

Knutpunkten: An Ethnographic Work at a Transportation Hub in Sweden

Leila C. Valoura – “Leila Kaas”

Lund University

leilakaas@gmail.com

This article describes and analyzes a three-month ethnographic field research study conducted at Knutpunkten, the central hub of all transportation located in the city of Helsingborg, on the southwest coast of Sweden. This busy, urban setting of transportation is affected by social conflicts and the general public’s feeling of avoidance, as if Knutpunkten was invisible. Looking further at these features the research study aims to uncover layers of social practices enacted in the space of this hub that “conveys” a diversity of people everyday through its space. In observation of material and non-material cultures as well as interviews, findings suggest that Knutpunkten reflects the social tension involving power relations, segregation, excessive alcohol consumption, and youth disorientation that exists outside its walls, as if this hub was a microcosm of Helsingborg. Contrasts, e.g., mobility/stagnation, routine/entertainment, upstairs/downstairs bring relevant and timely reflections regarding spatial practices and empowerment in the city of Helsingborg, at a time when the city is planning the urban renewal project H+ The Tolerant City, which will be built South of Knutpunkten.

INTRODUCTION

Knutpunkten, the central hub of all transportation located in the city of Helsingborg, on the southwest coast of Sweden, can be seen from the sea as a lighthouse illuminating the city's challenges and strengths. The station, which according to banners placed in Knutpunkten has around 45,000 people coming and going per day and offers buses, trains, ferries as well as airport shuttle services, is a connecting hub for the transnational Öresund region between South of Sweden and East of Denmark.

In September of 2009 I had my first contact with Knutpunkten together with other Cultural Analysis Master's candidates from Lund University. Seen by the city as a problematic place marked by violence, very little was known about this hub's social life. Since at that time I had just moved to Helsingborg, located around 60 kilometers from Lund University's main campus, the station became part of my daily routine, as I had to commute to the university. This made me continue observing this social setting while mingling as a user of the place and interviewing other users between the months of September and December.

In this ethnographic work located at a diverse urban setting of mobile flow through the space, both material and nonmaterial culture integrate data collection to bring about features of social life embedded in this structure. At Knutpunkten, the daily grind of commuting to work as well as the exceptional and playful activities of drinking alcohol at a pub or simply congregating blend to reveal urban social disorientation and tension.

Knut(knot)-punkten(point) is a local, national and international connecting hub open 24/7. However, how has this "knot-point" connected and tied itself to the community it serves? How is it perceived and placed in a segregated city space? At the hub, the conflict meeting-place vs. space of separation pointed out by David Harvey (1989) becomes a question to be examined.

There is a momentum for this analysis, when the urban renewal project H+ The Tolerant City is being elaborated "to develop central southern Helsingborg around the city's harbour entrance and create a creative centre in the Öresund region" (Helsingborg Stad, n.d., H+ vision is about the tolerant city).

The project, defined by the city as a "fascinating [sic] trip into the future" (Helsingborg Stad, n.d., The H+ project), affects Knutpunkten, since the railway that comes from underneath the hub to the surface in the South part of the city will be dug as a tunnel. This way, the southern city districts will not be cutoff by the railway as they are today, opening the area between the hub and the Southern part of Helsingborg for construction. However, how the hub and its users fit into this "trip into the future" is still unclear.

Knutpunkten is a fertile social setting where urban life with its pulse and tensions is concentrated and awaiting attention. This analysis aims to spotlight social and spatial aspects of this hub as well as inspire academic studies which can focus on Knutpunkten's materiality beyond its atmosphere of an unsafe place to be avoided.

The first part of this article brings a thick description of Knutpunkten's space and user's routine during rush-hours in the pulse of urban life and daily commute. The second part focuses on spatial and time divides brought up by the youth, workers, and entertainment businesses at Knutpunkten. The third part of this article examines data regarding segregation in the city of Helsingborg, excessive alcohol consumption, and youth issues. In this third part, the H+ city renewal project's challenge of connecting segregated groups is also examined within this space that is in transformation. The final part concludes by summarizing research findings and pointing to further study possibilities.

DAILY ROUTINES IN SPACE AND TIME

It is Tuesday morning in downtown Swedish Helsingborg bathed by the waters of the Öresund strait (The Sound). In an open square, a sign containing a red dot surrounded by four

concentric dark and lighter blue circles indicates one is entering Knutpunkten, the transportation hub of a city with an area of 346 km² and a population of 126,754 (Helsingborg Stad, n.d., Facts about Helsingborg).

Walking through the main door, a spacious building structure opens up. The construction looks like a bright greenhouse made of white metal and glass, paved with a beige marble floor. In the center of the main hall, silver metal rectangular ticket machines are aligned. Above the machines, round clocks and digital monitors for arrivals and departures reflect different ethnic faces of passengers staring at them as if in a mirror of the “sort of chronological net in which urban life was caught” (Harvey, 1989, p. 171). In contrast to the spacious hall, this area, which is near the ticket booths, is a busy one where people converge, stand in line, and leave in an urban and anonymous ballet to keep moving to their destinations.

Surrounding the main hall, there is a café chain, some convenience stores, a drugstore, currency exchange house, and, curiously, a casino. Looking up, two more floors open up in mezzanine style around the main hall of the station. From down the hall it is possible to see a restaurant, some pubs, a travel agency, and offices upstairs. The first impression of Knutpunkten reminds one of a mall where people can stroll freely, sit down on cold benches made of metal and simply spend time.

Suddenly a blond woman with glasses, wearing a thick red coat and carrying a plastic bag walks by to check a trashcan. She picks up a few cans of soda and walks in a fast pace to the next trashcan. She looks as busy and on the move as passengers who are running to catch their trains and buses with tickets in hand.

From the ticket machines one can choose to take the escalators down to the train platforms or to go straight outside through a glass door, pass by smokers and youth congregating, cross the road where buses approach the station, and enter the back building to the bus terminal. Although a glass and white metal structure is still present here, ceiling, floor, and benches follow gray shades in contrast to the light colors in the front building.

After a first walk within the space and flow of this transportation hub in Sweden, one question was recurrent: Where is the violence and danger strongly emphasized about this place? Cases of fights and stabbings had already happened at the station and the advice received when moving to Helsingborg was: Avoid Knutpunkten!

In order to understand the social life pulse and challenges faced by Knutpunkten, more observation of its space and flow was necessary. If space “is imbued with cultural and political implications” (O’Toole, & Were, 2008, p. 617), the objects and organization that construct the landscape of this space can reveal social structure and cultural understanding. However, space and objects can only develop meaning through everyday life practices and, “it’s not a matter of appropriating or of being ‘scripted’ by isolated artifacts” (Shove, Watson, Hand, & Ingram, 2007, p. 143). Therefore, in Knutpunkten material and non-material cultures were observed and analyzed together to bring about social meaning.

In search of this relationship between Knutpunkten’s users, space and objects, I moved towards the train platform. In an area with two-way escalators, as in a circulatory system of arteries and veins, a pointillism flow of people takes one up or down to the underground level. In this space where the white and shiny tile walls reflect the cold lights from the ceiling and the warm tan brick floor, waiting seems to be the motif.

On a relatively crowded platform with few benches, male and female workers as well as students spread out. The electronic panels hanging from the ceiling indicate destination and time. One or two show a message of delay, which upsets some of the passengers and relieves others who step panting on the platform. Here, the feeling of mobility in space and the time constraint of urban life are definitely present. The fragmentation between working time and living time in different spaces (Harvey, 1989) is almost a portrait seen in the faces of passengers waiting for trains during rush hour at Knutpunkten.

Surrounded by the smell of brewed coffee that comes from “to go” paper cups, some people read books, others text messages on their cell phones or listen to their iPods, and many simply stand still in their own spaces, in silence, avoiding physical contact. It is interesting to note that in busy urban settings, e.g., public transportation places like Knutpunkten, the avoidance of touching and looking at each other is usually present. Although the nature of these places is collective, “individuals create something like ghettos in their own bodily experience when confronted with diversity” (Sennett, 1994, p. 366), which makes them appear to want to stay as distant as possible from each other.

Public transportation can be seen as a singular social space of “uncomfortable proximities” (O’Dell, 2006, p. 88) where diversity meets. In Sweden, analyzing his commute from Lund to Knutpunkten in Helsingborg, the anthropologist Tom O’Dell touches upon space boundaries in this setting:

As I board the morning train to Helsingborg at rush hour, I find myself longing for the tyranny of an assigned place. Instead, it is first come first serve which is the rule, and as is so often the case at rush hour, this is going to be a standing room only journey. As luck would have it, I find a seat occupied by a young woman’s book bag. I ask her if I can have the chair. Reluctantly, she concedes the place (2006, p. 89).

After conceding him the seat, the woman places her book bag on the floor, clearly delineating the space between the two. Following this sense of space protection, commuters waiting for their trains in the underground of Knutpunkten finally embark on crowded cars for one more day of shared routine, even if they try to keep it the most individual as possible.

It is interesting to reflect on commuters’ experience as a group for whom Knutpunkten is an integrative part of their daily routine, in many cases for years or an entire life. In fact, for many commuters Knutpunkten has a major role because it is tied to their daily work routine and thus, linked with the very act of sustaining life through a paycheck. Consequently, Knutpunkten can symbolize both a necessary extension of its users or even a cage that they cannot escape from.

SPACE AND TIME DIVIDES

Moving from the platforms to upstairs, passengers’ efforts for individuality seem to give place to interaction, at least among one group of users who meet and congregate at the hub. This group is the youth who usually gather in the back building of the station, at the bus terminal area where there are more benches and the only free restrooms in Knutpunkten, as pointed out by students interviewed during fieldwork. After school hours and evenings are the prime time when youth use the hub as a “meeting point”, as they defined the place. When asked why they chose Knutpunkten as their place to meet, answers varied from “It’s easier, everybody come here” to “It can be dangerous but also fun with groups of people”.

However, if on one hand the youth find “fun” with people coming and going, on the other hand this group refers to Knutpsunkten with disgust, as a place where they would not like to be if there were other “cool” places to go. The youth’s antagonistic sense of ownership and desire to avoid Knutpunkten bring some questions. What role is Knutpunkten playing beyond its capacity as a transportation hub? What kinds of social needs is the hub filling?

Searching for input that could shed light on these questions, I reached out to another group that, like the youth and differently from passengers who come and go, stay at the hub for a few hours. This group was composed of employees who work at Knutpunkten. Observing and listening to bar attendants, waiters, cashiers, and janitors brought the perspective of who is immersed in that reality and who has no choice of not interacting with users, as passengers have. When asked about their experience working at the place, the feeling expressed was not

exactly of pride but of acceptance. However, their experience especially informed this research about a divide in Knutpunkten between day/night, and downstairs/upstairs.

During daytime in this central hub of transportation, one will find a flux of workers coming and going to their jobs, students, seniors, moms pushing their baby's carriages, children, and a few homeless, who according to some Knutpunkten employees, "are nice people", implying they do not contribute to insecurity at the hub. Though, at night, when most stores are closed, with the exception of places to eat, drink and play, Knutpunkten's atmosphere changes. At this time of the day the place attracts youth and adults whose final destination is the hub itself and who are looking for entertainment. They come from Helsingborg and surroundings, or even from Elsinore, the Danish city, home of Hamlet's castle, right across the Öresund strait and linked in 20 minutes to Sweden by a 24 hour ferry.

On the second floor, at one of the pubs located next to the ferries' boarding area, one of the waitresses referred to Knutpunkten as "the worst place to work" but later she said that "the place improved and it is very good now". When asked why it is better, the waitress said: "The police is more rigid now. They're not holding the trouble guys for one hour only and letting them go". When businesses upstairs, the majority of which are pubs, were asked about violence in Knutpunkten, they named the use of drugs, drunks, fights, and homeless people. Curiously, they said these activities all take place downstairs, and not in their area.

The space at Knutpunkten materializes a strong divide between what is called "upstairs" and "downstairs". Upstairs is brighter, wider, cleaner and quieter during the day. For businesses run on the second floor, they are separated from downstairs and in their area "if someone starts a fight, this person is immediately removed downstairs by hired guards", explained the manager of one of the pubs. This dissociated managerial model with private guards to guarantee the upstairs remains safe can indicate that businesses are the ones with more power of command of space production in Knutpunkten, and therefore, the ones more equipped to perpetuate this power even more.

In order to understand the space and time divides it Knutpunkten, I also did fieldwork at night. On a Friday, I went to the busiest pub on the second floor. At the pub, the music is loud, waiters are busy, men and women laugh, talk, drink and play games available for customers. The atmosphere indicates one is at a pub.

However, looking outside the pub through the open mezzanine, arrival/departure monitors, clocks, ticket machines, and passengers carrying suitcases indicate this is also a transportation place. Mentally switching from one atmosphere to the other can be confusing since expectations in these two settings, a pub and a transportation station, tend to be different. A passenger's experience involves mobility, transition of places and the time constraint of a schedule. A pub customer's experience involves repose within a limited space and a relaxed state regarding time constraints.

If at Knutpunkten's pubs, customers can choose to not look outside and forget this is a transportation hub, travelers do not have the same choice. The loud sound of music, glasses and chatting echoes in the entire hub, signals that entertainment is taking place. At night, on the first floor and underground of Knutpunkten the feeling is of being lost. Youth congregate in flocks, drunk people wander, homeless sleep, and passengers, confused about where they are, try to stay at Knutpunkten as little as possible.

Cases of fights and stabbings can also be part of the nightlife in Knutpunkten. Having witnessed two fights when coming home at night shed light on aspects of the social structure where Knutpunkten is embedded. Both fights happened downstairs and involved males in their late teens. The exact reasons for the fights were unclear, but in both cases fighters had a group of friends with them, although they were fighting alone. It was not possible to talk to these teens on either of the nights but observing the groups' interaction amplified the universe of information about Knutpunkten and its users. The youth was an element of this social

structure that needed to be analyzed more closely to bring about a better understanding of Knutpunkten and its social actors.

SEGREGATION, ALCOHOL, AND YOUTH DISORIENTATION

Talking to the Social Services / Mobile Team, a group recruited by the city to work with the youth of Helsingborg, I was informed that the province where the city is located, Skåne, has one of the highest concentrations of parents who bring alcohol home and develop the practice of drinking in their children. The team also presented research in which is indicated that around 80% of cases of violence and vandalism in the city are alcohol-related.

If alcohol is pointed out as one element of the problem, another feature is the lack or reduced number of meeting places for the youth, as indicated earlier during fieldwork. On top of that, another aspect observed while living in Helsingborg for three months was a strong sense of segregation that exists in this city.

Segregation in Helsingborg, for the city born filmmaker Robert Lillhonga, is as if there was an “invisible razor-sharp line through it, dividing North from South” (qtd. in *City of Helsingborg & Blå*, 2007 p. 57). Historically, the Southern part of this city concentrates poorer strata of its population, initially factory workers and, in the last years, poorer immigrants and refugees mainly from the Balkans, Middle East, and East Africa. The subject involving refugee policies and mainly the influx of Arabs in the city, as well as in Sweden in general, has been a controversial one that divides Swedes’ opinions.

I recall one time on the train from Lund to Helsingborg, when two Arabic teens were sitting in the small section of the train car next to the exit doors. They were listening to Arabic music from their cell phones, dancing and saying words in Arabic. From the other bigger section of the car that was next to where the teens were, passengers, in silence, looked at each other once in a while. The feeling of being in that car all the way to my destination at Knutpunkten was as if there was a veiled tension in the atmosphere. Non-Arabic passengers’ looks and restless body languages seemed to express a dammed up disapproval of the situation but at the same time a conflicting acceptance of what it represented.

Segregation between North and South in Helsingborg is not only geographic but also part of people’s mindset, as observed in my interaction with residents during the time I lived in this city. Helsingborg has an atmosphere of avoidance towards its Southern part and what (or who) it represents. This avoidance can be felt when residents from richer areas, especially in the North, refer not only to the South but also to Knutpunkten, which is on the border between the two, as something apart. Some residents, who do not commute, simply avoid the hub and use the pronoun “those” to refer to the people who congregate there, which emphasizes a separation between them and those they see as “other”.

Looking at the bigger social context in which Knutpunkten is placed helps to gain perspective of some of the issues faced by this hub that seem to be connected to the city’s issues itself. The youth who congregate in Knutpunkten come mainly from the Southern part of Helsingborg and from economically depressed smaller towns in its surroundings, e.g., Landskrona. For them, the hub is sort of a heated “mall”, or shelter from the outside, centrally located, since the closest big mall is further Northeast in a more industrial area. In the hub the youth can congregate for free, i.e., with no demands. However, at night, the hub becomes a territory disputed by different groups and reflects the social tension involving power relations, segregation, excessive alcohol consumption, and youth disorientation that exists outside, as if Knutpunkten was a microcosm of Helsingborg.

The sense of spatial separation found between North/South, them/us, upstairs/downstairs, and so on brings some reflections regarding spatial practices in Helsingborg. In a moment when a new space is being planned in the city through the urban renewal project *H+ The Tolerant City*, asking Harvey’s question “in whose image and to whose benefit is space to be

shaped?” (Harvey, 1989, p. 177) can be pertinent.

It was interesting to note that although there is so much space in Knutpunkten and so many people who come, wait, and go daily in the station, there was no sign or even a single space at the hub dedicated to inform people about the H+ project. As a place that is avoided, Knutpunkten seems to materialize invisibility in the city. This invisibility is also felt in the doubt about who is responsible for Knutpunkten’s space, since there are no information desks or channels of communication between users and Knutpunkten available in its space. Contact between users and Knutpunkten can only be made through a few policemen spread out in the hub.

The feeling is that people at Knutpunkten are not important to be cared about and therefore informed and listened to regarding the city’s renewal planning or other activities. There is a sense of abandonment of “those” people.

The H+ city renewal project plans “to connect the Söder [South] district with the new harbour district” (City of Helsingborg & Blå, 2007, p. 133) when moving the railway South of Knutpunkten to the underground. However, how to connect segregated groups in this space in transformation is a challenge. There is the risk that when renovating and integrating the South with new residences, offices, retail, and hotels, as is planned, segregation will shift in space and move from North-South to East-West. This shift is actually already happening with the East side representing primarily a new immigrant section, and West, a rich and modern section by the water.

Facing this challenge raises a bigger issue that involves spatial empowerment of growing segregated groups in urban areas (Harvey, 1989). In this case, transformation of spatial practices that bring about segregation seems to be the crucial point to touch upon. In order to develop a city “for all Helsingborgians, regardless of income or cultural affinity” (City of Helsingborg & Blå, 2007, p. 137), as the city aims, contact with those who are considered “different” and who are now avoided is necessary. Knutpunkten, being a microcosm of Helsingborg’s issues, as this fieldwork suggests, has an important role in the city’s transformation.

CONCLUSION

Through this ethnographic analysis I aimed to uncover layers of social practices enacted in the space of this hub that is Knutpunkten. Findings bring about awareness of urban life features and suggest that Knutpunkten can help to examine Helsingborg’s social issues as if one is looking at the city through a magnifying glass. Since this analysis does not produce a definitive interpretation, it aspires to encourage further studies especially including quantitative research methods in order to enhance the discussion raised here. Additionally, in light of the absence of in depth academic studies about Knutpunkten, this paper seeks to highlight relevant issues that call for attention and more analysis in this social setting.

The findings from this research suggest that Knutpunkten is perceived as a place of avoidance that is as marginalized as the poorer strata of Helsingborg’s population. For the people who search for entertainment and a meeting place at the hub, Knutpunkten is perceived as the only option as well as an arena to fight for their social visibility. On its part, Knutpunkten seems to also marginalize its users when it does not address who is responsible for the space and allows entertainment businesses alone to take command of space production with little regard for other groups who use the space.

In its daily routine around the clock, Knutpunkten signals to space mobility through its transportation flow. But its issues also indicate social stagnation awaiting intervention. If on one hand this hub concentrates social challenges, e.g., power relations, segregation, excessive alcohol consumption, and youth disorientation, on the other hand it can be an encouraging setting to bring about social change. The hub “conveys” a diversity of people into and out of

the same place everyday and although the predominant feeling is of avoidance and disgust, Knutpunkten can help to materialize social challenges that need to be faced in the city.

At the moment of this writing, when the urban renewal project H+ The Tolerant City is still in the blueprint phase, Knutpunkten and its concrete presence can work as a stimulus to reflect and act on space empowerment as well as on alleviating the risk of having an urban renovation that will intensify segregation of weaker groups in the city.

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