

Making Place for Sustainable Welfare in a Rural Setting

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Abstract

This article investigates how employees in welfare organisations address challenges to foster public places that can accommodate sustainable development. The overall aim of the study is to increase our understanding of the innovative states of mind among employees in rural welfare organisations, guiding how they forge places for the provision of legitimate sustainable welfare. Data were collected through ethnographic field studies in a public housing company in a rural municipality in southern Sweden. As we investigate the daily making and shaping of place in a rural public housing company, assigned to provide sustainable welfare, we will set out to analyse how employees act to create legitimate forms of sustainable welfare. Our unit of analysis concerns employees' innovative state of mind as they engage in identifying placemaking activities recognised as able to provide appropriate contributions to sustainable everyday life for the rural population. The results show nuances due to place, forming patterns in the innovative states of mind that guide the property managers' actions as they create legitimate, sustainable welfare in rural settings. The findings further suggest that placemaking, the daily making and shaping of places, in welfare organisations may sustain existing recognition of rural areas as peripheries or deprioritised places, reproducing a distinction between centre and periphery.

Keywords: Welfare organisations, workplace innovation, placemaking, rural, sustainability.

Introduction

This article investigates how welfare organisations address local challenges in fostering public places that are capable of accommodating sustainable development. The focus is on the daily making and shaping of places that allow welfare organisations to provide legitimate sustainable welfare in rural settings. More precisely, we analyse how employees in a rural welfare organisation, who are subject to political demands and expectations from a variety of local stakeholders, engage in placemaking activities to forge a sustainable everyday life for the rural population. Here, sustainability refers to development of welfare “that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). Further elaborated, this means that analysed employees address different durability issues that require their awareness of economic, ecological, and social conditions for the provision of rural welfare (Edwards, 2019). Previous research indicates that these are three common but broad conditions that often become specified at local level as welfare organisations struggle to make sense of them (PwC, 2023; Keskitalo & Andersson, 2017). Therefore, instead of treating economic, ecological, and social sustainability as entities that can easily be evaluated, we set out to explore how employees address and attribute different meanings to sustainability issues in their making and shaping of public spaces (Porter & Kramer, 2011; Caselunge et al., 2019; Edwards, 2019).

Here, placemaking is referred to as a bottom-up and hands-on process involving how employees intentionally or unintentionally create, shape, and change places (Baur et al., 2014). Thus, the analysis investigates the interplay between placemaking and employees’ abilities to solve problems and be innovative in everyday work practices (Lew, 2017; Ewalt, 2018), as central to emerging forms of sustainable welfare. By investigating the daily making and shaping of places, we are interested in frugal, innovative everyday activities. Such activities are not understood as eureka moments or attempts to bring inventions to the market (Albert, 2019). Instead, we align with previous research that has conceptualised innovative activities as mundane improvements of conditions at work (Delmas & Pekovic, 2018; Farooq et al., 2019; Gao et al., 2021). Our focus is on the employees’ understanding of how to contribute to a sustainable welfare in a rural setting (Wohlfart et al. 2016; Ploeg et al., 2021; Hossein et al., 2021), by capitalising on ideas that allow them to improve their daily work (Gao et al., 2021).

Research presents sustainable welfare as being more challenging in rural settings, often depicted as peripheries or deprioritised places, shaped by depopulation and communities falling into despair (Sällström, 2015; Carlow et al., 2016). Due to low tax revenues, welfare is perceived as being difficult to finance (Blix, 2013; Mörk et al., 2019; Sävje & Baars, 2022). Therefore, organisations assigned to provide rural settings with welfare can be expected to struggle to identify realistic means and measures that could serve a sustainable future welfare; they are expected to seek out new, innovative ways of managing and organising

services (Silvestre, 2015; Ghavempour & Valde, 2019; Pot et al., 2020; Bolten & Park, 2022). This means that employees become subject to what previous research depicts as demands for an innovative state of mind (Greenland et al., 2019; Galvin et al., 2020; Tiwari & Thakur, 2021), meaning that they must continuously change the way they think and act to contribute to sustainability (Masood & Afsar, 2017; Bicchieri, 2017; Bergquist et al., 2019). Such demands placed on employees in rural welfare organisations can address attempts to seek out both measures, potentially disrupting business as usual (North & Smallbone, 2000; Tiwari & Thakur, 2021), and more subtle changes based on new ways of performing daily actions (Wohlfart et al., 2016; Hossein et al., 2021; Ploeg et al., 2021).

While addressing such mundane workplace innovations, in the daily making and shaping of public places in a rural setting, the analysis recognises that place has an impact on behaviours and actions that are perceived as meaningful (Richardsson & Jensen, 2003; Halford, 2008); that is, places can either enable or obstruct action (Delmas & Pekovic, 2018; Vitello & Willcocks, 2020; La Fuente et al., 2022). In our exploration of employees' innovative states of mind, we recognise the need to identify and prioritise place-bounded actions (Ellery et al., 2021). Thus, our analysis complements existing studies identifying demographic and broader socioeconomic challenges to rural welfare by recognising the interplay between the dynamic forging of employees' innovative states of mind and rural placemaking. Concretely, this is done by analysing how property managers, at a public housing company in a Swedish rural municipality, engage in placemaking activities. Public housing is seen here as a critical case, where the daily work practices allow us to examine emerging forms of sustainable placemaking within the welfare sector (Albert, 2019; Farooq et al., 2019; Hossain, 2020; Hossain et al., 2021). When doing so, our emphasis on daily practices also enables us to revive discussions about how demands for innovative solutions to sustainability challenges in a rural context involve everyday adaptations and changes in the provision of welfare (Rau, 2018).

Hence, the overall aim of the study is to increase our understanding of the innovative states of mind among employees in rural welfare organisations, which guides how they forge places for the provision of legitimate sustainable welfare. The following questions have guided the analysis:

- How do employees in welfare organisations act in their daily work practices to create a sustainable everyday life for the population in rural areas?
- How do employees' actions interplay with conditions constitutive to place?

The article continues with a review of previous research, followed by a presentation of the theoretical framework for the analysis. After describing the setting and methodology, the results will be presented through subheadings based on the themes found in the analysis of the empirical data. The article concludes with a discussion, including theoretical analysis, and a list of references.

Previous research

Several studies have focused distinctly on urban placemaking activities in the design of public places. One example is a study by Matthews and Gadaloff (2022) on public art as a placemaking device to boost social capital and drive urban regeneration in three cities in Australia, highlighting variations in planning approaches to manage public art. Another example is Truong et al. (2022), who studied the enhancement of urban nature and placemaking through community gardening in social housing. The study showed how community gardens had strengthened a placemaking approach in these communities, fostering a stronger sense of community and enhancing the provision of green space. However, not all urban placemaking studies have focused on concrete or planned activities. Mohammed and Saad (2022) investigated the concept of place attachment in relation to placemaking and urban quality of life. Such a perspective differs from Kärholm et al. (2020), who studied placemaking in relation to migration and the transformation of urban space, investigating how practices of everyday life could challenge new and existing spatial scale rations and how they could be addressed by planning. From previous research, we know quite a lot about how urban areas can thrive and develop in a favourable and more sustainable direction through the making and shaping of place. As previously indicated, placemaking in rural settings is encompassed by unique and often challenging conditions constitutive to the rural.

Even though research has often neglected rural placemaking in favour of an urban perspective (Cresswell, 2009; Ghavempour & Vale, 2019; Platt, 2019; Johnson-Woods & Feldpaush-Parker, 2022), there are some researchers looking into the topic (see e.g., Gallagher & Ehlman, 2020; Hill et al., 2021; Xue, 2022). Within existing research on rural placemaking, it is common to depict the rural as something that emerges in relation to the urban. As an example, Johnson-Woods and Feldpausch-Parker (2022) studied the so-called “New ruralism”, which consists of approaches that enhance or preserve rural-urban edges to benefit urban areas, suggesting placemaking activities in a small village near the Canadian border. Tourism-oriented studies are also common in this field of research. An example is Zhang et al. (2021), who focused upon rural tourism by paying special interest to smallholders; specifically, how they adapted to a new rural paradigm and coped with changes in the experience, significance and importance of rural place.

Previous research has shown that placemaking can constitute a powerful tool in reaching sustainability goals (Buhl et al., 2016; Donovan, 2017; Ghavempour & Vale, 2019) and contribute to sustainability (McClinchey, 2021; Toolis, 2021). For example, the making and shaping of places in a sustainable direction can be about improving public transportation and greenways, resulting in more environmentally sustainable communities (Toolis, 2021). It can also relate to well-designed places providing a sense of security and stimulating social interaction (London, 2020), which relates to a social dimension of sustainability. Increasing knowledge of how placemaking is manifested in practice is relevant since several studies have attributed employees’ key functions in terms of enabling organisational contributions to sustainable development (Nidumolu et al., 2009; Haug & Talwar, 2010; Jenkin et al., 2011;

Sharma et al., 2021; Yuriev et al., 2022). Similar conclusions have often been drawn in research about the propensity of organisations to innovate (Yasir & Majid, 2020; Munoz-Pascual et al., 2021; Gao et al., 2021), which often is considered synonymous with the ability to forge sustainability. Still, we know considerably less about how sustainable welfare is created from the bottom up in organisations' daily practices. Instead, the emphasis is usually on investments, implementation processes and governance to innovate sustainability – that is, a top-down perspective (Adams et al., 2016; Gao et al., 2021; Tiwari & Thakur, 2021; Kim, 2022; Yuriev et al., 2022).

Studies on placemaking in organisations have also traditionally been characterised by a top-down approach. A plethora of studies have examined placemaking from a policy perspective (e.g. Nicodemus, 2013; Frenette, 2017; Guo, 2023), or in relation to management and governance (Vukmirovic & Gavrilovic, 2020; Yu et al., 2022; Son et al., 2022). However, placemaking in everyday practices has received attention during recent years (Ewalt, 2018; Rau, 2018; Hossain et al., 2021; Pink et al., 2022; Yuriev et al., 2022). Existing studies of placemaking in everyday work practices have primarily focused on activities within four walls, neglecting the making and shaping of public places. For example, Wilhoit Larson (2021) studied how and why employees create home at work, such as engaging in placemaking activities like decorating offices to be more like home. Another example is Cho et al. (2022), who investigated placemaking based on psycho-social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on experiences of working from home. The study included matters such as reimagining the physical space and the construction of home as a place that served multiple and, in some cases, conflicting roles.

This article contributes to research by deepening our understanding of the innovative states of mind, guiding the daily placemaking in welfare organisations, unfolding as the employees seek out legitimate opportunities to address demands for sustainable welfare in rural areas frequently depicted as peripheries or deprioritised places.

Theoretical framework

In the analysis, place is considered a social construction, meaning that places do not simply exist but take shape in interaction with human action. Places are seen as subjects that are created by people – that is, other subjects – and their understanding of place. This means that places are constantly created and re-created, made and re-made (Giddens, 1979; Friedman, 2010; Fuller & Löw, 2017). Moreover, the central concept of placemaking is diverse in its definitions. Placemaking can refer to the explicit or tacit cooperation among people to maintain, create and bring meaning to places through bodily occupation of differential resources and constraints (Chica, 2021). The concept can refer to an unplanned, organic bottom-up and local initiative process or approach to the creation of place. Similarly, placemaking can refer to planned, top-down, intentional, and professionally defined processes or paths (Lew, 2017). In some definitions, placemaking involves planning,

designing, and managing public places (Pascucci, 2015; Ewalt, 2018). Other definitions emphasise a hands-on approach and the aim to improve a place, such as a neighbourhood, by a process that inspires to reimagine and reinvest public places (Vukomirovic & Gavrilovic, 2020).

Due to the focus on welfare organisations' daily provision of sustainable welfare, placemaking will be referred to as a bottom-up and hands-on process that recognises the way employees intentionally or unintentionally create, shape and change places (Baur et al., 2014). Furthermore, placemaking encompasses every aspect of place, including sustainability (Courage, 2013; Pascucci, 2015). Like place, sustainability should not be seen as a dichotomous concept. It is not a matter of organisations or their employees contributing or not contributing to a sustainable development. Rather, sustainability is a dynamic process that unfolds over time, a becoming, meaning that sustainability must also be made and re-made (Mohrman & Worly, 2010; Adams et al., 2016; Ghavempour & Vale, 2019). The forging of places for provision of sustainable welfare is essential for the legitimacy of public organisations. To be considered legitimate, organisations must respond to and align with societal norms and needs and meet the exhortations of its stakeholders (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Suchman, 1995; Buhmann, 2017; Vodonick, 2018:459). To be considered legitimate, organisations must then contribute to sustainable development (Lins et al., 2017; Dyck et al., 2019).

Like most sociologically informed analyses of the making of places, our focus in this study is directed towards actors; that is, the ones who create and change place (Baur et al., 2014). Due to the focus on employees, the concept of agency becomes prominent; that is, employees' social commitment and capacity to control and plan their actions based on their own considerations and what is happening in their surroundings (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Agency is ultimately about people's ability to act, often to achieve some kind of change, linking the concept to an innovative state of mind (Bennet & McWorther, 2019; Zhou & Deneen, 2020; Hillebrand et al., 2020). Furthermore, agency comprises different elements. The *iterational element* means that people act based on what is already known, such as routines and existing ways of working. The *projective element* has a more project-oriented character, where people act to achieve specific goals and visions of the future. The *practical-evaluative element* derives from the ability to make judgements and evaluate different options for action, considering both obstacles and opportunities. These three elements are always present, to varying degrees in different situations, mainly determined by the prevailing conditions (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Furthermore, there is an interplay between employees' agency and place. Contextual characteristics influence how people think, act and whether they are to change their behaviours (Flyvberg & Richardsson, 1998; Richardsson & Jensen, 2013; Wilhoit, 2016; Van Renswouw et al., 2022; La Fuente et al., 2022). As examples, work environments are crucial for organisational innovativeness as they impact on employees' creative behaviours (Pakos et al., 2023), and the fact that peripheries are usually attributed lower status than cities affect the people who reside there (Heldt Cassel & Stenbacka, 2020).

Placemaking is the doing and negotiating within an existing place or space (Chica, 2021). Organisations providing welfare are, in themselves, spatial landscapes containing factors that can enable but also obstruct action. Even if these factors are not fixed once and for all, employees must navigate among them (Richardsson & Jensen, 2003; Halford, 2008). The same applies to the broader context, which can also be both actions enabling or obstructing (Delmas & Pekovic, 2018; Vitello & Willcocks, 2020; La Fuente et al., 2022); this means that employees' work locations impact upon their mindsets and actions. To provide an example, placemaking requires resources and social capital (Wyckoff, 2014; Chica, 2021). Access to resources differs between contexts and the access affects employees' abilities to act and, by extension, the external setting (Richardsson & Jensen, 2003). Another example relates to our sense of place, constituting an important foundation for the engagement of making sustainable places, by referring to places as being attached to memories and experiences. When talking about our sense of place, we also refer to elements like emotional attachment, meaningfulness and belonging (Matsunobu, 2018). The element of belonging has also been defined as place-belongingness comprising a personal, intimate feeling of being home in a place (Antonsich, 2010). Since people respond differently to places, their sense of place varies. However, these responses are dynamic, not static (Pascucci, 2015; Vitello & Willcocks, 2020; Ellery et al., 2021). The attachment to place becomes represented in peoples' cognitive maps (Rapoport, 1990). A strong and positive sense of place can stimulate initiatives to improve place, which in turn can generate an even more positive sense of place (Wyckoff, 2014; Ellery et al., 2021). To relate this to sustainability, people who are attached to a place, and ascribe meaning to it, become more concerned with issues like environmental matters in their surrounding (Ghavempour & Vale, 2019).

As we investigate the daily making and shaping of place in a rural public housing company, assigned to provide sustainable welfare, we will set out to analyse how employees act to create legitimate forms of sustainable welfare. Our unit of analysis concerns employees' innovative state of mind as they engage in identifying placemaking activities that are recognised as able to provide appropriate contributions to sustainable everyday life for the rural population. We will pay special attention to the interplay between employee's actions and the conditions constitutive to place. In doing so, we recognise both that place is created, shaped, and changed by people's action and that place also influences these actions.

Setting and methodology

The setting

The setting for the study is a public housing company in Sweden. Instead of offering government-subsided housing specifically directed to households with limited incomes, public housing companies in Sweden are owned by the municipalities, and their main aim is to provide sustainable and affordable rental housing for the entire population (Svärd, 2016;

Sveriges Allmännyttta, 2017; Boverket, 2021). These companies are required by law to take social responsibility and contribute to the general welfare (SFS 2010:879). Accounting for almost 20 per cent of Sweden's housing stock, they are also required to conduct their operations based on commercial principles, distinguishing them from many other public services. While their social responsibility is in line with the general nature of the public sector, and their business approach is closer to the private sector, we may thus describe them as hybrid organisations (Mair et al., 2015).

The analysed public housing company operates in a rural municipality in southern Sweden (Jordbruksverket, 2019; Tillväxtverket, 2021). Geographically, 4 per cent of the municipality is made up of populated areas. The rest consists of 74 per cent forest land, 13.5 per cent agricultural land and 8.5 per cent other, such as marshland. Since the 1970s, the population has decreased by approximately 6000 residents. Approximately 37,000 people now live in the municipality, the majority in the central town (81 per cent). The average age of the population is 47 and almost 30 per cent of the residents are older than 65 (www.scb.se). The company owns approximately 3300 apartments, mostly located in the central town but rarely in the town centre. In addition, the company conducts management services in non-owned properties, such as municipal school buildings and elderly care-homes. Within the company there is a CEO, eight department heads and about 150 employees. The average age of employees is close to 50 and most of them are men.

In this study, our point of departure is the company's sustainability work. This is a strategic decision as challenges in contributing to sustainable development are obvious to organisations that account for local welfare in rural settings, often lacking strategic and long-term work on sustainability issues, partly due to a lack of expertise and resources, but mainly for economic reasons (Sävje & Baars, 2022). This forces welfare organisations to address a variety of tense demands for sustainable welfare and everyday life, fostering costs and concerns as they try to turn rural regions into places capable to offer the population a sustainable way of living. Sustainability then places demands on workplace innovation. We focus specifically on the approximately 60 property managers who work in teams in different parts of the municipality. This allows us to move closer to the actual practice for placemaking as a bottom-up and hands-on process.

Data collection

The empirical material draws on ethnographic field studies, a methodology that is often used and advocated for grasping short-term processes such as interactions about place, space and spatial practices (Baur et al., 2014; Merriman, 2015; Schoneboom, 2018; McClinchey, 2021; Chica, 2021). We chose this methodology because it provided an opportunity to be close to employees' work practices so that we could get hold of the conduct of their innovative state of minds. Being close to the actual practice for placemaking was considered beneficial for creating deep and detailed knowledge about the different perspectives that are played out (Descombe, 2014). Ethnographic data were gathered between February 2020 and January

2021. The company's sustainability work was observed on 135 occasions, for a total of 346.5 hours. Some observations aimed to increase the understanding of the organisational context, while others aimed to increase the understanding of the sustainability work conducted in the organisation and in employees' daily work practices. Meeting observations were conducted both at management meetings and meetings at the departments between managers and employees. Observations were also conducted by following employees, mostly property managers, during their workdays. One-third of the observations, mostly meeting observations, were conducted digitally due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Data were also collected through ethnographic interviews with employees and managers; that is, informal, exploratory and often spontaneous interviews at the setting (Allen, 2017). Eventually, we also recognised the importance of collecting data covering staff that worked in different rural contexts, ranging from those who worked in the central town to those who worked in peripheral areas of the municipality. This type of variation in the type of data that is collected is common in this type of field study and is considered beneficial to attempts to elaborate and test preliminary interpretations throughout the analysis (Carpiano, 2009).

Analysis

The data consist of field notes written during the observations and the interviews. A total of 759 pages of computerised field notes were produced, forming the basis for the thematic analysis (Carlsson, 2010). Initially, the field notes were divided into observations and interviews at management level and operational level. Fieldnotes from observations and interviews with property managers were then sorted out. The analysis began by reading the field notes. During a second read-through, data were coded with an empirical approach. While the first step was characterised by open coding (cf. Charmaz, 2014), the second step was more theoretically informed, as the codes were reviewed to create more stringent codes. In doing so, the focus was on finding patterns within the codes that would form empirical subthemes and, by extension, overarching themes. The longer period for data collection facilitated the analysis and increased the reliability since it allowed follow-ups for validating interpretations. The analysis resulted in three overarching themes: (1) attaching to places, (2) renewing places, and (3) restoring places. Each of the overarching themes included subthemes, referring to nuances in the data collected from residential areas and more peripheral areas; see Table 1.

Ethics

Ethical considerations and principles were integrated in the research design to protect the integrity and confidentiality of the informants and the organisation, such as in handling and storing data as well as in the synthesis of the results. Informants were given written information about the study and their consent was requested consistently, with the right to withdraw consent (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017). No formal ethical review was required for the study because Swedish law does not require ethical approval for interviews with staff

concerning work-related issues (Lag om Etikprövning [Swedish law of Ethic Regulation], SFS 2003:460).

Results

The results show how the company operated in two different kinds of rural settings: rural residential areas and rural peripheral areas. Residential areas were located in central town, while peripheral areas consisted of smaller communities in the municipality. In some residential areas, property managers faced challenges related to matters such as integration, overcrowding, and crime, sometimes described in terms of: “drug sales and people shooting with air rifles”, “10-year-old girls who don’t dare to go outside”, or “the gang gathers outside the apartment. It’s drug dealing outside the kitchen window, not so nice ...”. These kinds of challenges were regularly discussed at management meetings and the company took active measures to overcome the challenges, such as by collaborating with the local police and social services. Challenging conditions also occurred in peripheral areas, with the difference that property managers did not experience the same organisational support as in the central town. The interviewees depicted these areas as less prioritised and complained that they had to “strain themselves bloody” to get support from management, or local politicians. One employee said, “All the money goes to the central town before we get anything”. Peripheral areas were also characterised as places with poor Internet connections, a lack of charging stations for electric cars and disabled parking, etc.

In the following three sections we focus on property managers’ innovative state of minds at work and how this has been shaped in interplay with the conditions characterising these two types of rural areas. The first section concerns how the interviewees’ attachment to these different rural areas motivated them to invest in being innovative, trying to create a sustainable everyday life for the population in their area. In the second and third sections, we focus on how property managers engaged in placemaking activities, aiming at *renewing* places or *restoring* places, as they set out to create a sustainable everyday life for the rural population.

Attaching to places

Property managers, working in both residential and peripheral areas, frequently expressed how they felt dedication towards place. Their dedication was commonly sprung from attaching to the place; that is, having a sense of home or belonging. Places in focus to their work were seldom just sites where the property managers engaged in their work practice, as they often worked and lived at the same location where both family and friends resided. It was also common that they had grown up in the area, meaning that their attachment to the places they were in charge of often went far back in time and that they had previous classmates, teachers, old babysitters and so on in the area. Several of the property managers managed the property that they had grown up in or school buildings where they once had

been pupils. When following one property manager during his workday at a school building, he described how the green floor, as well as the wall bars in the gym, were the same as when he had been a pupil. He talked about when the school had been rebuilt, many years ago, and how he as a young boy had thrown one of his old gym shoes into the solidifying concrete, resulting in his shoe now being cast in the concrete foundation of the school. The manager said, "It's a certain feeling to have a history with the properties".

Nonetheless, the property managers had a sense of home, or attachment, that varied between residential areas and peripheral areas, and that fostered different innovative states of mind, ultimately also affecting their practice. In peripheral areas, property managers felt a sense of belonging to places that had decayed over the years and struggled with upholding welfare. Peripheral areas were characterised by a certain fragility, and the interviewees often stated that there was an urgent need to take action. Property managers also described how they could not expect nor wait for someone else to get things done but had to act themselves; they were depicting themselves as responsible for the local community, or as "the extended arm of the municipality". One property manager explained the situation as follows: "We can't lie down and die; we have to do something". Property managers who worked in peripheral areas often took the initiative, constantly acting to create a sustainable everyday life for the population, albeit in a rather ad hoc manner as they acted on local needs. This differed from the residential areas, where property managers acted in more organised ways. As opposed to peripheral areas, activities in central town were characterised as rather stable. Welfare was not being threatened in the same way, and collective, societal measures were taken to preserve and develop local welfare. Even when the stability in central town was challenged by factors such as crime, property managers had access to organisational support, as well as support from the local police, for example. The property managers described the creation of a sustainable everyday life for the rural population as considerably more manageable. Property managers could focus on making an extra effort to improve welfare, not because there was an urgent need to do so, but as a good deed. For example, one property manager helped a tenant with a physical disability to arrange a locking device for his walking aid. This meant that the tenant could leave the device outside the apartment without any significant risk of it being stolen.

The differences between the peripheral and residential rural settings were further confirmed by one of the managers as follows: "There is more commitment in rural areas [areas outside of central town] to change and improvements. In those areas, it's not as easy as just calling someone. It is more difficult to stimulate change in the central town". Nevertheless, staff working in the peripheral areas expressed concern for the reliance on individual commitment to tackle urgent matters outside by stating that they may have problems the day when they retire or resign. In one smaller community, property managers also expressed doubts about whether the same dedication to act on urgent matters would remain if future property managers did not live at the location. They saw a risk that property managers who lacked a certain sense of belonging to the place where they worked would simply regard work as

nothing but a job, restricting their activities to formal work tasks, and neglect less formalised demands for a wider engagement in the area.

In the upcoming sections, we will describe how this attachment to place also became linked with different innovative states of mind, manifested in practices aiming to create a sustainable everyday life for the rural population. We identify two ideal typical practices that aim to renew or restore places. In brief, these are two practices that can be illustrated by referring to an initiative in a residential area, aiming to manage a great number of abandoned bicycles in the area. The responsible team intervened to make it “look good in the area again” by collecting these bicycles. They were cleaning up; that is, restoring places in the area. However, when they realised that all the bicycles could not be returned to their owners for several reasons, they also managed to find a new way to manage abandoned bicycles by donating them to a second-hand organisation whose profit benefited the local associations, and thus indirectly contributing to the renewing of local places by involving others in the maintenance.

Renewing places with support from the organisation or with a little help from my friends

To create a sustainable everyday life for the rural population, interviewees sometimes saw the need to renew places; that is, to change or adjust existing facilities and services. One example of how property managers acted to renew places was manifested in their attempts to nudge tenants to develop ecologically sustainable behaviours, such as increasing the recycling of materials. For instance, in one peripheral area, property managers engaged in nudging by putting up an informal sorting station for metal and cardboard outside a rental property. Property managers mentioned that while there was a formal sorting station in the area not far from the property, it was considered too far away for the elderly tenants in the property, justifying measures to facilitate and stimulate recycling by creating a new, more available and closer sorting station. Another property manager in one of the residential areas decided to designate a shelf allowing informal recycling in a municipal service operation building. In doing so, assistant nurses who worked in the building would become more aware that they could place products like broken light bulbs or old electronics on the shelf. The property manager motivated this extra service by stating that it is “better than if it would end up in the garbage,”. In both examples, property managers took responsibility for discharging the materials at the formal recycling facilities.

When renewing places, property managers often referred to their own attachment to the place they engaged with to identify local needs to act upon; that is, they were reflecting on their own personal experience of what would be appreciated by those populating the area. Initiatives based upon identified needs could then consist of, for example, creating social meeting venues. In one residential area, one team choose to build an outdoor furniture that enabled wheelchair users to get close to the table surface and use the furniture as intended, improving their access to outdoor environments. Peripheral areas often lacked social meeting

venues for the broader population, encouraging a team to build a public barbecue area for residents. This was done by reusing a concrete pipe that had been left at the location after sewage work, and they asked an old friend in the area for the material for the grill. One of the property managers pointed out how the barbecue area was not only an innovative way to handle different leftover materials, but it also allowed them to forge a place that was accessible from both the local school and the elderly care-home. The placement would also enable the elderly residents to view children from their windows when they were having barbecues. Another innovative example relates to the COVID-19 pandemic. During the first year of the pandemic, the Swedish government urged citizens to reduce physical contact and elderly care-homes established curfews, meaning that residents could not meet their relatives. However, the employees in the housing company noted that many elderly suffered from social isolation, and to make a difference and enable elderly residents and their relatives to meet despite the pandemic, some property managers in a peripheral area constructed a “Corona wall”. The construction was placed outdoors and consisted of a wooden frame on wheels with a plexiglass sheet inside the frame. By allowing the parties to sit on different sides of the plexiglass, the construction provided a new and safe way for the parties to meet, allowing them to avoid being infected.

When renewing places, many property managers emphasised the importance of having relations with the local population by talking about “favours and re-favours”. One property manager also stressed that “it’s important to have an old classmate in every municipal administration” to be able to get things done. These types of informal collaborations were especially common in peripheral areas where property managers regularly acted together with local acquaintances to renew places and associate services for the citizens, such as asking a friend to get a grill for the barbecue. It was also common for the interviewees to exchange favours with other local actors or officials from other organisational domiciles. For example, property managers in one smaller community helped a local entrepreneur with minor practical tasks. In return, they received help with interpreting when meeting tenants who did not speak Swedish, which led to the community becoming more inclusive towards newly arrived residents. Another example of informal collaboration was initiated when a property manager was contacted by a colleague who worked in a nearby community. The colleague informed that they were about to demolish a playground area and asked if there was something the property manager and his team wanted to have and reuse. The property manager appreciated the request since the local playground only had a swing that had to be renewed. When showing the current playground, the property manager pointed out how there was now both a slide and a climbing frame. He also emphasised that “they didn’t look like that when we picked them up” and that the team invested both time and some money to fix them up, but not anywhere near the purchase price.

Restoring places – struggling with mundane mending or urgent matters

The property managers also described the need to restore places; that is, to rehabilitate places and make them sustainable. In residential areas, restoring measures involved

mundane work tasks or routines such as fixing broken benches and picking up litter on the ground. However, measures to restore places emerged as a more extensive theme among interviewees working in peripheral areas, often depicting innovative actions against different types of adverse development. For instance, the interviewees talked about acting against the depopulation that motivated the housing company to address difficulties to rent out apartments by reducing its operations in peripheral areas. To retain the current population and prevent residents from feeling compelled to move to central town when their needs could no longer be met on site, property managers described how they customised their services by conducting tasks that “don’t really belong to the job”, such as offering assistance to relocate, refurnish apartments, sign TV subscriptions, run errands in central town, or transport waste. Acting outside of their professional roles in this way was often justified as measures that are sensitive to the fact that many tenants were elderly, with relatives who had left the region, enabling them to continue to live at the location. Property managers in peripheral areas were also keen to react immediately to opportunities to regain the number of inhabitants. For instance, during one observation two property managers were trimming grass at the local square when they were approached by a young man who told them that he needed an apartment since he had recently got a job in the area. After some discussion, the property managers told him that they had a suitable apartment to offer. In a follow-up conversation about the situation, one of the property managers stated: “Out here we got to have our own rental service”, indicating that this was the way they have to work. The property managers also emphasised that it was appreciated by the actual renters, who worked at the headquarters in the central town and who found it difficult to rent out apartments outside of central town.

Measures aiming to restore places frequently also addressed unrest or disruptions in the social order characterising the community. For instance, to come to terms with a gang of local teenagers vandalising public places in a peripheral area, property managers had come up with the idea of offering one of the teens a summer job, where he would take care of some of the places that had been hit. One property manager also announced that it had all gone well so far; the problem had diminished, and the teen had started every workday by cleaning up in the area. Another property manager declared that “it probably wasn’t as tempting to go around and sabotage public places in the evenings when he had to take care of it the next day”. The property managers added that they were positive about hiring another teen in that gang the upcoming summer, seeing it as a way to expand measures to restore vandalised places. Disruptive incidents in residential areas often involved mundane damage, e.g. damages to laundry rooms or theft of laundry, that property managers had to handle. Several teams in central town talked about how they handled these kinds of problems by installing digital booking systems or camera surveillance, displaying organisational support and access to resources that could enable them to identify the culprits and take necessary actions to prevent future problems. Access to a more widespread organisational support also occurred in residential areas, such as when the interviewees described how they used to tackle publicly visible unrest in collaboration with the local police. To do so, they were also setting up a work group consisting of property managers, department heads and employees working on

rentals, and social issues related to housing. This work group primarily engaged in discussing both short- and long-term proposals for how to make specific the neighbourhood safe again; for instance, through integration projects or by involving tenants in restorative measures in the area.

Discussion

This article has investigated a public housing company's daily making and shaping of public places as measures aiming to provide sustainable welfare recognised as legitimate in a rural setting. In this setting, sustainability is considered challenging (Sällström, 2015; Carlow et al., 2016), and legitimacy in the analysis draws on the ability of property managers to justify their daily placemaking in a way that motivates locals to accept them as valid welfare measures. In line with previous studies (Wyckoff, 2014; Matsunobu, 2018; Ellery et al., 2021), the analysis shows how the interviewees' sense of belonging become crucial. To justify their placemaking as legitimate, it is important for them to be familiar with and really know what the places they engage with mean to the local population whenever seeking out sustainable solutions (Baur et al., 2014). Still, there are differences in how the rural peripheral and the rural residential sense of belonging is articulated when the interviewees identify legitimate measures (see Table 1).

Table 1: Overview of the results based on the thematic analysis

Property managers innovative states of mind in rural settings	Attaching to places	Renewing places	Restoring places
Organised innovative states of mind in residential areas	A sense of belonging in a stable home, basing actions on a notion of manageability	Making adjustments to improve welfare, having formal support	Acting routinely to preserve welfare, expecting extended formal support when required
Ad-hoc innovative states of mind in peripheral areas	A sense of belonging in a fragile home, basing actions on a notion of urgency	Making changes to compensate for welfare shortcomings on site with informal support from local connections	Acting on local needs to regain welfare and prevent further decay, not expecting formal support

The study shows how the interviewees engage differently with placemaking guided by a desire to either *renew* or *restore* public places. Interviewees working in residential areas expect formal support in terms of resources from their own employer and collaboration with other public organisations when they engage in renewing or restoring public places. Thus, we may conclude that their placemaking is guided by an organised innovative state of mind, whereas those working in peripheral rural areas emphasise their own ability to respond to urgent challenges and independently seek out informal solutions that are valid to the locals. In doing so, they express what we refer to as ad-hoc innovative states of mind. Table 1 reflects how the interviewees' innovative states of mind interplay with local conditions, requiring constant reflections on how to navigate the way they engage in renewal or restorative placemaking (Richardsson & Jensen, 2003; Halford, 2008; Chica, 2021). Contextual factors, such as depopulation in the area, affected how the interviewees think and act (Wilhoit, 2016; Van Renswouw et al., 2022; La Fuente et al., 2022), causing them to apply different cognitive maps as they engaged in placemaking activities (cf. Rapoport, 1990).

An organised innovative state of mind was prominent in residential rural areas where the property managers acted on behalf of the organisation, such as by following routines, and relying on organisational support. In this case, we may talk about a top-down approach where placemaking emerges as a planned ingredient in their daily work practices (cf. Lew, 2017). In the terms of Emirbayer and Mische (1998), the property managers in residential areas draw on routine-based and projective elements of agency, prioritising manageable conditions that are constitutive to placemaking when acting to create sustainable welfare. In peripheral areas, however, the organisational representation was vague and the property managers displayed an innovative state of mind relying on ad hoc actions, constantly blurring and re-shaping professional roles and customising their services as they responded to urgent matters. In contrast with residential areas, placemaking activities in these peripheral areas were unplanned, or decoupled from organisational procedures, and reflect an emphasis on bottom-up responses to local needs (cf. Lew, 2017). The property managers' mindset was then characterised by practical-evaluative elements (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), justified by a sense of belonging to a fragile periphery, and the importance of balancing different needs, possibilities, and obstacles on-site.

Conclusion

The aim of this study is to increase our understanding of welfare organisations' daily making and shaping of a legitimate sustainable welfare in rural settings. The result suggests that there is a range of different initiatives that are recognised as sustainability measures. By looking at how the property managers conceptualise their own innovative mindset, however, the result indicates that there are variations in how welfare organisations in a rural setting identify opportunities for legitimate placemaking. As we look more closely at the result, our findings show how rural welfare organisations then also reproduce distinctions between centres and peripheries. In doing so, we conclude that activities linked with attempts to forge public places recognised for providing sustainable welfare can reproduce further legitimacy challenges. In

some regards, a less strict governance could, of course, be seen as beneficial for anyone who struggles to identify solutions to demands for a sustainable everyday life in the rural periphery. Loosening the grip and letting the staff address urgent matters on an individual basis could facilitate their attempts to come up with new solutions and accomplish change (cf. Kotter, 2008). However, we cannot ignore that this type of mindset also reproduces the fragility that characterises peripheral areas, either due to restricted resources (cf. Richardsson & Jensen, 2003; Wykoff, 2014; Chica, 2021) or the lack of a long-term perspective constraining attempts to acquire a sustainable development (UN, 2015). People tend to respond differently to placemaking (Pascucci, 2015; Vitello & Willcocks, 2020; Ellery et al., 2021), but the reproduction of distinctions between centres and peripheries may reproduce challenges to a legitimate pathway for welfare, which also reproduces challenges to social sustainability goals addressing inequality (UN, 2015; Lins et al., 2017; Dyck et al., 2019).

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