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THE STAIRCASE OF TRANSITION
Survival through failure

Ingrid Sahlin

The structure of available shelter and housing for the homeless in Sweden resembles a staircase. The higher an individual climbs, the more privacy and freedom he/she is awarded and the more 'normal' that individual's housing becomes, a regular rental flat typifying the ultimate goal. Despite growing evidence that this approach to housing, training and reintegrating the homeless fails to reduce homelessness, it is in fact expanding. This paradox is the focus of this article. The first section outlines the origin, elements and vision of the 'staircase of transition' and its development. The following two sections provide brief summaries on research carried out on the outcome of the model in terms of homeless numbers, and on the model's internal tensions and dynamics. Finally, common responses to criticism of the staircase model are discussed and reasons for its survival provided.

The 'staircase of transition' as an approach to housing, training and reintegrating the homeless has been accredited as being a special Swedish solution to homelessness (Harvey, 1998; Sahlin, 1998). It has demonstrated a conspicuous power of survival, and similar approaches are now being launched in other European countries as a response to the perceived need for additional social support in re-housing initiatives (Edgar *et al*., 1999; Hansen *et al*., 2002; NOU, 2002:2).[1] This success is paradoxical, considering that there is growing evidence that the staircase model fails to reduce homelessness and may actually diminish the prospect of housing for homeless people. This article is an attempt to account for the shortcomings, as well as the survival and success, of this approach to homelessness.

In the first section, the housing policy background, the emergence of a 'secondary housing market' in Sweden and its formation as a 'staircase of transition' are outlined. The second part provides a brief review of the quantitative research concerning the development of this approach and its outcome in terms of the number of homeless within and outside its domain, while the third part draws on qualitative research on the dynamics and functioning of the model. In the fourth section, national and local policy responses to allegations of the staircase's failure are presented. On the basis of these responses and the preceding sections of the paper, five distinct yet interrelated reasons for the continued existence of the staircase model are suggested and discussed in the concluding section.

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From Allocation Policy to Qualification Programmes

Since the 1980s, tenants who cannot afford to buy their homes, and whom landlords for one reason or other do not find desirable, have encountered growing difficulties finding a home. This is due to a series of governmental, parliamentary and municipal decisions, induced or informed by economic and ideological changes over the last 20 years. In the early 1990s, a deep recession combined with reinforced confidence in the efficiency of the free market stimulated a new approach to housing policy, which entailed the elimination of state subsidies for housing and a deregulation of housing allocation.

Deregulated Housing Allocation

For several decades following the Second World War the Swedish state subsidized the building of private as well as public housing. However, regular state subventions for rental housing have not been available since the mid-1990s, except small, targeted contributions for special housing for the elderly or students. As a result, the building of rental housing has nearly ceased completely,[2] and a growing number of municipalities are suffering from a housing shortage (Boverket, 2002; Statistics Sweden, 2002a, b).[3] Housing allowances for families have also been severely reduced, as has the number of eligible households in the past decade.

Until the early 1990s, local authorities had some influence on the allocation of private landlords' dwellings through a veto on state subventions and the legal option to claim assignment rights to vacant flats, but the abolition of these legal tools in 1993 further undermined their bargaining position. In the absence of financial as well as legal incentives, local governments can no longer control the allocation of private rental flats.

Conventional social housing is not available in Sweden, but about one-fifth of all dwellings are owned by municipal housing companies (MHCs) and make up a segment of public housing.[4] Today, these companies are the only remaining instrument of power for municipalities in the provision of local housing, although their share of the housing stock is shrinking.[5] However, many municipalities have locally deregulated their letting policy and practice, partly out of fear that their MHCs will become 'residualized' (i.e. inhabited only by poor, marginalized households) and partly for economic reasons. While in 1990 every second municipality ran a housing assignment agency, in which housing allocation was organized according to waiting time and need (Sahlin, 1993), this applied to only 10% in 1998 (Boverket, 1998) and 3% (nine municipalities) in 2002 (Boverket, 2002).[6]

Municipalities still have the option of choosing a 'traditional' socially oriented policy for their housing companies, aiming to make vacant flats available for homeless households, but few do so. Instead, many of them expect economic returns from their MHC, an aspiration which is sometimes placed explicitly above and against 'social' objectives (Lind, 1998). This means that public housing and private rentals are competing for the 'best' tenants and many of them have discontinued the use of waiting lists. As a result, people who are unemployed, have debts or are homeless are not accepted as regular tenants, no matter how long they wait or how hard they try. Hence, the role of the MHCs in housing allocation or provision for less competitive applicants has been dramatically reduced (SOU, 2001:27).

From a housing provision perspective, this deregulation of housing allocation has not been very sensible. In a 1990 survey on available tools for providing homeless clients

with regular homes, local social authorities ranked highest the possibility of giving precedence to local housing lists. Informal or formal co-operation with landlords,[7] rent guarantees, 'training flats' and other special housing for the homeless were all considered much less effective in this respect (Sahlin, 1993). Nevertheless, the latter are repeatedly promoted by the government as solutions to homelessness, as well as by city councils and town boards.

The Secondary Housing Market

Meanwhile, the responsibility for the provision of housing to vulnerable groups, especially the homeless poor, has shifted to the social authorities. These do not dispose of any regular housing, but rent estates and dwellings (mostly from MHCs), and sublease flats and rooms to their clients on special terms and without any security of tenure. These provisions include special rules of conduct and use of the flat, such as the prohibition of guests, pets, illegal drugs or alcohol, and close surveillance by social workers. Individual preconditions for such temporary housing frequently comprise obligations to participate in training programmes or regularly verify sobriety. If they do not comply with the rules or the specific agreements attached to the housing offered, the subtenants run a high risk of being evicted.

Taken together, dwellings sublet with special contracts make up a certain market segment of dwellings allocated to homeless persons who stand no chance in the regular housing market. This 'secondary housing market' (Sahlin, 1993, 1995) emerged in the late 1980s, was established in the early 1990s and has grown continuously since (Sahlin, 2000b). In recent years, it has been supplemented by similar market segments, which are publicly funded but supervised by charities (Löfstrand, 2003) or by for-profit companies (Ericson & Wikström, 2002).

The 'Staircase' Idea

The emergence of a 'staircase of transition' and its rationale were identified and verified in a 1990 national survey of local social authorities' tools and methods to counteract homelessness and help clients to obtain regular housing (Sahlin, 1993, 1998).[8] Today, social authorities customarily structure their various types of shelter, supported housing, training flats, etc. like a 'staircase', which homeless people are supposed to ascend step by step from the streets to a regular dwelling of their own via low-standard shelters, category housing (i.e. houses for specific categories, such as homeless male alcoholics), training flats and transitional flats. The higher they climb, the better their conditions in terms of physical standard and space, integrity, freedom, and security of tenure. Meanwhile, social workers monitor their efforts and progress in resolving 'underlying' problems (like debts, substance abuse, unemployment, etc.), and provide 'training in independent living' (Sahlin, 1996). In a recent homelessness programme in Göteborg, the system was described as follows:

> The housing staircase within Altbo,[9] like those of the voluntary associations, is divided into different 'steps', each of which consists of a certain type of housing, which is equivalent concerning standard, security, monitoring and control. The staircase model

> implies an opportunity to make a 'housing career' in the direction of the open housing market. (City Parliament of Göteborg, 2002:76, p. 7)

This 'career' is put into effect by offering moves 'upwards' as a reward for good behaviour and achievement, while eviction or dislocation to a lower step is used as a punishment for rule breaking or a relapse to problematic behaviour. Hence, 'the staircase of transition' (see Figure 1) is based upon and projects a vision of a 'housing career' that corresponds to the client's social and personal development, while at the same time it is used as a 'ladder of sanctions' in the sphere of social work.

The dismantling of national and local housing policies is motivated, directly or indirectly, by politicians' trust in the effectiveness of a 'free' housing market. This perception is followed by, and interacts with, changed notions of the causes of homelessness, and adequate measures and responsibility for solving the problem, all of which entails a modified image of homeless people. Homelessness is no longer framed as a problem of shortage or ineffective allocation of housing, but as one of the excluded individuals' deficient qualification. This idea is promoted, shaped, and sustained by the staircase of transition.

Signs of Failure on an Aggregated Level

The staircase of transition has been applied for more than a decade in Sweden and it has now reached a considerable level of institutionalization. This section will review studies on the scope, trends and outcomes. In general, research shows that the housing staircase does not reduce homelessness *outside* the secondary housing market, and if the tenants *within* it are included, the number of homeless people has actually grown substantially since the staircase's establishment.

Four ways of assessing the overall effect of the staircase of transition on homelessness will be dealt with here. Firstly, the development of the overall number of homeless clients *outside* as well as *inside* the secondary housing market is reviewed

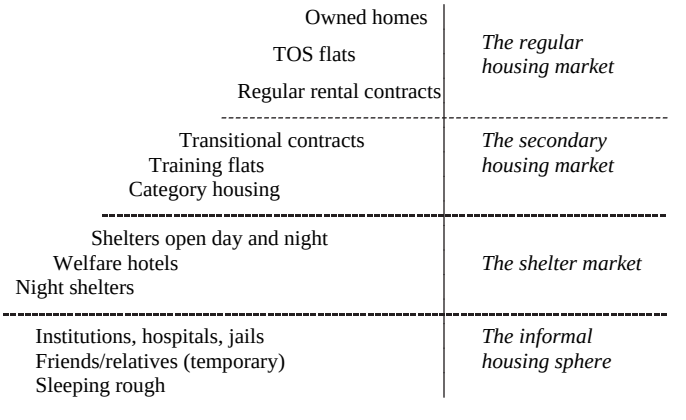

FIGURE 1

The staircase of transition.

TOS is an abbreviation of Tenant Owners' Societies. Members of these economic associations have exclusive access to a flat, which they can sell on the market

separately. Secondly, it is suggested that these figures are added, so that the sum total of homeless people (housed temporarily or not) can be compared over time. Thirdly, the correlation between the number of dwellings in the secondary housing market and the number of homeless people outside it, in proportion to the local population, is assessed at two different points of time. Fourthly, in towns applying the staircase approach, the rate of homelessness for people viewed as 'incapable of independent living' is compared with the corresponding rate in towns without any secondary housing market. The results of all four 'evaluation approaches' are consistent in their indication that the staircase of transition has failed to reduce homelessness.

No Signs of Reduced 'Literal' Homelessness

In 1993 and 1999, *Socialstyrelsen* (the National Board of Health and Welfare) counted homeless people through questionnaires sent to local social authorities, emergency hospitals, criminal institutions, charity organizations, and treatment institutions for substance abusers (Socialstyrelsen & Boverket, 1994; Socialstyrelsen, 2000a).[10] The respondents were asked to fill in a form for every homeless client during a specific week in April 1993 and 1999, respectively. The questions addressed the homeless individuals' present housing situation, the duration of their homelessness, problems that required care or treatment and what measures had been taken, and kinds of substance abused by the individual.

Homelessness was defined as not having an owned, rented or subleased dwelling, and not lodging permanently in someone else's home, but having to rely on temporary housing solutions or sleeping rough. In the second count, though, individuals staying with acquaintances temporarily were included only if they 'due to their homelessness had been in touch with the respondent during the week of counting' (Socialstyrelsen, 2000a, p. 123). In the absence of waiting lists and public housing assignment agencies, homeless people are not registered as such unless they have problems that social authorities usually deal with. Consequently most people who are homeless according to this definition are not identified by the charities and social authorities, moreover, among those who are identified only few are in contact with social workers during a specific week.

In total, 8440 (adult) individuals were reported homeless in 1999, of which one-fifth were women and 70% were reported to be substance abusers (ibid.). The total number was somewhat lower than in the previous count in 1993, when there were close to 10,000 homeless people (Socialstyrelsen & Boverket, 1994); but since the definitions and the respondents differed slightly between these two mappings, a comparison was not recommended (Socialstyrelsen, 2000a).[11] However, the number of people sleeping rough or staying in hostels, which was not affected by the revised design, had increased somewhat, and local counts show a continuous rise in the category of totally excluded homeless people in big cities.[12]

More Residents in the Secondary Housing Market

Since 1998, another department of Socialstyrelsen has counted the number of adult individuals (aged 21 or more) who on a certain day each year receive institutional care or 'housing assistance'. The latter includes 'group housing, category housing, lodging homes, emergency homes/flats, shelters, training flats, transitional flats, hotels and rental contracts

TABLE 1
Number of adult individuals receiving assistance, including housing by the local social authorities, on 1 November 2000 and 2001, respectively. These clients are categorised as 'substance abusers' or 'others' in the survey. Rounded figures

	2000			2001		
	Abusers	**'Others' = non-abusers**	**Total**	**Abusers**	**'Others' = non-abusers**	**Total**
'Housing assistance'	5800	5300	**11,100**	5600	6100	**11,700**
'Institutionalized'	3500	1200	4700	3200	1200	4400
Total	9300	6500	**15,800**	8800	7300	**16,100**

Source: Socialstyrelsen (2001, tables 3 and 18, 2002b, pp. 15, 17).

where the local social authority is the landlord' (Socialstyrelsen, 2001, p. 5). However, group homes, lodging homes and shelters are sometimes formally recorded as 'institutions' and their residents are therefore lumped together with those who stay in treatment institutions.

On 1 November 2001, about 11,700 adults (aged 21 or more) were staying in such housing (see Table 1), while another 4400 were staying in institutions (Socialstyrelsen, 2002). Two years before, the number of people who received 'housing assistance' was 10,300 (Socialstyrelsen, 2000b). This means that the total number of people who, according to these statistics, stay in the secondary housing market and shelters on any specific day grew by 14% from 1999 to 2001.

The number of people receiving 'housing assistance' on a given day is a snapshot of the number of shelter residents and tenants in the secondary housing market. In 1990, the number of dwellings and beds at the disposal of local social authorities for homeless clients was counted on a national basis through a survey of all local social authorities. While the 'shelter market' comprised 1200 beds, the secondary housing market amounted to 8600 rooms or dwellings (Sahlin, 1993). Some of the elements within this latter market were mapped in 1993 and a comparison showed that its overall size had increased; specifically, the lower steps in the staircase were comparatively more voluminous than in 1990 (Socialstyrelsen & Boverket, 1994).

In 2000/01, *Boverket*, the National Board of Housing, Building and Planning added items to its annual housing market survey, which allows comparison with the 1990 study of the secondary housing market and—with certain reservations—also with previous surveys of the perceived needs/supply of housing on special terms for people with social problems (see Table 2).

TABLE 2
The size and composition of the secondary housing market and the shelter market in Sweden, 1990 and 2001

Year	**Collective housing (shelters, hostels, category housing, etc.)**	**Dispersed flats (training flats, transitional flats, etc.)**	**Total**
1990	3128	6752	9880
2001	6414	10,766	17,180

Source: Sahlin (1996, p. 223); Boverket (2001).

While the number of dispersed training or transitional flats grew by 60% between 1990 and 2001, the number of flats in category housing doubled and the number of beds in shelters more than trebled (Sahlin, 1993, 1996; Boverket, 2001). In total, the local authorities reported that they had almost 75% more dwellings and beds for the homeless at their disposal in 2001 than in 1990. The reasons why the total figure is larger than the one representing people actually receiving housing assistance is probably formal: all this housing is not registered as 'assistance'.

Adding the Two Groups of Homeless People

In the statistics on housing, the total number of recipients receiving assistance, as well as the share of 'non-abusers' and women, was remarkably higher than in the national 'homelessness counts'. This confirms that the surveys of homelessness and recipients of housing assistance, respectively, cover different groups, despite the fact that both studies were conducted and published by the same central authority, and that both used the local social authorities as their prime respondents. Neither of the reports mentions or refers to the other, nor comments on this disparity, but in its latest report on homelessness, Socialstyrelsen accounts for its change in the definition of 'homeless' from 1993 to 1999:

> The investigation should describe the number of people who do not receive the help they need to prepare for independent living or who lack housing. In light of this, we did not find it reasonable to include persons who at the time of the study were targeted by measures and had a plan for their future housing. By relinquishing the old definition we wanted to avoid presenting municipalities that invest a lot in combating homelessness as municipalities with many homeless people. (Socialstyrelsen, 2000a, p. 19)

Hence, 'homeless' in the 1999 study refers to those who were *not* receiving housing assistance (except beds in shelters), but were still known as homeless to the local social authorities or voluntary associations. Therefore, the figures could be added to the number of people who *did* receive housing assistance, although a few overlapping categories, such as shelter users, should be subtracted.

To sum up, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the secondary housing market has proved to be not only firmly established but also steadily growing in size.[13] Its increase by far exceeds a possible decrease in the number of homeless people outside the secondary housing markets in the country as a whole. This is a clear indication that the staircase of transition does not replace homelessness but rather is emerging as a segment of precarious housing alongside or between the regular market and the shelters. If residents of the secondary housing market are included among the 'homeless', their number has definitely increased in the 1990s.

Staircase Effects on Local Homelessness and 'Housing Capabilities'

Statistical analysis of the 1990 survey data showed that a differentiated secondary housing market, indicating a staircase approach,[14] was correlated with high relative numbers of homeless people (outside the staircase) who were, according to the responding social workers, 'incapable of independent living' (Sahlin, 1993, 1996, 1998). Those among the responding municipalities in the 1990 survey that had at least three

TABLE 3
Mean rates (number per 100,000 inhabitants) of homeless clients and tenants in the secondary housing market in all municipalities and in Type A and B, respectively. (Cities with more than 200,000 inhabitants excluded) (1990)

Clients/tenants/100,000 inhabitants	Municipalities		
	All	Type A	Type B
Homeless clients outside the secondary housing market	42	78	12
Tenants in the secondary housing market	68	167	0

Source: Sahlin (1998, table 5, p. 54).

distinct types of special contracts (category houses, training flats, and transitional contracts), were compared with the municipalities that had no secondary housing market at all. In Tables 3 and 4 the municipalities are categorized as Type A and Type B, respectively.

Where the secondary housing market was supposedly arranged as a staircase of transition (Type A), it was also comparatively larger. Nevertheless, the rate of homelessness was higher than average in these towns and the risk of being literally homeless was more than six times higher than in Type B municipalities

As data from the 2001 survey by *Boverket* mentioned above and the figures from the 1999 survey of homeless clients by Socialstyrelsen (2000a) were subjected to a preliminary statistical analysis, a significant positive correlation was again found between the number of homeless clients *outside* the secondary housing market (according to the 1999 count by Socialstyrelsen) and the number of dwellings available in the secondary housing markets (both numbers referring to proportions of the population of the municipality) (SOU, 2001:95a). Hence, just like the analysis of the 1990 data, this study revealed that if a high number of homeless people are housed within a municipality's secondary housing market, a high number is also homeless 'outside' of it, while the risk of being homeless is significantly lower where no secondary housing market exists at all. This correlation remains after controlling for differences between the municipalities in relation to population size and median income, and whether the local housing market was characterized by a shortage or surplus of housing (ibid.).

The local proportion of the population deemed (by the responding social workers) 'incapable of independent living' in the 1990 survey was three to four times higher in Type A municipalities than the average, and especially compared to Type B municipalities.

TABLE 4
Mean rates (number/100,000 inhabitants) of 'incapables' and their housing situations in all municipalities, and in municipalities of Types A and B, respectively. (Cities with more than 200,000 inhabitants excluded) (1990)

	Municipalities		
	All	Type A	Type B
Rates of 'incapables' who were:			
Homeless	20	38	12
Tenants in the secondary housing market	42	69	0
Tenants in the regular housing market	17	22	25

Source: Sahlin (1998, table 6, p. 54).

Furthermore, if considered 'incapable', the risk of being excluded from regular housing was two to three times greater in Type A municipalities than in Type B municipalities.

Consequently, the processing of survey data from 1990 and 1999–2001 on homelessness and the secondary housing market indicates that the local homelessness policy is a causal factor of homelessness and, specifically, that the secondary housing market (and by implication the staircase of transition) entails higher local homelessness.

Closed Gates, Creaming, and Exclusion

In general, quantitative analyses illustrate that the staircase of transition does not work satisfactorily as a corridor to the regular housing market; nor does it reduce homelessness locally or nationally. Four themes that signify or contribute to explaining this failure will be discussed very briefly in this section: the dynamics of power and interests; the through-flow problem; the quality of agreements between involved parties; and the credibility of the system amongst social workers and homeless people.

The Dynamics of Power and Interests

A longitudinal, qualitative case study on the emergence and establishment of a secondary housing market in a Swedish city during 1990–95 revealed that the image of the homeless clients, as well as the way they were treated, was affected by the social workers' dual and contradictory positions (Sahlin, 1996). Besides being tenants themselves, the social workers exerted power and developed interests as both authorities and landlords in relation to their clients/tenants. Pressured by the property owners, on whom they are dependent for acquiring flats to sublet to new homeless clients, and anxious as landlords to get the best available subtenants, these social workers' willy-nilly became prone to 'creaming' and to rejecting potentially problematic homeless clients as tenants in their selection practice. Contrary to their initial ambitions, they intensified their supervision and control in the course of time and began evicting and sometimes permanently excluding non-compliant tenants as punishment for violations of work plans or rules of behaviour (ibid.).

As social authorities became more cautious about accepting homeless people in the secondary housing market and demanded longer qualification periods for pre-training and observation, the landlords in the regular housing market in the city gradually heightened their thresholds for granting rental contracts and became more reluctant to allow the transference of contracts from the authorities to the subtenants, even if these behaved correctly (ibid.).

The case study further revealed that the local staircases were actually built 'from above'. The local social authorities' original plan was to offer predominantly subleased, dispersed, self-contained flats without claims on any preparatory accommodation or training. However, to be able to expel non-compliant tenants quickly, which the property owners requested as a condition for letting their dwellings to the authorities, it was necessary to have some place to put them. Moreover, to ensure that their future subtenants would behave well, the social authorities wanted a form of accommodation where the applicants could be monitored and checked in advance. A low-standard shelter was established to fulfil both of these functions, and once this was available it was also

used as a waiting room and offered lodging for the rejected. Hence, the local 'need' for shelters grew with the secondary housing market (ibid.).

Through-flow and Stoppage

The first condition for a functioning staircase is that it actually facilitates its residents' eventual access to regular housing. Using social records, Lindberg *et al*. (2002) studied all recorded changes of the housing situation for 210 clients who had been registered as homeless by the local social authorities in five municipalities in the national count of 1999. Housing situations were ranked according to two dimensions, namely security and normality. Since these mostly coincide, each move could be classified as 'upward' (that is, to more secure and/or more normal housing) or 'downward' (or horizontal) in the staircase. Analyses showed that moves from *any* step into an own flat with a regular contract were extremely rare within the sample. It was far more common that tenants were dislocated to lower steps in the local staircase of transition, or to 'unknown' housing situations, which often turned out to mean street homelessness. Out of 82 moves from the top step (normal flats with transitional contracts) only seven led to regular leaseholds (ibid.).

Anecdotal evidence on this obstruction tendency is provided repeatedly from other towns, mostly because landlords turn down applications to transfer contracts to the subtenant in the stipulated time. Although the aim was to convert 100% of the transitional contracts (at the top of the staircase) in Göteborg to first-hand leases within a year, this was the case for only 7% in 2001 (Ericson & Wikström, 2002).[15] That very year, there were about 1700 dwellings or rooms in Göteborg's staircases (Löfstrand, 2003).[16] Representatives of the city claim (but cannot prove) that 50 of its subtenants achieve regular leasing contracts each year (City Parliament of Göteborg 2002:76). Even if this were true, it would take 34 years before all current residents in the staircase would actually transfer to regular rental housing.

Unreliable Agreements

An important reason why the subtenants' efforts in the staircase do not result in stable housing situations is found in the quality of the agreements among the three main parties—landlords, social authorities, and clients/subtenants—that the housing career plans are based upon.

Runquist (2001) collected information from the social records of 80 clients who had transitional flats in a town in 1998, and interviewed the social workers involved in order to understand how these cases were being handled. Despite distinct rules for the tenants, he found that sanctions for their rule breaking or awards for rule compliance were applied inconsistently. Tenants were subjected to negotiations between the landlords and the social workers in a way that made it very difficult for the tenants to predict whether and when they would be evicted, or just told off, or allowed to advance to a regular contract (see also Jokinen & Juhila, 1997). The landlords acted as if they were not bound by their commitments from previous years to offer first-hand leases to tenants in transitional housing. When somebody eventually qualified according to the criteria originally agreed upon, the landlord frequently invented new arguments for refusal (Runquist, 2001). Similar experiences of 'forgetful' landlords were reported by social workers in the previously

mentioned case study, as well as in the respondents' comments to the 1990 survey (Sahlin, 1996).

However, homeless people complain that social workers do not live up to their promises either (Sahlin, 2000a, b; Löfstrand, 2003). Stories abound about situations in which homeless clients have agreed with work plans and moved into low-standard shelters, only to find that they are left there without ever being offered the 'rewards' that were initially indicated. This is the result partly of the discretion of the social workers, who make their judgements in an unpredictable manner, and partly of their lack of power in relation to the property owners. Even if they can themselves decide on evictions, they cannot always acquire and allocate dwellings in the staircase as they want and may have hoped to, because of the landlords' right of veto, or because of obstacles on the higher steps in the staircase and subsequent shortage of dwellings on the intermediate rungs (Sahlin & Löfstrand, 2001).

Lost Credibility

Another vital precondition for success is that the parties believe that the staircase works. However, in-depth interviews with social workers disclose a growing uncertainty about whether the top steps in the staircase or a regular contract will ever be attained. Although the staircase is intended as a training device for people who are 'incapable of independent living', such 'capability' is commonly demanded from the start as a prerequisite for entrance into the system (Sahlin, 1996). In the 1999 survey of homelessness in Stockholm, the responding social workers thought that only 26% of their homeless clients needed housing, which was interpreted by the researcher to mean that only 'one quarter is assessed to be capable of independent living'. However, in the same questionnaire only another fifth of the homeless were reported as needing 'housing with support' (Finne, 2001, p. 85). Put differently, the responding social workers thought that more than half of their homeless clients did not need any housing at all (but only other measures, such as regular contact with social workers, treatment or institutional care). This result is a sad confirmation of my own conclusion that the staircase and the secondary housing market tend to reinforce the social workers' view of homeless people as 'incapable of independent living' and, therefore, neither needing nor deserving (regular) housing (Sahlin, 1996). It also confirms the observation that thresholds are built within and around the staircase in order to exclude many of the homeless people from this kind of housing.

That the prospect of 'real' housing seems unreliable contributes to the fact that the staircase system is losing credibility also among homeless people. Interview studies show that many of those sleeping rough regard themselves as permanently excluded from the secondary housing market, while others would not want to try it again after having been humiliated by the existing rules, surveillance or harsh sanctions, or because they feel let down despite good conduct and patience (Sahlin, 2000a; Sahlin & Löfstrand, 2001; Thörn, 2001; Löfstrand, 2003).

The remarkably low quota of tenants in the staircase who are eventually accepted in the regular housing market itself illustrates the landlords' low degree of trust in the power of the staircase to discipline tenants. At the same time it gives the other parties rational reason to doubt whether the staircase will contribute to opening closed doors.

Survival through Failure

Despite local and national recognition of its failure to fulfil its self-defined goals, the staircase model is not only surviving but expanding. I will end this paper by reviewing common responses to the criticism and then present some final reflections on the power of the model to turn failure into success in terms of stability and growth, if not in numbers of successful cases.

Responses to Criticism: Repair and Expand!

In its final report, the Committee for the Homeless took a critical stance towards the secondary housing market and the staircase of transition, and suggested some fundamental changes accordingly (SOU, 2001:95a). However, its proposal to reintroduce some kind of right to regular housing for vulnerable groups and its claim that municipal subtenants' security of tenure be reinforced have so far gone unheard by the government. These two proposals were also met with rather fierce opposition by the municipalities and their national organization, which obviously backed the view of their housing companies more than that of their homeless citizens. This leaves each municipality to decide for itself whether or not the staircase system should survive, despite its reported deficiencies.

Although there is less consistency within social practice, the shortcomings of the staircase are often also recognized today on the local level by social workers and volunteers working with the homeless. Nevertheless, the local authorities are not ready to abandon the system. This is partly due to the fact that landlords, including MHCs, explicitly and for obvious reasons prefer the staircase to more regular forms of tenure.

When deficiencies in the staircase are reported, these are characteristically met not with questioning of the model but with suggestions on how to improve and extend it, in accordance with the maxim 'more of the same': if the staircase is full and there is no through-flow, it must grow to be able to contain new homeless people. If the existing number of homeless people does not fit the staircase or if they are excluded from it, the stairs must be differentiated and special units established to target the misfit categories.

New housing units. As part of its 1999 inventory of the homeless in Sweden, Socialstyrelsen (2000a) conducted qualitative interviews with representatives of social authorities, NGOs and MHCs on various vignettes (i.e. fictional cases), representing different types of homeless people. In this study, several problems relating to the staircase were highlighted and summarized as follows:

> The big problem is that it seems often to be easier to be excluded from the system than to remain in it. This is probably to a great extent due to the fact that the stairs . . . are organized on the basis of the idea that people should flow through the system from the bottom to the top . . . to allow people like X (*a vignette case/IS*) to fail without becoming homeless. However, the number of places is constant. On some levels in the housing staircase, people tend to stay. When X and his social worker have found a kind of housing that works, they are less prone to work for his continuing to more independent housing. (Ibid., p. 116)

The implicit solution is to push clients harder to advance, though the difficult requirement of total abstinence from drugs and alcohol is stated as another general problem: 'This is one of the reasons why people like X often do not fit with the available housing stairs' (ibid., p. 116). However, in the concluding chapter of the report Socialstyrelsen encourages the local authorities not to abandon but to 'repair and expand' their staircases by establishing new housing units designated for groups that tend to be evicted or rejected from the existing ones.

> More housing units is not the whole solution to the homelessness problems, but it makes possible increased flexibility in the staircases. This may render it easier to keep people inside the safety net, instead of them causing their own eviction as they currently do. (Ibid., p. 119)

Another example where expansion is recommended in response to criticism is found in a recent city programme for 'higher quality in the work for the homeless' (City Parliament of Göteborg, 2002:76). Members of an outreach team for the homeless are quoted in the report, claiming that 'people who have misbehaved on a ''higher step'' have to return to emergency hostels but prefer sleeping rough' (ibid., p. 7). Nevertheless, the conclusion is that it is necessary to 'continue differentiating this kind of housing according to the special needs of the various target groups'. More concretely, the establishment of new shelters is proposed that specifically target women, elderly substance abusers, and homeless people with 'double diagnoses' (substance abuse plus mental illness): in total about 225 new units of accommodation (Hedlund, 2003). Again, criticism of the staircase is countered by suggesting that it be differentiated and expanded.

New actors. For the municipalities, the staircase is sometimes an expensive way of housing homeless clients. This is because it takes personnel to acquire housing, administer the system and monitor and support the tenants. For the same reason it has become a possible source of income for voluntary associations and for-profit companies. When mapping special housing for the homeless in Göteborg, Löfstrand (2003) found that charity organizations had constructed similar systems, the accommodation of which is 'sold' to the local social authorities that pay a monthly fee for each housed and monitored homeless client (see also Nordfeldt, 1999). This 'charity market', together with the secondary housing market and the municipal shelters, comprise a growing 'special-housing sphere' in which the tenants' security of tenure, integrity and rights are permanently undermined (Löfstrand, 2003). In addition to this, a private sub-market of housing for the homeless has emerged, where for-profit companies—besides running cheap hotels and shelters—rent vacant flats and sublet them on special terms to homeless clients, while the social authorities pay for monitoring and support, as well as the rent. These companies compete with the public and charity system through lower prices and possibly higher rates of success in terms of permanent housing (Ericson & Wikström, 2002). But they also contribute to the growth of the homelessness industry through extending the staircase system.

New steps. Many local social authorities complain that it has become more difficult to obtain regular or transitional contracts, even for clients/tenants who have abided by existing rules and never stumbled or fallen in the staircase (see ibid.; Socialstyrelsen, 2000a; Andersson *et al*., 2002). Landlords claim that they want to be reassured that their future

tenants will conduct themselves well, even *without* support and surveillance, before accepting them for transitional contracts. As a response to this problem, several staircases in big cities are now being extended through an extra step at the top, inserted between training flats and transitional contracts. This 'reference housing' is expected to provide the tenant, who has purportedly already been trained and disciplined on the previous steps, with good housing references (Ericson & Wikström, 2002). However, there is reason to doubt whether references to the local social authorities could ever compete with good records from 'ordinary' landlords.

Consequently, criticism of the staircase is often met with expansion. This is at times a direct response to reports of increased street homelessness, but at other times an unintended consequence of initiatives of new for-profit and charity actors constructing parallel ladders; or of claims for increased horizontal or vertical differentiation, which implies new accommodation units for previously excluded groups, or the invention of new steps that prolong the staircase and the time spent in it and increase the number of necessary moves and transitions within it.

Powers of Survival

Finally, I will consider five plausible reasons for the thriving and surviving of the staircase, despite the fact that its failure to reduce homelessness is known to decision makers. Some of these explanations were already suggested at the beginning of the 1990s, while others have emerged more recently.

One of the previously identified reasons is that the social authorities have *'hidden goals' which the staircase manages to satisfy* (1). Social workers use their control of a variety of housing as a tool for motivating their clients to change their lifestyles. In addition, the different rungs on the staircase are a means of making people accept and endure the low-standard lower steps. Many homeless interviewees report that they enter emergency hostels only because they hope that they will thereby be offered a better kind of housing. Furthermore, clients who are reluctant to accept support and supervision can be more closely monitored as subtenants than when they are sleeping rough or living in their own apartments, since social workers in their role as landlords can enter their homes without their permission (Sahlin, 1996). Hence, the staircase of transition fulfils *latent functions* for the social authorities' regular tasks (Merton, 1957).

A second reason for the survival of the staircase, which did not fully emerge until recently, is that the model has *developed into an institution* (2) and therefore is no longer vulnerable to fundamental criticism (cf. Foucault, 1979; Garland, 1990, on the prison). Established systems and organizations tend to lock our imagination, with the result that it is much easier to envisage piecemeal improvements than to radically rethink or abandon them. Moreover, due to general organizational principles of employers' influence and local autonomy, representatives of the personnel and, primarily, the managers of the staircase system take part in working groups and committees dealing with its deficiencies, or with homelessness in general. Thus, groups commissioned to investigate alternatives to the staircase system tend to involve its functionaries as members or experts, which probably contributes to the repeated 'repair-and-extend' responses to criticism.

The staircase's survival and expansion also attracts endorsement from other parties. Above all, *landlords appreciate it* (3), at least compared to the alternative of granting homeless people regular contracts. In a recent letter to the City Parliament of Göteborg on

'a housing market for all', private and public landlords and the local organization of tenant owners' societies jointly concluded:

> The responsibility of the society does not stop with providing the special housing market with dwellings and organizing emergency teams for nuisance in the neighbourhoods. Furthermore, there must be clear opportunities even for these individuals and families to make a so-called housing career. In order to render this possible, the actors of the housing market, the municipality and other responsible agencies must see to it that there are distinct rules and requirements so that the housing consumers after rehabilitation and other measures are able to apply for a dwelling with a first-hand contract. In this context, one can work with different kinds of housing and contracts. The important thing is that the housing career includes sufficiently many and distinct steps. Then it can function as a part of the rehabilitation and as an important part of the welfare society. (Letter by the city's property owners, appended to City Parliament of Göteborg, 2002:134, p. 11)[17]

Fourthly, as a result of its composition and manifold elements, the system is highly capable of *reacting to criticism through differentiation and re-definitions* (4). This includes the possibility of isolating problematic groups and disreputable houses without letting these possible failures 'contaminate' the staircase or the housing area. If certain groups tend to be excluded, specific units are offered to them in an extended staircase. If shelters are unpopular, they are justified as being only a temporary platform before entering the real staircase. And if there is an obstacle to proceedings from the highest step, an extra step is inserted so that at least the illusion of progress is sustained.

Fifthly, the system allows for *turning indications of failure into signs of success* (5). Clients who succeed legitimate the system, just as clients do who fail. If they are evicted or dislocated, or do not succeed to advance to the final steps, this is viewed as a confirmation that they were not capable of independent living and would not have managed in an ordinary home *without* special support and supervision. On the other hand, those who manage to climb the staircase to the top and enter the regular housing market are regarded as proof of the usefulness and rationality of the staircase—especially since the question as to whether this long route was really necessary is seldom posed and in any case difficult to answer. In other words, the discourse of the staircase of transition attributes success to the system and failure to its clients (Sahlin, 1996).

Summary

In the twenty-first century, no legislation, institutions, or agencies that aim to provide regular housing for homeless households remain within the housing sector in Sweden. Housing allocation has been deregulated, subsidies have been withdrawn, housing assignment agencies have closed, and municipalities no longer use the public rental sector for providing housing for the homeless, as long as this might endanger the competitiveness or economics of their housing companies. Instead, local social authorities rent and sublease flats and rooms to homeless clients on a 'secondary housing market', often organized as a 'staircase of transition', the aim of which is to house, train and monitor homeless people in order to realize a 'housing career' from the street to regular housing.

A review of research on the secondary housing market and the staircase of transition shows that these do not solve the homelessness problem but reinforce it. The secondary housing market has grown substantially in the last decade without any visible positive impact on homelessness outside it. A longitudinal case study has shown that the dynamics of the staircase, based on selection and eviction, created 'needs' for low-standard shelters and that social workers, acting as landlords, developed exclusion policies that were even tougher than those in the regular market. In two synchronic studies (1990 and 2001), local homelessness rates in municipalities using staircases were compared with those that had no secondary housing market at all. These analyses showed that comparatively more people are homeless and/or deemed 'incapable' in the staircase municipalities than in the others.

The main implication of these results is that the system intended to include the homeless into the regular housing market not only fails to achieve this goal but furthermore possibly worsens the situation for the homeless, and impairs their perceived 'capability of independent living'. A partial explanation of this paradox is that the staircase affects the discourse on homelessness by sustaining a system of control and training which implies and emphasizes deficiencies among the homeless individuals. At the same time, through their criteria for and practice of exclusion, landlords ultimately determine who will be homeless. Put differently, by treating those who are excluded from the regular housing market as 'incapable' of being housed, local social authorities confirm, reinforce and legitimize the landlords' negative presumptions about homeless people and, hence, their exclusion policies.

Recent case studies support the theory that the staircase of transition has inherent problems which counteract the realization of the intended 'career' of the homeless from the street to regular contracts. The flow through the system is generally low, and only a small minority manage to climb all the stairs. Those who endure the surveillance and restrictions and comply with the rules must wait several years before they can hope to get a dwelling of their own. Meanwhile, unpredicted obstacles emerge, like reluctant landlords who disregard previous commitments and create new criteria for acceptance. More commonly still, homeless people begin at the bottom of the staircase, but are not allowed to advance more than a step or two before they are dislocated to lower steps or evicted by the social authorities—and have to start all over again. From the point of view of the homeless, not only property owners but also social authorities appear unreliable, since their decisions on sanctions and actions are difficult to anticipate. Hence, the system has lost credibility among the homeless and, apparently, also among many social workers at street level.

Recurrent complaints about and criticism of the staircase of transition have been met primarily with requests and efforts to 'repair and expand' it through new housing units for excluded groups, new actors organizing parallel stairs, or new steps being inserted in the staircase. These measures may restore hope temporarily, but also prolong the time spent in the staircase system and widen its net.

In light of these recorded and rather well-known deficiencies and shortcomings, why is it that the staircase of transition still thrives and survives? In this article, the staircase's capacity to transform criticism into growth and to translate failure into success has been tentatively related to five 'qualities' of the model: Firstly, it fulfils latent functions for the local social authorities; secondly, it is institutionalized to such and extent that it is difficult to 'think it away'; thirdly, it is supported by locally powerful interests, such as the property

owners and the managers of the system; fourthly, it is sufficiently diversified to be able to adapt continuously to new challenges through differentiation or to respond to threats through reorganization and re-definition. Last, but not least, it is justified by and woven into a discourse in which the need for the staircase is confirmed by individuals' failures, as well as by their possible success.

NOTES

1. See, for example, recommendations by the Norwegian government's housing delegation in its report on the housing markets and housing policy: 'The homelessness project . . . shall develop solutions within a staircase model, i.e., a set of housing solutions and services that together shall make up a staircase of gradually growing independence in the housing situation. The central principles of this model should form the basis of the work' (NOU, 2002:2, p. 23).
2. In the years 1994–98 only 12,000 dwellings/year were built and only a small number were for rent. Since 1999, housing construction has started to rise but still does not exceed 20,000/year (Boverket, 2002). Furthermore, less than a third of the dwellings planned to be built with 2002 will be for rent, and most of these consist of special housing for the elderly. This leaves a possible contribution of 3000 'ordinary' rental flats at most (ibid.).
3. As a result of a deep economic recession and high unemployment rates, vacancy rates grew in the beginning of the 1990s and stabilized at a level higher than ever. Since 1998, when 5.3% of all rental flats were vacant (Statistics Sweden, 1998), the vacancy rate has decreased every year and was 2.5% in March 2002 (Boverket, 2002; Statistics Sweden, 2002b).
4. There are about 4.3 million dwellings in Sweden. Of these, 42% are owner-occupied single-family houses, while 40% are rental flats. Among the 1.5 million rental flats, about 45% are owned by private landlords (often big companies) while the rest, which are called public housing, are controlled by about 300 MHCs. The remaining 18% of the dwellings are the properties of Tenant Owners' Societies (TOSs) (Ministry of Finance, 2001). These are economic associations of tenants that can sell their dwellings on the market to the highest bidder.
5. Because of the demolition of 20,000 flats (due to chronic letting difficulties) and sales to TOSs and private housing companies (for ideological or short-term economic reasons) the public housing stock has lost more than 90,000 dwellings, or about 10%, since the mid-1990s (Boverket, 2002). Today, a number of municipalities have no public housing at all (SOU, 2001:27).
6. Even where there are municipal housing assignment agencies and a surplus of dwellings, homeless applicants may not actually acquire a home, since the local landlords themselves are often allowed to determine the criteria for refusal.
7. Today, three-quarters of the municipalities regularly co-operate with the municipal housing companies in order to acquire housing for homeless people (Boverket, 2002). However, in relation to homelessness, no positive effects of such co-operation have been evidenced, and has rather proved counterproductive as a means of providing housing for homeless people (Sahlin, 1996). This is partly due to the fact that public landlords no longer accept any responsibility for homelessness and housing problems and keep a veto against unwanted subtenants, while the local social authorities have come to serve as

gatekeepers on behalf of the property owners, helping them dislocate troublesome tenants, and providing information which makes it easier for the landlords to detect and reject potentially risky housing applicants (ibid.).

8. In this survey, respondents compared their local organization of shelter and housing for the homeless to a 'ladder', 'chain' or, most commonly, a 'staircase' (*trappa*). The argument for this structure was similar and included the notion that ultimately, almost without exception, the residents should attain independent living in the regular housing market. The term 'staircase of transition' is coined by the author in order to distinguish this kind of scheme from 'ability grouping', where the aim is to provide clients/patients with a permanent location on one of several 'steps' with regard to independence, standard and support/care.
9. Altbo is the name of the organization in charge of the main staircases of transition in Göteborg up to the level of transitional contracts.
10. In its final report, the parliamentary Committee for the Homeless proposed that Socialstyrelsen count homeless clients at least every three years (SOU, 2001:95a). However, neither this kind of mapping nor any extended count or investigation to assess the scope and trends of homelessness was conducted or planned since 1999–2004.
11. According to the report: 'However, an estimation of the importance of these differences (*in definitions and the circuit of respondents/IS*) supports the conclusion that the number is about the same today as in 1993' (Socialstyrelsen, 2000a, p. 6). Researchers in Stockholm City, who have stuck to the definition used by Socialstyrelsen in 1993, claimed that the revised definition excluded almost half of the homeless people who should have been included in the original one. According to their statistics, the absolute number of homeless clients decreased from 3167 in 1993 to 2792 in 1999 (Finne, 2001), but not to 1512, which was the figure calculated by Socialstyrelsen (2000a, p. 127). See Ågren *et al*. (2000) and Borgny & Qvarlander (2000), representing Stockholm City and Socialstyrelsen, respectively, in this debate.
12. The city of Malmö has counted homeless clients with the local social authorities (both within and outside the secondary housing market) each year since the beginning of the 1990s. In 2002, 543 adult individuals, compared to 383 in 2001 and 93 in 1993, were staying in shelters and cheap hotels or sleeping rough (City Office in Malmö, 22 Nov. 2002; the 1993 figure is from Socialstyrelsen's count). In Göteborg, the numbers sleeping rough (meaning 'sleeping outdoors more than indoors') grew from 50 in 1997 to 150 in autumn 2001 (City Parliament of Göteborg, 2002:76).
13. In the wake of de-institutionalization, the frail or senile elderly, and people with disabilities, have moved to special housing. There is also a significant amount of accommodation for refugees and asylum-seekers with similar features. However, these kinds of special housing are not included in the mappings referred to in this paper, nor in the concept 'secondary housing market'.
14. The analysis of the 1990 survey data revealed significant correlations between the occurrence and numbers of different kinds of housing within the secondary housing market. This means that the secondary housing market appears to be mostly differentiated. Although respondents were not asked explicitly whether they actually related different kinds of housing for homeless clients to each other in a staircase model, appendices and added comments often referred to staircase arrangements.

15. In defence of this system, the officials in charge claim that around 50 subtenants on the top step obtain regular contracts each year. This figure is probably too high, since Ericson and Wikström (2002) could identify only 14 contracts that were transferred in 2001. In any case, it is obvious that even the claimed pace of 50 people entering the regular housing market each year is far too slow to warrant the system.

16. According to a mapping by the landlords in the city, the secondary housing market is actually larger and comprises between 2500 and 3000 flats (City Parliament of Göteborg, 2002:134).

17. The City Council declared that it was positive towards the landlords' letter (City Parliament of Göteborg, 2002:134).

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