Enacting safe places – a study of (im)balancing acts in everyday city centre management

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this study is to outline a practice approach towards safety in public places whereby safety and place is understood as simultaneously produced in everyday work practice. Hence, the focus is shifted from place safety as a manageable asset to safe places as ongoing accomplishments.

Design/methodology/approach – This study focuses on practices of enacting safe places on the municipal level in Sweden. Thus, the focus of analysis is on the meanings of safety. The empirical material was collected during the period 2017–2019 in the Swedish cities of Stockholm, Helsingborg and Malmö. In different ways, these cities struggle with navigating safety issues in public places.

Findings – The study demonstrates how urban places are enacted as safe in and through practice. The findings include some of the ways in which safe places are accomplished, such as maintaining and caring for places, countering negative rumours and news reports and forming collaboration across sectors and actors. To gain a better understanding of safety in city centres, the study illuminates competing meaning-making processes in management work practice whereby places are negotiated as safe.

Originality/value – The existing research on safety in public places is scattered across disciplinary fields and dominated by a fortress approach to safe places. By contrast to the top-down view of safety as a measure of control, this study generates knowledge of how safe places are continuously construed in the junction of management practices and practices of everyday life.

Keywords Safe places, Safety, City centres, Enactment, Everyday practice, Urban violence

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The openness of cities has historically made them the targets of violent attacks seeking to maximise damage (Glaeser and Shapiro, 2001). In particular, bustling inner-city districts and crowded streets are vulnerable to incidents aimed at gaining the attention of and creating fear in the public (Despard, 2012; West and Orr, 2005). Coaffee and Wood (2006) thus note that "security is becoming more civic, urban, domestic and personal: security is coming home" (p. 504). Urban violence is typically characterised by unpredictability, which causes fear and insecurity in those living and working in, as well as visiting, cities (Moser, 2004).

Unlike enclosed spaces such as shopping malls and airports, city centres are open spaces that are not easily monitored and controlled (Poyser, 2005). Thus, experiences of fear and insecurity pose challenges on many different levels of place management.

There are a number of different issues that need to be balanced when working with safety in places, for instance, ensuring a secure physical environment, whilst, at the same, creating experiences of safety among the public. Place management and place branding research primarily focus on the symbolic production of place safety. Places that are associated with unsafety and danger are considered less attractive to live, visit and invest in. Coaffee and Van Ham (2008) argue that security has become a scarce commodity in many cities, and therefore communicating a safe image is key to place branding strategy. For example, Avraham (2021, 2016, 2015) has developed image repair strategies that help place managers to re-establish the place narrative and image after crisis events, such as terror attacks. In particular, he sheds emphasis on the importance of communication for restoring images of place safety.

However, previous research highlights that the construction of places should be understood not only in symbolic but also in material terms (Cheetham et al., 2018; Warnaby and Medway, 2013). The built environment frames the images and narratives that can be assembled of a place (Warnaby and Medway, 2013). The reciprocity between the material and symbolic construction of place may be exemplified by how urban violent events have affected the appearance of cities and become embedded in the planning and management of urban places, for example, by way of street polls serving to protect against vehicle attacks. Narratives and experiences of places as safe and physical urban safety measures are thus understood as intertwined and accomplished at the same time in networks of heterogeneous human and non-human actors, across which agency is distributed (Coffin, 2021; Cheetham et al., 2018; see also Hill et al., 2014). The relation between the material and symbolic is also reflected in studies of safety in city centres (Parker et al., 2017; Millington and Ntounis, 2017). These studies predominately concern three focus areas, which are briefly addressed here and further expanded on in the next section of the paper. The first focus area refers to the symbolic dimension of revitalising and repositioning city and town centres (Parker et al., 2017; Mowery and Novak, 2016; Pain and Townshend, 2002). Since the 1970s, city centres have been struggling with sinking levels of attractivity and perceptions of unsafety among visitors, due to factors such as declining populations, the relocation of shopping and urban deterioration (Thomas and Bromley, 2000; Millington and Ntounis, 2017). The second focus area deals with the materiality of places and crime prevention through securing built urban environments such as pedestrian streets and shopping malls and environmental safety planning (Cozens and Love, 2015; Badiora and Odufuwa, 2019; Kajalo and Lindblom, 2010; Moser, 2004; Minton, 2018). The third focus area captures the social dimension of safe places and stakeholders' perceptions and experiences of safety (de Nisco et al., 2008; Millington and Ntounis, 2017).

Despite the growing numbers of violent incidents in city centres, either explicitly or implicitly targeting civilians, and despite the concrete measures being taken to prevent attacks in urban environments, scant research addresses the construction of safe places. The presumed lack of studies addressing placemaking with regard to safety is arguable due to place management's concern with a functionalist knowledge interest and developing best-practice models and recommendations, which gives less attention to practice and processual approaches to places. These studies also typically neglect the destructive and dangerous side of places from the viewpoint of everyday life. Instead they rely on top-down approaches to safety planning and view place safety as a specialist function within city administration primarily concerned with crime prevention and physical protection.

In this paper, we bring the construction of safe places into the limelight of place management by examining how urban places are enacted as safe in practices of city centre management. Our attention is directed to the production of safe places in everyday work practices. Focusing on everyday work practices enables us to understand safe places in less abstract terms as enacted and lived. In addition, the emphasis on everyday work practice implies a shift in focus from safety as a measure of management control to safety as an integrated component of everyday placemaking.

The aim of the present research is to develop a more nuanced understanding of safe places by examining their symbolic, social, as well as material manifestations in and through various city centre management practices, such as place branding, strategic communication and urban planning. The study addresses this aim through the following research questions:

RQ1. How are safe places organized in everyday work practices within city centre management?

RQ2. How is place safety embedded in the design and outline of city centres?

RQ3. How are images of safe places dealt with in communication strategies?

These questions are investigated in a study the making of safe places in three Swedish city centres. City centres are regarded as suitable empirical sites for this investigation, as they are vulnerable to urban violence, whilst at the same time, need to maintain an image of being safe places to attract flows of visitors, investors and residents. Moreover, actors within city centre management are understudied in placemaking (Coca-Stefaniak, 2014). These actors are typically struggling with scant resources, often being caught in-between professional groups, such as urban planners, politicians, architects and business developers, and positioned in-between national and EU-level policies and regulations.

In the remainder of this paper, we first explain our approach to place safety and the research literature upon which it relies. Next, we introduce the study in more detail. Thereafter, we analyse how safety is enacted by using three balancing acts involving different practices in Swedish city centres. Finally, we discuss the implications of these balancing acts for understanding the construction of safe places in place management scholarship and practice.

Dimensions of place safety

Research on safety in public places is scattered across different disciplinary fields, for example, urban planning research, tourism studies, place development and place branding. In the following, we distinguish three research strands addressing the symbolic, social and material dimensions of safe places. Thereafter, we outline a practice-based approach to understand safe places that will subsequently inform the analysis in the paper.

The first research strand deals with symbolic dimensions of place safety. Lately, safety has received increased attention in place branding and image management research. Safety is generally understood in terms of experiences of being safe among publics, which is considered a key component in the overall attractiveness of a place (Coaffee and Van Ham, 2008). Place narratives are argued to be important in the experience of safety, especially if the place has an overall vague image. Narratives influence how reality is experienced by linking disparate events into a coherent whole by giving them meaning. Avraham and Ketter (2008) observe that media narratives tend to reinforce unsafety in places with

recurring violent incidents. Informed by image-repair theory, they develop three groups of communication strategies that work in concert to lever unfair media narratives and negative stereotypes of places (see also Avraham, 2021, 2016, 2015). The first group includes source strategies that aim to offer images running counter to dominant negative portrayals in the media by, for example, using the personal testimonies of visitors, or by strategically inviting influencers and journalists to write stories about the place. The second group refers to message strategies with the aim of offering alternative stories that show the unexpected potential of a place over and above stereotypes. This may be done through mocking prevailing place stereotypes or using stories of place ambassadors about their local experiences of living in the place. The third group involves audience strategies that communicatively anchor and legitimise a restored image with the local public and specific strategic groups of visitors. The main concern of the scholarship on the symbolic dimension of safe places is how places tarred by a negative reputation can re-establish public trust. The previous research typically focuses on strategies for changing dominant narratives of unsafety after crisis events to attract more tourism, investment and residency, thus making safety an important part of the overall commodification of place (Warnaby and Medway, 2013; Coaffee and Van Ham, 2008).

Furthermore, there is a strand of research addressing the social dimensions of safe places by way of examining people's interactions with the urban environment. Already Jane Jacobs (1961), in her classic *The Life and Decay of the American Big City*, observed how shops, shop windows, store staff and customers contribute to safe pavements and streets. She argued that activities in shopwindows and ground floors slow down the rhythm and pace of visitors walking along streets, making them more alert to what is happening. Hence, pedestrian activity and vibrant street life are here generally understood as important to safety in inner cities (see also Sennett, 2018; Gehl, 2013). A similar reasoning is found in studies of retail stores as key components of attracting visitors to city centres, and in doing so increasing experiences of safety in these places. Foster *et al.* (2014), for instance, demonstrate that visitors are less afraid of being exposed to crime in walk-friendly retail areas, whilst simultaneously being worried about other types of crime in populous environments. A central assumption in these studies is that safe places can be accomplished by maintaining tidiness and order in the physical urban environment (Ross and Mirowsky, 1999). The assumption of creating safety by way of upholding an ordered environment may be traced back to the influential broken windows theory that was first introduced by Wilson and Kelling (1982) and later reworked. Poorly maintained places typically involve littering, graffiti, vandalism, poor lightning and so on, signalling that the place is not being properly cared for (Jiang *et al.*, 2018; Foster *et al.*, 2014; Osgood *et al.*, 1996; Perlgut, 1983). Over the years, the broken windows theory has been criticised for simplifying explanations of how to achieve safe places. Critics argue that socio-structural conditions and lack of social cohesion have greater explanatory power of unsafety than maintaining an ordered urban environment (Jiang *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, ordered urban environments also imply value judgments and mechanisms of exclusion, determining what counts as order and disorder.

The material dimensions of safe places typically encompass research on crime prevention and protection measures to ensure safety in cities. This type of research dominates the literature on safety. Firmino *et al.* (2013) highlight three urban safety measures of relevance to the material construction of safe places. These measures include *surveillance*, such as security guards, surveillance cameras, drones and spotlights, *fortification*, in the form of walls, fences and traffic obstructions and *architecture*, like windowless ground floors, robust entrance doors and closed systems. In a related vein, Pain and Townshend (2002) distinguish between four interrelated approaches to security

planning in cities, which they term *the fortress approach*, *the surveillance approach*, *the regulatory approach* and *the animated approach*. As previously mentioned, such safety measures were originally developed for closed spaces like airports and shopping malls. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks against the World Trade Center in New York, however, they were successively implemented to ensure safety in urban places (Badiora and Odufuwa, 2019; Minton, 2018). In particular, the fortress approach has been influential to understand how safe places are created in scholarship and practice. In part, it resonates with the multidisciplinary framework Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED). CPTED consists of crime prevention strategies, such as access control, surveillance, territorial reinforcement and facility maintenance (Cozens and Love, 2015). Similar to the aforementioned broken windows theory, this framework builds on the assumption that experiences of safety can be strengthened by controlling the design and built environment of places (Crowe, 2000). Nevertheless, CPTED offers a more holistic view of safety, which includes seeing the place both from the criminal offender's point of view, in terms of escape paths and so on, and from the point of view of the people who visit, work and live there. The CPTED framework has been applied in different contexts such as shopping malls (Ceccato, 2020; Ceccato and Tcacencu, 2018; Akinci, 2015) and urban places (Cozens *et al.*, 2018). Similar to the fortress approach, CPTED is a top-down framework for planning and controlling safety. Piroozfar *et al.* (2019), however, stress that it is not enough to use the CPTED framework as an isolated measure to accomplish safety in places. Instead, they suggest combining CPTED with strategies that involve residents in safety measures to avoid a fortification of places that signals danger. Commodification of urban safety is reflected in the increase of fortress environments in cities. In particular, the fortress approach is applied in areas with exclusive retailers and residency that serve as safe havens in an otherwise turbulent urban landscape (Bahar, 2019; Akinci, 2015).

Making safe places
The previous research on the dimensions of safe places, briefly presented here, rests on the assumption that safety can be controlled by either media and communication strategies, urban design, or the built environment. Safety is typically viewed as a commodity in the promotion of urban areas, and an outcome of crime prevention and protection. The view of safety as a more or less manageable asset to places, arguably, also reduces its complexity. Such reductive view is problematic given that safety is a multi-dimensional construct, which does not only emerge in vertical top-down approaches but also in horizontal ways. To be able to account for the organisational complexity of safety in places, the concept is here approached as *enacted* in everyday practices undertaken by actors in everyday city centre management. The focus on everyday practice enables a situated understanding of safety and place as continuously constructed in the daily work of making and remaking city centres, which often escapes strategic plans of safety (de Certeau, 1984). In the paper, we use the term *safe places* to refer to the ongoing and simultaneous production of safety and place. Safe places are understood as accomplishments of "nets of practice-arrangement meshes" governed by specific social rules, conventions and norms (Schatzki, 2003, p. 195). Characteristic for these nets is that they consist of human as well as non-human actors whose agency is distributed in the net (Hill *et al.*, 2014; Cheetham *et al.*, 2018). Thus, the ability to act depends on other actions in the net. Coffin (2019, 2021) observes that placemaking processes have suffered from taken-for-granted assumptions of the dichotomy of the agentic human subject and the passive non-human object. Non-human aspects, he argues, often surpass human awareness, but nonetheless enrich the understanding of how places are constructed. In light of this argument, this study will consider how human as well

as non-human actors, such as polls, fences and lightning, partake in the making of safe places.

Researching safe places in the making

Enactments of safe places were examined in three city centres in Sweden: Stockholm, Helsingborg and Malmö. Swedish city centres are currently struggling with coming to terms with urban violence, such as shootings and bombings. Between 2017 and 2020, there were 1,330 reported shootings in Sweden, most of which occurred in public places in major cities (Swedish Police Authority, 2020). Table 1 shows crime statistics in Sweden during the period 2017–2019 when the empirical material for the present study was collected.

The Swedish cities deal with safety issues in different ways. Stockholm experienced two terror attacks in the city centre, in 2010 and 2017. Both attacks were carried out by single perpetrators in daylight on the main pedestrian street where many people circulate. In Helsingborg, the city centre is divided into a north and south part, where the latter encompasses run-down, abandoned and poor areas, which are notoriously experienced as unsafe among residents and visitors. Malmö, the third-largest city in Sweden, struggles with reputational problems connected to unsafety due to repeated shootings and explosions in public places. In media reports and social media, the city is often negatively portrayed and stereotyped as dangerous, segregated and crime-infested. Table 2 refers to the average socio-economic status in the central districts of the cities.

It is noteworthy that, in comparison with the national means, Malmö and Helsingborg have higher unemployment rates and lower average income. These cities may be characterised as post-industrial, as they struggle with the shift from an industrial to knowledge-intensive mode of production (Bennett and Koudelova, 2001). Moreover, the cities are closely located to Denmark and the rest of Europe, making them vulnerable ports for trafficking illicit goods (Ceccato and Haining, 2004).

Capturing safe places in everyday practice

To be able to capture how the city centres were enacted as safe places, we studied the everyday work within city centre managements. The Association for City Centre

Municipality	Abuse	Homicide	Explosions	Terror
Stockholm	30,536	453	71	39
Malmö	10,727	253	114	2
Helsingborg	4,961	65	23	–
Sweden	250,310	3,961	767	47
Source: Swedish Police Authority, 2021				

Table 1.
Municipal-level reported offences 2017–2019

Municipality	Population	Average age	Employment rate(%)	Income	University education(%)
Stockholm	975,000	39	80	33,500	31
Malmö	348,000	39	68	23,800	20
Helsingborg	150,000	41	75	27,150	23
Sweden	10,379,000	41	80	28,700	23
Source: Statistics Sweden (SCB), 2020					

Table 2.
Municipal-level socio-economic indicators

Management is a formal partnership scheme consisting of public and private actors that join forces to develop, manage and revitalise town centres (Coca-Stefaniak, 2014). City centre management constitutes a relevant site at which to develop a practice-based understanding of safe places, as it consists of networks of place-making practices. Many different practices accomplish safety in a place, for example, urban planning and development, place marketing and branding, safety management, communication and so on.

A multiple case study design was used that combined survey methods, qualitative interviews and document study. In the spring of 2018, a survey was conducted with 206 city centre managers, representing over 150 cities across Sweden, with regard to their work with attractive and safe urban places. A majority of the respondents were working as developers and managers in semi-private place management organisations, while a small number had neighbouring professions, such as property owners, city planners and retail developers. In smaller cities, these responsibilities typically converge in one professional role, while in larger cities, several people work within one area of responsibility. The respondents were all engaged in developing attractive city centres but few worked exclusively with safety. Safety was merely one among several issues that they dealt with. The survey comprised six questions in total. A total of 4 of the questions used a Likert-scale, 1 involved prioritising 12 current challenges for city centres, and the final question asked the informant to make a selection of safety measures frequently discussed in their daily work. The survey was subsequently analysed by means of descriptive statistics, using SPSS.

To deepen the understanding of the results of the survey, in 2019, 10 qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with actors working with safety issues in city centres. Furthermore, to capture the aforementioned dimensions of safety, we included municipal safety officers and communications professionals in the sample (Table 3). The interviews were conducted in a face-to-face setting in the informants' work environments and took approximately 1 h each. In the interview situation, we were interested in capturing how the informants dealt with different aspects of safety in their everyday work.

Focus group interviews were also conducted at two workshops involving professionals working with place security (e.g. police officers, safety officers, crisis managers). The workshops were organized to improve collaboration between different actors on place safety issues. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated into English by the authors.

The qualitative material was analysed against the dimensions of place safety with a focus on practice. In the analysis, we sought to capture how safe places emerged in informants' recollections of their daily work with safety issues. Thus, the research follows the tradition of the interpretive inquiry in social science research, whereby primacy is given

Informant no.	Municipality	Organisation	Professional role
1	Stockholm	Association for City Centre Management	CEO
2	Stockholm	Association for City Centre Management	Safety Manager
3	Stockholm	Municipality	Safety Manager
4	Stockholm	Municipality	Communication officer
5	Malmö	Association for City Centre Management	CEO
6	Malmö	Malmotown	Communication officer
7	Malmö	Municipality	Communication officer
8	Helsingborg	Association for City Centre Management	CEO
9	Helsingborg	Association for City Centre Management	Co-worker
10	Helsingborg	Municipality	Safety Manager

Table 3.
Informants

to the "interpretation of the interpretations people gives to their own actions and interactions with others" (Smith, 1992, p. 105). During the analysis, the focus was on identifying typical patterns of meaning in the way that the informants reasoned with regard to safety measures, and the way in which they were implemented in the city. Thereafter, we compared patterns of meaning and examined inconsistencies and paradoxes between them (cf. Spiggle, 1994). Finally, we aggregated tensions between the meaning patterns into analytical categories that were labelled "balancing acts". Balancing acts refer to how city centre actors negotiate competing and contradictory enactments of safe places in city centre management. Hence, acts may be more or less balanced and imbalanced. Next, we present three typical ways of balancing enactments of safety in public places.

Balancing enactments of safe places

The analysis shows that city centre actors struggle to cope with issues of public safety using scant means and often in isolation from specialists in safety and security management. In what follows, this struggle is accounted for in terms of three balancing acts referring to the tensions between competing enactments and conditions of safety work in city centres. These enactments include balancing multiple actors, fear, and place image.

Balancing multiple actors

The first balancing act concerns the tension between multiple actors and levels of organising safe places. Safety work occurs on different levels and involves multiple actors. These actors have different understandings of their responsibilities and represent different interests that need to be balanced in relation to one another.

The results from the survey with the city centre managers show that safety is not being a prioritised issue in Swedish cities. The respondents were fairly uniform in their views and there was little variation in their replies. It is noteworthy that when asked to rank 12 challenges to city centres, the majority of the respondents gave very low priority to challenges of crime, assault and feeling unsafe. Moreover, terror attacks were ranked as the least prioritised issue (Table 4).

Instead the top challenges for city centre managers were e-commerce and insufficient range of stores and services. Next, came competition from external malls, bigger cities and

Perceived threats	Ranking
Competition from e-commerce	1
Insufficient range of stores and services	2
Competition from external malls	3
Competition from bigger cities	4
Insufficient collaboration between centre actors	5
Poor accessibility	6
Lack of cultural and other events	7
Too much traffic	8
Unattractive urban environment	9
Feeling unsafe	10
Robber, abuse, assault	11
Terror attacks	12

Table 4.
Ranking of
challenges in
Swedish city centres

Note: $n = 206$

insufficient collaboration among city centre actors. Thereafter, came a lack of cultural events, poor accessibility and traffic congestion.

Safety is often related to place attractivity (Thomas and Bromley, 2000). Mowery and Novak (2016) note that experiences of unsafety in city centres took hold when their attractivity diminished, with the massive relocation of housing, businesses and retail outlets during the post-war era. Thus, safety is typically a consequence of other efforts aimed at creating attractivity. This may be the reason why city centre managers do not pinpoint terror, crime and feeling unsafe as specific challenges, but view them as integrated in the overall work with place attractivity. Even though discussions about safety are rare, there are still efforts to manage safety in city centres that relate to issues of place attractiveness collaborations and communications. The main challenge of these efforts is balancing interests of multiple actors in implementing safety measures:

> We're in continuous dialogue with the police and the municipality about city safety. We also seek to put more of a focus on safety in the Purple Flag Certification. For example, we gather different actors from local communities (e.g., religious, ethnic, housing, etc.) during the certification process for different areas. So, it's a big part of our role, intercepting ideas and enabling them. We have a group of representatives from property owners, retail, and the municipality. But we also collaborate with the police and the security companies (Association of City Centre Management, Helsingborg).

In addition, safety is understood as an issue for the police and security management, and not for city centre management. One professional said:

> We don't work with safety issues in the city centre, we leave this issue to the police and municipal security. We've chosen to focus on how to make a smaller part of the city centre more attractive to visitors. Questions about safety typically come up when business actors want to book a conference or an event in Malmö, and they're worried that the city isn't safe enough (Association of City Centre Management, Malmö).

In the city center of Stockholm, where the two deadly terrorist attacks occurred, the Association of City Centre Management has employed a security manager whose primary task is to collaborate with and coordinate efforts between actors. The security manager told us that they recently transformed one of the main city squares, *Sergel's Square*, infamous for drug dealing, into a lively place for encounters and interactions:

> Just recruiting more police officers is not the solution to safety, but - collaboration is. The most important thing we do to make a place safe is to communicate that it is cared about and taken care of. We do this through regular cleaning, inviting different people to engage in activities there, and being visible and present. *Sergel's Squa*re is one place that we have worked a lot with. It used to be the main venue for drug dealing in Stockholm, but we changed that using rather simple means. First of all, we clean the square in the mornings and at night. Second, we painted everything white to make it look new and fresh – like a place where ordinary people want to be. Third, we opened a safety centre, which is open between 8am and 10pm every day (Association of City Centre Management, Stockholm).

In the remaking of *Sergel's Square*, it is possible to discern the social and material dimensions of safe places and the influence of strategic planning models such as CPTED and broken windows theory. Balancing practices of everyday life to remove the traffic in drugs is emphasised as particularly important to turn the square into a safe place. An important aspect of increasing the safety of the square is to make it more attractive for ordinary people to visit. The place is supposed to communicate that it is purposefully managed and thus not open for any activity. Order is accomplished through active maintenance that enable everyday activities creating a lived place. Keeping the square clean

and tidy was also regarded important to safety. Litter influences place attitudes negatively and untidiness may even be conceived of as a form of anti-place marketing (Parker *et al.*, 2015).

The revitalisation of the square required the balancing of professional practices and functions within and outside of the municipality, like the police, cleaning services, security management, social work and urban planning. In Stockholm, urban security is diversified with many different areas of specialisations. The discussion about the organization of safety is thus not so much about clarifying areas of responsibility, as it is about collaborating and creating synergies between different units in the city administration. This may involve formulating a shared vision in order to work towards a common goal. Organizations such as the Association of City Centre Management typically formulate such shared visions and goals to coordinate collaborations:

> The key actors in our safety network are retailers, property owners, the municipality, the police, and security firms. It's important for us to try to break down bureaucratic barriers, create routines, fast communication routes, and common goals (Association of City Centre Management, Helsingborg).

The centre of Helsingborg encompasses the north and south urban districts of the city. The south district is classified as a vulnerable area. In 2018, local residents and visitors experienced it as one of the most unsafe places in southern Sweden (SVT, 2018). The city centre manager in Helsingborg said that the main challenge facing the district was the lack of collaboration between different actors:

> The balance between attractivity and safety is important - more people in circulation also means safer city centres. The challenge is how to involve small shop owners in the south part of the city. We try to explain that messy shop windows and untidy street corners can create insecurity in visitors and residents (Association of City Centre Management, Helsingborg).

In addition to seeking to improve the conditions for collaboration between actors, the Association of City Centre Management in Helsingborg also organises night-time walks, restores decaying facades and broken street lights. On the other hand, in Malmö, the organisation did take responsibility for collaborations but focussed solely on issues tied to place attractivity. Safety was not a prioritized issue and were not viewed as improving visitors' experiences of the city centre. On the contrary, top-down interventions in the material place were met by suspicion:

> Security experts have impacted Malmö's cityscape in a negative way by putting up traffic obstructions and surveillance cameras. Measures of that kind will not prevent violent attacks from occurring. To prevent attacks, the municipality needs to work with other factors, like preventing petty crime early on (Association of City Centre Management, Malmö).

In Malmö, street polls and surveillance cameras have been installed to fight the recent increase in public shootings and explosions. The safety measure converges to a great extent with those presented in the discussion of the material dimension of safe places. It is obvious that with the materialisation and visualisation of safety in places follow irritation and a sense of hopelessness before urban violence that continues regardless of measures. Instead, it is here suggested that safety measures damage urban aesthetics and should be used to prevent crimes on the individual level. Consequently, safety here turns into an imbalancing act, which discontinues collaboration around safety in the city centre.

In this section, the social and material dimensions of enacting safe places were considered. The balance acts involve negotiating the interests of nets of heterogenous actors,

such as surveillance cameras, street polls, social workers, the police, residents and visitors. Balancing acts also concerned encouraging everyday practices to outmanoeuvre illegal practices of drug trafficking, and how top-down safety measures are seen as disturbing the urban landscape failing to address the real causes of crime and violence.

Balancing fear

The second balancing act refers to the implementation of security measures (e.g. surveillance cameras, traffic obstructions, fences) without causing public fear and maintaining a vibrant inner city street life. The results from the survey with city centre managers demonstrate that traffic barriers and surveillance cameras dominate the discussion about measures aimed at improving safety in Swedish city centres (Table 5).

The survey was carried out in 2018, one year after the terror attack in Stockholm, when a truck entered the main shopping street, injuring and killing several people. During this period of time, similar attacks were also carried out in other European cities (e.g. Paris, Nice, Berlin, Brussels). Since then, measures taken to improve safety in Swedish cities have mostly concerned putting up physical obstacles to prevent trucks from entering pedestrian streets and railway stations. Barriers redirecting traffic are material manifestations that contribute to the making of safe places. Traffic polls serve as a signal to the public that the city administration is actively preventing future attacks. In Swedish cities, barriers should take on different shapes to blend into the urban environment, most commonly as lions, benches, flowerpots or hearts:

> We have taken concrete measures, for example by putting up traffic barriers in the shape of red cement hearts on pedestrian streets. These hearts are integrated with the cityscape without creating too much anxiety among visitors. Frequently, they are not seen as weapons against terror, but more as benches or something else you can climb up on and hug, Association of City Centre Management, Helsingborg).

Strategies of countering potential terror attacks should be seamlessly integrated in the urban environment, so as not to cause insecurity among visitors. The hearts mentioned above are an example of how material enactments need to strike a balance between safety and fear. The red colour and the heart shape diverts the attention from danger and unsafety (Plate 1). The heart functions partly as an artwork, and partly as a bench. It is also a material manifestation of the municipal project "I love Helsingborg!", which aims to reduce littering and keep the city neat and tidy.

The heart exemplifies how barriers for protection is used to unite the key elements of urban place safety: aesthetics, user-friendliness and maintenance. It corresponds to what

Measure	Type	Frequency
Traffic obstruction	Physical	97
Surveillance cameras	Physical	68
More contact with police	Organisational	51
Increased surveillance using security guards	Organisational	49
Planning of open spaces	Physical	44
Crisis communication	Organisational	41
Communication pathways	Organisational	19
Other (e.g. collaboration, visitor behaviour, event security)	Organisational	5

Note: $n = 206$

Table 5.
Public safety measures discussed among Swedish city centre managers

Plate 1.
Concrete road blocks
in Helsingborg

Coaffee *et al*. (2009, p. 503) call "transparent security invisible to the public gaze", in other words, measures for countering urban violence designed to fulfil both aesthetic and security needs. The Swedish Association of Regions (SAR) has developed a policy with principles for the design of traffic barriers in city centres. These principles emphasise, among other things, the importance of "maintaining the vitality of the public sphere", adding that security measures should strive to "improve the aesthetics of the site and functional qualities" (Levander, 2018, p. 19). On the other hand, as previously noted, in Malmö, traffic barriers were experienced as decreasing the overall attractivity of the city:

> There are other nicer ways to do it, and these barriers only prevent the type of truck attack that occurred in Stockholm. What are you going to do when some madman with a machete runs around injuring people? What do you do about explosions or people with weapons, knives, guns? (Association of City Centre Management, Malmö).

It may be argued that traffic barriers indicate a lack of imagination of expressions of urban violent attacks. It is perhaps not likely that attacks always occur in the same way. Coaffee *et al*. (2009) propose that counter-terrorism responses are attempts on the part of the state to be perceived as being in control, and able to protect its citizens. However, in principle, such

measures simultaneously expose the urban fear that underpins city planning and design. Arguably, the heart-shaped traffic barriers circumvent fear by enabling everyday practices of climbing, hugging and resting, which do not signal coercive control. In this sense, safety is enacted through balancing different ordinary activities in relation to the heart without alluding to people's fears.

Balancing place image
The third balancing act is related to tensions in the symbolic enactment of safe places. The main challenge in this balancing act is to counter negative media portrayal and restore place reputation and image. Undoubtedly, social media and online news media make it more difficult to control a city's overall image. In the aftermath of the terror attacks carried out in many European cities since 2014, Avraham (2021) demonstrates that officials in cities such as Paris and Manchester were very quick to implement message strategies to communicate business as usual. Stockholm adopted a similar strategy after the terror attack in 2017 to restore the image of the city as a safe (Cassinger *et al.*, 2018). In a public statement, the mayor of Stockholm said that the city was to remain open and tolerant, which was supported by the Twitter hashtag #openstockholm through which inhabitants could connect and help each other (Anderson, 2017). Cities with a vague or negative place image experience more difficulties to recover from crisis events. The Association of City Centre Management in Malmö continuously struggles with the image of the city as unsafe and tied to gang criminality and shootings:

> We are all aware of the image that the media is trying to project onto Malmö. They cannot let it go, but that is the way it is. I think they are making things quite easy for themselves in doing their own kind of brand analysis of various cities. Yes, we do have problems here and they have been revealed many times. But if you compare us with other places, it is not as bad as the media want to make it look. [...] And we have asked different actors to help us spread a different image of Malmö (Association of City Centre Management, Malmö).

Co-workers at the Malmö press office were concerned over the Stockholm-centric portrayal of the city in national new media reports. The portrayal was conceived of as one-dimensional, simply reporting violent events taking place in the city:

> It is often the case that the national news media write about us whenever something happens, and it is usually negative. If you repeatedly hear about violence in Malmö, this will lead to the city gaining a certain image Press officer, Malmö Municipality.

News and social media narratives are difficult to handle and refute, not least because there are no clearly formulated communication routines regarding how to counter them. Social media posts constitute a borderland between factual and fictious accounts on what is happening in a place. There are different ways for places to address media narratives. The semi-public tourism organisation Malmotown deals with Malmö's negative media attention by way of using place ambassadors who try to turn the current place image into an advantage:

> We do not refute posts in social media in a reactive manner, or seek to disprove what is said. Instead, we focus on supporting and creating positive messages about Malmö. We take part and try to keep the positive threads alive (Communication officer, Malmotown).

Using place ambassadors to counter negative stereotypes about the city is a form of message strategies (Avraham and Ketter, 2008). In place of formulating counter-narratives to the stereotypical portrayal of Malmö, Malmotown attempts to mobilise social media users to reproduce favourable narratives of the place. Thus, the aim is to create an ongoing flow of

innovative and positive messages in contrast to the prevailing image of Malmö as dangerous. In a media landscape where information is easily manipulated and amplified by the use of algorithms, it is important to ensure a greater organic flow of images of place safety that will increase the level of resilience to reputational crises. On the other hand, communication officers said that they wanted to avoid narratives that beautify the city and divert attention from problems with unsafety. Thus, they called for a more balanced representation of Malmö:

> We will gain no credibility by trying to sweep things under the carpet and by highlighting one single positive image. What I mean here is that we have to be honest and describe the city as it is. And that means we need to talk about both the positive and the negative issues (Communication Department, Malmö Municipality).

The press office in Malmö compiled facts about the city that were used to respond to offensive comments in a neutral manner. The fact sheet was distributed to politicians, civil servants and communication officers who are in the frontline of counteracting false narratives of Malmö. It is important to point out, however, that a negative place image in the media will not necessarily affect the public view. After all, in 2019, the number of both residents and guest nights increased in Malmö. The increase in the number of residents and visitors raises questions about the need to control the symbolic enactment of safe places, as there will always be unintended consequences and unplanned events that exist beyond and beneath our awareness (Coffin, 2019).

Discussion

This study illustrates how tensions are balanced in the symbolic, social, and material enactment of safe places. Overcoming these tensions means counterbalancing top-down approaches to safety, so as to promote collaboration between actors, avoid public fear, ensure place attractivity and promote a positive place image. Previous research has predominantly focussed on the material dimension of safety in terms of crime prevention and protection. Police cars, fences, surveillance cameras and traffic barriers are highly visual safety measures aimed at stopping urban violence. However, these measures also signal a high degree of coercive control by the state, which may fuel urban fear (Coaffee *et al.*, 2009; Minton, 2018). There is thus a certain level of fear produced in securing cities, which needs to be balanced. Urban fear is embedded in social problems linked to segregation and socio-economic inequalities in urban places (Castilhos, 2019). Urban fear may also be connected to the restructuration of cities, transformations in retail and decaying city centres. Deserted areas between neighbourhoods, and abandoned shopping streets create a city centre that is devoid of social meaning and life. In such places, it is easier for stereotypes and negative rumours of violence and danger to gain a foothold.

Conversely, this study demonstrates the value of everyday practices and ordinary life for enacting safe places and curbing urban fear. Everyday practices refer to both mundane activities undertaken by visitors in a place, and the general maintenance and refurbishment work done by the municipality and property owners. Such efforts include improving lighting, clearing litter, repairing decaying facades, turning gloomy subways into illuminated works of art and activating people to use outdoor gyms and playgrounds. Everyday practices are organised in networks consisting of heterogeneous actors (Cheetham *et al.*, 2018). This means that they often escape the balancing acts that we propose uphold the order of safe places. We may here recall de Certeau's (1984) argument that the unpredictability of practices of everyday life constitutes a form of resistance against the

planned rational order of places. Everyday life consists of routine practices governed by rules, norms and social conventions (Schatzki, 2003), but in contrast to planned and professional practices, they are silent, even ghostly (de Certeau, 1984). Consequently, they easily escape our attention. Imbalances in the accomplishment of safety were also identified in the study. Imbalances often concern dissatisfaction with or resistance to safety measures. They were observed in the dissatisfaction with physical safety measures in Malmö and in the unwillingness of communication officers to convey an overly positive image of the city. Thus, imbalances point towards the limits of top-down approaches and open up for alternative ways of understanding safe places.

Conclusion

The research aim in this study was to develop a more nuanced approach to understand safe places by examining their symbolic, social, as well as material manifestations. To this end, focus was shifted from safety a measure of management control and asset to places, to practices of simultaneous production of safety and place. The study suggests that top-down safety measures need to be balanced with other practices of accomplishing safe places. The value of daily routinised practices of maintaining and developing places is overlooked in the extant research on safety. Safety measures following the fortification and fortress approach (Pain and Townshend, 2002) were the most common in the examined cities. The problem with these measures is that their effectiveness builds on the signalling of state control, which tend to increase public fear.

By contrast, this study shows that safety is also constructed by enabling everyday practices and ordinary life in places. The making of safe places involves nets of different practice-arrangements, which address challenges that are not necessarily linked to safety, such as creating attractive city centres, activating residents to use urban space and promoting the city to visitors. The knowledge of these practices-arrangements, however, is limited, as they are often overshadowed by physical security measures and experts. Understanding safe places as an outcome of practices of everyday life enables us to capture safety as something other than control and how our experiences of safety are influenced by factors, which lie beyond or beneath our awareness (Coffin, 2019).

The argument put forward here has relevance for understanding safety in the context of place-making. The study is limited to an examination of a relatively small sample of municipal-level practices of enacting safe places in Swedish city centres. Thus, it is difficult to extend the findings beyond these practices. However, the practice-based approach to safety developed here may be used in other studies to complement the dominant view of safety as a management control measure. Future research may want to investigate the significance of non-human actors for upholding safe places. This study has only briefly touched on non-human actors in the shape of safety measures, and more research is needed on how, for instance, artificial intelligence contributes to safety. Further research could also investigate if balance is always desirable in city centre management, or whether a focus on imbalance could open up for new ways of thinking about the construction of safe places.

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