

The sociotopes and landscape of inhabitants

Alexander Stähle¹
Spacescape Agency

By using the sociotope method to more clearly understand the needs of present and future inhabitants, Stockholm's new Park program encourages a highly dynamic approach addressing both the "green structure" and the urban landscape, a method typical of the Swedish capital.

Stockholm is considered one of the most attractive metropolitan areas in Europe. The main challenge facing urban planners is to develop along the same lines while maintaining the city's beauty. This challenge is tackled differently at each of the planning stages and the results vary accordingly. At regional level (2 million inhabitants), the regional plan (2001) identifies development lines and a solid green structure based around green urban motorways linking the city-centre with the outlying countryside. However, this urban motorway concept is clearly at odds with the motorway projects outlined in the regional plan. At city level (800,000 inhabitants), the Stockholm city plan (2010) provides for the "building of a pedestrian city towards the centre" under the slogan of "the walking city". This would be achieved by reclaiming urban wasteland and establishing transport links near the city-centre. The traditional urban landscape would be maximised and the existing "green structure"

preserved. But the plan says nothing of how this structure might evolve alongside the urban fabric. Finally, in terms of the islands or undeveloped sites, detailed plans were drawn up by developers, but without any real understanding of inhabitants' wishes and practical concerns.

What is missing in today's urban planning is a tie-up between the city and local levels, as well as constructive dialogue between urban planning stakeholders and inhabitants, especially on the green structure. To address this issue, the city of Stockholm outlined new proposals in its recent *Parkprogram* (2011) designed to take better account of inhabitants and based around the idea of "sociotopes". The sociotope map was the fruit of dialogue with inhabitants and focuses on the urban planning of city districts, both from a city and local standpoint.

Creating and using the sociotope map

The sociotope concept was invented by my colleague Anders Sandberg and me at the City of Stockholm Department of Strategic Planning, inspired by the more familiar "biotope" idea. We define a sociotope as "an open space with a specific life world in a given cultural environment" – in this case, that of the inhabitants of Stockholm. The sociotope map of a city district reflects the usage of open spaces in daily life: "green", "grey" or "blue". It is drawn up as follows.

Firstly, the open spaces larger than 0.5ha are defined and designated based on simple categories such as parks, squares, nature, riverbanks, quays, etc.

Secondly, industry specialists (landscape architects) evaluate the open spaces through observation and in line with the protocols developed by national and international research and evaluation work on open spaces.

¹ Alexander Stähle is a Landscape architect with a doctorate in Urban planning and is the director of the Spacescape agency.

Experts such as park and garden historians are also called upon.

Thirdly, the inhabitants are invited to evaluate their open spaces and have their say on the sociotope map through several rounds of discussion chaired by officials from each city district. Feedback on the value that open spaces represent for inhabitants is collected via short questionnaires on their “favourite outdoor areas”. The surveys are distributed to parents and staff at crèches and nursery schools, published in the local press or on the city district’s website. Feedback is also collected using focus-groups and interviews with young people, adults and the elderly. Maria Nordström, an environmental psychologist from the University of Stockholm, drew up the questionnaires and interview guides. Since 1996, the City of Stockholm has carried out around twenty such surveys on the usage and qualities of green spaces. They have confirmed how important parks and nature are to inhabitants and to the attractiveness of Stockholm by extension.

Fourthly, the information collected from this dialogue is combined with that observed by the specialists. Twenty standard qualities or “sociotope values” are identified and these are deliberately expressed in everyday language (play, picnic, peace and quiet, swimming, etc.) to serve as a common base for both development stakeholders and inhabitants. Next, each space is inserted into the sociotope map with its specific combination of values. This georeferenced map can now be used in the green structure research of various urban planning projects.

Accepting that it is impossible to preserve everything

A city’s attractiveness creates urban pressure on open spaces. The most frequent response to this pressure is to preserve the open space,

which reflects the degree of importance attached to such places. However, it is neither possible nor desirable to preserve “everything” in a city, as it is constantly evolving. Urban renewal and extension projects must take into account the quality of existing or future open spaces near the development site, just as at city-district level. Development stakeholders (urban planners, landscape designers, etc.) must view open spaces as areas liable to be changed, moved or redeveloped. By modifying and widening the green structure as new roads and buildings are built, the urban environment can gain in quality even if there are fewer open spaces. The goal is create a high-quality city that offers varied environments for varied ways of living. Proximity to open spaces is a major plus for new buildings. In return, if the buildings are well located, they can shield these open spaces from traffic noise. Furthermore, the open spaces of city centres can be a solution to the urban sprawl affecting many European cities.

Stockholm’s Park program outlines a development strategy and policy for open spaces partly based on the sociotope map and are designed to be used as an integrated development and urban planning mechanism. Through dynamic, qualitative and quantitative guidelines, it seeks to promote an ideal park offering, but also sustainable management and a real “park culture”.

The qualitative guidelines are derived from the sociotope map, in other words from dialogue with the inhabitants about the value of Stockholm’s open spaces, making them well suited to the needs of the city:

- less than 200m away: green haven, games, calm and relaxation, sunbathing, walking;
- less than 500m away: flowers, community life, picnic, ball games;
- less than 1km away: swimming, agriculture, events, fishing, toboggan, ice-skating, forest, history, viewing point, water activities, wildlife.

The program has shown that some sociotope values, such as swimming or a viewing point, require specific locations. Values such as peace and quiet and children's games are difficult to combine in a park and require specific areas. However, sunbathing and walking can be combined in the development of a park. Parks with a high number of values become attractive and draw in more visitors, which increases wear and tear. Sustainability here depends on the size and maintenance of the parks. If the green spaces are to remain green and preserve their qualities, they need to be big enough. They also need to be part of a well-connected green structure so they can be both accessible and operate as sustainable ecosystems. Appropriate management is essential.

The quantitative guidelines summarise the policies and recommendations of the urban environment expert group from the European Commission, the Nordic Council, the National Board of Housing, Building and Planning, and from the Office of Regional Planning and Urban Transportation of Stockholm:

- less than 200m away: a nearby park, 1-5 ha in size;
- less than 500 m away: a city-district park, 5-50 ha in size;
- less than 1km away: a nature reserve, more than 50 ha in size;
- additional open spaces, less than 1ha in size.

These guidelines promote discussion about the resources needed to achieve an ideal park offering as part of the urban planning process. Three major strategies are detailed in the *Parkprogram* to achieve this goal. The first is to extend the open spaces where there are not enough open spaces to develop the qualities desired. The second is concentration. This entails amending existing open spaces and/or reducing the quantity of open spaces while improving the remaining spaces.

Concentration also implies improving all aspects of accessibility: being able to reach a space (e.g. for children), the public nature of a space or being able to pass through a space (e.g. for the disabled). The third strategy is management, which keeps spaces and structures in good working order. There is no point in creating a "good" park if it is not maintained. Equally, there is no point in continuing to maintain a "bad" park. And it is up to the inhabitants to decide what is "good" or "bad".