8. Discussion - the general situation for Sweden

Arterial streets
Many cities in Sweden are today facing severe problems on their arterial streets, which are too wide and carry too heavy traffic. The main function for these streets has been to offer sufficient capacity for motorised traffic while the influence of other functions has been difficult to imagine. There is, however, a tendency for some years now to try and find tools for redesigning these streets. Cities are looking for guidance for how to better deal with other qualities of theses streets such as good living conditions, enhance strolling activities, possibilities to cross these streets even if you are a child or an elderly, etc. There is, among other things, a need for a new street classification system that includes the sustainable arterial street. This is a prerequisite for being able to start deciding upon relevant conditions for these streets.

Today the municipality of Gothenburg has introduced humps on most local streets in Gothenburg in order to reduce car speeds. The ambition is now to move into the main streets and try to make a change. This is, however, very difficult as the main streets are really the streets in the city today with speed problems, and where the general conception still is that these streets are built “to carry cars”. These are the streets with strong conflicting interests regarding function. When moving into the main streets other considerations must be made. There are great desires for guidance on how to take care of all the different interests from different user groups.

The municipality of Malmoe has already started to reconstruct some of their main streets. Malmoe is filled with four-lane roads. Roads that were built that wide already 100 years ago. There might have been some wise consideration of sustainability aspects behind ;“if the roads are built wide enough then later generations would have good possibilities to redesign compared to if the space between the buildings is very narrow”. The negative aspects are, however, striking. Besides the high speeds, these wide roads also give other types of “indirect” priority to the car over other road users; the barrier effect; the priority to decide the rythm, the image of the city. In Malmoe the allocation of the space of these wide roads is now discussed. Other functions than capacity for motorised traffic has started to become important. Lanes are for instance removed and turned into parking spaces and/or cycle facilities. But also here there is a need for better guidance.

The reconstruction process
Traffic planners in Sweden are not only dealing with traffic planning issues, they also have to be good salesmen/women with good insight into social communication. When changes in the urban environment is on the agenda a majority of the different interest groups / individuals around the street wants to be involved in the process already from the start. A considerable amount of time must therefore be allocated to negotiations with these groups. Groups that often have so different interests that it might be wise not to collaborate with them all at the same time in order to prevent that only the strongest groups get their views heard. At the same time as new stakeholders enter the process there is still a strong will from the politicians to be the ones making the final decision.

This new way of handling the process around alternative design options has become rather established in some municipalities. The residents are getting quite used to being involved all the way through the process. “There is not a single larger traffic project in
urban areas in Sweden where different NGOs have not been involved right from the start.” Yes, a drastic simplification but still a lot of truth. The details in the decision-making and design process have become very important. The traffic engineer can be rather self-indulgence to decide upon the rough lines but when it comes to details there must be discussions with different stakeholder groups. If the reconstruction for instance deals with changed crossing facilities for pedestrians, representatives from the disabled organisations of course have to be involved. Another difficult subtask is to carefully consider the consequences for e.g. shopkeepers with regard to the kind of restrictions that are imposed on them and their customers. For some cities it is preferable to have reconstructions during the summer vacation while that would be a disaster for others.

The demand for providing a lot of information right from the start is of course a heavy burden on the traffic engineer but it simplifies the whole communication process considerably. Politicians never have to doubt what is going on and the public is secured that their home environment not is changed without them knowing and having the possibility to influence. Groups that for different reasons are left out of the process - like motor organisation - because they do not have a natural place as they do not represent any particular part of the city - are the ones who complain the most. These types of organisations can, however, be included in a reference group and be informed that way. Another big advantage in today’s processes around reconstructions is the evident need for evaluation of the effects. Urban planners and traffic engineers must have results from assessment studies to feed back into the project organisation. Was the reconstruction a success or not? Were the invested resources well spent? Again; not completely true but almost - today it is not feasible to carry out any traffic project without some kind of assessment. Sometimes these are rather restrictive but the tendency is very clear; there are more and more assessments done. There is, however, a need for a different type of assessment; assessments that take the effects for the different types of user groups into consideration.
References


[3] Cykel 99 program för Malmö stad


