

State-led gentrification?

The effects of transit infrastructure in Malmö, Sweden and Kitchener, Canada

Lina Olsson, Malmö University

Ren Thomas, Dalhousie University

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Research Context

Two mid-sized cities: Kitchener (270,000 inhab.) and Malmö (320,000 inhab.)

In both cities, new rail infrastructure for transit has been developed in recent years.

In both cities, the new transit infrastructures has not only aimed to impact travel patterns and behaviour, but to reshape neighbourhoods.



Research Context

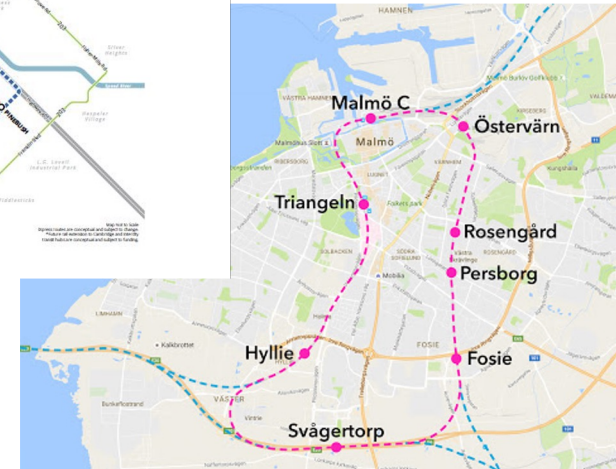
In both cities the new public transit lines link both local and regional destinations.

In Kitchener the new “Ion” LRT connects the mixed-income downtown area with suburban neighbourhoods. It also links two cities (Waterloo and Kitchener).

In Malmö the new commuter train line connects low-income areas with the wealthier city centre, as well as with two cities (Lund and Kristianstad).



The Region of Waterloo ION route



The Malmö Commuter train route

Research Context: Kitchener

Kitchener is the middle city between Waterloo and Cambridge, Ontario. The regional government raised the idea of a transit system linking the three in 2003. In 2009 the regional and municipal governments approved LRT, cost shared with the provincial and federal governments. The line between Waterloo and Kitchener was completed between 2014-2019

Focus: Downtown Kitchener station area, which had for the most part had a “gritty” reputation during the 1990s and early 2000s with a mix of retail, commercial, and residential neighbourhoods adjacent to downtown



Research Context: Malmö

In Malmö the city came up with the idea to use the old heavy ring rail surrounding the city for local and regional transit. The project was motivated as a social investment. The Malmö commuter train frequents 8 local stations, of which one - Rosengård station - is new.

Focus: Rosengård area, which is one of the poorest and most stigmatized neighborhoods in Sweden. The City of Malmö has committed to break social marginalisation eg. by improving public transit access to the area.



Rosengård station

Research Question

How do new public transit, and transit improvements, contribute to change in perceptions of the respective neighbourhoods among investors, developers, local residents, local business owners, neighbourhood organisations and NGO's?

Methods

Interviews: 8 in Malmö, 8 in Kitchener

Policy document analysis

Research Findings: Kitchener, Neighbourhood Type

Downtown Kitchener had a mix of land uses, including residential areas in and near the core. The City had long tried to revitalize the area, but it only began to change in 2010-2011 when several tech companies leased space downtown.



Research Findings: Kitchener, Role of the LRT Project

The LRT line was largely framed as a move towards sustainable growth and development, as it would no longer be possible to continue sprawling outwards (first raised in the Waterloo Region 2003 growth management plan). The Region did extensive consultation on this topic: this story was consistent across the interviews

Later, LRT was embraced by the tech community as bringing an innovative technology to a mid-sized city

Research Findings: Kitchener, Changing Perceptions

Up until 2010, it was difficult to get financing for projects in Downtown Kitchener. Then Communitech moved downtown into a large refurbished building, and shortly after that several private equity firms and big REITs began to build condominium projects downtown.

One downside has been rising rents and displacement:

“It drives up rent in the area, but I don’t see...in downtown Kitchener I don’t see the reaction to homelessness, mental health and addiction issues, from the tech companies it’s like what can we do to help..We don’t want to be San Francisco because they deal with all this stuff horribly. “ (tech employee)

Research Findings: Kitchener, Role of Real Estate Developers

Local real estate agents were quite surprised by the quick leap in land values after 2011. In 2002 land in the King/Victoria area near the Downtown Kitchener station cost \$50,000/acre. By 2012 it was \$1.5 million/acre

“Now when I market the area, I say it’s centre ice. Like you want to be near centre ice...On all of our marketing we’ve put in the number of steps from the LRT stops if it’s in that proximity. It’s very important.” (real estate agent)

Research Findings: Malmö, Neighbourhood Type

Malmö's Rosengård neighbourhood had always been primarily a residential area with multi-family housing. Very little new development had occurred since it was built in the 1970's. It has a centre with retail and some public service functions.

The area is densely populated.



Research Findings: Malmö, Role of the Rail Project

In Malmö, the commuter train project was initially framed as a strategy to “heal the city”, i.e. to counteract segregation and social inequality by creating links between the wealthier city centre and poor outer neighbourhoods. The project was deemed to not be financially viable, but socially motivated due to its anticipated ‘integrative’ and equality effects.

Gradually the focus shifted and it was more framed as a project for leveraging development in Rosengård, which has been subject to long-term under-investment. The new train station and the commuter train were seen as important tools for realizing this new goal, which also sought to change the demography of the area.

Research Findings: Malmö, Changing Perceptions

In Rosengård, Malmö, the commuter line has not contributed to improve transit access significantly. Travel patterns have not changed much.

The new station and the commuter line (which is infrequent) are instead seen to have a “symbolic value”. They aim to change perception of the Rosengård area among locals and potential new residents.

“In my view, building a station in this area was also symbolic. It was a major motive [for the City of Malmö]. I also think that they manage to convey that it was important to make this investment. /.../Locals do probably not perceive this project as important. It is important for everything that has to do with urban planning. This [the commuter train] is one of several important investments that the City of Malmö is making to develop the city.” (regional transit planner)

Research Findings: Malmö, Role of Real Estate Developers

Property developers see that the rail station is key to changing perceptions of the area, which has been seen as too financially risky to build in. The aim was to create the image of Rosengård as an attractive place to live in for middle-income groups.

In the existing housing stock, there appear to be no rent increases linked to this public transit improvement. Rents are however increased through renovations which are also a part of a strategy to make the area more attractive and successively change the demography of the area. The area is slowly gentrified.

Research Findings: Similarities and Differences

Transit investments were made for different purposes in the two cases.

Rosengård, Malmö: the commuter rail project was to make a symbolic investment to increase social equity and accessibility to/from the neighbourhood. It's difficult to say whether it has been successful or not in this regard. The social equity became less important and leveraging development became more important. The project became a strategy to change the demography of the area.

Kitchener: the LRT kick-started property development, and is widely perceived as part of a larger regional growth management strategy and as innovative infrastructure that puts them in the same league as much larger cities. There has been some loss of affordable housing and some displacement due to rising rents which community advocates are fighting. Kitchener and Waterloo are working on inclusionary housing policies.

Next Steps

Phase II of interviews: community residents in summer 2021, given COVID-19 restrictions, to find out the role of residents and advocacy groups

Questions?

Lina Olsson: lina.olsson@malmo.se

Ren Thomas: ren.thomas@dal.ca