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Changing development path through revised urban design

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Abstract

In the paper is presented and discussed a strategy of city restructuring and renewal towards a more service and knowledge intensive industrial character to meet increased competition between cities in attracting people and growing industries. Special attention is paid to the challenges for local politicians, planners and risk-willing private investors to find ways of switching from one development path to another with in many respects quite different characteristics and claims. According to earlier research a “cultural” reorientation, or change of image in people’s minds is more difficult than changing economic and physical conditions. A city renewal is thus both a matter of changed content and form but also how these new elements are perceived by creative and entrepreneurial people locally and in the surrounding world.

The chosen case is a small city in northern Sweden with a strong tradition of manufacturing industry. The main drivers in the reorientation process are local higher education options, fostering of creativity and innovations and construction of a physical milieu which may increase attractiveness and facilitate local and regional networking and cooperation.

Key words: mental maps, path dependence, urban design, creativity.

Introduction

One consequence of globalisation, and especially the integration processes in the European Union, is that national barriers to flows of people, goods and capital, have been significantly reduced. This means elaborated options for enterprises to increase their competitiveness through relocations and more efficient organisation of production and logistics. For individuals and households this means a corresponding increased freedom to stay or to move. However, increased flexibility and locational options for enterprises and households mean increased vulnerability for regions and places. Extremely vulnerable are regions and places with a strong dependence on industries where competitiveness is based on mature products, routine production and low prices.

All over the world we find examples of traditional industrial towns and cities in degeneracy in terms of reduced job opportunities, population loss due to net outmigration of people, outdated infrastructure and diminished investments. One may argue that structural changes and relocations have a long tradition as part of industrial development and technological shifts. However, the great difference between now and then in Sweden is the character of consequences for the affected places. During the peak of the goods production industry in terms of employment numbers decrease in one local enterprise could often be met with increase in another. In a back mirror perspective appears that over the recent decades many both small and big places have been captured in negative development spirals with diminished chances to find compensating alternatives. In many cases there are no simple ways to leave this path and make way for a new one which may lead to stabilisation or even growth and thereby into a completely changed identity and image.

In this paper is presented how a small city in northern Sweden is trying to change its development path. The challenge is to elaborate a strategy and action plan aiming at an increased attractiveness. This challenge ranges from attracting risk willing capital, entrepreneurs and other skilled key persons to providing the young generation with good motives to either stay directly or to come back after education and maybe also valuable job experiences nationally or internationally. Capacity building for such a process includes several components – some of them of a general character, others based on unique preconditions and options.

Departure from path dependence

A highly visible feature of old economy places is their built form, and this raises the question if rebuilding these places – revitalising their form – may help the adaptation process. Within urban geography research the terms morphology, function and evolution are often used. They represent key dimensions behind the concepts identity and image. Morphology is about the form elements of the urban area; the arrangement of streets, squares, parks, etc in relation to various physical landscape elements, the density and forms of buildings, in fact the whole urban landscape. The inner diversity of functions in the city is a signal of the role in a regional and wider context as site for production and consumption. Though the emphasis may be upon current conditions traces of the past often play a significant role. In practice, morphology, function and evolution are virtually inseparable. So are also the perceptions identity and image. Identity may be seen as an expression of the mix of physical, social, economic and cultural features which have been transformed into dominating viewpoints among the inhabitants about the special character of the place. It mirrors peoples feeling of homeliness and orientation of togetherness. It also reflects behavioral patterns among different categories of households and industries. Image is how this constructed identity is communicated with others and how it is perceived.

Development paths of places are often rather stable in character over time. A launched concept for the main barrier to break a negative trend is “path dependence”. The principle of path dependence originates from studies of development of technologies, which showed that technologies used over a long period of time, although increasingly inefficient, cannot easily be replaced by new and more efficient ones. Often there appear a “lock in effect” when well established tools and methods block out introduction of a new technology (David 1985). Also in organisational frameworks the principle of “path dependence” has been noticed. The American economist and Nobel Prize winner Douglass C. North (1990) has in studies of institutions found a similar pattern of barriers to renewal in cases when institutions have become inefficient. These findings are very close to results by the human geographers Gould and White (1986) who testified that it is easier to change economic conditions than an image in people’s eyes, or mental maps in their terminology.

A dilemma is that physical change may play an important role in city renewal but if it takes place as a reactive change then people do not see it as a renewal, but just as copying. Gould and Whites (ibid) message is that drastic strategies and action plans should be considered in order to achieve successful results.

“Influencing and changing deeply entrenched images (...) sometimes demands solutions that initially seem so outrageous, impractical and expensive that they are dismissed outright. Yet sometimes outrageous solutions of yesterday are tried and we find tomorrow that they are really not so outrageous at all” (Gould and White 1986, p.144-145). This statement calls for strategies that are based on more far reaching analytical work than benchmarking among cities with similar character who have managed to change development path.

There are many empirical evidences in line with this statement. A successful investment in terms of breaking a negative trend in a place has stimulated many others to invest in copies without achieving similar trend breaking effects. Popular projects across Sweden have been industrial parks, theatres, multifunction swimming halls, buildings for events and colleges for higher education. Only the starters among cities in such a reorientation process may in the best cases have taken a lead in their competition with other cities in their regional surroundings.

The challenge to attract the creative class

In recent years the importance of creativity as a main factor behind regional development has been advocated by Florida (2002). The basic idea is that economic growth, at least in the developed parts of the world, increasingly is generated by a creative class:

“The driving force is the rise of human creativity as the key factor in our economy and society. Both at work and in other spheres of our lives, we value creativity more highly than ever, and cultivate it more intensely.”
(Florida 2002, p.4)

The creative class includes people doing various types of creative work, for instance engineers, architects, researchers, teachers, writers, musicians, managers, lawyers, consultants and technicians. In contrast to other classes, such as the working class and the service class, people belonging to the creative class have, in general, longer education and higher incomes. According to Florida, the proportion of creative people and the ability to make use of their creativity explain differences in economic development in US regions. Analyses have shown that US regions with a high share of creative people outperform many traditional industrial centers and metropolitan areas in terms of economic growth.

Florida (2002) claims that creative people do not necessarily migrate to regions offering many jobs, rather they choose places that are perceived as attractive to them. Career opportunities are just one aspect among others. Places attracting creative people are characterised by tolerance, diversity and flexibility. Creative people prefer places that offer a wide range of recreational activities and personal freedom to choose life-style and identity, and that permits self-expression. In many cases these places are big cities and metropolitan areas, but there are also examples of smaller places and less densely populated areas attracting the creative class, not least because of these places high amenity values and authenticity. In contrast, creative people tend to avoid places and regions that are perceived as traditional, hierarchical and not open to newcomers, alternative lifestyles or new ideas. In particular, the kinds of communities with lots of traditional social capital put forward by Putnam (1992) are, according to Florida, more or less doomed to fade away. Small communities, often industrial or rural ones, characterised by strong social ties and conservative values are especially at risk of being abandoned by the creative class, whereas societies that offer both openness and social capital are those that are likely to become winners in terms of in-migration and economic growth. Both creative people and enterprises tend to cluster in these attractive places. From an enterprise perspective the decision to locate or invest in such a place is of interest in order to find qualified personnel, whereas from an individual or household perspective it is advantageous to live in a place with many possible employers to be able to change jobs frequently. Perhaps this can also be interpreted as a risk-minimizing strategy for individuals, especially young people, trying to make a living in a period with dramatic labour market changes and a society characterised by increasing uncertainties regarding for instance job security (see also Persson & Wiberg 1995).

The creative class that Florida (2002) describes may also be seen as a mix of Højrup's (1989) two life-modes emphasising independence/autonomy respectively career. Creative people thus value both independence and to make career though at the same time avoiding the traditional professional progress achieved by being loyal to one enterprise for a long time. Creative people, argues Florida (2002), make career by being active on a horizontal labour market and change jobs frequently not only between enterprises but also between branches, sectors and even professions.

According to a study by Garvill et al. (2000) an already substantial and increasing share of Swedish migrants claim that the main reason for moving is social or environmental. In fact, this category clearly outnumbers the group emphasising work-related motives. Also motives related to education are

frequent. Although the study was not limited to the creative class, it indicates that there have been important changes regarding the motives for migrating within Sweden during the last few decades.

Florida's ideas and findings partly correspond with observations done by researchers in Sweden and elsewhere in Europe. Already during the 1980s Andersson and Strömquist (1988) argued that Sweden had entered a post-industrial knowledge society where regional growth was based on factors such as knowledge, competence, creativity, communications and culture. They thus also included the importance of good communications for people, products and information, whereas Florida (2002) tends to play down this aspect as a key factor for regional growth. In addition may be argued that physical urban design can help to change places in two ways. Firstly, that it makes them more physically attractive places to live in. Secondly, that the physical rebuilding process may spark a social and cultural rebuilding process, so that the city milieu becomes more tolerant and open and hence more attractive for creative people.

Örnsköldsvik in context

In the following we will present and discuss efforts to change development path in the small city of Örnsköldsvik in northern Sweden. The case is far from unique in Sweden. It represents a category of cities where the process of retardation has been rather slow and so fairly balanced that there still exist substantial potentials and options to change the development path. The city has a long tradition as site for goods production with emphasis on the sectors machinery and pulp and paper. The number of inhabitants in the city centre is approximately 35 000 inhabitants and another 20 000 in the rest of the municipality. Between 1990 and 2008 the population of the city has decreased with 4%. In the rest of the municipality the decrease has been 11%.

The city of Örnsköldsvik is located at the coast of the Bothnian Sea and is characterised by a rather unique hilly landscape both within the city and in the nearby surroundings. These landscape qualities have also meant extremely good conditions for building a harbour for transports by sea within convenient walking distance from the city core. A further reason behind the specific location of the city is the closeness to a river, which formed a basic prerequisite for locating a pulp and paper factory at the river mouth in the past when raw materials in form of logs were floated on the river. Örnsköldsvik also has a long tradition as site for a major machinery company and many small enterprises with similar types of production. These two sectors, and with two

dominating companies, have significantly influenced how the city has developed from a very small town since the late 1800s. The development pattern since then has shown rather small variances between years both during times of population increase and decrease. This means that there are no experiences of sudden dramatic reductions of employment opportunities and related migration streams. As a consequence the path dependence has not explicitly been challenged in an acute crisis situation. The key companies and related smaller enterprises have gone through a rather successful product cycle development. Their competitiveness has increasingly switched towards applications of high competence and technology in production processes and automation.

The main problem for the city is thus not primarily the developments within enterprises. It is rather that the product development processes have resulted in reduced demand for mainly low skilled labour among existing industries and the growth of new enterprises and expansion of the service sector have been of insufficient volume to compensate for that. In turn this has led to net outmigration and population loss.

Urban design and rebuilding Örnsköldsvik

Due to changes in types of goods, transport systems and logistical solutions the traditional role of Örnsköldsvik harbour just a few hundred meters from the city core has disappeared and opened up for alternative use of this attractive area. Since the early 1990's the city has gone through a water front renewal as an essential part of efforts to elaborate a revised development path for the future. The launched projects and investments include several components aiming at a more advanced and a broader mix of activities with stress on the service sector.

Inspirations for this process have been found in many other cities around the world facing similar restructuring challenges. The chosen investment profile in Örnsköldsvik in terms of functions in mind follows a general pattern across Sweden which became popular already during the 1980's. The recommendation given by researchers and consultants was to build physical platforms in order to actively take part in the elaboration of a "C city" as the future option for maintaining and improving positions in hierarchies of cities. With "C city" is meant a place with a significant capacity and quality in terms of competence and creativity among people, cultural options and communications (Andersson & Strömquist 1988). An important part of that concept is also to focus on the core area of the city as a combined arena for production and

consumption in new service industries and activities. In principal terms a complete milieu for attracting the creative class includes the following types of functions: housing with unique qualities, higher education options, cultural options, high quality of IT infrastructure and transport infrastructure providing good accessibility to nearby cities, the national centre and international market centres.

The main concrete investments in the harbour area of Örnsköldsvik are localities for meetings, conferences and events, higher education courses and programmes, library, enterprises in the service sector and apartments. Very close is also located a multifunction swimming hall. The architecture of the buildings have also been used as signals for a new development path towards the future.

Options for a strategic city alliance

The profile of a revised development path in Örnsköldsvik may have both a local and regional dimension (Wiberg 2002). The local efforts may draw significant advantages by cooperation with the nearest city which is the university city of Umeå located 105 kilometers further north along the coast. In contrast to Örnsköldsvik the city of Umeå has had a population increase 1990-2008 with 25% and the rest of the municipality also with 25%. In a longer time perspective the contrasts between Örnsköldsvik are even stronger. While the municipality of Örnsköldsvik has experienced a population decrease of 8% since 1950 the municipality of Umeå has experienced an increase with 140%. This makes Umeå unique in expansion among municipalities north of Stockholm. Today the municipality of Umeå has 113 000 inhabitants. Of these approximately 75 000 people live in the city core. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the settlement pattern and contrasts in population change on a micro level between 1990 and 2002. The maps are based on georeferenced official population data with attributes linked to each individual. The coordinates for each individual are accurate on 100 x 100 meters. This makes it possible to make descriptions and analyses independently of administrative borders and traditional forms for aggregation of data on individuals.

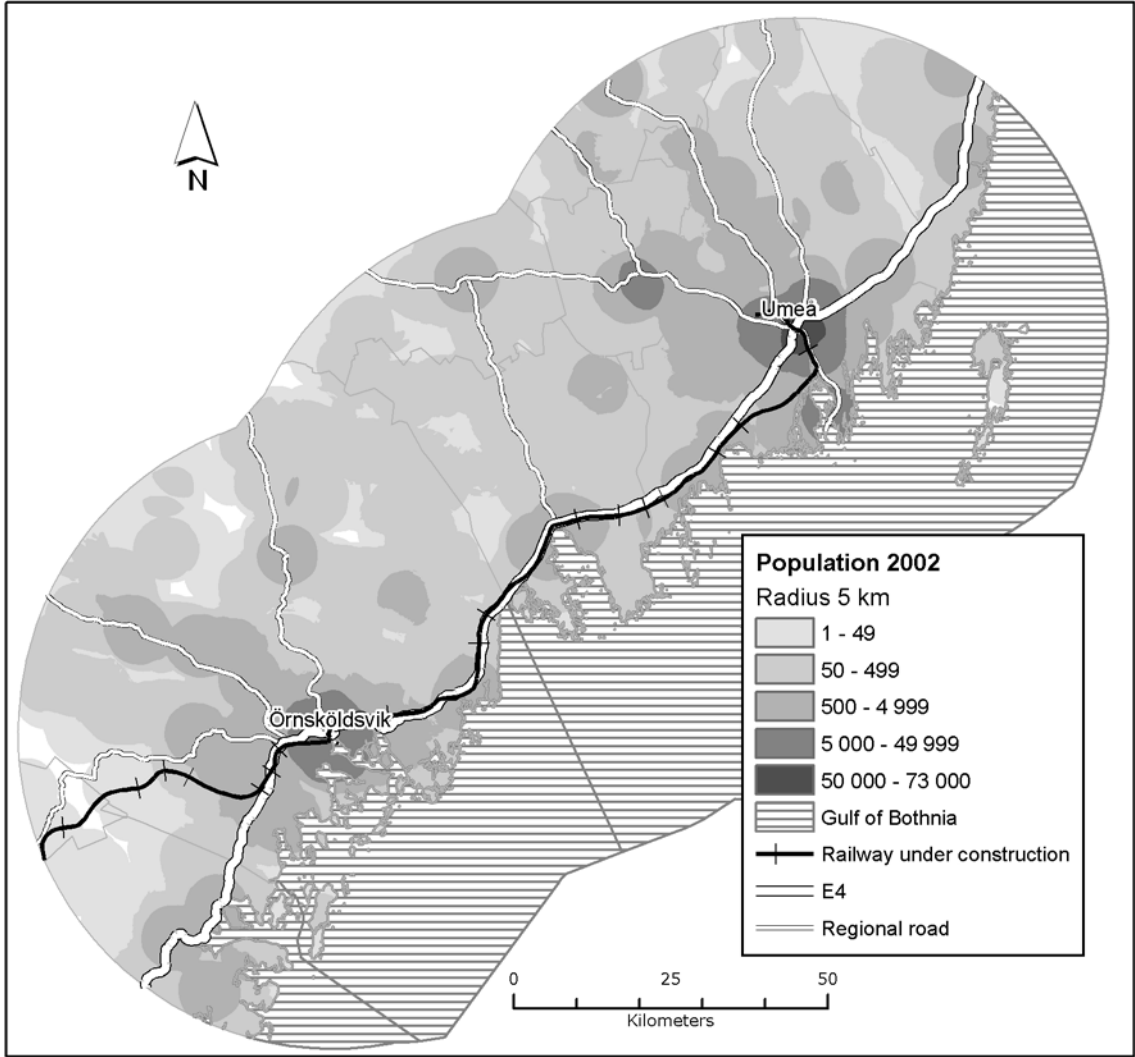


Figure 1. Settlement structure – population within 5 km from each grid cell 100 x 100 m.

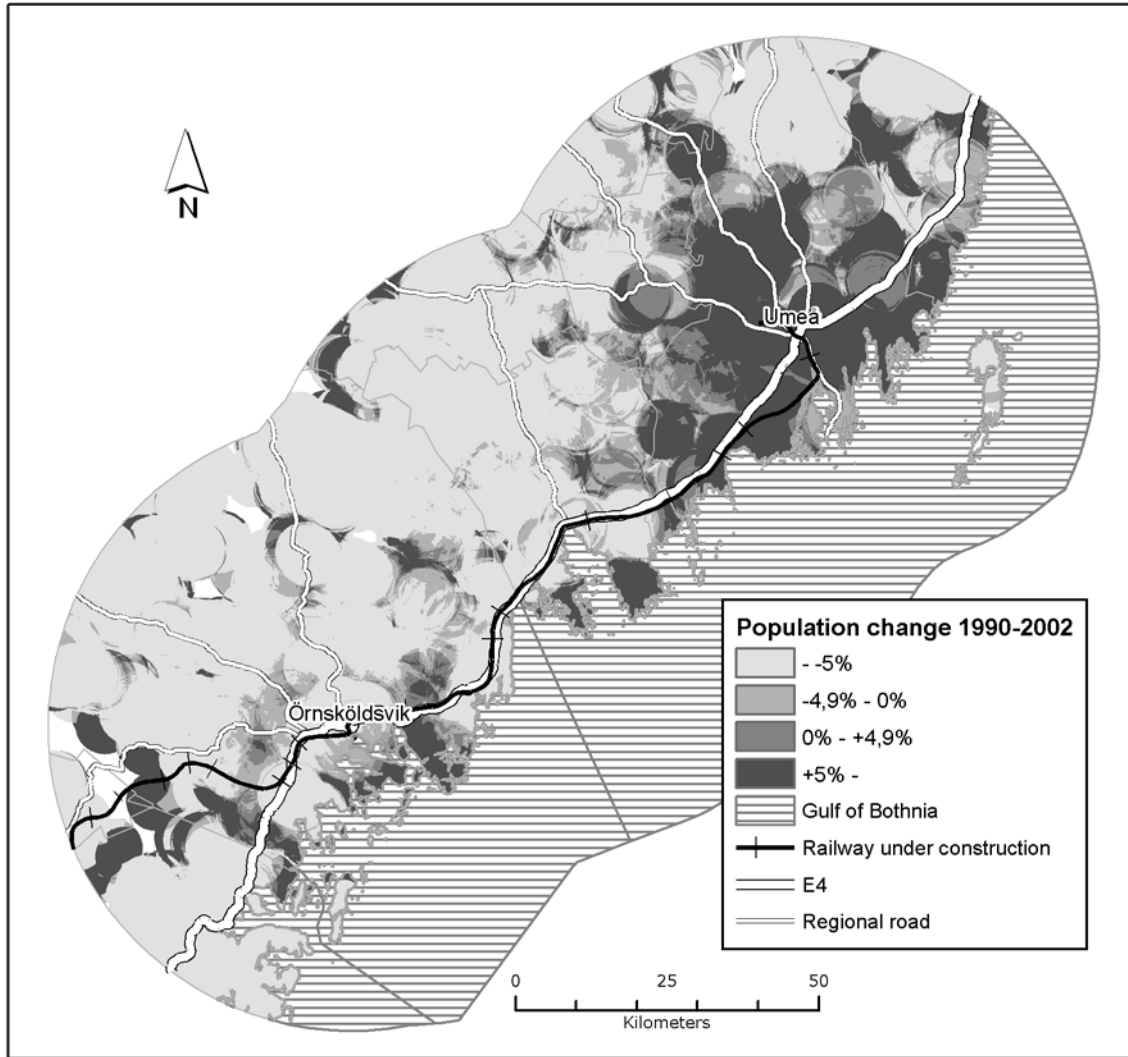


Figure 2. Relative population change 1990-2002 within 5 km from each grid cell 100 x 100 m.

The main explanation behind the significant increase in Umeå city and nearby surroundings is the establishment of a university. The first steps were taken during the 1950's and accelerated after the formal inauguration 1965. Today the university has approximately 4 000 people in staff and 29 000 students, making it the fifth in size in Sweden. The university has meant a lot for attraction and expansion of not only other public sector institutions but also private enterprises.

With reference to Floridas (2002) framework, stressing the role of the creative class, we find significant differences in composition of inhabitants between Örnsköldsvik and Umeå. We may use the share of highly educated at least three years as an estimate. In the city of Örnsköldsvik this share increased from 8,4

% among people aged 20-64 years in 1990 to 14,3% in 2002. In the city of Umeå the corresponding shares were 18,1% in 1990 and 28,5% in 2002. Figure 3 illustrates the differences across the study area more in detail.

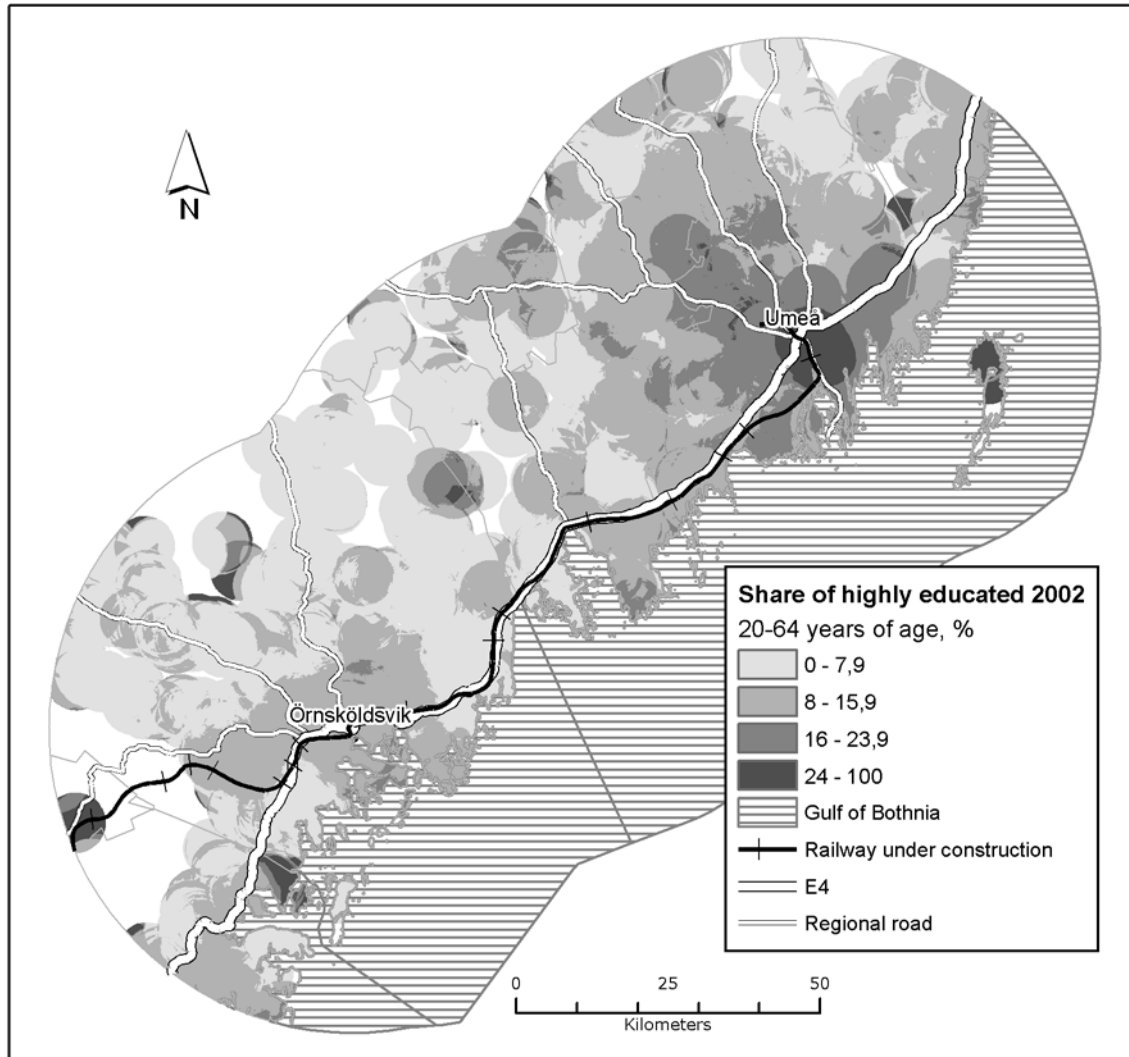


Figure 3. Share of highly educated 2002 within 5 km from each grid cell 100 x 100 m.

A consequence of these quite different development patterns over time is that the forms and contents of the cities are in many dimensions very different from each other. A challenge is thus to take advantage of the complementary features. Up to now and in the near future the distance between the city cores is a big hindrance for this. However, the internal accessibility conditions between the city cores will from 2010 be dramatically upgraded. A quite new railway with standard for rapid trains is under construction along the coast. It will mean quite improved possibilities for commuting between the city core of

Örnsköldsvik and Umeå and also improved accessibility to other cities in the south direction towards Stockholm.

A most visible present strategic alliance is campus Örnsköldsvik as a satellite to Umeå university. This arrangement provides accessibility to knowledge provision and evolution of competence building. A broader potential for mutual advantages lies in the complementary character of the economic life and the labour market demands in the two cities. This will give household members more degrees of choices of carrier paths. Also the market for various types of services will be enlarged which may lead to a more diversified supply structure.

The mental regeneration

The general policy perspective for the city and the whole municipality of Örnsköldsvik during recent years has had a focus on a need for mobilisation in line with a general trend among smaller cities captured in a negative population spiral over a longer period. The key to success lies in ability to stimulate and attract people with various types of competences and entrepreneurial spirits. The political leadership has launched the following strategic work. A red thread through the mobilisation has been a visionary work. The first step started in 1998 and was labeled Project Vision 2008 to shape Örnsköldsvik. The second step started 2006 and is labeled World class 2015. In these processes efforts have been on stimulating plurality, participation and sustainability in an open space for ideas and initiatives. A further feature of the visionary work is stress on three key components behind attractiveness and competitiveness of the city – supply of options and perceptions of the city as work place, as place to live in and as place to visit.

A clearly stated goal is to develop Örnsköldsvik as a city of knowledge and expertise. This is mainly being achieved through development of cooperation with Umeå University and the other nearby Mid Sweden University south of Örnsköldsvik. Also clearly stated are efforts to promote the well-being of the region's youth by improving educational and leisure opportunities for them.

Örnsköldsvik may also draw advantages of renewal initiatives taken in Umeå. Here one interesting opportunity may be mentioned. Since 1995 the European Union has designated cities of culture for a period of one year. Since 1999 the name of this is European Capital of Culture and from 2005 two cities in different countries will share this status each year. The countries from which these cities will be chosen have already been determined up to 2020. In 2014 Sweden is on the rotation list and Umeå is one of the candidates. This means

that work with formulating visions, strategies and action plans have started. Involvement of Örnsköldsvik in some part of these efforts seems worth considerations as there will at that time exist significantly better opportunities for rapid transports between the city cores on the new direct railway link.

The contrasts between Umeå and Örnsköldsvik may also open up for other influences from the international arena. One such dimension to consider for Örnsköldsvik is the "Slow City" concept. This process of appointing slow cities started in Italy just a few years ago and is already spread to many countries throughout the world. It is a grassroots movement that aims to reinvent to some extent diffuse but important aspects of urban life, by putting pleasure and well-being before profit, human beings and social life before head offices, slowness before speed (www.cittaslow.net/world/eccellenze.asp). A platform for such a movement is already at place. At the university campus in Örnsköldsvik there are undergraduate programmes with a preventive health profile. An infrastructural asset is also the multifunction swimming hall close to the water front and the university campus.

Concluding remarks

In this paper conditions and processes in the Swedish small city of Örnsköldsvik are presented and discussed. Several quite similar cases may be found across the Nordic countries. The development of Örnsköldsvik is based on strong functional links to a fairly limited rural hinterland and as that hinterland declined both the city and the municipality in general have lost positions in the national hierarchy. However, the absence of a severe crisis meant that the local politicians did not re-evaluate their strategies until the end of the 1900s. The start towards a reorientation was the initial steps of harbour redevelopment in the 1990s, in which consultants argued that this would help Örnsköldsvik rebuild itself as a city to meet the challenges of the knowledge economy. The following physical regeneration built the foundation for two visioning exercises which in turn build on one another, Project Vision 2008 and World Class 2015. This visioning work also built on new mental frameworks of Örnsköldsvik's residents, and allowed to stress a more open and cosmopolitan vision for the city, but also more inclusive for various categories of residents. That has in turn driven a wider process of restructuring and mental regeneration in the city. Several critical steps have been taken for re-networking of Örnsköldsvik, and building the necessary connections with other cities to attract the kinds of activities that realise Örnsköldsvik as an economic, social and cultural space with new qualities and potentials. Some of the new approaches and investments may be regarded as copying from other cities,

while others have unique features. At present the optimism about having managed to start a revised development path through a combination of these efforts is great. A rough quantitative indicator of this is population development. Between 2002 and 2008 the population in the municipality has increased with 340 persons or 0,5%. This increase has to a rather high degree occurred in the city and the immediate surroundings.

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