



Preliminary
draft

Frihamnen - a case study

Notera att detta är ett utkast och inte en slutgiltig text. Vi välkomnar kommentarer, förtydliganden och påpekande om vad som kanske framstår som missförstånd eller felaktiga slutsatser, samt även förslag på hur analysen kan kompletteras eller göras mer robust. Vår förhoppning är att vi genom att dela dokument som ännu inte är fullständiga skall kunna öppna för en bredare delaktighet i projektet.

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1. The focus of the case

A governance perspective

This case study looks at the development process of a strategically very important piece of land in Gothenburg, the three piers and surrounding land known as *Frihamnen*. The development is part of the broader *River City Project* that aims to transform the much larger former industrial area along the river in the heart of the city into attractive residential and commercial space.



In the development process in Frihamnen, an proposal for a detailed plan plan for the first phase of developments has been produced. But due to perceived deficiencies in this plan, it has been rejected by Älvstranden Utvecklings AB, the municipal development company which is one important municipal actor in realising the vision for the River City developments. A new development phase has consequently been initiated by Älvstranden AB that now is under way.

This case of Frihamnen consequently offers two development processes to study: one that according to one important actor involved has gone wrong, and one that now needs to be governed so that it does not also go wrong. At a more general level, the case helps us ask the question of what it means for a development process to go right or wrong and thus what could be done to guard against it.

The case is here approached from a broad governance perspective. This means that the question asked is not so much about the quality, in a general sense, of one particular design or another. Rather, the question asked is whether public power was used effectively in accordance with the democratically endorsed steering documents for Frihamnen, or not.

The use of public power

The city has a number of tools at its disposal to influence how Frihamnen will be developed.

Firstly, and most obviously, the municipality owns the land and has the legal right to decide what to do with it. Financial and capacity constraints, however, mean that the municipality has no other choice than to develop the area in close collaboration with the private sector.

Secondly, municipalities in Sweden all have the unique right to designate how land within its jurisdiction should be used, which includes the construction of infrastructure and buildings. This is only overruled in certain cases concerning land use of national interest, such as national roads, water ways and train tracks. This gives the municipality the right to accept or reject any plan that is produced also in a co-development process with private developers. This means, in other words, that even if the city were to sell the land, it would still have the veto over any plans suggested by private developers.

Thirdly, and more subtly, the municipality can decide what degree of private involvement and in what form it accepts in the design process generating a plan. This means that the municipality has not only the right to accept or reject a plan, but also the right to frame the process so as to influence what kind of plans are likely to emerge.

Fourthly, the municipality has significant financial resources at its disposal, which allows it to make infrastructure investments that will change the conditions for a development process, but also, within certain limits, to adjust land prices so as to make one development alternative seem more attractive to market actors than another.

Overall what this means is that the municipality has significant powers at its disposal to make sure development of Frihamnen is pushed in one direction rather than another. In doing so, the municipality will be favouring some ideas and interests over others, as well as committing significant public resources one way or another.

Needless to say, this use of public power must be put under democratic checks.

This is a particularly pertinent issue in Gothenburg, where there are very substantial powers vested in municipal hands, through the control of land, through the large balance sheets of municipally controlled companies and due to the general acceptance of fairly activist municipal policies in the case of housing and more generally urban development.

This all adds up to an unusually large degrees of freedom of the public agencies in the city to act so as to further democratically endorsed values. While this can help open up new development trajectories for the city, it is of course also an unusually large degree of freedom to go wrong.

The democratic constraints

In the case of Frihamnen there are five types of steering documents whose role is to ensure specifically that the use of public power is properly constrained by democratic decisions.

These begin with the broad Vision Statement that sets the direction and the values for the overall River City project.

This is followed by the Programme that sets out one possible broad development strategy for Frihamnen, which is then open for consultation.

Once the consultation phase is complete, the Directive gives formal go ahead based on a set of key principles and objectives.

The Sustainability programme subsequently focuses on the sustainability strategy in the development process.

Finally, the Manifest significantly deepens the development strategy, as part of the process of eventually creating a set of formal plans for the area.

The role of these steering documents is to gradually shepherd the design process from the very broad intentions in the overall River City Project, to a proposal for a detailed plan to be developed in a certain place and at a certain time within this broader project.

It is important to note that these documents also exist in a broader context of more general steering documents outlining the overall urban development ambitions for Gothenburg.

These include in particular Vision 2021, the Comprehensive Plan (Översiktsplan ÖP), the Traffic Strategy (Trafikstrategin), the Green strategy (Grönstrategin), the Strategy for Housing development

(Strategin för utbyggnadsplanering) as well as the Strategy for a more equal Gothenburg (Strategi för ett jämlikt Göteborg).



The governance challenge

The governance question in focus here is whether the steering documents serve their intended roles or not, as democratic constraints on the use of public power.

Two complementary questions help clarify two important and practical aspects of good governance in this context: coherence and cost effectiveness.¹ These two aspects can be brought out by asking the following two questions:

- (i) Are the steering documents internally consistent and rationally coherent in the sense that subsequent documents follow rationally from previous documents?
- (ii) Do the steering documents outline the most cost efficient strategy to realise the broad political ambitions that have been democratically endorsed?

The first question raises the issue of whether the various design decisions taken in the long development process in Frihamnen are possible to rationally defend through an explicit argumentation, based on a careful reading of the steering documents and on the best knowledge available about urban form and its relationship to urban life from relevant academic research.

In such a broad argumentation, for it to qualify as rational, the assumptions made must be made explicit and the evidence used to infer certain conclusions from these assumptions must be presented.

This means that later documents must either adhere to the broader argumentation set out in previous documents, so that they are constrained by these, or later documents must explicitly reassess specific parts of these previous documents, and over-rule them. In the latter case, the old

¹ From a theoretical perspective, it is possible to argue that these two questions, in fact, amount to one question. If a coherent argument is based on the best available knowledge, the means suggested to achieve certain ends should be the best available means to do so. However, for the sake of clarity in the argument it may be useful to distinguish these two questions here.

argumentative logic that ran through the documents would be replaced with a new one, based on new evidence or new reassessed assumption.

The second question above focuses on the efficiency demand on the use of public power. This means that it is not enough for a public body to pass the governance test to offer policies that are coherent; the policies must also be reasonable in view of other possible and equally coherent alternatives.

Indeed, it is quite possible to imagine a situation where the steering documents would follow coherently from each other, but without actually offering the most effective translation of public ends into a certain set of means to reach those ends.

This may, for example, be a case where there is a clear ambition to bridge a river to allow more effective flows of people between the two sides, but where two alternatives exist that may be deemed equivalent in their desired outcome, eg bridges or flexible boat transportation, but where the cost implications and long-term risks are substantially different.

What the second question above thus stresses is the essential focus on effective budget management as part of effective governance.

Overall what this means is that in order to meet the test of good governance, the public ambitions and strategies put forward in the steering documents must be able to meet both these challenges. Policies put forward must in this sense both be coherent and constitute the best policies available in view of possible alternative and equally coherent alternatives.

The risk of accountability failure

The general risk in any development process like that in Frihamnen is that the various steps taken in the translation between the different steering documents are taken with no or limited base in factual knowledge or rational arguments.

This means that democratic ambitions are formulated to pursue certain specified ends, but where the means that are selected to reach these ends are suboptimal for the specified purpose.

This may be either because the means chosen are actually likely to push developments in a different direction from that which was democratically endorsed (ie. the documents are inconsistent). Or it may be because the desired effect could have been achieved more effectively through other means (ie. the documents may be consistent, but there exists other consistent alternatives that are less expensive, or involve less risk).

Broadly speaking, both these cases could be construed as a kind of accountability failure, ie. public bodies are asked to do one thing by the electorate and entrusted with their resources, but end up doing something else, or not using the resources in the best possible way.

The frequent occurrence of such accountability failures is well documented in the research literature.

Firstly, studies show how urban development processes easily take on a life of their own and get disconnected from their initial ambitions. This may be because the processes fall prey to the

influence of strong personalities, particular stakeholder campaigns, or to sudden shifts in the political climate, or simply because the process is poorly governed and hence allowed to meander.²

Secondly, a general tendency has been identified that public officials involved in urban development projects have a persistent tendency to over-estimate the benefits big infrastructure projects will, while underestimating their costs.³

The risk of management failure

Importantly, rational coherence between the steering documents matter not only to ensure proper constraints on the use of public power. It matters also as a way to ensure a fluid and effective coordination of different municipal departments involved in implementation.

One example of this is when there is a need to back track in the process, because the road ahead appears impossible to pursue further.

In such cases, if there is rational coherence in the steering documents, there is also a structured way to backtrack in the planning process. When one hits an obstacle, it is simply possible to walk back a few steps in the argumentation, reassess a particular part of the broader argument which seems to be where the problem arose, and chose a new way forward based on the new information that has emerged.

If, on the other hand, there are no rationally coherent steering documents to fall back on, the only alternative to pushing forward may be to start anew in the planning process, from a completely blank slate.

The unfortunate risks in such situations is that the perceived political costs of changing course rise to a point where they seem insurmountable. Rather than adapting to new information and choosing a new path forward, an ever stronger political lock-in around the first idea may instead be the result. The obvious risk of this is massive cost overruns and the subsequent undermining of political legitimacy.

Well written and rationally coherent documents, can in this sense make it politically “less expensive to fail” and thus allow for a more adaptive and dynamic development process.

Another illustration of why rational coherence in the steering documents matters practically is that such coherence is crucially important for effective coordination of different municipal bodies around a certain development strategy. Indeed, if the various steering documents are not coherent, this allows different municipal bodies to proceed with quite different understandings of what precisely they are trying to do, where each can point ot the steering documents as a way to justify their reading. This

² This danger is comprehensively illustrated in Bent Flyvbjerg’s famous study of Aalborg, *Power and rationality*, where an ambitious project to shift a bus terminal in central Aalborg to serve one set of objectives, as a matter of fact ends up serving a rather different set of objectives. In his book Flyvbjerg offers an in depth study of how this happens, and of how the various public bodies in the city of Aalborg gradually come to reinterpret the original intentions behind the “bus project” so as to allow for a less conflictual implementation. As a result, the “bus project” eventually, according to Flyvbjerg, ends up pushing opposite ambitions to those originally motivations the project, without any clear decision to this effect ever being taken, and indeed without anyone clearly noticing the change in direction.

³ This danger was noted early on by Albert Hirschman who however saw this as something positive and thus gave it the name the “benevolent hiding hand”. Bent Flyvbjerg has documented through a database of very many so called “mega projects” the general tendency of public officials to over-estimate the benefits of public infrastructure projects and to underestimating their costs. Jointly with Cass Sunstein, Flyvbjerg has thus taken issue with Hirschman’s positive appraisal, suggesting that their is also a “malevolent hiding hand” at play, which actually tends to lead public officials to recommend the wrong means to reach certain ends. See Flyvbjerg, Sunstein “The malevolent hiding hand”

allows for tension to gradually build up, until an open conflict is created or where a plan that has reached an advanced level of development is suddenly rejected.

In this sense, rationally coherent steering documents matter not only because of the broader importance of ensuring that there are effective democratic constraints on the use of public power. Additionally, such rational coherence is crucial to ensure a fluid and systemic management of the implementation phase.

2. The steering documents

The Vision Statement

When the RiverCity Gothenburg project was initiated by the City Executive Board in 2010, a task force was formed to devise a vision for the project.

This led to two-year intensive process involving a broad range of different groups, actors, experts and the public, with the ambition to formulate a holistic perspective on the city and its future developments. It culminated in the adoption of the RiverCity Gothenburg Vision by the City Executive Board in October 2012, with broad political agreement among all political parties.

This became the most generally formulated steering document for the project, and was until very recently the only steering document with explicit political endorsement. This changed with the very recent formal adoption of the new over all project plan for the River City project, the so called "Färdplanen".

The broad message in the Vision Statement is subsumed under the three main headings: Bring the city together⁴ Meet the water and Strengthen the core. These are referred to as "strategies" in the Vision.

These strategies have explicitly emerged as ways to cover the different dimensions of Brundtland's sustainability concept, but in ways that seeks to apply this broad concept to the specific context of the River City Project in Gothenburg.

Thus "bringing the city together" serves as the heading for the broad area of social sustainability, and particularly the need to counter strong segregating trends in the city. "Meet the water" covers the environmental aspects, in particular climate adaptation. "Strengthen the core" covers the economic aspect, and more specifically the perceived need to support the transition from an industrial economy into a successful knowledge based and creative economy.⁵

Under each of these the following quotes can be used to illustrate the key messages.

Bring the city together: *"We should heal the city - counter segregating pressures and connect the city across the river. We should create a mixed city with strong connecting street and many dynamic meeting places. We should work for socially mixed living areas. At the same time we should give the opportunity to the citizens to participate in decisions around how the River City is used and is developed."*

Meet the water: *"We should meet the water - we should create a dynamic and attractive space that allows us to adapt to climate change. It should be easy to live sustainably here."*

Strengthen the core: *"We should strengthen the core in order to strengthen Gothenburg and the region over all. We should shape the River City so that we support the developments towards a more diversified and robust economy:"*

⁴ The Swedish term here is "Hela Staden", literally translated into "Healing the city". However, in the English translation this is rendered as "Connecting the city", which brings rather different connotation. The translation chosen here is instead "Bringing the city together", since this phrase better captures the intention of this part of the vision, as the manifestation of the ambition to strive towards social sustainability. It does so by opening up more effectively for the social aspects of the ambition, ie. bringing different sociologies together, than does the phrase "Connecting the city", which more easily lends itself to a technical interpretation which focuses on connecting infrastructure, as opposed to sociological developments.

⁵ See the research of Sara Broström

In addition to these very broad statements of intent, there are also a large number of more specific claims made about what these different strategies translate into when it comes to practical urban development strategies.

For example, the Vision makes rather brief reference to the main links in the city that should be promoted, as well as very general references to what kind of developments should be pursued in the different parts of the broader River City project.

However, given the kind of processes that went into the formulation of the vision, largely fairly broad stakeholder engagement without deep analysis of the particular urban development context in the different parts of the city, it is possible to interpret these more specific claims primarily as illustrations of value statements, rather than as descriptive claims about practical development strategies.

More broadly, this suggests that the Vision statement, in spite of its many practical references may reasonably be read primarily as a statement of values, rather than a statement of strategies. Under such a reading, the references that are made in the Vision statement to tangible development ideas should really be understood as illustrative of values statements, rather than as actual proposals.

The Programme

The more practical description of how to drive the developments in Frihamnen are laid out in their first broad version in the Programme. This is in other words where the translation from very generic value based formulations to something beginning to resemble an actual development strategy for Frihamnen is laid out.

The immediate aim of a Program is to investigate the appropriate land-use for an area and to briefly process questions about building density, traffic, environmental issues and implementation. In this sense, the program sets out the city's broad intentions with the area. The Programme consequently forms the basis for the subsequent work on the detailed development plan.

The Program for Frihamnen was established in 2014 by a group led by the City Planning Office. The Program was described a *dynamic framework* that would indicate conditions and guidelines for Frihamnen.

Here we find the following formulations, which clearly seek to reflect the broad intentions in the Vision Statement, while also becoming more specific in its references.

“Frihamnen should be a district for everyone and be attractive to both families with children, as well as elderly people and youth. The area should contain socially mixed housing with different types of apartments with different price points. A dense space with good public transport, with commerce and basic services in close proximity, create the conditions for a lifestyle with no need for cars.”

“The new district connects to the history of the harbour. The pier and a select number of key buildings are preserved so as to convey the history of the location. The open vistas that characterise the location today should be considered in all subsequent work.”

“Frihamnen should be a green and sustainable district. A City Park - the Jubilee Park - should be located by the water. The docks and the water should be available to everyone, and surface water is integrated into the urban space. Kvillebäcken is led via green spaces through Frihamnen into the river.”

“Frihamnen should connect the city across the river and a number of important streets and connections should tie Frihamnen to nearby areas and districts. An urban main street along the Hjalmar Brantings street is suggested with high and dense urban developments as well as a

concentration of commerce, office spaces and some housing. A street network is proposed which is able to channel traffic into many small streets, so as to avoid larger more heavily trafficked streets that break the continuity of the urban fabric. Pedestrians and cyclists are given priority on all streets. Streets are also shaped so as to constitute attractive urban spaces.”

Once the Programme was completed it was sent out on consultation, to allow stakeholders to give input into the continued process.

The Directive

Once the consultation phase is complete, the Directive gives formal go ahead to the next stage of planning process, based on a set of key principles and objectives laid down in the Directive.

This happened on 12 August 2015, through a decision by the steering group for the RiverCity Project. This is a group that was formed to govern the River City Project, and it includes representatives of the central coordinating agency in the city, *Stadsledningskontoret*, as well as of the other relevant municipal department and the municipal development company, *Älvstranden Utvecklings AB*.

This was also the decision to start the actual project of developing the plan for the area.

The content of the directive reinforces the idea that the inner city should grow across the River at Frihamnen and also to connect the main nodes in the city:

“The inner city should grow across the river. Frihamnen is a strategically important area to connect the inner city across the river as well as with Kvillestan, Backaplan, Lindholmen and Ringön. “

Furthermore, the Directive stresses that an “inner city” feel should characterise *Frihamnen*:

“Frihamnen should be developed into a modern inner city with a large mix of residential, offices, commercial and cultural spaces. “

The directive furthermore lays out the more specific timelines for the project.

The Sustainability programme

In parallel with the work on the Frihamnen Manifesto, a sustainability program was developed as a tool to direct the high ambitions on sustainability as a foundation for urban development towards its realisation. It is based on the ten points developed in the Manifesto, and the aim of the program is to secure that the level of ambition in the ten points is reached.

3. The proposed plan and its rejection

Core ideas in the proposed plan

The Manifest significantly deepens the development strategy, as part of the process of eventually creating a set of formal plans for the area.

The Manifest should be read as compendia to the first finished plan. As such they go into fairly detailed description of the differ features of the proposed plan and recommends design principles also for the architecture of the buildings.

In its first version, it was produced as part of a workshop series that was arranged during 2015 with representatives from the City of Gothenburg, from the municipal development company Älvstranden Utveckling as well as from the private developers who had been invited into the development process.

Four main ambitions run through the most recente manifest:

- (i) *Frihamnen* is developed with a basis in *Jubileumsparken*, a meeting place for very diverse groups from all across the city
- (ii) Connections are created to *Backaplan*, *Brämargården*, *Kvillebäcken*, *Ringön* and *Innerstaden*
- (iii) The area should offer housing to socioeconomically diverse groups
- (iv) Bicycles should be given ample space
- (v) Spaces, buildings and parks should be put to multiple use

In very broad terms this manifest itself in a first physical plan that has been produced for the first phase of the development of *Frihamnen*.

This plan proposes a dense urban structure along *Hjalmarbrantingsleden*, so as to create a passage (“stråk”) with “inner city like qualities” from the area around the central station toward *Backaplan/ Kvillebäck*. The purpose of this, in turn, seems to be to connect these parts of the city more effectively.

A secondary smaller passage is then created running diagonally through the area, that aims in the longer run to connect *Avenyn* with *Backaplan*.



These two strategies for connecting the city are then complemented with the ambition to create surrounding urban structures that can offer the kind of broader living environments described in the various steering documents.

The core idea here is to offer denser more 'inner city like structures' to align the main street, and with less intense commercial energy further away, where the big park rather seeks to establish a general meeting place for diverse groups from across the city.



Increasing costs and disappearing income

In the course of the project new technical information has emerged, as is often the case.

Generally, the technical difficulties of building on the piers have become clear, raising the costs of any development.

More specifically, it has become clear that the inner dock which was intended to be land filled at a later stage is technically too difficult to fill. The reason is that the stream known as "Kvillebäcken" enters the river at this point making any attempts at land fills very unstable.

This latter fact means that the potential to build in the area falls significantly, taking a large chunk of the expected income out of the calculation.

Two significant financial pressures are thus at play: the general technical difficulties pushing up construction costs, and the specific challenge to fill the third dock takes a significant chunk of income out of the equation.

Both of these cost factors would furthermore seem to put significant pressure on the ambition to offer social diversity in the area, since it increases the pressures to bring in as much income as possible from the remaining land available to build on.

These broad concerns about the ability of the first plan to connect nearby areas matters more generally for the ability of the plan to sustain the broad ambitions behind it, as these are expressed in the early steering documents and confirmed in the manifest.

Firstly, with lower flows of people to and through the area, the ambition to create an “inner city feel” risks being undermined, depending on what interpretation that term is given. The vision of a vibrant mixed city with commercial energy risks being replaced by a more sterile and mainly residential area.

Secondly, with insufficient flows of people moving through the area, the ability of the area to serve as the connecting bridge between the surrounding areas risks being undermined. This arguably threatens another core pillar behind the plan, that of using the developments in *Frihamnen* as a means to “healing the city”, both physically and socially.

Thirdly, with insufficient flows through the area, the *Jubileumsparken*, the city park around which the area is supposed to be built according to the steering documents, risks becoming not a park for the whole city, but rather more of a residential park for people living nearby.

Overall, all these three emerging doubts threaten to undermine the very significant ambition with *Frihamnen*, which is to create a socially diverse space.

The rejection of the first proposed plan

Älvstranden Utvecklings AB has now proposed that the first proposed plan be rejected and has instead initiated a redesign phase which is now under way.

The main reason for this given by the company was that the financial calculation for the had project deteriorated.

As the project proceeded, it became clear that the cost of developments would be higher than initially thought. Furthermore, construction volumes turned out to be lower than expected, thus taking a significant chunk of income out of the calculation.

This fact that it has now been proposed that the first plan be rejected is interesting for the broader analysis of the development process.

What it means is that no actual consensus exists among the professionals involved in the planning process about what constitutes the best way forward. Consensus among professions can thus no longer serve as the yard stick for what constitutes the best way forward. Rather, some other standard needs to be relied on in judging whether to redo that plan or not, and if so, according to what more precise criteria that should be done.

The rejection of the first proposed plan in this sense puts the focus on what the qualitative and financial success criteria for the development of *Frihamnen* should actually be, and to what extent these can be distilled from the various politically endorsed steering documents for the area.

Furthermore, as is suggested above, the economic pressures on the developments in *Frihamnen* have broader implications. The most obvious strategy to counter these pressures would be to seek to build more. That solution, however, may risk pushing the general dynamics of the area away from that idea of a socio-economically balanced environment that can help “heal the city”. That strategy may therefore not be open as a way forward.

Potentially, a more radical rethink of the strategy in *Frihamnen* is therefore called for. This again underlines the governance question, ie. what qualitative and quantitative guidelines should be used in governing such a potential radical reassessment of the development plan in *Frihamnen*?

4. The governance challenge

The difficulty of identifying and tracking core development ideas

The steering documents are generally well written and extensive in what they cover.

They are not, however, written in a way that makes it easy to single out a limited set of core ideas that can be focused on as a way to give the broad direction of developments and thus serve as a check on consistency.

Furthermore, without such core ideas highlighted which help give the identity of a specific proposal it becomes very challenging to judge when a certain description of an urban environment turns into a description of another urban environment.

The rational argumentation that is supposed to bind the various steering documents together after all need to be able to hook on to some relatively clearly defined features of the physical environments proposed. If there are no such relatively clear features to hook on to, this argumentation will end up hanging in the air without serving its purpose.

The steering documents therefore do not readily allow for clear success criteria to be distilled.

The description of the envisaged local streets i Frihamnen can serve to illustrate this:

“The local streets have an intimate residential feeling, tranquil and half-private character with low speed and mixed traffic. In connection to street intersections space is created for indoor spaces for public use and smaller meeting places. The most local street spaces can partly be used for outdoor activities, play and ball games” (Programme, p 12)

This passage reads more like a set of general ambitions, rather than as well defined strategies with a clearly ordered hierarchy of aims. It is a description that is strong on conveying the feeling the end result should have, but weak on what available means exist to get there, and what possible complementarities or conflicts that exist between these different means.

The situation is aggravated by the fact that a similar lack of clarity exists in the established practices for describing the qualities of the specific plans that are produced and evaluated.

In the discussions of a proposed plan, it is not generally made clear how more precisely the specific characteristics of a certain physical plan is supposed to help support the broader objectives with the plan.

More generally, this means that it becomes very challenging to judge when the changes and amendments to a new steering documents or to the proposal of an actual physical plan are such that it no longer seems likely that the description given above will ring true for the finished result.

The way the steering documents are written thereby sets up the process for a serious risk of “drift”, where one development idea is gradually transformed into another, without anyone really noticing that this drift is taking place. It thus makes the process very liable to accountability failure of the kind discussed, and of the kind that is well recorded in the research literature.

After all, if no one can clearly tell the difference between two possible avenues going forward, it is only natural to assume that there will be ample room for external pressures or strong individuals to push developments through in the directions they deem fit.

The risk of such project drift is consequently directly linked to this difficulty of clearly differentiating different design options.

Different forms of accountability failures

In the context of Frihamnen, the broad risk of accountability failure can be broken down into two separate but complementary versions of this idea. They are referred to here as *general accountability failure* and *specific accountability failure*, with reference to the different stages in the development process where they tend to occur.

These two accountability failures are certain to interact. Indeed, from a broader theoretical perspective, they should really just be understood as two aspects of the same general challenge.

Still, for practical and institutional reasons the two challenges can usefully be distinguished. This is both to allow different kinds of knowledge processes to be constructed to manage each of them, as well as to allow the responsibilities for these different knowledge processes to be placed with different institutional bodies.

General accountability failures take place in the general stage of the design process, where the broad objectives and values that are democratically anchored in the Vision Statement are translated into a certain urban development strategy for a specific area, in particular in the Programme.

This kind of accountability failure thus takes place when one moves from very broadly formulated and largely value based expression of certain democratic ambitions, to a more specific set of suggestions about what kind of urban form to pursue in a particular place and time to further the broader democratic ambitions.



Specific accountability failures instead take place in the more specific part of the development process, when the more detailed urban development strategies are outlined, but where these strategies are not consistently carried through to subsequent documents and are consequently inadequately manifested in the physical plan that is produced.

A specific accountability failures thus involves a transition between different documents outlining ever more detail development strategies, and eventually a set of physical plans, but where these transitions are not based on rational arguments.

In both the case of general and specific accountability failures, the underlying problem could be described an insufficient rational underpinning of the various choices that are made in the urban



development process. What this means is that the underlying reasoning is invalid, or that it does not build on the best available information coming from verified research.

Lastly, as highlighted above, it is not enough to pass the test of good governance that the steering documents are clearly and coherently argued. What is also needed is that any proposals put forward in such coherently argued steering documents also constitute the most cost effective and less risky way of actually realising the broad political ambitions, compared to available and reasonable alternatives.

This means that any proposed development strategy must be assessed both in terms of its coherence with a broader set of democratically endorsed steering documents, and in terms of the costs and risks involved in trying to realise the underlying and democratically endorsed objectives.

In addition to the general and specific accountability failures outlined above, one can thus also speak about this kind of efficiency challenge as yet another form of accountability failure.

Illustrating the general accountability challenge

The core messages in the Vision statement is that Gothenburg should develop in line with Brundtlands three legs of sustainability: social, ecological and financial. The three strategies are explicitly formulated as local and urban manifestations of these three ambitions.

A well known challenge with Brundtland's definition, however, is that it gives little guidance, firstly, as to how these different aspects of sustainability should be manifested locally, and secondly, as to how possible conflicts between the three should be handled. Also the vision is silent on these issues, something that was recognised in the early stage of the River City process.⁶

At this level of formulating the ambition for Gothenburg, many questions remain regarding the question of how to implement the vision in Frihamnen. The Vision Statement is also largely silent on this question.

In the programme, however, and in subsequent documents it is made clear that *Frihamnen* should be developed with a dense inner city structure that helps extend the inner city across the river.

Importantly, however, no rational argumentation for why this is the right way to implement the three legged idea of sustainability in Gothenburg is given. The step from the Vision to this central

⁶ See the research of Sara Broström

assumption in the Programme in this sense lacks rational underpinning: it does not clearly follow from a careful reading of the vision and the best available research.

It is possible to detect in the text, a general sense that “dense” inner city structures are good, especially if they contain mixed use. But since the idea can hardly be that there should be dense mixed used urban environments everywhere in Gothenburg, an additional argument would seem to be needed to justify this particular choice in Frihamnen. That is not given. Rather it seems to be an assumption that is taken for granted.

Two implicit arguments seem to be at work here.

The first seems to be based on the ambition to “strengthen the core” of the region as a way to support economic growth and the transition to a creative knowledge economy.

This ambition is clearly expressed in the Vision. However, it seems to somehow have been translated into the much more specific idea that Frihamnen should be developed into a dense area that expands the inner city across the river and also helps bring together the different nodes of strong growth that presently exists, at Kvillebäck/ Backaplan; Centralen/ Brunnsparken; Järntorget; and Lindholmen.

This step in the argument would however seem to require independent justification. What is the hidden assumptions or the empirical evidence that makes this argumentative step compelling, or at least reasonable?

Clearly the assumption can not be taken for granted. Indeed, it is conceivable that a more effective way of “strengthening the core” of the city is to leave Frihamnen as sparsely developed as possible, firstly to save very significant amounts of money that needs to be invested here to make it ready for construction, but also to avoid diverting financial and creative energies from the other already organically emerging nodes in the city. In this sense, rather than strengthening the core in Gothenburg, it is conceivable that dense developments in Frihamnen would serve to dilute it.

Furthermore, there is certainly no immediate reason why a “strong core” for the region could not consist in a circle of nodes around eg. a park, a large body of water, or potentially a smaller largely residential area. Indeed, comparative studies would suggest this is a fairly natural development path for many urban regions. Therefore, if that “multi-core development path” is excluded for Gothenburg, rational argument backed up by evidence would need to be given.

The other argument that seems to be implicitly at work here seems to emerge from the ambition that is clearly expressed in the vision to “heal the city”, in a socio-economic sense.

This idea seems to have been translated into the idea of developing a dense urban fabric at Frihamnen. The broader implicit argument seems to have been that creating a substantive and dense urban fabric in Frihamnen is the best way to bridge the two sides of the city.

But again this step is taken without rational justification, and would require independent support. Indeed, there are plenty of comparative examples that would serve as potential counter examples to what seems to be an important implicit claim.

Stockholm, for example, would seem to have been brought together socio-economically quite well - to have been “healed” in the sense intended in the Vision - with much greater physical distance between north and south and without any substantial and dense urban fabric that bridges the two sides.

If this “Stockholm development model” is explicitly rejected for Gothenburg, some argument backed by evidence must be given.

More generally, in view of these rational gaps in the argumentation, it seems possible to argue that what has been going on in the case of Frihamnen is that certain assumptions about what qualifies as “good inner city environments” have been unreflectively taken for granted. In the case of Frihamnen, the process may have been particularly influenced by the overwhelming popular support for the very vague ideal of “mixed and dense inner city environments (“tät blandstad”).

This would suggest that the design process in Frihamnen, because of insufficient clarity in the formulation of the steering documents, may have fallen prey to the surge of broad public policy pressures, in precisely the way in which “project drift” has been documented to happen in other projects.⁷

Again, it is important here to note that the argument here is not that the decision to develop *Frihamnen* into a dense urban fabric is the wrong design decision to take. Rather, the point is a more limited governance point, that the step to that conclusion lacks rational underpinning, and in this sense exposes the process to the risk of accountability failure.

Illustrating the specific accountability challenge

While the steering documents that follow after the Vision are fairly clear on the ambition to develop an “inner city environment” in *Frihamnen* - whether this is justified or not by the Vision - there is far less clarity around what precisely this means. There are after all rather different urban environments that could pass as “inner city environments”. It is also unclear how large a part of Frihamnen should have this characteristic: only the areas near to Hjalmar Brantings gatan, or also the environments on the piers?

This sets up the process for the risk of a more specific form of accountability failure based on the uncertainty around how to interpret and implement the idea of an “inner city urban environment”. This also is no small issue. Indeed, what interpretation is given to the idea of an inner city environment has very significant consequences for what connections that need to be ensured to nearby areas so as to secure adequate flows of people. This means that the interpretation given to “inner city feel” potentially has very significant cost implications.

To illustrate the ambiguity around the term “inner city environment”, three different areas where at least the first two would naturally qualify as “inner city”, can be used as examples: *Haga*, *Brunnsparken* and *Eriksberg*.



These areas however are radically different among themselves. A simple way to illustrate this is by focusing on the number of people passing through them, with Haga having a through flow of people

⁷ See, B Flyvbjerg *Power and Rationality*

of approximately 500 per hour, Brunnsparken 5000 per hour and Eriksberg 50 per hour (note this figures are indicative).

If the implicit aim in the steering documents is that a centre should be created in Frihamnen with similar properties to Brunnsparken, this has very significant consequences for the linkages that are created. With such an implicit understanding of the term “inner city feel” it would therefore be quite natural to regard the first proposed plan as deficient in its connections.

If, on the other hand, the steering documents are interpreted to suggest that an “inner city feeling” more akin to that in Haga is the aim, which would seem like at the very least a not wholly unreasonable interpretation of the steering documents, that may lead to a less negative view of the proposed plan.

Furthermore, what interpretation one adopts of “an inner city feel” is likely to have a significant implication for the means one sees as available to push the ambition to secure social diversity.

If an environment like Brunnsparken is realised in the heart of Frihamnen, social diversity will follow fairly unproblematically, simply as a result of the volume and diversity of the flows passing through such a place. Thus, few other means may be seen as necessary to employ in such a scenario. Also, a large park adjacent to such a centre would probably have fairly good chances of developing the diversity intended.

However, if one rather strives to create a centre in Frihamnen that has the characteristics of Haga, then additional means would seem to be required to ensure the social diversity intended, such as, for example, place making initiatives or controlled rents.

This simple example thus again illustrates the risk of accountability failure: very different interpretations are possible of which way to push the developments in *Frihamnen*, and none of these follow unambiguously from the steering documents.

Furthermore, these different alternatives have potentially very different implications for the broader socio-economic dynamics and they most certainly have radically different implications for the cost and incomes generated.

Again, the lack of more stringent formulations in the steering documents, potentially supplemented with a more frequent use of real world examples, again exposes the project to a risk of drift, influenced by personalities, stakeholder interest, or sudden shifts in public opinion.

Illustrating the effectiveness challenge

Also, the effectiveness challenge can be illustrated using the illustrations above.

There may, for example, be a development strategy for Frihamnen that does not seek to develop a dense inner city feel, but rather seeks to keep new construction in the area to a minimum.

One rationale for such a strategy may, as outlined above, be based on an argument that neither the strategy to “heal the city”, nor that to “strengthen the core” actually need a dense urban fabric in Frihamnen to be successful. Instead, one may argue that a combination of open public spaces and strategic bike lanes and public transport through the area could accomplish these two objectives as well, but in a different way.

This means that two rather different strategies may now emerge that both offer ways to satisfy the political objectives of “healing the city” and “strengthening the core” but which do so in very different or possibly even opposite ways.

In cases where these alternatives are otherwise largely deemed equivalent, what ought to sway the argument one way or another is the expected costs and the risks to the public involved in each respective strategy.

If it turns out that one could confidently say that a “densification strategy” for *Frihamnen*, where the city seeks to realise an urban environment that is comparable to “Brunnsparken”, would be possible to realise while securing a net income to the city of eg. sek500m, then this might seem like a very attractive strategy to chose. A lot of new residential and commercially very attractive space would be created in the heart of the city while creating an economic surplus to taxpayers.

If, however, development costs are such that this kind of “densification strategy” can only be realised in *Frihamnen* at a net cost to the city of sek500m, then this strategy would seem a lot less attractive. This would especially be the case if it also turned out that a much less intense, and thus a lot less costly, development in *Frihamnen* were possible at the same cost to tax payers, as the option to build in the future remains in such an option.

The general point suggested here is that good governance in these type of situations require that multiple coherent strategies are articulated, and that their costs and risks are being compared.

The public choice would then be between a set of different narratives, that in different ways promise to bring the kind of values that are democratically endorsed, by where a comparisons of the costs and risks involved would be an integral part of the public choice.

The more specific point made here is that such cost and risk comparisons are only possible if the more precise definitions of what the different strategies involve are actually given. As illustrated above, the cost and income scenarios of creating “Brunnsparken” in *Frihamnen* are certain to be radically different from those of creating “Haga”, or “Eriksberg” for that matter.

Cost and risk assessment in this sense rely on precise definition of what the proposed development strategies actually involve. When this is missing, not only is the process liable to general and specific accountability failures, but the cost effectiveness challenge is also almost certain to occur.