

# American New Urbanism as a Gesture Spread out through Europe

Adilson Costa Macedo

*Department of Architecture and Urbanism, University São Judas, São Paulo 03166000, Brazil*

**Abstract:** The Charter of New American Urbanism signed in 1996 represents a gesture that was spread out through Europe intended as the basis to the Charter of New European Urbanism, 2003. In this manuscript the new urbanism (NU), is considered a movement whose aims are to recover values of traditional cities, concerning the neighborhood patterns and the land mixed use. Looking to design the region, city, town, neighborhood, district and the in-fill projects, set out on garden-city principles the NU concerns also the urban sprawl, natural resources economy and to maximize the transit system. Doing so, this movement could be settled in the role of disciplines concerned to sustainability, as explained by the place chosen to welcome the meeting where the Charter of Stockholm was signed.

**Key words:** NU, European urbanism, urban design.

## 1. Introduction

The widespread repercussion resulting from the New Urbanism concepts in the United States of America, USA, suggested the starting of a similar movement in Europe. A universal interest for projects based on the traditional city structure opposing the Modern Urbanism Movement was the emulation to this attitude. The manuscript will enlarge this simple explanation pointing to issues relating sustainability, eco-design and smart growth suggested by these documents. It is drawn out the fact of the Chart of European Urbanism being introduced in a context where such problems like urban sprawl and search for sustainability are not so urgently imposed. Because these are questions that, with no alarm, are inherent to the continuous European pattern of development, the European charter comes about as consequence of different meetings starting in Brussels, on April 2003, at same year it was signed.

Leaders of new urbanism (NU) in the USA participated formulating their Chart, to later supported the European counterpart as responsible for their own

document. The Americans were architects with experience in suburban neighborhood projects, urban infill clusters or middle-class resorts like Seaside, Florida: a town that has become the icon of the American movement. The intellectual appeal was for regionalism, the recovery of the traditional community way of life, and the resumption of aesthetic values of American historical architecture. The sustainability agenda did not exist explicitly. The result was the contact with a European group of architects, with similar experience. From this statement could be understood the choice of the neighborhood Järila Sjö to host the meeting, from which would result in the European Charter. The manuscript will develop this issue in a critical way saying that the sustainability agenda did not exist explicitly at the time. The Järila Sjö location will appear in this manuscript as an urban design case study intended to show a similar impact like the project of Seaside to Americans.

In a way to highlight elements related to urban patterns concerning to smart growth, principles borrowed from different European entities, will be presented by their own words. This option looks for better didactic, although the text becomes a little more extended.

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**Corresponding author:** Adilson Costa Macedo, Ph.D., professor, research fields: urban morphology, and urban design.

## 2. A Favorable Situation for New Urbanism in Europe

Due to the peculiarities of European and American cities and the urbanistic tradition of each continent, similarities as well as significant differences were identified. The differences are due to the characteristics of city network on the two continents, the distance between the cities themselves, the size of the countries, and the historical and cultural context in each case: in short, the New and the Old World.

The similarities are regarding the urgency to:

- minimize the impact of urban sprawl;
- encourage mixed-use urban spaces;
- treasure pedestrian transit;
- encourage the use of bicycles;
- promote the use of compact vehicles powered by alternative energy around neighborhood streets;
- pay as much attention as possible to the requirements of communities organized around small nuclei or districts;
- preserve historical assets, by attributing current usage to such spaces incorporated into the urban project<sup>1</sup>.

The similarities with the North American scene have been dealt with in Europe in several situations; some experimental solutions have arisen, such as the use of small alternative energy-fueled vehicles or the communities designed for low energy consumption<sup>2</sup>.

However, in order to characterize the European context where new urbanism was to be launched, it is important to remember the garden-city concept developed by the urban theorist Ebenezer Howard [1]. This was the basis for the first garden-city, Letchworth Garden City, 1903, located in North London (current population: 33,600 inhabitants). There is the

garden-city project of Hellerau, in Germany, created in 1909 on the initiative of entrepreneur Karl Schmidt (current population: 15,000 inhabitants), and which is today a neighborhood of the city of Dresden (505,000 inhabitants). Then in 1918, through a business project once again led by Howard, a second English garden-city was established, called Welwyn Garden City (current population: 43,250 inhabitants)<sup>3</sup>. The United Kingdom after World War Two entered a phase of new city construction, with the objective of establishing a ring of cities to form the metropolitan region of London. Stevenage (current population: 79,000 inhabitants), and Harlow (current population: 78,000 inhabitants), were founded in 1946 and 1947, respectively. Both were conceived according to the original spirit of the garden-city concept, despite their larger populations. Twenty-one cities were built in the United Kingdom between 1946 and 1970; all conceived with different project criteria. The last, Milton Keynes (current population: 207,000 inhabitants), is located 75 km from London and covers an area of 8,800 hectares. The objective of this regional planning was to form a cluster ultimately comprising three more already-existing small cities and project a fourth nucleus with 150,000 inhabitants. With the main center in the new nucleus, the population is expected to grow to 250,000 inhabitants, forming a consortium of the four settlements in the garden-city mold. The vehicular system accessing the urbanized nucleus was designed like a grid. Such one by one kilometer was framed suggesting a new pattern to the vehicular distribution. In this period (1946-1970) the United Kingdom offered an interesting set of experiments in planning and city shapes.

In order to understand the context that paved the way to the introduction of the new urbanism concepts into Europe, it is essential not to forget the long underlying

<sup>1</sup> The identification of similarities stems from author's knowledge on the new American urbanism and European urbanism.

<sup>2</sup> The BEDZED complex, Beddington Zero Energy Development, located south of London, besides practicing mixed-use principles for spaces which favor social integration, the aim is to be pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly and to reduce the energy consumption by 10%.

<sup>3</sup> In 1920, the Jardim América neighborhood came into being in the city of São Paulo, Brazil, through a business undertaking by the English company City of São Paulo Improvements and Freehold Land Company, Limited. In the EUA are influential the Howards concepts in cities like Boston, besides many suburban towns and neighborhoods.

awareness of historical preservation, conservation of natural assets and the sense of citizenship (individual and collective) present on the continent. The concepts detailed by Howard a century ago persist. It is necessary to remember the repercussions of the Tapiola city plan in Finland and the post-modernism of the concepts developed for the Poundbury, neighborhood project, part of the city of Dorchester, UK.

Tapiola (current population: 38,000 inhabitants), in Finland, was conceived as a garden-city. It was founded in 1953 and has since become a district of Espoo County, which has a total population of 220,000 inhabitants. It was devised by a young lawyer [2], who petitioned the Housing Foundation of Finland against the construction of repetitive apartment blocks, which were being built in several places, with arguments from his humanist point of view, his knowledge of projects and several visits he had made to the garden-cities in the United Kingdom. Hertzén affirmed that people should live in commune with nature and invited several architects in Finland to develop his plan, then organized a competition for the central area of Tapiola. He worked tirelessly to raise funds from the government and in the selection of builders, and so ultimately saw his dream city materialize. Today Tapiola is the icon of an urban nucleus, where the inhabitants can live close to nature, where the mix of land usage is in good proportions, and the public transportation system is adequate [3]. Considering its foundation date and from the point of view of current concepts, it can be said that this was sustainably developed city and it presents a unique system of green spaces [4].

There is a group of professionals, under the NU umbrella concerned with urban retrofit through the viewpoint of revival the benefits that existed in the traditional city and their architecture. To some entrepreneurs and architects either the resurgence of past styles, in the United States, the circle of professionals who evocate these styles resurgence is known as the “Neo-Traditionalists”. It is an attitude

that is very sympathetic to the popular taste in USA and in many other countries. A lifestyle that takes full advantage of public spaces, reclaims a sense of the neighborhood and accepts a reinterpretation of traditional styles. These concepts make it easier for the affected population to accept a plan for the city, the neighborhood, the suburb or even the intra-urban sector. It also aids in the sale of real estate, the basic factor for the success of this type of undertaking, which are almost always private ventures.

On the intellectual level, having something to do with the desire of the aristocrat to be a social theorist, this neo-traditionalism inspired Charles, the Prince of Wales to devise and undertake the establishment of the Poundbury neighborhood, an extension of the city of Dorchester. It happened in 1989, in a 162-hectare area, planned to be a mixed-use space for 1,200 inhabitants with about 40 parcels destined for commerce, services and light industry. Despite its small size, the Poundbury project reflects the urbanistic principles established by Prince Charles that were put into practice by Leon Krier’s architecture firm [5]. Directed by the Prince of Wales Foundation for the Built Environment, in collaboration with other urbanists, the Prince’s original eight principles grew to thirteen principles that were followed in the planning and creation for a pleasant lifestyle space for people. These principles as urban design guidelines are closely related to the twenty-seven principles of American NU, they are listed here in full:

(1) Place: the project should be conceived around the characteristics that make the chosen site unique; anonymity as a characteristic in a development project is a bad thing.

(2) Hierarchy: the physical constitution of a building should reflect its function and its importance.

(3) Scale: the building should reflect the scale of its desirable public appearance; its spatial dimension should neither exaggerated nor too small.

(4) Harmony: a building should have individuality and whilst also interacting with its neighborhood.

(5) Limit: the spaces under public and private control, as well as urban and rural spaces, should be clearly defined.

(6) Material: the project should use locally produced material that intertwines with the landscape and age with dignity.

(7) Decoration: the projects should be decorated with works by artists and craftspeople.

(8) Community: the local community should participate in all phases of the project.

(9) Public space: the external areas of buildings, including signage, artificial lighting and urban furnishings should be as neatly planned as the rest of the project.

(10) Permeability: the complex of buildings should permit passage through its internal spaces, thus facilitating the transit of pedestrians and merchandise.

(11) Durability: the buildings should be solid, long-lasting, and adaptable to new uses as their older functions become obsolete.

(12) Value: the project of a building should consider its economic value.

(13) Quality: a building should be conceived with expertise, which should be reflected in the quality of its construction [6].

Despite of possibilities to use the NU principles on larger scale, its origin stakes in reformulating the small suburban district concept, with a disperse location but a good internal organization. In Europe there is a strong integration of social affairs on the district level, such as control of the shared space by the community or the tender relationship between people and nature. We understand that the application of NU principles could just come to refine principles that are already in common usage. May be leaved aside the issue of the resurgence of past styles, which is not what concerns us here, because the architecture of buildings may or may not have this “revival” type appeal, depending on the entrepreneur and the architect.

The city network has consolidated itself over the centuries, with ever shorter distances between urban

centers and a longstanding hierarchical distribution of urban infill. These days however, despite the settled group of regions, due to the demand for areas in the mid-level price range for the establishment of large social, cultural and industrial activities or the provision of services, the urbanization process has been relatively dispersed. This process in Europe is less significant than the same process in the USA, but it is still sufficiently important to be considered in regional and local planning. “Megacities” and “città diffusa”, “the two extremes I am referring to, like both kinds of ideals, are present today in Europe as two autonomous modes of establishing what amounts to lifestyles, activities and different social formations” [7].

In USA, the Anglo-Saxon tradition of contact with nature, amplified by the protestant religion and the legacy of the struggle of immigrant families to colonize the country has led to their deep-rooted predilection for suburban living. With time it became mainly the predilection of the middle class, due to the direct and indirect costs of moving to obtain such a lifestyle. This trend was further advanced by the availability of resources to extend a high-quality transport system everywhere urbanization arose. Cities are now attempting to direct their urban planning mindful of the current concerns regarding fuel conservation and the consequential requirement to return to a situation where it is possible to organize public transportation on a regional and local scale. NU has grown out of this experience with plans and projects for small suburban cities or urban sectors within larger cities.

### 3. The Council for European Urbanism

The European initiative, called the Council for European Urbanism (CEU), was preceded by The Congress for New Urbanism (CNU), established in the United States of America ten years previously. The American Chart of New Urbanism is dated 1996. The objective was to set down the basis for what would become New Urbanism in Europe. A previous meeting took place in Belgium—April 6, 2003, Declaration of

Bruges. Six months later in Sweden—November 6, 2003 was signed the Charter of Stockholm, addressing the European basis to the New Urbanism.

The Council was founded and held its first meeting on April 6, 2003. It was organized by the Belgian architects Christian Lasserre and Joanna Alimanestianu and by Lucien Steil from Luxembourg. The administration also included the Americans John Massengale and Bill Dennis. Two of the founding fathers of new urbanism in the USA, Andrés Duany and Stefanos Polyzoides, took part as consultants in the establishment of the CEU. Besides professionals from firms operating in the area, other participating entities included: INTBAU, International Network for Traditional Building, Architecture and Urbanism, the Prince's Foundation for the Built Environment, Byens Fornylse (Norwegian Foundation for Urban Renewal), A Vision of Europe institute, the Institute of Classical Architecture, Technische Universität Berlin, the architecture schools of Viseu University (Portugal), San Sebastian (Spain), Ferrara (Italy), Napoli (Italy), Glasgow (Scotland), Miami and Notre Dame and the Knight Program in Community Building.

Some months later, on November 6, 2003, a new meeting was held in Sweden, where the Stockholm Charter of European Urbanism was ratified. The meeting took place in the Järila Sjö neighborhood of Nacka county, located 8 km from downtown Stockholm. It is interesting to note the reach of new urbanism in Europe through the “in totum” text of the Charter and to narrate sequential topics about the Järila Sjö neighborhood project, a neighborhood faithful to the principles of new urbanism, which is why it was chosen to hold this meeting.

The principles for the planning and projects regarding new urbanism presented in the Charter are got together following the sequence:

- I. Regions;
- II. Cities and Towns;
- III. Villages and the Countryside;
- IV. Neighborhoods and Districts;

- V. Streets, Squares, Blocks and Public Gardens;
- VI. Architecture and Landscape Architecture;
- VII. Transport.

These seven titles include thirty-eight items all together. There is an effort to systemize in an integrated fashion the elements of human-use spaces in relation to the natural space, establishing a hierarchy to its physical organization. Codes and manuals may arise from these principles detailing even further what could become the plan and the project, from the European New Urbanism point of view. In fact, this European Charter is a manifesto of sorts as well, dealing with the ethical aspects and strategies of urban policy. The initial classification of the principles into regions, cities and towns, villages and the countryside, neighborhoods, streets, squares, blocks and public gardens, helps in the comprehension of how may be considered, as well as being an analysis or project of the different scales of urban morphology. Considering the peculiarities of each country in Europe, diagrammatic sections of territory in the guise of codes and manuals can be identified [8]. We note that this European Charter details more than its sustaining document, the American New Urbanism Charter, on the transition of the region to the neighborhood and the urban center, but it does not make mention of the “mega-city” or issues involving high population density. However, the planning process involving a large city could still make use of the principles established in this Charter.

#### 4. Järila Sjö District's Urban Design

Järila Sjö is a neighborhood of the town of Nacka (80,000 inhabitants), a neighbor of Stockholm (788,300 inhabitants), in Sweden. Due to the region's geographical layout, Järila Sjö is only 8 km from downtown Stockholm. It has an area of 10 hectares, and a permanent population of about 2,500 inhabitants and about 1,500 job places, partially filled by the residents themselves. The commercial and service provision spaces are mostly located in renovated

industrial buildings. Järsla Sjö has a school, several daycare centers, stores, restaurants, sports facilities and other services. In the central area, the main landmark is an old industrial building that has been recycled for commercial use, service provision and small residential units (Fig. 1).

Changes in the regional scale have continuously been developing the transformation of activities from an area that was previously predominantly industrial. Gustaf de Laval, a notable turbine manufacturer, began production there around 1860, and continued right up until the 1960s. Some years later the AGA Company was established at a nearby site that was within Järsla Sjö. Once the big industries had left, the area went into decline and was subsequently occupied by a plethora of small businesses from the service sector. Since then, due to its accessibility and the natural beauty of the area around Lake Järsla, fanciful plans were proposed for its urban development. In the 90s the landowners in the area ran a competition for an urbanistic project whose winner proposed the demolition of most of existing buildings and the installation of complexes of building blocks and houses according to the functionalist principles of modern urbanism. This plan was severely

rejected by part of the inhabitants of the houses that existed in the district and the neighborhood and was finally discarded. In 1998, the Järsla Sjö project was acquired by Oskarsborg AB, which proposed an undertaking that both fulfilled the aspirations of the inhabitants and was commercially viable. They joined up with Wihlborgs, a real estate company, and hired the architects Vernon Gracie and Håkan Jersenius as consultants to elaborate a new program and urbanistic proposal (Fig. 2).

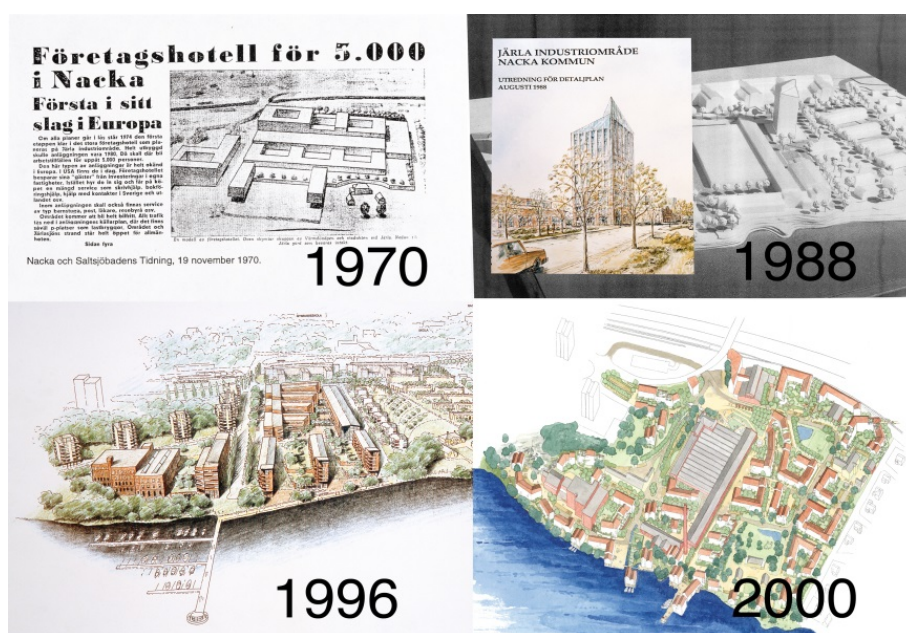
The new plan was monitored by the Nacka County Planning Department. This undertaking was aided by consultations with the community, which were held to discuss ideas and aims, and incorporate them in the guidelines of the project as it progressed. In order to reach a consensus about what ultimately to do, an exhibition was held, compared the earlier project proposal—the competition from 1990—with the new plan (Fig. 2).

From a public policy standpoint, it was necessary to attain a “yes” vote for the choice of the plan for Järsla Sjö that would be detailed at the executive level. This vote would also officialize the abandonment of the plan awarded by the competition.



**Fig. 1** Järsla Sjö, aerial view.

Source: Google Earth, 09/23/2007.



**Fig. 2 Järla Sjö, timeline of urban design concepts.**

Source: courtesy V. Gracie & H. Jersenius.

The present site plan designed in the year 2000 has been detailed and is presented showing: to the north, the main access system; to the south, Lake Järla; to the east, private residences lay out in a suburban standard; to the west, residential buildings with between eleven and thirteen floors (Fig. 3).

At this time, a consortium comprising of the HSB, Riksbyggen and Wihlborgs Company was formed to continue the plan. The aim was to build a socially, ecologically, physically and economically sustainable complex. At the end of 1999, the firm Småstaden Arkitekter AB, of which the architect Håkan Jersenius was part, was invited to join the consortium group. The company PEAB, Civil Engineering Co. was hired to carry out the construction of the entire project.

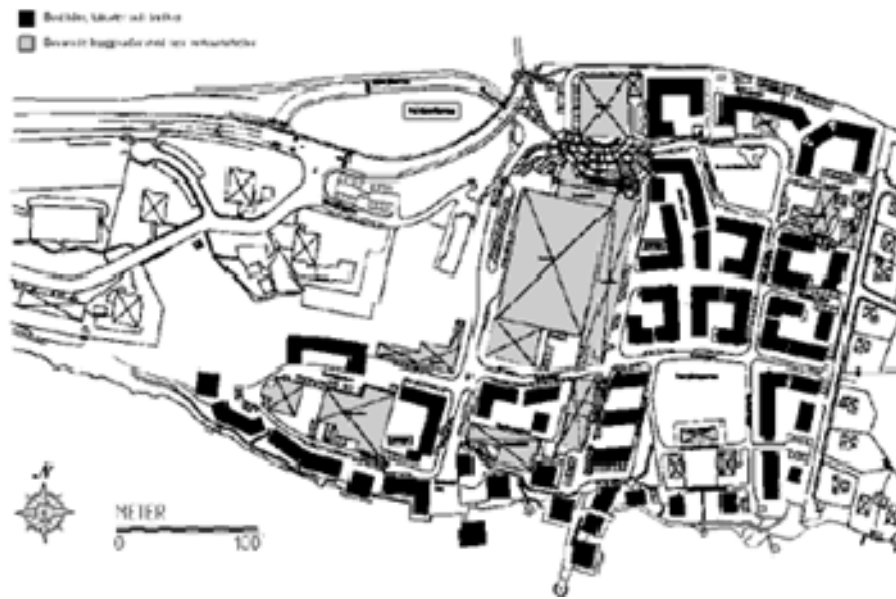
In its proposals, the Järla Sjö, urban design is characterized by:

- The choice of buildings to be preserved according to technical criteria and consultation with the community. By decision of local people and the coming entrepreneurs was decided to keep the main building of the Laval Company as a major landmark being used for multi-use purposes (Fig. 4).
- The occupancy of the spaces between real estate

parcels chosen for preservation with buildings from two to five floors. This follows the objective of maintaining a low rate of use, harmony with what already exists and valorization of horizontal lines (Fig. 5).

- The organization of buildings into small groups creating patios between them, a common occurrence in small towns in Sweden. The option for patios is emphasized because they are very much appreciated by the community, for they help to clearly delineate private spaces from transitional spaces and public spaces. They give people the feeling of security, a sense of place and they favor social control. They are flexible, in terms of concept and context, which encourages multiple uses. As a result, the location creates its own great identity and generates a lot of informal contact between people (Fig. 6).

- The treatment of the space surrounding the building as an integral part of the urbanistic proposal. This starts with the preservation of the significant existing vegetation (most of the trees are fully grown), leisure areas (consolidated spaces for adults and children) and other facilities such as a working pier in good condition.



**Fig. 3** Järla Sjö, site plan 2000.

Source: Municipality of Nacka. Environment and Urban Planning Administration (image of public domain).



**Fig. 4** A preserved landmark.

Source: author 2007.



**Fig. 5** Lakefront surrounded by the wooden pathway and diverse building forms.

Source: author, July 2007.



**Fig. 6** Courtyard shaped by buildings, three to five floors.

Source: Common Wikimedia 2013.

- Encouragement of the principle that every ground-level residential unit should have a small garden (a transitional space, without any kind of fence) (Fig. 7).

- A space with enough quality to shelter collective activities and to be known as a people place. The sample is a Community Center located in a residential neighborhood formed by the retrofit of two existing constructions (Fig. 8).

- The establishment of an internal distribution system for motorized traffic over routes that permit

continuous circulation compared to the main roads (“loop”), avoiding dead-end streets (“cul-de-sac”) as these kinds of streets are inefficient uses of urban infra-structure.

- The avoidance of large parking lots, by providing spaces in the streets. Public use garages were planned, in three central locations.

- The projection of buildings to take maximum advantage of the position of the sun, which is very low at this latitude, especially in the winter (more exactly, for half a year, when sunlight in any form is rare). This



**Fig. 7** Neighborhood court, buildings up to four floors.

Source: author, July 2007.



**Fig. 8** A space to live in.

Source: author, July 2007.

affects the shape and direction of the rooftops planned to receive solar panels, which also had to take into consideration the thick layers of snow common in the winter.

- The use of a range of strong colors on external walls, a tradition in Nordic countries, in order to contrast with bright white snow in the winter<sup>4</sup>.

## 5. Final Comment

From a strategic point of view for the occupation an area, Järila Sjö followed the process that has occurred in several other places in Sweden, which treasure the presence of water. These are places sought after for homes, work and tourism and are always close to large economic and financial centers.

From the beginning, there was a generalized feeling in USA and in other countries that the NU would be a matter to fit for the bourgeoisie consumption. In time, the NU supported by its solid concepts, under the umbrella of sustainable development principles became one of the design contemporary concerns with

people and local landscapes. Thus, the label of something new is no longer necessary. On the timeline, the NU manifesto may take place alongside other studies in the smart growth context.

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<sup>4</sup>The information about the Järila Sjö project was obtained as special deference from our colleagues from the Nacka Kommon and from Vernon Gracie & Håkan Jersenius architects. We visited the area in July 2007.

## Appendix

### Websites

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