

The City of Malmö, Sweden: Innovative Social and Ecological Projects

Malmö, a port city in the Skåne region located in the south of Sweden, has approximately 250 000 inhabitants. Now connected directly to Copenhagen thanks to the new Öresund bridge, this traditionally industrial city (shipbuilding) which has had to face a difficult economic transition over the past 20 years benefits today from new forms of economic development, in large part thanks to the construction of the bridge. The interest this city has had for sustainable development can be traced back to the Rio Earth Summit in 1992; indeed, the launch of a Local Agenda 21 initiative began in 1994, and a document that outlines the main objectives and the processes to achieve these was adopted unanimously by the City Council in August 1997 (document available on-line on the city's official website). Within the framework of this Local Agenda 21, a few neighbourhoods have been revitalized and upgraded to higher social and ecological standards.

We should first mention the new ecological neighbourhood called Bo01, in Västra Hamnen, the west side of the harbour located to the north-west of Malmö's city centre. "Bo" in Swedish, means to live, and the "01" stands for the year 2001, date at which the European housing exposition was held, between May and September. This part of the city, built on the old shipbuilding grounds from over 50 years ago, was designed to be fully self-sufficient in local renewable energy; indeed, virtually all electricity needs are covered by a 2MW windmill, one of the most powerful in Sweden, located some three kilometres away in the eastern part of the harbour. Solar energy and heat pumps provide households and businesses with heat. For the well-being of all, and as an important aspect of quality of life, the presence of water was fully designed into the landscaping in Bo01: rainwater is recovered from rooftops, and little canals that run through the streets channel it into retention ponds filled with aquatic plants and small fountains. At this time, this neighbourhood is quite exclusive and gentrified, because the apartments and houses there are very expensive to buy, mostly due to high demand to live in such a fashionable and fancy part of town. In order to promote mixed and affordable housing, a key component of sustainable development, the current large empty spaces of the northern part of the harbour adjacent to Bo01 will offer some 700 new housing units at a much more affordable price.

The neighbourhood of Augustenborg, in the south-east of Malmö, also offers some interesting social and ecological initiatives. Built back in the 1940s, this district of 3000 residents was designed for families and individuals with low incomes. Over the years, this part of town became progressively run-down, and housing standards were poor in comparison to the new apartments that had been built in other parts of Malmö since that time, which were more modern and better designed. Today, unemployment in Augustenborg is quite high (estimated at 30%), there is a large Eastern European immigration population, and many people depend on social help and welfare. A first phase of urban renewal projects was launched and was completed in 2002; a second phase of rehabilitation and infrastructural improvements is currently being undertaken. Some of the features one can find today in the neighbourhood include over 9000 m² of green roofs on the city works buildings, the installation of small open channels and drainage systems to recover rainwater, the creation of ponds to capture this water and act as a buffer against the flooding of car garages and businesses, the retrofitting of buildings with elevators to enable elderly and disabled people to leave their apartments,

the construction of waste disposal and recycling depots which contain over 12 different recycling bins and a composting machine for biodegradable waste, the greening of schoolyards and the installation of a musical playground, the possibility to borrow for a small fee one of the two ethanol cars available as part of a car-sharing project, the production of heat and energy through rooftop solar panels, etc.

Of course, not everything is perfect and rosy in Malmö; this city, like many other European cities, is struggling with a number of serious social and ecological issues. There are still neighbourhoods that have not yet had the fortune to receive the attention that Augustenborg has had, and despite the famous generous welfare State in Sweden, there are segments of the population that have a difficult time to make ends meet and who feel excluded from the rest of society. Also, the greater city area is located on some of Sweden's most fertile agricultural land, and the pressures of economic and population growth means that this land will be progressively developed into housing units and new neighbourhoods. These challenges and others have led city councillors and city personnel to find the political will to tackle them head on, and for this reason, the numerous initiatives the city has taken so far should be an example for the rest of us.

Emmanuel Prinet
ejprinet@hotmail.com