Introducing Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) in Sweden: A social justice appraisal

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Abstract
In a context of growing socio-spatial polarization and of restructuring state–market relations in urban governance, a new phenomenon is emerging in Swedish cities, that is, partnerships for urban regeneration inspired by the Business Improvement District (BID) model. Through an empirical case study research on one of the most long-standing BID partnerships in Sweden – that is, BID Gamlestaden in Gothenburg – the article critically assesses whether the BID model as it has been applied in Sweden represents a socially and politically sustainable tool for urban regeneration. Namely, the study analyses the complex constellation of power entrenched in the BID, with a focus on the relations with urban governance actors ‘above’ (city planning department, public housing, real estate companies, media, politicians) and ‘below’ (residents and local businesses). Despite general claims around BIDs as successful tools for uplifting distressed neighbourhoods, BID Gamlestaden presents shortcomings regarding issues of urban social justice in terms of democratic participation and representation (democracy), disciplining and sanitizing strategies (diversity) and gentrification risks (equality). In fact, while BID partners notice improved attractiveness and sense of security and higher estate values, this improvement is based upon the removal of the most socio-economically vulnerable residents and the disciplining of residents’ and businesses’ behaviours and aesthetics. This study warns about the risk that BIDs as they are currently implemented in Sweden are used as a ‘neoliberal fix’ to move social problems elsewhere rather than solving them, which might lead to new landscapes of exclusion and gentrification.

Keywords
Business Improvement District, gentrification, public housing, public–private partnerships, Sweden, urban governance

Introduction
‘Would BIDs [Business Improvement Districts] work in Sweden?’. In 2009, 80 amongst policy makers, authority representatives and academics gathered in a conference held in Stockholm to seek an

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answer to this question, and to discuss on the viability and applicability of the BID model in Swedish cities. BIDs are ‘privately directed and publicly sanctioned organizations that supplement public services within geographically defined boundaries by generating multiyear revenue through a compulsory assessment on local property owners and/or businesses’ (Hoyt and Gopal-Agge, 2007: 946). The aim is to improve the security, urban design, commercial offer and real estate values of selected geographically defined areas, typically depressed commercial town centres or stigmatized residential neighbourhoods. After the 2009 conference, a lack of consensus remained over the applicability of BID legislation in Sweden. Cook and Ward (2012) reported that a number of concerns were expressed by the participating stakeholders and that ‘this type of quite profound change [developed in Anglo-Saxon contexts] was understood to be politically unthinkable’ (149) in Sweden. That is to say, the BID model seemed to represent a socially and politically drastic departure from Sweden’s social democratic traditions and welfare state model, where the production and management of urban spaces had been led primarily by public institutional actors and had been characterized, at least discursively, by universalistic and socially inclusive principles.

Ten years later, there still is no national legislation on BIDs in Sweden. Yet, in 2018 the Municipality of Gothenburg signed an official agreement of collaboration with a BID-inspired association of property owners in the Gamlestaden neighbourhood, which arguably represents a noteworthy step towards the formalization of the model in the country. Noticeably, the BID model is rapidly gaining popularity, and various versions of it are currently implemented in several cities and towns across Sweden. Enthusiastic accounts of the model consistently appear in the media produced by the property owners’ associations themselves, urban developers’ companies, reporters and some liberal political parties,1 which praise the efficiency and the results achieved in terms of the improved attractiveness and sense of security in the areas interested in BIDs.

International academic literature points out that BIDs are politically controversial tools, and hint at several problematic implications deriving from the emphasis on security and economic efficiency at the expenses of other social aspects of inclusion and redistribution. In particular, BIDs have been criticized for important shortcomings regarding democratic participation, inequalities in service provision, over-regulation of diversity and public spaces (Morcol et al., 2008).

As the phenomenon is rather new in Sweden, only a handful academic studies have delved into the topic in this context. With a focus on urban safety and security, Sahlin (2010) studied BID-inspired and other market-led urban developments and found that these tend to exacerbate social exclusion from participation in decision-making on ethnic and economic grounds. Thörn (2011) studied property-based partnerships in public and commercial spaces and expounded their associated effects of gentrification, social marginalization and exclusion. Recently, Stalevska and Kusevski (2018) presented a comparative inventory of all operating BID-like partnerships in the country, concluding that such tools ‘remain largely unburdened by accountability, democratic dialogue or social justice considerations’ (14). These critical appraisals clearly clash with the persisting cheerful representations of BID-like initiatives in the Swedish public debate, which instead emphasize security, attractiveness and economic growth narratives, glossing over fundamental aspects of social justice.

To date there has been no in-depth academic study of the application of the BID model in Sweden that looks holistically at the multiple dimensions that have been found to be problematic in the international and Swedish literature. To fill this gap, this article contributes to the emerging debate with a unique in-depth case study research on the complex constellation of power entrenched in one of the most long-standing BIDs in Sweden, BID Gamlestaden. The case study features some structural characteristics that are illustrative of most Swedish BID-inspired partnerships (see Stalevska and Kusevski, 2018): it was the first BID that signed an official agreement with a city council, and it is forcefully presented as a ‘best practice’ across the country and, thus, it is likely to become a model reproduced elsewhere.
With the aim to provide a comprehensive assessment of the socio-political impacts of the introduction of BIDs in Sweden, we look at this illustrative and long-standing case through the lens of social justice (Brenner et al., 2012; Dikeç, 2001; Harvey, 2010; Merrifield, 1996). Namely, we investigate whether BIDs in Sweden actually tend to hinder or contribute to making a more socially just city, that is, following Fainstein (2014), a city where access to space and resources is more equitable, diversity is acknowledged and preserved and the management of collective resources is characterized by democratic participation. This approach allows us to consider together and provide an integrated critique encompassing the various controversial dimensions highlighted in the existing literature on BIDs, that is, the securitization and disciplining of public spaces (related to Fainstein’s (2010) diversity principle), issues of democratic participation (democracy), consequences for housing displacement and risks of gentrification (equity). In order to unpack these social justice dimensions and contextualize them within the power structures they emerge from, we analyse the BID’s relations with urban governance actors ‘above’ and ‘below’ and highlight their long-term effects on the local population.

The analysis shows the following. Firstly, BID Gamlestaden has achieved some of its goals of efficiency, improved sense of order and security and contributed changing the reputation of the area by means of its connections ‘above’, consisting of the high political capital of some BID members and a tight relationship with the city planning department. The empowerment deriving from the deployment of such assets and the connected access to decision-making arenas, though, is a prerogative for those who are members of the association, while tenants are consistently excluded. Secondly, BIDs exercise disciplining power over stakeholders ‘below’, that is, tenants and local businesses, as follows: (a) by lobbying for standards and aesthetics in public spaces that accommodate the taste of a desired middle-class population of residents and consumers; (b) removing the most socio-economically vulnerable categories of tenants, and relocating them elsewhere, with the aim to increase real estate values. This contributes to decreasing the cultural and socio-economic diversity in the neighbourhood; (c) BID partners underplay and deny the negative aspects connected to risks of gentrification and housing displacement, while city planners and local politicians show a rather positive and unworried attitude towards gentrification effects, buying into the creative city discourse on economic growth, territorial attractiveness and vitality.

From a social justice perspective, the overall concerns advanced by our study regard the three dimensions of democracy, diversity and equity. We argue that BIDs in Sweden, from their governance position, are able to advance and legitimize the agenda of developers and estate owners, while symbolically and materially displacing socio-economically weak tenants and businesses. While BID partnerships have widely been criticised for their privatizing and commodifying effects on public spaces, which may lead to the indirect exclusion of city users on socio-economic grounds (Richner and Olesen, 2019), we will see that the nature of BIDs in Sweden presents risks for direct housing exclusion. As processes such as gentrification and displacement are context-specific (Maloutas, 2018), it is important to highlight that the displacement risks enforced by the introduction of BIDs are specific to the Swedish case, due to its housing institutional constellation, and not so accentuated in other contexts. Swedish municipal housing companies, in fact, are at the forefront in the promotion of BIDs and play a decisive role in enabling housing displacement. This is a reflection of, and enabled by, the shifting towards an embrace of market logics by municipal housing companies in recent years (Grander, 2017).

Finally, the case of BID Gamlestaden provides an example of the new emphasis on security in Swedish urban governance, a growing entwining of market-based and state-based regulatory measures, the implications of the marketization of public housing, a discursive shift regarding housing universalism and the emerging interest of Swedish politicians in forms of public–private partnerships for urban governance. As such, the article offers new insights into a growing literature on neoliberalizing trends in Sweden and in the Nordic countries.

This discussion is tackled in the concluding remarks of the article. Before coming to that, the
The article is structured as follows: it opens with a critical review on BIDs and the state of the art in Sweden and theoretical anchoring on urban social justice, followed by an explanation of the used methods, contextual clarifications on the Swedish public housing system and a descriptive account on the case study, BID Gamlestaden. Next, we analyse in depth the case study and the relative constellation of power of urban governance actors ‘above’ and ‘below’, which highlight the analytical dimensions of social justice.

Social justice and Business Improvement Districts: A critical overview and Swedish experiences

The BID model emerged from a long tradition of private sector-led initiatives for revitalizing city centres in Canada and the USA and evolved in the 1980s and 1990s in response to urban decline and shrinking government funding. It has since been adopted in several cities across Asia, Africa (Didier et al., 2013) and Europe, including Germany (Michel and Stein, 2015), the UK (Ward, 2006) and recently Denmark (Richner and Olesen, 2019). BIDs’ forms and names vary across national and local contexts but are generally formed by municipal authorization pursuant to enabling legislation at the national level.

International research on BIDs depicts such partnerships as controversial political tools. They are praised and emulated by local governments, thanks to their flexibility and adaptability to different contexts (Steel and Symes, 2005). BIDs are, in fact, perceived as innovative and effective tools for tackling urban issues, such crime and economic decay, with the involvement of private capital. Some researchers have acknowledged BIDs as successful interventions in channelling private financial resources for public goods (Forsberg et al., 1999), combating urban decline by strategically advancing business and retail (Gopal-Agge and Hoyt, 2007), improving security (Peyroux, 2008) and promoting residential development (Birch, 2002). Yet, most researchers are rather critical of the model, raising important debates about, amongst other issues, inequitable representation of residents on the bases of wealth, inequality in public services provision, privatization and securitization of public spaces and promotion of gentrification and space-based disparities (for an overview, see Hoyt and Gopal-Agge, 2007).

All of these issues are challenges to the ideal of urban social justice. While broadly deployed by progressive urban scholars as latent normative judgements guiding critiques to urban policies (including BIDs), uneven urban development and neoliberalism, social justice concerns are only rarely spelled out and explicitly defined (notable exceptions being Fainstein, 2010; Fraser, 2009). The meaning of justice in urban space, in fact, is not universal and depends on historical, geographical and social contexts. Still, its mobilization in urban critique is productive because it allows one to bring to the fore the political and dialectical nature of place-making (Harvey, 1992) and the ethical judgements behind urban policy. For this reason, we adopt the just city as a theoretical anchoring for our assessment of BIDs in Sweden, as it allows one to bring together several critical dimensions of governance and policy evaluation and analyse them comprehensively as the dialectical outcome of complex entanglements of power relations in space. To this end, we refer to Fainstein’s definition of the just city, which is at the same time detailed and far-reaching. For Fainstein, the just city is ‘[…] a city in which public investment and regulation would produce equitable outcomes rather than support those already well off’ (3) and, importantly, it encompasses the three principles of equity, democracy, and diversity. Furthermore, she argues that justice should be ‘the first evaluative criterion used in policy making’ and ‘its influence should bear on all public decisions’ (5).

Concerning our analysis of BIDs, studies that deal with their social implications in terms of urban social justice are of particular interest. Several researchers linked BIDs to the neoliberalization of urban policies and their social effects (Didier et al., 2013; Lippert, 2012; Marquardt and Füller, 2012; Peyroux et al., 2012; Richner and Olesen, 2019). Rankin and Delaney (2011: 1363) contend that BIDs ‘can be read as an iconic institution of roll-out neoliberalism’, as ‘[t]hey are an institutional mechanism through which urban economic development is devolved to neighborhood […] while shifting the onus and scale for
such competitive strategies to commercial property owners and tenants who pay levies and volunteer their time’. Ward (2007) concludes that BIDs are an example and expression of neoliberal urbanization, by virtue of reflecting ‘the growing interweaving of market-based and state-based regulatory arrangements, the combined effects of which have profound implication for notions of spatial and social justice’ (Ward, 2007: 669). Core values of BIDs, such as community, safety, place-attractiveness, self-regulation and, crucially, housing, are powerful disciplining tools, in which urban governance is strongly connected with the goal of policing ‘anti-social’ behaviours and ‘undesirable’ populations (Flint and Nixon, 2006).

In Sweden, BIDs have emerged following two different models: Town Centre Management partnerships (TCMs) and Neighbourhood Improvement Districts (NIDs) (Stalevska and Kusevski, 2018). The TCMs were formed as a response to the decentralization of retail activities in the 1980s and consist of municipality–business–retailer partnerships aimed at revitalizing city centres as commercial cores. They have limited budgets, act essentially as platforms for communication and entail mainly promotional events, maintenance and street cleaning activities (Forsberg et al., 1999). Although TCMs also have critical impacts in terms of social justice, as illustrated by Thörn (2011), in this article we focus on NIDs, as they have a broader scope and a more complex set of regulatory tools and strategies.

NIDs are public–private partnerships formed by property owners and supported by local authorities, with the main aim of improving the attractiveness of a stigmatized residential area and increasing real estate values. They adopt an integrated approach with strategies that span from ‘broken windows’ crime deterrence methods through urban refurbishing, to territorial marketing, planning participation and, crucially as we will see here, disciplining undesired activities and residents through housing management. From here on, we refer to NIDs as ‘BIDs’, as it is the most commonly used denomination of such initiatives in Sweden.

Stalevska and Kusevski (2018) noted three recurring distinctive preconditions of BIDs in the Swedish context, which differentiate them from other international cases. Firstly, BIDs in Sweden emerge in particularly vulnerable socio-economic areas; secondly, they present a property-ownership structure dominated by one or a few bigger property owners, often a municipal housing company; and, thirdly, they tend to appear in areas with a noticeable rent gap, that is, areas that hold a high economic potential due to perceived under-exploitation in relation to an advantageous geographical location.

In the coming section we introduce the case of BID Gamlestaden, which, as we will see, presents all the features highlighted by Stalevska and Kusevski above. Before an historical appraisal of the case, we present some contextual elucidations on the recent evolutions of Swedish public housing, which are fundamental for grasping the institutional context in which BIDs in Sweden emerged.

Introducing Business Improvement District Gamlestaden: Institutional premises and history

Swedish public housing between marketization and social responsibility

The past 50 years have seen substantial political and ideological transformations in the Swedish housing provision model, which has led to their gradual and diffuse marketization, privatization and deregulation (Andersson and Turner, 2014; Baeten et al., 2015, 2017; Christophers, 2013; Grundström and Molina, 2016; Hedin et al., 2012; Lindbom, 2001).

In the immediate post-war era, municipal housing companies represented ‘the main instruments for implementing the state’s [Social-Democratic] housing policy’ (Hedman, 2008: 12), embodying the principle of ‘allmännytta’ (‘for the benefit of everyone’):

It operate[d] on a not-for-profit basis; it [was] almost entirely owned by municipalities; it [was] open to everyone, i.e. not only directed at specific target groups; and its rents have been given the role of serving as the main norm for rental levels across the entire rented housing sector. (7)

Since the 1980s, though, the municipal housing system has gradually marketized. A milestone in this
direction was the 2011 national legislation\(^2\) that established that municipal housing companies’ management should follow a ‘business-like logic’ and compete in the market with private rental companies. This had the effect of decentralizing social responsibility for housing from the State to municipalities and local housing companies, and of eroding the universalistic basis of access to housing, especially for low-income populations (Borg, 2019; Grander, 2017; Lind, 2017). In fact, the profit principle clashes with the ‘moral and political obligation to cater for all types of household’ (Turner, 1999: 694), which had led the municipal housing stock to an overrepresentation of socially deprived residents.

However, ‘while we know that the new law will mean further marketisation of the Swedish public rental sector, it remains too early to say how much further’ (Christophers, 2013: 889). The case of BID presented here, amongst other things, importantly illuminates how the conflicting principles of market and universalism are played out in daily decision-making by the largest municipal housing company in Gothenburg.

**BID Gamlestaden: Historical background, formation and goals**

Gamlestaden, a former working-class neighbourhood located in the northeast of Gothenburg, counts about 9000 inhabitants from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds (2017). Gamlestaden is popular due to its industrial history as the first city factories were founded there, including the internationally leading Swedish ball bearing factory SKF (Svenska Kullagerfabriken). The industrial expansion continued until the economic recessions of the late 1960s, which resulted in the relocation of a large part of the industrial production, and the evacuation of many rental apartments originally built for factory workers. From the 1970s, the municipality allocated a high number of ‘social housing’\(^3\) dwellings in the area, including those for newly arrived refugees. In the 1980s–1990s, Gamlestaden reached one of the highest concentrations of unemployment, social benefits recipients and first-generation immigrants in the city. The post-industrial recession, the high vacancy level and the socio-economic segregation fostered the spread of illegal activities (civic disturbance, drug dealing, gambling, motorcycle gang-related crime). These socio-economic challenges are at the basis of a harsh stigmatization process towards the area.

In 1996, with the goal of counteracting decay and stigmatization, the North-East Gothenburg City District initiated ‘Gamlestaden Council’ (Gamlestadsrådet), a partnership between public administration, real estate owners (municipal and private), tenants unions, local police, the local church and the city planning department. In collaboration with other municipal partnerships for urban improvements, such as ‘The Safe and Beautiful City’ (Trygg Vacker Stad) and the ‘Safety Group’ (Trygghetsgruppen, later Kortedala Project), this local partnership managed to channel some municipal investments into Gamlestaden for improving street security and maintenance (Stenberg, 2010).

Drawing on this experience, in 2001 the largest municipal housing company in the area, Poseidon AB, initiated a partnership of 42 local property owners (including private and municipal housing companies and private cooperative owners) and a consultancy firm. The association, called ‘Real estate owners in Gamlestaden’ (Fastighetsägare i Gamlestaden) was a non-profit organization whose members had the common vision of making Gamlestaden more ‘safe, secure and attractive’ and improving its reputation. Some examples of the activities co-financed by the association relate to the improvement of public and green spaces, urban gardening, street lights and the privatization and regulation of parking lots. Explicit goals were to reduce the number of apartments for social benefit recipients and diminishing crime in apartment buildings and public spaces (Holmberg, 2012, 2016). This time, the public administration was not an official partner in the association but was regularly informed of its activities.

At the same time, since the early 2000s, the City and the Western Götaland Region have worked on capitalizing on the central location of Gamlestaden and envisioned the area as a new strategic transport hub, with new housing, commerce and services in relation to the so-called West-Swedish agreement (Västsvenska paket), that is, a series of infrastructure initiatives for public and private transport in Western
Sweden. The agreement situates a new strategic node for local and regional traffic in Gamlestaden. Accordingly, the city planning department developed a detailed masterplan for Gamlestaden as a strategic densification area (Göteborgs-Stad, 2006a) that foresees the construction of a new travel centre, a ‘world literature centre’, a shopping precinct, a hotel and 3000 new flats that will double the number of residents in the area. As we will see in more detail later, the property owners’ association was involved in the redevelopment projects in different ways.

The original vision of the property owners’ association, ‘Safe Gamlestaden’ (Trygga Gamlestaden), changed in 2014 to ‘Whole Gamlestaden’ (‘Hela Gamlestaden’ in Swedish has the double meaning of ‘whole Gamlestaden’ and ‘to heal Gamlestaden’), to highlight the intention of integrating the existing Gamlestaden and its future developments. The ‘Whole Gamlestaden’ vision is about making Gamlestaden more ‘safe, pleasant, beautiful’ (Holmberg, 2016). The vision shows a market-orientated logic, where a milieu that facilitates businesses is the necessary prerequisite for economic and social sustainable local development: ‘Sustainability requires business-friendliness (affärsmässighet)’ (Holmberg, 2012: 6). “Municipal and private estate owners and housing cooperatives should act together to fulfil the premises of business principles […] The vision is to achieve a living environment where people thrive and want to live in, which would mean higher customer satisfaction and attractiveness’ (Holmberg, 2012: 6). The management of private cooperative housing and the provision of public rental housing need to respond to business principles, and in particular to the goal of increasing property values. This idea takes force in reference to the aforementioned 2011 law on municipal housing companies, which now need to act under business-like logic (Holmberg, 2012: 35).

The year 2018 represents an important milestone in the history of the association and a turning point in the broader prospects of BID practices in Sweden: BID Gamlestaden – the first in Sweden – signed an official collaboration agreement with the municipality of Gothenburg and eight partners: two administrative city districts, four city departments (respectively real estate, building, traffic, park and nature), a development and maintenance company and the city insurance company. The timeframe for the BID agreement is from 1 May 2018 to 31 December 2020, after which the agreement will be extended one year at a time. The agreement aims to provide institutionally structured support and continual public investments into the BID-inspired initiative that has de facto been in place for almost 20 years. The cooperation agreement states:

Gamlestaden will be a harmonious and functional whole, where older and newer parts strengthen each other, where everyday life works well for new and old residents, where social networking, local initiatives, cultural expression, security, the area’s exciting history and local identity can flourish. The agreement will create the conditions for a developed and beautiful urban environment, by strengthening local business opportunities and developing local services with local entrepreneurs, shops, restaurants. The agreement will promote equality and sustainability in Gothenburg and help Gamlestaden to develop into a good neighborhood to live in, attractive to move to, visit, run business, work and build new homes and possibilities. The district’s history, identity and culture are valuable building blocks for the Gamlestaden of the future, and contribute to increase interest in Gamlestaden as a destination and future developments. (Emphasis added.)

Given BIDs’ declared goals of promoting equality and socio-economic sustainability, our study asks: what have been so far the socio-political impacts of BID Gamlestaden in terms of social justice, that is, interconnected issues of democracy, diversity and equality?

Methods

The main empirical material for this article is constituted by in-depth interviews with key informants, documents and media analysis and direct observation. In 2018 we conducted in-depth interviews with stakeholders differently involved in BIDs, that is, city officials (1), BID leaders (3), city planners (1), real estate owners (2), business owners (2), social
services workers (2) and tenants (3). The interviews constitute the primary source for our analysis, together with the study of written materials from BID-produced reports, planning documents, local history literature, archival print media coverage and social media posts.

Methods of content and discourse analysis (Mayring, 2004; Wodak and Chilton, 2005) were employed on the gathered information from texts and the transcribed interviews (Talja, 1999), from which the analytical categories for this article emerged.

Business Improvement District Gamlestaden: A social justice appraisal

In this section, we present the result of our case study analysis from a social justice perspective. The analysis is organized following Kudla and Courley (2019) and Lippert (2007), who envision BIDs as ‘complex entity that mediates between governance “from above” and “from below”’ (Lippert, 2007: 51), as they entertain strategic relationships and interactions with a range of actors that span from government officials, urban planners, international interlocutors and real estate developers, to local business owners, social services and regular residents. By unpacking BID Gamlestaden’s political relations ‘above’ and ‘below’ with other urban stakeholders, we examine its social justice implications through the following dimensions: democratic participation and representation (related to Fainstein’s (2010) principle of democracy); sanitizing and disciplining actions (diversity); and attitudes towards gentrification (equity).

BID relationships ‘above’: Democratic participation and representation

Drawing on its institutional and political connections, BID Gamlestaden has been able to work relatively closely with the region and the city planning department regarding the radical changes the neighbourhood and its surroundings will undergo in the coming years. From official planning documents it emerges that the city planning office held special meetings with Fastighetsägare i Gamlestaden as local consultants in the process of preparing the in-depth masterplan in 2002–2006. ‘The City Planning Office has prepared the plan in cooperation with property owners and other municipal administrations’, and in particular with two Poseidon AB employees as representatives of the property owners’ reference group (Göteborgs-Stad, 2006b: 7). Moreover, the real estate company Platzer hosts a showroom about the redevelopment plans in one of its buildings, which also serves as a venue for the BID meetings.

The BID partnership, hence, works as a venue and a tool for facilitating flows of information between planners, developers and smaller property owners. By virtue of being organized as a coherent group with the BID, property and business owners have access to information and arguably are able to make their interests heard in a more outspoken way, as if they had to face the planned redevelopments as individuals.

Arguably, this contributes to build consensus and, in point of fact, keenness around the aligned agendas of city planning and developers. None of the property owners we interviewed raised negative critiques to the plans and were rather enthusiastic about the changes. The only concern expressed by some was about how to better connect the new and the old urban fabrics in a way that would not spoil the praised characteristic ‘small town’ feel of Gamlestaden, but rather increase its attractiveness. The slogan ‘Whole Gamlestaden’ is an expression of this desire of integrated development.

Such efficiency in decision-making, ‘getting things done’ and collaborating with higher levels of governance, though, has some important drawbacks in terms of democratic participation. Critically, the privileged platform of communication between the planning department and local actors excludes those who are not part of the BID partnership, namely all the residents who do not own property, raising important concerns about how BIDs can skew democratic dialogue on urban matters and planning processes, based on property.

The ways in which the BID is presented at the local and larger scale is the result of its connections ‘above’. The association uses reports and self-funded surveys as evidence for the effects over time of its
work in the neighbourhood. Such surveys show that the interviewed residents perceive the area as more safe and attractive compared to the early 2000s (Holmberg, 2012, 2016). The experience of BID Gamlestaden gained a great deal of attention from administrators and politicians. Members of Parliament and of the Gothenburg City Council have visited the area on several occasions in the past couple of years. During the city electoral campaign in 2018, centre-right political parties helped put the spotlight on BID Gamlestaden. Centerpartiet (liberal centre-right-wing party), proposed ‘to make Gamlestaden a national role model’ for urban renewal and countering criminality by relaunching local businesses with a five-point programme inspired by BIDs in New York City.

Moreover, the social democratic city administration seems to be equally enthusiastic about the Gamlestaden model. The East Gothenburg district leader had only positive words for BIDs in our interview (2018), and wished to export the model to other segregated neighbourhoods:

> When I started in 2016 and the association took contact with me and said they would like to have me working with them in a BID, I said that if I had the money, I would start a BID in Bergsjön, because Gamlestaden is already up and running. And then I looked into what BID is and what the driving factors in BIDs are, and I realized that trust is the main thing (…). Since Gamlestaden owners’ association had been working with trust issues in this area for many years, I had to change my mind (…). My hope is that we learn good things now as a city and we can apply it in Bergsjön in a year or two.

Arguably, part of the reason why BID Gamlestaden has managed to create knowledge and consensus around itself is due to the political, economic and cultural capital of its members. Noticeably, the manager of the association has remarkable political ties: she ran as the leader of Liberalerna (centre-right liberal party) at the regional elections in 2018 and is the chairperson for a large hospital in North East Gothenburg. She regularly gives talks about BIDs in different national and international settings, including the government offices in Stockholm. This political capital is important in increasing the visibility of BID Gamlestaden.

Finally, the marketing and consensus building around the BID is backed up and promoted at a larger scale than the local one, through collaborations with researchers and academics. A Gothenburg urban think tank for sustainable urban futures recently organized an international event titled ‘Slumification. Underperforming local areas. Short-sightedness and unsustainability. Is BIDs the tool we have been waiting for?’ Here the Gamlestaden experience was presented to a Swedish and international audience as a process through which ‘a crime ridden neighborhood has been turned into a success story’. Finally, the association’s leadership has been collaborating in academic research funding applications, with the agenda to document the positive outcomes of the BID experience, corroborate its status, buttress its role in urban development and lobby for a national legislation on BIDs in Sweden (our interview, 2018).

**BID relationships ‘below’: Sanitation and disciplining**

One of the priorities of all BID-inspired partnerships is to enforce safety and social control through the regulation and disciplining (Foucault, 2007) of public and commercial spaces. In Gamlestaden, these aspects are combined with disciplining and ‘sanitizing’ actions in *housing*. As the leading owner in the BID is a municipal housing company, most disciplining actions take place through housing provision and affect specifically the housing situation of the most vulnerable social groups. We first look at the disciplining of public and commercial spaces, before tackling the housing issue.

Thörn (2011) explains that BID-like public–private partnerships (TCMs) in Gothenburg have worked since the early 2000s to create a business- and visitor-friendly ‘ambience’ in the city centre. This disciplining power is achieved by pursuing ‘sanitizing strategies, that involve eradicating signs of disorder, and imagineering strategies, that impose visual norms on space [which] together create a specific image (…) and clear expectations for
behaviors in public spaces’ (997). The result is a fierce exclusion of homeless people from the city centre.

In Gamlestaden, similar strategies of sanitation and imagineering were put in place by working on the urban decor design and lighting. The association pushed for privatizing the parking places along the streets to prevent their uses for illegal purposes (some informants stated that cars used to be parked there indefinitely to store and exchange stolen goods). Moreover, the association co-financed gating access to the internal courtyards of some residential buildings, which had historically been open, to prevent the access of substance users and other disturbing behaviours to the common gardens. This echoes a broader normalization of urban gating, relatively new in Sweden (Grundström, 2018).

Local small businesses are considered to be a fundamental part of the local character and ‘local culture’ of the area, and hence attributed a value of authenticity to be encouraged and preserved. Yet, not all existing businesses are seen as a positive part of the local cultural heritage and worth preserving. The Bellevue industriområde (Bellevue industrial district) is a controversial case. Bellevue sits long the Säveå River, between SKF landmark buildings (to be redeveloped into a shopping mall) and some recent housing blocks in the Kviberg area. It is dominated by small-scale businesses such as cars repairers, tyre shops, warehouses, thrift stores, Mosks, ‘ethnic’ food and furniture shops, religious and cultural associations and garden allotments. The buildings, mostly small warehouses from the 1940s to the 1950s, belong to several owners. Although economically vital, Bellevue aesthetics are more informal than other areas nearby. While the Gamlestaden masterplan describes Bellevue as ‘run down and dirty’ (Göteborgs-Stad, 2006a: 19), there are no clear plans for the redevelopment of the area in the near future, besides the goal of eventually converting 20% of the area to housing.

Our informants from the BID admitted that they would have expected the municipality to demolish the whole area, build ‘nice housing’ and ‘start fresh’ (interview, 2018). Instead, the city formulated a decision to preserve the most valuable historical buildings and temporarily keep the current functions (Göteborgs-Stad, 2014b). This arguably resulted from political efforts to avoid the aggressive displacement that happened in other post-industrial areas in the city (see Thörn and Holgersson, 2016). With the lack of a political will to demolish and rebuild, the alternative vision proposed by the BID for Bellevue is to preserve the retail function but to ‘tame’ it for middle-class consumption. In 2016, the association commissioned a study from a place development consultancy firm. The resulting report states: ‘Bellevue should retain its retail activities, which make the area unique and distinct from other retail places in Gothenburg. The challenge is to improve the local businesses and develop it to match the customers’ expectations’ (Reteam-group, 2016: 7). The idea is that, if it is to be preserved at all, the aesthetics of the existing businesses should be polished and ‘corrected’ (Reteam-group, 2016), for instance the signage, described as ‘unclear (…), handwritten, outdated and broken’ (52), ‘dirty, dated and worn out’ (49).

What seems to particularly bother the property owners association is the informal looks and management of many retail activities in Bellevue, including a large and very popular second-hand market that opens at the weekends, and that according to the interviewed BID leader below, causes disorder and littering, and affects the property values of the bordering properties:

That area is total chaos. People who live next door are so frustrated and people who are running their businesses there are so frustrated, because it’s so much, there are traffic jams every Friday, Saturday and Sunday but also the rest of the week it’s littering and it’s horrific. And the people that live next door, they know that if you want to sell your apartment and that particular day there is…, it looks like…, it looks like this, of course it will affect your business.

The association has been putting pressure on the city in various ways to take action in the area, including filing reports on littering to the city environment and health authorities, and denouncing shady activities (allegedly stolen goods and alcohol reselling) to the police and the media.13
By consistently labelling the area as chaotic, problematic, ‘lawless’ (interview, 2018) and a site of illegal and immoral activities, the BID leadership not only enforces disciplining power, but also legitimizes its specific actions and its very presence: ‘The municipality did not understand that it is...a collective action problem. [...] It’s many actors in the same place and we don’t have the legal means to deal with that, that’s why you need BIDs, really’ (interview with BID leader, 2018).

Crucially, sanitation strategies in Gamlestaden are not limited to the public spaces. As mentioned, a priority goal of the BID is to reduce the presence of residents on social benefits from the housing stock altogether. The association explicitly states that there are ‘clashing interests between the property owners associations and local authorities’ (Holmberg, 2012: 13) consisting of, on the one hand, the desire to ‘offer the best possible living environment for all tenants’ and, on the other, the necessity for social services to offer accommodations for vulnerable categories (Holmberg, 2012). Such statement implies that the presence of social benefit recipients in rental housing potentially constitutes a disturbance for other tenants and is directly connected to the economic devaluation of the estate.

This mirrors the challenges municipal housing faces around preserving social responsibilities in the context of market adjustments (Grander, 2017). Still, these sentiments were formulated and acted upon by the housing company Poseidon AB, at least 10 years before the 2011 law. Deeming what they perceived as disproportionate levels of social benefit recipients and their alleged misbehaviour being amongst the primary causes of urban blight and decline in Gamlestaden, the association deployed a set of measures to displace them in the name of profit maximization. The association and Poseidon AB, in particular, actively worked for and managed the reduction of the concentration of social housing by (a) intervening punctually and systematically against disturbances and missed rents payments and (b) relocating and redistributing social services accommodations to other parts of the city (Holmberg, 2012).

Statistical data show clear changes in the socio-economic fabric of Gamlestaden between the mid-1990s and 2010: the average income increased, while the proportion of residents with a foreign background decreased. The local real estate values increased considerably more than the city average over this period. The most striking change, however, is in the share of social benefits recipients, which went from 20% of the total population in 1996 to 7% in 2010 (Westerström, 2013: 70).

Gentrification issues

The experience of BID Gamlestaden has so far been celebrated in the media as a remedy to urban decline, where the use of dramatic Anglo-Saxon words like ‘slumification’ recalls catastrophic scenarios from American ghettos and emphasizes the stigmatization of the area, while bolstering the discourse on the beneficial effects of the real estate owners’ association initiative.

While more empirical evidence on the actual extent and nature of displacement in Gamlestaden is needed, there are several indicators that the celebrated ‘renaissance’ of Gamlestaden actually extends patterns of gentrification, intended as a substitution of lower-income residents with wealthier ones. As we explained, BID Gamlestaden gained traction in concomitance with the regional and municipal plans to redevelop the area into a strategic hub and inner-city district, by capitalizing on the rent gap constituted by its geographically central location and its current under-exploitation. The rent prices in several business spaces saw a 20–30% increase in 2018–2019.14 Moreover, the specific efforts of the association to economically and socially uplift Gamlestaden are largely based on a specific plan for disciplining behaviours that would not fit into its new anticipated middle-class character (Järlehed et al., 2018) and, crucially, by physically displacing the most socially and economically vulnerable residents.

These concerted efforts by public and private stakeholders hold together several of the components that gentrification-induced displacement processes typically embody in Sweden: top-down redevelopments with newly built amenities and condos (Loit, 2014; Thörn and Holgersson, 2016); tenure conversion (Andersson and Turner, 2014); privatization and marketization of public housing (Grundström and...
pressures and displacement on the public estate residents due to renovations (Baeten and Listerborn, 2015; Baeten et al., 2017; Polanska and Richard, 2018; Pull and Richard, 2019); and ‘ambiance’ policies of exclusion (Thörn, 2011).

When questioned about the BID’s potential contribution to processes of gentrification and on the (present or future) exclusion of poorer residents on the base of unaffordability, the BID members we interviewed strongly denied the issue of displacement in Gamlestaden. They depicted their actions as contributing to a healthy process of urban regeneration that changed the fate of an inexorably declining neighbourhood:

You must have in mind that in the late 90s and at the time of the millennium, it was then that people were forced to move from Gamlestaden, not now. People who perhaps wanted to stay here but they did not want to live here because they couldn’t raise their children in a local environment where people were shooting each other on the streets... That’s where we come from. [...]. (Interview with BID leader)

Moreover, local political and academic debates on gentrification were dismissed as skewed by preconceptions:

Some people of course will be critical... I have talked so many times about this, and doing lectures in different contexts, and there is always this first question ‘oh, are the same people living in Gamlestaden now as twenty years ago?’, under the pretence that people would have been forced to move because of this process... and it’s like, well, some people are still here and some people don’t, some people die in twenty years... It’s like there is a debate which has its own preset conceptions, and they apply it, not taking reality in. (Interview with BID leader)

If it comes as no surprise that a property owners association would endorse gentrification, a more critical or at least cautious position about the negative consequences of gentrification would reasonably be expected by urban planners and a public administration that promotes urban development under the tropes of ‘sustainability’ and ‘equality’ (Göteborgs-Stad, 2014a). Instead, the city officials and city planners we interviewed explicitly stated that some levels of gentrification are positive and desirable. They also asserted that real estate inflation and private owners’ involvement in local development are the only feasible strategies to counteract the stigmatization and ‘slumification’ of Gamlestaden. Such positive cultural and ideological predispositions to urban renewal serve as lubricant to the highly unequal social impact of urban redevelopment and the role the BID plays in it.

Conclusions

This article opened with the reflection that arose from a conference in Stockholm that in 2009, ‘there was still work to be done before the BID model should be introduced into another geographical context’, that is, Sweden, and that the model seemed too distant from a welfare state ethos (Cook and Ward, 2012: 152). Ten years later, through our empirical study on an actually existing BID in Gamlestaden, Gothenburg, we conclude that cautiousness to the translation of the model into the Swedish context was actually in order.

Our study shows that the BID in Gamlestaden strongly challenges the three selected dimensions we used to appraise social justice – participation and representation (diversity aspect), disciplining and sanitizing (democracy) and gentrification (equity). Our empirical findings show that, despite the urban renaissance trope and trickle-down effect claims, the application of the BID model in Gamlestaden (a) privileges the interests of developers, wealthier residents and property owners while excluding renters, especially lower-income ones, from decision-making processes, (b) enables sanitizing and disciplining actions, which further ostracize marginalized groups and (c) supports patterns of gentrification, discursively and materially. These critical effects are enabled by the approving support that the BID receives by decision makers at higher levels of governance, such as national and local politicians and administrators, and city planners.

These findings are in stark contrast to the enthusiastic national and local representations of BIDs as
an innovative tool enhancing urban regeneration, economic growth, business vitality, spatial order and security. In fact, our results echo social critiques of the model in other countries, which has been interpreted as an instrument for neoliberal urbanism (Didier et al., 2013; Kudla and Courey, 2019; Lippert, 2012; Richner and Olesen, 2019; Steel and Symes, 2005; Ward, 2007; Weber, 2002). We build on this critique, yet, the aim is not to provide just another national example of the BID as a globalized neoliberal model. Embracing previous calls for nuanced and context-sensitive analysis of neoliberalism (Brenner et al., 2010) and of BIDs (Bénit-Gbabou et al., 2012; Didier et al., 2013; Michel and Stein, 2015), we would like to restate the importance of the specific institutional context of the Swedish case with its public housing system, and the outcomes it enables in terms of social exclusion.

Following historic processes of neoliberalization in Nordic countries (Ahlqvist and Moisio, 2014; Baeten et al., 2015; Mäntysalo and Saglie, 2010; Olesen and Carter, 2018), the BID model has recently entered this geographical arena as a market-driven solution to issues brought about by marketization itself, or, in Richner and Olesen’s (2019: 160) words, as ‘a neoliberal fix to a neoliberal problem’. In Denmark, similarly to the USA (Ward, 2007) and the Swedish experience of TCMs in the 1990s (Forsberg et al., 1999; Thörn, 2011), BID-like partnerships were introduced to revitalize town commercial areas, challenged by competition from detached shopping malls. More recent examples of Swedish BID-inspired partnerships though, like the above BID Gamlestaden or BID Sofielund in Malmö, resemble more complex interventions in Germany (Michel and Stein, 2015) or South Africa (Didier et al., 2013) and are adopted to solve structural issues of security, socio-economic segregation and urban decay in residential areas exacerbated by the neoliberal trends of the last three decades.

National area-based policies for distressed neighbourhoods were implemented in Swedish cities up until the 1990s, but none have managed to affect levels of socio-economic and ethnic segregation more than marginally (Andersson et al., 2010). In the context of increased polarization, worsening conditions of the already worst-off neighbourhoods (Hedin et al., 2012) and substantial failure of national policies to counteract segregation, municipal actors are looking for alternative, non-orthodox local solutions to deal with segregation and security. This is the reason why, we argue, the BID model, presented as a flexible and adaptable ‘best practice’, is welcomed as an innovative solution for relaunching urban economies.

An important specificity of the Swedish system is what Christophers (2013) called ‘a monstrous hybridity’ of fierce marketization vectors entrenched with stout welfare state legacies and regulations. This hybridity is at the basis of the ‘pivotal role currently played by the Swedish housing system in the creation, reproduction and intensification of socio-economic inequality’ (Christophers, 2013: 885). We argue that the conduct of the municipal housing company described in this article is a clear manifestation of this hybridity: despite its social responsibility towards homing low-income groups and social benefits recipients, the municipal housing company has enforced the substantial removal of these groups from its local estates in Gamlestad, in the name of economic profitability.

‘Neoliberal fixes to neoliberal problems’, that is, market solutions to social and economic issues, have largely proven to be insufficient in the long-term (Peck, 2007; Peck and Tickell, 2002) and arguably BID Gamlestad is expected to be no exception. The short-term fix of relocating the socio-economically vulnerable groups from Gamlestad to elsewhere might have served the scope of raising the neighbourhood economic status, but has most likely not solved the issues of these residents. As stated by Maloutas (2018), despite contextual specificities, ultimately ‘[g]entrification is a process of segregation in the sense that eventually it leads to more segregation, even though in its first stages it increases the social mix in working-class areas where incoming middle-class households displace lower social strata’ (253).

Finally, while ‘it is crucial that [public–private] partnerships do not erect walls around themselves and exclude groups that are already marginalised’ (Elander, 2002: 203), it is always worth remembering that ‘[p]artnerships can at best be partially responsible to particular interests, whereas the
parliament and the city council are accountable to all citizens’ (Elander, 2002, emphasis added). It is fundamental then, that public policies and planning guarantee broader, larger scale perspectives on urban inequalities and socio-economic segregation and keep on engaging in more integrated programmes than those offered by local ‘fixes’ like BIDs and similar private-driven partnerships for urban governance.

Ultimately, with this article we wish to provide a contribution to the BID debate in Sweden beyond the academic sphere. In current political and popular debates around BIDs in Sweden, issues of social justice are largely eluded, or based on statistical reports at the neighbourhood scale produced by the BIDs themselves. We argue that to inform the public debate, more academic research is urgently needed to analyse the effects, possibilities and potentials of BID-inspired partnerships, for example, to understand BIDs’ actual impacts on the social fabric of cities also in quantitative terms.

In avoiding social justice questions, and uncritically supporting BIDs, local administrations might risk investing into solutions that can reinforce existing hierarchies of exclusion, and produce new landscapes of displacement. This would drive away from the professed goals of reaching progressive, socially sustainable and more just cities (Göteborgs-Stad, 2014a). Hopefully, the present study can provide some entry points for deeper discussions on BIDs in Sweden and the larger European context that put at the forefront the principles of social justice.

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Notes
1. http://www.gp.se/nyheter/debatt/g%C3%B6teborgs-stad-till-nationell-f%C3%B6rebild-l-5188709 http://www.bidsinsweden.se/ https://bidgamlestaden.se/category/rapport_gamlestaden/ http://www.jarvafast.se/2019/05/goda-exempel-pa-svenska-bids/
2. The Act and Chapter 12 in the Swedish Land Code (Jordabalken), in force since 1 January 2011, state that Common Benefit Companies for municipal rental housing ‘shall operate in business-like forms’
3. Social housing, understood as subsidized housing specifically for low-income households, does not exist in Sweden as in other national contexts. The municipal rental housing stock is open for everyone despite income levels and allocation follows a time-of-queue-registration criterion. However, local authorities are in charge of providing housing for certain socio-economically vulnerable groups, such as people with severe physical or mental disabilities or addiction to alcohol or drugs. The practical arrangements vary in different municipalities and housing is distributed between municipal and private rental stock.
4. The West-Swedish agreement was planned in the 1990s by the Västra Götaland and Halland Regions, the City of Gothenburg and the national traffic department, to be constructed between 2010 and 2027.
5. Gamlestaden includes a mixture of housing types, with both rental and owned apartments. A total of 40% of the housing stock is owned by the municipal housing company Poseidon AB. Twenty-four owner cooperatives
together own 30% of the properties, while the rest are held by private owners. Today, ca. 45% of the local property owners are members of the BID and ca. 80% of the total households live in a building owned by association members (Holmberg, 2012: 12). The association is self-financed through internal taxation and its annual budget is around 1 million Swedish crowns (ca. 100,000 Euro) (Holmberg, 2016).

6. https://bidgamlestaden.se/stadsdelen/sverigeunik-bid-avtal-i-gamlestaden/

7. The field research was carried out as part of a larger researcher project that explored the entanglements of planning, heritage and marginality in Gamlestaden.

8. While we anonymized the interviews, some of the interviewees are public persons and therefore might be recognized by readers familiar with the context.

9. Illustrious visits include the former Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt, the minister of Justice Morgan Johansson, the minister of urban development Karolina Skog and the minister of coordination Ibrahim Baylan, https://www.facebook.com/BIDGamlastaden/ (20 March 2018).

10. http://www.gp.se/nyheter/debatt/g%C3%B6r-gamlastaden-till-nationell-%C3%B6rebild-1.5188709

11. Bergsjön is a neighbourhood in North-East Gothenburg with a high percentage of public housing and high socio-economic and ethnic segregation.

12. https://www.mistraurbanfutures.org/en/urban-research-slumification

13. http://www.gp.se/nyheter/goteborg/spritbussarna-ska-bort-fran-gameastaden-1.202923

14. Pettersson, Mia. Gamlestaden en stadsdel i förändring – men alla gynnas inte. Göteborg Posten 31 December 2019.

15. https://fastighetsagaresofielund.se/

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