

Haunting the Legislation of architecture: The Concept of Trevnad

Ann-Kristin Kaplan Wikström. KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, Sweden

Abstract

In July 2025, Sweden passed a new building code, replacing windows and daylight with a technically standardised daylight factor. Newly built holiday housing in Sweden already shows signs of this reregulation: instead of rooms, apartments feature windowless spaces of 5 sqm or less in size. This current state of affairs stands in contrast to the intangible concept of *trevnad* (loosely translated as comfort and well-being), embedded in Swedish legislation from 1932 to 1995. Through a conceptual history analysis of legal texts and preparatory works, this paper traces how *trevnad* emerged as a response to critiques of closed courtyards and overcrowding, was abolished amid semantic shift and historical amnesia, and ultimately disembodied into supposedly neutral technical metrics. As an umbrella concept, *trevnad* once anchored aesthetic and social values across scales—from urban plans to interior design—actively shaping the built environment. Framed by Picon's notion of architectural "ghosts", this paper invites a reassessment of the qualitative values that legislation can embed.

Keywords: *trevnad* (comfort and well-being) · architectural quality · legislation and building codes · linguistic governance · Sweden



Figure 1. Newly built holiday housing in Sweden shows signs of the ongoing reregulation – windowless micro-spaces, and windows without views or daylight. [Sources: The Apartment: Älvdalen Municipality, building permit 2019, design: Siegers CAD. The other two examples experienced by the author.]

Introduction

The Swedish concept of *trevnad* was codified in national legislation from 1932 to 1995. It is a distinct Swedish concept, translated into contemporary English as “comfort and well-being” (Nationalencyklopedins ordbok n.d.). Etymologically, *trevnad* traces back to Old West Scandinavian *þrifnaðr* and *þrifinn*, the latter a root shared with the English word *thriven* (SAOB 2007). A quotation from an 1842 newspaper offers a historical glimpse of the usage of the concept prior to its juridification: “I consider light, spaciousness, and *trevnad* in home to be a more living form of intellectual capital than the dead treasure in silver pitcher.” (Ibid.). Within its semantic field, *trevnad* encompasses a constellation of interconnected concepts, such as flourishing, prosperity, pleasure, serenity, harmony, and beauty. The Danish concept of *hygge* is also related, emphasising cosiness and comfortable conviviality (OED n.d.). To preserve its cultural and linguistic specificity, the Swedish word *trevnad* here remains untranslated.

Markus and Cameron argue that language plays a constitutive role in shaping the built environment, with aesthetic and social values inextricably intertwined (Markus and Cameron 2004). They emphasise that legal documents, as a distinct category, exert the power to advance ideological objectives, with linguistic shifts reflecting underlying power relations that legitimise certain values while marginalising others. Koselleck’s *Begriffsgeschichte* offers a method for conceptual history, analysing how concepts tied to social and political structures evolve over time by examining their changing meanings through synchronic and diachronic analysis (Koselleck 2004). According to Koselleck, words and concepts are bound to both intellectual and material meanings, yet a concept must remain ambiguous to function as such—it transcends the word by condensing entire sociopolitical experiences and contexts.

In Sweden, legal texts are constructed, refined, negotiated, and revised through committee reports, state agency documents, and government bills. Their motive sections—which articulate the rationale, intent, and meaning behind regulations—not only shape the provisions themselves but are also pivotal for their practical interpretation and application. This paper traces the genealogy of *trevnad* in legal texts and preparatory works, confined to urban plans for cities and excluding articles concerning non-residential premises. The paper analyses *trevnad* synchronically—extracting descriptive components and motives—and diachronically, examining its changing meaning, use, and connection to the built environment from its 1909 introduction to its 1995 abolition and the 2025 disembodiment of its remnants.

Picon explores the persistent tension between architecture’s artistic ideals and the constraints of technical and bureaucratic systems (Picon 2004). This dynamic, currently in its second phase, sees the discipline increasingly succumb to the dominance of technical and digital imperatives. In this process, the core of the architectural discipline has become a “ghost”—an idea once central but now existing only as a lingering absence. Within this framework, *trevnad* can be understood as a kindred “ghost”, an idea once embedded in legislation but now absent from its discourse.

The Genealogy of Trevnad

Introduction and entry

Prior to the introduction of *trevnad* in legislation, the 1874 Building Ordinance required urban plans to meet “aesthetic demands for open space, variety, and embellishment” (BS 1874, §12). *Trevnad* was first proposed as an addition to this article, alongside space, comfort, variety, and

embellishment (Betänkande 1909, 7). However, the preparatory work omitted further elaboration on the concept (cf. *Ibid.*, 58–59). Criticism of the closed building typology arose in the general motives, citing lack of light and air, as well as overcrowding (*Ibid.*, 40–41). The link between *trevnad* and the built environment became explicit in subsequent preparatory work, where *trevnad* was presented alongside new courtyard regulations (Överintendentsämbetet 1918, 58, 85, 92). Specifically, the lack of greenery and narrow courtyard strips were correlated with a lack of *trevnad*, reflecting a growing demand for “more sun, air, and greenery in our homes” (*Ibid.*, 58–59). *Trevnad* was also paired with soundness, and joint requirements for daylight and unobstructed views were introduced (*Ibid.*, 118–119). Hence, the incorporation of *trevnad* into the Building Ordinance reveals how qualitative ideals were politically mobilised to steer a transformation of the built environment (fig. 2). Within Koselleck’s *Begriffsgeschichte*, this represented an act of conceptual empowerment, transforming *trevnad* into an active legislative tool that embedded social and aesthetic values into Swedish legislation.



Figure 2. Three closed courtyards, photographed between 1880 and 1920. [Source: Stockholm City Museum (Stockholmskällan). Middle photograph: Kasper Salin (co-author of the 1909 proposal and City Architect of Stockholm 1898–1915); other two photographers unknown.]

In close succession, another proposal clarified that urban planning requirements—*trevnad*, order, variety, and cultural heritage—constituted “the aesthetic side of urban planning” (Bostadskommissionen 1919., 21, 154). Courtyards were to be designed to foster *trevnad* and tranquility for residents, with layouts that incorporated greenery (*Ibid.*, 24). The Commission set minimum standards for hygiene, comfort, and *trevnad*, including apartment sizes to combat overcrowding, with rooms of suitable form and windows preferably facing multiple directions—not just north (*Ibid.*, 237–238, 47, 254–256). By this stage, *trevnad* had evolved into an umbrella concept encompassing the full spectrum of architectural scale—from urban plans and courtyards to interior design—while embodying the cultural capacity to transform the built environment.

A decade later, *trevnad* was addressed at the comprehensive plan level, which stated that “a wide esplanade can serve a purely local need for space and *trevnad*”, and that parks should be arranged to promote soundness and *trevnad* (SOU 1928:5, 170–171, 19). Two decades of investigative work culminated in a government bill, which also expanded the scope of *trevnad* by adding a minimum distance to ground for rooms, as well as an exception for bay windows and balconies (Prop. 1931:192, 17, 15). The latter were permitted to protrude over the street if they

served the purposes of soundness and *trevnad* and had no adverse effect on the exterior (Ibid., 15). In this context, the government deliberately used regulations to allow protruding elements, thereby uniting aesthetics and soundness in the built form.

The new Building Ordinance, which came into effect in 1932 (BS 1931), formally incorporated *trevnad* into four articles: §15 (urban planning), §39 (building / protruding elements), §45 (courtyards), and §50 (interiors / distance to ground).

Hight of social concerns

Although apartments meet the minimum requirements for government loans, they were criticised in the early 1940s for not being spacious enough, an explicit social concern (SOU 1943:30, 45). The article on room height in the existing Building Ordinance was thereby revised to include an overarching requirement for *trevnad* and good hygiene (Ibid., 7). The expanded article stipulated that apartments should provide adequate space for furniture, storage, and sanitary facilities, with well-lit, connected rooms and, where possible, sunlight and cross-ventilation. It also specified detailed requirements for minimum room sizes, heights, and cubic metres. The subsequent government bill emphasised that, from a social and hygiene perspective, it was of considerable importance that the production of insufficient room area was prevented (Prop. 1945:119, 65).

During the 1947 revision of the whole Building Ordinance, the room metrics were criticised as too schematic and restrictive, and limited design flexibility in floor plans (Prop. 1947:211, 114). The government bill clarified that the regulations aimed “to ensure even small apartments included a room large enough to enable social interaction for the entire family in *trevnad*” (Ibid.). The requirements for courtyards were brought together with the requirements for front yards, and *trevnad*—though included in the motives—was not included in the joint article (Ibid. 106–108).

At this point, political momentum peaked, as social concerns about the built environment took centre stage, yet the consolidation of courtyard and front yard requirements foreshadowed a fragmentation of *trevnad*’s holistic power.



Figure 3. Three cramped apartments, photographed between 1946 and 1951. [Source: Nordiska Museet. Photographers: Gunnar Lundh (left), K.W. Gullers (middle). Sundsvalls museum/Norrlandsbild (right).]

Dismantling and abolition

A shift towards “simplification” and a discourse of “building hassle”, was initiated in a 1957 report, though *trevnad* persisted, tied to acceptable apartment layout (SOU 1957:21, 62, 286, 243). Protruding elements were still permitted on practical and aesthetic grounds, but *trevnad*

was omitted (Ibid. 232–234). By 1975, the focus turned increasingly to interior layouts, with furniture and equipment metrics introduced in the building code (SBN 75, 359–371).

In the 1987 Planning and Building Act, *trevnad* appeared alongside—and partly intertwined with—the new phrase "suitable for its purpose" (PBL 1987, 3 Ch. §5). The preceding government bill had defined the new phrase in terms of functional layouts, spatial connections, and furnishing abilities, while *trevnad* was linked to windows facing outdoors, daylight, good solar values, outside views and the avoidance of being overlooked (Prop. 1985/86:1, 489–490). *Trevnad*'s functional aspects may here be interpreted as having been subsumed under the concept of suitability.

In 1992, a proposal to abolish *trevnad* was presented, while acknowledging its historical role in raising housing standards but noting a shift in conditions to a housing surplus of "good quality" (SOU 1992:47, 109–111). In the adjacent motives, the inquiry replaced *trevnad* with the related concept of *trevligt* (loosely translated to pleasant) and deeming it "highly subjective" and unsuitable for legislation (Ibid., 111). By 1993, *trevnad* was categorised as a technical requirement, reduced to "reasonable daylight access and cleanability", akin to basic hygiene standards (SOU 1993:94, 229, 232). The 1994 government bill considered both *trevnad* and suitability in legislation, arguing that—except where partially covered by demands for hygiene, indoor climate and accessibility—the requirements "otherwise are of such a nature that it cannot be considered to be in a substantial public interest to regulate them by law" (Prop. 1993/94:178,101). *Trevnad* was abolished in 1995, with remnants preserved under the requirements for suitability and health, thus marking the final step in its transformation from a holistic ideal to technical metrics.

Complete disembodiment

The building code *Boverkets byggregler* (first edition 1994) issued by Boverket (National Board of Housing, Building and Planning) mandated windows to the outdoors in all rooms (Boverket 2020a, 27). Rooms were to be designed and oriented to maximise daylight access, and all apartments were to have a room with direct sunlight (Ibid. 97–98). Outdoor views were a general recommendation guided by the principle that views should provide opportunities to follow seasonal variations day and night (Ibid. 98).

In 2020, Boverket proposed a new model for its building code, designed to promote innovation, technical development, efficiency, and competition, and to be "technically neutral" (Boverket 2020b, 6, 36). Following consultation, the new building code came into effect in July 2025 (Boverket 2024a, 2024b). A key change in the new code was the removal of mandatory requirements for windows and sunlight; daylight is now regulated by a daylight factor (Boverket 2024c, 83–88). Direct daylight is no longer mandatory—to "admit more solutions, for example daylight passing through several glass sections, such as balcony glazing and windows, or reflected daylight, fibre-optic cable, or other technologies" (Ibid. 84). Although requirements for outdoor views became mandatory, the previous qualitative description was omitted and a standard for evaluation was mentioned (Ibid. 87). Boverket asserts that these amendments comply with European standards and computer-based simulation and will "not significantly impact architecture" (Ibid., 38, 156). Thus, the final traces of *trevnad*'s qualitative legacy were erased, replaced with technical metrics, that embody Picon's "second moment", where architecture's depth is reduced into two-dimensionality through digital standards.

Tracing the Drift of Trevnad: From Holistic Ideal to Technical Metrics

As a holistic concept, trevnad encompassed the full spectrum of architectural scale, and anchored aesthetic and social values in the built environment. From 1931 to 1947, trevnad marked its peak legislative scope, integrated in articles on urban plans, courtyards, interiors, and buildings (fig. 4). Its inclusion in legal texts and preparatory works responded to critiques of the closed building typology, particularly its lack of greenery, narrow courtyards, and overcrowding. Aligning with Markus and Cameron’s distinction between prescriptive and proscriptive regulation, trevnad operated as a normative framework—actively shaping the built environment’s qualitative ideals.

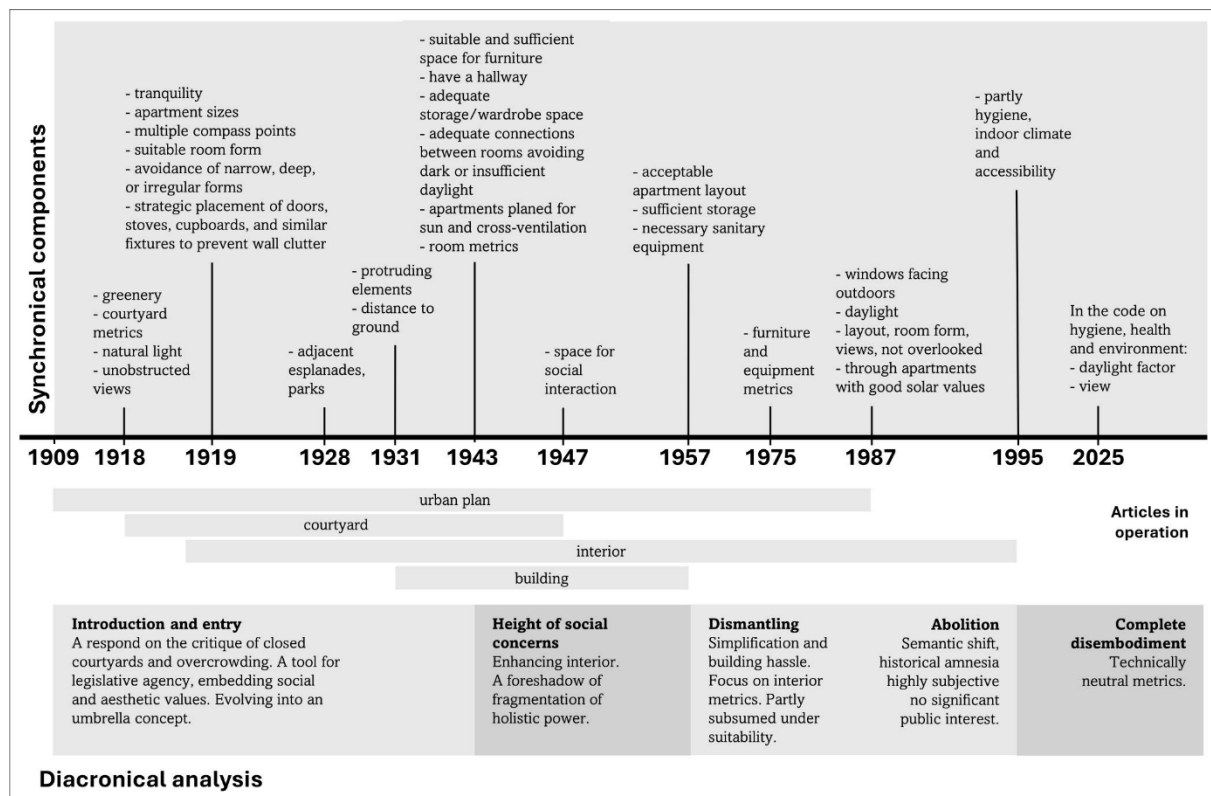


Figure 4. A visual yet stripped-down illustration of the synchronic–diachronic analysis of trevnad in legal texts and preparatory works.

In 1947, trevnad was amalgamated with front yard requirements—a shift foreshadowing its marginalisation. The subsequent 1957 discourse on "building hassle" further legitimised this erosion and promoted simplification at the expense of its intangible dimensions—and marking the start of its dismantling. During the eventual abolition of trevnad, it was acknowledged for its historical role in raising housing standards, only to be dismissed as redundant in an era perceived as one of housing surplus of “good quality”. In the preparatory works, trevnad was loosely replaced by *trevligt*—and deemed highly subjective—and of no significant public interest. Simultaneously, the Cultural Inquiry highlighted a diminishing scope for aesthetic and social values in architecture (SOU 1995:84, 436), thus exposing a tension within the corridors of power—a tension that exemplifies Koselleck’s notion of semantic shifts. Collectively, these instances illustrate how power structures marginalise intangible values—not only through active

suppression but also through the silent rewriting of conceptual history, thereby reducing architecture to mere technical compliance.

The 2025 Building Code professes to foster innovation—a demand that first emerged in the late 1940s, back then as evidenced by critiques of regulations limiting design flexibility. Nevertheless, newly built holiday housing appears to challenge this claim (fig. 1). The *Stjärnhusen* typology, developed during *trevnad*'s peak influence, demonstrates how prescriptive yet qualitative regulations can inspire creativity (fig. 5). This resonates with Picon's observation that the most innovative architecture often arises at the intersection of constraint and artistic freedom.

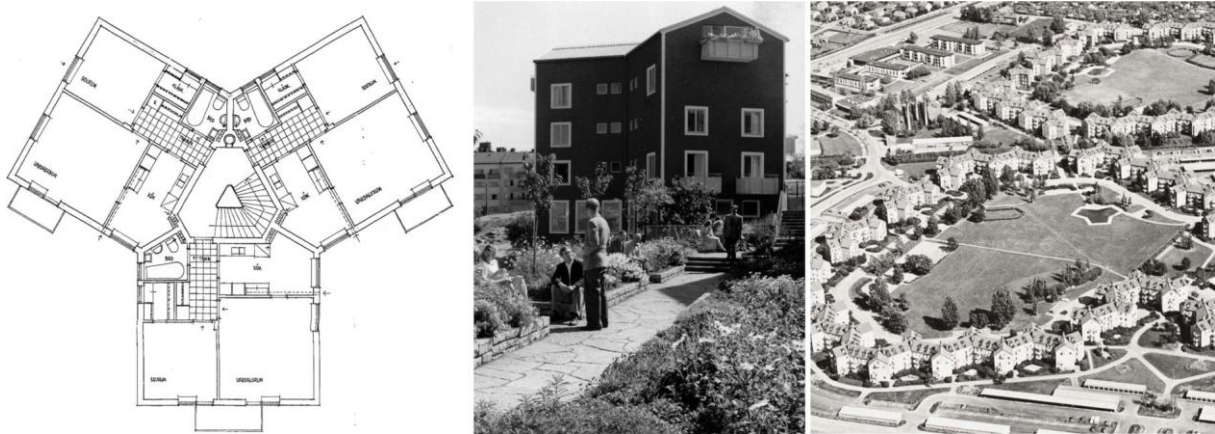


Figure 5. The first *Stjärnhusen* in Gröndal (left and middle). Built as a detached unit, or in chains, as in Rosta (right). [Sources: Stockholm City, building permit, 1945. Architects: Sven Backström and Leif Reinius (left); ArkDes, photographer: C.G. Rosenberg, 1947 (middle); Örebro stadsarkiv, photographer unknown (right).]

Conclusion

By analysing the intangible concept of *trevnad* in legal texts and preparatory works, this paper contributes to the field of building codification by highlighting a previously unexplored category of codes. *Trevnad*'s trajectory reflects Marcus and Cameron's argument that legal language shapes reality by embedding aesthetic and social values into the built environment, while simultaneously legitimising some values and marginalising others. The reduction of *trevnad* to technical metrics exemplifies Koselleck's observation that concepts, once rich with sociopolitical meaning, can shed their ambiguity—and with it, their capacity to condense complex human experiences. This trajectory reveals *trevnad* as a former core architectural ideal, whose erasure embodies Picon's notion of a "ghost". Though now absent from discourse, it lingers as a reminder—and an invitation to reassess the qualitative values that legislation can embed.

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