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From community building to commodity production: the political economy of the Swedish housing and building industry

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Abstract

The Swedish building industry has been going through a neoliberal transformation from community building to commodity production. In this article, we employ mixed-methods research aiming at addressing what this structural transformation entails and what its (adverse) effects may be. Based on a contemporary historical materialist approach, we draw on the principal contradiction in the labor theory of value and the respective contradictions in housing commodification and production fragmentation to conceptualize an integrated framework (referred to as a triaxial threat space), which we then situate in the socio-historical context of the Swedish building industry. Finally, we employ this framework and demonstrate how the structural transformation from community building to commodity production is threatening the famed Swedish high-road model, leading, among others, to labor deskilling and exploitation, lower productivity, and production quality issues. We also posit that these phenomena are exacerbated when moving towards the extremes of fully exploiting labor for profit, universally commodifying housing production, and completely fragmenting production through multilayered subcontracting. Our contributions include integrating relevant scholarship into a coherent framework for understanding transformations in housing production and labor relations in Sweden, as well as linking labor degradation and the potential collapse of high-road production with the gradual change in the political economy of Swedish construction.

Keywords Community building · Commodity production · Swedish building industry · Housing commodification · Labour theory of value · Production fragmentation

1 Introduction

The political economy of the Swedish building industry is inherently tied to Swedish housing politics. During the 20th century, affordable housing was key to the social democratic welfare project (Hedin et al., 2012). This was strongly emphasized through a unitary rental system and public housing (*allmännyttan* in Swedish) (Gustafsson, 2021). *Allmännyttan*

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

generally refers to municipal housing companies providing rental housing based on the principles of public benefit and social responsibility (Sveriges Allmännytt, 2026). In contrast to social housing, public housing was not a measure directed to marginalized groups but rather a tool to achieve affordable housing for the public (Christophers, 2013). However, public housing in Sweden has been subjected to deregulation and is currently under the increasing pressure of segregation and gentrification (Gustafsson, 2021). For example, successive Swedish governments have promoted the real estate developers' inclination to build tenant-owned apartments, and there have been extensive tenant conversions of public rental housing apartments in municipalities (Hedin et al., 2012; Christophers, 2013; Andersson & Turner, 2014).

This structural alteration is rooted in the early 1990s, when a deregulation of public dwellings implied that public housing companies needed to establish themselves as financially independent actors (Blackwell, 2021). Relevant legislation in 2011 further established that such companies are not only supposed to be socially responsible but also need to act in accordance with market principles (Grandér, 2024). This effectively pushed them to implement new accounting practices and sharpen rental policies (Gustafsson, 2021).

Parallel to public housing deregulation, the Swedish building industry is structurally changing, with a fragmented building production process resulting in declining production quality and labor deskilling and exploitation (Ahlstrand, 2022). Since the early 2010s, Swedish building companies have followed the international trend of neoliberalization (Druker et al., 2021) and adopted multi-layered subcontracting with the aim of increasing organizational flexibility and cutting labor costs (Ahlstrand, 2022, 2024). An inherent aspect of this is the downward shift of employer responsibility and the use of migrant labor; as elsewhere in Europe, subcontracted labor consists predominantly of foreign workers willing to work longer hours with lower pay (Kjellberg, 2026).

In Sweden, this neoliberal reorganization of labor represents a drastic shift from previous decades of the social democratic welfare project. For a long time, the Swedish building industry adhered to the “high road of coordinated economies” model. This refers to the combination of high education levels, high-quality production, high wages, and high productivity (Arnholtz & Ibsen, 2021) and was essentially, just as with pre-deregulation housing politics, a result of the ‘beneficial constraints’ in the social democratic project (Streeck, 1991). Namely, the pressure applied by regulations, trade unions, and collective bargaining on companies has traditionally forced them to take social responsibility and invest in their own labor force while also increasing productivity to remain profitable and competitive (Arnholtz & Ibsen, 2021). Subsequently, in this article, we depart from the neoliberalization of Swedish housing politics and the building industry and identify a shift of what we term *community building* towards *commodity production*. Here, community building refers to how the building industry and the housing market were previously encompassed in the social democratic welfare project, which inherently implied the ambition of social and economic prosperity through regulating capitalism – not least through pressuring for-profit companies to take social responsibility. We conceptualize this shift as a structural transformation and emphasize how profit maximization has replaced social aspects of Swedish building and housing politics since the early 1990s. To explore it further, the article engages with the following research questions:

- What is the impact of market-oriented building on the Swedish building industry?

- How are the integrated elements of labor exploitation, housing commodification, and fragmented production threatening the Swedish high-road model?
- What are the potential consequences of this threat for the Swedish building industry?

To address these questions, we first conceptualize a theoretical framework containing a potential “threat space” for the Swedish building industry. Based on a contemporary historical materialist analysis, we identify three axes that define the integrated volume of this threat space. These respectively reflect the current-day embodiment of the contradictions within for-profit labor, the commodification of housing, and the fragmentation of production through intensive subcontracting. Then, we place this framework in the socio-historical context of the Swedish building industry and demonstrate how labor deskilling, low productivity, and quality issues are indeed threatening the high-road model. We posit that this threat space will worsen as we move towards the extremes of fully exploiting labor for profit, universally commodifying housing production, and completely fragmenting production through the unhinged use of multi-layered subcontracting.

This study’s theoretical contribution lies in the integration of the labor theory of value, the commodification discourse, and the underpinnings of production fragmentation into a conceptual framework, which forms an extension of existing debates in studies employing critical political economy in housing and can aid in understanding transformations in housing production and labor relations in Sweden. We then imbue this framework with its spatial and temporal specificity by placing it in the socio-historical context of the Swedish building industry. In turn, our analytical contributions are reflected in how we use the framework to link labor degradation with the way the Swedish building industry has transformed from community building to market-oriented commodity production, while we also seek to provide insights into the development of the socio-historical Swedish context in general and the decay of the high-road model in particular.

Following this introduction, we describe our theoretical framework and our employed research methods. We then expound on the process and results of our analysis and conclude with targeted discussion points and ending remarks.

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Labor theory of value

Scholars have interpreted the labor theory of value (LTV) in various ways (Murray, 2016); nonetheless, a central aspect of LTV is understanding the commodity as the “cell form” of capitalist production (Moseley, 2023). While there have been arguments that value is created only when it is converted into money through the sale of commodities on the market (Heinrich, 2021), recent scholarship on LTV has reaffirmed the epistemological basis of determining the value of commodities by the socially necessary labor required to produce them (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2016; Moseley, 2023).

This re-affirmation points out that commodities should not be perceived in isolation but rather understood through a representative commodity that encapsulates the essential attributes shared by all commodities: use value and exchange value, where exchange value is perceived as the monetary equalization of abstract labor (Moseley, 2023). The value of

commodities originating from the exchange value of the representative commodity signifies that each commodity is equivalent to all others in specific proportions (Moseley, 2023). This relationship of equality necessitates a common property held by all commodities, governing the proportions in which they are equivalent; such a common property, which determines exchange values, is the abstract human labor embodied in commodities as it is expended during production (Wang, 2024). As such, the concept of the equality of all commodities is central when employing LTV to analyze labor (Finger, 2020), and the magnitude of a commodity's value is exclusively determined by the quantity of socially necessary labor invested in its production (Yoshihara, 2022). Further, this posits that in commodity production, labor possesses a dual character, encompassing both concrete and abstract labor within the same labor process; in other words, a labor process in production can generate the use-value of a product while simultaneously embodying abstract human labor that imparts value to the product (Sohn-Rethel, 2020). As such, the commodity production process is forming through an immediate fusion of the labor and valorization processes, that is, value rises through the application of human labor (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2016). Subsequently, when new commodities are produced through human labor, they generate 'potential' new value, which is later realized (in modified quantities) when the commodities are sold (Roberts, 2023).

It follows that units of production are commodities embodying the principal contradiction of producing for social need (use value) vs. producing for profit (exchange value) (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2016; Moseley, 2023; Roberts, 2023). To consider that value emerges only when a commodity is the object of a monetary transaction would violate this embodiment (as money represents value but is not value *itself*) (Best, 2024). The globalized capitalist system has then been developing through ever-changing and successive regional, national, and local contradictions (e.g., transnational monopoly capital vs. the nation-state), which in turn trigger more modifications to and even different manifestations of the principal contradiction itself (Lauesen, 2020); such modifications and manifestations work in tandem (Lauesen, 2020).

Mainstream neoclassical economics suggests that monetary prices are sufficient for understanding the value of commodities, thus downplaying the embodiment of the principal contradiction (Nicholas, 2023). However, neoclassical perspectives fail to grasp the root causes of crises in capitalist production. By reducing the reasons behind the abundant and frequent cycles of capitalist crises through the triumph of neoliberalism in the 20th and 21st centuries (Lauesen, 2018, 2020; Wolf, 2023) to "just" excessive credit and financial instability (Roberts, 2023), neoclassical economics disregards both the principal contradiction and the profits generated by human labor. To replace them with a focus on money alone ultimately dismisses the fundamental role of human labor power in creating value – i.e., the *raison d'être* that capital exploits labor for profit (Nicholas, 2023; Roberts, 2023).

Construction and the built environment contextualize the principal contradiction in an analysis of production, value generation, and labor. Relevant studies are not common, but neither are they rare. Particularly, Tan (2002) uses that in examining the dynamic relations between construction labor and economic development in "less developed countries." Further, Jewell et al. (2010) draw on relevant elements to comment on the impact of globalization in the UK construction sector, including the increase in foreign ownership and procurement forms. Bresnen and Harty (2010) consider the value imbued in (construction) products and commodities as a driving function of labor relations (Bresnen & Harty, 2010). The principal contradiction and its embodiment in societal development, history, relations,

norms, and values have informed studies investigating construction labor policy formulation and diffusion (Smiley et al., 2014). Digitalization in construction is the focus in Çıdık and Boyd (2022), where they use elements of LTV to analyze the impact of digital commodification of information on value creation. The principal contradiction is even reflected in the (negative) post-COVID-19 relationship between profit and the construction laborers' health and safety within the UK (Sherratt and Dainty, 2023). Finally, LTV and the principal contradiction have been employed for analyses on construction processes and work organization; for example, Koch et al. (2019) pointed to such studies in the 1970–1980s within the Danish context.

Nonetheless, the tension created within the building industry by the principal contradiction has been researched far more extensively within the commodification of housing.

2.2 Commodification of housing

Commodification broadly refers to the “general process by which the economic value of a thing comes to dominate its other uses” (Madden & Marcuse, 2016). Namely, it occurs when the use value of goods and services is subordinated to their exchange value, often as they enter the market and are therefore produced for profit (La Grange & Jung, 2004; Chan, 2023). It is a multifaceted and complex process that involves the penetration of commodity relations into different aspects of social life (Forrest & Williams, 1984). While the domination of exchange value over use value is evident in all facets of urban development (Chan, 2023), housing has been particularly impacted by commodification as it has “belatedly but increasingly obviously [become] subordinate to large-scale capitalism” (Lefebvre, 2016). Housing commodification occurs when “a structure’s function as real estate takes precedence over its usefulness as a place to live” (Madden & Marcuse, 2016). As a commodity on the real estate market, housing is critical for capital circulation and is often seen as a fix to problems pertaining to capital flow and effective demand (Aalbers & Christophers, 2014). Housing commodification can therefore be understood as a central strategy to capital accumulation and expansion within contemporary capitalism.

Housing commodification has taken on different forms depending on the geographical and politico-economic context. Relevant examples include the privatization and marketization of public housing (Forrest & Murie, 1995; Chiu, 2001), the deregulation of rental controls (Christophers, 2013), the abolition of non-profit-making communal housing (Larsen & Lund Hansen, 2015), and the weakening of tenants’ rights while emphasizing home ownership (Rogers et al., 2018). Broadly speaking, studies on housing commodification tend to focus on two main areas. The first refers to the consequences and impacts of housing commodification, especially those related to housing consumption and the city’s socio-spatial organization. As Madden and Marcuse (2016) contend, the main problem with housing commodification lies in the fact that housing is increasingly distributed according to one’s ability to pay even though the need for living space is universal. In addition to highlighting the increasingly unequal rights, distribution, and access to housing (Fenton et al., 2013; Rolnik, 2013; Kadi, 2015; Rogers et al., 2018; Polanska et al., 2024), studies have also shown that housing commodification often results in urban gentrification, segregation, and polarization (Forrest & Murie, 1995; Hedin et al., 2012; Andersson & Turner, 2014; Larsen & Lund Hansen, 2015).

Another focus of the relevant literature is on the commodification processes and drivers in the housing sector, including transitions of broad politico-economic systems (Hamilton, 1999; Chiu, 2001), shifts in housing policies and regulations (Larsen & Lund Hansen, 2015; Musil et al., 2024), changes to housing delivery and provision mechanisms (Forrest & Murie, 1995; Andersson & Turner, 2014; Kadi, 2015), and the differing roles of state and private actors in housing production (La Grange & Jung, 2004; Fenton et al., 2013; Wu, 2015). Various housing scholars have over the years developed theories and frameworks to understand and explain transformations in housing systems (Kemeny, 2001; Stephens, 2020; Moreno Zacarés, 2024); for example, Ball's (1986) structures of provision framework posits that housing outcomes cannot be analyzed from only a consumption-orientated approach but must instead be understood holistically through the institutional arrangements and social relations between different actors producing, financing, and allocating housing. It is pertinent to not only uncover the relationships between production, exchange, and consumption but also situate them within "broader patterns and logics of accumulation that span the entire housing supply chain" (Blackwell et al., 2025). From this perspective, housing commodification can be interpreted not just as a shift in housing policy but as a systemic transformation through which housing provision becomes increasingly organized around exchange value and market logic.

An area that has remained relatively understudied pertains to the impact of housing commodification on housing production, specifically in the building industry. While some light has been shed on the correlation between housing commodification and production levels (Forrest & Williams, 1984), few authors have examined its impact on the relevant labor processes and production mode. As Aalbers and Christophers (2014) suggest, housing is first and foremost a product of labor, and its 'creation is the locus of wage-labor-based production'. It is against this backdrop that this paper seeks to shift the attention toward the production aspect of housing commodification by examining how the process is reflected in the organization of construction work and the dynamics of the Swedish building industry.

Aalbers and Christophers (2014) logic leads to understanding that housing commodification in Sweden manifests another contradiction, that of emphasizing use value vs. exchange value in housing production. This manifestation follows Lauesen's (2020) argument that regional, national, and local contextual factors trigger modifications to, and further manifestations of, the principal contradiction described in LTV.

2.3 Fragmentation of production

Subcontracting is integral to construction work during on-site production. On the one hand, it is a consequence of the compartmentalized building process itself, which breaks production into sequential activities carried out by trade specialists (Eccles, 1981a). On the other hand, it results from industrialization (Bosch & Philips, 2003), the political economy of labor markets (Thiel, 2013), and changes in the control and management systems in building companies' work organizations (Ahlstrand, 2022).

Streamlining production through industrialization results primarily in increased prefabrication and work standardization, as the most labor-intensive parts of production move from project sites to factories (Bosch & Philips, 2003). Off-site production does not necessarily mean less production work but rather different types of it (Stehn & Jimenez, 2023); e.g., instead of in situ concreting, workers are mounting prefabricated concrete elements. Thus,

increased industrialization further compartmentalizes the building process and encourages subcontracting, while work standardization makes it possible for companies to utilize less qualified labor and cut costs (Ahlstrand, 2022, 2024). With an array of subcontractors involved in a sequential production system, increasing labor complexity and insecurity are further exacerbated by the subcontractors' interdependencies; to plan for their own production segment, subcontractors rely on the others' work practices, organization, and scheduling (Eccles, 1981b) and need to trust that others will deliver as or when expected.

Thus, trust is key for understanding subcontracting relationships. It is the mechanism that reduces uncertainty and allows for assumptions about other actors' potential behavior (Kadefors, 2004; Mackenzie, 2008). This does not mean that subcontracting arrangements are based on individual and rational calculations; rather, to reduce risks and uncertainty, they rely on both regulations and social relationships as control mechanisms (Mackenzie, 2008). In the building industry, social control through norms of what constitutes good work has traditionally been important to build reputation, strong networks, and to guarantee a high-quality product (Eccles, 1981a; Thiel, 2013). Thus, contractual relations are often informally regulated based on social relationships (Thiel, 2013).

However, in labor markets marked by deregulation and flexibilization, an increasingly fragmented production can lead contractors and subcontractors to develop a specific economic logic seeking to fulfill compartmentalized work tasks while spending as little as possible (Bygballe et al., 2013). This is further exacerbated by neoliberal tendering regimes that are governed by cost flexibility (Thörnqvist & Woolfson, 2012); that is, contractors depend largely on the purchasing power of public authorities and municipal housing companies, which, as described previously, are increasingly governed by market principles (Christophers, 2013). Therefore, to secure profitable contracts, it is important for contractors to minimize costs.

This incentive drives companies in their endeavor for organizational flexibility but also largely translates to reducing labor costs (Ahlstrand, 2022). For example, rather than having their own directly employed staff, contractors increasingly take on a construction management role and rely on bought services from specialized firms and subcontractors (Druker et al., 2021; Sweet, 2023). As the logic of 'cost flexibility' (Thörnqvist & Woolfson, 2012) subverts both trust and other social control mechanisms on which subcontracting relationships are supposed to rely, new work organizations building on construction management take form, altering both management systems as well as marginalizing craft-based knowledge and worker autonomy (Ahlstrand, 2022, 2024; Green, 2024).

While this is indeed a global trend, the characteristics of specific contexts matter in how it will manifest (Ahlstrand, 2022). In the EU, including Sweden, firms draw on the system of posted work by temporarily placing workers on project sites in other EU member states; this enables contractors and subcontractors alike to minimize labor costs (Arnholtz, 2021). As such, transnational subcontracting functions primarily as a form of flexibility in labor recruitment and indicates how short-term profit takes precedence over quality and social control (Ahlstrand, 2022, 2024). It also suggests why an increasingly industrialized production with prefabrication and standardized work is financially lucrative for building companies; it implies increased possibilities of using cheap and easily exploitable labor.

The precedence of short-term profits and using cheap labor also intensifies the day-to-day management. Rather than relying on skilled workers' knowledge and experience, site management needs to control work in minutiae (Ahlstrand, 2022; Ahlstrand & Kifokeris,

2023; Haakestad & Friberg, 2020). This is a shift from craft-centered management to management based on neo-Taylorist principles (Haakestad & Friberg, 2020), where workers have little control and influence over their work as the mental and manual components of labor are separated. As such, work standardisation and the workers' loss of control indicate a potential degradation of craftsmanship (Braverman, 1974). Green (2024) attributes this crisis in skills development to a growing dependence on and exaggeration of the significance of industrialized building, as well as the reliance on multiple tiers of subcontracting. Particularly in Sweden, such neo-Taylorist management has previously been absent from the building industry due to the high-road model and the reliance on skilled labor.

Following this, we can posit that production fragmentation triggers yet another manifestation of the principal contradiction (Lauesen, 2020), that of integrated production with targeted subcontracting vs. fragmented production with multilayered subcontracting. Due to the contextual factors described previously and adhering to Lauesen (2020), we can surmise that the contradiction in production fragmentation works in tandem with the formerly examined contradictions in LTV and housing commodification.

2.4 Integrated framework: the triaxial threat space

As described earlier, while some authors have investigated the correlation between housing commodification and production (Forrest & Williams, 1984; Aalbers & Christophers, 2014), few have examined its impact on the industry's labor processes. This denotes that there is not enough discourse on how housing commodification plays a role in subverting human labor while creating value, which exacerbates its exploitation by capital for profit. What is more, the practice of (transnational) subcontracting and the way it is fragmenting production can scarcely be found in the discourses related to housing commodification and/or labor exploitation resulting from the principal contradiction – let alone in the Swedish context.

We hereby posit that a theoretical framework integrating the dimensions of LTV's principal contradiction in labor exploitation, the contradiction in housing commodification, and the contradiction in production fragmentation (see Fig. 1) can constitute the basis for addressing our research questions – namely, how market-oriented building is impacting the Swedish building industry, how labor fragmentation and exploitation in production are threatening the Swedish high-road model, and what this threat's potential consequences are.

As implied in Fig. 1, the more acutely one uses labor towards producing for profit instead of for social need, commodifies housing by emphasizing exchange value instead of use value, and exacerbates production fragmentation through more intensive and multi-layered subcontracting, the more the volume of what we denote as the “threat space” increases. Based on the previously described theoretical explications, this threat space can potentially include a combination of adverse phenomena, like labor exploitation, skill loss, reduced quality in construction, and losing sight of a built environment that is societally beneficial.

Nonetheless, the phenomena constituting this threat space depend on the socio-historical context in which the framework is placed (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2024). Therefore, this theoretical framework will be situated in the Swedish building industry and its transformation from community building to commodity production and will then serve as a vehicle to address our research questions. In that vein, the epistemological status of the threat space is that of our analytical device, and it should not be understood as a heuristic or predictive tool.

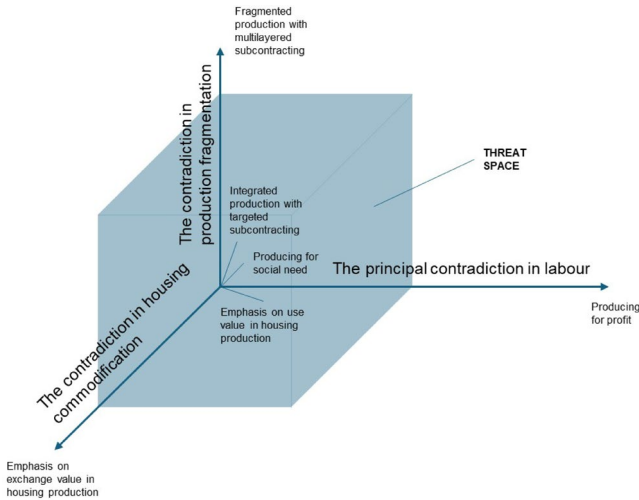


Fig. 1 The 3-axial theoretical framework

3 Research methodology

In this study, we employed a systematic literature review (Webster & Watson, 2002) and then implemented the methodology of phenomena construction by Alvesson and Sandberg (2024) to achieve our research results. The literature review was conducted via the iterative concept-centric method enhanced by units of analysis (Webster & Watson, 2002) and supported by the references-of-references and snowballing techniques (Greenhalgh & Peacock, 2005). We used it to cover three distinct but interconnected search streams:

1. The background studies supporting the introduction and other parts of this article, where the main searched concepts were “Swedish building production” and “production labor process”. The emerging units of analysis included, indicatively, “Swedish housing policy”, and “labor exploitation”. This stream situated the study in terms of content and context and provided a foundation for theory and analysis.
2. The theory-intensive studies equipping each of the three axes, as well as their integration in the theoretical framework, which leaned on searched concepts such as “capitalist production”, “labor theory of value”, “housing commodification”, and “production fragmentation”. The emerging units of analysis included, indicatively, “representative commodity”, “use value”, “exchange value”, “human labor”, “surplus value”, “commodity relations”, “privatization of public housing”, “subcontracting”, “production specialization”, “production industrialization”, “transnational labor”, and “production social control mechanisms”. This stream incorporated the study into an integrated and contextually relevant theoretical schema.
3. The studies concerning the analysis, as well as the discourse in the discussion and conclusions, combining previously mentioned searched concepts and emerging units of analysis.

In addition to the above, we employed further context- and content-related criteria in our literature search. In terms of the socio-historical context, studies were sought to either refer explicitly to Sweden and its building industry or be able to get interpreted through a Swedish lens. In terms of content, studies were chosen based on whether they included contextually relevant intensive data (e.g., ethnographic studies) and extensive data (e.g., statistics) (Pink et al., 2013) to corroborate the analytical arguments and properly furnish our triaxial theoretical framework.

The initial iterations of this process resulted in many hits. In subsequent iterations, we applied relevant exclusion and inclusion criteria (Dundar & Fleeman, 2017) to refine the found sources into the ones finally included in this study. Table 1 offers a broad overview of the hit range of each iteration, as well as indicative inclusion-exclusion criteria.

Having gathered our study material through our literature review, we performed the analytical process of constructing a new phenomenon addressing the stated, previously non-tackled, research questions. That is, a historical materialist analysis delineating, in a novel way, the neoliberal transformation of Swedish community building into a market-oriented commodity production while providing insights into the decay of the high-road model during recent developments in the socio-historical context of Sweden. For this, we employed the phenomena construction methodology (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2024) (see Fig. 2).

In our study, Theory (T) reflects the three axes of our theoretical framework (the contradictions in LTV, housing commodification, and production fragmentation), as well as their integration to form our conceived “threat space”. Empirics (E) refers to reflexively understanding the literature findings related to the concepts and emerged units of analysis mentioned earlier and then situating them within the socio-historical context of the Swedish building industry. Finally, Pre-understanding (P) pertains to researchers’ broader grasp of themselves and society, consisting of their sociocultural preconceptions constantly guiding and bringing about certain inclinations and reasoning; hermeneutically, this pre-understanding originates from the context the researchers share with their study (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2024). In our case, this reflects the socio-historical context of the Swedish building industry and the researchers’ historical materialist reasoning.

Consistently with T-E-P, such reasoning unfolded when we analyzed our socio-historical context in a two-day in-person workshop held among the authors (as well as all subsequent writing sessions), where we followed Fletcher’s (2017) critical realist approach of using existing theory; collecting, coding, and analyzing our data; and critically engaging with our knowledge and experience. Employing critical realism also enabled us to manage the interpretive bias inextricably associated with our reliance on the pre-understanding dimension of T-E-P in phenomena construction, as well as being epistemically aware about the boundaries of our conceptualizations. Therefore, during the aforementioned workshop and writing sessions, we utilized: (i) retroduction (asking what must exist or operate to cause the phenomena), thus anchoring interpretations in underlying sociohistorical structures rather than just our immediate assumptions (Belfrage & Hauf, 2017); (ii) reflexivity, by actively interrogating our own positionality, disciplinary biases, and the social structures within which we ourselves are embedded (Downey et al., 2024); and (iii) collective reflection, discussing our analytical findings among ourselves to challenge our interpretations and preconceptions (Downey et al., 2024).

Table 2 illustrates how the phenomena construction methodology’s five steps (creating, specifying, scrutinizing, elaborating, and linking – see Fig. 2) translate given the T-E-P

Table 1 Literature review iteration ranges and indicative examples of inclusion-exclusion criteria in each iteration

Iterations	1	2	3	4	5	...	9	10	Sum of unique references in the reference list
Inclusion-exclusion criterion	Broad scientific relevance to the research question	Epistemological and philosophical relevance to investigated phenomenon	Contextual relevance (i.e., referring to Sweden)	Temporality (i.e., time-frame principally defined by the deregulation in Swedish housing politics)	Content (i.e., inclusion of relevant intensive and extensive data)	...	Originality (i.e., not repeating the point of other references (Greenhalgh & Peacock (2005)	Integration capabilities (i.e., having a dialectical connection to each other (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2024))	Finally included references in each section
References in Introduction	> 200,000	> 75,000	> 25,000	> 10,000	> 500	...	25	...	9
References in the Theoretical framework	> 100,000	> 50,000	> 20,000	> 10,000	> 2,000	...	108	...	76
References in the Analysis and Discussion and Conclusions	> 150,000	> 50,000	> 20,000	> 5,000	> 1,000	...	76	...	41

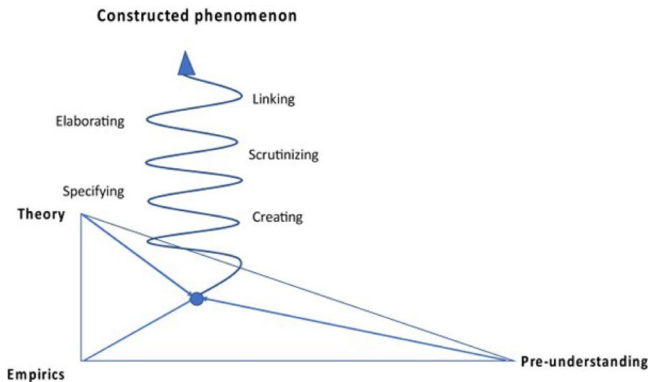


Fig. 2 The methodology of phenomena construction (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2024)

angles above, also describing how the three contradictions in our integrated framework intercorrelate.

This study's limitations should be acknowledged. In terms of theory, we adopt historical materialism and have not encompassed other approaches. Therefore, scholarly research adopting other frameworks (e.g., neo-Taylorism) can challenge our reasoning and results. Furthermore, we focus on building production that still takes place largely on-site, even if there is an expanded use of prefabrication and modularization. We do not consider dwellings that were produced in a fully industrialized setting, as the Swedish industrialized construction industry only possesses a modest to small market share of ca. 15% (Kifokeris, 2021). Moreover, on the empirical level, our study is not supported by first-hand material; rather, it is dependent on the analytical processing of second-hand extensive and intensive data provided by reviewed literature and statistical sources. One could argue that this adds layers of bias to our reasoning. Nonetheless, we view these limitations not as underminers of our effort but as invitations for further research, sparking intriguing debate and further contributions to housing and production studies.

4 Analysis

4.1 Housing commodification in Sweden and the contradiction in use vs. exchange value in housing production

Housing in Sweden has shifted from being one of Europe's most regulated to "one of the most liberal market-governed housing markets" in recent decades (Lind & Lundström, 2007). While the roots of financial and housing deregulation in Sweden can be traced back to the 1970s and 1980s (Blackwell, 2021), for many observers, housing commodification in Sweden truly began when the Conservatives took power from the Social Democrats in 1991 (Hedin et al., 2012; Christophers, 2013). The subsequent closing of the Department of Housing, which had overseen planning, rent regulation, and housing subsidies, marked a significant shift in housing policy and paved the way for further deregulation. Long-standing legislatures regulating and safeguarding mechanisms for just housing provision were

Table 2 The translation of the phenomena construction five stages within the context of the current study

Stages	Focus	Core activities	TEP input	This study's response
	Methodological prompts*	Methodological prompts*	Methodological prompts*	
Creating	Bringing into being a new, hidden, or rethought phenomenon	→ Imagining and tentatively naming an interesting phenomenon	→ <i>T: What existing theories can interact with P and E to create a potentially interesting phenomenon?</i> <i>E: What ideas from earlier empirical studies can be used to create a new phenomenon?</i> <i>P: What observations, patterns, events, etc. in our pre-understanding may indicate this new phenomenon?</i>	→ Realizing the phenomenon of the transformation of the Swedish building industry from community building to commodity production. Ideas from earlier empirical studies include, e.g., multilayered sub-contracting and other occurrences in Swedish building production. Observations and patterns in our pre-understanding include, e.g., the ceased governmental subsidies for housing production in Sweden. Existing theories interacting with P and E include socioeconomic ones.
Specifying	Giving the emerging phenomenon an initial meaning	→ Sorting out boundaries and key characteristics of the phenomenon, and giving a more precise meaning to it	→ <i>T: What theories can differentiate the emerging phenomenon from other phenomena?</i> <i>E: What empirical studies can draw the boundaries of the emerging phenomenon?</i> <i>P: What aspects of pre-understanding can specify the characteristics and meaning of the emerging phenomenon?</i>	→ Realizing the transformation in focus as a result of the neoliberal change in the political economy of the Swedish building industry. Historical materialism can differentiate this emerging phenomenon compared to other described by neoclassical economics. Empirical studies and statistics in housing politics, construction production, and on-site labor processes can draw the boundaries of the phenomenon. Specification aspects of our pre-understanding include, e.g., the temporal framing of the phenomenon starting at the point where structural transformations started emerging in the Swedish building industry.
Scrutinizing	Examining whether and to what extent the emerging phenomenon is interesting and promising	→ Deciding what empirical and theoretical insights the phenomenon adds, what speaks against it, whether there is enough empirical support for it, and whether we can proceed to analyzing it	→ <i>T: To what extent does the emerging phenomenon challenge existing theory?</i> <i>E: Is it possible to identify empirical studies that support – or question – the emerging phenomenon?</i> <i>P: To what extent does the emerging phenomenon resonate our pre-understanding?</i>	→ The interest in the emerging phenomenon lies, among others, in its connection to subsequent, materially experienced transformations in the Swedish building industry (e.g., the decay of the high-road model). Most mainstream socioeconomic research endeavors usually employ neoclassical economic theories, which we pose are challenged by the emerging phenomenon – thereby meriting the use of historical materialism. It is possible to identify existing studies resonating with the emerging phenomenon (see cell above), and it does resonate with our pre-understanding.

Table 2 (continued)

Stages	Focus	Core activities	TEP input	This study's response
	Methodological prompts*	Methodological prompts*	Methodological prompts*	
Elaborating	Identifying and elaborating the phenomenon's most distinctive features and potential research domain	→ Examining what is distinct and what is shared between this and other phenomena, and how it can be narrowed down to allow differentiation, or expanded to broader generalization	→ <i>T: What specific theories may help the identification and further elaboration of the key features of the phenomenon?</i> <i>E: Further elaboration of existing, relevant empirical studies to specify the emerging phenomenon.</i> <i>P: Can our pre-understanding give a well-informed sense of the scope and relevance of the emerging phenomenon?</i>	→ A Marxist analytical lens using historical materialism can be employed to further elaborate this phenomenon. Such further elaborations include insights into producing for profit rather than use value, the commodification of housing, fragmenting production through excessive subcontracting, and neo-Taylorist management practices potential leading to deskilling. Our analysis builds on expanding relevant insights of the existing literature. Our scholarly and professional engagement with the context of the Swedish building industry can provide a well-informed sense of relevance and scope of the emerging phenomenon. In this sense, the three contradictions expounded in the study (i.e., the principal contradiction of producing for social need vs. profit in LTV, and the manifested contradictions of emphasizing use value vs. exchange value in the housing commodification process, as well as integrated production with targeted subcontracting vs. fragmented production with multi-layered subcontracting in production fragmentation) can be understood to intercorrelate and work in tandem due to the specific contextual factors of the Swedish building industry. The convergence of the contradictions before and their expansion after each “vs.”, creates a threat space, as schematically shown in Fig. 1.
Linking	Identifying to which research domains the phenomenon may be related	→ Clarifying how the phenomenon is linked to specific research domains and potentially other phenomena within those domains, and enriching it further through contextualization	→ <i>T: Into which theoretical domain(s) are the emerging phenomenon most likely to offer new and interesting intellectual insights?</i> <i>E: Can previous empirical studies support the linking of the phenomenon to those theoretical domains?</i> <i>P: In what domains does our pre-understanding suggest the presence of the phenomenon?</i>	→ The emerging phenomenon can contribute to the domains of housing studies, construction management and economics, socioeconomic and socio-historical studies, sociological studies, and studies on the political economy of industrial sectors connected to construction – which is also where our pre-understanding suggests its presence. The previous empirical studies used in the analysis of this research can link the phenomenon to those theoretical domains through the analytical lens adopted here.

*All methodological prompts adapted from Alvesson and Sandberg (2024)

dismantled (Hedin et al., 2012). Various laws relating to housing provision and assignment, as well as land conditions (requiring municipal land ownership or transfer for loan subsidies), have since been altered or nullified altogether. The introduction of the so-called Danell system for housing finance in 1993, in which most existing subsidies for housing production were “either discontinued or radically reduced” (Hedin et al., 2012), illustrated the permeation of commodity relations and the contradiction in housing commodification.

As is similarly happening across Europe, housing commodification in Sweden is the most evident in public rental housing, where it appears in two forms (Christophers, 2013). First, formerly highly regulated and de-commodified forms of public housing have been increasingly converted into tenant-owned condos that are bought and sold as commodities in the real estate market. As (Turner 1999) suggests, the withdrawal of state-supported borrowing options and subsidies has substantially increased the exposure to financial risks for municipal housing companies, many of which have struggled to break even; the number of newly constructed public housing units in Sweden during 1991–1999 was about half of the previous decade (SOU, 2000). Moreover, amidst increasing economic pressure, municipalities often had to sell off part or all their housing stocks to private housing companies (SOU, 2000; Christophers, 2013; Gustafsson, 2021). As a result, the net increase of public housing stock in Sweden went from 123,200 in the 1980s to only 20,700 in the 1990s (SOU, 2000). Among all apartments in Sweden, the proportion of tenant-owned dwellings increased from 28% in 1990 to 42% in 2024 (SCB, 2025), while public rental housing dropped from about 25% of all housing in Sweden in the mid-1990s to 16% in 2024 (Hurvibor, 2025). The relative decrease in public housing stock since the 1990s is indicative of the ongoing privatization of public housing and worsening imbalance of tenure because of housing commodification in Sweden.

In addition to this large-scale privatization of existing de-commodified public housing, the shift in housing policy also encouraged municipally owned housing companies to maximize their profit and act more like private and entrepreneurial entities (Christophers, 2013). A new national legislation established in 2011, for instance, stipulates that municipal housing companies must compete ‘on the same terms as private rental companies on a level playing field’ (Grander, 2019). While public rental housing is, to some extent, still regulated by a “soft” rent control system utilizing a use-value approach to rent setting (Christophers, 2013), municipal housing companies have not only adopted cost-saving measures such as reduced maintenance, prefabricated constructions, and price-driven procurement (Thörnqvist & Woolfson, 2012) but also increasingly deployed exploitative tactics like renoviction to drive up rental prices and maximize profit (Polanska & Richard, 2021).

Following Ball’s (1986) structures of provision framework, housing commodification should not be understood merely as a transformation in housing consumption or tenure relations but, instead, as encapsulating a restructuring of institutional and social relations through which housing is produced, financed, and allocated. The transformation of the Swedish housing system in the 1990s altered several key components of the housing structure of provision, including housing finance regulations and the operation and governance of municipal housing companies, as well as state subsidies and other incentives provided to developers and building companies. It can be analytically inferred that these changes exacerbated the dominance of exchange value over use value in the building industry, which in turn shaped both the quantity and character of housing being produced.

One of the most substantial impacts of the shift in housing policy is the decline in new housing production (Turner, 1999; Lind, 2003; Clark & Johnson, 2009; Hedin et al., 2012). The annually constructed dwellings went from almost 70,000 in 1991 to just above 10,000 in 1995 (SCB, 2026). Although housing production slowly picked up and was almost back to the early 1990s levels in 2023, it is still substantially trailing population growth in Sweden (Boverket, 2024). This underproduction can be exemplified in an estimated cumulative housing deficit of just over 151,000 dwellings in 2023 (Boverket, 2024). Furthermore, housing underproduction is especially prevalent in rental apartments. The proportion of rental apartments in annual apartment construction went from above 80% in the mid-1990s to around 60% in 2024 (SCB, 2025, 2026). Currently, only about a third of the Swedish population lives in rental housing, half of which is owned by municipal housing companies. However, since the implementation of the new legislation in 2011 (Christophers, 2013), it could be argued that there is no longer substantial distinction in how municipal or private housing companies operate rental housing. Since both public and private rentals are regulated by the “soft” rent control system based on use value (Christophers, 2013), they are not yet considered fully commodified forms of housing. Nonetheless, they are moving towards that direction; Blackwell et al. (2025) suggest that the production cost of tenant-owned housing is substantially higher because it can command a much higher price than rental housing. In other words, not only is the financial return much faster, but it is also more profitable for building companies to build tenant-owned housing. The focus on tenant-owned condos over both public and private rentals thus reflects the broader shift from use value to exchange value in commodified housing production.

As highlighted by several scholars, housing affordability and accessibility in Sweden have diminished substantially because of commodification (Hedin et al., 2012; Christophers, 2013; Polanska et al., 2024). According to statistics compiled by both Riksbanken (2018) and the OECD (2025), the real (inflation-adjusted) housing prices in Sweden have more than tripled from the mid-1990s to the mid-2010s. Moreover, despite the existence of soft rent control mechanisms (Christophers, 2013), the recent rent increase has significantly outpaced the rate of inflation. Up until the 1990s, rental prices had historically trended along the consumer price index, but by 2024, they have doubled the index’s increase (SCB, 2025). While this rise in prices can be attributed to several factors, it is clear that housing commodification has played a significant role in driving both rental and tenant-owned housing prices by contributing to the sustained underproduction of housing, tenure imbalance, and increased competition among construction companies (Hedin et al., 2012; Christophers, 2013; Blackwell et al., 2025).

In addition, housing commodification in Sweden has also contributed to an increase in crowded housing conditions (Hedin et al., 2012). Not only has housing become less affordable, but the last decades have also seen dwellings in Sweden substantially shrink. The useful floor space per dwelling in newly constructed buildings has dropped from ca. 83 m² in 2001 to less than 58 m² in 2023 (SCB, 2026), while the proportion of one-room (studio) apartments in new buildings has increased from less than 10% in 1991 to more than 35% in 2023 (SCB, 2026). Even though the trend of living smaller can be attributed to various social, cultural, and environmental factors, the connection between housing commodification and decrease in dwelling size has been well established (Harris et al., 2023). Since smaller apartments generally have a higher price per m² and are therefore more profitable,

developers and housing companies have increasingly emphasized smaller units in new apartment buildings to maximize profit.

In sum, it could be argued that the impact of commodification on housing production in Sweden is twofold. On the one hand, the changes in housing policy have reduced housing affordability and accessibility by contributing to a sustained housing underproduction. On the other hand, housing commodification has also played a significant role in shaping the types of housing being built, in terms of tenure, size, and even quality. Viewed through Ball's (1986) structure of provision framework, the significance of housing commodification extends beyond housing consumption and market outcomes. By restructuring the institutional conditions of housing provision and intensifying pressures for profit maximization, the shift in housing policy also transformed housing production and reshaped the organization of the building industry. Cost minimization practices such as fragmented subcontracting and competitive procurement can thus be understood not as isolated reactions to the changing housing market but as a result of the increasing domination of exchange value in the housing structure of provision in Sweden. The following section examines how, in Sweden, these pressures can be analytically understood to aggravate the principal contradiction of producing for use value vs. exchange value and the contradiction in integrated vs. fragmented production, which can in turn be understood to lead to the potential decay of Sweden's high-road model.

4.2 The decay of the high-road model in the Swedish building industry and the contradictions in producing for social need vs. profit and in integrated vs. fragmented production

The Swedish building industry has for a long time sought to increase industrialization (Karlsson, 1982). Such a pronounced industrialized production is currently visible not least through an increasing use of prefabricated building modules. In combination with an extensive use of transnational subcontracting in the last two decades, this has structurally transformed the Swedish building industry (Ahlstrand, 2022).

Labelling this transformation as structural is not an exaggeration; subcontracting in general accounts for around 80% of all production work in the Swedish building industry (Koch & Kifokeris, 2024), and recent figures show that only 10% of the workforce at Swedish sites are employed by the general contractor (Byggnads, 2025). Transnational subcontracting and posting workers from other EU countries to Swedish building sites reflect a substantial subset of the total subcontracting work (Kjellberg, 2026). This is demonstrated by the number of posted workers rapidly increasing during the 2015–2019 Swedish building boom, from around 3,000 in 2014 to 16,000 annually (Arbetsmiljöverket, 2019). Nevertheless, while the industry has argued that using posted workers is tied to labor shortages, current research has shown that such an accelerating use is primarily connected to the global trend of labor cost reduction (Ahlstrand, 2022). This can be corroborated by the even higher number of posted workers (ca. 33,000) in Sweden during 2022–2023 (Arbetsmiljöverket, 2022, 2023), despite the drastic cooldown of the building boom since 2019 and well into 2026.

Transnational subcontracting is most often multilayered, as it is also practiced among subcontractors themselves. Thus, while subcontracting increases contractors' organizational flexibility, it can be inferred that its transnational character offers options to reduce labor

costs by shifting and obscuring employer responsibility and making it possible to circumvent national labor legislation and collective agreements (Arnholtz, 2021). This does not mean that highly skilled and qualified labor is not demanded in specialized and labor-intensive parts of production (e.g., electricity work); however, in the parts that are standardized due to industrialization, employing labourers depends on cost reduction rather than skill (Ahlstrand, 2022). Given the excessive supply of cheap labor in the EU single market, our analysis points to the fact that building companies' engagement in transnational subcontracting also implies a historical shift: construction work in Sweden is increasingly not performed necessarily by skilled labor but by the cheapest available instead.

This illustrates the effects of the short-term profit-maximizing combination of fragmenting production and multi-layered, transnational subcontracting. As large contractors are increasingly assuming a construction management role, they buy production services from an expanding array of subcontractors and, in general, only oversee production rather than build themselves. Such an organizational restructuring also facilitates companies engaging in several projects simultaneously (Ahlstrand, 2022). We can analytically surmise that this reinforces a production logic where companies grow and absorb market shares from competitors without having to invest in skilled labor. In such a regime, there are few incentives for Swedish building companies to act as "community builders". Instead, persistently streamlining production is not only a matter of cutting costs through fragmenting and standardizing work while using cheap foreign labor but also a matter of reducing production times and engaging in several projects concurrently.

While multilayered subcontracting was particularly evident during the Swedish building boom (2015–2019), the neoliberal tendering regime that pressures building companies to secure contracts through, not least, public procurement (Thörnqvist & Woolfson, 2012) has normalized an increased production work tempo (Ahlstrand, 2022). Specifically, aggravating the contradictions of producing for profit rather than for use and gradually fragmenting building production implies changes in both management and control systems and thus modifies the labor process for the workers involved (Ahlstrand & Kifokeris, 2023). For example, transnational and multilayered subcontracting results in new forms of work organization and informal recruitment strategies (Ahlstrand, 2022); even though subcontractors are responsible for their own work organization (e.g., planning the on-site work and having their own laborers and foremen), it is the general contractor's site management that leads the subcontracted labor daily. While this sometimes results from a failed subcontractual arrangement, it is often the general contractors' deliberate strategy, allowing them to circumvent labor legislation and collective agreements (Ahlstrand, 2024). This inevitably increases the site managers' workload and can lead to a clash of expectations between them and the (posted) workers. That is, diversifying labor implies varying skill levels among the workers and dissimilar experiences of working in different cultural contexts and management systems (Ahlstrand, 2022). In the Swedish building industry, management has traditionally been decentralized and organized around teams where control has been mainly tied to occupational norms of what constitutes "good work" (Styhre, 2012). Yet, these managerial systems are largely resulting from the Swedish high-road model. Consequently, labor diversification and transnational recruitment have accelerated demands on site management to lead and micro-manage the work in a neo-Taylorist manner (Ahlstrand & Kifokeris, 2023).

Hence, it can be both empirically demonstrated and analytically derived that fragmenting production in the Swedish building industry transforms the labor process by exacerbating the principal contradiction. Not only is shorter production times and routinized work harmful for craftsmanship, but they also legitimize low-wage and easily exploited (often posted) labor. In other words, moving away from craft-centered management principles (characterized by an autonomous labor process and skilled work) towards neo-Taylorist management (Haakestad & Friberg, 2020) with little room for autonomy and trust in the workers' qualifications implies both a loss of control on the laborers' part and also the risk of work degradation (Braverman, 1974). With workers trapped in multilayered subcontracting and having less control over their work, the principal contradiction can be aggravated towards separating the mental and manual components of construction labor, thus ensuring that laborers cannot fully reap the value of what they produce. Consequently, contractors gradually purchase cheaper labor due to the parallel processes of routinized work and a deskilled workforce; fragmenting production through excessive (transnational) subcontracting will likely continue as a business practice in Sweden, as the industry's focus is continuously placed on reducing (labor) costs and maximizing short-term profits. However, since this is exacerbating a situation where low skill, quality loss, and reduced productivity are becoming prevalent results of cheapening and deskilling production labor, the high-road model in the Swedish building industry (Arnholtz & Ibsen, 2021) should be considered severely challenged.

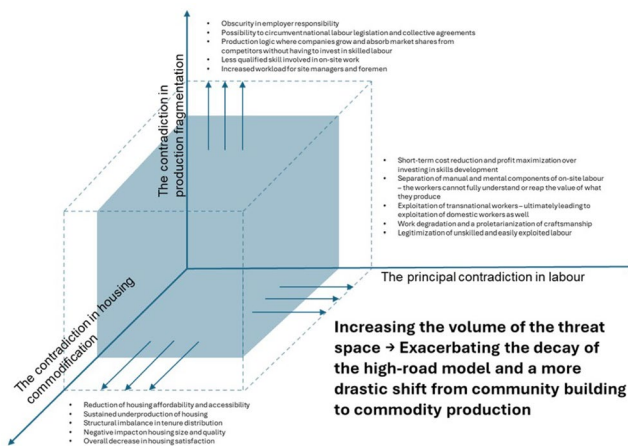


Fig. 3 The volume increase of the threat space as a result of the exacerbation of three contradictions and of turning from community building to commodity production

4.3 Further challenges resulting from the decay of the high-road model

Based on the previous analysis regarding the interconnected intensification of the three contradictions in the Swedish building industry, we can analytically devise the potential outcomes of the phenomenon of turning from community building to commodity production on the facets of the cubic threat space in our triaxial framework (Fig. 3). “Dragging” the relevant facets along the axes, we can schematically observe the increase of the threat space, which in turn exacerbates the decay of the high-road model. Without claiming that we can predict future phenomena, we use this mapping in the last part of our analysis to detail further latent consequences of such a decay for the Swedish building industry, as those can be historically and materially derived from the co-evolution of the three contradictions.

Further neoliberal transformations in the labor processes of building production can make general contractors even more hesitant towards long-term investments in skilled labor and trainee programs (Ahlstrand, 2022; Green, 2024). This can in turn feed a more systematic informalization of the Swedish building industry, where laborers are further objectified and alienated from their own labor process, while the industry itself has monopolized the structures of labor objectification, thus making it more segmented and precarious. Such precarity and segmentation are harbored in a global/local matrix that goes beyond the specific building company; the labor process is rather placed within a dynamic of the state, a transnational market, and the private building industry (Thörnqvist & Bernhardsson, 2014). Precarious and informal labor has increasingly become a commodity that attains its value through organizations specialized in such informalization (Thörnqvist & Bernhardsson, 2014). This phenomenon has been defined as “masked staffing” by Ahlstrand (2022, 2024), where firms in the lowest levels of complex, multi-tiered subcontracting structures stop being subcontractors but rather operate as staffing agencies providing informal and usually unprotected migrant labor to Swedish building sites.

The evolution of this situation can point to a further degradation and proletarianization of craftsmanship, where labor control (especially when considering migrant labor) is lost even beyond the bounds of neo-Taylorist micro-management and is realized through the absence of the laborers’ rights (Bahnariu et al., 2022). Shortcomings in Swedish and European labor and migration laws further outline transnational circuits and constraints that allow for various laborers to enter Sweden under highly different conditions – to be included in the workforce but excluded from their rights (Bahnariu et al., 2022). Combining this with the apparent lack of collective agreement coverage and protection for non-Swedish workers, as well as the documented reduced membership in the Construction Workers’ Trade Union (*Byggnads*) – falling from 81% to around 60% between 2006 and 2024 (Kjellberg, 2025) – indicates job precarity for both Swedish and non-Swedish workers as well as a diminishing support for the Swedish labor market model.

Finally, it can be considered that the prevalent focus on short-term profit maximization and cost minimization in the intersection of housing commodification, fragmentation of production, and labor exploitation is inhibiting sustainability and circularity from becoming widespread practice in Swedish building production. While some public and private actors’ sustainable and circular initiatives are valorized, and the respective European and Swedish regulations are pushing climate neutrality goals for 2030 and 2045 (European Parliament 2023a, 2023b; Boverket, 2025), the current understanding of value production in the build-

ing ecosystem's economy and labor processes largely lacks the perspective of longer-term resource efficiency and skills security (Andersson & Buser, 2022; Kifokeris & Koch, 2024).

5 Discussion and conclusions: from community building to commodity production?

In this study, we analyzed how profit maximization plays an increasingly important role in shaping the political economy of the Swedish building industry, leading to a neoliberal, structural transformation from that which we refer to as community building towards commodity production. In identifying this transformation, we addressed the research questions of how market-oriented building impacts the Swedish building industry, how the integrated elements of labor exploitation, housing commodification, and fragmented production are threatening the Swedish high-road model, and what this threat's potential consequences are. To achieve that, we first conceptualized a framework based on a contemporary historical materialist analysis drawing on the principal contradiction in the labor theory of value and the contradictions in housing commodification and in production fragmentation; then, we placed it in the socio-historical context of the Swedish building industry. Finally, we employed this context-specific framework to analytically show that the transformation of community building to commodity production is threatening the Swedish high-road model, leading to continuously intensified phenomena like labor deskilling, low productivity, and quality issues in production. We also posited that those might worsen as we move towards the extremes of fully exploiting labor for profit, universally commodifying housing production, and completely fragmenting production through multi-layered subcontracting, thus linking labor degradation and declining building quality with changing housing policies and the potential decay of the Swedish high-road model.

Specifically, we demonstrate how commodifying housing in Sweden has reduced housing affordability and accessibility by contributing to a sustained housing underproduction and a structural imbalance in tenure distribution. Moreover, in the Swedish context, housing commodification and its consequences go hand in hand with fragmented building production, which is not only characterized by shorter production times and routinized work, but also legitimizes unskilled and easily exploited labor – thus enabling a focus shift from community building to commodity production.

Key to this process is how housing and building companies alike increasingly engage in a strictly market-driven economic logic of minimizing costs. Neoliberal policymaking in Sweden, such as the removal of state subsidies (e.g., the state-supported borrowing options for municipal housing companies (Turner, 1999)) but also price-driven procurement in housing production, pressures municipal housing companies to adhere to an entrepreneurial organizational identity similar to that of private for-profit firms (Christophers, 2013; Gustafsson, 2021; Blackwell et al., 2025). In doing this, other aspects of the municipal housing companies' mission, such as providing quality housing and other social and environmental considerations, are subordinated to the financial. In addition, price-driven procurement drives a downward pressure on wages, as winning tenders presents an opportunity for building companies in the seizing of market shares (Thörnqvist & Woolfson, 2012). This downward pressure has materialized primarily by contractors taking on a construction management role, relying on cheap labor through transnational subcontracting (Ahlstrand,

2022; Sweet, 2023). It is also reflected in the widening production cost differentials between tenures (Blackwell et al., 2025), as well as the increasing focus on tenant-owned housing production. As such, neither municipal housing companies nor building contractors in Sweden are currently pressured by legislation to take social responsibility as they used to. In other words, with the degradation of the high-road model, community building as a political project seems to no longer be in effect in Sweden.

Still, production fragmentation and purchasing of cheap and ultimately deskilled subcontracted labor will likely continue as a business practice in Sweden, as the building industry's focus remains on reducing labor costs and maximizing short-term profits. This is exacerbating a situation where low skill, quality loss, and reduced productivity are becoming more prevalent because of cheapening and deskilling production (Green, 2024; Haakestad & Friberg, 2020). With little room for autonomy and independence in the labor process, there is a palpable risk that the indicated work degradation results in the separation of mental and manual labor, alienating workers from that which they produce (Braverman, 1974). Moreover, worsening material conditions (e.g., the decreasing size of dwellings), combined with the policy-led subsidy reduction, seem to result in a further homogenization in design and production, diminishing occupant satisfaction and consequently increasing the chances for a reduced quality in Swedish dwellings.

At a broader level, the decline of the Swedish high-road model is hardly a phenomenon confined to building production. The decreasing share of wages in relation to profits made is indicative of how capital is increasingly favored at the expense of labor across different industries in Sweden (Prytz, 2024). When it comes to policy, a strengthening of collective bargaining mechanisms and/or implementing sufficient statutory minimum wages might be key to ameliorating the high-road model's decay (Prytz, 2024). Moreover, reconceptualizing the labor process in the Swedish building industry through new forms of direct class struggle and syndicalist self-organization, even for workers not represented by traditional trade unions, could re-empower labor and its value production (Ahlstrand, 2026), thus significantly reaffirming the high-road model.

As future research, we recommend corroborating the current analysis with new first-hand empirical data while enriching it further with more emphasis on the way policy-driven initiatives championing sustainability, circularity, and even digitalization in building production can (positively or negatively) affect its neoliberal transformation. Moreover, we point to a deeper analysis of housing and labor policies (e.g., on the European level) to identify trends shared between the Swedish and other contexts and cross-compare the relevant impacts on the respective building industries. Finally, we urge deeper investigation into current forms of class struggle in Swedish building production, their connection to housing commodification and production fragmentation, and the social, economic, and production-related implications of a strengthened practical movement initiated by building workers.

Author contributions In the initial submission, D.K. was the main author of all manuscript sections and prepared all figures and all tables. R.A., E.C., and G.F. were the co-authors of the manuscript, heavily contributing to the theoretical, analytical and results-related parts of the study. G.F. was also responsible for most of the initial content on Swedish housing statistics. Finally, R.A. and E.C. were responsible for most iterations of text densification to fit a reasonable word count limit, as the initial manuscript was overtly long. In the revised submissions (both in the first and second rounds), the revisions and amendments in the manuscript's text, as well as the responses to the reviewers' comments, were primarily taken up by D.K., R.A., and E.C. The minor first round revisions in the figures and tables were done by D.K.

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Data availability The data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article itself.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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