

Rutan

The square in Värnamo. How it happened. Roughly.

“Can we paint a square in the marketplace?”

It wasn't as much a question. More of a statement. And that was it. A square. In the marketplace Flanaden, in the centre of Värnamo. Known today simply as “the Square”.

Here, traditional dramaturgy would require something about how long and winding the road was – from the rhetorical question to the inauguration of the Square. But it wasn't. Instead, the road was short and surprisingly straight, after a few initial thought loops. And there really wasn't an alternative, since the statement/question was put around six weeks before the Square and the exhibition with the same name were to be inaugurated at the art and design museum Vandalorum, on the outskirts of Värnamo.

THE EXHIBITION

Let's stop a while at the exhibition, because without it there would not be a Square in Värnamo. At least, the world's first Square would not have ended up in the small market town in Småland.

Nor would this have happened without Karin Lundh. She is the daughter of Vandalorum's initiator Sven Lundh, and in 2014 she filled in for the curator Elna Svenle, who was on maternity leave. Karin had already met the film professor and producer Kalle Boman, who had told her about his thoughts of a square that would serve as a sanctuary; a zone where equality and trust would prevail. When someone's standing in the Square, everyone is obliged to help this person, and you don't steal in the Square, so one can leave one's belongings there. A square that somewhat represents the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Or a humanistic traffic sign, a mandatory road sign that reminds us about our role as responsible and trustworthy fellow human beings.

Around ten years earlier, Kalle Boman had presented the idea of making Nybroplan in Stockholm into a sanctuary, but it never made it beyond a beautiful thought. Then.

Kalle couldn't let go of the idea and soon found a devoted partner in his endeavour to create a sanctuary: the film director Ruben Östlund. Together they developed the concept of a sanctuary in the shape of a white marked box. The Square.

This is what Kalle Boman and Karin Lundh talked about, and they agreed to arrange an exhibition at Vandalorum in spring 2015 to explore the thematics of the Square. The exhibition would be designed by Kalle Boman together with Ruben Östlund, who had won no less than six Guldbagge Awards the previous year for his film "Force Majeure".

CAN WE PAINT A SQUARE IN THE MARKETPLACE?

As a result, we find Kalle Boman, Ruben Östlund, Karin Lundh and Elna Svenle around a table at Vandalorum's restaurant Syltan on a rainy Tuesday at the end of February 2015. They are discussing the design of the exhibition, without knowing exactly what they have in mind, except for exploring the thematics of the Square. Saying that they had plenty of time would be misleading. The opening was planned for 18 April, less than two months away. But this didn't seem to particularly stress the two exhibitors.

At the same time, at a table a little further away, Eva Törn, chair of Värnamo's culture committee, and Lars Alkner, municipal director of culture, are having a lunch meeting to discuss something completely different: the future of the replica Viking ship Vidfamne, which has sailed on the nearby Lake Vidöstern for sixty years. They do not, however, manage to find a solution for the ship, but on their way out they happen to overhear some of the conversation about the exhibition. They stop long enough for Karin Lundh to introduce them to her visitors. Kalle and Ruben say that they have spent the morning in central Värnamo and decided that the exhibition needs an offshoot by way of a temporary installation in the marketplace Flanaden. And this is when the rhetorical question is put: "Can we paint a square in the marketplace?"

Lars Alkner is completely new in his job as director of culture. Perhaps this is why, without considering the municipal way of doing things or asking his chair, Lars replies:

"Of course, we'll paint a square!"

FILM MEETS ART

He's in luck. The chair, Eva, also sees the potential of the project. Film meets art and the museum's exhibition which steps out into society with a public installation in the streetscape. And with an important message, just right for our times. But the culture director has a major reservation: why only a temporary square? Isn't it just as well to invest in a permanent solution?

Said and done. Together with representatives from the technical services department Lars Alkner inspects the site. Here, rigid municipal bureaucracy could have put an end to the

story. But the technical services department in Värnamo happens to be extremely swift and responsive to cultural demands. So, when Kalle Boman and Ruben Östlund return to Värnamo, a meeting is arranged at the café Kafferepet in the same building as the town hall. A whole range of municipal officials are present, as well as the local newspaper Värnamo Nyheter. Before the meeting is over, it has been agreed to make a permanent installation in the cobbled marketplace, by way of two rows of white paving stones with strip lighting in between, forming a square measuring 3.14 x 3.14 metres.

THE SPIRIT OF COOPERATION

Everything is love, peace and harmony until the first cost calculation lands on the culture director's desk. Somewhere in the region of 150 000 SEK. A sum which does not fall within the culture department's budget for public art. Enters the spirit of cooperation which characterises Värnamo: Värnamo Business Association, Värnamo City AB and Vandalorum offer to sponsor part of the cost, which after some compromises amounted to approximately 75 000 SEK.

Another two weeks pass, and the next time Ruben and Kalle are in Värnamo, construction of the Square is in full swing. When the exhibition opens at Vandalorum on Saturday 18 April, the Square in Flanaden is completed. The sign by the Square says:

"The Square is a sanctuary
of trust and caring.
Within it we all share equal
rights and obligations."

In the bottom right corner of the sign, you find the number 1; the evidence that the world's first Square is in Värnamo.

THE PROTECTED SQUARE HAS LANDED – AND TAKEN OFF

"The protected Square has landed", reports the newspaper Värnamo Nyheter. It may be true, but actually, it has just taken off. The exhibition at Vandalorum attracts thousands of visitors during the two months of its duration, and in a seminar the researchers Lars Trägårdh, Per Molander and Kristina Sahlqvist discuss different aspects of the concept of trust. And when the exhibition at Vandalorum is over, the Square in Flanaden remains.

And here, both the Square and its values live on. It has become a meeting place, not least for young people; one couple even got married in the Square. Demonstrations against cuts to disability support, against political violence and for the rights of refugees have taken place here. After the terror attacks in Trollhättan and Stockholm, the people of Värnamo lit candles and placed flowers in the Square. Someone put a rose and a thank you note to the unknown person who helped their son. Värnamo's inhabitants have made their own interpretation of the message and taken the Square into their hearts. It is quite logical that

Värnamo likes to celebrate its Square. Around 18 April every year, an anniversary celebration is arranged in the Square.

THE SQUARE

Many people have followed the events around the Square with interest, but there is one person who has been especially keen. When the exhibition opened, Ruben Östlund had already started working on his next film. The storyline is about an art museum setting up an exhibition about trust, and where a sanctuary in the shape of a square is constructed in the town. The exhibition at Vandalorum and the permanent Square in Flanaden thereby served as a pilot study and inspiration for the film. The script evolved and was influenced by the real-life exhibition and Square. The actual film production was also guided by Värnamo. When the Square was being built for the film, both the paving stones and the construction workers Torleif Svensson and John Rindeljäll were brought in from Värnamo to ensure a proper result. And the Square was constructed exactly according to the drawing made by Sabina Johansson Kullman at the technical services department in Värnamo.

The making of the film was completed just two years after the opening of the exhibition at Vandalorum. The premiere of "The Square" took place on Saturday 20 May 2017 at the Cannes Film Festival. On Sunday 28 May, Ruben Östlund made film history by being the first Swedish director in 66 years to win the festival's most prestigious award, the Palme d'Or, one of the most sought-after prizes in the film world.

After the summer, on Thursday 24 August, it was time for an exclusive pre-viewing in Värnamo. The Palme d'Or was placed in the Square, and the information sign about the Square was inaugurated. "The Square" was the first film to be shown in the almost completed cinema in Gummifabriken. We have come full circle.

THE ROAD TO VICTORY STARTED IN VÄRNAMO

And now, the Square must have truly landed? Not quite. In June 2016, the world's second Square was inaugurated in Grimstad in Norway, by the Crown Prince couple Haakon and Mette-Marit. The third Square was inaugurated in Ängelholm in October 2018 and the fourth at Landala square in Gothenburg in December the same year. Several people in Gothenburg supports the idea of making a Square where the equestrian statue known as Kopparmärta stands, moving Charles IX and his horse to join his son Gustavus Adolphus in the big central square.

In January 2018, the movie was nominated for an Oscar for best foreign language film.

The Square's road to victory around the world has only begun. And it started in Värnamo, at Vandalorum and in Flanaden.