

Gottsunda's Common Ground

Contextual Narrative & Analysis

Gottsunda, a southern district of Uppsala built in the 1960s–70s, was planned around the automobile. The Gottsunda Centre mall (opened 1974) sits isolated amid a sea of parking – a mono-functional, auto-centric layout lacking the diversity and street life of a true urban center. Social policies in the 1980s compounded the area's segregation: many middle-class families moved out and low-income immigrant families moved in, giving Gottsunda a stigmatized reputation for exclusion, crime, and poverty. By 2014, over half of Gottsunda's 10,000 residents had a foreign background (more than twice the city average), and the district faced high unemployment and low incomes. Meanwhile, Uppsala is a growing university city with a 2030 climate-neutrality goal, underscoring the need for inclusive, sustainable development in places like Gottsunda. In this context, the aging Gottsunda Centre and its car-dominated surroundings have become a focal point for change.

Recent initiatives hint at revival. The municipality and new site owner (Hemmaplan) have begun to reverse negative trends: over 100 local jobs were created via new businesses, a 320 m blank mall facade was converted into an outdoor dining terrace, and an urban garden was planted – first steps to enliven the public realm. Uppsala's plans also call for 5,000 new homes in Gottsunda and a tram line to connect the area to the city center. The European 18 competition brief builds on this momentum, asking for ~600 new homes, new public spaces (a plaza and a preschool), "green corridors" linking parks, urban farming opportunities, and a strategy to open up and repurpose the mall and adjacent swimming hall. **The task is to reshape Gottsunda's car-centric center into a sustainable, inclusive heart for southern Uppsala – bridging divides between immigrant communities, students, and longtime locals.** Our proposal addresses this challenge by integrating urban design, social programming, and green infrastructure into a cohesive yet porous civic hub.

Architectural & Urban Concept

Our masterplan introduces a low-rise, high-density urban structure at a human scale to accommodate the required ~600 new dwellings. The design is anchored by a perimeter-block layout – a proven European typology that clearly defines streets and courtyards. It transforms the current expanse of parking into a network of streets, a central park-like courtyard, and a lively plaza on the east side. **Instead of a single monolithic block, we propose an "exploded" perimeter block with multiple openings that allow pedestrian paths and sightlines to link the interior courtyard with surrounding parks and neighborhoods – essentially extending the landscape through the site.** This contemporary Nordic approach of opening up the courtyard block makes the inner garden accessible to all; in our scheme, the courtyard park becomes part of a continuous green corridor connecting the school and woodland to the south with new development and transit to the north.

Phasing & Urban Integration: The project will be realized in two phases. Phase 1 develops the northern part of the site next to the new tram stop and urban corridor, immediately tying into the expanded street network and transit. Phase 2 replaces the vast southwest parking lot (near the church and school) with the second half of the housing cluster, once a new mobility hub accommodates relocated parking. The former asphalt expanse will be "de-paved" and reborn as a neighborhood park encircled by housing and civic facilities.

Buildings in Phase 2 are terraced along the gentle slope of the site, creating sunny south-facing courtyards and promenades – echoing the local vernacular of siting homes for maximum light. We draw inspiration from the Swedish *Skärgårdshus* (archipelago house) concept, where a family's living functions are scattered across small cottages in the landscape (sauna by the water, separate washhouse, guest cabin, etc.). Similarly, we distribute shared amenities and communal spaces throughout our housing cluster instead of confining them to one building. The result is a kind of "green archipelago" of homes and pavilions interwoven with nature, rather than a single monolithic development.

Housing Typology & Scale: The new buildings are 4–6 stories tall and built with modular timber (CLT) construction. They line the perimeter of the block, forming a strong street edge and a pedestrian-friendly “high street” along the east side, while opening internally to the shared courtyard park. By clearly defining the street edges, the perimeter buildings create intimate, human-scaled streetscapes (in contrast to today’s oversized roads) and shelter the interior green space. Unlike traditional perimeter blocks with private back courtyards, here the inner landscape is a semi-public commons accessible via multiple entry points – inviting residents, students, and visitors alike into the heart of the block. Crucially, this low-rise, high-density arrangement comfortably accommodates ~600 homes without high-rise towers, avoiding an alienating scale and instead fostering neighborly interaction.

Porosity & Mobility: Each housing cluster consists of smaller linked volumes, creating multiple ground-level passageways and a varied roofline. Upper floors feature continuous 360° shared balconies along the inner courtyard side – an open-air circulation loop that lets neighbors meet casually and animates the courtyard façades. External spiral staircases at a few points provide vertical access to these gallery decks, echoing the metal stair towers of traditional Nordic apartment blocks. This design turns the routine of coming and going into a social experience, as residents cross paths on the shared balconies overlooking the garden. The site layout prioritizes walking and cycling: paths weave through the block and each building has ample bicycle storage. Car access is limited to a small loop at the periphery for emergencies and drop-off, leading to semi-sunken garages under each block (~200 parking spaces, primarily for car-share and essential vehicles). With cars tucked away, the ground plane becomes a safe, green realm for pedestrians and play. This spatial arrangement naturally brings together different resident groups – students, immigrant families, and longtime locals – around the same courtyards and shared amenities, encouraging chance encounters and a sense of common ownership of outdoor spaces.

Sustainability & Civic Strategies

Sustainable Timber Construction: All new structures – from the housing blocks to the added facades – will be built using cross-laminated timber (CLT) from sustainable Nordic forests. Building in wood dramatically reduces embodied carbon by **storing CO₂ in the buildings themselves**. For example, each cubic meter of CLT sequesters hundreds of kilograms of CO₂ that would otherwise remain in the atmosphere. Replacing concrete with timber for a mid-rise building can avoid emissions equivalent to removing hundreds of cars from the road. Using timber for the hundreds of new apartments will thus lock away thousands of tons of carbon, effectively turning the development into a carbon sink. Prefabricated CLT also means lighter construction and faster assembly, minimizing disruption, and the timber architecture brings a natural warmth that benefits residents’ well-being. All buildings are designed for energy efficiency as well (high insulation, passive solar design, and heat-recovery ventilation). Together with on-site renewables (see rooftop solar), the project targets net-zero operational energy and supports Uppsala’s 2030 climate goals. **In effect, the timber-built neighborhood will function as a carbon sink for the city.**

Green Corridor & Biodiversity: The vast asphalt parking fields will be transformed into a rich landscape of native vegetation. We will restore healthy soil and plant a diverse mix of species indigenous to the region’s forests and meadows, creating habitat for birds and pollinators. Key plantings include hardy native trees like birch, pine, spruce, linden, and oak (for shade and seasonal beauty), with understory shrubs such as juniper, wild rose, heather, and berry bushes (blueberries, lingonberries) that thrive in the local climate. This ensures year-round greenery and a resilient ecosystem while providing residents with an engaging natural environment – from fruit bushes for foraging to aromatic pines and wildflowers that delight the senses. The landscape mimics a natural forest edge with rain gardens for stormwater, avoiding lawn monocultures and minimizing maintenance. The green corridor through the site will reconnect fragmented green areas, linking the new central park to the larger Gottsundagipen nature reserve and nearby parks, and giving residents easy access to nature trails.

We also embrace the “**3-30-300**” urban greening rule to maximize health benefits. Every resident will be able to see at least 3 trees from home, the tree canopy will exceed 30%, and everyone will have a quality green space within 300 meters (in fact, right outside their door). Our design easily meets these benchmarks, which translates into tangible gains: views of greenery help reduce stress, a 30% canopy cools the microclimate and correlates with better health, and close access to parks encourages regular exercise and socializing across all ages and cultures. By ensuring

abundant greenery and inviting open spaces (playgrounds, community gardens, seating areas) as part of daily life, we improve residents' well-being, comfort, and social cohesion through nature.

Civic Infrastructure & Programmatic Mix: Physical design alone cannot achieve integration – it must be paired with inclusive programming. Thus, the ground floors of our perimeter block (and a few standalone pavilions) are devoted to community, cultural, and commercial uses to activate the public realm throughout the day. Based on local input, we propose:

- **Preschool & Childcare:** A new preschool is placed near the existing school, with its own secure play yard adjoining the central park. This fulfills the brief and supports young families – bringing together children of immigrants and longtime locals and fostering integration from an early age.
- **Community Laundry & Kitchen Hub:** A combined laundromat and community kitchen/café provides practical amenities (especially for students) and a casual social venue. In Swedish housing tradition, communal laundry rooms are common; here we elevate that concept into a social hub where doing laundry becomes an opportunity to chat over coffee or an affordable *fika* break.
- **Makerspace & Workshop Studios:** A makerspace with shared workshops (3D printers, sewing machines, woodshop, etc.) encourages creativity, skill-sharing, and entrepreneurship among residents and students. For example, locals could start a carpentry micro-business or students prototype designs here. Such creative hubs have successfully empowered youth in other Swedish communities.
- **Cultural Center & Language Hub:** A community center will host language classes (e.g. Swedish for newcomers), job training workshops, and cultural events (performances, exhibitions). It could partner with Uppsala University and local NGOs. Similar centers in immigrant neighborhoods have become cherished neutral ground where different groups mingle. We plan to include a small library or reading room overlooking the park (perhaps as a city library branch) to draw in both students and local families.
- **Retail & Food:** Lining the new east-side “high street” (facing the mall) with small shops and eateries will create a welcoming street frontage. Possible offerings include an international grocery, bakery, bike repair, and affordable restaurants featuring Middle Eastern, African, and Swedish cuisines – reflecting Gottsunda's diversity. Food is a powerful integrator: a lively mix of cafés and food stalls can attract visitors from across Uppsala, rebranding Gottsunda as a cultural and culinary destination instead of a stigmatized “no-go” zone.
- **Community Mosque & Wellness:** Given the sizable Muslim community in the area, we propose a modest prayer hall/mosque as part of the complex – a visible commitment to cultural inclusion (doubling as a multi-use hall for meetings and celebrations). Additionally, in the spirit of Nordic wellness culture, a public sauna and small gym by the courtyard pond will offer residents of all backgrounds a place to relax together, using Sweden's communal sauna tradition as a social bridge.
- **Sports & Play:** The central green space will include a multi-use sports court and playground to engage youth from all communities. Facilities for basketball, football, skating or parkour provide healthy outlets for interaction. Building on the local “*Football without Borders*” initiative piloted in Gottsunda, we can partner with sports clubs to host regular activities on-site. Active recreation and teamwork will help break down social barriers.

All these programs are intentionally mixed (rather than separated by user group) **and they front the streets and courtyards, ensuring a lively public realm with “eyes on the street” at all hours.** Equally important, these amenities respond to what residents have asked for: local outreach shows people want more places to meet and activities for youth – not just new housing. By enabling daily interactions – a student chatting with a entrepreneur in the makerspace, or families mingling at the playground – the design strengthens the social fabric needed for true integration. This approach aligns with Sweden's integration strategies that pair physical renewal with social initiatives. We also draw inspiration from successes elsewhere: in Malmö's Rosengård, for instance, the new Culture Casbah

project (mixing housing with cultural venues) is helping reconnect a marginalized district to the city. Likewise in Gottsunda, by blending new housing with ample civic infrastructure and economic opportunity, we will transform a once-monotonous center into a vibrant, human-centered district that attracts both locals and visitors.

Adaptive Reuse, Façade & Rooftop Strategies

A portion of the Gottsunda Centre's façade has already been improved with planters and seating, turning a blank wall into a small gathering spot. We build on this idea with a much bolder intervention. Rather than demolish the aging 1970s mall (a costly and wasteful approach), we will **add and transform** it by layering new uses onto its structure. As *Lacaton & Vassal* put it, *"Never demolish, never remove – add, transform, and reuse."* Embracing this ethos, **our design wraps the mall's long west façade in a lightweight timber-and-glass structure of linked greenhouses – converting a concrete relic into a vibrant vertical farm and community space.** This modular greenhouse addition attaches to the mall's frame and extends along the entire 300-meter façade. It creates a series of stepped indoor-outdoor terraces (winter gardens) on the exterior, acting as a climate buffer and dramatically improving the building's appearance. Most importantly, it provides productive space for the community in the form of a linear urban farm.

Vertical Farming & Community Co-op: Inside the new façade, rows of hydroponic planters will grow fresh produce year-round, harnessing the southwest sunlight (with LED lighting in dark months). Crops like leafy greens, herbs, and strawberries will thrive – a local startup, Grönska, has already proven that indoor farming of such crops is viable even through Swedish winters. We estimate the façade farm could yield dozens of tons of produce annually, supplying an on-site farmers' market or local cafés with ultra-local food. The farm will be run as a cooperative enterprise: residents can volunteer or work part-time in the greenhouse and share in the harvest or profits. This model creates green jobs and training opportunities (especially for youth) while building community ownership. Visually, the lush greenhouse facade will be a living landmark that literally *re-greens* the mall.

Beyond farming, we will repurpose the mall's interior and adjacent facilities to better serve the community. The existing public swimming hall, for example, can be expanded into a broader health and recreation center – hosting not just swimming but also fitness classes, and even offering outdoor water play in summer (a splash pad or skate park in the new courtyard). Some of the mall's indoor space can be converted to house civic amenities from our program mix (library nook, gallery, etc.), and new entrances will connect the mall directly to the surrounding housing quarter, knitting it into the neighborhood.

Rooftop Solar Energy: The mall's flat roof will be utilized for sustainability. We plan to install a large solar panel array of about 1–2 MW, capable of generating roughly 1 GWh of clean electricity per year (enough to power a few hundred homes). This would be managed as a community energy cooperative so that residents collectively own the installation, use the power, and potentially sell excess back to the grid. (A similar urban energy coop was recently launched at Hammarby Sjöstad in Stockholm.) We will also explore adding solar thermal panels to feed into Uppsala's district heating network.

Rooftop Community Spaces: In addition to energy production, the roof will be activated as a public space. Using the same spiral stair tower design, we propose providing access up to a rooftop park. On the roof, residents and visitors will find green areas like meadow plantings (which improve insulation and biodiversity), small allotment gardens or a rooftop orchard, and possibly a café terrace with views over Uppsala. Portions of the roof could also host more hydroponic greenhouses to extend the vertical farm's output. The roof will be designed to be safe and accessible (with railings, elevators), becoming an inviting "fifth facade" of the project where community events – from harvest festivals to solar-coop meetings – can take place. **Every surface of the site – ground, façade, and roof – is reimaged as productive, green, and community-oriented.**

Gottsunda's Common Ground exemplifies European 18's vision of sustainable, inclusive urban development. It transforms a car-dominated mid-century center into a human-scaled programmatically rich "village" for the 21st century – a vibrant community where immigrants, students, and longtime locals can live, work, grow food, relax, and learn together in a shared neighborhood.