



Europe's green

The title “Europe’s green Capital” has been awarded by the EU for the first time. And the winner is ... Stockholm. The city deserves the title, says our Swedish correspondent, because Stockholm’s town council has been a front-runner in cleaning up the environment.

| by *Reiner Gatermann*

The inhabitants of Stockholm saw the EU announcement to elect a “green capital” in Europe, starting from 2010, as a real challenge. However, it was not certain that they would even compete for the title. ‘Imagine what would have happened if we hadn’t won? The opposition would have had a real field day,’ says the councillor for the environment, Ulla Hamilton, in an interview with EER.

To understand Hamilton’s fear, you have to know that power in the Stockholm town hall changed hands in the autumn

of 2006. The Social Democrats and Greens were replaced by a coalition of the Conservatives (Moderata Samlingspartiet), the Liberals (Folkpartiet) and the Christian Democrats (Kristdemokraterna), who don’t have a very “green” reputation. However, especially the largest party in this camp, the Conservatives, drastically changed its position when the new party leader, Fredrik Reinfeldt, took over the reigns in 2006. They now present themselves as not only the “new workers’ party” but also as a party ‘in which the environment and the climate are in good hands’.

Eventually, the new town council took the gamble and on February 23, the European Commissioner for Science and Research, Janez Potocnik, announced the good news. Stockholm had been selected as the first winner of the European Green Capital Award for 2010. Hamburg has been selected for 2011. In the last round, these two cities beat Amsterdam, Bristol, Copenhagen, Freiburg im Breisgau, Münster and Oslo. ‘With their measures to tackle air pollution, traffic and congestions levels, greenhouse gas emissions, and waste water management, Stockholm and Hamburg can act as role models for the rest of Europe’, said the EU Commissioner for the Environment, Stavros Dimas.

Sober buildings |

Back in the early 1970s the city of Stockholm had already recognised the deterioration of the quality of life through polluted air and water, as well as the danger of collapse of the transportation system. In the preceding decades the capital hadn’t always shown its best side. Parts of the old town centre were razed to the ground and replaced with sober office buildings. The city council even wanted to demolish the 17th century old town, which was



Capital

Photo: Staffan Brundell/ANP

only saved at the last minute by a citizens' protest – unusual for Stockholm.

In 1972 Stockholm hosted the first United Nations Conference on Human Environment, which triggered a stronger environmental awareness in the work of the world organisation. At the same time the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) was established. June 5, the opening day of the Stockholm conference has been world environment day ever since.

In many surveys and research projects, Stockholm has been found to be in a leading position with regard to environment and quality of life. In one of them, the "European Cities Monitor", the Swedish capital has come out on top in most years in the category of "best cities in terms of freedom from pollution". It was also elected one of the world-wide top seven intelligent communities of 2009 by the New York based think-tank Intelligent Community Forum (ICF). Stockholm has been praised for its provision of e-services and the development of the largest public broadband network in the world.

It is not only a question of policies, however. Stockholm is blessed with a favourable geographical location, naturally healthy air and plenty of room for green spaces. The city, which now has 810,000 inhabitants, has developed on 14 islands interconnected by almost 60 bridges. More than half of the city area consists of parks, green spaces and water. The subsoil consists mainly of granite which offers excellent conditions for the construction

European Commission, the European Environment Agency, Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI), the European Federation for Transport and Environment (T&E), the Union of Capitals of the European Union and the Committee of the Regions, chose Stockholm primarily because of its integrated management system in which environmental issues are automatically included in the city's budget, and in its operational planning,

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of tunnels and an underground transport system. The first T-banan, the Stockholm underground, was commissioned in 1952 and has now become an extensive, and in places lavishly furnished system. Almost none of Stockholm's inhabitants has to walk further than 300 meters to the nearest means of public transport.

The jury of the 'Green Capital' award, consisting of representatives of the

reporting and monitoring. Another factor was that some 95% of the population lives less than 300 meters from green spaces. Stockholm was also praised for planning to create more swimming beaches of which there are already over 20. Furthermore, Stockholm was lauded for its innovative integrated waste collection system, which has led to high recycling rates, especially of bio-waste, which is collected through underground systems. A pioneering

regime of congestion charges has reduced car use, increased use of public transport and reduced emissions. The city can boast a 25% decrease in per capita CO₂ emissions since 1990, reducing emissions to about half the national Swedish average.

In 1990 every inhabitant of Stockholm produced an average of 5.4 tons of CO₂, in 2005 this was 4 tons and the projection for 2015 is just 3 tons. This has largely been achieved through a reduction in CO₂ emissions from public transport from 1.6 to 1.3 tons; a reduction in carbon intensity from 114 to 103 grams of CO₂ per kWh in electricity generation; a doubling in the proportion of the population using eco-labelled electricity which has risen to 12% in the period between 2001 and 2007; and finally, 70% of Stockholm's households being connected to the district heating network.

Not that everything in Stockholm is perfect. Although Stockholm has moderate traffic levels, as it relies on only a few bridges, there are often long queues, especially during the morning rush hour. Stockholm is also one of the very few capital cities not to have a complete ring road, which has been impeded by political squabbling. Therefore, there are often many cars in the city centre. According to a survey by the city council there are almost 150 bottlenecks within Stockholm which can lead to 'severe traffic jams'.

Use of public transport has gone up in recent years. Nearly 80% of the travellers use it during peak hours; taken over the whole day the average is about 65%. This represents an increase of 20% between 1993 and 2006. The city introduced a travel guarantee in the public transport system: if traffic disruptions cause a delay of more than 20 minutes, the affected passengers have the right to take a taxi and be compensated for the cost.

Showcase |

Stockholm's showcase, which attracts many foreign visitors and town planning experts, is Hammarby Sjöstad. This is where the Olympic village would have been built if the Olympic Games had



come to Stockholm in 2004. Now it has been turned into an upscale urban area, which boasts all sorts of environmentally friendly features. The city did increase the number of parking places, though, after complaints from the residents.

Inspired by the success of Hammarby Sjöstad, councillor Ulla Hamilton is already planning two further eco-profiled residential districts: Norra Djurgårdsstaden and Lövholmen. In the Järvafältet suburb in the north-west, plans are in place to modernise the existing housing stock with the goal of halving the use of energy. Hamilton notes that the greatest energy savings can be made in existing buildings rather than new ones. 'Far too little has been done here in the past.'

Despite its "green" policies, the town council declined to take part in the international Earth Hour event. The idea

of this was to switch off as much electricity as possible for one hour as a symbol of energy-saving and a better climate. In the view of Ulla Hamilton, this is not the right way to fight for a healthier environment. 'Stockholm is an environmental role model for the world', she says. 'Therefore Stockholm has a particular responsibility to do that which was intended by the Earth Hour, namely to send out "a message of hope". To plunge a city into darkness in the belief that this is the right way to fight against climate change would be a signal which would have precisely the opposite effect.'

Stockholm wants to continue to grow. It wants to have around 1 million inhabitants by 2030. It is not that long ago that Stockholm paid PR experts a lot of money to brand Stockholm as the capital of Scandinavia. Promoting Stockholm as Europe's green capital might carry a great deal more weight. ■