

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Transition towards and of sustainability—Understanding sustainability as performative

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Abstract

Our purpose is to explore the concept of “sustainability” when understood from a performative perspective, i.e. as a concept that is filled with meaning across time. Drawing on a 10 year-long study of the digital footprint of Stockholm Royal Seaport, claimed to be northern Europe’s largest sustainable urban development district, we show that “sustainability” emerged as the project became associated with particular places, projects, histories, and technologies. This means that “sustainability” was *local* in that it was situated in the particular spatial context of the project; *temporal* in that it was situated in a particular time; and *political* in that it expressed particular values and perspectives. The study contributes to explaining why “sustainability” remains—and always will remain—a contested concept, which is why sustainability transitions are complex. Consequently, we suggest that the transition *towards* sustainability always involves the transition *of* sustainability, something that needs to be acknowledged in order for a transition to actually become sustainable.

KEYWORDS

performative, Stockholm Royal Seaport, sustainability, sustainability transition, urban development

1 | INTRODUCTION

Although the idea that society as well as businesses must take measures towards a sustainable development has gained increasing attention (Wang et al., 2016), “sustainability” remains a contested concept (Mebratu, 1998; Montiel, 2008; Morrow & Mowatt, 2015; Rossi et al., 2000; Schwartz & Carroll, 2008; Zeemering, 2009). Despite well-spread definitions, such as that by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED)—“the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs” (WCED, 1987, ch 2)—and the nomenclature of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals,¹

“sustainability” has several different definitions and operationalizations (Elkington, 1998; Gimenez et al., 2012).

Some have argued that it is a problem that “sustainability” still lacks a solid meaning because this opens up for interpretations that, in fact, may be *less* sustainable (Johnston et al., 2007; Newton & Freyfogle, 2005). The spectrum of “sustainability” definitions range from “weak” to “strong” depending on, for example, the integration and extent of collaboration among various actors (Hediger, 1999; Landrum & Ohsowski, 2018). When sustainability for example is reframed in a “weak” way as “sustainable growth,” the original idea of sustainability is compromised (Banerjee & Bonnefous, 2011), and when products are branded as “green,” morality is commercialized in a questionable way (Fuentes, 2014). “Doing good does not always mean doing well,” as Broadstock et al. (2019, p. 1199) recently concluded.

¹<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org> (Accessed June 23, 2020).

It may even be argued that the many different meanings of “sustainability” rather than support the transition towards a more sustainable world, instead may impede it. Not simply because definitions differ, but because defining “sustainability” as “a codified and stable ‘what’” reduces this important idea to a list that in itself does not lead to the achieving of it. Instead, the focus needs to be on the “how,” that is, the *doing* of sustainability (DuPuis & Ball, 2013, p. 64); or, as Intezari (2015) argues, the *applying* of wisdom of sustainability in practice. The development where the triple bottom line of sustainability is reduced to an accounting system, rather than a “triple helix of change for tomorrow’s capitalism” (Elkington, 2018, p. 4) is simply not enough to achieve sustainability transitions, as these are affected by notions of morality, processes of power dynamics, institutional logics, and sub/cultures (Demers & Gond, 2020; Kok et al., 2017).

In line with this thinking, we join those who previously have argued that “sustainability” emerges, not through stable and stipulative definitions of the concept, but through its translation, use, and daily practice (e.g., Corvellec, 2016; Finch et al., 2015). From this perspective, the meaning of “sustainability” emerges across time through the power of association whereby humans, ideas, and events are mobilized and associated with the concept in nonverbal action (Callon, 2007; Latour, 1986) as well as in discourse and through language-in-use (cf. Hajer, 1995; Hajer & Versteeg, 2005).

We draw on a 10-year longitudinal empirical study of a large urban development district in Stockholm, Sweden: the Stockholm Royal Seaport (SRS). Often described as Northern Europe’s largest, state-of-the-art, sustainable urban development district, this is a suitable case for our purpose because it involves a wide range of actors from a variety of contexts over a longer period of time. Hence, it provides the possibility of understanding how “sustainability” is performed across time.

The findings of our study show that “sustainability” is performed as local, temporary, and political; findings that not only help explain why and how “sustainability” remains a contested concept. By showing how “sustainability” is performed across time, we also contribute to the understanding of the complexity of sustainability transitions; a complexity that may be understood better if focusing simultaneously on the transition *towards* sustainability, that is, the envisaged state of the transition, as well as on the transition *of* sustainability, that is, the way the idea of what is “sustainable” changes across time. We conclude that doing so increase the chances that sustainability transition actually becomes sustainable.

2 | PREVIOUS DEFINITIONS OF SUSTAINABILITY

Different operationalizations of “sustainability” have been made in relation to different parts of the so called triple bottom line (ecology, economy, or society, see Elkington, 1998)—a framework for sustainability that still seem to permeate researchers’ as well as practitioners’ understanding of “sustainability” (Amini et al., 2018). Whereas economic sustainability is often operationalized as the costs of producing

or manufacturing, environmental sustainability is frequently related to the use of energy and other resources and as waste from operations (Gimenez et al., 2012). Social sustainability is often translated into measures pertaining to equal opportunities (Elkington, 1998).

Increasingly, the middle ground between economic growth and environmental protection (Collins et al., 2010), and the integration of economic, ecological, and social concerns (Schneider & Meins, 2012) has become more emphasized, and various integrated frameworks have been proposed (e.g., Christensen, 2012). A key argument for an integrated perspective is that sustainability is far too often discussed solely in ecological terms, disconnecting it from human social behavior (Faber et al., 2010). In line with this, it has been argued that sustainability should be understood as the integration of multiple perspectives and methods, for example, ecological economics, industrial ecology, ecosystem health, sustainable decision making, policy, and design (see Seager, 2008), an idea that is also the corner stone of the emergent meta-scientific field of sustainability science (see, e.g., Clark & Dickson, 2003; Miller, 2013). Others have argued that it is impossible to achieve goals related to economic growth, participation, and environmental protection in one and the same initiative and that the triple bottom line thus creates a “post-sustainability trilemma” (*sic*, Sconfienza, 2019).

Extant research show that among companies, there is a variety of interpretations of what “sustainability” means and how it should be implemented and companies perform sustainability in different ways (Montiel, 2008; Schwartz & Carroll, 2008). This may be explained by trade-offs between various forms of value embedded in the business models of organizations, for example, between sustainable value and economic value (Brennan & Tennant, 2018); as a result of institutional logics (Horak et al., 2018); by differences in organizational identity (Song et al., 2019); or by varying company size (Gallo & Christensen, 2011).

Research also shows that different groups of people ascribe different meanings to the idea of “sustainability” (Mebratu, 1998). Whereas governments and public authorities for example associate “sustainability” with public visions of control, social equity, and action, corporate visions of sustainability involve leadership and innovation (Rossi et al., 2000). Furthermore, studies show that middle managers and employees even within the same organization understand “sustainability” differently (Morrow & Mowatt, 2015), as do public officials, even if they work for the same organization (Zeemering, 2009).

In addition, it has been argued that it is a problem that “sustainability” lacks a solid meaning as this opens up for less sustainable interpretations (Johnston et al., 2007; Newton & Freyfogle, 2005). It seems as if there is a spectrum of “sustainability” definitions, ranging from “weak” to “strong” (Hediger, 1999) depending on the ambitions of, for example, change, integration, and extent of collaboration among various actors. A study of corporate sustainability for example shows that companies to a large extent aim at building business cases when working with sustainability, which is an example of a “weak” representation of sustainability (Landrum & Ohsowski, 2018).

Others argue that “sustainability” is an emergent concept, resulting from on-going practices and negotiations (Ozaki et al., 2013),

and expressed in discourses that not simply express a concern for the future, but for the past (de Burgh-Woodman & King, 2012). The contestedness of “sustainability” may thus reside in the approach used when defining it. In the following, we will explore this further.

3 | SUSTAINABILITY AS A PERFORMATIVE CONCEPT

The various attempts at producing definitions of sustainability, also the ones integrating various aspects, may be understood as attempts at proposing so called ostensive definitions of the concept. Ostensive definitions build on an approach whereby the meaning of a concept is developed by pointing to other concepts (that, in turn, also may be defined ostensively), which means that the meaning of a concept is brought about within an already existing normative structure (Ramsey, 2015). Or, as Ramsey (2015, p. 1077) puts it, “If you want to know what ‘sustainability’ means, offer a definition of its component terms, each one of which is clear, simple and—one hopes—operational.” This means that ostensive definitions explain things *in principle*, outlining the fundamental components and underlying theoretical constructs, thereby defining what is ontologically “real” and what is not (Latour, 1986). The problem with ostensive definitions is that they may “be variously interpreted in every case” (Wittgenstein, 1953, section 28, italics in original), and to offer a stipulative definition in the hope that practices will be performed in line with it is futile (Ramsey, 2015). Rather than producing policies or strategies that build on an ostensive understanding of “sustainability” and hope that societies and business will change accordingly, researchers as well as public and private policy makers must adopt a different approach.

Such an approach is offered by “performativity theory,” which is an umbrella concept for various theories that posits that verbal and nonverbal actions perform in and upon the world (Bramming et al., 2012). Stemming from language philosophy (Austin, 1955/1975), communication theory (Bateson, 1972), social theory (Goffman, 1974), and social philosophy (Lyotard, 1979/1984), performativity theories have developed in many areas of social science, for example, gender studies (e.g., Butler, 1990), cultural geography (e.g., Nash, 2000), science-and-technology-studies (Callon, 2006; Latour, 2005), organization studies, and management (for an overview, see Diedrich et al., 2013).

Common to these strands of theorizing is that a concept can be made sense of by studying how it is filled with meaning as it is performed in talk and action (MacKenzie & Millo, 2003). From this perspective, the meaning(s) of a concept come(s) about through what Latour (1986) called the powers of association, whereby ideas, events, actors, and so forth, are mobilized when a particular concept is used or acted upon. To define something performatively then, is to study *how a concept acquires meaning across time* and how it emerges as people speak about it or perform in accordance with their interpretation of it (Latour, 1986).

A performative understanding thus involves the basic assumption that reality is made up of constantly changing relationships

(Chia, 1995) and, consequently, that ideas and meanings may not be defined in a permanent fashion, because these are undergoing constant changes and negotiations (Helin et al., 2014).

From a performative perspective, ostensive definitions hide the complexity of a concept and the processes through which the concept is filled with meaning—the underlying mechanisms are black-boxed. This is because ostensive definitions lead to “the Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness” (Bakken & Hernes, 2006), that is, “the tendency to see physical objects and things as the natural units of analysis rather than, more properly, the *relationships* between them” (Chia, 1995, p. 582, italics in original). A performative approach, on the other hand, highlights that a concept is not a given; it unpacks it from the black box and draws our attention to the ways it is produced and reproduced (MacKenzie & Millo, 2003).

In the area of sustainability, a performative perspective has been used to show how sustainability emerges in and through discourse and language-in-use (e.g., de Burgh-Woodman & King, 2012; Hajer, 1995; Hajer & Versteeg, 2005), as well as how objects and human entangled in daily practices perform sustainability in various ways (Corvellec, 2016; Finch et al., 2015). Not only do these studies show that sustainability is constructed through language, practices, and the mobilization of objects. They also highlight that a performative approach may develop a deeper understanding of “the actual dynamic of sustainability transition, not as one may define it in theory or wish it politically, but as individual and organizational practices are actually forming it on an everyday basis” (Corvellec, 2016, p. 397). To adopt a performative perspective when aiming at understanding how the meaning of the concept may help support or impede sustainability transition thus seems particular suitable.

4 | DESIGN OF THE STUDY

4.1 | The case: Stockholm Royal Seaport

The study is explorative and draws upon one case (Dul & Hak, 2008; Eisenhardt, 1998; Flyvbjerg, 2006): the urban development district Stockholm Royal Seaport (SRS; Swe: “Norra Djurgårdsstaden”) in Sweden. The urban development context is particularly suitable when it comes to understanding the social, economic, and ecological dynamics that shape or retard the transition towards a more sustainable future (cf. Wagenaar & Wilkinson, 2013) and SRS is a good example of the ambition expressed in urban planning in general, where urban districts—particularly cities—on an overall level are seen as important tools for enhancing sustainability (Wheeler & Beatley, 2014).

SRS is a large urban development district that involves the reconstruction of a former sea-front harbor area that used to house a large ferry terminal, an oil terminal, and several oil and gas storage tanks. When completed in 2030, SRS will house 10,000 new homes as well as workplaces for some 30,000 people; several restaurants, bars and cafés, shops, gyms, theaters, a hotel, and a conference center.

The initial discussions about SRS took place already before the turn of the millennium, and the first residential houses were designed

in 2011. In 2013, the first inhabitants and tenants moved in. The vision is to make SRS an international role model for sustainable urban development, or as the mayor and vice mayor of Stockholm expressed it,

Stockholm Royal Seaport shall not only consolidate Stockholm's position as one leading capital in climate work but also support the marketing of Swedish environmental technology and contribute to the development of new technology that will cover all housing construction in Stockholm, Sweden and the rest of the world.²

This means that SRS is a good example of a sustainable urban district that develops over time, where the future is constantly projected (Karrbom Gustavsson & Hallin, 2013), which makes it a good example when aiming to understand how “sustainability” is produced performatively.

The leading actor behind SRS is the City of Stockholm, which owns most of the land where the new area is developed. In addition, a multitude of other actors are involved: public organizations on local, regional, and national levels, companies, consultants, and business associations, to just mention a few. Also, individual politicians, university scholars, urban planners, city managers, developers, lobbyists, and others have been involved in various ways and on various occasions, for example, by using SRS as a test bed for research and development projects.

4.2 | Tracking digital footprints

As public debates about urban development increasingly take place online, the internet is a good context for finding empirical material, allowing for the tapping into the on-going performance of a wide variety of actors (Foth et al., 2009; Gustavsson & Czarniawska, 2004). In accordance with this, we decided to follow the digital footprints of the actors involved in the SRS as they appeared online (Weaver & Gahegan, 2007) by collecting online published material related to SRS over a 10-year period, in 12-months intervals.

The longitudinal approach was found suitable as it allows for an in-depth understanding of change (Pettigrew, 1990) and for answering *how-type* questions (Pratt, 2009) such as how sustainability is performed across time.

In practice, we, in late February every year from 2011 to 2020, have searched for the Swedish name for SRS—“Norra Djurgårdsstaden”—on search engines that are commonly used and readily available: AltaVista, Yahoo, Google, Bing, and DuckDuckGo. All authors were involved in the yearly searches. To minimize bias, different computers located at different sites were used. We also performed an extra search on different computers while sitting in

the same office. This made evident that the search results were the same for each search engine regardless of which computer was used.

Initially, we agreed to create and download pdf:s for the top-10 hits per search engine, but after realizing that also the hits further down on the hit-list could be of interest, we decided, in 2013, to download and save pdf:s for the top-20 hits we accessed per search engine. The data regarding all hits from the different search engines were compiled in a separate master document. Based on this compilation, we removed duplicate hits (i.e., the same webpages that occurred on different search engines and the same webpages that appeared across years) and a few pdf:s that for some reason were empty (one reason being that some hits did not translate into text-based pdf:s, e.g., if they included films or images only). Through this process, the initial 640 pdf:s were reduced to 341.

4.3 | Analysis

The analysis of the 341 pdf:s took place through what may be described as an abductive process (Dubois & Gadde, 2002); a creative and iterative process involving all authors whereby we oscillated between the interpreting of empirical material and the reading of literature. In practice, this meant that we, together, read all pdf:s systematically, looking for the ideas that were mobilized in them.

More specifically this process began by a two of us orally describing each pdf, while the third person took notes that were inserted in the master document. In our descriptions, we not only observed which organization or individual was “the sender” of the particular web page but also looked at the combination of images and text and “the tone of voice” that the page expressed in our interpretation, in terms of what it constructed as news, relevant, comprehensible, and intelligent (Rowley, 2004, p. 231). Doing so, we noted which arguments and ideas were mobilized (Callon, 2007; Hajer, 1995; Hajer & Versteeg, 2005; Latour, 1986) in texts and images, in relation to the case studied (SRS), and in the discussions amongst us, we found a common interpretation of the pdf:s.

We then turned to performativity theory and articles that have adopted this lens to make sense of various empirical phenomena (e.g., Lucarelli & Hallin, 2015; Corvellec, 2016). Inspired by our reading, we returned to our notes in the master document, and when re-reading the entries, three themes emerged: local, temporary, and political. The local entries drew on the particular geographical and historical context of the area of SRS; the temporary entries were entries that associated ideas, technologies, events, and so forth that were specific for particular points in time; and the political entries expressed intentions, directions, or visions of various actors. After having agreed that these three captured the empirical material well, we revisited the pdf:s to look for further nuances and to look for illustrative quotes. In the following, we will describe these three ways through which sustainability was performed in more detail.

²Source: Sten Nordin and Ulla Hamilton, mayor and vice mayor of the City of Stockholm, 2010, Dnr 303-1015/2010.

5 | SUSTAINABILITY AS LOCAL

As mentioned earlier, the overall vision of the SRS is to develop a sustainable urban district that uses cutting edge sustainable solutions and that can function as an international showcase for tomorrow's city planners. Despite reproducing this general idea of "sustainability," our analysis of the empirical material shows that sustainability is also performed as *local* in that various aspects of the particular area where the SRS is built are mobilized. In particular, there are three aspects of the local situatedness of SRS that stand out in the empirical material: its geographical location, the history of the area, and the linking of SRS to another sustainable urban development district in the Stockholm Region: Hammarby Sjöstad.

First, the SRS is closely associated with the particular geographical area in which it is situated through the mobilization of the Baltic Sea, the National City Park of Stockholm, and the close proximity to the city—in particular, the posh area of Östermalm: "From here, Stureplan [a well-known meeting place and posh area down-town with night-clubs, restaurants and exclusive shops] is accessible, as is the beautiful nature of National City Park"; a real estate broker writes (Borätt, Google, 2015), and a property developer formulates it similarly: "here we live beautifully with direct contact with the Royal National City Park while being close to the [city] center. It only takes 8 minutes by bike to Stureplan" (Skanska, Bing, 2020). The proximity to nature—the sea as well as forests—in combination with the proximity to the urbanity that the city provides is even portrayed as providing a "balanced life" (Skanska, Google, 2014) to those living in the new area. Sustainability is performed as something that takes place locally, and with values that involves nature as well as urbanity, and as something that involves a balanced mix of these aspects.

"Sustainability" is also performed by mobilizing the history of the place. Not only does SRS do so through its name and its link to the Swedish monarchy—"Stockholm Royal Seaport is historically part of the stately owned 'Royal Djurgården'", as Wikipedia tells us (Wikipedia, Google, 2013). The digital footprint also establishes that the port in the area has a special history in that it was Sweden's first toll-free port (ibid), and a property developer claims that the area since at least a century back has been a "central node for supplying the capital with gas and electricity" (Äril, DuckDuckGo, 2018), with gasworks from the early 20th century. "Sustainability" is performed as building on the past of the particular place and as cherishing this past by relating the present to it.

Third, the project is performed as local by being associated with another sustainable urban development district in Stockholm: Hammarby Sjöstad. This was a project with high sustainability ambitions that was initiated in 1996, whereby a run-down, polluted and unsafe industrial and residential area was transformed into a popular residential district (Iverot & Brandt, 2011). This was also used as source of inspiration for the SRS-project: "Based on the experiences from Hammarby Sjöstad [...] the City has raised a vision to create a sustainable urban district in the middle of Stockholm", the Royal Institute of Technology declares (Yahoo, 2012), and the city officials

themselves claim that SRS "takes the baton from world-known Hammarby sjöstad and brings environmental technology another step forward" (Stockholm bygger, Google, 2012). By associating SRS with Hammarby sjöstad, "sustainability" is performed as passing on local knowledge from a previous sustainability urban renewal project to this new one.

By drawing on its geographical location, the history of the area, and the linking to a previous sustainable urban development project in the region, the meaning of "sustainability" in the case of SRS thus emerges as closely linked to a particular, local, context (Kok et al., 2017; Miller, 2013), and as strongly related to the particular place and space of the area where SRS is situated (Guthey et al., 2014).

6 | SUSTAINABILITY AS TEMPORARY

In addition to its local performance, "sustainability" is performed differently across time. Green technologies and a green lifestyle are two examples of materials and sets of ideas that are mobilized at different points in time.

Across the studied 10-year period, "sustainability" is closely associated with various green technologies that may help solve problems related to environmental issues. An article in a large Swedish daily for example reported that

Stockholm Royal Seaport will be the first urban area in the world that is built with a smart grid. [...] New technology will enable small-scale, locally produced electricity to be fed into the grid. [...] There will be charging stations for electrical car. (Dagens Nyheter, AltaVista, 2011)

But during the past few years, no *new* technologies have been mobilized in the digital footprint of SRS. Instead, already introduced technological solutions are re-iterated in the data, also in relation to the most recent buildings, as on the webpage of the Belatchew Architects, describing the houses that are currently being constructed in the seventh phase of the project:

A compact climate shell provides the best solution for low energy consumption. [...] On the roofs there are solar cells providing energy to the building, sedum plants are planted on the roofs, delaying water, thereby diminishing the pressure on the stormwater system [...]. The ventilation is taken care of by an FTX-system that reuses energy from extracted air. The amount of waste is minimized through disposers and is collected via an automated waste collection system. The houses have green roofs absorbing rainwater. Cycling is encouraged through large and easily accessible cycle racks. (Belatchew, Google, 2020).

All technologies mentioned above (solar cells, sedum-covered roofs, system for reusing energy, garbage disposers, automated waste collection system, and cycle racks) had already been associated with SRS: smart grids were mentioned in the vision document from 2010, and solar panels were associated with SRS in the footprint of a property developer 2016 (Stockholmshem, Bing, 2016). It is somewhat of a paradox that SRS on the one hand is intended to become a “show-case” of modern green technologies, while on the other hand, the technologies associated with this cutting-edge sustainable urban development project are not new.

As the first houses were finished and people started to move in, another set of ideas were mobilized in the digital footprint of SRS; ideas related to a green lifestyle. These ideas were related to daily aspects of residents' life. As seen in the quote above, cycling and other green means of transportation are encouraged, and overall, the inhabitants “are expected to live a green life and exercise”, as an article in a large Swedish daily put it (Dagens Nyheter, Google, 2011). As people moved in, they also began to mobilize this lifestyle themselves in relation to the area. “What's the latest news about charging stations in the area”, an inhabitant for example wrote on the Facebook page for the area managed by the city, referring to charging stations for electrical cars (Yahoo, 2015). Another resident wrote “Great with new neighbors ... do you know if there are any plans in relation to the increased number of residents in the area? More public buses?” (Facebook, Google, 2016).

Whereas “sustainability” in the early parts of the studied period was performed by mobilizing green technologies, mainly related to renewable energy, it more recently has come to be about sustainable living and healthy lifestyle that for example includes cycling and taking the bus, or possibly an electrical car. From a performative perspective, “sustainability” thus change across time as various actors mobilize different technologies, solutions, and ideas when acting upon it verbally and nonverbally (cf. Miller, 2013).

7 | SUSTAINABILITY AS POLITICAL

The political aspect of “sustainability” is performed by the expressing of particular intentions, directions, or visions, for example, by the mobilizing of ideas that are related to perfection. These positions SRS as the best of areas, thereby attracting the best individuals. The political aspect is also seen in the power that the city of Stockholm has in the material, both as a whole and relative to other actors.

The digital footprint of SRS makes it clear that the overall ambition of the project is high: “the environmental goals are more ambitious than ever” (Fortum energy provider, AltaVista, 2013)—the area is even linked to perfection: “All of us that are part of creating Stockholm Royal Seaport are driven by the same thing. This will be a perfect area: to live, work and spend time in.” (Borätt real estate agent, AltaVista and Google, 2013). The area is said to be “a model for urban development” (Kjellander & Sjöberg architects, DuckDuckGo, 2018) and the area “will soon be one of the most obvious tourist attractions for everyone” (Stockholm medical office, Bing, 2020).

The good reputation of the area is also expected to spread across the world—as the fact that the area has an English name that is not a direct translation from the Swedish name indicates: “‘Stockholm Royal Seaport’ is easier to remember. ‘Norra Djurgårdsstaden’ is too difficult to pronounce for all the Chinese, Indians, French people and Americans that come to visit us. One of the goals is to market the area across the world, says Martin Ottosson, Communication Strategist [in the City].” (Dagens Nyheter, Google, 2015).

By being the best of areas, the most talented people will gather here: the area “should be developed to a world-class, vibrant and sustainable port city, attracting the most competent individuals and the most successful companies in the world” (Tengbom architects, Google, 2020).

This however also means that the inhabitants have to adapt to the area, rather than the other way around: “If the ambitious goals are to be achieved it is not enough to build energy efficient houses, find smart technical solutions and ensure good public transportation. Those that move in must, according to the City of Stockholm, understand and get involved” (Dagens Nyheter, Google, 2011).

This is not the only example of how powerful the city of Stockholm is in filling “sustainability” with meaning in the case of SRS or how the city mobilize what “sustainability” is and how sustainable development is accomplished through urban development. “Other Swedish municipalities have picked up ideas from this project, and we have had many international visitors interested in how to do it”. (Svenska Byggprojekt, DuckDuckGo, 2018). Being “Sweden's largest urban district”, the city of Stockholm wants SRS to be recognized and comparable with other urban districts, “such as those in Copenhagen, Oslo and Hamburg” (Royal Institute of Technology, Yahoo, 2015). Hereby, SRS is used as a tool to brand the city of Stockholm as role model for initiating sustainable development, in order to “meet international competition” and facilitate “tomorrows business” (Stockholm, Yahoo, 2014). However, while a city official describe SRS as an “environmental project” (Svenska Byggprojekt, DuckDuckGo, 2018), the same official gives the following explanation to why the city invest: “The target is to create a financial surplus to the City of Stockholm” (ibid).

In other words, from a performative perspective, “sustainability” is not a neutral concept, rather it emerges as political in that particular values and perspectives are favored (Connelly, 2007; Jacobs, 1999; Nyberg & Wright, 2016). Traditional political value propositions associated with superiority and economic growth of the region are strongly mobilized, not only by the city of Stockholm who initiated the project, but by a great number of other actors. Furthermore, it favors certain conventions and demands of particular.

8 | CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

As illustrated above, the present study shows how “sustainability” in the case of SRS emerged as the project became associated with particular places, projects, histories, and technologies. Although the focus here has not been to tease out why these particular associations were

made at particular points in time, our overall analysis indicate that the meanings that emerged were *local* in that they were situated in the specific local context of the project; *temporary* in that they emerged at particular points in time; and *political* in that they express particular values and perspectives. Understanding “sustainability” as performative thus helps us see that in practice, “sustainability” may become something *else* than what it was intended to be according to an ostensive definition.

Not only is SRS performed as sustainable through, for example, the mobilizing of nature, a “green” lifestyle and “green” technologies (which all are implied to be “sustainable”), but SRS is also performed as sustainable by the mobilizing of the poshest parts of Stockholm, and by becoming associated with a certain kind of lifestyle required by the layout of the area as well as by the implementation of particular technologies. This means that “sustainability” in this case emerges as something associated with a particular type of individuals—individuals who are fit and able to use a bike instead of a car; individuals who are attracted to the posh areas of the city, and who have the financial means to afford to live in SRS where prices are high due to the implementation of expensive technologies and materials. The individuals that are to live in SRS are even explicitly expected to be talented and competent. Consequently, it could be questioned if SRS fulfills the ostensive definition of being socially sustainable, because it seems to prioritize an elite, rather than offer equal opportunities to all kinds of people (Elkington, 1998). Furthermore, the mobilization of the industrial history in the performance of “sustainability” in this case fails to mention the fact that the energy suppliers that previously resided in the area contributed, not only to supplying the rapidly expanding 19th- and 20th-century Stockholm with energy but also to polluting the city, particularly its soil, which, during the construction of SRS, has had to undergo extensive and expensive sanitization.

This does not mean, however, that SRS is *not* sustainable. From a performative perspective, all associations that are mobilized in relation to this sustainable city development project help define “sustainability” in this particular case. Adopting a performative perspective opens up for seeing the *variety* of meanings of “sustainability” that makes the concept elusive and contested as illustrated above. Or, to use Corvellec’s terms, “sustainability” is “plural and contentious” (Corvellec, 2016, p. 397).

If “sustainability” is in a constant process of becoming, transformed (Bergström & Dobers, 2000), and continuously and ceaselessly re-performed (cf. Lury, 2009), then the transition *towards* sustainability also involves a simultaneous transition *of* sustainability. Whereas the transition *towards* sustainability implies a striving towards a pre-defined idea, an end-state that is “sustainable” according to an ostensive definition, the transition *of* sustainability takes place as the concept materializes in a particular place and at a particular point in time, for example, in the form of a project, like in the case of SRS, in an object (Corvellec, 2016), in an infrastructure (Finch et al., 2015), in marketing discourse (de Burgh-Woodman & King, 2012), or in a policy discourse (Hajer, 1995; Hajer & Versteeg, 2005).

We would argue that both of these processes are important. Rather than searching for a definitive meaning of “sustainability,” we

agree with Haughton and Counsell (2004, pp. 72–73) that it is “necessary to recognize the multiplicity of ‘sustainabilities’, and to analyze the ways in which these are shaped and mobilized”. Doing so will enable a better understanding of the underlying normative basis of “sustainability” (Ramsey, 2015) and help tease out what drives the concern for sustainable transition (cf. de Burgh-Woodman & King, 2012).

In the case study here, we saw that such concerns included not only the vision of a sustainable city, supported by environmentally friendly technologies and the supporting of green lifestyles, but also visions of a particular type of successful elitist group of individuals who potentially could contribute to the city also in other ways (e.g., financially and intellectually). This is not surprising as sustainability processes are always inherently political by involving a multitude of stakeholders with vested interests (Köhler et al., 2019). But understanding the transition *of* sustainability—that is, how various interests become entangled in the shaping of the meaning of “sustainability” across time—provides the possibilities of keeping the transition *towards* sustainability on track. This means that acknowledging that “sustainability” always will remain a vague and contested concept, is not meaningless—on the contrary. It is precisely this that enables a constructive discussion of why the work towards sustainable transition is difficult.

Sustainability involves structural changes that need to happen over longer periods of time and requires co-evolutionary changes in technology, economy, culture, and organizational forms (Köhler et al., 2019; Loorbach et al., 2010). By scrutinizing the practices of “sustainability,” rather merely than the definitions, visions, and objectives of the concept, researchers, managers, and other practitioners may develop an understanding of potential differences in frames of references, differences that may impede fruitful and effective collaboration towards sustainability. The plural of “practice-s” here is important.

9 | FUTURE RESEARCH

We believe that there is a need for further studies of how “sustainability” is performed in various contexts. Understanding how sustainability is made sense of in relation to the context in which it is used will lead to more a comprehensive and transformative understanding of the concept (Guthey et al., 2014), not only by helping understanding gaps between ideal and practice (Wagenaar & Wilkinson, 2013), and in relation to the “post-sustainable trilemma” (*sic* Sconfienza, 2019), but also by equipping us with the possibility of evoking the performative effects of language in order to stimulate change (Wickert & Schaefer, 2014). This could also prove useful in mindfulness-based approaches to sustainability, which builds on reflection and mindful strategizing (Ndubisi et al., 2019).

Future research could for example compare how “sustainability” is performed differently across different geographical and cultural contexts. It could also delve deeper into the political aspects of how

sustainability is performed, by further exploring which interests are privileged and which actors are more or less influential and by studying how competition or negotiation takes place in such processes and among different central or peripheral actors. Here, it should be pointed out that “actors” may not only be humans but also nonhumans, as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digital technologies are becoming increasingly more important in sustainability transition (see the special issue by Bohnsack et al., 2019). Such studies would generate a deeper understanding of how power and inequality emerge in the performing of sustainability and the role of various actors in these processes.

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