

CLAIMING SPACE

CHARLOTTE BYDLER

A tower stands at Telefonplan. Austere, slim and dark; rising towards the sky like an exclamation mark. A tower is an archetypical creator of place: it breaks in and becomes an event in a continuous landscape. This characteristic is emphasized by the illuminated windows of this particular tower - but the patterns and colours also vary constantly. The tower speaks in a sign language composed of light. But what is the tower at Telefonplan saying, and who gives the architectonic form meaning?

Its lights don't spell out a clear message, but someone or something is definitively signaling to us. In search of the spirit of the place, we examine its surroundings and its recent history. Half a century ago, the tower housed LM Ericsson's experiments with microwave technology. More than so, it was a finger pointing our attention to the company's territory. The infrastructure of the suburb Midsommarkransen grew up around it. Homes for workers and cultural facilities were built here, and the subway station even got the name Telefonplan after the company's line of business. The tower was never an organic part of Ericsson, more like a flexible prosthetic that was used for this and that, one day the development of telephones, the next day something else. Today, the finger is no longer connected to a body. The original constructors have without nostalgia made room for new

users, creators of experiences rather than objects. The corporate suburb has become a typical city collage where the architectural form doesn't reveal anything about its function, and flexibility and pragmatism are the watchwords. The tower was left behind, uncommunicative, its sides like blank pages. Here was a visible area, but no one to take visual control over it.

But now, new signals from the tower will light up the dark winter months. The windows on the ten floors along the tower body glow in rainbow colours. And there actually is a sender of the message. With a nod to local history the tracks can be traced to cell phones and the internet. Erik Krikortz, Milo Lavén and Looove Broms give anyone the opportunity to control the lights using these technologies. Go ahead; colour the windows, make the tower shine.

A window full of light has many connotations in the context of a modern city. It can make visible a section of the private sphere, or attract passers-by to public spaces, like department stores, churches or museums. Commercial signs are obvious symbols which are relevant for our tower. The vertical extension is also central. All architecture likes to add its signature to the surroundings with height. The cityscape becomes a kind of mass medium. In this case, this means that a relatively flexible area contacts a broad and diverse public. The mass medium is a physical area, a place where you can write a message. Representational buildings like churches and castles have always been like this. But this tower is an example of architecture that has to negotiate its identity with the surrounding city. Roads,

homes and offices are becoming more and more like screens which are made available for different messages. In the general collage, anything can be claimed to add a signature to a place and signal (temporary) presence.

Cell phones and the internet are also media that create space. Their public nature both complements and competes with the tower's spacial visibility. You can control the signals with your phone, and you can see them on location or on the internet. The technology is accessible for the individual. Which is good - the public space should be open to any person or usage that gives others the same freedom.

Display windows are a part of public spaces. In a political repertoire this can refer to propaganda and slogans; for commercial purposes advertising. It can seem obvious that political symbols in the public space have to be strictly regulated. But access to this space is also to a high extent open for pragmatic and economic arguments. Inscriptions on a publicly owned area are judged differently from signs on privately owned areas. A billboard is in a certain sense an area for sending a message in the public space, but the person paying for it controls it. Private citizens rarely get the chance to send their messages high above the houses and subway, as now at Telefonplan.

There are other ways for an individual to reach out into the public space. If you don't have

legal or economic access to display windows in the public space, you can of course illegally write your message on their exteriors. This "from the outside" technique, graffiti, is so controversial that its graphical style has been stigmatized and criminalized. The legal graffiti wall at the Röda Sten Culture Center in Göteborg was painted over so it wouldn't appear on photographs of the finish of the Volvo Ocean Race 2006. If you're using a spray can and writing tags, it doesn't really matter where you're doing it. The police graffiti unit advocates zero tolerance, and this attitude has some support in certain circles.

In comparison with other two-dimensional urban sign languages, the light signals from the tower at Telefonplan obviously come "from the inside". As such they have required a successful negotiation of space. It's also clear that we all have a rare opportunity to briefly influence part of the cityscape, or perhaps send messages, which can only be understood by our confidants. The playfully secretive element is apparent. Architecture is a mass medium, but the tower's message is individual. Someone is holding the controls, pushing buttons for commands and showing their colours. But this "someone" can't use the tower for political or commercial purposes. What remains is a playful communicative process that takes over the public space as the colours change. The tower at Telefonplan sends out a message, and for most people the message is "art".