



Culture

Lessons from Inside the World's Most Sustainable City

Scientists predict we've got about eleven years to vastly reduce global emissions before we're, in a word, screwed. That would require governments to dramatically restructure their economies. So where does that leave everyday people doing their best to recycle? A city in Sweden claims to have an answer. They claim to be the "most sustainable city in the world." GQ sent novelist Reif Larsen to find out what we can learn from the good people of Gothenburg.

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This past July, I found myself in Gothenburg, Sweden, trying to figure out once and for all if humanity was capable of saving itself.

Perhaps this is a bit dramatic. I was actually surveying the lunch options available in the cafeteria of Volvo's sprawling headquarters just outside the city. On my way to lunch, I had passed new Volvo mission statement printed neatly on one of the office walls:

FREEDOM TO MOVE

IN A PERSONAL, SUSTAINABLE AND SAFE WAY

This surreal bit of corporate doublespeak, which attempted to pair the dream of personal autonomy with a vague moral responsibility to a greater good, had me confused as I stood in front of the cafeteria menu. My first preference was for the Chef's Choice of *Krämig älgfärspanna med rökig kesellakräm*, or "Creamy moose cobbler with smoky kesella cream." Unfortunately, this dish was marked by a long red bar on the menu, informing me of its 2.61 kg CO_{2e} carbon footprint, versus only .76 kg CO_{2e} for the Indian curry with pumpkin, basmati rice, and zucchini raita, which was marked by a benign little green bar. I was fuzzy on what exactly 2.61 kg CO_{2e} meant for climate change, but those aggressive visuals made clear what choice a mindful Volvo employee should make, even if the freedom to choose was presumably still hers.

During my visit to Gothenburg, "sustainability" (*hållbarhet*) was on the lips of nearly everyone I spoke with, even if they all seemed to have a slightly different idea of what sustainability meant. Rules and practices were shifting rapidly, and anxiety about personal impact was at an all-time high, leading to some curious behaviors and rituals. The concept of *#flygskam*, or "flight shaming," had sprung up in Sweden almost overnight. This had naturally led to *#tagskryt*, or "train bragging," with people Instagramming highlights from their rail journeys. The sidewalks of Gothenburg had become impromptu mobility laboratories, as a new wave of electric scooters could be found littered across every surface, their riders congratulated via app on performing a "carbon-neutral" ride. Virtually every restaurant I visited now claimed to use locally sourced ingredients "whenever possible"—except, of course, for the wine or the coffee or the lemons or the chocolate.

Indeed, Gothenburg itself, once viewed as a dingy industrial port town—Sweden’s “second city”—is in the midst of a massive **rebranding effort** to reposition itself as “the world’s most sustainable destination.” I wanted to see if the city and its nearly 600,000 inhabitants were actually fulfilling this claim and whether Gothenburg could become a model for how to successfully build an ethical urban community in the midst of a climate crisis.

The city was certainly talking a big game. Neither particularly picturesque nor close to anything else, Gothenburg has instead had to rely upon its own vision and ingenuity. The city planners recently put forth plans for a **massive urban expansion** called “RiverCity Gothenburg,” a remarkable blueprint based upon principles of density, inclusion, accessibility, ecology, and (hopefully) durability, despite the fact that the city straddles the Göta älv river mouth, which will likely rise anywhere from three to ten feet in the coming century.

Such plans come at a critical juncture in the global climate crisis. According to several new reports, **we now have only an eleven-year period** to vastly curtail our greenhouse emissions, or else we will almost certainly face **a climate-induced cataclysm** in which many millions of people will die.

Millions of *hypothetical* people. Let’s be honest: Climate change makes for lousy storytelling. If climate change were a Netflix series, it would be canceled almost immediately. The problem is too vast, the terminology too confusing, the range of outcomes too broad, the sense of personal impact too small. In the United States, the climate-change story has clearly struggled to gain traction, as large swaths of the population simply can’t be bothered changing their lifestyles to address what is perceived as a distant, future problem—“I’ll be dead by the time that happens...*if* it happens!”

In Sweden, things feel different. In a country blessed by a strong public sector, a heavily regulated marketplace, progressive values, and a slightly unnerving culture of following directions, the story of the crisis has clearly taken hold. It appears as if Swedes have managed to translate climate change from a future problem into a *now* problem.

When I asked Gothenburgers where this newfound urgency had come from, many cited the “Greta effect,” in reference to 16-year-old Greta Thunberg, a fellow Swede who recently shot to global fame after **scolding large groups** of important adults for their ludicrously hypocritical climate policies. Ms. Thunberg, a 2019 nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize, had essentially singlehandedly shamed the EU into **dedicating a quarter of all future spending** toward reducing greenhouse emissions. It’s fascinating to me that it took a truth-telling teenager to move the needle, to become our storyteller. But now that the needle has moved, can it move fast enough?

I found myself thinking about our brief, eleven-year opportunity for radical intervention as I stood seaside later that day in Långedrag, not far from the Volvo factory where I faced my lunch-menu dilemma of freedom versus responsibility.

A stiff breeze whipped in from the North Sea as a group of children in sailboats attempted to tack against the wind. One of the young sailors hadn’t managed to make the turn and was getting blown across the bay while several adults watched helplessly from the pier.

I had been ushered to this dramatic vista to view a prototype of sustainable manufacturing, a white Volvo XC60 T8 plug-in hybrid SUV. Twenty-five percent of all the plastics and textiles in the vehicle had been made from recycled materials, including fishermen’s nets. It was a feat of engineering, chemistry, design, sourcing. Everything inside the cabin looked and felt like a \$65,000 luxury SUV should. It did not smell like fishermen’s nets. It smelled like the guilty perfection of a new car.

“Plastic is an amazing material,” said Sandra Tostar, Ph.D., as the sea breeze battered us. Tostar is a technical specialist of polymer material application at Volvo. “Our problem with plastic is actually a human problem. It is a waste-industry problem. It is not necessarily a plastic problem.”

Such seamless integration of recycled plastic into a premium product had turned many heads in the industry, I was told. Supply chains were being overhauled.

Founded in Gothenburg in 1927, the Volvo Cars brand has always been inextricably entangled with the industrious identity of its hometown, and now both company and city were searching for an evolved, sustainable philosophy in a swiftly changing world. Volvo had set the ambitious goal that all of its plastics would be made of at least 25 percent recycled materials by 2025, the

same year they will also attempt to go “carbon-neutral” as a company and have 50 percent of their car sales be “fully electric.” This kind of innovative ambition was reflected in the motto of their sustainability program: *omtanke*, a Swedish word that means “caring” but also “to think again.”

Tostar and I geeked out on the chemistry of polymers as I stroked the SUV’s retractable cargo cover, which had also been partially sourced from recycled materials. Yet as the children fought the gale-force winds in their little boats, I could not help but also be filled by a rumbling, unspeakable despair.

I had been overcome by this despair a lot lately. Perhaps “overcome” was the wrong word—this was a functioning despair, which made it all the worse. It was a despair permeated by the uncertainty of the future but also by the seduction of the now, by our incapacity for long-term planning, by the knowledge that what we are doing is very bad and yet we continue to do it.

I had felt this despair the day before when I stared, awestruck, at the fifteen-foot hellfire inside one of the huge burn furnaces at the Renova “energy recapture” plant, Gothenburg’s state-of-the-art **waste incinerator**, which transforms the energy from burning garbage into electricity and heat to clean its output gases, the plant still releases 559,600 tons of CO₂ into the atmosphere annually.

“It’s 30 times less damaging than the methane released from landfills like the ones you have in the States,” yelled Ebba Olofsson Fredholm, as we stood helmeted beside the roar of the furnace. Olofsson Fredholm spends her days giving tours of the Renova plant to school groups and teaching children how to recycle.

“But burning is still the second-worst waste-solution option,” she said, pointing to a five-step waste-hierarchy chart.

The best option being: prevent waste.

(Cue despair.)

Elizabeth Rush calls this condition “**endsickness**” in *Rising: Dispatches From the New American Shore*, her mesmerizing if bleak portrait of sea-level rise. She describes endsickness as “its own kind of vertigo—a physical response to living in a world that is moving in unusual ways toward... [an] event horizon.” The dizziness comes with trying to understand things we are not equipped to understand, time periods we don’t usually grapple with, catastrophic events we have no reference points for.

For me, though, I was struck most with endsickness not in moments of utter hopelessness but, rather, when I was witnessing human ingenuity in full bloom—like Tostar’s polymer magic or the amazing energy-recapture operation at Renova—even as I understood such ingenuity to be either misplaced, grafted onto an outdated system, or not nearly enough.

Let me say it again: We have eleven years to radically alter our behavior.

Volvo Cars, if it were really serious about moving in a sustainable way, about “*omtanke-ing*,” would jettison all talk of freedom and stop making cars today. As in: *right now*. But this will not happen, because Volvo is a company operating in a capitalist market, with a responsibility to its many workers and shareholders. And if Volvo stopped making cars, someone else with zero *omtanke* would inevitably step in where they left off. Markets, even heavily regulated markets, are not designed to embrace revolutions. They are designed to persist. And persistence is important: Volvo takes great care of its employees. I toured the factory line, populated by a diverse, young workforce, and wanted to sign up myself.

And so Volvo is left to innovate in baby steps, slowly, incrementally, in beautiful ways, like piloting gentle **alternatives** to traditional car ownership, but in ways that are also entirely inadequate. Volvo, like the rest of us, is caught between a marketplace and an imminent yet distant catastrophe.

While I was in Gothenburg, trying to triangulate our response to this catastrophe, I stayed at the lovely **Upper House Hotel** inside the Gothia Towers, a series of three futuristic glass towers interconnected by suspended walkways. Across the street, you could hear giddy screams echoing from **Liseberg**, the legendary amusement park, which was largely powered by renewable wind energy.

Gothia Towers is the largest hotel in Europe to be certified “very good,” according to the BREEAM environmental classification standards. Although the hotel already offered 1,200 rooms, there were plans in place to build a fourth tower. This was a general theme of my visit: There were plans everywhere in Gothenburg to expand, get bigger, do more, reach higher. Across the river, they were busy pouring the foundation for Karlatornet, which will be the tallest skyscraper in Scandinavia.

When I asked a woman who worked for the city if such expansionism was also the most sustainable course of action, she shrugged her shoulders and said, “Men like to build tall buildings.”

Gothia Towers is also home to the Swedish Exhibition & Congress Centre, which hosts more than 30 trade shows and large-scale exhibitions every year. Ever since Gothenburg’s ship-building industry disappeared, such nexus points have become critical for the city’s economic future. Motorcycle, boat, horse, and book conventions are the new ports of call.

I got a behind-the-scenes tour of the convention center from an eager Nicklas Höjer, director of logistics and production. Höjer was a tall man with silver hair who strode around carrying a tube of mysterious architectural plans that we never got to see, as we were too busy looking at things.

To make these conventions run smoothly, Gothia Towers must have its own city of infrastructure: its own recycling center, catering hall, florist; its own fleet of carpenters, mechanics, painters, electricians. Historically, conventions and trade shows have been dirty business, with an incredible amount of waste simply thrown away by vendors. But as in many other industries, standards and practices are changing, slowly.

The hotel and convention center at Gothia Towers are among the leaders in the field in pushing for more sustainable practices. They are completely wind-powered. Last year Gothia donated over 6,000 portions of food to Gothenburg Rescue Mission. In 2018, they recycled 94 percent of their waste. They are aiming for 99 percent.

“We’re trying to do our part. We’re always looking for new ways to push our sustainability program, to close the loop,” said Höjer, proudly, sheepishly.

In Sweden I noticed a general reluctance to boast too much about one’s sustainability practice, lest one be accused of “greenwashing.” It often became a quiet game of environmental humblebrag. Maybe this is what Volvo meant by moving in a personal, sustainable, safe way.

Somewhere in the bowels of the basement, Höjer stopped in front of a giant machine that looked like the world’s largest pasta maker. He tapped the machine with his architectural drawings.

“This is only one of two in the world,” he said with a muffled kind of glee.

The machine was a mechanical carpet cleaner. Industrial carpets, something most of us never think about, are the dirtiest of businesses, miles of them used once and then simply tossed after large-scale events around the world. This was not closing the loop. Gothia Towers uses only tiled recycled carpets and cleans each square with this wild machine, which employs a series of rotary brushes and wire tools that resemble torture devices, all without the use of chemicals.

What a small, remarkable thing. Here was a machine that no one would ever see as it went about its business of cleaning the dirt and grime off of carpets that will be used and used again. The world is filled with such small, remarkable things. People quietly innovating, doing their part to keep the global temperature rise closer to the slightly less catastrophic 2 degrees Celsius instead of the totally catastrophic 4+ degrees Celsius.

Yet, as is so often the case, such quiet ingenuity was undermined by the opulent: On the 19th floor of Gothia Towers, there was a glass-bottomed pool that jutted out from the building into space, a cantilevered, vertigo-inducing marvel. When you looked down through the water, you could see the city and its citizens churning far below. Every fifteen minutes bubbles percolated, perhaps to shield the squeamish from the view. It was referred to as “the Champagne Pool.”

“It takes the same amount of energy to heat that pool as our entire third tower,” said Höjer in disbelief, as if he were witnessing a traffic accident in slow motion.

Does this mean they should get rid of the pool? It has now become an indelible part of the Gothia Towers brand, one of the first things people ask about when they visit the hotel. When I slid into the warm, suspended waters and looked between my legs at a tiny man struggling with his luggage, it felt magnificent—a once-in-a-lifetime experience. It did not, however, feel like a “closing of the loop.”

Percolating in the Champagne Pool, I considered our amazing capacity to compartmentalize. Throughout history, it has been one of our greatest assets: *Yes, my arm is a bit gangrenous, but I will still putter on and plant the wheat to feed my family.* But such compartmentalization does not serve humanity well in the age of sustainability, particularly when most of us are still hazy about the actual impacts of our actions. I will go to great lengths to recycle a glass bottle, to avoid taking a plastic bag, and then I will jump on a plane without even thinking about it. My selective attention is the root of my hypocrisy.

Take the whole premise of this article: To fly to Sweden to write about sustainability is inherently ridiculous, a perfect portrait of the self-justified duplicity of our times. Did you know, for

I discovered this as I was looking for ways to purchase carbon offsets for my flight. Carbon offsetting, in which you invest in carbon-negative projects like reforestation, renewable energy, or carbon sequestration to counteract your carbon-positive actions, is itself a **tenuous concept**, an invented, **fraught** economy that critics say often allows wealthy countries and companies to claim “carbon neutrality” without fundamentally changing their high-emission practices. And yet, like so many choices we face these days, it is better than nothing.

So I went to six different websites and was given six different carbon footprints for my round-trip flight, ranging from 1.25 tons to 3.38 tons of CO₂, emissions I could offset by spending anywhere from \$12 to \$60 to fund carbon-negative projects in Uganda, Brazil, Iowa, or Switzerland. Such uncertainty hurt my head. I began to supplement these offsets with my own game of magical emission justification: “Well, because I’m writing an *article on sustainability*, that must account for...oh, say, 14 tons of CO₂, give or take?”

Without a way to visualize our impact, we perform such magical thinking about our emissions every day. Cities practice their own brand of magical thinking. When I asked Gothenburgers about a sustainable example of “closing the loop,” I was directed toward the city’s much-touted transformation of kitchen waste into a biogas that can be used to heat homes or run vehicles. But upon closer inspection, this loop turns out to actually be quite saggy: First the kitchen waste must be trucked to Renova’s biological-waste facility, where it is turned into a kind of porridge, which is then trucked to a facility 100 km away in Falkenberg, where it is converted into usable biogas, which can then be shipped back to the city.

What would it mean to close the loop locally, for a community to be its own self-contained loop? One potential model can be found in the Frihamnen neighborhood, on the docks of what was once Gothenburg’s industrial port. Beneath the old, rusting gantry cranes that have now become an almost nostalgic part of the city’s swiftly morphing skyline, you will find William Bailey and Jonas Lindh tending their vegetable beds. They run the urban farm **Kajodlingen**, where they are trying to promote the simple yet revolutionary idea of “hyperlocal” produce.

William and Jonas imagine a city where every rooftop is used to grow food for the people who live in that building, using soil composted from the building's organic waste. Right now most food isn't grown in cities, so it must be trucked or flown into the city, where it sits in great quantities on supermarket shelves before much of it is thrown away. Hyperlocal produce cuts out the carbon footprint of the food-delivery system, but it also forces city dwellers to claim ownership over what is in season and what is available at any given moment.

William and Jonas recently installed a rooftop garden on the Clarion Post Hotel and a beehive and herb garden on top of one of the Gothia Towers. The beehive is the highest in Sweden. Despite the altitude, the bees seem to be adapting.

"There's so much unused space in a city," William told me as we surveyed a bed of fledgling beet greens. "It takes a mind shift to see it."

A mind shift is also needed to "respect the waste," as William put it. He hoped that one day the city would create its own quality compost soil made from linden tree cuttings and coffee grounds and other organic materials and disperse this soil to a future army of urban farmers supplying inhabitants with food. For now, there was only Kajodlingen and a couple of other commercial farms within the city limits.

Next to their vegetable beds on the pier, William and Jonas have several **Johnson-Su bioreactors**, where they are experimenting with different composting techniques to break down tougher organic material, like wood chips. "We have a lot to learn from these microorganisms," said William. "Functioning soil is a living soil—it sequesters carbon, it holds water. It's a miracle of biodiversity." I poked my head into one of these bioreactors, really just a barrel filled with aerated organic refuse.

"You leave it for 400 days," said Jonas. "It takes some patience."

It sure smelled like work was being done. While I waited, patiently, I had my own momentary mind shift: In order to solve humanity's biggest problems, we must turn to the wisdom of microscopic bacteria.

"This is a system that has been supporting itself for 420 million years, but often it doesn't even enter into the conversation about sustainability. We only talk about technology, like the next LED light," said William. "It's super anthropocentric. We think that only we can solve this because we're humans."

Viewing this tiny slash of green beneath the vestiges of the city's industrial past, I was subsumed by another wash of endsickness. I asked William why he persisted, despite knowing that efforts were probably not going to transform the city's economy into one based upon ecological principles.

"I have no idea," he said. "It's entertainment. I know it will make absolutely no difference."

I waited.

"I suppose it's the power of a good example," he said slowly. "It's the one pure thing in my life. Besides my kid."

Soon William and Jonas's little urban farm on the industrial docks will be engulfed by the grand plans of "RiverCity Gothenburg," including Scandinavia's tallest skyscraper. The new neighborhoods will accommodate the 250,000 new inhabitants who are projected to move to the city in the next fifteen years.

We should pause here and acknowledge that the public sector in Sweden does not fuck around when it comes to doing their urban-planning homework: The city conducts **visionary workshops** with young people about their plans. They host **international conferences** on sustainable urban design and then make these findings central to the vision. They create **huge dioramas of the future city**. They answer any and all questions. They employ environmentalists, sociologists, artists. They downscale highways to make room for public-transport lanes and cycle paths, create interactive bioswales to absorb rainwater. These are progressive public-works projects that Americans—with our **intra-party fisticuffs** over the comparatively modest "Green New Deal"—can only dream about.

Yet much of RiverCity is still development. Development in which a lot of money will exchange hands and tall buildings will be built and desirable apartments will go to the highest bidder. I had seen what happens to **cities like London** when the natural end-cycle of unchecked development leads to a new kind of blight, neighborhoods filled with empty luxury apartments purchased by the ultra-rich not as places to live but as speculative investments. Could Gothenburg thread the needle and create a sustainable city that is also an inclusive city?

Amazingly, the planners of RiverCity Gothenburg are workshopping this question in real time. Not far from Kajodlingen's vegetable beds beneath the shipping cranes, there is an abandoned industrial parking lot that has been transformed into a utopian, egalitarian park called **Jubileumsparken**, its name partly inspired by the city's 400th anniversary in 2021. It will

eventually be a permanent park in the city with trees and green space, but for now it is a kind of social laboratory.

“It’s a prototyping space, where ideas can be experimented and played with,” said Cecilia Helsing, a photographer who is now working for the city to help curate the park. “It’s unusual because it was designed for this in-between time, before all of the development begins.”

The park was conceived largely on the back of community input. One of the main requests was for a place where people could swim since the river, while cleaner than it used to be, is not yet swimmable. So they created a community pool on a floating dock that uses no chemicals, only beds of gravel and plants to filter the water. Nearby, you will find **the world’s most amazing sauna**, an eerily gorgeous dystopic structure perched on four legs, sourced largely from recycled materials. Like everything else in the park, the pool and sauna are free and open to everyone. This is a firm rule.

“We’ve had many requests from world leaders to reserve the park for private functions, but we always say no,” said Ia Kjellsdotter. Kjellsdotter runs **Passalen**, a nonprofit advocacy group for disabled children that provides a broad range of inclusive programming in the park. Passalen recruits a staff of 25 to 30 young people each year to help run the park, actively drawing upon different populations (Arabic and Hindu speakers, transgendered, disabled) who are often overlooked in public spaces.

“We want our staff to reflect the reality of the society we live in, rather than a society we think we might want to live in,” said Kjellsdotter. For those who run the park, a sustainable city, by definition, must be an inclusive city.

The park’s newest prototype is a large yellow play structure called “Näsan i blöt,” or “the Wet Nose,” built by over 100 people from the community in conjunction with the Spanish design firm **Recetas Urbanas**. The Wet Nose teaches children about rain water, evaporation, and flooding through a series of interactive stations. Such a playground is subtly preparing them for a world in which water—its rise, its scarcity—will increasingly be a source of conflict in their lives, regardless of what language they speak.

Watching kids scamper up the Wet Nose and fashion river deltas in the sand, I was struck by the throughlines between the Kajodlingen microorganism investigations and these prototypes of social acceptance. Places like these allow for a kind of experimentation and flexibility not often seen in a major city, where plans like RiverCity Gothenburg must be laid out and approved far in advance. It may seem trivial, but these sandboxes are critical urban spaces, as important as any skyscraper. We need arenas to try things out and to fail, to build new stories together. I wondered, for instance, once the buildings did come, whether Jubileumsparken's remarkable emphasis on radical egalitarianism would continue.

But do cities have the luxury to experiment and prototype when it comes to combatting the climate crisis? We need solutions now. Large-scale solutions that revamp our public transport systems, transform our energy grid, our homes, our food-production networks.

And perhaps more importantly, we need powerful climate narratives that actually change the way we consume, live, travel, play. We need the [RED BAR] and the [GREEN BAR]. And if we are to take a lesson from our urban farmers and the Wet Nose, it seems like these narratives must not all be about shaming. Sustainability must be economically feasible, but it must also be fun.

On my last day in the city, I visited the Johanneberg Science Park on the Chalmers University of Technology campus. The Science Park employs a "triple helix" model of bringing together academia, the public sector, and private businesses as partners in cultivating sustainable urban development innovations.

"Technology needs to reset the business models," said Mats Bergh, CEO of the Science Park. "But this is very difficult to do. We're pushing to deliver not just products but sustainable systems. These systems can be disruptive to traditional markets."

The question remains whether traditional markets can be disrupted. One of the most compelling proposals to combat climate change that I heard while in Gothenburg was to move to a universal **four-day work week**, which would reduce commuting and power consumption while also slowing capitalism's frenzied growth trend. (In Sweden, where the entire country basically takes off the whole month of July, this idea seemed semi-plausible.) But beyond a revolutionary economic

freeze-out, the triple-helix model, which draws upon the strengths of each collaborating partner, might be our last, best hope for combining the free spirit of sandbox experimentation with the kind of paradigm-shifting systemic solutions that can truly combat climate change.

For instance, the Science Park helped to prototype **ElectriCity**, a sustainable transportation model, which includes an electric bus that travels back and forth between Johanneberg and another science park in Lindholmen. The bus, which was built by Volvo Group, stops for minutes at each terminus to recharge its battery.

What can happen during these six minutes? The bus stop itself has become a humanistic research project, a meeting space filled with prototypes like an all-weather **book swap**. The bus and its associated ecosystems have been so successful that the city of Gothenburg has recently **purchased 160 electric buses** that will completely transform not just its urban fleet but hopefully the architecture and pathways of the new city. Such a commitment offers an opportunity for a true, multidisciplinary mind shift.

In the Science Park you will also find the **HSB Living Lab**, an apartment building for students filled with thousands of sensors that monitor in real time temperature, movement, climate, energy output, light. In the common area you will find a clothing swap, a shared fix-it station, an experimental washing machine, and a bicycle connected to a blender. I wondered aloud if students would be reluctant to sign up for a building that monitors them so closely.

“There’s a waiting list to get in,” said Eva Kouraki, the project manager for the HSB Living Lab. I think the students understand even better than we do that this is about their future.”

Leaving the Living Lab, I felt energized. No doubt another wave of endsickness would come, but for now I was content with our capacity for great social collaboration—to connect a bicycle to a blender, to read a found book for six minutes while you waited for your bus to recharge. Over the course of my trip, I had witnessed our capacity for compartmentalization and the withering reticence of the marketplace, but I had also witnessed brilliant feats of imagination and execution. We are stubborn creatures. We are also adaptive. And we have the capacity to change. If it has taught me anything, it is that we must in fact try harder, that we must not look away—not for some utopian future but for the society we live in right now. We must live sustainably not to save our descendants but to be awake, here, in this moment. Because sustainability, at its heart, is about being truly thoughtful, being deeply and unflinchingly aware of one’s impact upon the

world in which we live. To practice sustainability is to practice a kind of universal empathy. To see the planet as a body, like our own. Such empathy is at the root of our humanness. It is where all stories begin.

Ultimately we will not save our planet from “catastrophic warming,” as David Wallace-Wells **calls it**—a form of vast, environmental genocide. But does this mean we should not try? If Gothenburg