Designing preschools for an independent and social child: visions of preschool space in the Swedish welfare state

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ABSTRACT

The physical environment in early childhood education and care is crucial. This paper examines the Swedish government’s vision of preschool design in the welfare state of the 1970s and the conceptions of children and society upon which it was based. Presenting an investigation of reports, booklets, and study materials published by various branches of the central government, this paper analyses an ambitious preschool design intended to provide children with a diverse and stimulating environment that supported their independence and freedom of choice. Unlike similar designs in postwar Europe, this preschool design was not formulated in response to the experiences of the world wars. Inspired by the theories of Piaget and Erikson and based on the rationality of the Swedish welfare state, this preschool design was instead intended to remedy the shortcomings of a perceived anonymous, sterile and barren modern society. In relation to existing research, this paper contributes to the study of the so-called nursery heritage by examining how it was formulated in the setting of the Swedish welfare state. In so doing, the paper also provides ample ground for a continued critical discussion on contemporary strands of neoliberal preschool design.

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Introduction

In early childhood education and care (ECEC), the physical environment is crucial for children’s learning and development. This is particularly the case in countries such as Sweden, where 84 percent (2017) of all children aged 1–5 are enrolled in preschools (Skolverket 2017). Here, children spend large parts of their upbringing in preschools, learning, playing, sleeping, and eating.

Although visions of preschool design have a long history, including the English infant school, the French crèche, and the German kindergarten, the Swedish government first took a comprehensive interest in preschool design when the expansion of the preschool sector was planned in the 1970s. In this paper, I will examine these visions of the ideal environment for preschool children and how the visions were conceived. I will thereby show how the Swedish preschools’ indoor and outdoor environments were intended to provide stimulating spaces that, based on an interpretation of the theories of Jean...
Piaget and Erik H. Erikson, supported children’s independence and social interaction. This envisaged preschool design was supposed to cater to all Swedish children in line with the universalist ambition of the Swedish welfare state and was intended to counteract the negative effects of the urban, sterile and anonymous Swedish society on children’s development. By providing insights into this history of preschool design, the present paper sheds light on how a nursery school heritage informed preschool design in a Swedish context and how issues of children’s independence and freedom of choice were formulated in the context of a Scandinavian welfare state.

The spatial dimension of education

This paper on preschool design contributes to the research on the spatial dimension of education, which has been studied from a wide range of perspectives. These include studies of space as control and resistance (Ailwood 2004), as social order (Watkins 2017), as an agent shaping the experience of schooling (Burke and Grosvenor 2008), and as educational spaces marked by inequalities (Reh, Rabenstein, and Fritzsch 2011). The spatial dimensions of preschools have been examined in terms of architecture (Dudek 2000; Mostaedi 2006), materials and learning environments (Prochner, Cleghorn and Green 2008), identities and gender (Frödén 2012; Heikklä and Årlemalm-Hagsér 2015), and effective learning (Ata, Deniz, and Akman 2012). Preschool space has also been examined in terms of ideals of childhood (Kraftl 2006), and as a place for social encounters, cooperation, conflicts and the creation of subjectivities (Gallacher 2005; Halldén 2007; Lynch 2017).

The present investigation of preschool design focuses on the material culture of preschools, that is broadly defined to include ‘the landscapes, buildings, rooms, furnishing, clothes, toys, and many other objects’ (Gutman and De Coninck-Smith. 2008, 3). In the present paper, my interest is not in how this material culture is experienced by children or how children use spaces and materials for their own purposes. Instead of dealing with ‘children’s places’, I focus on ‘places for children’ (cf. Rasmussen 2004); that is, how these spaces have been designed by adults for children. Consequently, I will not address the impact of preschool design on children, but rather examine how this design was conceived. As Larry Prochner (2011) noted, preschools are always designed in accordance with adults’ understanding of children and their education.

Although the historical dimension of preschool design has been neglected in comparison to historical studies of the design and material culture of schools (for literature reviews of the latter, see, e.g. Burke and Grosvenor 2008; Grosvenor and Rosén Rasmussen 2018), the present paper builds upon a growing research field. This includes historical studies of discipline and governmentality (Markus 1996; Westberg 2010), toys and play materials (Korsvold 2010; Prochner 2011), the aesthetics and medicalization of early childhood spaces (Greene 2017), and the pedagogy and everyday life of preschools (Read 2006; Taylor Allen 2017; Grunditz 2018). Those studies have provided insights into various templates of preschool design: the nineteenth-century infant school’s school-like vision of a disciplined and supervised space (Markus 1996), the hygienic rooms of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French nursery schools (Greene 2017), and the home-like environment of the early kindergartens (Taylor Allen 2017).

In particular, this paper contributes to the study of post-war preschool design. As Burke and Grosvenor (2008) noted, postwar architects and educators reacted to the
wartime dictatorship and the destruction of war by envisioning kindergartens and primary schools as sites that, through their design and spatial organization, should foster a democratic society. In the early years, self-directed learning and flexibility was emphasized (Burke and Grosvenor 2008, 120). Following Bennet, Wood, and Rogers (1997), this tradition might be termed a Western nursery inheritance. This tradition includes an emphasis on self-directed play and learning through hands-on play with materials. Preschools in this tradition organize their space to allow children to actively choose and play with materials. This means that preschools are organized into different spaces with specific purposes in mind: for playing with blocks; listening to stories; or for dressing-up (Dahlberg and Moss 2005; Prochner, Cleghorn and Green 2008).

Against the background of this research, the present paper examines how this nursery inheritance was articulated in a Swedish context that had not directly experienced war or dictatorship, but instead had been marked by increasing wealth, heavy investments in social welfare, and increasing urbanization during the postwar era. By doing so, I also add a historical perspective to studies of present-day preschools that are structured in accordance with this nursery tradition. This includes studies of how notions of user adjustment, choice, and flexibility have marked so-called new kindergartens and ‘nature kindergartens’ in the Nordic countries (see, e.g. Kjørholt and Seland 2011, part II). Instead of describing the kindergarten as a home, the kindergarten in the twenty-first century has been defined as a bazaar, open to the many choices of children (Kjørholt and Seland 2011). In the above-mentioned literature, this focus on choice and flexibility has been linked to a neoliberal ideological trend stressing the free choice and self-realization of individuals (see, e.g. Edwards 2000). In this respect, the present paper examines how the creation of spaces adapted to children’s choices has been part of discourses other than the contemporary neoliberal.

**Preschool design in the Swedish welfare state**

The history of Swedish preschools stretches back to the first Swedish infant schools (småbarnsskolor) in the 1830s, the first crèches (barnkrubbor) in 1850s, and kindergartens at the turn of the century (see, e.g. Hatje 1998; Holmlund 1999; Westberg 2008). The infant schools were built with galleried rooms like those designed by the English infant school promoter Samuel Wilderspin (Read 2006); the crèches had a focus on hygiene similar to their French counterparts (Greene 2017; Westberg 2008, ch. 5); and the kindergartens were designed to create a sense of home (Hatje 1999). In the early twentieth century, Swedish preschool design and material culture was also marked by other educational visions, particularly those of Maria Montessori and Elsa Köhler. Montessori materials were introduced into Swedish kindergartens primarily in the 1920s and 1930s (Westberg 2008, ch. 8), and Köhler’s ideal of the preschool as a studio or a workshop was influential in the 1930s (DeJong 2010).

The number of Swedish preschools remained, however, limited, estimated to only 267 day-care institutions – including infant schools, crèches, kindergartens, etc. – in 1937 (SOU 1938:20, 25). The preschool sector first experienced a significant expansion in the postwar period, supported by the expanding welfare state. The Swedish welfare state was comprehensive in that its social policy covered a wide range of social needs; it was institutionalized in that it presented citizens with rights to several social services; and it
was universalist in that it was intended to include the entire population rather than groups that were perceived as problematic. The welfare state, broadly defined, enacted a wide range of policies including a universal noncontributory pension, universal accident insurance, active housing policy, publicly funded healthcare, and a comprehensive school for all school-aged children (Esping-Andersen and Korpi 1986; Johansson 1995).

This setting affected the way preschools were understood. As part of a universalist welfare state, preschools not only catered to the poor or needy, but were described as a necessary complement to every family's home and as an expression of society's responsibility for all children (Socialstyrelsen 1976, 3–4). In this context, when the number of preschools rose, a National Commission on Child Care was appointed in 1968 to investigate the future of early childhood institutions in Sweden (Martin Korpi 2007, 23). The report of the National Commission, published in 1972, established the foundation for the Law on Childcare (Lag om barnomsorg), issued in 1975, which granted all six-year-old children the right to preschool, free of charge, for 525 hours a year. Although limited in scope, this law defined preschools as a municipal responsibility and thus became the basis for the subsequent expansion of the Swedish early childhood institutions (Korpi 2007, 24–25).

In this context of creating what was termed a ‘universal preschool’, or allmän förskola (SOU 1972:27:27, 264), the Swedish government published a variety of documents that expressed its visions of future preschool design. Design can be defined as the act of ‘imagining, inventing, drawing and forming things’ (Laris 2012, 14). Here, design is perceived as a political discourse in line with the works of Nikolas Rose; that is, both systems of thoughts and systems of action through which the government have understood but also tried to change preschools. Focusing on the discursive level, I have not attempted to reach past the surface of language, interpreting what the documents really meant or what the authors’ real motives were; instead, I have examined how preschools were envisioned and how these designs were justified (Rose and Miller 2010). That is, I am investigating how the purposes of preschool design were formulated and how these purposes were articulated in specific spatial organizations.

When conducting historical research, knowledge of the existing source materials, their origins and significance is vital (cf. Westberg 2018). Investigating this past political discourse on preschool design, I have focused on the most influential governmental documents of the period. Although written by individuals, they primarily represented the political will of the Swedish state. These publications include the two volumes published by the National Commission on Child Care in 1972, which laid the foundation for the above-mentioned Law on Childcare (1975). I have also examined regulations, instructions, and recommendation published by the National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen) and other government agencies. Although these materials do not enable an analysis of actual preschools, and their local and regional variations, they are fundamental when examining the Swedish government’s visions of preschool design in the 1970s.

In this paper, I use the word ‘preschool’ to denote the Swedish förskola in the 1970s. Preschool is thus used to denote a kind of preschool intended for children between the ages of six months to seven years. These preschools were either full-time or half-day and were intended to provide both care and education. In this century, the Swedish preschool has been described in terms of EDUCARE, which emphasizes this combination of educational and care-giving practices (Hammarström-Lewenhagen 2013, 27).
A stimulating room for independent children in urban Sweden

As will become evident, the Swedish preschool design of the 1970s clearly differed from the spatial organization of the galleried infant schools, the hygienic nursery schools or the home-like early kindergartens. However, there were some obvious similarities. In addition to maintaining hygienic standards, which was a stand-out feature of the nineteenth-century crechés and twentieth-century nursery schools (Caroli 2017, 38; Greene 2017), the Swedish preschools of the 1970s were, like the galleried infant schools, supposed to provide opportunities to supervise children (Socialstyrelsen 1976, 30). Similar to kindergartens, the Swedish preschools were also designed to avoid the aesthetics of a public institution (Socialstyrelsen 1977a, 106–107).

However, the prominent feature of the 1970s preschool design was not supervision, hygiene, or the aesthetics of a home, but a fundamental desire to promote children’s cognitive and social abilities by providing them with a diverse and stimulating environment that supported their independence and freedom of choice. The Swedish government expressed this ambition as a general thesis: educational settings in which children can choose their own activities, materials, and partners is best suited for their social and intellectual development (Socialstyrelsen 1977a, 14).

As noted above, this emphasis on self-directed play and flexibility has been described both as being a postwar promotion of democracy (Burke and Grosvenor 2008), and as a part of a neoliberal ideology that portrayed children as customers and envisioned preschools as bazaars, trade fairs, or marketplaces (Kjørholt and Seland 2011). In the Swedish case, the importance of children’s choice and independence was, however, not a reaction to war or an articulation of a neoliberal ideology, but the result of psychological notions of the child and a conception of modern urban society. In this context, the work of Jean Piaget (1896–1980) and Erik H. Erikson (1902–1994) was particularly important. Their theories were explicitly mentioned as the basis for the Swedish preschool in the National Commission on Childcare (SOU 1972:26, 59), and the Swedish preschool was later described as either entirely or mainly based on Piaget and Erikson (Socialstyrelsen 1976, 3, 1977a, 36). To some extent, the appreciation of these psychologists mirrored international trends. According to Barbara Beatty, Piaget’s writings had, by the 1970s, become comparable to the word of God in the US early care and education sector (Beatty 2009, 464).

The Swedish reception of Erikson and Piaget requires further studies, and this paper may serve as encouragement to examine what may be described as the translation or transformation of Erikson and Piaget to the Swedish context of preschool education (Cowen 2009). Initial observations indicate that the Swedish reception of these theorists in the 1970s was marked by literal translations of certain ideas, simplifications of some concepts, the neglect of certain statements, and an disinterest in the inconsistencies between Erikson’s and Piaget’s theories (Kugiumutzakis 1991). In the context of preschool design, this meant that a certain emphasis was put on Jean Piaget’s notions of the role of self-directed activities, cooperation and experiences in the development of children’s cognitive structures and Erik H. Erikson’s use of terms such as autonomy, initiative and competence (SOU 1972:26, 51–57). Summarizing the consequences of Piaget’s and Erikson’s theories, the National Board of Health and Welfare noted that these theories meant that the preschool should provide children with an environment that they could actively and independently explore in social interaction with other individuals (Socialstyrelsen 1976, 3).
When describing their visions of future preschools, the National Commission on Child Care made similar deductions from the theories of Piaget and Erikson. With references to these theories, the National Commission stated that children’s conceptual learning required a rich environment that offered different experiences, and that preschool children had a growing need to broaden their experiences through a variety of activities and play materials (SOU 1972:27, 30, 164–165). In this context, the Commission noted that deprivation (that is, the withholding of, for example, sensory impressions) could have a severe impact on children because childhood was considered a particularly sensitive period (SOU 1972:26, 23–29; Socialstyrelsen 1977a, 24–25).

Providing a stimulating environment was considered particularly important in the context of the emerging modern and urban Sweden. The National Commission on Child Care noted that although children’s living environment had not historically been planned in accordance with their needs, children in the past nevertheless had been presented with freedom of movement and a stimulating environment. However, the Commission argued that the growth of traffic and the expansion of homogenous residential areas had limited children’s range of experiences. In addition, social segregation, infrequent social interaction with older generations and isolated playgrounds presented children with a sterile and barren everyday environment that hampered children’s potential for growth (SOU 1972:27, 17, 164–165).

In the publications of the Swedish government, a diverse preschool environment was supposed to compensate for these shortcomings of modern society by providing children with a rich environment that enabled them to make their own decisions (SOU 1972:26, 45). This richness was achieved and structured in accordance with a number of ‘activity areas’ (aktivitetsområden). This concept, derived from biology (referring to the home area where an animal finds food, water, and shelter), emphasized that each form or type of activity should have a specific place or room in the preschool. In total, 14 or 15 activity areas were identified as essential. In a study leaflet, these included arrival and departure; body hygiene; meals; role play; exploratory play; and movement play (Socialstyrelsen 1976, 31). This varied environment represented, according to the National Commission, the opposite of what was described as the sterile urban world of Swedish cities (SOU 1972:27, 17).

The National Board of Health and Welfare argued that this rich preschool environment should be designed so that children could independently take the initiative to perform new activities, choose materials, and complete their choice of activities (Socialstyrelsen 1976, 20). Ideally, children were to be able to move freely between indoors and outdoors, allowing them to choose their materials, workplace, timeframe, and partners for their activities. The layout of the preschools should therefore be well structured so that children could easily understand in which places certain activities were to be performed (Socialstyrelsen 1976, 30). Because all children were supposed to be presented with these freedoms and opportunities, preschools also had to be designed so that the activities would not interfere with each other. Thus, the preschool design would make it possible to place similar activities next to each other, while noisy or wet activities would be separated from other activities. Referencing Piaget, the National Commission argued that such surroundings created the proper conditions for children’s concept formation (SOU 1972:27, 153–154, 164–165).
**Functional indoor and outdoor environments**

These general guidelines for meeting the needs of children in modern society by creating a stimulating environment marked the design of the preschool’s individual rooms and their organization. This vision of preschool design was neither the kindergarten vision of a home nor a neoliberal marketplace where children as consumers could exercise their free choice (Kjørholt and Seland 2011), but a functional environment. As such, these rooms were created through a so-called functional analysis (funktionsanalys) based on the purpose of the preschool environment in modern society. Similar to how Swedish urban planners (Franzén and Sandstedt 1993, 143–144) had identified a set of vital functions of urban areas (accommodation, recreation, work, transportation), the preschool design was intended to support a specific set of activity areas. In this respect, this preschool design was certainly based on the belief in the rational and scientific planning of society that characterized the Swedish welfare state (see, e.g. Olsson 1991).

As a result of such a functional analysis, the demands set on the rooms of a preschool were quite elaborate, stretching way beyond the demands that a vision of, for example, the preschool as a home would imply. For example, the activity area ‘play with basic materials’ required a room that enabled the pouring, spraying, and splashing of water, as well as the pouring, digging, and shaping of sand. Thus, this activity area presupposed a room that gave access to water, such as using a sink with a hand shower, a separate area with floor wells, water-resistant walls and roofs and easily accessible cleaning equipment. The National Board recommended that such a space should be large enough for approximately four children to play simultaneously (Socialstyrelsen 1976, 23; SOU 1972:27, 208).

The National Commission and the National Board presented several examples of how such various rooms, spaces, and sites could successfully be organized. The National Commission argued that open plan solutions facilitated children’s self-directed play while efficiently using the often-limited spaces that preschools had at their disposal (SOU 1972:27, 153). Figure 1 provides an example of such a solution, intended for children aged between 2.5 and 7. This open plan design meant that many of the rooms lacked a proper door, and other rooms were provided with a glass door. Figure 1 shows, clockwise, that the layout began with a cloakroom divided into a wet part (A) and a dry part (B), which presented plenty of room for arrival and departure activities. There was a therapy room (C) intended for simple medical examinations and the isolation of sick children; a room for rest or sleep with portable mattresses stored on the left side of the room (D); a room for meals, food preparation (E), and role play (F); and a space for exploratory play and image production (G) in close connection with a room that offered activities with basic materials such as sand and water (H). The plan also shows a larger room for movement play, construction play, and musical play (I), and a room for hygiene (J), where the children could visit the toilet, wash themselves, and comb their hair. The National Board of Health and Welfare claimed that if these rooms were correctly designed, children would be able to take their own initiative for activities and choose their own materials, encouraged by the preschool’s activity areas that structured the layout of the rooms (Socialstyrelsen 1976, 19, 34).
As evident from Figure 1, this was not a preschool design in which supervision was the main feature. Although preschool premises should be easily supervised from several places (Socialstyrelsen 1976, 30), the preschool design was intended to be based on the idea of mutual respect between children and adults. Consequently, preschool premises should not be planned for passive supervision of children, but to support the activities of preschool and, by extension, the development of children’s autonomy. That is, preschools would not only consist of the open spaces that marked the disciplinary institutions of the nineteenth century, in which it should be ‘possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly’ (Foucault 1991, 173). The National Board of Health and Welfare instead argued that preschools should have protected areas: quiet and private corners where children could hide, and be by themselves (Socialstyrelsen 1976, 30, 1977a, 104–105).

The preschool’s outdoor environment was also designed to provide children with a stimulating environment. The National Commission on Child Care noted that the outdoor environment could not be perceived as a mere afterthought when planning a preschool, and that it had to meet children’s need for a rich environment where they could move freely,

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**Figure 1.** The drawing of a preschool for children aged 2.5–7 years of age. Source: Socialstyrelsen (1976), 43.
experiment, and have different experiences. According to the National Commission, the outdoor environment had to be ‘exciting and rich in imagination and variation’ (SOU 1972:27, 165). In this context, the National Board of Health and Welfare noted that the outdoor environment was expected to create experiences that the indoor environment could not (Socialstyrelsen 1977a, 108). The outdoor environment was supposed to include six activity areas: movement play; building play; sand play; water play; gardening and animal husbandry (Socialstyrelsen 1976, 57–58).

The National Commission on Child Care claimed that thorough planning was required to achieve such an ambitious outdoor environment, which differed greatly from the monotonous asphalt covered Swedish school playgrounds of the 1950s and 1960s (Larsson 2013, 119–120). The National Commission placed particular emphasis on earthworks, which clearly set this vision of the preschool outdoor environment apart from that of flat school playgrounds. Embankments were perceived as important for at least two reasons. First, because they created rooms in the outdoor environment and consequently separated children’s activities from each other. Second, they were important because they created slopes that formed the basis of toboggan runs or slides and places where children could crawl or roll (SOU 1972:27, 167).

In addition to earthworks, the National Commission saw vegetation as an important method for creating a diverse outdoor environment. Various forms of hedges and shrubbery were recommended to delineate outdoor rooms. With a selection of plants that included smaller plants, larger trees and perennials, the outdoor environment would provide not only rich opportunities for activities, but also rich aesthetic experiences (SOU 1972:27, 167–169). Indicative of the Swedish government’s ambitious and detailed vision of preschool design, the National Commission listed eight pages of suggestions for various types of ornamental bushes, trees, rockery plants, hedge plants, perennial plants, and annual plants (SOU 1972:27, 168, 660–668).

The National Commission on Child Care provided an example of how the outdoor environment could be designed (see Figure 2). This design was created in cooperation among the child welfare departments, the city gardener, and the Central Building Committee of Halmstad municipality, located on the Swedish west coast. This outdoor design was marked by vegetation belts (A) that delineated the preschool’s property and divided it into several parts. The preschool’s outdoor environment was separated into two main parts: the forest and the hillside, which was also used by children who did not attend preschool, and the area exclusively used by preschool children. The latter area was further divided using paths, trees, shrubs, pergolas, and hop vines (humlestörar) into an animal garden (B) with a rabbit cage; a garden with fruit trees (C); a so-called fairy tale meadow (D); and grass areas for ball games (E). As shown in Figure 2, the outdoor environment was also equipped with two large sandboxes (F); a wide variety of materials including cartons, boards, car tires, ropes, spades, ladders, bricks, and light concrete (G); and several ground surfaces that included grass, uncut grass, asphalt, and gravel (SOU 1972:27, 176–179). Like the preschool’s indoor environment, the outdoor environment was marked by a fundamental principle of diversity in contrast with the perceived monotonous experience of the modern Swedish city.

Promoting social interaction in a modern anonymous society

In addition to being informed by the theories of Piaget and Erikson, this preschool design of the 1970s bore the marks of the Swedish welfare state. Its level of ambition
Figure 2. The outdoor environment of a preschool in Halmstad, Sweden.
Source: SOU (1972:27), fig. 13:4.
and richness in detail spoke of a comprehensive and universalist welfare state that aimed to plan society rationally and had both the intention and ability to spend significant amounts of public funds on the preschool sector. One of the fundamental educational ambitions of the preschool design was also aligned with that of the Swedish welfare state which promoted social solidarity as a part of its universalistic approach (Esping-Andersen and Korpi 1986, 41). Preschool design was intended to promote social cohesion and to foster children’s interaction with other individuals (SOU 1972:26, 63). The National Board of Health and Welfare even described social interaction (socialt samspel) as a basic concept in the planning of future preschools (Socialstyrelsen 1976, 15).

In this ambition, the Swedish government found support in the theories of Piaget and Erikson. According to the national board, both theories, particularly Piaget’s, stressed the importance of social interaction (Socialstyrelsen 1977a, 45). According to the National Board of Health and Welfare, Piaget saw children as ‘cognitive strangers’ with their own world view and their own intelligence. In such a context, the National Board argued, communication was particularly important, since the adult must understand the child in order to be able to reach him or her (Socialstyrelsen 1977a, 41). The National Commission on Child Care also used Piaget’s theory to stress the importance of communication between children. Collaboration was perceived as a practice that not only developed the child’s social and ethical qualities, but also stimulated the growth of language. Social interaction encouraged children to leave their egocentric world because interaction and cooperation required the ability to imagine the opinions of other individuals and integrate other individuals’ worldviews into their own. Therefore, so-called group discussions and so-called group experiences were considered particularly important (SOU 1972:26, 52–53. See also Socialstyrelsen 1977a, 45–46).

Apart from this theoretical foundation, emphasis on social interaction was motivated by contemporary societal changes. Unlike post-war preschool design that responded to the experience of wartime dictatorship (Burke and Grosvenor 2008), the social dimension of this Swedish preschool design addressed the changing social structures of modern society. These changes were interpreted roughly in line with Ferdinand Tönnies’ distinction between Gemeinschaft (community/interactions) and Gesellschaft (society/contracts). In modern society, the extended families of the agrarian society, with many close social relationships in small local communities, had been replaced by increasingly mobile nuclear families. As a result, modern society was, according to the National Commission on Child Care, marked by anonymous residential areas that lacked the complex web of social relations, traditions, and social norms that linked children to society. As part of the Swedish welfare state, and in line with its building policy, intended to create communities within the city (Franzén and Sandstedt 1993), preschools were supposed to compensate for this lack of social cohesion (SOU 1972:27, 14).

In this context of Piaget’s developmental psychology and modern society, preschools were intended to promote social relations on various levels, starting with social interaction among children. The National Commission on Child Care argued that preschools should not include overly large groups of children because this would only mirror the alienation of modern society. Instead, smaller preschools were recommended, where children could develop meaningful relationships with each other in smaller groups (SOU 1972:27, 154; Socialstyrelsen 1977a, 87–91). However, the National Commission clarified
that this did not imply the favoring of small premises; in fact, the opposite was the case. Spacious and well-planned premises were described as an excellent tool for promoting social interaction. Furthermore, open plan solutions allowed children to create a higher number of meaningful relationships with other children (SOU 1972:27, 153–154, 165).

Preschool design was also supposed to promote interaction between children and staff. The National Board of Health and Welfare argued that this was vital because children are oriented towards adults, and learn social interaction from them. To achieve fruitful relationships between children and staff, the environment must be designed so that both children and the preschool staff are comfortable. As a result, the National Board argued against an entirely child-centered preschool design, instead suggesting a design that also catered to the needs of adults (Socialstyrelsen 1977a, 103. See also Arbetarskyddsstyrelsen 1975). Furthermore, preschools were intended to promote social cohesion in a wider sense. In this context, the preschool was supposed to function as a bridge between the various social and professional groups that structured Swedish society and reduced its solidity (SOU 1972:27, 16).

**Entrances, cloakrooms, kitchens, and lunchrooms**

When promoting social relations among children, between children and staff, and in society in general, decisions about play materials were deemed fundamental. In line with the Western nursery inheritance, the National Commission on Child Care recommended that preschools offered a rich and easily accessible selection of materials. A wide range of materials was intended to reduce the number of conflicts between children because, according to the National Commission, conflicts often arose when children were forced to wait their turn or to wait for help from the staff. The materials should also be well-organized (SOU 1972:26, 130–131; Socialstyrelsen 1977a, 114) and should encourage activities in which children competed only with themselves because competition between children would ‘confuse [children’s] sense of solidarity’ (SOU 1972:26, 184).

In the context of promoting social interaction, the potential of the lunchroom and the kitchen was stressed. According to the National Board, children should be able to participate in all steps of preparing and eating a meal. This meant that children should ideally be involved in cooking, setting the table, serving, and cleaning up the table, among many other things. Since the National Board emphasized that children learn through imitation, the staff would be required to eat with the children. By imitating how adults use cutlery, pour water and serve themselves, the children would learn to do these things. Thus, much was demanded from the indoor environment. In addition to suitable furniture, the National Board recommended that preschools should have a play kitchen that included a stove and an oven, a sink, and storage areas for groceries, household utensils, and other kitchen tools (Socialstyrelsen 1976, 19–20, 22. See also 1977c, 42–45).

The National Board of Health and Welfare emphasized that the procedures of preparing and eating meals should not become routine. When eating lunch, the focus should not be on the practical arrangements, but on the fostering of social abilities. The National Board argued that the preparation of a table promoted extensive social interaction because of the many questions to be asked and decisions to be made. Thus, according to the National Board, lunchtime offered many opportunities to involve children in social interaction. The National Board and the Council of Play Environment illustrated this social potential of lunch
time with an image (see Figure 3) that shows how children first see the fish they are going to eat, then peel the potatoes, set the table, and finally have conversations with the teacher regarding how the meal tasted (Socialstyrelsen and Lekmiljörådet 1974, 63–64). Figure 3. Preparing for and eating lunch. The captions read: ‘Today we’re eating fish’, ‘It looks nice’, ‘Yuk!’; ‘Do you want to taste and see if it needs more salt?’; ‘This fish did not taste that bad’. Source: Socialstyrelsen and Lekmiljörådet (1974), 64. Artist: Maria Blomberg. Published with the permission of the artist.

In this context of encouraging social interaction, the role of furniture was emphasized. According to the National Board of Health and Welfare, a balance had to be achieved regarding the height of chairs and tables. To promote children’s participation, the National Board recommended that preschools should be fitted with child-sized tables, chairs, and workbenches where children could sit, stand, and work at a height adapted to them. There should also be full-sized furniture where children and adults could sit together and eat or perform activities such as sewing or writing. If there were no such spaces, the National Board felt that the staff might withdraw to the staff room just to be able to sit properly, if only for a short time. A proper combination of child-sized and adult-sized furniture was also intended to promote contacts between parents and staff. Adult-sized furniture was supposed to make parents feel less like strangers and present them with better opportunities to interact with children and staff on their own terms (Socialstyrelsen 1977a, 103–104. See also 1976, 30).

Preschool design was also intended to promote social relations and social cohesion on a more general level, as noted above. To remedy the isolation of modern society (an alienation from other generations and other social and ethnic groups), the National Commission argued that the preschool’s outdoor environment played a particularly important role. If the preschool’s premises were sufficiently large, they could be
designed to become a self-evident meeting point used not only by children, but also by teenagers and adults (SOU 1972:27, 165–166). The choice of location was crucial for accomplishing this interaction, not only between individuals at different stages of life, but also those in different social groups. The Swedish government recommended that preschools should be placed where the inhabitants of an area already had many errands; namely, near shops, banks, libraries, and schools. To foster social solidarity and to disrupt the urban social segregation of modern Sweden, preschools should be positioned in cities so that children from various social groups could attend the same preschool (SOU 1972:27, 151–52; Socialstyrelsen 1976, 29).

In terms of social cohesion in society at large, the entrances and cloakrooms of preschools were deemed particularly important. The National Board of Health and Welfare proposed that the cloakroom should be designed so that not only children but also parents and other adults could hang their coats and sit comfortably. In a tutorial for preschool staff, this function was illustrated with an image of the cloakroom (see Figure 4), with generous floor space where children could get dressed by themselves and individual storage boxes that further promoted children’s independence. The cloakroom was also provided with a couch that would enable parents to sit comfortably and thereby feel inclined to stay and interact with the staff and other parents (Socialstyrelsen and Lekmiljörådet 1974, 32–34. See also SOU 1972:26, 166). To fulfil this purpose, the National Board noted that parents should be able to park their strollers near the cloakroom, and that the preschool staff were expected to use the opportunity of a well-designed cloakroom to engage in personal interactions with parents.

**Figure 4.** The cloakroom.
Source: Socialstyrelsen and Lekmiljörådet (1974), 33. Artist: Maria Blomberg. Published with the permission of the artist.
In another illustration, a child says to her father, sitting on a coach in the cloakroom, ‘Here, I have a newspaper for you. Isn’t the couch comfortable?’ Socialstyrelsen and Lekmiljörådet (1974), 57.
conversations with the parents on topics such as the child’s interest and the life situation of the parent (Socialstyrelsen 1975a, 101, 1976, 18).

The Building Research Council specifically noted the role of a well-designed entrance. In addition to providing shelter from rain and wind, the entrance should prevent trucks from parking close to the entrance when delivering food or collecting garbage. This was motivated by a desire to make such mundane practices into events that were a recurrent part of the preschool’s activities. Thus, the sanitation worker and the food deliverer could become part of children’s everyday life; people who children could watch, talk to, or even help if the entrance was designed to promote such social interactions (Berg et al. 1977, 45). In this respect, the entrance and the cloakroom are excellent examples of the many explicit purposes that the preschool design served. The physical environment was intended to promote social interaction, not only among children, but also among staff, parents, and social groups in general to remedy the shortcomings of modern society.

**Conclusion**

This investigation of the Swedish government’s visions of preschool design in the 1970s has revealed an ambitious design encompassing both the indoor and the outdoor environment. In summary, this preschool design was intended to encourage children to explore a wide variety of activities (thematized in activity areas), and to promote children’s independence and social interaction between children, children and staff, and society in general.

In this respect, this preschool design clearly differed from those of nineteenth-century infant schools and early twentieth-century nursery schools and kindergartens. Although there certainly were resemblances – including the ambitions to enable supervision, guarantee a certain hygienic standard, and avoid an institutional character of the preschool building – this vision of preschool was based on a functional analysis of the social and cognitive needs of children, and the spatial requirements of preschool activities.

By linking this preschool design to conceptualizations of children and society, this paper has indicated the varying contexts of preschool design. As the paper has shown, the creation of a stimulating environment in which children were offered the opportunity to actively choose among a variety of materials, rooms, and play partners for their activities was in line with what has been termed a Western nursery inheritance (Bennet, Wood, and Roger 1997). In this specific case, this preschool design was not linked to the experience of war and repression as it was in other countries (Burke and Grosvenor 2008), nor was it based on a neoliberal ideology as in contemporary settings (Edwards 2000; Kjørholt and Seland 2011). Instead, this preschool design was articulated as a response to modern urban society and underpinned by the theories of Piaget and Erikson. The sheer level of ambition in the encompassing and detailed preschool design mirrored the belief in the rational planning of society and the will to spend public funding that marked the comprehensive Swedish welfare state.

In addition to providing insights into yet another model of preschool design – preschools for an independent and social child – and thus shedding new light on how the Western nursery inheritance was justified and envisioned in the context of the Swedish welfare state, the present paper also raises important questions about contemporary visions of preschool design. Who creates these visions, based on what knowledge, with
what purposes, and with what level of ambition? By posing such questions, this paper invites a continued critical discussion on contemporary strands of preschool design.

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