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## **Social and economic objectives and safety work in Swedish municipal housing companies**

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### ***Abstract***

In this paper the Swedish municipal housing companies (MHCs) will be approached from a sociological perspective with a special focus on their activities to increase safety, in relation to their social obligations and market conditions.

In recent decades, the traditional role of MHCs on the housing market has changed, partly due to the fact that they have been ascribed new functions, partly as a result of new financial market conditions. While financial sustainability or return has become increasingly important for these companies, their social responsibility has been abolished or re-interpreted. To work for increased safety in exposed residential areas is at the same time a recent re-formulation of the ‘social’ dimension and a new tool to increase the demand for dwellings in these blocks of flats.

This paper will try to illuminate and analyze how social, economic and safety goals of the MHCs are interrelated and intertwined in the management of three residential areas in the city of Gothenburg. Data on safety strategies and discourses have been gathered within the framework of an interdisciplinary research project, “Public Housing and Local Safety”, through documents, observations and interviews with officials within MHCs, the city administration, and tenants. The analysis focuses on how the claimed reasons for safety work and its outcomes are related to social and economic goals of the MHCs. Discourse analytic as well as critical realistic thinking and economic sociology will be applied.

Key words: Municipal housing companies, social and economic objectives, housing market, social responsibility, safety measures.

*Work in progress – not to be quoted!*

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## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to reflect on how social, economic and safety goals of municipal housing companies are interrelated and intertwined in the management and discourse of public housing in three residential areas in the city of Göteborg, Sweden. Data on safety strategies and discourses have been gathered through documents, observations and interviews with officials within MHCs, the city administration, and tenants. The analysis presented in this paper focuses on how the claimed reasons for safety work and its outcomes are related to their traditional social and economic goals.

## Methodological and theoretical framing

The interdisciplinary research project, “Public housing and local safety” is run by Göteborg University and Chalmers University of Technology and funded by the Swedish Research Council Formas, 2005-2007 (No 2004-1002-908-16). The project was developed from observations in previous research into housing, urban studies and crime prevention, as well from theoretical applications to our object of study (see Sahlin 2006, Borelius & Wennerström 2009, Stenberg forthcoming).<sup>3</sup>

Three districts in the city of Göteborg were chosen strategically on the basis of criteria such as the proportion of public housing and degree of socially exposure with regard to the residents’ class and socioeconomic situation. The selected residential areas have different positions in terms of culture and history, geographic location, and concerning the safety work done by the MHCs and the local authorities in the three districts.

Data have been gathered with qualitative methods and include transcribed in-depth interviews with over 100 interviewees: officials at different levels in the MHCs, tenants living in the concerned districts, representatives of local authority offices, the central municipal administration, politicians, and the municipal concern Framtiden, to which the MHCs belong. In addition, interviews have been conducted with private safety consultants and tenants’

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<sup>3</sup>Apart from the authors, the research team consists of Ulf Borelius, dept of Social Work, Johan Öberg, Faculty of Art, both from Göteborg University, and Jenny Stenberg, dept of Architecture, Chalmers University of Technology. All interviews were conducted by Ulf Borelius, Jenny Stenberg and Ulla-Britt Wennerström.

associations outside the concerned areas. The researchers have also analysed documents and taken part as observers in meetings with partnerships for local safety in the three districts.

The study's interdisciplinary approach has enabled us to combine different methodological and theoretical perspectives, since the members of the project group have different academic affiliations and backgrounds. The sociological perspectives applied in the research differ between papers, although in this one, discourse analysis and critical realism, respectively, are predominant.

The understanding and analysis of MHCs' safety work and their different kinds of goals, social and economic, is aptly founded upon critical realistic analytical thinking, based upon Margaret Archers' (1995, 2000) development of sociological theory, as applied in her social ontology and analytical dualism. In this thinking, different analytical strata are recognized in relation to the causality of mechanisms in the human and social environment. The structural societal conditions are going through a process of change, based on human activities. In urban studies, according to Höyer & Naess (2008), different strata – physical, social and economic ones – must be analysed both separately, and in their different relationships.

The objectives that are said to be guiding the MHCs' activity will here be analysed as expressions for the (changed) direction of the enterprise. Special focus is put on how social versus economic objectives are formulated. In this understanding we take our point of departure in Granovetter and Polanyi's theory development and concepts about embeddedness of social and economic activity (Granovetter 1985).

The discourse analytical approach in this paper is inspired by critical discourse analysis as developed by Fairclough (1992) and mainly applied in order to get an understanding of how MHC managers account for safety as related to other kinds of objective, and their affinity with what is in official documents claimed to be their task and aim.

In the next two sections of the paper we will outline the recent and current situation and challenges of the specific Swedish kind of public housing and briefly present the research project and the local context in which it is being conducted. Next – on the basis of qualitative data from the project – we will relate how MHC managers reason and account for measures taken by the companies in order to increase safety in the residential areas at

hand. Why is safety so high on their agenda? What is being done in order to enhance safety? How do managers and employees account for these measures? We will then discuss how safety measures relate – as a bridge and link, or as a substitution for – social and economic objectives of the MHCs in Göteborg and reflect on their implications for public housing in Sweden.

## 1. The housing market in Sweden

### Tenure structure

Forms of tenure in Sweden comprise owner-occupation (always in single-family or semi-detached housing), public and private rental and tenant owners societies (TOSs). The latter is a quite specific Swedish variety of tenure, where an economic association owns a real estate (mostly a multi-dwelling building), in which the residents are members and pay a monthly fee to the association to cover costs for heating, exterior maintenance, management, interest and mortgages. A TOS may reject a specific buyer as a member, but in general the right to dispose of a certain flat is sold on the market to the highest bidder. In the current process of urbanisation, growing numbers of wealthy people and a general shortage of rental flats, prices on TOS-flats have become very high, especially in the densely exploited inner city areas in growth regions. Hence, low-income people cannot compete for this kind of tenure, with the possible exception for places and periods of very low demand.

In the whole country with its 9.2 million people, there were in 2008 about 4 470,000 dwellings, whereof 45 percent in single-family houses and 55 percent in multi-dwelling buildings (Statistics Sweden 2008a). Of the latter, about 40 percent of the flats are TOS-owned, while 60 percent are rental, about half of which in public housing. Taken together, this means that of all dwellings in Sweden, 45 percent are owner-occupied single-family houses, 22 percent TOS-flats, 16 percent public rental and 17 percent private rental flats.<sup>4</sup> Public housing in Sweden is in a few cases owned by foundations, but mostly of municipal housing companies (MHCs).

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<sup>4</sup> Of all dwellings in 2008, 2 003,000 (45 %) were single-family houses while 2 440,000 (54,5 %) were found in multi-dwelling buildings (Statistics Sweden 2008a). The number of rental dwellings, which are almost exclusively found in multi-dwelling buildings, was 1,467,528 (data from Statistics Sweden's databases). The national organisation of MHCs, SABO, reports that its member companies own a total number of 726,000 flats (SABO, [www.sabo.se](http://www.sabo.se)). However, there are other ways of counting. Magnusson & Turner (2008: 281) found that 42 % of all dwellings are owner-occupied (single-family houses), 20% owned by TOSs, 17% are private rental and about 16% public rental.

In 2002, about 42 per cent of all dwellings were owner-occupied single-family houses, 40 per cent rental flats and 18 per cent TOS-flats. Although the tenure of dwellings and households are not identical – for instance, a household can rent a TOS-flat – a comparison with the last census in Sweden (1990) and with tenures of dwellings in 2002 indicates an unambiguous tendency of change:

Table 1. Distribution on different kinds of tenure of households in 1990 and of dwellings in 2002 and 2008 (percent)

	households 1990	dwellings 2002	dwellings 2008
owner-occupation	41	42	45
TOS-flats	15	18	22
rental	40	40	33

*Source:* Statistics Sweden (1990, 2003 and 2008a)

TOSs should rather be viewed as a kind of owner-occupation, which adds to the signs of a decreasing proportion of rental flats. Among the rental flats, the share of public housing is also in decline. While changes on the aggregated level are rather slow, the pace seems to have speeded up with the conservative government in power since 2006. There are several reasons for this development. In sites with consistently high vacancy rates, MHC-owned houses have been demolished, and among the new-built homes only a small share has been ordinary, rental flats in the past decades (Boverket 2008). An (irreversible) conversion of rental flats into TOS dwellings has contributed further to the reduction of rental flats.<sup>5</sup>

In the years 1990–2007, the number of TOS-flats grew with 206,000 (Statistics Sweden 2008a). Many of these dwellings were newly constructed but more than half, or 115,000 were previously rental dwellings converted to TOS-flats, 76 percent of which were located in Stockholm. Since 2006, the national government as well as the conservative majority of the

<sup>5</sup> If a property owner wants to sell a real estate, the tenants in a rental building have the right to buy it in the first place if they have established a TOS and declared their interest in buying the property to the authorities, provided that at least two thirds of the tenants have signed a declaration that they want this conversion to happen. Due to tax legislation, converting rental flats into TOS ones is in general profitable for the landlord, as well as for the sitting tenants, who afterwards may sell their flats at a much higher price than they had to pay themselves.

city of Stockholm have encouraged tenants of MHCs to organise TOSs and buy their homes, why the number of public rental flats transformed to TOSs is expected to grow.

Besides the fact that rental dwellings are converted to TOS-flats or demolished, some municipalities have sold parts – or all – of their public housing to private housing companies. Today, a number of municipalities in the Stockholm region have no public housing at all. Consequently, the share as well as the absolute number of the MHC-dwellings are decreasing, and in addition, the Swedish variety of public housing has been severely questioned by private landlords, the EU Commission and researchers and municipal officials engaged in homelessness. This is probably part of the answer to why MHCs keep striving for renewal and appreciation, although they are considered to be mighty and stable institutions on the Swedish housing market, nationally as well as locally.

### **Surplus and shortage**

During the past 15 years, a surplus of dwellings has turned into a shortage, entailing high prices on owner-occupied homes and TOS-flats, in particular in the big cities and their neighbouring municipalities. At the same time, the urbanisation process has resulted in a considerable oversupply of dwellings – single-family houses as well as rental homes – in other towns and regions, especially in the North of Sweden. While the proportion of vacant flats in public housing 2008 in the two biggest city regions – Stockholm and Göteborg – was only 0.3 and 0.1 per cent, respectively, eleven small municipalities had more than 10 per cent vacancies (Statistics Sweden, BO 35 SM 0801: 9).

However, vacancy rates have dropped on average in the country. Shortage of rental dwellings is now reported in a growing proportion of the municipalities, and most of them – including all the bigger cities and towns – suffer from deficient supply of, in particular, small and large flats. The general tendency is demonstrated in the statistics on vacancies, which is gathered by Statistics Sweden on certain dates every year. The number of vacant flats in September 2008 was the lowest one since 1992 (Statistics Sweden 2008b, BO 35 SM 0801). From Table 1 it is also clear that in recent years, the vacancy rate in general is higher in private rental than in public rental housing, which is a quite new tendency.

Table 1: Number of vacant rental dwellings and vacancy rates for private and public landlords, respectively, and for all rental dwellings on a certain date (1996-2008).

Year	No of vacant rental dwellings	Public rental % vacant	Private rental % vacant	All rental % vacant
1996	49,385	4.2	1.9	3.2
1997	59,185	4.9	2.4	3.8
1998	62,244	5.3	2.5	4.0
1999	56,494	4.7	2.4	3.7
2000	48,677	4.0	2.4	3.2
2001	37,797	3.1	1.9	2.6
2002	29,446	2.5	1.5	2.0
2003	26,250	2.0	1.5	1.7
2004	25,547	1.8	1.7	1.7
2005	25,530	1.7	1.7	1.7
2006	23,899	1.4	1.8	1.6
2007	19,817	1.3	1.5	1.4
2008	18,590	1.2	1.4	1.3

Source: Statistics Sweden (databases; BO 35 SM 0801)

The balance in the housing market varies with the national and local unemployment rate. In periods with high unemployment, the effective demand on housing decreases since many cannot afford the rent for available housing and are not trusted with loans from the bank. When the unemployment rate goes down, more people (especially youth) apply for housing, which results in increased demand. Hence, in the current labour market crisis, one might expect somewhat higher vacancy rates again.

Despite its declining share of the housing market, the situation of no vacancies and high demand indicates, nevertheless, a reinforced market position for Swedish public housing.

## 2. The changing role of public housing

There is no social housing in Sweden. The Swedish housing policy model, developed in the 1940s and established and implemented after World War II, implied that the central state should see to that a substantial part of the housing stock was built, owned and controlled by the municipalities through MHCs in order to secure that households that were deemed unattractive by private landlords, e.g. due to their poverty or number of children, would still have access to decent housing. To counteract socio-economic



segregation, all kinds of people were eligible for public housing from the start, and construction subsidies as well as means-tested housing allowances for low-income families were approved regardless of tenure. Vacant public housing was allocated according to waiting-time and need through public housing assignment agencies. However, most elements of this policy have been abandoned during the past two decades.

### **The history of Swedish public housing**

By the end of the 1960s, the objectives of the Swedish housing policy were formulated as follows:

”The society's objective for housing provision is that the entire population should be offered healthy, spacious, well-planned, and appropriately equipped dwellings of good quality to reasonable costs.” (Gov. prop. 1967:100).

This goal was long repeated each year, with some aspects added, such as sustainability and the conditions for children and youth.

The Swedish housing policy in general is separated from other areas of the welfare state, since it has to be “realised through the market” (Bengtsson 2006a: 14). This is why, Bengtsson (ibid.) claims, the housing policy has been denoted as ”the wobbly pillar under the welfare state” (Torgersen 1987) and dwellings are viewed as “market goods of the welfare policy” (Bengtsson 1995). The role of the state is not to provide housing but only to influence the structural institutional arrangements of the housing market, including “the rules that govern these markets' organisation and the units that act on them” (Bengtsson 2006a: 15; see also SOU 2001:27, p. 63).

According to Klas Ramberg (2000: 210), ”individuality and varying market-related preferences have replaced the Swedish welfare state's ideas of conformity and equality” on the Swedish housing market. This change has taken place since the 1990s, starting with the introduction of a new housing policy by a new, right-wing government in 1991. During the election campaign the social democratic housing policy was pointed out as a symbol for “iron triangles, corporatism and organisational and institutional leverage” and the Ministry of Housing was seen as the core of this problem. Accordingly, the new administration closed it and split housing issues into seven other ministries and the policy influenced by neo-liberalism and “public choice-thinking” (Bengtsson 2006b: 140). Competition and freedom of

choice were advocated, and housing subventions were phased out and replaced by state credit guarantees. The special norms and rules regarding MHCs were suggested to be abolished (SOU 1992:47, p. 118–119), but the public housing sector has nevertheless survived as concept and institution, partly because it is based on strong and lasting structures of the Swedish society, partly because the social democrats, who won the governmental power in the next election (1994), wanted to keep it. However, the financial crisis of the mid 1990s and the urge to reduce the budget deficit after having joined the EU entailed that the dismantling process was rather speeded up through reduced housing allowances and few efforts to restore housing subventions. The deregulation of municipal housing had come far when the right-wing parties again won the election in 2006, and the new government seems to continue the road it took in 1991. In 2007, it re-formulated the goal for Swedish housing policy into the following credo, where ‘policy’ is absent but ‘market’ central and ‘needs’ subsumed under ‘demand’:

”The objective for housing issues is long-term well-functioning housing markets, where the demand of the consumers meets a supply of housing corresponding to their needs” (2007/08:CU1).

In his overview of the history of housing policy and the housing market in Sweden, Bengtsson (2006b) distinguishes four phases. First, the introduction phase, triggered by the societal crisis caused by urbanisation and industrialisation processes in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when there was a great shortage of housing; secondly the growth phase in the post-war period, peaking and turning in the mid 1970s when the ‘million program’, with one million dwellings constructed during ten years, was completed; thirdly, the management phase when the large-scale production was questioned and the requirements on tenants were increased. By the start of the 1990s, housing policy and regulations were scrutinised and debated, and the fourth phase, when the general housing policy was phased out, was introduced.

In 1996, the then social democratic government presented a report on the future housing policy (SOU 1996:156), which was received as a confirmation of the shift of policy from active to passive and from general to selective (see Turner & Vedung, eds, 1997). The phasing-out period of municipal housing was characterized by two housing market problems, segregation and increased regional differences between big cities and the countryside (Bengtsson 2006b: 147). Municipalities started to sell their housing companies to private companies or to TOSs organised by tenants. These measures were justified as solutions to

problems of the MHCs and the municipalities, as well as of the private housing companies, since it was argued that the MHCs were obstacles to a free housing market. The social democrats tried to hamper the selling out process through legislation in 2002 (SFS 2002:102), but it was eliminated in 2007 by the new government. A new debate emerged, in which public housing again was questioned on the basis of neo-liberal ideas, and the present government has facilitated and encouraged sales to TOSs, while it has been more ambivalent to the corporate system of rent settling.<sup>6</sup>

Hence, although public housing has reinforced its market position as housing, the ‘public’ dimension is being probed.

### **The growing importance of financial goals**

Some years ago, Turner (2003:111–119) outlined possible future roles of Swedish municipal housing: it will either grow *businesslike*, i.e., competing on equal condition with private landlords on the housing market, or become like ‘social housing’ in other European countries, that is, be defined as a *social good* for households with lower incomes and social positions. A third possibility, according to Turner (ibid.), was one of *extinction* of the MHCs. Which road would be taken, he claimed, will depend on the development of underlying societal conditions, as well as on actions taken by the central state. Göteborg, however, is an example of a city that has tried to form a fourth alternative direction through providing its MHCs with a new mission, namely, to contribute to the whole city’s development – a goal we will come back to.

In 1986 the criteria for ‘public housing’ (*allmännyttta*) were settled to include that the municipality has a decisive influence in the company and runs it on a non-profit basis. Because of central and local deregulation of housing allocation, declining state subsidies (and complete tenure neutrality for those that remained), new housing companies cannot obtain the label ‘public’ after 1992, while older MHCs were allowed to keep this

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<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, an element of the traditional housing policy that still remains, although it is currently severely questioned, is the specific Swedish variety of rent control. Rents in public housing are settled in negotiations according to the principle of self-cost (including profit, up to a limit, for the municipal owners) and serve as a level of reference in negotiations on rents between the Tenants’ Association and landlords (or their associations) in the private rental sector, for flats of equal ‘use value’, to the result that rents were (and are) similar in the private and the public rental sector. However, due to the cessation of state subsidies, the gap has widened between rents in newly constructed or renovated buildings and the ones in older buildings.

designation only as long as the municipality retained a ‘decisive’ influence over them and as long as the profit extracted from the company is not excessive.<sup>7</sup> That is, the criteria are financial, and MHCs do not have to work for any social goal to be defined as a ‘public utility’.<sup>8</sup>

In 2005, the Swedish variety of public housing was threatened by the decision by the EU Commission on the prerequisites for state support to housing, the central and local state is not allowed to support specific companies that compete with others on the market. However, in July 2005 the Commission stated that an exception would be services of general public interest, including social housing, which means

... providing housing for disadvantaged citizens or socially less advantaged groups, which due to solvability constraints are unable to obtain housing at market conditions (Message from the EU Commission, July 2005).

In October 2005, the Government appointed a special investigator to review the preconditions for public and municipal housing (Gov. Dir 2005:116) and a possible response to the EU decision on state support to social housing. Necessary changes in the legislation for tenancy in general and public housing in particular were to be considered, including the two main alternative directions for the MHCs that Turner (2003) had defined – pure business or a social good.

The investigator shall describe what conflicts of interests and goals that might exist, e.g., the question whether public housing shall have clearer housing-social goals versus the fact that municipal housing companies today both compete on the same housing market as private companies and provide rent standards for the private rental sector” (Gov. Dir. 2005:116, p. 16).

The need to reflect on the social goals of the MHCs was underlined in the directives:

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<sup>7</sup> In 2009 this means not more than 4.88 percent of the share capital that the municipality has invested in the MHC (Boverket [www.boverket.se/Boende/Om-boende/Allmannyttan/Definition-och-skalgig-utdelning/](http://www.boverket.se/Boende/Om-boende/Allmannyttan/Definition-och-skalgig-utdelning/)).

<sup>8</sup> It is commonly claimed that Sweden through its large segment of public housing “for everybody” (not only low-income people) has avoided the stigmatization that is ascribed to the smaller and more selective ‘social housing’ in Great Britain, for instance. However, in 1980 social housing in Britain comprised 30 percent of the dwellings, as compared to 22 percent controlled by the Swedish MHCs (Emms 1990), and that the share of publicly controlled housing today is about the same in countries like France, Britain and Sweden (Fitzpatrick & Stephens 2007). Furthermore, Sweden had the same debate on deterioration and decay and blaming of the MHCs in the 1980s, and the fear of its return is still haunting them (see further Sahlin 2008).

The investigator shall especially consider the importance of the municipalities' ability to utilise their housing companies as a housing-policy tool, e.g., as a tool to promote integration and counteract homelessness, but also review the complications that this might imply (ibid.: 12).

A great proportion of the Swedish MHCs refrain from any 'social responsibility' other than what every landlord or property owner should take, which definitely makes the sector 'non-social', according to the EU. Although housing subventions have been phased out, there are still some benefits attached to the status of 'public housing', such as the possibility to get central state support in situations with high vacancy rates through the State Housing Credit Board (*Statens bostadskreditnämnd*); in addition, the limit of the return taken from the MHCs is considered to be state support (SOU 2008:35). Hence, observers agreed that the position of the Swedish MHCs' was precarious.

When the investigator delivered his report in Spring 2008 he suggested a fully-fledged market-orientation of the MHC (SOU 2008:35). He also briefly outlined what a social housing profile would entail, but did not suggest any such change. However, according to additional directives by the conservative government in May 2007, the investigator was *not allowed* to make any such recommendations:

If several models are possible to implement necessary changes, the investigator *shall not suggest* any model that implies that the municipal housing companies develop in a direction of primarily or only supplying housing for specific groups after special review, for instance according to certain income criteria (Gov. Dir. 2007:73, p. 1. Emphasis added).

Accordingly, the social dimension of public housing is not only fading away, it is also explicitly prohibited by the sitting government, and it is stubbornly rejected by most MHCs and their national organisation, SABO (Sahlin 2008). On the other hand, the public opinion against such a complete dismantling of the idea of public housing that was suggested by the investigator (SOU 208:35) was quite intense, and the Government has so far not issued any bill with this content to the Parliament. However, there are negotiations going on between the Tenants' Association, SABO and the national organisation of private landlords in order to establish a new rent-settling model that would satisfy all parties.

## **New tenants**

To secure access to housing for all, public (and sometimes private) rental dwellings used to be allocated through municipal waiting lists according to time spent in the housing queues but with the possibility of precedence in cases of emergency or special needs. Between 1981 and 1993, the municipality had a legal option to demand in court that a share of private vacancies be allocated through the municipal housing assignment agency, if needed for housing provision or in order to counteract segregation. Although this formal right was almost never enforced, the legislation behind it provided the municipalities with a bargaining position that resulted in voluntary deals with private landlords on municipal control over the allocation of a share of their vacancies. The flip side of these deals was the emergence of a new market segment of municipal sub-tenancies – a secondary housing market – since the landlords required in return that the authorities took the full economic and social responsibility for housing applicants that were deemed risky as tenants (Sahlin 1996, Knutagård 2009).

Most agreements with private landlords on local housing assignment were terminated with the cessation of the housing assignment legislation in 1993, and the municipal housing agencies were closed subsequently. Today such agencies are found only in very few municipalities and where they do exist, they rather assist private and public landlords in finding good tenants according to their preferences,<sup>9</sup> while the secondary housing market is slowly growing.

There was never any upper income limit for being eligible for public housing, and in many municipalities the MHC is the only big owner of rental properties. Nevertheless, in the late 1980s, the municipalities and their companies became concerned about what they perceived as a tendency of residualisation of public housing and the additional ‘social costs’ that might entail (Turner 1979). This was due partly to international discourse, partly to the matter of fact that a growing share of two-parent households had moved to the comparatively cheap single family housing which was mass-produced in the 1970s. A process of discourse change started, in which “housing for all” and “social mix” was

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<sup>9</sup> For instance, the housing assignment agency of Stockholm, *Bostad Stockholm*, has an agreement with local (public and private) landlords that their claims on housing applicants should be completely respected and complied with: “It is the property owner who determines the requirements for accepting a housing applicant as a tenant. These can concern type of income, size of income, age, gender etc. The requirements of the landlord may imply that applicants are bypassed (in the housing queue/IS) when a flat is allocated” (Rules for housing assignment, *Bostad Stockholm*, see [www.bostad.stockholm.se](http://www.bostad.stockholm.se)).

interpreted to mean that the composition of tenants in public housing should reflect the total population. Hence, efforts were made by MHCs to attract the under-represented upper and middle classes through building luxurious apartments and purchasing attractive, expensive and well restored real estates in the inner cities.<sup>10</sup> At the same time the doors were increasingly closed for housing applicants with some kind of negative record, be it with debts, social problems or previous neighbour complaints (Sahlin 1996).

Accordingly, the so-called social responsibility, i.e. the obligation to offer apartments to inhabitants who fail to find housing in other ways, has been toned down since the 1980s. Instead, the MHCs are expected to be run with economic efficiency and, preferably, to generate profit and contribute to local growth (Lind 2001, SOU 2001:27, Turner 2000).

The central and local deregulation of housing allocation, coupled with an increased market-orientation, has entailed a growing space for landlords to select and reject tenants (Popoola 2001). The practice of selecting tenants is similar in public and private housing companies and often housing queues are not used at all; in this way the landlord can secure that vacant flats are allocated to the best available applicants from their perspective as landlords. However, due to the better access to information on local citizens and more elaborated screening routines in public housing, applicants with previous debts or neighbour complaints, low or precarious income or deficient references to previous landlords run even higher risk to be rejected by MHCs than by private landlords. Today, many MHCs will not let their dwellings to applicants without regular work or perfect records from previous housing. As a result, homeless people in general cannot count on public housing as a solution, even in municipalities with high vacancy rates.

### **Looking for a new role**

MHCs seem to be looking for (or are being assigned) new roles in relation to its owners. To strive for tenants' influence and better safety and order in the neighbourhoods are highlighted objectives. Some MHCs form partnerships with other local landlords and property owners in the neighbourhoods and use them to increase their local power position and influence the provision of public and commercial services, the allocation of public funding, the composition of tenants in a residential area, and so forth. In recent

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<sup>10</sup> Ironically, many of these estates were the first ones to be sold to TOSs when this option was introduced in the 1990s.

years – often with support from state project grants – MHCs have been involved in issues such as local labour market programmes, traffic politics, crime prevention, special housing, integration projects – and safety issues. Put briefly, the MHCs seem to expand their role in the society beyond mere housing (Borelius & Wennerström 2009). The Tenants' Association sometimes combats this tendency with reference to, on the one hand, the fact that public housing tenants through their rents are paying for public utilities that should be funded through taxes and, on the other hand, that important economic decisions are being taken in the company's closed board rooms out of reach for democratic influence.

### **3. The case of Göteborg: safety and development**

Up to now, we have provided a general account of characteristic features and tendencies of change in the Swedish housing market and tenure structure, as well as in the role of public housing. However, there are differences between cities, regions and MHCs. Göteborg stands out as a city where the MHCs have been given a strong role in the municipality, and where there is consensus on keeping public housing as a vital element on the housing market. It differs from Stockholm also in its consistent refusal to re-install a public housing assignment agency; instead, all MHCs administer their own allocation of flats and determine their own criteria for eligibility.

There are five MHCs in Göteborg. Together with a few other municipal companies, they all belong to a concern, Förvaltnings AB Framtiden (“The Future Inc.”; [www.framtiden.se](http://www.framtiden.se)), through which they can transfer profits and losses and coordinate policies. In its owner's directives, the city has decided that the reason for the city to own real estates is to promote “the development of the city” and ensure the tenants' influence over their housing. There is no obligation to provide housing for homeless people and it is explicitly stated that the MHCs have no social responsibility other than what any actor on the housing market should bear ([www.framtiden.se](http://www.framtiden.se)).

Of the three MHCs studied in this project, two are established companies with dwellings in many parts of the city, while one was formed in 1997 through collecting all public housing dwellings in a specific geographical area in a new company, Gårdstensbostäder, which owns



almost all dwellings (86 %) in *Gårdsten*. In *Gamlestaden*, Poseidon is the only MHC with a third of the dwellings, while a number of private landlords and TOSs own the rest of the real estates. In *Norra Biskopsgården*, the MHC Bostadsbolaget is the big landlord, controlling 86 % of the dwellings. These neighbourhoods comprise each 3,200, 4,700, and 1,800 dwellings, respectively.

The following account is based on an analysis of documents and a number of qualitative, transcribed interviews with officials in the concerned MHCs, as well as in the concern Framtiden.

### **Balancing social and economic objectives**

Accounts for efforts to keep the neighbourhood tidy, demonstrate, in particular, how closely social, economic and safety goals are intertwined. In the following quote, an interviewee from the concern tells about the examination of properties before the interest rate is set when a new loan is negotiated with ‘our rating companies’:

I: /.../ they come here, a big delegation from London, and then they walk around in residential areas. Then we compose portfolios with real estates as security for this loan, then they walk around in these real estates, they walk around in the yards, they enter the staircases, they enter apartments and check that they measure up and that it looks good and that it's fresh and nice and that this will work as a security /.../ And then one considers the vacancy rate, for instance. Right now there is no problem, of course, we are in a boom with high demand on housing and hardly anything is vacant. The test comes later if the business cycle goes down and so on, but if you have good real estates and they are well kept and nice, if you have a good relationship with the tenants through high influence and great involvement, then people will stay. (R: *Yes.*) But if you don't fix that, then you will have trouble with vacancies, and this is something the rating companies look at, for instance. It is extremely important to them that everything is fully let (?).

For the interviewee, various social issues, including user involvement and happy tenants, are all embedded in the financial plan. In this way of speaking, there is absolutely no conflict between financial and social goals of the MHCs or the concern, but in the narrative, the financial institutions are the ones that they need to accommodate to.

The three MHCs that are in focus in this study try to balance their economic and social objectives in somewhat different ways and ascribe different weight to them. A manager in Poseidon put the issue quite bluntly:

I–28<sup>11</sup>: Well, the economy comes first, that's how it is (*R: Yes.*), there are no social issues, that's a fact. Then you could say that what's in our directive, it's that we shall take our share of the social responsibility, then if we talk only about the social part, our share, that is 10 percent. If we have a 10 percent share of the market, then we should take 10 percent of the social [responsibility].

Encouraged by the city's district office, this MHC has taken the lead in coordinating different kinds of property owners and landlords in Gamlestaden in a joint action to raise the status and standards of housing in the area. Ironically, this includes getting rid of especially the kind of housing that is intended for, or at least available for people with low income and difficulties to get access to housing elsewhere.

In Gårdsten, the social objective has been transformed into an ambitious strategy to raise the comfort and safety of the sitting tenants. The MHC has worked hard to improve the public image of the neighbourhood and also won a number of awards, and it has made great efforts to improve public transports and banking and commercial services in the shopping centre and has formed a board where the majority of the members are tenants residing in the area. However, it has also strived for a replacement of some tenants with more resourceful residents, and for the exclusion of others through eviction. A few real estates in the area have been substantially rebuilt as environment-friendly, ecological 'solar houses', in a successful attempt to attract Swedish-born tenants, substituting for the former ones – immigrants that could not afford the new rents.

The word 'social' has many different connotations in Swedish, and in Gårdsten, a staff member in the MHC claims that the company fulfils its social obligation through accepting some people with social problems in special contracts:

I–40: ... we have both flats that are especially adjusted for disabled people, and then we have flats that the City's Real Estate Office disposes of (*R: OK*) for various such ... well social tasks, so to speak.

Interviewees from Bostadsbolaget in Biskopsgården, finally, presents itself as the MHC that currently has to shoulder the responsibility for large immigrant families and other kinds of tenant that are not so popular with those MHCs that opt for better reputation and

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<sup>11</sup> I stands for interviewee. Interviewees have been given numbers, e.g. I–28, except for those where we due to their position fear that they could be identified. R stands for researcher/interviewer.

ranks. In the course of our study, there were attempts to involve the tenants in participative democracy in planning for densification, and in contrast to the other two, we saw no explicit ambition to change the composition of tenants, except for attracting new tenants through new constructions. While Gamlestaden was an area determined for upgrading and Gårdsten was defined as a special 'development area', Norra Biskopsgården did not have any strategic commission within the concern in the course of our study.

In general, the social objective seems to be less articulated and this, in turn, is often justified with accounts that include the unfair distribution of social problems among the different districts of the city.

### **Safety goals**

On its website, Göteborg City has a special entrance called 'Safety', announced like this:

In Göteborg we have cooperate broadly in order to increase the feeling of safety. Here [on this website] you can find out what kind of preventative safety work and campaigns against litter and vandalism that are taking place all around the city ([www.goteborg.se](http://www.goteborg.se))

The integration of litter and vandalism (mostly understood as graffiti) in safety issues is a general feature in the safety discourse of this city, which also has a special council called 'Safe, Beautiful City'. Hence, the Framtiden concern in its *Annual Account 2008* distinguishes only one goal in the City budget for 2008 of relevance for its safety work: "People in Göteborg want a safe and clean city, why the amount of litter shall be reduced in Göteborg" (Framtiden 2009:5). Nevertheless, Framtiden highlights safety work within its MHCs, and in its articulation of its own goals, safety is part of the objective to "contribute to the development of Göteborg" and the districts and neighbourhoods where MHC dwellings are located (ibid.:7). It is also mentioned that the concern has a yearly prize for 'Increased safety & security.'

In the *Annual Account 2008*, safety issues have an own subsection within the section "Market and tenants". The first paragraph of this subsection starts with a statement that safety and security for a long time have been important issues for Framtiden, and continues: "The current development is in the direction towards a more systematic work with risk and crisis management issues." The paragraph ends with the following sentence:

“Measures and development work are continuously implemented, aiming at raising *the concern’s safety* and security” (ibid., p. 16; emphasis added). Consequently, the impression is that tenants’ safety is on the one hand presented as a general goal of the housing management, on the other hand specifically oriented to technical control of the companies’ financial risks. Another kind of ambiguity is found in the following excerpt:

The companies focus on increasing the feeling of safety in the close environment through a continuous renewal of lighting, exterior environment and other physical measures. Safety walks with residents and cooperation partners is an important activity in the preventative work. An important part of the experience of safety is also that the residential area is clean and tidy. Working exterior security, security doors, lock systems and booking of laundry rooms etc are important parameters in the safety work (ibid.:16f.).

Of all these “important” activities, some aim at an increased feeling of safety (lighting, reducing litter) with the tenants, while others seem to be oriented at reducing the actual risk of crime (e.g., the lock system). The rest of the subsection on safety in the report comprises brief presentations of a special company in Framtiden, whose task it is to manage disturbing tenants, and of a partnership aiming to reduce the recruitment of young people to criminal gangs.

### **Safety measures and their reasons**

In Gamlestaden, the ‘physical’ safety work went on within the Partnership of Property Owners in Gamlestaden, PPOG, through an employee or the board gathering local crime reports from the police and inspection walks in the area to see if there were garbage, broken street lights, graffiti or other signs of disorder in need of attention. Poseidon in Gamlestaden is the one of the three studied MHCs that most decisively stressed the financial motives for safety work:

I–20: Yes, yes, we calculate the financial value of the real estate in exactly the same way [as private property owners], and a value has its origin where the market gives a price for the risk, so to speak. We have those all over the city, and in Gamlestaden it has gone down, that is, the risk is less for our property owners, and if the risk is low, then the value increases.

An interviewee representing a TOS but member of the PPOG appreciated the partnership but still expressed a certain amount of alienation, which concerned exactly this stress on the economic motives for safety work:

I-11: Yes it (the PPOG) has made a great difference but unfortunately – the idea was that /.../ residents of Gamlestaden should take over, or those of us who are ... You see we have completely different interests in this. They have economic interests, naturally, while we want to be able to identify with our close environment and think that it's a good place to live, of course. We have TOS-flats, we residents, and have certain financial interests, too, although we've bought ourselves into this neighbourhood and want to like it here, and want to live here /.../ It's as simple as this, that some of us have lived here for very long and some of us are born here, we have, we get involved in this with our heart as well. The property owners don't do that, for them it's with their purse, and you should understand this, but I'd say that it's another kind of involvement then.

The interviewee's 'we' does not include the public or private landlords in the neighbourhood, and although he is a member of the partnership, he and his 'we' obviously regards themselves as less powerful partners of the PPOG.

In Gårdsten, safety measures were more spectacular and often highlighted in the media as bordering to the indecent or repressive, as the MHC prohibited certain kinds of dogs and gave notice to some families, whose members had committed crime in the neighbourhood – and even tried to change the Tenants' Act to make it easier to evict due to crime.

Two of the three residential areas in the study had engaged a specific 'safety consultant' who was much into situational crime prevention and target hardening. He also conducted (identical) 'safety surveys' of residents to find out about local hotspots and places where the residents felt unsafe. We will not go into the details of these, but only mention a curious result of the repeated survey in Gårdsten: Although various specific questions indicated that the residents' safety was indeed enhanced in the neighbourhood, the general feelings of safety among the respondents had on average declined between 2001 and 2004, according to these surveys (Malm 2001, 2004).

In Biskopsgården, safety measures seem to have been less comprehensive, more scattered, and closer to the city district's social services and previous work for increasing the residents' involvement and community. In the research project, we took a special interest in the partnership formed to engage a voluntary association called Easy Street, the idea of which is to employ (at very low wages) young boys with previous experience of crime as guardians in the school, tram stations and streets (see Borelius 2009). But we also got the impression that safety was not as high on the agenda here, or interpreted

differently than in the other two areas. Two employees in Bostadsbolaget accounted for a safety strategy that is at the same time a way of launching the neighbourhood and the MHC:

I-22B: We work a lot with positive information. Those positive things that happen in the area, so that you will not see, not look for the negative. If you all the time talk about how good everything is, and that 'Now we are fixing this', 'Now it's fine here', and 'We cut these bushes in order to make it easier for you to look out', and not talking about unsafety but talk about safety instead. (R2: *Yes.*) In that way, I think that you increase people's belief that it's safer (I-22A: *That feeling.*) Yes.

In this quote, safety is presented only as a feeling that is subjected to more or less manipulative information.

#### *Keeping the neighbourhood nice and tidy*

As mentioned above, removing litter and graffiti is consistently integrated in 'safety' on all levels of the city's safety work. This holds also for MHC in other parts of Sweden, as they are all subjected to something called 'safety certifying' which is used as one criterion among several others in negotiations on higher rents. Safety in this context is highly focused on physical measures and checked through inspections in place:

I-23A: They examined constructions, garages, parking lots, everything! In order to get this safety certificate (I-23B: *Yes, exactly!*) And then they were out here and looked at it afterwards, when they had fixed ... made a check of what should be fixed and what had been removed ...

In this quote, as well as in the one above on rating companies' visits, the interviewees speak of external inspections as being of great importance to the *financial* situation of the MHCs. I explains this as a win-win situation:

I: ... nowadays we primarily borrow money on the European capital market, with the real estates as security. /.../ We [Framtiden] have better interest rates and the city has got better rating, and thereby lower interest, of course, so it has been very good business for all involved (R: *Yes.*) So that now our real estates make up the security [for loans], and that implies, also for this reason, that it's important that the real estates are kept in a good shape, that they are attractive and have a high letting rate and so forth.

### *Carefully selecting new tenants*

In the interviews, managers of MHCs brought up the importance of carefully selecting new tenants in order to increase local safety. However, they were conscious that this could be criticised and therefore made great efforts to present themselves as non-racist and tolerant.

In accounting for such a selection strategy, the interviewee from the MHC in Gamlestaden makes an interesting journey. He starts with pitying the unemployed, continues with referring to the harm their presence does to other residents, to their own children who are claimed to be at risk for becoming criminal gang members – and ends with claiming that he is not a racist.

I–30: Problem is, the big problem today, it's ... what you call segregated neighbourhoods – the problem is not that people have kinky hair or that you come from Pakistan, the problem is that you have no job. /.../ So if there are too big concentrations of it [unemployment], then you find yourself in situations like, where you have this gang criminality and all that, you see. Kids need to have a belief in the future, and they can only get that if their parents get on the track and get a job and they themselves believe in the future, dignity and all that, and can be role models to their kids. If we don't get there, well then everything will go to hell (R2: *Hm.* R1: *Yes.*) And it has not one iota to do with if whether you come from Pakistan, or ... (R2: *No.*) The sad thing is that those who do are too often, very often, tainted with this thing: one hasn't got a job.

So on the one hand he has nothing against kinky hair or people from Pakistan, on the other hand such people are often unemployed, and their kids will become gang members. From the MHC's point of view, accordingly, the only reasonable conclusion in order to accomplish safe housing in the neighbourhood, would be to be vary to accept as tenants people with "kinky hair" or immigrants from certain countries. In another sequence of the same interview, the 'victim' is the neighbours or the neighbourhood itself, which has been unfairly burdened of homeless accommodation.

I–30: Of course, the closest neighbours are not extremely delighted to ... have this close by. /.../ On the other hand, this thing [homeless accommodation], it must be allowed to exist somewhere, it's just that in Gamlestaden there has been *very* much of it. And Gamlestaden should, in our view, have its share, but other districts will have to carry their share, so to speak. One cannot concentrate it to one district, because then it will have very negative consequences for this part of the city.

Taken together, these two quotes demonstrate how the interviewee shifts perspectives depending on whether or not his own neighbourhood has more or less of some perceived

problem phenomenon or group than other parts of the city. The share of unemployed and of immigrants is actually not especially high in this neighbourhood, compared with the two other ones, but this was still no reason to accept unemployed or immigrant people without special caution. These quotes also show that working for local safety might imply excluding more vulnerable groups of people from housing (see further Sahlin 2009).

In Gårdsten, too, unemployed people were not accepted as new tenants:

I-40: /.../ since some years we have this letting policy, implying that those who ... get housing with us today have an income from either paid work or ... pension or students' loans.

R: So unemployed people cannot move here?

I-40: No but

R: If you have unemployment insurance?

I-40: No, like I said: There we have this letting policy ...

Note that the agent here is not the MHC but the letting policy, which seems to decide for itself who is welcome and who is not. Then this interviewee accounts for this letting policy through referring to the problem of segregation as a 'social challenge' to the whole city:

I-40: we have many social challenges to work with, also the social situation found here. So it is important to ... so to speak, to take a greater – and that's what this is based upon – take a greater common responsibility within public housing in order to work with these existing social challenges, but also to integrate more in the city of Göteborg and its different parts, making them more equal, because it is not equal. We know that when it comes to ... I mean, we can talk about ... if you take, for instance, we see it as a resource, out of this thing with diversity, but 83 percent of the residents here have another ethnical background [than Swedish] and then you can say like this, that if you take other parts [names of wealthy neighbourhoods], there it is segregation due to the fact that there is no *other* ethnical background [than Swedish].

Again – just like in Gamlestad – the MHC rejects unemployed applicants and tries to attract Swedes as part of a social objective and a safety strategy, with reference to the claim that the existing distribution between different city districts of something unwanted is not fair.

### *Eviction policies*

Evictions are mentioned by several MHC employees as a necessary means to enhance safety in the area. To Gårdstensbostäder, it is a matter of principle, and this company has



made efforts to widen the concept of ‘disturbance’ as a reason for eviction in the Tenants’ Act. In a motion to the national organisation of MHCs its formal suggestion starts with the following paragraph:

“The MHC Gårdsten works hard to obtain safety for the residents through various kinds of measure. In some extreme cases we have given notice to tenants who have committed serious crimes of violence and who actively contributed to creating an unsafe housing environment for other tenants. Unfortunately we have lost these cases in the Tenant’s Court, since the Court has found that the direct connection between the crime and the flat has been missing. (Motion No 9 to the SABO congress June 2003).

In this quote, there are four distinct subject positions with regard to goodness and agency. The speaking subject, the ‘we’, is the MHC that “works hard” for safety against the criminals, who, in turn, “actively contributed” to unsafety in the neighbourhood. The, “other tenants” are the implicitly ‘good’, passive victims, on whose behalf the MHC claims to be acting, while the Tenants’ Court is mildly blamed for protecting the criminals, and hence, implicitly putting the good tenants at risk. This is a discourse in which some of the tenants are positioned as enemies of others, while the MHC is ascribed the role as the saviour of other tenants.

In the following excerpts from an interview with a staff member in Framtiden, the interviewee describes evictions or dislocations as “the top of a safety pyramid”, a metaphor used by the interviewee to describe the concern’s safety work:

I: /.../ in our housing, it is very much about that people should like it there. And then we have formed a little ‘safety pyramid’ (*laughter*), to illustrate this. And let’s say that the basis of our safety work, it is the maintenance staff, those who work out there in the neighbourhoods, of course. Besides that, we have our own disturbance service /.../ with cars, who drive around and react upon complaints when people feel they are being disturbed /.../ So that’s the next step in the safety staircase. Then in some areas, like in Gårdsten and [another neighbourhood] it has been necessary to supplement this with ‘safety groups’ /.../ walking around in the area by night and ... eh ... creating safety around them /.../ they also escort people [from the tram station etc.]/.../ This ‘escort service’ (*laughter*) has become a very very important part [of the safety work] and means a lot to many who have got a new life, simply. /.../

In the bottom and middle of the ‘safety pyramid’, the maintenance workers, the ‘safety group’ (which is also employed by the MHCs), and the disturbance team are actively working for

safety with and for unsafe residents. However, the interviewee changes her way of speaking when she comes to the ‘top’ of the safety measures:

I: Besides this, in very very special ... contexts, you have in [neighbourhood] formed something called a ‘cross group’ consisting of social workers employed by the MHC and people from the city district office, where there are various forms of competence, social ones, and there is one [member] with a background as a policeman but who is also a social worker, and ... there are different ethnical backgrounds and so forth in this group. And they work, in particular, with a number of identified great problems, so to speak, you see. In [neighbourhood] one has identified about one hundred families ... who are especially problematic in one way or another, where there is often trouble, fuss, around children and also the grown-ups, many conflicts between families and so on.

Note that ‘one’ – not ‘we’ – has identified these families, who ‘are’ problematic and where there ‘is’ trouble. Agency is being disguised, while there are what Fairclough (1992: 161) calls ‘categorical modality’: an interpretation is presented as an objective fact. Although the aim is not to evict, according to the interviewee, this is obviously a possible solution to certain difficult problems:

I: Well, then the fact is that one could maybe in some cases on good grounds evict these families – but where should they go? It does not work, where should they go? It does not work, one couldn’t do that (*R: No.*), but we must try to solve the problems on the spot, as well as we can. So we cannot, then we’re back again, we cannot keep pushing people around in the city ... eh ... Sometimes it can be a solution that some family gets a flat in another part of the city to be able to start anew (*R: Yes of course.*), because you might have *got stuck* in a behaviour, in a conflict, that you’ve shaped an identity that is filled with conflicts or whatever, and in order to break that pattern they might need to change neighbourhoods, so to speak, in order to get a new start .. eh ... with various kinds of support. So that could sometimes be a solution, but then it’s a more, well, a conscious work you do ... eh ... But mostly it is about working with ... .. creating confidence and ... eh ... going through, well, what applies, like “this is not acceptable, you don’t do this” ... eh ... and so on, that you start a dialogue that might lead somewhere (*R: Mm*). So this is like the top of the safety pyramid, and it’s [used] in very special situations.

Here, we would like to focus on the vague description of this ‘top of the safety pyramid’. The interviewee is clearly reluctant to point out any agent who is working to evict or remove problematic families, and anyway, their possible relocation is only implemented for their own sake (“they might need” it), in order to enable them to start anew with ‘a new identity’ somewhere else. These families are positioned as being in conflict, not with the MHC but with other problematic families, while the MHC staff is presented as ‘social’ in its background, competence and intent. In terms of modality, the possibility to evict and the housing rules (what applies) are presented as categorical facts, while the speaker describes

reprimands as a ‘dialogue’ and the actual removal of families, the pyramid’s top, as a caring solution to *their* problems. However, there is a lot of hesitation in articulating this measure, visible in ‘hedges’ (Fairclough 1992: 116) like ‘well’, ‘sometimes’, ‘could be’ and ‘in very special situations’. Put shortly, the wording suggests that the interviewee is anxious *not* to give the impression of any conflict of interests between the tenants and the MHCs, and that safety measures are indeed social, even if they include exclusion from the neighbourhood.

## **Concluding discussion**

In this final section, we will argue that the MHCs have taken on their safety task as a way of re-interpreting their social objectives and providing new accounts for economic objectives, and that safety to a growing extent has become a tool to improve the finances of the companies. This, in turn, has contributed to shape the safety work of the involved MHCs in the three studied neighbourhoods.

Public housing in Sweden has a long tradition of conflicts between economic and social objectives, although most observers agree that the economic goals have become predominant and prioritised in recent decades (SOU 2001:27, Turner 2003, Bengtsson 2006, Sahlin 2006). Today, safety work has emerged as a crucial part of the strategic developmental work for public housing. The question is, whether this direction of the MHCs in rhetoric and/or in practice, 1) has entailed that economic and social objectives have become embedded (Granowetter 1985) in safety as being a superior goal, 2) if the social objectives have become subsumed in ‘safety’ and, hence, lost their redistributive dimension, while the financial goals are indirectly reinforced, or, finally, if 3) ‘safety’ has become an independent, additional objective, with the possible capacity of bridging the economic and social objectives.

In the first part of the paper, we recounted the development of public housing in Sweden in terms of its position on the housing market, in the national and municipal housing policy and in the legislation. The MHCs have time and again been questioned and stripped of their previous privileges but survived partly through distancing itself from the original social objectives, partly through improving its economic position. On the one hand, its share of the housing market is in decline, on the other hand its position on this market has been reinforced, which is evidenced especially by two facts: the MHCs’ average vacancy rate is declining and

lower than the one in private rental, and their freedom to select tenants is as great as the one of private landlords. In general, the owners – the municipalities – have ensured their MHCs the right and resources to act ‘businesslike’ on the local housing market.

However, this new position has led to the MHCs searching for a new role in the society, which distinguishes it from private housing companies in new ways. They still differ from the latter in a geographic restriction: an MHC cannot buy properties in other municipalities; accordingly, their properties are spatially concentrated. This is why it is possible to ascribe new tasks to them locally, like in Göteborg, where the MHCs are commissioned to work for the city’s (sometimes the city district’s) development.

Several interviewees with central positions in the concern Framtiden or in individual MHCs in Göteborg frankly claim that the economic objectives are superior to the social ones and that safety work to a great part is motivated as a way to strengthen the MHCs’, and indirectly the city’s, financial position. The dislocation of the social objectives – from housing provision for vulnerable or poor households to a general attention to the sitting tenants’ influence and comfort – is supported by the interviews and documents studied in this research project. Safety has here been defined as a way of enhancing the quality of life of tenants through reducing crime, fear and disturbances in the housing area.

However, as we hopefully have shown, this is not only a deliberate confinement of the social responsibility, but may also indirectly counteract some dimensions of this now-abolished obligation. Safety has come to fulfil a rhetoric function for the exclusion of formerly or currently homeless people, unemployed housing applicants and tenant households with members who have committed crime or are deemed as troublesome in other ways.

In concluding this analysis, we must consider the question on how this process of change started and how it is related to a wider context. We claim that the study has demonstrated the influence of globalisation on the local community. Nowadays, cities have to compete for investors and tax-payers, as well as for low interest rates on the international credit market. The endeavour to create safe and decent housing for the existent citizens is embedded in this struggle for higher ranks in the competition between companies and cities. It is also related to the gentrification processes analysed in international studies (Pattillo 2007, Feldman & Stall 2007, Marwell 2007).

Many of the activities now launched as safety measures are in fact not new, but traditional elements in management and renovation work, although with new motives. This holds for parts of the improvement of the outdoor environment, staircases and entrances and the dissemination of positive information on what has been done and what is being planned by the MHCs. Other measures used to be taken more quietly for pure financial reasons – reducing rent losses or vacancies due to neighbours' flight – but are now proudly announced as part of the safety work. Here, the best illustration is the spectacular introduction of a new eviction policy in Gårdsten. Still, the analysis of some interview quotes supports an understanding of this policy, as well as of selective letting practices, as not (yet) self-evident, since they are accounted for as implemented not by 'us' in the MHC, on behalf of other residents, or as being in the best interest of the concerned tenants. That is, their motives are presented as social, more than economic. At the same time, interviewed employees skilfully shift perspectives from the whole city to the specific neighbourhood they manage in order to demonstrate how their exclusionary measures contribute to the locally social good, or to social justice in the city, respectively.

From a critical realist perspective, then, we see the changed position of the MHCs as an actual change of context, but the labelling of management measures as 'safety work', as well as the re-definition of 'social responsibility', as social constructions that serve as accounts for a new road taken by the MHCs in order to improve their stock of tenants, their image, and as a consequence, reinforcing their market position.

In returning to the three questions on the role of safety as a goal, our tentative answer is that safety has emerged in the MHC discourse and practice not as a new, independent goal, nor as a bridge between social and economic objectives, but rather as a specific translation of the traditional social objectives which makes the latter agree with the economic ones. Put differently: the introduction of safety as a goal for public housing has further encouraged the proceeding development of public housing in Sweden from the provision of 'social goods', to producing profitable market goods on the housing market.

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