or vandals often cause damage. It is not unusual to find broken glass or vomit from drunkenness during the weekend. On weekdays, groups of alcoholics gather on a bench near the ridge. Many parents have expressed concern to each other over their presence near the children. During the 2013 riots, a motorcycle was burned near the park, and some windows of the winter clubhouse were smashed. Moreover, toys are sometimes stolen or broken. Despite this conflict over space, there is no police or security presence. The park is essentially unsupervised, except for how the supplied toys are used.



**Picture 2.** Toys are available to borrow without cost (Author's photo)

There is nothing shiny or new about Vippan. The materials and buildings are rustic, and in no way could the appearance of the park be described as chic or hipster. Toys rot in the rain and are destroyed, the climbing equipment worn down with exposed screws in places, and everywhere there is a desperate need of fresh paint. The clubhouse suffers from water damage from being open without being properly winterized (see Picture 3). The park needs money for basic maintenance and upgrades, and it shows. Plans for renovation are underway according to the 2008 Stockholm park plan, but few of them will be implemented for Vippan until 2020.

The park is managed by a non-profit organization called Unga Örnar

(the young eagles), which supports community programming and activities at parks throughout Stockholm and other cities. A children's advocacy group, Unga Örnar started in the social democratic tradition emphasizing human rights in the 1930s, and is now a global network for children's rights advocacy.<sup>4</sup>



**Picture 3.** The main clubhouse in the park is decorated by children and staff. It is possible to buy snacks and drinks at a cost from the house. (Author's photo)

As a politically and religiously independent organization, Unga Örnar is deeply concerned with children's rights, in particular to play and to access public spaces. It believes that parks are a fundamental right, and that play should not be expensive. Unga Örnar focuses on issues such as gender, anti-racism and other forms of inequality. Staff at the park wear bright red t-shirts that state *Rätt att ha Kul*—"the right to have fun."

The organization works to enforce the United Nations children's convention. It is engaged politically, and comments on school policies

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4) Available online at <http://ungaornar.se/>.



**Picture 4.** An example of the Articles of children's convention which are hand painted and posted throughout the park (Author's photo)

and other issues that impact the lives of children. Vippan, and the other parks it manages, are reflections of this political philosophy and engagement. The park is peppered with children's hand-painted plaques outlining articles from the convention (see Picture 4). Article 3 asserts that the best interest of children must always take primacy.<sup>5</sup> The small red buildings are covered with children's handcrafted signs, and often the toys and activities are created by the children and adults working together. In the summer of 2014, chil-

children and staff created a trail of trolls in the bordering woods. Children painted stones, glued on hair and eyes and hid these trolls throughout the wooded area of the park.

Given the park's needs, shifting neighborhood dynamics and shrinking budgets, the future management of Vippan is unclear. Local government has suggested that the park would be better managed by a private com-

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5) Article 3 (Best interests of the child): The best interests of children must be the primary concern in making decisions that may affect them. All adults should do what is best for children. When adults make decisions, they should think about how their decisions will affect children. This particularly applies to budget, policy and law makers (Available online at [http://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Rights\\_overview.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Rights_overview.pdf)).

pany, or at the very least by the municipal government. In a recent local newspaper article, a reporter questioned whether the need to change management stemmed from Unga Örnar's social democratic history. Local politician Eva Fagerhem answered: "It is you who suggests this" (*Det var du som sa det*).<sup>6</sup> The Unga Örnar will continue to manage the park until 2017, and then the decision will be revisited.<sup>7</sup>

Petitions and citizen proposals reveal the perceived importance of the park; however, as of yet none has been successful. A citizen proposal to expand the park services to include domestic animals such as chickens and rabbits, a park feature found in several neighboring suburbs, including Solberga and Aspudden, was turned down as being too expensive.<sup>8</sup> Parents have also petitioned for toilet facilities and a winterized clubhouse.<sup>9</sup> Both advocate an expanded role for Vippan in the community.

It is quite clear that economic resources will be limited for playgrounds like this, despite their long and important history. Questions over management and renovations interplay to raise important questions about the future purpose of this park. Will it continue to be child-centered, or will it change to meet the neoliberal, adult-centered management agenda? Will the free bicycles and shared toys disappear? Or will Vippan continue as a center of equality and shared resources for all members of the community, regardless of economic status?

It is fairly obvious that the park's future depends more on the political climate than what is best for it, or for the local children and other users. Vippan is slowly emerging as a site of ideological debate over how

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6) Available online at <http://www.battrestadsdel.se/hagersten-liljeholmen/fruangen/parklekarna-vippan-och-lugnet-kan-bli-kommunala>.

7) Available online at <http://www.battrestadsdel.se/hagersten-liljeholmen/fruangen/lugn-unga-ornar-ni-kan-driva-parklekarna-vidare/>.

8) Available online at <http://www.battrestadsdel.se/hagersten-liljeholmen/fruangen/vore-jattekul-om-vi-fick-djur-har-pa-vippan/>.

9) Available online at <http://insynsverige.se/documentHandler.ashx?did=127005>.

public spaces in Sweden should be managed. The “right to have fun” value is not readily taken up in a time of neoliberalism and political views that are moving away from the social democratic state. Neoliberal emphasis on streamlined services and the accumulation of individual resources is pitted against the collective ideals advocated by Vippan. Parks like it represent an important site of political debate and shifting social responsibilities at the local scale.

Fruängen’s play space emerged out of a particular context of Swedish social democratic history and community design. It was meant as a focal park for the east side of Fruängen with the inception of the community, and with the idea of being a pro-child space. This element of planning continues successfully today, but it is not unthreatened. Neoliberal government practices menace the funding of this community space. Concerns with policing and regulating environments also threaten many of the child-focused practices that were at the heart of the design. This is an important space for the children of Fruängen, who will pay the price of the neoliberal encroachment on this small community resource. Only time will tell whether the hand-painted sign stating article 3 of the UN convention, that the best interests of the child should take precedence, will be a guiding principle for Vippan, or merely a sad reminder of what used to be.