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Imagining the ideal city, planning the gender-equal city in Umeå, Sweden

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ABSTRACT
Focusing on imaginaries of the ideal city is an important method to illustrate the power of ideas, imagination, representations and even visions, and how these dimensions influence the way in which cities are organized and lived. In this article, we argue that one current and important city imaginary in a Swedish context is the gender-equal city. In this imaginary, the gender-equal city becomes a symbol for the open, tolerant, bustling, safe city, a city aiming to attract the middle and creative classes. However, at the same time, the imaginary of the ideal, gender-equal city is highly ambiguous. This ambiguity will be discussed throughout the article. Based on present planning projects in the city of Umeå in Sweden, we will discuss how the imaginary of the gender-equal city is presented, filled with meaning and used in place marketing, with the overall ambition of discussing the possibilities and pitfalls of what we call the gender-equality planning strategy. The aim of the article is to study how the city of Umeå is acting to create a gender-equal city and what kind of imaginaries these practices build on. The material consists primarily of a case study focusing on projects that aim to create an equal city, and also includes analyses of policy documents and media reports. This study illustrates how imaginaries are produced through local projects and different imaginaries provide different spaces for politicizing gendered power relations.

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Introduction

There is no one narrative of a city, but many narratives construct cities in different ways highlighting some aspects and not others. (Bridge and Watson 2002, 14)

There is not one imaginary of the ideal city, but rather many, sometimes conflicting, powerful ideas, imaginings, representations and even visions of the ideal city. In this article, we begin with an understanding that visions of a ‘good’ city are largely defined by the values of the dominant or hegemonic group and legitimated by planning discourses and documentation, and that this ‘only allows a limited range of “sensible”, i.e. pre-framed, dreams, or options, of what constitutes the “sustainable”, “healthy”, “competitive”, or perhaps “creative” city as “good” within the context of an increasingly globally competitive capitalist world’ (Gunder 2005, 175). Hence, the contemporary understandings of societal problems often stand in the way of open or ‘free’ articulations of visions of a ‘good’ city, thus ‘good’ is constantly under negotiation.

The city, although it belongs to all, is also filled with both visible and invisible boundaries. These boundaries are the result of yesterday’s spatial planning, including its norms and values, and they affect our way of life, our way of being and moving in the city.

In her book The Sphinx in the City, Wilson (1991) addresses the gendered imagery of the city, and people’s everyday experiences of urban living. She argues that we wrap ourselves in the city ‘like a cloak of many colours as: a disguise, a refuge, an adventure, a home’ (Wilson 1991, 159). In recovering the feminine imagery of the city, Wilson seeks ‘a new vision, a new ideal of life in the city – and a new, ‘feminine’ voice in praise of cities’ (Wilson 1991, 11).

In this article, we argue that one current and important urban imaginary in the Swedish context is the gender-equal city, and we are interested in exploring how this kind of imaginary could work as a potential tool for change. The aim of the article is to study how the city of Umeå is acting to create a gender-equal city, what kind of imaginaries these practices build on, and to what extent there is a potential for politicizing gender equality and thus changing prevailing gendered power relations. The
material consists of a case study, the city of Umeå, and the analysis focuses on planning projects that aim to create an equal city, such as improving accessibility in public spaces, and gender-aware analyses of the city's symbols and decorations and also includes analyses of policy documents and media reports. Thus, our focus is the representations and practices of the 'official' Umeå.

**Theoretical framework**

This article concerns the production of imaginaries and place. Our understanding of place is informed by the work of Massey (1994, 2005), and thus we perceive place as flexible, in process and constructed through power relations, where power is understood as relational and productive (cf. Foucault 1980). It is of primary importance in this study to regard space and place as gendered, and Massey argues that this gendering of space and place both reflects and has effects upon the ways in which gender is constructed and understood in the society in which we live (Massey 1994, 186). Gender relations are thus constructed in and through space and place and, equally, space and place construct gender (Bondi and Davidson 2005). The different constructions of space are also informed by how different power relations – age, class, race, gender and sexuality – interact together with the more explicit spatial power dimension. Thus, we see gender equality as produced in space, and this needs to include an understanding of the impact of different power relations such as class, race and sexuality in how gender equality is produced.2

Through its space, its architecture, its social relations, and its gendered activities, the city produces and reproduces the structures of power in society. Certain ways of organizing and structuring the city are accepted as natural, neutral processes, and in this way the gendered and racialized power relations remain hidden (Grosz 1996). van den Berg (2013, 530) even uses the term genderification, referring to the production of space for different gender relations, and how it can contribute to understanding the city’s gender dynamics and its strategies for changing its gender composition.

Under today's neoliberal rule, the traditional division between politics and economics, driven by two different rationales (justice and capitalism), has melted together, and the capitalist rationale is a technology of rule that works from ‘… the soul of the citizen-subject to education policy to practice of empire’ (Brown 2005). Thus, ruling technologies like marketing and branding have become part of the political logic, and public institutions like municipalities tend to act in line with the same logics as private business. Here, place branding is a central example.

As city marketing is about myth-making by ‘connecting elements of old myths to ambitions for the future’ (van den Berg 2012, 165), it is important to understand imaginaries of the ideal city in a place-branding context because cities all over the world are today promoting themselves to attract both investment and people. Place branding could be defined as the official imaginary and communication about a place, aimed at promoting and presenting the most favourable characteristics of the place (Andersson 2014). In addition, this process also includes power relations because it also involves processes of exclusion as less attractive aspects are left out of official communications.

In her study, Johansson (2012) focuses on place branding by using the concept of the imaginary and arguing that place branding aims to present a sanitized, appealing image of a place, which inevitably means selecting particular elements to put forward. Following Johansson's argument (2012, 3613), it is important to keep in mind ‘that this is an expression of a particular group, or groups, of imaginaries and hence it is always a political act that is intended to produce a particular effect’. At the same time, this political act is not necessary acknowledged in political terms.

Hence, we would like to introduce a discussion of politicization and depoliticization, beginning with Chantal Mouffe's (2005) distinction between politics and the political. Mouffe argues that we need to differentiate between politics and the political, between the organization of our political institutions and conflicting positions and interests, in order to fully comprehend when power is articulated in politics and when it is not. Although certain questions may be extremely prominent in politics, this does not necessarily mean that they are political. If, for example, gender equality is treated as a purely administrative task, we regard it as depoliticization and thus not likely to address the gendered power dimension. In
relation to neoliberal forms of rule, where place-making and place-branding are rationalities, we argue that there is a risk of conflicting dimensions in society being moved outside both planning and politics overall. Is it possible for an imaginary of the gender-equal city to challenge these neo-liberal rationalities?

We also believe policies and practices of gender equality to be of special interest in this kind of analysis, this being a field in which there should be the potential for political considerations due to a tradition of focusing on ‘political’ dimensions such as justice. Following Damyanovic and Zibell’s (2013) argument, that planning the gender-equal city requires a more explicit consideration of gender in both how the planning process is conducted and its wider impacts, and that this means building an understanding of the different perspectives and interests. Hence, there is a need for the political so that gender-equal planning can challenge the prevailing order in society. We see cities as produced in process and that these processes are permeated with power, i.e. that spatial planning in its various forms is essentially a political process in which the work is performed within political constraints. However, the political could be ‘hidden’ administrative rationalities such as branding and marketing. We also believe it to be important to also acknowledge that there are also cracks in the neoliberal façade, i.e. that processes of depoliticization are not a self-evident ‘destiny’ for all policy initiatives. In this article we will investigate the implications of imaginaries of the gender-equal city for challenging and changing gendered power relations.

Methodological considerations – imaginaries as analytical tools

The concept of the imaginary, as presented by Ricoeur (1994), is not an expression of pure fantasy; rather, it is a projected image which is socially edited through discourse and narration (Johansson 2012). Imaginaries draw on what is already known. Within feminist research, scholars from different disciplines and approaches have elaborated upon visions and ideals, not least in order to enhance feminist emancipation. One example is the feminist theorist Iris Marion Young, who has developed a vision of city life as a normative ideal (Young 1990). Hudson and Rönnblom focused on what a city that is a ‘good’ place for both women and men might look like (Hudson and Rönnblom 2008) as they tried to capture women’s visions of the city. They argue that one of the key advantages of the visions methodology is its potential to challenge the existing orders of the city and to imagine alternatives to the constricting and discriminatory spaces of the present. It needs to ‘transgress the structures and ordering of our present ways of thinking, conceptualizing and theorizing’ and allow us to think the unthinkable (Sargisson 1996, 59). It is only by doing this that we can move beyond the confining and limiting boundaries of the past and the present.

But, although imaginaries are ‘closer to’ the present than visions, the task of capturing them still remains. How is it possible to study imaginaries of, in this case, the ‘good city’? Inspired by critical policy analysis (cf. Bacchi 2009), we have chosen to focus on the actual implementation of policy through specific local initiatives and projects and in this way analyse imaginaries as something being produced in these processes, in the same way as Bacchi see problems to be produced in policy. The image of the equal city is complex and difficult to articulate. Therefore, we have chosen to highlight various projects that aim to challenge and change unequal power relations in the city.

To grasp the complexity of planning projects aiming to create a gender-equal city we used a broad qualitative approaches and wide range of materials. In other words, we have followed, and been in active contact with Umeå municipality’s work on gender equality for a long time and collected various types of materials (i.e. formal and informal interviews and meetings, attending planning meetings, participating in reference groups and workshops hosted by the municipality etc. We have continuously collected reports published by the municipality; surveys, descriptions and evaluations of projects, minutes of the municipal council, etc.). The empirical data considered here include newspaper articles, policy documents, reports, web pages and information leaflets concerning work that aims to improve different urban spaces, initiatives to work for a gender-equal city, etc. This width of our data collection has also come to mean that we have a diversity of materials and hence a thematic analysis was used in an initial stage to identify, analyse and report patterns within the acquired data (Braun and Clarke 2006).
This approach provided a useful interpretative strategy for understanding the material. The identified themes all capture important aspects of how gender-equality projects were planned, organized and performed and represent a patterned meaning among the different kinds of material. Based on these central themes, we have found it necessary to proceed with the analysis. Inspired by critical policy analysis (cf. Bacchi 2009), we have in step two focused how imaginaries are produced. In Bacchi's *What’s the Problem Represented to Be?* Approach, problems are seen as produced within policy, departing from a Foucaudian understanding of knowledge and power. Beginning with this understanding, we turn our attention to the implementation of policy through studying these local projects that have the explicit intention of making the city ‘more gender equal’. We regard these projects or initiatives as examples of both addressing the problems articulated in gender-equality policies and, here more importantly, articulations of imaginaries. Thus, our main analytical question is (drawing on Bacchi’s first analytical question) ‘What is the imaginary represented to be?’ in a particular policy initiative or practice? Through the initiatives – or solutions – suggested and implemented we are thus seeing imaginaries being produced; underpinning each strategy for change there is an imaginary produced. In the next section, the case of Umeå will be presented in more detail.

**Becoming a gender-equal city**

The fact that Umeå is one of Sweden’s most gender-equal cities also means that it is one of the world’s most gender-equal cities. (Nordic City Network, webpage) On the website quoted above and others, Umeå is presented as the largest city in northern (with 120000 residents) Sweden and as a growing and youthful town, due to the presence of Umeå University, a regionally important university with more than 30,000 students, which has shaped the city in many ways. There are about 12,000 people in Umeå who are foreign born (where about 20% of these come from the other Nordic countries). Umeå Municipality has been working actively with gender equality; its overall gender-equality goal is ‘to create the conditions that women and men should have the same power to shape society and their own lives’ (Umeå Municipality, webpage c, n.p.). There has for example been a strategic body that functions to oversee gender equality since 1989.

Umeå Municipality has good potential to become an equal municipality. Gender does matter and it is therefore important to use gender glasses when we look at our operations. (Umeå Municipality’s webpage, c)

A large part of Umeå Municipality engagement with gender equality has for a long time been the implementation of various gender-equality projects. Working for change through projects has become a more or less self-evident strategy within the public sphere, sometimes labelled ‘projectified Politics’ (Sjöblom, Löfgren, and Godenhjelm 2013). In earlier research, Projectified Politics has been regarded as problematic in relation to creating sustainable change. Here, we have chosen instead to see the vast number of projects, carried out by the municipality during a period of at least 20 years, as a form of sustainable work with the aim of creating a more gender-equal city.

Focusing on the translation of imaginaries of the gender-equal city into practice and on how the gender-equal city ‘is made’ in a continuous process through the work with gender equality (Bacchi and Eveline 2010), we focus on the city of Umeå as an overall imaginary of the gender-equal city. What kind of impact has ‘the gender-equal city of Umeå’ had on policies, practices and projects in the city of Umeå? We will discuss this by focusing on how and the ambition to build, promote and represent a gender equal city performed through three different projects that illustrate how imaginaries are produced, how they are utilized to create agency, and how they are used in the implementation of projects. Important to notice is that we do not regard these processes as intentional but as an effect of the power relations at play. In the following sections we have chosen to discuss three examples of gender-equality projects. These examples illustrate three different perspectives, themes or strategies within which the gender-equality projects could be categorized, thus illustrating three different imaginaries of the gender-equal city. As our main interest is initiative taken by the official representatives
of the city, in these projects, representatives of the municipality are the main agents constructing the idea of gender-equal Umeå, as well as the driving force for gender equality in the planning of the city.

Building a safe, gender-equal city

Being an attractive city has become increasingly important in the contemporary discourse of (economic) growth (cf. Anholt 2003) as place promotion has become a political strategy for municipalities (Mukhtar-Landgren 2009). In short, we argue that being portrayed as a city with unequal opportunities for women and men is bad for city branding.

Studies have shown that it is difficult to transfer the general objective of gender equality into practical planning activities (Larsson and Jalakas 2008, 9). The authors believe that gender equality is thus at once a priori and difficult to relate to spatial planning. The planning practices are characterized by diffuse discursive power relations (Larsson 2006), which can be visualized by the doing of imaginaries of the gender-equal city.

The gender-equal city is often synonymous with the safe city. Hence, an important focus of research has been on how women (in particular) feel constrained by their fear of violence in public space and how the underlying power relations between women and men influence uses and perceptions of city space (Valentine 1989; Koskela and Pain 2000; Listerborn 2002). Umeå has long worked to create a safe city, mainly as part of the work for a gender-equal city. The attention given to women's fear of violence greatly increased at the turn of the century, when a single repeat offender known as the 'Haga Man' assaulted several women in the city (Sandberg 2011). In the wake of these assaults and the public discussion regarding women's safety that followed, the municipality, and other actors, reported having experienced 'increased pressure' to implement safety measures during the Haga Man period. And thus a focus developed on 'fixing the image of Umeå' (Sandberg and Rönnblom 2015). Here we will present an example which shows how planning for safety in Umeå transformed from gender neutrality to gender awareness.

Lev – a city passage

The city passage called Lev (Live), opened in 2012, is close to 80 metres long and runs under a road and some railway tracks. The tunnel itself has become a landmark, and was even awarded an architecture prize for an exemplary design of a pedestrian and bicycle crossing. This work has been increasingly highlighted as a 'good example' and, hence, it is a representation of Umeå as a city in the forefront working to promote gender equality.

It is a well-portrayed tunnel where art and design combine to create both a functional and beautiful place, helping to create safety in an environment that is perceived as unsafe. (Umeå Municipality, webpage: a)

This passage was planned with a gender perspective to ensure that it will be available to both women and men at all hours and could thus be seen as an example of a gender-aware planning process. Working with gender mainstreaming meant awareness raising on issues of safety, fear, violence and power in public spaces. This approach resulted in a focus on the design of the passage; its openings are wide with plenty of natural light, it rises in the middle and there are rounded corners to enhance the lines of sight through the tunnel. In this way, physical planning of the city becomes a question of planning the safe city.

The municipality received funding to create a pilot study for how they would work to strengthen safety from a gender perspective in the tunnel environments for the future. They used gender mainstreaming as a method throughout the project and all stakeholders were invited to put ideas into practice. The physical part of the project focused on improvements in the form of light and sound design, the use of elaborate materials and thoughtful design of the tunnel's roof and walls. (The Swedish National Board of Housing, Building and Planning, webpage)

How can the city passage Lev be understood in terms of imaginaries of the gender-equal city? The entire work on the tunnel was undertaken in order to create a physical space which people feel comfortable to inhabit and where the focus was on creating a place that is not perceived as frightening or
insecure, but open and welcoming. The project recognized how fear is connected to how public space is used, occupied and controlled by dominant groups at different times. This was done through the process of gender awareness when selecting the actors involved in actually constructing and building the tunnel. The civil servant responsible for gender equality in the municipality carried out workshops on gender equality and planning together with the involved actors. The physical place, the tunnel, was the result, but gender equality was also produced in the process of getting there. An awareness of the fact that women perceive places as unsafe was included in the design and thus the ambition was that the place will be accessible to all. Attempts were made to reduce factors that might lead to the passage being perceived as insecure and thus inaccessible. The contribution is thus not only the high-profile tunnel because, starting from a narrow focus on preventing crime through environmental design, the planning focus has expanded to address broader challenges (Whitzman 2011), i.e. using public space and discourses to tackle the root causes of violence (Whitzman 2007). Hence, a gender-equal city could be interpreted through the production of an imaginary of a safe, open and welcoming city, with a special emphasis on women’s safety.

This project takes as its starting point an imaginary of the gender-equal city, but the project does this without actually asking the question: What impact does the vision of gender-equal planning have? The challenges are then encountered while translating this into practice, which demonstrates the difficulty of translating imaginaries into practice. The action of increasing women’s safety is of course intended to alleviate women’s fear of violence in public space, but it also becomes a way of safeguarding the image of a safe and gender-equal Umeå. Procedures for increasing safety thus become procedures for branding the city and the imaginary produced thus includes a branding dimension (Sandberg and Rönnblom 2015).

**Promoting a progressive, gender-equal city**

Cities take their shape through representations and the discursive practices that construct them (Bridge and Watson 2002). How cities are envisioned, represented and filled with meaning have an effect, and Bridge and Watson (2002, 7) use ‘city imaginaries to illustrate the power of ideas, the imagination, representations and visions in influencing the ways cities are formed and lived’. Healey (2002) argues that images of the city are filtered and used in order to represent the city to outsiders and to citizens. But to develop a politically and organizationally useful conception of a city is a challenging task, as ‘a city is many cities’ (2002, 1782).

In public representations, Umeå is hence described as a ‘tolerant city’. The feminist movement is regarded as strong and there is a vast range of social commitment to equity issues such as gay rights and gender equality. In this section, we present one project that we regard as an initiative that articulate, and also carries the potential to promote, the gender-equal city. This image has been significant for the opening of a women’s history museum in Umeå.

**The Museum of women’s history**

In May 2010, the Left Party in Umeå filed a motion to the municipal council in which they requested that Umeå Municipality should work to establish a Women’s History Museum. The argument put forward for this project was that women’s history is and always has been underrepresented in museums. The opening of a women’s history museum in Umeå was also a condition for the Left Party to enter into cooperation with the Social Democrats (Umeå Municipality 2012). The Left Party also argued that the opening of a women’s history museum is well suited to Umeå’s ambition to be a gender-equal city (Špirić 2010).

The Women’s History Museum asks the rhetorical question on its website of why the museum was established in Umeå. The answer follows:

> Gender equality and community engagement has long been important to people in Umeå. (The Museum of Women’s History, webpage)
However, the project to establish a women’s history museum has been marked by political disagreement and a project manager who dropped out of the project. In May 2014, the leader of the Moderate Party suggested that the proposed space of the museum should instead be allocated to Umeå tourist office. Nonetheless, the museum opened at the end of November 2014. The opening of the museum was reviewed and discussed, for example in the online newspaper Feministiskt Perspektiv (Feminist perspective).

Just days before the opening ceremony, criticisms were again raised by former members of the steering committee against the museum’s purpose and high operating costs. These include that the museum, as a letter of intent, has a mission to not only show what the living conditions of women were like in the past, but also to be an active voice in contemporary society concerning gender and power. (Wemmenhed 2014-11-25)

The ambition for the museum is that it will not only be a place to make women’s stories visible, but will also be involved in discussing what society should be like in the future. The letter of intent states that the museum’s vision is that it will become a voice for the equal distribution of power and that in turn helps to break the norms and structures that restrict women’s and men’s opportunities to participate in society on equal terms (Umeå Municipality, Letter of Intent).

The museum runs with courage and emphasis on questions of gendered power relations. It is a platform for different voices in the conversation about what kind of society we should have in the future. The museum stands up strongly, persistently and bravely for its message and its stories. (Women’s History Museum, 2015 Operational Plan)

The ambition of the museum is hence to show that the past shapes the future. The museum had exhibits on for example, gender identity and ageing, and an exhibition that seeks to challenge Umeå’s history. However, the museum’s diverse representations of women’s history is made through its seminars and lectures, not through its exhibitions. Its public arrangement addresses inequalities rooted in heteronormativity, racism or social class, although this is still being developed. Hence, the museum also seeks to help the visitor to respond and take action to change the way society looks.

Critics, cultural journalists and researchers have noted since the museum opened that it seems to see it as its task to explain this with gender equality to those who do not care – particularly men. (Palmström 2015-10-15 Newsarticle)

As imaginaries draw on what is already known, the museum begins with the ambition to try to change what we know. The goal is to show that change is possible and to encourage action; however, what this change should be is not directly made concrete, beyond saying that it will be a more equal future. The imaginary produced is a more gender-equal future, and the way to get there is to discuss gender, power and identity.

The opening of the museum contributes to an attractive urban environment and to developing the city’s public spaces. (...) The Women’s History Museum will be an attractive destination that also contributes to increased regional attractiveness. The goal is to establish it as a ‘must-museum’, that is, it should have such an appeal that everyone who visits Umeå will feel that a visit to the Women’s History Museum is a must. (Womens History Museum, 2015 Operational plan)

The opening of the Women’s History Museum discussed above illustrates how Umeå is represented as the gender-equal city and as the progressive city. This representation is used in the marketing of Umeå as a whole but also in order to promote a specific project. The co-optation of gender-equality discourses and planning practices in the service of branding has also been addressed in the literature (e.g. van den Berg 2012). Hence, it is the articulation of the gender-equal city in itself that becomes the imaginary.

**Representing a prominent and a reflexive gender-equal city**

Why is it so important to imagine alternatives? Is it not more productive to address the problems that we see in society? In our view, focusing on imaginaries is a way of going one step beyond the problems of today while still acknowledging the present. In fact, it could also be seen as a way of actually addressing the contemporary situation. Hayden (1980) argues that most cities have been designed around the implicit principle that a woman’s place is in the home and this leads to cities that constrain women physically, socially, and economically. In relation to the built environment, the physical space that we all relate to, that we produce and that produces us (Grosz 1996), this is especially relevant; as
the built environment embodies power relations that can be both difficult to grasp and difficult to change, due to its physical character.

But perhaps imaginaries could also be about staging gender inequality? When the hegemonic image of Sweden is a country where we have ‘fixed’ gender equality, and when Umeå also uses ‘being a city working actively towards gender-equality’ as one of its city brands, one way of performing imaginaries could be described as displaying gender equality and inequality. In the following example, we discuss a guided bus tour as an illustration of that.

The gendered landscape of Umeå

Since 2009, Umeå Municipality has worked with ‘The gendered landscape of Umeå’, which can be described as a gendered city tour or a guided bus tour wearing gender glasses, in which roughly 500 external actors take part every year. During the tour, participants are guided through initiatives in the city aimed at improving gender equality, but some remaining challenges are also pointed out. Places highlighted include: the university, nursery schools that employ gender-aware pedagogy etc. This bus tour can be seen as a symbol as well as an actual project aiming to challenge the non-gender-equal city. The symbol becomes a way to stage gender-aware place-making and hence a way to demonstrate gender mainstreaming practices.

The tour is a way of making the statistics in the report come alive and an innovative way of demonstrating the concrete effects of striving for gender equality. (Umeå Municipality, Information brochure, The Gendered Landscape)

During the tour, successful changes and landmarks in the city are pointed out as well as remaining issues being illuminated. The tour operators argued that the purpose is also to underline the importance of gender in society and to show the results of long-term work with gender issues. This is about drawing attention to who gets what, and under what conditions within the municipality.

This tour has had a great impact and helps people to visualize the importance of the decisions and physical locations as well as the city as a venue for inequality and efforts to challenge norms and structures, completed work and remaining problems. (Umeå 2014: 14)

Thus, the bus tour almost becomes a symbol for the work carried out, and for the awareness among municipal representatives. As an example of what is being presented during the tour:

A political decision by the municipal board of leisure (1999) led to practice hours being divided according to which division the soccer teams played in, regardless of gender. As a direct result, Umeå’s leading women’s soccer team, Umeå IK, gets to choose their hours for practice before the leading men’s team, Umeå FC. (Leaflet, The Gendered Landscape)

The bus tour forms an evaluation of the work that has been done, and the work that needs to continue. In this way, the bus tour can be said to be a way of performing an imaginary of the gender-equal city, but even here the articulating of a gender-equal imaginary is just as much about showing the inequality that still prevails, while it is difficult to articulate what a gender-equal vision is. The good examples will serve as the tools and the outcome. The bus tour is in itself described as a success and other cities are following Umeå’s example, organizing tours as an educational strategy.

Through the bus tour, gendered norms are made visible and analysing the project brings an imaginary of articulating the complex situation of gender equality and gender inequality into view. In that we consider the bus tour as an illustrative example on spatial organization of the city and prevailing gender norm. As van den Berg (2013, 531) so clearly argued ‘The spatial organisation of the city is a reflection of dominant gender ideals. Spatial organisations reaffirm and co-construct dominant gender norms, precisely because it makes certain gendered practices possible and obstructs other ways of organising production and reproduction’. This is an imaginary in which the different dynamics of gendered norms are articulated and actions for change are possible. The bus tour is hence both a method and a way of performing imaginaries of the gender-equal city through making both gender equality and gender inequality visible.
Paradoxical imaginaries – concluding remarks

Through the three different forms of gender-equality projects described here, the municipality has succeeded in the integration of a gender perspective into the planning practice in three different ways:

- Integrating a focus on women’s fear of violence in public space and planning practices.
- Presenting symbolic statements of gender equality.
- Discussing and performing complex and strategic knowledge of different dimensions of gendered norms by combining spaces of gender equality and spaces of gender inequality.

Through these projects, three forms of imaginaries emerge. There is the imaginary of the open, safe and welcoming city in the built practices of gender equality, the imaginary of the articulation of the gender-equal city, and the imaginary of performing the complex understanding of the gender-equal/gender-unequal city when challenging gender equality. In this concluding section we will explore the potential of these three forms of imaginaries for political change, and for politicizing gendered power relations.

We believe that these imaginaries carry with them both neoliberal practices of branding and also attempts at encouraging participation and articulations of power. The projects studied can be said to impose a staging of the image of the equal Umeå. They become ‘project-policies’ and hence a way to stage and create gender equality. When discussing strategies of gender equality, gender mainstreaming is always put forward as the sustainable strategy, the argument being that in order to really make a change we need to mainstream gender (equality) into all policies and practices. We argue that Umeå is a clear ‘gender mainstreaming example’ in two ways – both through the more ‘traditional’ work of trying to include a gender (equality) perspective in different activities and areas (Walby 2005), but also through working with the kind of projects we have been analysing in this article, in which ‘gender equality is made’. Here, gender mainstreaming is conceptualized as a process of revision of key concepts to get a better understanding of a world that is gendered (Walby 2005). On the other hand, gender mainstreaming tends not to challenge the prevailing order due to its inherent focus on inclusion (Alnebratt and Rönnblom 2016). To include a perspective or a dimension means to accept the order within which it is to be included. In this article we see the large numbers of recurring gender-equality projects as a form of gender mainstreaming with the ambition of scrutinizing the potential for change through project politics.

By analysing the case of Umeå, we want to illustrate how work can be continued when the documents have already been drawn up. The policies are already there, and gender mainstreaming is also a self-evident strategy. What then becomes interesting is that projects are carried out in the name of gender mainstreaming. The projects become the doing. To follow on from Sara Ahmed’s famous quote (Ahmed 2007, 599), we end up doing the documents instead of doing the doing – but there is also a continuation. We believe that the case of Umeå shows that doing can follow the documents, and that the doing produces imaginaries of gender equality. But does practice necessarily mean political change? Does it mean that gender equality becomes politicized, in Mouffe’s understanding of the word? Our three versions of imaginaries explored here carry different potentials for politicization.

We relate the first imaginary – a safe and gender equal city – to what we have previously labelled the ‘analytical-practice paradox’ (Sandberg and Rönnblom 2015). The ambition of creating a safe and inclusive city, through both the built environment and inclusive practices involving participation from different groups of citizens, is on the one hand a way of doing the imaginary of safety. On the other hand, the imaginary of safety is a narrow translation of gender equality, a way of addressing the immediate problems, but also an imaginary that becomes a part of the branding process. When the projects are done, the problems are also solved. There is a potential for politicizing gender power relations but only in a certain space at a certain moment. The solution is created and the space for politicization closes.

The second imaginary, progressive and gender equal city, is to a larger extent part of a depoliticizing practice of place-making and branding. Places have always been brands; hence, the reputations of places have always been managed and occasionally invented by their leaders. Anholt (2003) argues
that cities are to a large extent actively engaged in the business of taking care of their good names. ‘A place-brand strategy is a plan for defining the most realistic, most competitive and most compelling strategic vision for the country, region or city; this vision then has to be fulfilled and communicated’ (Anholt 2003, 214). When a project is part of a depoliticized discourse from the beginning, a politicization of gender equality becomes difficult. The ambition of the project is in itself depoliticized.

The imaginaries of safety and progressive both carry ambitions of change and of creating and sustaining a gender-equal city. But the spaces for politicizing gendered power relations are narrow. With these two versions of imaginaries as the backdrop, we argue that the third, *prominent and reflexive gender equal* stands out as the one with the greatest potential for politicizing gender equality and thus addressing gendered power relations in society, mainly – and paradoxically – due to the articulations of inequality inherent in this imaginary. Politicization needs articulations of conflict or different interests, and this could also be an imaginary. To be allowed to articulate questions of power and explicitly address inequalities is in itself an imaginary during a time of neoliberal rule. In this way, problem representations and imaginaries can be seen as two sides of the same coin.

In sum, how can we understand the imaginaries of the gender-equal city? There is still a vision of a gender-equal future, but this is articulated through the demonstration of the inequality that currently exists. However, it is also about showing the way towards this desired future by including voices for change. In other words, all imaginaries carry traces of articulations of inequality. van den Berg (2012) argues that it is important to remain attentive to the gender dynamics in urban politics and space production. It is about creating tools for people to see the inequality. And the tools become a way of articulating the imaginaries of the gender-equal city. In other words, this study illustrates how imaginaries are produced through local projects and different imaginaries provide different spaces for politicizing gendered power relations. Important to notice is that the understandings of gender produced in these imaginaries reproduces gender as ‘only’ being about men and women, and also especially about women. Dimensions of class, race and sexuality are not articulated, opening up for the risk of gender-equality reproducing prevailing systems of privilege related to these dimensions of societal power relations. Politicizing gender in a multi-dimensional manner thus seems even more as a challenge.

**Notes**

1. Sweden has during a long period of years taken official pride in being one of the most gender-equal countries in the world, often highlighting rankings like the Global Gender Gap Report where Sweden has been ranked in the lead for several years.
2. Earlier empirical studies have shown that gender equality often produces a one-dimensional understanding of gender which in turn enhances a heterosexual, middle-class and white norm (see e.g. De los Reyes, Molina, and Mulinari 2002).
3. Examples of projects that the municipality has worked with are: Ledningskraft – This project focused on providing process support to dozens of local government operations in their efforts to break down overall gender equality into regular activities, Umeå against trafficking (2007), and Umeå and gender equality became something that was highlighted in the bid to become *The European capital of culture, Umeå 2014*.

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