



The lawn as a social and cultural phenomenon in Sweden



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ABSTRACT

Lawns have a significant influence on the cityscape as one of the essential elements of green spaces and an important part of people's everyday lives. Most people in the Western world view lawns as a compulsory element of the urban landscape, almost an icon, without questioning their social, symbolic, ecological or aesthetic values. This research is a part of the conceptual framework and methodological approaches that are being used in an ongoing transdisciplinary collaboration project to study lawns in Sweden as a social and ecological phenomenon.

The overall aim of this study was to investigate social and cultural perceptions of lawns, as well as motives behind decisions about the establishment and management of lawns in Sweden. Two multi-family housing typologies, the 'Million Programme' and 'People's Homes', were examined due to their dominance in Swedish cities. We also studied how an alternative vision of conventional lawns can be applied and accepted by urban residents. We estimated lawn cover in multi-family housing areas and links to people's perception and use of lawns. Questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and observational studies were used (N = 300). Our results showed that people like lawns even if they do not always directly use them. Lawns cover the most significant amount of outdoor spaces in all multi-family residential areas and accompany people everywhere from the house to the schoolyard or park. The total lawn cover in the study areas was 27.8%. Lawns were particularly valued as important places for different outdoor activities (playing, resting, picnicking, walking, socialising) and enjoying the green colour. However people do not want to use a vast monotonous lawn, but a variety of spaces that provide good conditions for different senses (sound, smell, touch and sight) and activities. Alternative lawns were also appreciated by many citizens, politicians, planners and managers. The implementation of new types of lawns requires special planning and design solutions adjusted for each particular neighbourhood.

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1. Introduction

Lawns occupy a significant proportion of green spaces in many cities worldwide today (Stewart et al., 2009). According to the most recent EU study "Green Surge – A typology of urban green spaces, ecosystem provisioning services and demands" (Braquinho et al., 2015), green spaces are defined as "any vegetated areas found in the urban environment, including parks, forests, open spaces, lawns, residential gardens, or street trees". In 44 identified types of urban green areas, the lawn is one of the most common elements, for example in large urban parks, botanical and zoological gardens, historic parks/gardens, institutional green spaces, green playground/school grounds, street green or green verges and house

gardens. The complex character of urban green areas is well recognised and there is a growing body of research investigating the roles of green spaces in social, economic, cultural and environmental aspects of sustainable development (Haq, 2011). Even if lawns are one of the most dominant elements in green areas in all countries (irrespective of climatic differences), this phenomenon itself is not well researched, and especially not its socio-cultural component. At a time of climate change and the search for a sustainable urban environment, there is an urgent need to have interdisciplinary empirical quantitative and qualitative studies on lawns: the values of different lawns are revealed and conclusions drawn about their negative and/or positive environmental impact (Ignatieva et al., 2015).

There are many different definitions of 'lawn', but we define it here as an artificially created or modified plant community (phytosociological composition) consisting predominantly of grass (more technically graminoids), but it may have spontaneously occurring herbaceous species (which are also called 'lawn weeds'). Lawns are used for recreation and sports, and as a pleasant green backdrop for displaying other plants or functional (playgrounds)

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and decorative elements (pieces of art, fountains, benches and pavilions). One of the main characteristics of lawns is their construction technique (preparation of soil and seed mixtures) and management regime (mowing, herbiciding, fertilising, watering) aimed at maintaining grass species, controlling weeds and mosses, and keeping a certain grass height.

The lawn is quite a recent ecological and cultural phenomenon. Lawns are an artificially created grass-dominated plant community designed mostly for pleasure and/or decorative purposes. It most probably appeared in medieval times in Europe (Fort, 2000; Ignatieva, 2011). A broader use of lawns is connected to the development of the most influential landscape architectural styles, such as picturesque and gardenesque (18th – 19th centuries), in Europe, the US, Australia and New Zealand. The 20th century Modernism movement used lawns as a massive prefabricated element in all green areas (public and private). Lawns today are seen as a symbol of globalisation and the market economy (Ignatieva, 2010).

An ecological component assessment of lawns (floristical and phytosociological composition, urban biotope) has been a primary subject in lawn research since the 1990s in Germany (Müller, 1990) and later in England (Thompson et al., 2004), New Zealand (Ignatieva et al., 2000; Stewart et al., 2009) and recently in other countries (Bertocini et al., 2012; Pooya et al., 2013).

The US and UK are trying to raise awareness of broad-scale research – an estimation of lawn cover in cities (Milesi et al., 2005; Gaston et al., 2005; Edmondson et al., 2014) because of the dominant role of lawns in suburban private gardens and public green spaces. For example, the combined area of lawn (turfgrass) represents an estimated 23% of urban land cover in the USA (Robbins and Birkenholz, 2003). In the early 1990s the area cultivated with lawns in the US was up to three times greater than that of irrigated corn crops. Awareness of the environmental impact of intensively managed lawns in US suburbia resulted in a rising number of scientific and popular publications on the history of American and English lawns and an analysis of socio-cultural and even anthropogenic reasons (speculation that people love lawns because of the evolution of humans in savanna-like landscapes in East Africa) behind an obsession for the perfect short-cut green lawn in modern society (Schultz, 1999; Teyssot, 1999; Fort, 2000; Macinnis, 2009). In recent years, particularly in the US, England and Germany, there is a growing number of papers discussing the ‘evils’ of modern monotonous and homogenous lawns and the need for alternative sustainable solutions as well as the education of local citizens in favour of a new vision of lawns in urban nature (Borman et al., 2001; Pollan, 1991).

The social norms and psychological and social predictors of lawn fertiliser application have been studied in the private gardens of American suburbia (Kaufman and Lohr, 2002; Carrico et al., 2012). However, there are still very few proper empirical social studies on perceptions, norms and aesthetic values of current use and management practices of lawns, especially in non-American countries.

Swedish cities share the same lawn pattern as many other cities around the world. Lawns are widely advertised by urban planners, landscape architects, developers and mass media as a very useful consumer product for the market. It is the dominant component of green areas in multi-family housing, public parks and gardens, street verges and cemeteries as well as in private gardens and on golf courses. However, no studies of the biodiversity, environmental impact or public use of lawns, for example, have been conducted in Sweden (Ignatieva et al., 2015).

The overall aim of this study was to investigate social visions and perceptions of lawns and motives for decisions about the establishment and management of lawns in common housing areas in Swedish cities. The main research question involved studying lawns from different perspectives. This also included an examination of how sustainable (alternative) design and management

of lawns could be applied and accepted by urban residents, an estimation of lawn cover in typical multi-family housing areas, and people’s perception and use of lawns. Without understanding the social motives behind the strong attachment of modern western society (including Sweden) to lawns, it is impossible to introduce potential alternative solutions and change conventional management routines. The transdisciplinary approach (in this particular case between data on lawn cover in Swedish residential areas and visions of lawns by local residents) allows us to exchange knowledge between scientific disciplines and achieve a multi-dimensional understanding of the lawn as a phenomenon.

2. Lawns in Sweden

The history of lawn establishment in Sweden is similar to that in many other European countries. Grazed meadows have existed for millennia and during the Iron Age it became possible to harvest hay in larger amounts. It is difficult to say exactly when grass-dominated plots (lawns) for entirely decorative purposes appeared in European gardens, including Sweden (Ignatieva and Ahrné, 2013). In Medieval European gardens of the 12th–15th century, cut turf from meadows with their various grass and herbaceous flowering plants was used in monastery (and castle) gardens. Lawns were first used in Sweden as entirely decorative short-cut grass areas during Renaissance and Baroque times (1600–1750s). The establishment and maintenance of lawns was expensive and resource-consuming and lawns were initially used only in limited amounts as a parterre element or *tapis vert* (green carpet) in the grand parks of royalty and the nobility. During the English landscape park era (1750s–1840s), rather large undulating lawns were still the prerogative of the nobles. Public parks first emerged in the second part of 19th century, marking a new era of Swedish lawns. They started to be an important decorative and recreational element and served the needs of the common people rather than those of the privileged higher social classes. Swedish parks at that time were valued as places for good health and ‘moral education’. They provided a pleasant environment for strengthening the family’ by taking people’s minds away from drinking and gambling (Wärn, 2013).

From the second part of the 19th century, the process of transformation of an agrarian country to a highly industrialised nation began, resulting in accelerated urbanisation. After the Second World War, Sweden’s undamaged industry needed even more urban labour to produce goods for the destroyed Europe. New urban development plans and a new generation of housing areas with apartment blocks were built all over Sweden. The planning structure of Swedish cities before and after the war directly reflected the economic and political situation and were connected to the “Swedish Model” implemented by the Social Democratic Party (in power from 1932 to 1976) with the aim of creating a more equal society. This policy resulted in creating the progressive welfare state. One concrete goal was to provide simple, but good-standard apartments and healthy outdoor environments for the working class (Dahlberg, 1985). Influences also came from the international functionalism movement, strongly expressed in the Stockholm Exhibition in 1930. The basic idea was that form or design should follow the function of dwelling both indoors and outdoors in new housing areas. Functionalistic planning and architectural values and policies included equal access to high-quality public spaces and provision of sun, light and air and an improvement in the population’s health. As a result, functionalistic multi-family housing areas – “People’s Homes” (*Folkhemshusen*) in 1940–1959 and the “Million Programme” (*Miljonprogrammet*) in 1960 until the mid-1970s – were established all over Sweden. 500,000 apartments were built in 15 years during the People’s Home programme and

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