

# Swedish Commercial Spaces in New York City

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***Abstract:** With examples of Swedish small-scale commercial businesses in New York City, and through the analytical concept of space, this article discusses how such businesses manifest the Swedish or the Scandinavian and how this manifestation differs from how Swedish nationality has been expressed through earlier Swedish immigration to America. This is discussed in relation to the concept of cultural heritage. The impact these businesses have on the city in the form of gentrification is also discussed.*

***Keywords:** Sweden—New York City—Swedish-American—cultural heritage—commercial space—Brooklyn—Williamsburg—Lower East Side—coffee—gentrification*

New York City is historically characterized by immigration, which has had, and still has, an important impact on the city's character as well as commercial life. In recent years, Swedish small-scale businesses, i.e. shops, cafés and restaurants, established, and in most cases still run, by Swedes, have become increasingly common. Apart from the presence of big multinational Swedish companies such as IKEA and H&M, small local businesses are also flourishing. Characteristic of most of these businesses is an

intentional and conscious staging of Swedish culture.<sup>1</sup> With a number of recent examples of Swedish businesses in New York, and through the analytical concept of *space*, this article will discuss how they, as commercial spaces, manifest the Swedish or the Scandinavian and how this manifestation is both connected to and differs from how Swedish nationality has been narrated through former Swedish immigration to America. How are these Swedish businesses negotiating national cultural heritage, and how are they being made into spaces by the people using them? What are they suggesting regarding the characteristics of the making of national spaces in an urban cosmopolitan setting such as New York City? And finally, in reference to urban sociologist Sharon Zukin (2005), how are these spaces relating to the concept of the city's "authenticity" or lack thereof?

Michel de Certeau defines space as a "practiced place" (1988:117). One advantage with this definition is that it makes space into something that is both concrete and abstract. This defines the city as both the physical place and the mental image of the same place made up by the people using it. What creates space, according to de Certeau, are people's everyday routines, the practice of place in everyday life, which also includes stories and legends surrounding these places. This definition of space obviously also makes it possible to distinguish specific spaces *in* a city, for example a restaurant or a shopping mall, places that are constructed as spaces through the attachment of certain practices and stories. This article will investigate how the places referred to are made into spaces through, among other practices, the activation of different stories about the "Swedish" and how this practice is affected by the foreign and cosmopolitan space that they are also a part of.

After a short background I will, through the example of coffee, show how changes are gradually being made in how Swedes are presenting their cultural heritage. Departing from Swedish ethnologists Lizette Gradén and Barbro Klein, who have both been studying processes of Swedish heritage making in America, I will show how coffee and coffee drinking are treated as cultural heritage and how stories surrounding this national custom are being activated in the making of national spaces in an urban context as well. After this, I will discuss how the cosmopolitan environment of New

1 The empirical material of this article is collected in the course of periods of ethnographic fieldwork in New York City 2008-2011 and through Internet-based material, such as blogs, articles, city guides, and commercial web pages.

York City plays a significant role in the creation of national spaces, which I will then relate to discussions about urban authenticity. Finally, the closing paragraph will present the main conclusions of the article.

### **Background: Scandinavian cool**

In the U.S., contemporary images and stories attached to the concept of Scandinavian culture are nowadays sometimes associated with the notion of “cool” and the provision of intelligent, trendy and somewhat intellectual, contemporary popular culture and products. An art review in *New York Times* states for example: “Scandinavian people are cool, like Bergman”.<sup>2</sup> Business successes such as IKEA are sometimes referred to as “Scandi-cool”.<sup>3</sup> The examples in this article are—rather than “Swedish”—often mediated by blogs and other media as “Scandinavian” or “Scandi-”; the shorter prefix that indicates the regularity of such a merge of the Nordic countries.

New York City is also an arena where Swedish brands that have not been considered particularly “cool” in Sweden are being marketed to an urban, cosmopolitan audience. The Swedish everyday outdoor brand *Fjällräven* is a good example of this. Their clothes, and especially the backpack *Kånken*—now a relatively common sight in the streets of New York—was for the first time sold in America in a small store in Soho, established in 2009 by a young Swedish entrepreneur.<sup>4</sup> The old national hiking companion, found in most Swedish households, was branded towards a younger, more alternative hipster crowd.

Swedish restaurants and coffee shops are becoming increasingly common in New York. The high-end restaurant *Aquavit*, located between Park Avenue and Madison Avenue in Midtown Manhattan, has been offering Scandinavian fine dining since 1987 and might have played a role in the prosperous situation experienced by Swedish restaurants to follow.<sup>5</sup> “If we have a choice between Swede and not Swede, we’re going Swede every time,” a New York blog declared when reviewing the then newly opened Swedish owned and themed restaurant called *White Slab Palace* on the

2 Johnson, Ken. “Chilly Scenes (and sounds) of Scandinavia,” *New York Times*, July 8 2011.

3 <http://mydeco.com/folder/scandi-cool-homeware/4681/>, accessed 2012-01-20

4 <http://nymag.com/listings/stores/fjallraven/>, accessed 2012-01-20.

<http://www.freshnessmag.com/2009/11/19/fjallraven-new-york-store-now-open/>, accessed 2012-01-20.

5 [www.aquavit.org](http://www.aquavit.org), accessed 2012-01-20.

Lower East Side in 2009.<sup>6</sup> The statement illustrates well the fondness of the Scandinavian that is frequently expressed by New York media.

These types of businesses can all be regarded as a part of what Sharon Zukin has called the city's "symbolic economy" (see Zukin 1995, 2008). Summarizing the term she concludes: "Today the city's business is, to put it simply, finance, fashion, food and art" (2008:xi). The increasing role of consumer culture in the shaping of cities has also been named for example the "entrepreneurial city," a term which suggests that the city's economy is connected with "finance, media, tourism, heritage, gentrification, and, above all, with consumerism" (Hetherington & Cronin 2008:2). Emphasis on the importance of creativity, culture, and small entrepreneurs for a city's economic growth can also be associated with urban theorist Richard Florida, who coined the term "the creative class," suggesting that creative people have special preferences when they choose where to live, preferences that city planners should try to meet if they want to attract capital (2002). Florida has had significant impact on the planning of cities in many parts of the world, but has also received strong criticism and been accused of pointing out an elitist class and causing gentrification and social inequality.<sup>7</sup> Using measurements such as "bohemian index," "gay index," and "melting pot index," he has tried to describe the "diversity" and the "organic" urban life that the creative class wishes to experience. Florida's influence on city planning is a good example of Zukin's claim that the concept of the city's "authenticity" is now being heavily promoted; a concept that she argues has been kidnapped by capitalist forces and therefore is currently creating discrimination and inequality for cities (Zukin 2010:xiii). The present article will further discuss how the commercial spaces described are relating to the concept of "authenticity."

### **Coffee as a cultural heritage—from Lindstrom to Manhattan**

While the current Swedish immigration to America is mainly represented by middle class people that move for work or marriage, Swedish immigra-

6 [www.urbandaddy.com/nyc/nightlife/2241/White\\_Slab\\_Palace\\_The\\_Next\\_Scandinavian\\_Scene\\_New\\_York\\_City\\_NYC\\_Lower\\_East\\_Side#ixzz1joF6Bvz9](http://www.urbandaddy.com/nyc/nightlife/2241/White_Slab_Palace_The_Next_Scandinavian_Scene_New_York_City_NYC_Lower_East_Side#ixzz1joF6Bvz9), accessed 2012-01-20. *White Slab Palace* had the same owner as the also Swedish-influenced but now closed restaurant *Good world* and the Swedish food store *Fisk*, all of them on the Lower East Side.

7 Some of his most articulated critics are the Toronto-based called Creative Class Struggle Group, [www.creativeclassstruggle.com](http://www.creativeclassstruggle.com), accessed 2012-01-20.

tion to America in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was primarily made by poor people with the main purpose to escape starvation and harsh conditions in Sweden. The recent tendency that is portraying Swedes as trendy, intellectual people is far removed from the more rural image of the Swede, represented by the first Swedish migrants. This traditional image has also won recognition through the Swedish author Vilhelm Moberg and his work *The emigrants*, a series of four novels on the Swedish emigration to America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The main characters are the hard-working farmer Karl-Oskar and his wife Kristina who decide to move to America to escape the hardships in Sweden and make a better life for their family.

Examining cultural heritage and representation, Barbro Klein tells the story about how a number of American towns with Swedish descendants have water towers that have been rebuilt and decorated with Swedish *kurbits*-paintings, in order to look like giant coffee pots. The most famous ones are found in the town of Stanton, Iowa.<sup>8</sup> Similar ones can for example be found in the small town of Lindstrom, in an area north of Minneapolis that has become famous through Moberg's literary work. Every year in July, the little town arranges a Karl-Oskar festival, involving among other events a parade in which people dress up as Karl-Oskar and his wife Kristina. During the festival the giant coffee pot is drawing extra attention through steam from the pipe. The coffee pot is a sign of the town's Swedish heritage and emphasizes the city's history as founded by Swedish immigrants. Klein argues that the coffee pot plays on the American stereotypes of cute *kurbits*-paintings as a Swedish aesthetic, and immense coffee drinking as a typical Swedish habit. Water towers in the shape of coffee pots are an invention that is regarded to be a sign of "Swedishness" although it lacks equivalents in Sweden. Swedish people have often been accusing traditions and things that Swedish-Americans consider Swedish for not being "authentic" (Klein 1997:16).

8 They were in fact built in the seventies, as a tribute to Stanton-born actress Virginia Christine that appeared as Mrs. Olsen in a successful TV commercial for coffee. With a fake Swedish accent, she was recommending the coffee brand *Folger's* (Klein 1997:16). It is hardly a coincidence that the name of one of the main characters in the hit AMC TV series *Mad Men* is named Miss Peggy Olson since the series, featuring an advertisement company in the beginning of the sixties, is overflowing with references to iconic commercials. Peggy Olson, the young career-driven secretary that starts out serving coffee, but later in the series becomes a copywriter, is actually not of Swedish descent, but of Norwegian, which, giving the reference to Folger's Mrs Olsen, is intentional, serves as an additional example of the tendency to blend the Nordic countries.

Swedish ethnologist Lizette Gradén has further examined how Swedish cultural heritage has been a way for the town of Lindsborg to brand itself. The making of the town into “Little Sweden U.S.A” was an investment in heritage tourism as an effect of increased urbanization in the 1960s and a decline in industries and agriculture, which forced small towns in the Midwest to seek new sources of income. Although nearly half of the townspeople had no Swedish background, the Swedish profile was embraced and increased. In the 1970s people actually moved to Lindsborg from elsewhere in the United States to open businesses with a Swedish profile (Gradén 2003:65). Coffee drinking as associated with being Swedish is also noticed by Gradén who states that “[i]n the United States among Swedish Americans today, coffee, a peasant society prestige product, is not only a symbol of ethnic belonging, but also a reminder of the background from which most Swedish immigrants once came” (2001:82).

Although a reminiscence of a rural background, Swedish coffee drinking has now made it to the urban context of New York City. The following examples will show how Swedes in New York also choose their preferred stories and artifacts and how these are being activated in the making of a Swedish space.

A relatively well-known and established Swedish business in New York is the Swedish owned coffee shop *Fika*. It was founded 2006 and now has three venues in New York City. The first one was established close to Central Park on Park Avenue South. The coffee shop specializes in Swedish food and snacks, such as open-faced sandwiches, cinnamon rolls and, naturally, Swedish coffee. The Swedish name *Fika* is explained on their webpage:

‘Fika’ is a Swedish verb which translates to ‘take a coffee break’, usually accompanied by something sweet and delicious. While most Americans take their coffee to go, ‘fika’ is an important daily ritual for Swedes who like to take a moment to indulge in conversations with friends and colleagues. It is not a surprise that Swedes are amongst the heaviest consumers of coffee in the world! This fine appreciation of a coffee-centric lifestyle was our inspiration [...]<sup>9</sup>

The text on *Fika*’s webpage is presenting a specific narrative of the ritual “fika,” the way it used to be. Although a lot of work places in Sweden still have a set hour for sitting down and having coffee with your colleagues, a

9 www.fikany.com, accessed 2012-01-20.

lot of Swedes have also, in recent years, started taking their coffee to go, but this is not mentioned in the text. The information that you in fact can get your coffee to go at *Fika* is also kept a secret on the webpage, where no take away cups are presented in the pictures. Following *Fika*'s success, the small coffee shop *Konditori* opened their first venue on Manhattan in 2011. In Allen street on the Lower East Side, the Swedish owned and originally Brooklyn-based coffee shop (with two additional locations in Park Slope and one in Williamsburg) manifested its national belonging with Swedish flags painted on the brick wall, and an English definition of the Swedish word "konditori" visibly put on the shop window: "1: Traditional Swedish meeting place to enjoy friends over great coffee, fine baked goods and confections. 2: Where one goes for a coffee break." However, apart from this, croissants and bagels were also painted on the brick wall, and from the signage one was also informed that the place served French-pressed coffee, espresso, and cold brewed ice coffee—none of which can be considered to be Swedish specialties. Inside, the only thing really Swedish was the cinnamon rolls; apart from them, *Konditori* looked exactly like any other American coffee shop in the neighborhood. The fact that the Swedish name and the Swedish flags were there, although they were not really motivated by the selection of food, could be regarded as an indication of the commercial potential in branding something as Swedish or Scandinavian. On *Konditori*'s page in *Yelp*—an Internet guide based on reviews from the users—a Swedish New Yorker says she is "hugely disappointed with the pastry offerings" and argues that the owners should "either stop branding yourselves as a Swedish-inspired coffee shop, or do something about your inventory." Her annoyance was raised by the fact that she went to the coffee shop in order to get cinnamon rolls to celebrate *Kanelbullens dag* ("Cinnamon roll day"), only to find out they were all sold out and furthermore misspelt on the menu.<sup>10</sup> According to this story, *Konditori* was experienced by the Swedish customer as a clever business idea, rather than a fully developed concept, or something that was considered "genuinely" Nordic or Swedish.

De Certau argues that "everyday stories [...] are treatments of space" (1988:122). The meaning of this is that these stories tell us what spaces can be used for and what one can do of them, and make out of them. The Swedish woman in this example presupposed the coffee shop *Konditori* as a

10 <http://www.yelp.com/biz/konditori-manhattan>, accessed 2012-01-20.

Swedish space, a space that in this example should be possible to use for an articulation of a Swedish national tradition, “Kanelbullens dag”. She was surprised and disappointed when this was not possible; her posting on *Yelp* clearly states that her experience of *Konditori* was a failure in this respect. Her suggestion that they should either stop branding themselves as Swedish or change the inventory shows the annoyance with *Konditori* as nothing but a commercial stunt.

Maybe an awareness of this lack was the reason that the place is promoted as Swedish through the most obvious sign, the national flag, a symbol that is not at all used in for example *Fika*'s communication material where the “Swedishness” has been more thoroughly integrated in the concept. *Fika*'s almost mythological approach to the coffee break as a Swedish ritual, for example by leaving out the take-away coffee culture in Sweden, is an example of how the making of a Swedish space in New York does not necessarily need to have anything to do with everyday life in Sweden. Rather, specific, chosen symbols and stories of the Swedish are simply being put to practice. Even if *Konditori* is being criticized for not being Swedish *enough*, this is however also a way of creating a national space, since *Konditori* is being treated and practiced as Swedish by the complaining Swedish woman. She even points out the sense of national identification with the place as ground for her disappointment by stating: “[T]his is more important to me and my fellow Swedes than the rest of you, I get that.” The fact that she was so eager to get cinnamon rolls for *Kanelbullens dag* could seem rather odd for the average Swede in Sweden, since this day is hardly an established Swedish tradition, but rather, if it is noticed at all, considered a quite meaningless, fairly new and commercially invented routine.<sup>11</sup>

The examples indicate that the creation of a national space abroad is composed by stories and practices that are specific for the everyday life that is lived in that particular geographical context rather than the practices of the homeland. It has been proposed that when a group of people arrives in a distant world full of strangers, they and their descendants have the prerogative to decide what their cultural heritage should consist of (see for example Gradén 2003, Klein 1997). This sometimes leads to unexpected “artifacts” gaining importance, far from prominent monuments and memorials; the gi-

11 “Kanelbullens dag”, celebrated the 4<sup>th</sup> of October every year was introduced by *Hembakningsrådet* (The Home baking organization) in 1999. *Hembakningsrådet* is owned by different corporations in the Swedish food industry ([www.hembakningsrådet.se](http://www.hembakningsrådet.se) 2012-01-20).



ant coffee pots are good examples of this (Klein 1997:18). It can also lead to arguments about what is to be regarded as “authentic” national heritage (Gradén 2003).

The warm, homey feeling that is associated with coffee and home-baked pastries could possibly be regarded as an articulation of the immigrants’ wish to truly establish their new homes and lives in the new better land. Today, however, the focus on the coffee ritual as a national trait and cultural heritage has obviously also proven to be a good idea for business, as the commercial achievements of *Fika* and *Konditori* show. Yet another example is the Swedish owned interior store, *Scandinavian Grace*, that in fact moved from their original location in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and opened up a store in Catskills in order to include the ability to serve coffee and homemade pastries in the concept.<sup>12</sup> When it is needed, cultural heritage tells stories about unjust behaviors committed in the past or about rights that were never fulfilled (see for example Klein 1997:19). From this perspective, the focus on coffee, coffee breaks, and pastries gives the impression of Swedes as an immigrant group that has been rather well taken care of by their new homeland.

Sometimes though, the narratives of the Swedish commercial spaces are being related to the hardships that the first immigrants experienced. The story about Lars, the founder of *Fika*, is told on *Fika*’s homepage:

[...] it all began taking shape with what was intended to be a recreational trip to New York in 2001. Lars fell head over heels in love with the city that was about to become his new home. Lars felt the city’s pulse, vibrant energy and endless possibilities but also noticed a void when it came to one of his favorite things in the world ...—a truly satisfying cup of coffee. His entrepreneurial mind quickly got to work, and Lars saw the potential for a great business opportunity. After 4 years of extensive research and planning, Lars decided to gamble everything on his dream of opening up his own business in New York. He sold every single thing of value he owned and moved his entire life across the Atlantic to start doing the real work he knew was ahead.<sup>13</sup>

The old story of the hard-working Swede trying his luck in America is visible in the text that emphasizes Lars’ “entrepreneurial mind” and how he “decided to gamble everything” and move “his entire life across the Atlantic to start doing the real work he knew was ahead,” a concept generally also well known as the “American dream.”

<sup>12</sup> www.scandinaviangrace.com, accessed 2012-01-20.

<sup>13</sup> www.fikanyc.com, accessed 2012-01-20.

De Certeau states that “stories about places are makeshift things. They are composed with the world’s debris” (1988:107). Stories about places can thus change or be challenged by new stories, just as easily as they can be established. But the new stories tend to insert themselves in the imposed framework. This can explain why Lars describes his starting up of a new business in such a dramatic manner, although immigration to America from Sweden today has little or nothing to do with the difficulties endured by the former immigrants; to start with, just the endeavor of travelling “across the Atlantic” is indisputably a lot easier today.

According to de Certeau, both the past and the present can be put to practice in the making of space—experiences and stories that are being highlighted depend on the circumstances relevant for the very moment space is created. Space has in contradistinction to place no stable expression (De Certeau 1998:117). When the context makes it appropriate, this allows also the experiences of former generations of countrymen and women to be a part of the story of the “Swedish” and thus active in the making of a national space.

### Cosmopolitan influences

National spaces are, however, not only affected by historical references. In the midst of a cosmopolitan city space like New York, questions concerning nationality and national identification are always negotiated and open for influences from the transnational geographic context, which the following examples will demonstrate.

*White Slab Palace*, a restaurant referred to previously, is described by New York blog “Urban Daddy” as “the next Scandinavian scene,”<sup>14</sup> and the restaurant serves a great deal of Swedish influenced food. It is possible to place the order “*SNÖ*,” which according to the menu behind the bar consists of herring (*sill*), a small shot of vodka (*nubbe*) and a beer (öl), forming the Swedish word for snow, *snö*. This is a version of the well-known Swedish dish *SOS* that consists of butter (*smör*), cheese (*ost*) and herring (*sill*) and is typically served with vodka. *SNÖ*, however, although it sounds Swedish and has resemblance to *SOS*, is actually an invention and is obviously intended to be a fun Swedish gimmick to order at the bar, rather than a full

14 [www.urbandaddy.com/nyc/nightlife/2241/White\\_Slab\\_Palace\\_The\\_Next\\_Scandinavian\\_Scene\\_New\\_York\\_City\\_NYC\\_Lower\\_East\\_Side](http://www.urbandaddy.com/nyc/nightlife/2241/White_Slab_Palace_The_Next_Scandinavian_Scene_New_York_City_NYC_Lower_East_Side), accessed 2012-01-20.

dish. *White Slab Palace* also serves licorice-gratinéed lobster and the Greek national dish *saganaki* made of the Swedish cheese *västerbottenost*, none of which are of course Swedish specialties, although the ingredients licorice and *västerbottenost* are.<sup>15</sup> This playful experimental cross-over kitchen obviously has no wish to preserve the Swedish food heritage, but rather to repackage it and present it in a fun way to an urban cosmopolitan audience, that most likely has had *saganaki* before, but probably not made of *västerbottenost*.

Comments on *Yelp* show that a lot of customers, however, are having difficulties with really experiencing the “Swedishness” of the place. One woman writes for example: “I’m a swedeophile and while the influence of this place is more hipster than Swedish, I like it. The food is tasty and fun and the music is good.” Although the lack of the “Swedish” does not bother her, she also states that “the service is terrible,” which makes her only give the restaurant two out of five stars. Many reviews with the same complaint have been posted, a lot of them also articulating that it does not really matter that it is somewhat hard to perceive what is supposed to be the “Swedish” concept, but that the place is in any case overpriced, the service unacceptably bad and the staff so unengaged and detached, that the commentators wish to warn others. The owner of *White Slab Palace* had earlier run the successful Swedish restaurant *Good world*, also located in Lower East Side for several years, yet *White Slab Palace* had to be shut down in 2011. The example clearly shows that the national profile was not, however, as important to the customers as the overall quality of the place.

Another example of Swedish food as cross-over is “The Swedish meatball truck” as it was called in *New York Magazine*’s food blog “Urban grub” that in 2009 was excited over the fact that this Swedish specialty was soon to be served in the streets of Brooklyn.<sup>16</sup> According to the comments on the article a lot of people that discovered Swedish meatballs at IKEA were equally happy: “OMG—I am very excited for this. Now I don’t have to eat at IKEA,” says one commentator, which is followed by statements such as “I’m happy to know I’m not the only one who treks to IKEA for the Swedish meatballs”<sup>17</sup> In a later blog post it was revealed that the name of the truck was actually not “The Swedish meatball truck” but the “EuroTrash

15 <http://nymag.com/listings/restaurant/white-slab-palace/>, accessed 2012-01-20.

16 [http://newyork.grubstreet.com/2009/08/get\\_ready\\_for\\_the\\_swedish\\_meat.html](http://newyork.grubstreet.com/2009/08/get_ready_for_the_swedish_meat.html), accessed 2012-01-20.

17 [http://newyork.grubstreet.com/2009/08/get\\_ready\\_for\\_the\\_swedish\\_meat.html](http://newyork.grubstreet.com/2009/08/get_ready_for_the_swedish_meat.html), accessed 2012-01-20.

Vending Truck,” and the Swedish owner said the truck was going to specialize in “Northern European comfort food” defined as “Belgian Fries, Fish and Chips, Swedish Meatballs, Bangers and Mash.” One commenter says: “There is a truck for everything in NYC, so why shouldn’t northern European comfort food be added to the list?”

While serving food from a truck can be seen as one way of negotiating the Swedish, another way of mediating the national is the inclusion of Swedish meatballs in a so far non-existing tradition of “Northern European comfort food,” a practice that merges Sweden not just with Scandinavia, but with the whole of northern of Europe. Furthermore, the fact that the meatballs were actually served over noodles and not the traditional Swedish way with mashed potatoes and lingonberries—which is how they are served at IKEA—did not seem to bother the customers of the Williamsburg-based truck.

*White Slab Palace* and the *EuroTrash Vending Truck* are not examples of how Swedish cultural heritage is sought to be preserved (see Klein 1997:18, Gradén 2003:232) but rather businesses that present Swedish food as a modern-day export, something Swedes offer at a globalized and cosmopolitan market, something that is presented with self-esteem. In this lies possibly the capacity to also make fun of the objects, modify and play around with them.

The aspiration of updating the national heritage also becomes clear in how *Fika* presents their pastries:

[...] what you might come across if your Swedish great grandmother decided to host a pastry party, but always adding a modern, innovative touch<sup>18</sup>

Drawing on the image of the Swedes as good and decent homemakers and breadwinners of the past (as presented for example in Moberg’s literary work), this statement also launches the contemporary story about the Swede as trendy, modern and creative, the story that is one of the most apparent ones in the making of the commercial spaces described here. This description of *Fika*’s selection of baked goods, starting with the image of how “your Swedish great grandmother decided to host a pastry party” and ending with the addition of the “modern, innovative touch” is thus an explicit

18 [www.fikany.com](http://www.fikany.com), accessed 2012-01-20.

example of how contrary elements fill the established form of the story, when new components are being inserted into “the accepted framework” (De Certeau 1998:107). In the case of pastries, the connection with the past is relatively clear just through the, in this urban context, almost archaic ritual of baking. Sometimes though, the traditional components of the narrative need to be overly articulated. One example is how the Swedish candy store *Sockerbit*<sup>19</sup> presents itself. The owners state on their website:

Our mission and desire is to share the Scandinavian candy culture and the amazing selection of ‘smågodis’, which translates into little candies. For any Scandinavian person (Swedish, Danish, Finnish or Norwegian) smågodis is part of their everyday life; and most of the Swedes grew up with the tradition of ‘lördagsgodis’, meaning Saturday sweets.<sup>20</sup>

The rhetorical presentation of smågodis and “the tradition of ‘lördagsgodis’” as something “most of the Swedes grew up with” slightly obscures the fact that “lördagsgodis” is actually a fairly new phenomenon, introduced by the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare in the 1950s.<sup>21</sup> In this way, even the presentation of different types of bright colored mass-produced candy—a product that is visibly modern-day—is being inserted into the frame work of cultural heritage which motivates the “mission and desire to share the Scandinavian candy culture.”

As these examples show, the urban cosmopolitan space is a rather tolerant milieu in the making of national commercial spaces. The products that are being offered are often expected to be modern and to add something new, rather than to represent genuine traditional Swedish heritage. National space is thus implemented through the practice of new stories inserted into existing ones and into already accepted contexts.

### **Stories and rumors—negotiating space or just buying in?**

Several of the empirical examples in this article are from the Lower East Side and Brooklyn. These are traditional immigrant neighborhoods that have been undergoing great changes in the last couple of years. As a radical

19 *Sockerbit* is the Swedish word for sugarcube, and also the name of a special type of Swedish “smågodis.”

20 <http://www.sockerbit.com/>, accessed 2012-01-20.

21 The Swedish name for this board is Socialstyrelsen. Until 1962 the name was Medicinalstyrelsen, <http://www.socialstyrelsen.se/>, accessed 2012-01-20.

shift from the immigrant businesses that have usually been family owned and geographically set in these areas, the small-scale Swedish owned businesses are often operated by young entrepreneurs from economically secure backgrounds, businesses are started in this geographical context *by choice*, rather than as a means to escape harsh conditions in the home country, as was the case for many of the former immigrants. These new businesses are often branded towards the new cosmopolitan population in these neighborhoods—mainly ethnically white, middle class. This commerce, if not “high-end” so at least “trendy” or “hip,” is a part of the gradual change of the city landscape, most noticeable through the process of gentrification. This development makes prices for housing rise and turns areas that used to be ethnically mixed into becoming more and more ethnically white (see for example Zukin 2010).

As mentioned initially, Zukin claims that the word “authenticity” has been stolen by people who want to experience a city that has a somewhat authentic, urban, and gritty feeling to it, but in reality is no longer a place for everyone, but only for an elite:

Authenticity, then, is a cultural form of power over space that puts pressure on the city’s old working class and lower middle class, who can no longer afford to live and work there (Zukin 2010:xiii)

Zukin has argued that some cities and places visually project what she defines as a “liminality between *market* and *place*.” With examples such as L.A., Miami, and Disneyland—which, each one in their own manner, are presenting a sort of artificial, dreamy glamour—Zukin shows how the landscape is “explicitly produced for visual consumption” and, moreover, self-consciously produced. These places give expression to collective fantasies and are nothing more than façades in the service of consumerism, Zukin claims (2005:219). In the case of New York, the image projected is instead the one of the “cool” “authentic” city—an image that the Swedish commercial spaces described in this article could be regarded as contributing to (Zukin 2010).<sup>22</sup> As the examples here have shown, the symbolic economy

22 As I mentioned initially, the search for the “authentic” city could well be illustrated by how Richard Florida argues that the creative class looks for signs of “diversity.” An illustration of what Zukin defines as “façades” could be how he argues that the creative class is actively looking for visual signs such as “people of different ethnic groups and races, different ages, different sexual orientations and alternative appearances

of the big city is promoting a different packaging of heritage, often with a cosmopolitan and urban twist. De Certeau states that the practice of space often “manipulates spatial organizations” and inserts ambiguities into them. The practice of space is in this way seen as an act of power. Therefore, the city is not really possible to plan, since it is made up by the spatial practices of people, and these in turn are affected by these people’s earlier experiences, thoughts and imaginations. Space is created in part through “crack[s] in the system” that allows for different stories about places, and this is what makes spaces habitable (de Certeau 1988:105). This central point that constitutes space as made up by stories is, however, followed by an important distinction between the definition of *stories* and what is defined as *rumors*. Stories differ from rumors in the way that stories diversify, while rumors totalize:

Stories are becoming private and sink into the secluded places in neighborhoods, families and individuals, while the rumors propagated by the media cover everything and, gathered under the figure of the City, the masterword of an anonymous law, the substitute for all proper names, they wipe out or combat any superstitions guilty of still resisting the figure.

Rumors allow no “cracks in the system,” as they are “propagated” and imposed on the citizens’ practice of the urban space, forcing an image rather than negotiating one (de Certeau 1984:108). Rumors, one could argue, are in this way comparable to what Zukin defines as “façades” made for consumption.

The official making of Lindsborg into a Swedish town is, as Gradén puts it, an example of how “packaged well, heritage becomes a financial resource” (2003:222). Lindsborg would in this respect be a good example of a space created not so much through stories but rather through totalizing rumors, a space where what is considered the “right” sort of “Swedishness” is controlled by local politicians and commercial actors, even to the extent that Swedish people that come there cannot quite get it right (Gradén 2003:222).

In my material, however, as I have already referred to briefly, it is possible to see some resistance both to the strive for the “genuine” and “real” Swedish heritage and to an apathetic approval of the “authentic” façade

such as significant body piercings and tattoos” (Florida 2002:226).

that, as Zukin has declared, characterizes the city space of New York. I will now sum up the article by developing how this resistance can be identified.

### **Contemporary heritage and commercial authenticity**

This article has shown examples of how the “Swedish” is negotiated in the creation of national spaces, sometimes with a sense of humor and openness to new influences. As I have shown, the creation of a national space in this context is accomplished through inserting new stories into already existing narratives about the Swedish. These stories have components from both past and present, and also from other national and cultural contexts that are a natural part of the urban cosmopolitan space. Thus space is made up by stories that are ambiguous and sometimes contradictory.

In this way these examples of the creation of a national space differ from the purer heritage making of for example Lindsborg, where the aim of preserving national cultural heritage is a thorough and meticulous negotiation of what is considered to be the most “correct,” “authentic,” or “genuine” details of the “Swedish”—to the point that it is stated that —“the perceived threat of losing one’s heritage is itself part of Lindsborg’s Swedish heritage” (Gradén 2003:225, 232). This does not mean that contradictory narratives are completely absent in the heritage making of Lindsborg or that stories about the “genuine” Swedish heritage are entirely absent in the creation of the Swedish commercial spaces in New York City. However, as the examples have demonstrated, the search for the alleged “genuine” national heritage does not seem to play such a significant role in the context described. Empirical examples show how there are no objections to serving meatballs with noodles, or even to mixing Swedish food with other influences to the extent that it is not even recognizable as Swedish anymore. The acceptance of these businesses seems to be revolving around different concerns.

The commercial spaces described here all fit into Zukin’s description of the “authentic” as something hip, contemporary, and urban, and to some extent they are most probably contributing to gentrification, a process that often has serious implications that this article does not explore further. It appears, however, that it is possible to detect some resistance to the mere acceptance of the “authenticity” described by Zukin, as a façade created for profit and without substance, in favor of big commercial actors.

This resistance is shown not least through the many web-based channels where people now interact with each other in their everyday making



of spaces. The examples show that there is no tolerance with poor entrepreneurship or attempts to make money out of a cleverly branded concept without genuine engagement.

Furthermore, the article has also shown that local actors, such as the Eurotrash Vending truck are preferred to big companies such as IKEA—even though they are the ones which present the Swedish national heritage in the “correct” manner—something that has not been considered to be the stereotypical American consumer behavior (Zukin 2010).

What is considered to be “genuine” in this sense, are the engaged entrepreneurs and small-scale local actors, not the big companies or for that matter small “authentic” businesses that try to profit on a cultural stereotype rather than showing true devotion and presenting something unique.

Authenticity, then, is defined not as national purity or national heritage “packaged well” and commercialized (Gradén 203:222). The imposed form of stories, in de Certeau’s definition, rumors propagated by the media and commercial actors, are instead opposed by additional stories that are contradictory and mix up the national with new impulses. The investigated commercial spaces are thus not made up of totalizing rumors of authentic heritage, but of diverse stories that together contribute to fleeting cosmopolitan ambiguity, and a strive for revitalization.

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