

ASK THE COUNTRYSIDE: DESIGNING CAPACITY FOR AN ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVE ABOUT URBAN AND RURAL

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Extended abstract

This extended abstract takes as its starting point the urban logic and norms that set the agenda for developing rural areas, which carries the risks of commercializing the countryside that overlooks the needs and conditions of the people who already live there (Nilsson, 2020).

Fråga landet (Ask the Countryside) is a podcast in the making where people living in the county of Kronoberg answer and reflect on questions posed by people living in the big Swedish cities concerning their everyday life, wonders, and dilemmas. Sharing reflections about how to live and dwell as humans in these challenging times is a way to a mutual shift of perspectives.

For the SBEUT – conference, I will use Tiny House on Wheels as a meeting spot/podcast studio to let the participants reflect and add responses to the collected questions, as well as pose additional questions. The wonders and responses braid stories of life, of everyday beings and doings (Adsit-Morris & Art, 2015), inevitable for the long-term sustainable growth and development of the rural the Swedish government strives for (Prop. 2017/18:179)

To pose a question is two-fold. It involves inquiring about what someone finds intriguing and simultaneously learning to engage with the transformations arising from unforeseeable responses (Haraway, 2016). It is about “cultivating the wild virtue of curiosity, to retune one’s ability to sense and respond” (ibid:127).

How can we get silence in public spaces? How can I live well with stressed people all around me? How do I live in harmony with nature while living in a big city? How do I deal with my fear of darkness even though I live in a bright city?

To sense and respond to the everyday struggles and being by posing matters of concern (Latour, 2004) to the public encourages dreams and hopes for alternative ways of living. We can’t cultivate curiosity without a relational gesture, the questions are invitations to commonly engage in making worlds, to be able to worlding as Donna Haraway (2016) puts it. In this project, worlding is to share what you care for, for others to build reflections on which could lead to an action of some sort.

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I see rats in the street almost daily; how do I deal with the fact that I live with rats? How can I live and think more collectively while living in the city? How do I connect with strangers when they hardly look at me?

When the rural residents respond to the questions posed by citizens, the subject of concern transforms into a matter of care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017) through the involvement of giving and receiving. I see this relaying practice as becoming accountable for everyday living enactments and recognizing that small concerns are valued for changing the way we think of others. By means of a reciprocal interchange of everyday life, unforeseen aspects emerge- such as initiating contact with a stranger on a bus, or receiving a confession from a villager struggling to engage with someone he encounters daily, who consistently ignores him.

To respond involves suggesting alternative possibilities, not as rigid solutions but rather as fostering curiosity that shapes meaningful conversations and stories. As a designer, I explore *Ask the Countryside* as a space for the “capacity for responses” (Giaccardi & Redström, 2020:42) to create the possibility to pose questions and responses differently for new worlds to appear. Thinking with and playfully approaching the relationship between the center and the periphery the question of how do we live well together in many worlds. The podcast is about collecting and combining questions and responses from lived experiences to craft a story about contemporary urban and rural life that “emerges relationally” (Binder et al., 2015:162). Cultivating curiosity for the mundane aspects of life is a design practice that cares for complex relations among humans, more than humans and the inhabited built environment. In a society that often prioritizes acceleration and progression over the contemplation of dreams and wonders, we as humans need profound narratives capable of delving into the essence of becoming human and transcending the boundaries of urban and rural, self and others to build worlds of collective possibilities. *Ask the Countryside* is one design practice that explores these narratives.

Keywords: design, stories, rural, urban, podcast

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