



# Our Greatest Artefact: the City

Essays on cities and museums about them

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## Essays on cities and museums about them

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## The diversity of urban life and the Carnival of Hammarkullen: how global meets local in a suburb of the city of Gothenburg, Sweden

*Mats Sjölin*

Since 1974 the Carnival of Hammarkullen has been a yearly event held on the last weekend of May in the suburb of Hammarkullen outside Gothenburg on the west coast of Sweden. At first sight this event must appear to an outsider like a Latin American carnival. This kind of carnival has never been a tradition in Sweden. On the European continent on the other hand, the carnival tradition goes far back in history. Its origin is lost in the mists of time but known to the Greeks in 1100 BC.<sup>1</sup> In Greece the Patras Carnival starts on the week before the beginning of the Greek Orthodox Great Lent. Like most carnival events in the Mediterranean and the Balkans it is connected with pagan rituals. In Christianity the carnival marks the last opportunity to celebrate before Lent. The Catholic carnivals are often based on local pre-Christian rituals. In medieval Europe the carnival was associated with wild woodsmen.<sup>2</sup> In Protestant countries similar festivals like "Fastnacht" in Germany and "Vastenavond" in Netherlands, have partly pagan origins.<sup>3</sup>



*Figure 1.  
Candombe performance  
at Hammarkullen 2001.  
Göteborgs stadsmuseum*

<sup>1</sup> Rector

<sup>2</sup> Kinser

<sup>3</sup> See also UNESCO Culture Sector – Intangible Heritage – 2003 Convention: Belgium. <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?cp=BE>. Retrieved 2009-07-29.

The carnival has been characterised by Mikail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and his world* as “the people’s second life, organized on the basis of laughter”.<sup>4</sup> This “time out of time” definition is the most accepted academic interpretation of carnivals today. The carnival is seen as a celebration of “dualism, contradiction, and mixed feelings”, its events deform, deconstruct and reinterpret the world as it is and promote social solidarity among its participants. The carnival as a ritual is “vital to recreation, but it is also the life blood of revolution.”<sup>5</sup>

All societies have their own self-serving mythologies whose meaning is to explain their origins, justify their ideologies, and legitimise their values and norms in order to create order in the universe. The public carnival event serves the participant’s purpose to “define themselves to themselves”.<sup>6</sup> The carnival’s dualistic approach to understanding what’s going on is also relevant in approaching the dialectics between the city centre and its suburbs. I will argue that urban history today is not to be interpreted as a single narrative, but understood as several competing histories. This article tries to recognise the different urban histories, memories and the diversity of urban voices. The Carnival of Hammarkullen is, in this sense, a part of this ongoing interpretation of urban life.

### Late modern Gothenburg

Late modern Gothenburg was dependent on its industries. After the second world war the city’s factories expanded rapidly. The Eriksberg shipyard extended their plant with prefabrication utilities to the west and the Götaverken yard built the new Arendal shipyard further to the west of the city. The Volvo car plant was already situated in the western parts of the city. The expansion of the ball bearing manufacturer SKF was both in the factory’s vicinity in Gamlestaden in Göteborg (The Old City of Gothenburg) and abroad. For instance, in 1964, SKF bought the Italian ball bearing manufacturer Roberto Incerti Villar (RIV). SKF were amongst the first to recruit workers from Italy. In Italy unemployment

<sup>4</sup> Bakhtin

<sup>5</sup> Gilmore

<sup>6</sup> Geertz



Figure 2.  
Volvo Amazon and Volvo PV at  
Volvo manufacturing plant 1970’s.  
Göteborgs stadsmuseum

was high after the war and most of the first immigrants came from the area around Torino where the ball bearing manufacturer RIV was located. The first immigrants arrived in 1947 and new groups were recruited in the years 1948, 1952, 1955 and 1964/1965.<sup>7</sup> During the late 1960’s and early 1970’s new immigrants from Macedonia in the former Republic of Yugoslavia were recruited to the shipyards. Statistics are weak, official registration was prohibited, but in the 1970’s a majority of blue collar workers at Volvo were registered as foreign citizens.<sup>8</sup>

A shortage of apartments forced the authorities to start a housing programme where one million apartments were to be built in ten years. Due to secret procurement the new suburb areas were located in the north east of the city away from the expanding industries. Thousands of immigrated workers were provided accommodation in the newly build suburbs of Angered, Hjällbo and

<sup>7</sup> Beckman

<sup>8</sup> Feiff C & Sjölin M.

Foreign citizens in relation to total number of workers

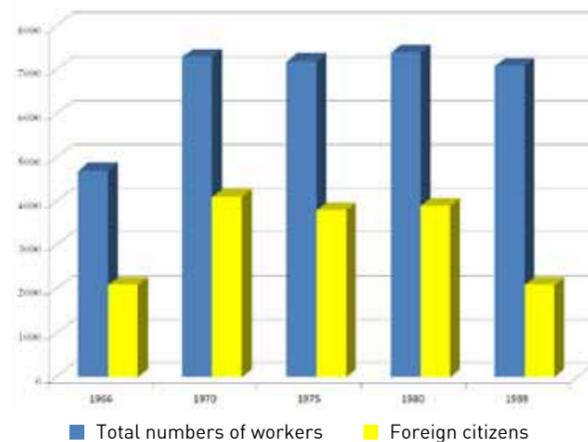


Table 1. Volvo manufacturing plant.

Kin immigration to Sweden 1980 - 2010

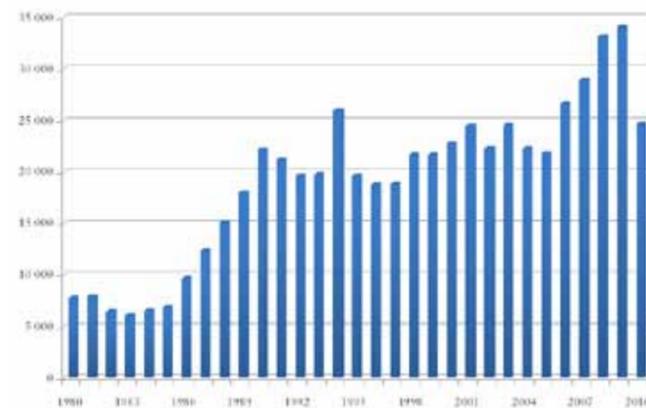


Table 2. Migrationsverket

Hammarkullen. During the 1980's the industries and the city went into a decline. The suburbs of the north east were abandoned by most Swedish born citizens and left to people with low income or dependent on social welfare.<sup>9</sup>

Back in the 1970's a small number of political immigrants from Latin America had settled in Hammarkullen. Their kin had, in the late 1980's and the early 1990's, started to arrive at what was the rather rundown suburbs in the north east, where rent was low. The local authorities desperately needed the revenue and gladly offered them apartments when the immigration authorities paid subsidies for the rent.

### The new concrete suburb

To implement the Swedish housing programme, the construction industry needed to be rationalized. The prefabricated housing constructions, typical of the north east suburbs fit into the particular Swedish model of modernity which is based on a view of a certain social and economic rationality that co-ordinates with an imagined efficient society. The Swedish welfare state is defined as

<sup>9</sup> Sjölin

a home. It has to do with more than just material safety, it's a concept of a spiritual and emotional inclusion, a right to belong. This differs from the liberal tradition of a social contract between the state and the individual where rights and obligations must balance.<sup>10</sup> The right for every citizen to belong is associated with being equal and, as a consequence, the formation of a homogenised society. Citizens of the Swedish welfare state are expected to be integrated into society which, on the other hand, presumes acculturation.<sup>11</sup>



Figure 3.  
One of the newly built suburbs to Göteborg 1974. Göteborgs stadsmuseum

Improving housing conditions was a cornerstone in forming the Swedish welfare state. It was, at the time, argued that the social environment was the source of criminality and bad behaviour in general. When the media began to report on criminality and the rebellion of young people in the new suburbs, it was to strike at the foundations of this imagined community.<sup>12</sup> Stereotypical tales, which are common in so many countries where there is a significant immigrant population, began to circulate about the immigrants' appalling way of life in the suburbs.<sup>13</sup> Counter narratives which paid tribute to the way of life in the new

<sup>10</sup> Andersson

<sup>11</sup> Cadaval Olivia

<sup>12</sup> Sjölin 2004

<sup>13</sup> Klintberg

housing areas were created.<sup>14</sup> Both narratives served as interpretations of a new situation and influenced what was to become the carnival of Hammarkullen.<sup>15</sup>

### The Spring festival that became a carnival

The Spring festival started with the organisation of spare time activity for young people in the area who wanted to show that they weren't as bad as everybody seemed to think. A typical headline describing Hammarkullen at the time was: "Where violence rules".<sup>16</sup> They organized family activities, music performances that included local rock'n roll bands which performed late into the night. There were also political demonstrations during this first spring festival. A demonstration paraded through the residential area, demanding a place for youth recreation activities. From the beginning some of the participants were dressed in clothes associated with former popular cultural activities like Dixie and jazz music, which, back in 1930's and 1940's, was looked upon as subversive music, although later accepted by the cultural elite.<sup>17</sup>

After two worrying years when the festival was inhibited due to fighting and unrest, members of the Bolivian local community wanted to participate in what they instead wanted to call a carnival. The introduction of Latin American carnival dances, costumes and other props gave the former Spring festival a local feel. The Latin American carnival also introduced a new global political consciousness and awareness of historical events. The narratives, told in the carnivalesque tradition, were an historical interpretation of how the west colonized and mistreated the indigenous people of America. This was a new perspective on the history of the developing countries never told in Swedish schools whether they were in Hammarkullen or elsewhere in Sweden. In the 1981 carnival there was an attempt to challenge this historical approach by presenting a Viking ship and dressing up as Vikings.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Jensen. Jens Jensen was an architect student who moved to Hammarkullen and documented people who lived there. The result became a book.

<sup>15</sup> Franco P. in Green G. & Scher P.

<sup>16</sup> Göteborg-Tidningen 1976.09.30

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Britt-Marie Godthardt. Göteborgs stadsmuseum.

<sup>18</sup> Documentary film of the carnival. Göteborgs stadsmuseum.

### What is carnival?

Although the goal of festival organisers was to better the area's bad reputation and improve the future of the community, the festival wasn't at the beginning financially supported by the local authorities. The festival organisers wanted to construct an identity, a self-definition of living in the suburbs and turned to the young population for help in identifying the suburban and challenging the city centre media representations of a rough, concrete environment. The counterpoise ingredients were family activities oriented towards what might be defined as Tivoli pleasure activities like pie throwing, barbeques, hot dogs, traditional music entertainment like folk music and Dixie - and what was at the time described as aggressive, long haired rock'n roll bands. The community started to form its own narrative, inventing its own history and negotiating a future in dialogue with the public.



Figure 4.  
Bolivian performance  
at Hammarkullen 2011.  
Göteborgs stadsmuseum

The construction of a suburban self, made by the majority population in Hammarkullen, left the people from Latin America to identify themselves as being the Other. For people from countries like Bolivia, Chile, Uruguay “going out in the streets”, to a festival, was a way of feeling as if they were back home, creating a new common Latino identity, even if that was a utopian dream. In a festival participants can defy, transform and offer alternatives to everyday rules and structures. During a festival in Washington DC, USA, Olivia Cadaval recorded that people entered a utopian realm of freedom and equality in which they could imagine a different order.<sup>19</sup>

Different Latin American national identities came together in the Hammarkullen carnival to create a new Latino identity in the Swedish national context. As Cadaval concludes in her study of Latino identity in Washington DC, rituals that tell stories about a common past are central to a citizen’s adoption of an imagined common identity.<sup>20</sup> Local and global histories are interwoven into a new narrative that aims to identify a new reality.<sup>21</sup> From being an aggregate of different national groups, they have become a single group united by culture and language, during the carnival. At the time of the carnival they wanted to take control over what it meant to become Swedish and to partake in the carnival, and thus the Latino identity showed itself to be adaptable and dynamic rather than static.<sup>22</sup>

### “A walk on the wild side”

Although the local community leaders of Hammarkullen never fully recognised the carnival, it became a celebration as well a political event. Community leaders participated from a distance, and unknowingly made the carnival into a festival of the Other, where the Otherness was, in negotiating terms, put up for sale. To uphold the carnival the carnival committee had to rely on different forms of sponsorship for finance. The carnival became, in the eyes of the

<sup>19</sup> Cadaval

<sup>20</sup> Cadaval

<sup>21</sup> Green G. & Scher P.

<sup>22</sup> Cadaval



Figure 5. INTI performance at Hammarkullen 2008. Göteborgs stadsmuseum

majority a working class or an ethnic group, a jollification that, at worst, could threaten to undermine community discipline. It was therefore seen as wasteful of time, money and energy.<sup>23</sup> From a distance, this interpretation of the carnival served the purpose of highlighting the “normality” of the rest, confirming the reconstruction of the “average citizen” seen through the dominant Swedish homogeneity.

Treating all citizens alike is a basic concept in Swedish communal legislation. Inequity is by no means accepted. When the Carnival of Hammarkullen was then seen as a public spectacle of Otherness and difference, it was a way to maintain a dominant discourse arguing that in due course all citizens will become integrated into the Swedish welfare state. Taking the tram out to the suburb Hammarkullen to watch the carnival was looked upon as “a walk on the wild side”. Instead the Carnival of Hammarkullen’s multi cultural animated expression challenged the fundamental idea of a homogenous Swedish welfare state. The new Latino narrative, even if it was utopian, was the traditional Swedish welfare state’s dystopia.<sup>24</sup>

Several times the carnival committee tried to make the carnival a part of the city’s official tourist entertainment programme, without success.<sup>25</sup> Projects financed by the city council had started a dialogue with the carnival committee which resulted in an exhibition presenting the history of the carnival.<sup>26</sup> In the 21<sup>st</sup> century the Göteborg cultural department, of which the city museum is a part, started, gradually, to engage in the financing of the Carnival of Hammarkullen.

### **Difference in diversity**

Today the Carnival of Hammarkullen is a carnival of diversity where different groups from different parts of the world put on a performance. South American

<sup>23</sup> Owusu K. & Ross J.

<sup>24</sup> Eagleton T.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Tony Parath. Committee Organizer of the Carnival of Hammarkullen. Göteborgs stadsmuseum.

<sup>26</sup> Esteban Johansson

carnival traditions co-mingle with the “Vikingarna” (Viking) parade music band, Swedish folk dancers, West coast jitterbugs, traditional Bulgarian performances and Nigerian association dancers. New outsiders have joined, and during the course of the carnival they become insiders, a new order where defining a cultural self is built on difference in diversity rather than as a minority in a majority. They carnivalise a new identity and reality of difference that reflect the multiple voices and points of view.<sup>27</sup>

To relate to the Carnival of Hammarkullen, one must not perceive it as an obscure, ancient, third world picturesque tourist attraction. Instead it belongs to a modern experience whose aim is, in the eyes of the participants who live



*Figure 6.  
Swedish folk dancers  
at Hammarkullen 2011.  
Göteborgs stadsmuseum*

<sup>27</sup> McGowan

the carnival, goal-oriented rather than some sort of ethnic event as society's majority has preferred to identify it. The carnival challenges a museum representation of the late modern city – is it to be something to be classified and static or goal-oriented and built on a participating approach? Instead of displaying artefacts as design objects the Gotheburg city museum has chosen the participating approach. An effort is made to include different narratives to be heard and to involve different interpretations of the city's modern history. If the Gothenburg city museum is about "we the people of Gothenburg", then the question of who is defining the "we" arises. Who defines the borders of the "community" and who decides what representations are on display in the museum?

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