

Miljonprogrammet - How its "garden suburbs" have influenced residents and creatives from the 1980's until today (By Jimmy Granström)

Following World War II, Sweden enjoyed several decades of unprecedented growth, largely thanks to intact infrastructure and industry, much like the United States. This provided the country with an economical head start compared with most other European countries. In 1965, the government made a decision to build 100.000 new apartments per year during a 10-year period, in order to address a housing crisis and improve the standard of living for a growing and increasingly wealthy population. From 1965 to 1974, one million apartments were built as



The Miljonprogrammet suburb Jordbro in Stockholm

part of "Miljonprogrammet" in areas that can be characterized as "garden suburbs". I grew up in a working class area in the garden suburb Jordbro outside of Stockholm in the 1980's and 90's. Although this area has often (and especially recently) been criticized, I could not have asked for a better childhood growing up in a working class area virtually anywhere else in the world during the 1980's and 90's. Thanks to excellent suburban city planning, I could enjoy immediate access to a diversity of activities and experiences within walking distance, without having to bother about traffic or being dependent on rides from relatives or other adults. From the front door of my apartment complex, my "immediate physical world" spanned across several miles of freedom, independence and open (car-free) space, through forests, meadows, parks, schools, shops, restaurants, sports facilities, tennis courts, a public pool, and many other types of activities and experiences. Although none of these facilities or public spaces may be considered "world-class", the kind of "unrestricted access" that they offered, would be considered a "luxury" (not only in working class areas) in other countries, including many in the rich part of the world. Thousands of residents had access to a "public backyard" that people in a similar socioeconomic group could only dream of in many other parts of the world.

During the last 20 years, I have visited and lived in or near more "spectacular" places, including Santa Barbara, Rio de Janeiro, Las Vegas, Paris, New York City, London, Los Angeles, Tokyo, Vancouver and Portland, Oregon. However, I still consider the type of independence, security and freedom that I experienced during my childhood in Jordbro to be something unique, and I am very grateful that I got to opportunity, when growing up, to experience an "immediate physical world" (not restricted by traffic or other "barriers" preventing maximum mobility and "flow") that was much greater than the backyard or balcony of my apartment. Although I may not believe in the long-term sustainability of all of the political policies that were in place when I grew up, I cannot deny that they contributed significantly to my happy childhood. The suburban city planning in places like Jordbro, maximizing the amount of space accessible to as many residents as possible, without significantly limiting any individual's prospects to strive for financial success, contributed substantially to my happy childhood; one that was vibrant, but not congested, lively, but not noisy. I am absolutely convinced that growing up in Jordbro empowered me to pursue greater long-term opportunities, in a way that a working class childhood in many other comparable countries may not have done. The city planners behind this type of suburban environment left a lasting legacy, one that I am immensely grateful to have been part of.



Jimmy at his old school in Jordbro, September 2007.

Photo: Rayna Flye



Movie taking place in Jordbro



Jordbro Town Square, July 2017 *



Jordbro Astro turf, July 2017 *

* Photos: Jimmy Granström

Jordbro and Miljonprogrammet today - A legacy tarnished but intact

There is no doubt that Jordbro is no longer quite as idyllic as I remember it from my childhood in the 1980's and 90's. This is captured both by some crime statistics and a general feeling of being less safe as well as in popular culture, e.g. the movie "Måste gitt (A Hustler's Diary)" about the petty criminal Metin struggling to make a living in Jordbro. He dreams of a different life and applies to an acting program at the Stockholm University of the Arts as well as writes a diary, which also covers the activities of some criminal elements. He is terrified that it will end up with the police or with other criminals. Instead it ends up with a major publishing house in Stockholm which wants to publish the book. This unexpected opportunity scares him as well, but he also sees a chance to change the direction of his life. The movie clearly shows how life in Jordbro and other Stockholm suburbs have gotten tougher in recent years, but there is also hope conveyed in Metin's story. It also suggests that "the swanky publishing people (in Stockholm) are as morally laid back and 'anything goes' as Metin and his friends in Jordbro", as described in Sofia Olsson's review for SVT Nyheter (Swedish National TV news).

I have visited Jordbro many times since moving to a Stockholm student apartment in 2002 and later to the United States. During my visits to Jordbro I have enjoyed both the beautiful things I remember from my childhood as well as a lot of new housing and recreational facilities, including an astro turf soccer field replacing the worn out tennis courts from my youth. One of the biggest surprises during a visit to Jordbro in 2019 was seeing the trash collection done by a horse and small carriage. Apparently this had been going on for a few years in Jordbro when I visited. The idea of using a horse for doing certain types of work in suburbs and small towns in Sweden has (re-)emerged in recent years, and is a welcome addition by the residents. Other than reduced sound pollution, kids (big and small) also enjoy saying "hi" to the horse on its daily route, and that type of trash collection makes perfect sense in the car-free areas in many towns and suburbs.



Jimmy and his mom at new swings in Jordbro, July 2019

Photo: Rayna Flye



Trash collection by horse in a Miljonprogrammet area.



Ken Ring



Jens Lekman



Pa Modou in Panetoz (left) and in Gambia (lovebyforce.se)



Artists from Miljonprogrammet - From Hip Hop to Indie Pop

Miljonprogrammet is also the birthplace of a large number of artists, who have toured the United States extensively, been featured on NPR, CNN and New York Times or signed to a talent agency owned by Wyclef Jean’s manager. These artists, from Hip-Hop acts such as Ken Ring and Panetoz to indie singer/songwriter Jens Lekman, have covered many different aspects of Miljonprogrammet, often influenced by the multi-culturalism in their residential areas. From the darkness of Ken Ring’s experiences to the brighter outlook of Panetoz and the empathy and humor of Lekman, listeners are likely to find something they can relate to or resonate with in their songs and stories. Starting on the brighter side of Miljonprogrammet, the band Panetoz certainly put a lot of smiles to people’s faces when they rose to fame with their first #1 hit “Dansa pausa” in 2012. Prior to that release, Panetoz’s positive hip-hop was often met with record company skepticism, as dark-skinned artists and bands from the suburbs were expected to focus on drugs and social struggles. Nonetheless, Panetoz has performed in the most popular TV shows and biggest stages all over Sweden, and was interviewed by Suzanne Malveaux on CNN in July 2012. In the TV program “Doreen kommer hem”, the host meets founding Panetoz member Pa Modou in Jordbro, and he tells her that he used to joke that he’d stop making music once he’d met the King of Sweden. However, after performing in front of the Royal Family, he had to retract his statement, claiming “I cannot stop now - I’ve just started!”

Despite Panetoz’s success, the members of Panetoz still have a great commitment to their home town Jordbro, e.g. co-arranging a soccer tournament in honor of the late youth recreation leader Birger Jensen, who supported the band a lot in the early stages of their career. This kind of commitment and “common bond” is often shared by people who grew up in Miljonprogrammet, who – regardless of criticism from “outsiders” – still feel a strong connection to the area that played a big role in defining their identity. In 2018, Panetoz member Pa Modou founded the non-profit organization “Love By Force International”, which works in Sweden and Pa Modou’s home country Gambia, to create awareness and increased participation in society for people with disabilities. The vision for the organization is a happier society enabling a more welcoming place for everybody, regardless of ethnicity or functional variation. Their primary goal is to create a community across both country- and cultural borders, as well as support everybody who lacks a voice. Through different events, activities and projects they work to spread warmth and increase the participation for different people with a functional variation, both in Sweden and Gambia. These events include “Funkistalang”, a talent contest for people with various functional variation, as well as “Awareness Festival” at the school “Methodist School For The Disabled” in Gambia every Christmas. Pa Modou is certainly keeping the Panetoz spirit alive in his current activities!



Ken Ring and Titiyo in “Så mycket bättre”.

Akustiken

Jesper Welander

There’s also a darker side to Miljonprogrammet, which can often be heard in Ken Ring’s songs, where the “garden suburb” is described more like a concrete jungle than anything else. During Ring’s life, he experienced many detours into darkness along a long and winding road to redemption, eventually winning the heart of the Swedish people. In the 2013 season of the TV show “Så mycket bättre (So Much Better)”, where six artists socialize and interpret each other’s songs, Ring describes how his friend Niklas died in his arms after being stabbed at the age of 17. Later in the same program, Titiyo performed a heartfelt rendition of Ring’s song “Själen av en vän (The Soul Of A Friend)”, dedicated to Niklas. In one of the most touching scenes in Sweden’s TV history, a butterfly flies into the studio as Titiyo sings the song, which can be interpreted as Niklas returning to pass a greeting to his friend from the other side. “Själen av en vän” is taken from the 2013 album “Akustiken”, a collection of emotionally naked songs. The instrumentation on the album is primarily piano and strings, beautifully arranged by Stockholm-based producer and songwriter Jesper Welander. “Akustiken” is an album that can be enjoyed by audiences who do not normally listening to hip hop. The songs touched many people who condemned Ring’s words and actions earlier in his career. In January 2014, Ken Ring was signed to the "Orlando John Agency", a talent agency owned by Wyclef Jean’s manager in the United States.

Ring’s life was often troubled and turbulent in his formative years, spending most of his childhood with a single mother (who died from cancer when Ring was only 13 years old), selling and using drugs as well as serving six months in prison. Over the course of seven years, Ring went from one of the most promising rising stars on the Swedish hip hop scene to being a convict. After completing his prison sentence for fraud in 2006, Ring settled down and began raising a family. He eventually sought his roots in Kenya where he manages a soccer team. His troubled Stockholm past is truly a thing of the past in Kenya, where he’s a role model for the soccer kids who know him simply as “coach”. In 2020, Ken Ring once again collaborated with Welander on the song “Leva i frid (Live In Peace)”, with a video featuring a TV clip from the early 1990’s where the host is talking about meeting then 15-year old Ken Ring and how she looked into two eyes devoid of emotions in a person that is always on guard and suspicious of the world. The song itself is a stark description of Ring’s own experiences and the struggles and faiths of people around him, though trying to seek solace in the chorus, which is taking a small step towards Panetoz’s message though in a much more somber tone. Ring now seems to be on the right path after detours into his darker nature – triggered by almost unimaginable circumstances – in his earlier years. If recent efforts continue, his legacy is bound to be dominated by the future he is currently crafting, rather than the past that defined him for so long.



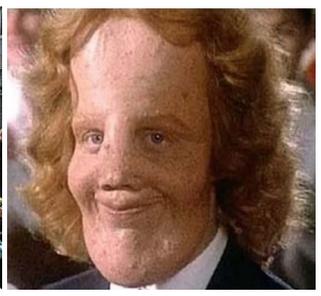
Lekman on NPR



Kirsten Dunst



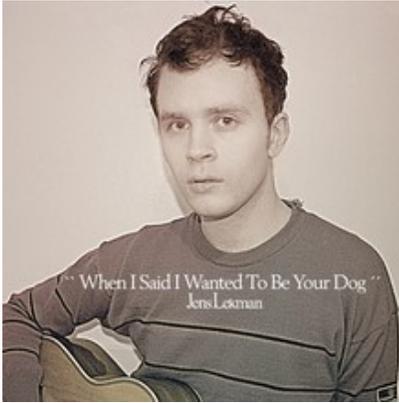
Hammarkullen, Gothenburg



Rocky Dennis

Also originating from Miljonprogrammet, Jens Lekman is an Indie pop singer-songwriter who has covered a wide range of topics in his songs, from stalking U.S. Hollywood actress Kirsten Dunst (whose acting credits include Mary Jane Watson in the Spider-Man movies with Tobey Maguire) and the Gothenburg suburb Hammarkullen he grew up in to the facially disfigured Rocky Dennis in the Cher movie "Mask" and drive-in bingos in Sweden. Lekman has topped the Swedish sales charts, toured the United States extensively since 2004 including upcoming concerts in Portland and other parts of the U.S. In April/May 2022, been interviewed in the New York Times and performed on National Public Radio (NPR) Tiny Music Desk Concerts. In the latter, he was described as someone "...whose banter falls somewhere between the effortless delivery of a seasoned comic and the nervous rambling of an indie-rock frontman". Lekman's NPR performance included "Waiting On Kirsten" about almost meeting Kirsten Dunst during her visit in Gothenburg. As Lekman told the NRP crew prior to his performance, there was an interview with Kirsten in a Swedish paper and she mentioned that she liked his music. He was trying really hard to not be impressed by that despite his humble Gothenburg beginnings. Lekman and a friend of his ended up at this club where Kirsten was supposed show up and later found out that she had tried to get in but couldn't because there was a long line outside. Lekman finished his story by telling the NPR crew that "There aren't any VIP lines in Gothenburg, and you won't get into the club faster because you have the right name, or because you've got money or because you made out with Spider-Man. And I love that, I think that's great, and wish that these basic principles of solidarity would be applied to the rest of society". This story perfectly captures the Swedish perspective in Lekman's songwriting.

A big part of Lekman's world view is related to growing up in Hammarkullen ("Hammer Hill"), a multi-cultural suburb outside of Gothenburg. Many of Lekman's lyrics refer to his background in this type of multi-cultural area, for example "Shirin" about an Iraqi hair-dresser trying to make a living in Sweden. In the song, Lekman sings "When Shirin cuts my hair her mama's sitting in the rocking chair, she tells me stories from the war in Iraq cause they were there, Shirin pulls my head to the side, But in the mirror I can see a tear in her eye". This kind of empathy is common in Lekman's work, which often sympathizes with the outcasts in society. Lekman's rise to fame in Sweden started with the EP "Rocky Dennis" in 2004, about the main character in the movie "Mask". Lekman's EP contains the hauntingly beautiful ballad "Farewell Song To The Blind Girl", about how the facially disfigured Rocky Dennis falls in love with a blind girl at a summer camp for blind children. She falls in love with him too because of his kindness and ability to describe things to her that she cannot see, but her parents do not approve of him, captured by the following lines in Lekman's song as Rocky Dennis "Someday I'll be stuffed in some museum, scaring little kids, with the inscription "Carpe Diem", something I never did".



First full-length album



Night Falls Over Kortedala



Swedes at a drive-in bingo

Lekman released his first full-length album “When I Said I Wanted To Be Your Dog” shortly after the “Rocky Dennis” EP in 2004. The album, released in the United States on the label Secretly Canadian, was ranked as the 37th best Swedish album by Sonic Magazine in June 2013. The album contains the upbeat “You Are The Light (By Which I Travel Into This And That)” in which Lekman’s character sings “Yeah, I got busted, so I used my last phone call to dedicate a song to you on the radio”, and a string of beautiful ballads. The most memorable one may be “The Cold Swedish Winter”, where Lekman sings “When people think of Sweden I think they have the wrong idea, like Cliff Richards who thought it was just porn and gonorrhoea, and Lou Reed said in the film “Blue In The Face”, that compared to New York City Sweden was a scary place” only to conclude that the reason for the (perceived) promiscuity is that “The Cold Swedish winter is right outside, and I just need somebody to hold me through the night”.

In 2007, Lekman released his next full length-album “Night Falls Over Kortedala”, which topped the Swedish sales chart and received rave reviews in Sweden and abroad. PopMatters wrote “a first-rate songwriter and the best lyricist this side of Jarvis Cooker and Craig Finn” while the U.K. newspaper The Guardian wrote “audacious and beautiful...pop is rarely as genuinely affecting, joyful or good as this”. The Guardian also ranked it as the 60th best album of the 21st century in 2019, with similar accolades awarded from other media outlets. One of the most memorable songs on the album is “Friday Night At The Drive-In Bingo”, featuring commentary on rural Sweden in general and its drive-in bingo phenomenon in particular. This topic was also covered by The Guardian, citing the following lines from Lekman’s song: “So this is what they do out here for fun? They play bingo and let their engines run? ... Just bring your savings and a bottle of wine / to Friday night’s reversal of time.” Lekman is also interviewed in the article, saying that rural Swedes “...evokes a sense of nostalgia in me - but it’s like a strange nostalgia for a time that never was. I think 1950s America sometimes echoes through Sweden, particularly the rural and smalltown areas, where a lot of people own classic American cars and listen to 1950s American rock. Drive-in bingo seems like a cross between the 1950s American love for drive-ins and the Swedish love for bingo”. From a Swedish multi-cultural suburb to Rocky Dennis and 1950’s America reflected in rural Sweden, Lekman seems to have an innate ability to cover a broad range of topics in his songs with humor, intelligence and empathy. From the darkness of Ken Ring to the positive hip hop of Panetoz and the intelligence and empathy of Jens Lekman and the movie “Måste gitt”, creatives from Miljonprogrammet have captured a wide range of experiences and emotions from residents living in Sweden’s “garden suburbs”.