Zlatan Ibrahimović: a monument and a mirror of his time

Roger Johansson, Per-Markku Ristilammi & Helena Tolvhed

To cite this article: Roger Johansson, Per-Markku Ristilammi & Helena Tolvhed (2023) Zlatan Ibrahimović: a monument and a mirror of his time, Soccer & Society, 24:3, 333-349, DOI: 10.1080/14660970.2023.2179197

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2023.2179197
Zlatan Ibrahimović: a monument and a mirror of his time

Roger Johansson\textsuperscript{a,b}, Per-Markku Ristilammi\textsuperscript{c} and Helena Tolvhed\textsuperscript{d}

\textsuperscript{a}Department of Urban Studies, IMH, Malmö University, Malmö, Sweden; \textsuperscript{b}Department of Educational Sciences, Lund University, Lund, Sweden; \textsuperscript{c}Department of Urban Studies, Malmö University, Malmö, Sweden; \textsuperscript{d}Department of History, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden

\textbf{ABSTRACT}

In October 2019, Zlatan Ibrahimović, the most successful and famous Swedish football player ever, was honoured with a monument by the Swedish Football Association and the city of Malmö. Born in Malmö in 1981, Ibrahimović grew up in a migrant area of the city (Rosengård). Growing up, he played football in local teams, and at the age of 19 he was sold by Malmö FF to Ajax for the highest transfer fee ever in Sweden. However, when Ibrahimović unexpectedly entered as an investor in rivaling Stockholm-based football club Hammarby in November 2019, he challenged local identities: The place is the team, the team is the family, and betrayal of the place and the team is a betrayal against the family. The monument was soon vandalized and taken down, facing an uncertain future. The aim of this article is to understand the different interpretations, eruptions of emotions, and conflicts that the monument of Zlatan Ibrahimović raised. As a theoretical frame, three disciplinary perspectives will be used: a cultural historical and a historical didactic perspective, with the intention of understanding the motives and signals send and received through public art in the city space area; a second perspective with a focus on the special use of history in sport, where gender and nation form an interpretive framework in this study; and finally, a third ethnological perspective based on ‘scaling’, where a monument as a social phenomenon can change meaning depending on geographical scale from district to city to nation and a global scale.

\section*{Introduction}

Zlatan Ibrahimović, one of the most successful Swedish football players in modern times, was born in the city of Malmö, and was honoured with a monument by the Swedish Football Association and the city of Malmö in 2019, but the monument was vandalized and taken down three months later, in January 2020. The aim of this article is to understand the different interpretations, eruptions of emotions, and conflicts that the monument of Zlatan Ibrahimović raised. As a theoretical frame, three disciplinary perspectives will be used: a \textit{cultural historical and a historical didactic perspective}, with the intention of understanding the motives and signals send and received through public art in the city space area; a second perspective with a \textit{focus on the special use of history in sport}, where gender and nation form an interpretive framework in this study; and finally, a third \textit{ethnological perspective based on ‘scaling’}, where a monument as a social phenomenon can change meaning depending on geographical scale from district to city to nation and a global scale.
Art in public space: methods to interpret a monument

The three disciplinary perspectives will be used as a lens to understand the relations between the city of Malmö and its most prominent football team, MFF (winner of Swedish Championship 22 times), and its former player Zlatan Ibrahimović.¹

Art in public space – a methodological framework

Public art in general is sometimes considered and understood based on its artistic aesthetic value; this contrasts with a monument, the purpose of which is usually to commemorate events, or in this case a person. Furthermore, to understand public art, there has also been a conceptual shift in meaning over time in the view of public art.² However, for the present article, monuments erected from the mid-nineteenth century constituted a shift in terms of viewing monuments more as an expression of a political opinion, a political manifestation and a statement to citizens.³ From that perspective, it could be seen as an intentional communicator to highlight narratives to present and future viewers.

This means that a monument speaks to us. To interpret the power of the Zlatan monument to create contemporary conflicts, we will use three key concepts:

- **Referentiality;** that is, how the sculpture is understood by different viewers/groups.⁴
- **Site-specificity;** that is, the relation to the place, as a spatial context of the significance of the place for how we understand a monument. Thus, placement assists in the understanding and interpretation of the sculpture’s meaning or message.⁵
- **Location, size, and quantity/range;** the interaction of these factors plays an important role in the formation of meaning in the sculpture; that is, the larger the sculpture and the more centrally it is located in the public space, the greater the symbolic importance of the intention of the sculpture/monument.⁶

In addition to academic literature, sources for this article include Malmö City Archives, minutes from Malmö City Council, Malmö municipal committees, letters from the Swedish Football Association, national press, radio, TV, websites, monuments, and interviews.

Definition of a monument

A monument is a representation of an event or person, often in stone or bronze, erected not only to commemorate something that has happened, but also with the intention of mediating a narrative for future viewers. There are often inscriptions to clarify the message. Therefore, the design of public monuments should not be assessed primarily according to an aesthetic value scale, but as applied art with specific purposes that can be measured by its ability to create opinion and as an object for communication.⁷ In this way, a monument can be loaded with a strong symbolism and its life story often redefined and filled with both factual and symbolic violence.⁸ The interest in the monument itself is then transferred from the artwork itself to the appointment of committees, clients, subscriptions, and to the societal context.

The monument of Zlatan Ibrahimović

The sculpture of Zlatan was modelled by the artist Peter Linde, who had also modelled a sculpture in 2011 of Ingemar Johansson, a former world champion heavyweight boxer, born in Gothenburg. The monument was placed outside the Nya Ullevi stadium in Gothenburg.⁹ The sculpture of Zlatan is 3.5 metres (11.4 feet) high, of which Zlatan himself measures 2.7 metres (8.8 ft) and is cast in
bronze and coloured in gold shimmer. The plinth, which is in red granite, weighs 8 tons (16,000 pounds) and the statue itself weighs 500 kilos (1102 lbs.).

The monument is strongly masculine and highlights an almost-naked male muscular body in a gesture with outstretched arms that expresses victory and conquest. The art historian Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe has argued that the sculpture, like other sculptures depicting male athletes, reflects how ‘a targeted-oriented will and disciplined mind can control the body’s performance’. Put another way, how ‘the body is placed in a cultural sphere where the body is controlled and disciplined by the power of thought’,\(^\text{10}\) which makes the object an almost mythical primordial force that can also gain meaning and send messages outside of sports.

Photo 1: The monument of Zlatan Ibrahimović at the inauguration of the monument on 8 October 2019. Photo: Pierre Mens.

**Zlatan too heavy for Solna football stadium**

In the spring of 2015, it was announced that the Swedish FA had taken the initiative to erect a statue of Zlatan Ibrahimović, and on 21 November the following year, the news was also posted on SvFF official website. Håkan Sjöstrand, general secretary of the Swedish FA, the national team manager Lars Richt, and SvFF’s chairman Karl-Erik Nilsson were the initiators of the statue, according to the Swedish FA’s official website. The choice of location outside the National Arena was obvious and self-evident, according to the initiators:

"The statue is a way for us to thank Zlatan for his amazing efforts for Swedish football . . . I also hope that the statue can to some extent form a feeling that everything is possible, both in football, but in life itself."\(^\text{11}\)
The last sentence of the statement, that the statue also symbolizes something beyond the football player Zlatan, is interesting insofar as the transcendence, where the message of the excellent football player turns into a message about everything is possible, and that the message was further on repeated in different versions, also by Zlatan himself.

However, not everyone was equally convinced of the appropriateness of the location outside the national arena. This location was also the home arena for the AIK football club, one of the leading and oldest football clubs in Solna/Stockholm. The day after the statue’s location was announced, Elvira Eriksson, the vice chair of the AIK supporter association, said to Aftonbladet, Sweden’s largest newspaper: ‘It sounds like a joke when you hear it!’12 AIK’s supporters had in fact been collecting money for several years to erect a statue of the club’s founder, Isidor Behrens. However, the proposal had been rejected by both the City of Solna and the City of Stockholm on the grounds that they were the owners of kinds of art on municipal land owned by the cities of the area outside the stadium, meaning that the ownership of the monument would then be unclear.13

Two years later, in mid-May 2018, several Stockholm sites suddenly announced that the monument of Zlatan was about to be moved to Malmö.14 The usually well-informed Fotbollskanalen.se wrote that the reason for the move was that AIK had not been ‘positive about having Ibrahimović just outside their home arena.’15 The broadcasting channel, on the other hand, referred to SvFF, which stated that:

“The reason for the move is, among other things, that the statue is too heavy for the area around Friends Arena. The area, first designated to place the statue, was not feared to carry the weight of the monument between Friends Arena and the large shopping centre nearby.”16

Finally, it was announced on the FA’s website that the municipal board’s working committee in Malmö had decided that the statue would be erected in the Stadion area, owned by MFF. It was decided that the monument would be unveiled at 5 p.m. on 8 October 2019 and, in addition to Ibrahimović himself, representatives of the FA, the city of Malmö, and Malmö FF would be present.

The FA took responsibility for the costs of producing and transporting the artwork, while the city of Malmö was to bear the costs for construction, lighting, and operating. It was further added that there could be ‘possible costs in connection with vandalism and other unforeseen events’.17 This later proved to be a wise addition. The total costs for the city of Malmö have been estimated at SEK 555,000 (EUR 54,292).18

**The move to Malmö and inauguration of the sculpture**

In November 2018 the municipal board in Malmö decided to accept the FA’s offer of a donation in the form of ‘a sculpture depicting Zlatan Ibrahimović’.19 The inquiry had been prepared by the director of cultural affairs in Malmö, recommended that the city of Malmö should receive the donation and to investigate a future location. The letter also discussed three possible locations: in the stadium area, at Rosengård where Zlatan grew up, or in another place that symbolized ‘Malmö and the world outside’.20 The official letter also dealt with the problem of memorials to famous and public figures, as well as the question of memorials representing living people. The letter stated that such memorials are at present located in two areas of the city: the American-inspired Walk of Fame in the (MFF) stadium area, as well as Malmö artists on the Davidhall Bridge in the city centre. Both cases depicted both living and deceased people. There are also about 40 memorials and busts, among other things, of politicians from the labour movement.21 According to the proposal in the official letter, the municipal board decided to receive the donation and to instruct the city’s staff responsible for artistic design to investigate placement and construction.22

The analysis of the location in March 2019 was based on the three alternatives previously stated in the official letter in November 2018. The first alternative was at the stadium area; specifically, the square just outside the stand and the entrance of the standing spectators of the stadium. The second alternative referred to Zlatan’s childhood at Rosengård and his first football career. Here again there
were some different options. One obvious was Zlatan Court, which was inaugurated in October 2007 by Ibrahimović and is in the courtyard at Cronmans Road where he played football as a youngster. The base of the football pitch consists of recycled sneakers and at the entrance is the inscription, 'Here is my heart. Here is my story. Here is my game. Take it further. Zlatan'. Another option was connected to Björn Carnemalm's artwork entitled Zlatan's smile at the bicycle tunnel, and a third one was in the in the centre of the residential area. Both were problematic, for different reasons: the former because it was difficult to fit the sculpture into a bicycle tunnel, and the latter because the area was under transition and reconstructions. The third alternative was a location in another 'public place in Malmö that symbolizes 'Malmö and the world outside”’, for example next to one of Malmö’s train stations. Neither of the stations was considered to have any natural connection to a statue of Zlatan or football.

Finally, a location on Stadion Square was recommended because it was believed that it was a natural route for walking to and from the arena during matches and the new stadium built by MFFin 2009. Finally, the location meant that all football supporters had to pass the statue on their way into the stadium.

The city of Malmö and Zlatan

Zlatan was born in the city of Malmö in October 1981 and grew up in poor conditions in a migrant area of the city (Rosengård), played from a young age in local football teams and at the age of 19 was sold by the Malmö FF (MFF) to Ajax in the Netherlands for EUR 8.1 million – at the time, the highest transfer fee ever in Sweden.

To understand Malmö, it is important to understand its geographical location on the border between Sweden and Copenhagen in Denmark, connected by a bridge. Malmö is the port to Sweden from Europe or to migrants from the rest of the world (in all, people of 179 nationalities live there). Malmö is also by history a strong labour town that has been governed by the Social-Democratic party most of the time since the universal suffrage 1919.

The city of Malmö is also an old heavy industrial city, like Liverpool or Newcastle, that has lost almost all its industry, and a lot of residents left the city during the regression in 1980s. Malmö’s population reached its lowest level in recent times in the 1990s, with 220,000 inhabitants, then grew to almost 300,000 in 2010 and 350,000 in 2021. Malmö has grown rapidly recently, with a young population (48 percent are younger than 35), and almost half of the population are immigrants. Malmö has gone from being a city with a large shipbuilding industry to a young, dynamic, and trendy city (it is the centre of Sweden’s gaming industry, for example), but it is also poor and faces several challenges. It has fewer rich people and more poor people than the other big cities in Sweden, while football and support for Malmö FF is an important and unifying force. Ibrahimović is the city’s most prominent player, and at the time of the sculpture’s inauguration, he was also a symbol for many to relate to.

Solemn inauguration and brutal vandalism

On Tuesday, 8 October 2019, the Ibrahimović sculpture was unveiled at the square in front of the football stadium in Malmö, with more than a thousand people attending. The inauguration was followed by many people and by the two main characters: Ibrahimović himself and the artist Peter Linde. The chair of the municipal board (mayor) in Malmö, Katrin Stjernfeldt Jammeh, gave the inaugural speech and emphasized that the statue should be seen as an inspiration to many people. Zlatan himself expressed that the sculpture was ‘a symbol for all who do not feel welcome, who feel that they do not fit in, who feel that they are not like everyone else that everything is possible. I’m proof of that . . .’

In November 2019 the sculpture was vandalized with white paint and burned. The events occurred after it became publicly known that Ibrahimović had become a partner in Hammarby
IF Football club and stated that he would work to make it the best football club in Scandinavia. Soon after, in early December 2019, despite the statue being protected by fences and guards, jacks were sawn into the Ibrahimović figure’s ankles. On the night of 22 December 2019, its nose and left little toe were sawn off. Finally, on the night of 5 January 2020, the statue was literally sawn off along the ankles. After that, the City of Malmö took the statue away and kept in an undisclosed location.

Breaking down images and vandalizing monuments has a long history. Public art and especially memorials engage and provoke, and sometimes inflame debates. Recent international examples are the dismantling of statues of General Robert E. Lee in Richmond Virginia US, and the statue of Edward Colston leading businessman in the seventeenth century British slave trade in Bristol UK. Therefore, to erect sculptures of a person may result in future questioning and rethinking, and even more problematic on a person who is still alive.

**Monuments and sculptures in Malmö: some examples**

Unlike many other European countries, Sweden had relatively few monuments during the post-war period. But that does not mean that they do not exist or can be given a new meaning. Sometimes public works of art and decorations can give rise to upset feelings and vandalism, while others are allowed to stand in silence.

We will just most briefly touch on some examples of sculptures and monuments from Malmö to highlight some aspects that link to the current discussion about the Ibrahimović monument, but also to show how the same sculpture can be filled with different meanings depending on referentiality, site-specificity (that is, the relation to the place), and location, size, and quantity/range.

The examples referred to in this article are a statue of Pehr Henrik Ling (erected in 1914), the father of Swedish gymnastics, placed outside the old Stadium (from 4 July 1896); the bust from 1952 of Gustav Möller (prominent Social-Democratic ministers, born in Malmö) in People’s Park; Optimist Orchestra (erected in 1985) near Stortorget the central square in the city centre of Malmö; and the Karl X monument in the middle of Stortorget (erected in 1896).

**Monument as a coulisse in the city space**

Per Henrik Ling was born on 15 November 1776 and has been called the father of Swedish gymnastics. All medals at the Summer Olympics in Sweden in 1912 had a portrait of Per Henrik Ling on the back.

On the first Saturday in July 1896, large parts of Malmö’s upper class were present when the Vendes Artillery Regiment’s music corps blew fanfare and thus started the inauguration of Malmö Idrottsplats (Malmö’s oldest stadium). The event for the day was cycling competitions on the newly built velocipede track. Two years after the Olympics 1912, the monument of Ling was erected 1914 and once again with Malmö’s most prominent and the gentry as participants and in military forms.

The story of the Ling sculpture contains nothing controversial and could be an example of sports monuments of silence, partly forgotten. Part of the ‘invisibility’ can be understood from the fact that the sculpture, based on its permanent location, is only regarded as a ‘street coulisse’ if it is not reactivated in the future by graffiti or other damage. Ling also represents the masculinity and body culture that can be seen as something positive, from the perspective that Malmö was a working-class city where a strong masculine man was part of the class identity.

**Monument to a living person**

An aspect of the discussion about the monument to Ibrahimović has been about erecting memorials or monuments to living people, which is unusual; however, it is not impossible to find examples. In that sense, the Zlatan monument is not unique. Some examples on athletes honoured by sculptures are the middle-distance runner Gunder Häg in Gävle (1947), football players, such as the Lennart
'Nacka' Skoglund statue in Stockholm’s South side (1984), Henrik Larsson (2011) in Helsingborg, and prominent female soccer players as Caroline Seger in Helsingborg (2019) and Nilla Fischer in Linköping (2019). There are also earlier examples, such as when prominent Malmö labour politician Gustav Möller was present when his bust was unveiled in 1952. In the view of the politically dominated labour movement in Malmö the bust of Gustav Möller did not raise any objections, either then or subsequently.

The relation to the place

The Optimist Orchestra from 1985 located near to the central square in Malmö is perhaps the most popular monument among visitors taking photos on family members ‘socializing with the sculpture. The bronze sculpture is led by a drum major and consists of four playing participants. A decoration in a street depicting an orchestra might not cause any debate, other than a purely aesthetic one, if it were not for the fact that the location is also the starting point for the Social Democrats and trade unions’ traditional May Day parade in Malmö. However, it was clear that the relationship to the place had a meaningful role that filled the sculpture with a symbolic meaning for some viewers and the right-wing political opposition, which it probably would not have had in a different location. The Optimist Orchestra was politically ‘contaminated’ by its location in the street space.

Monument as location, size, and quantity/range

The most striking monument in Malmö, both in terms of location and size, is the statue of the Swedish King Carolus X Gustavius, who died in 1660, he conquered the southern landscapes of Denmark where Malmö was situated, and the Danish town became Swedish according to the peace treaty of 1658. Due to its size and central location facing the city hall (built 1546), the monument is significant to viewers in the city’s history. The monument has also been given different meanings by different groups, over time, since it was erected in 1896 by the Swedish Crown Prince Gustavius V and has become a constant object of motions of varying party-political value in the City Council to be taken down and replaced by a more appropriate and less provocative one.

The conflicts connected by the size and a central location could be transferred in a figurative sense to understand the upset feelings around the Zlatan monument. You cannot get past the monument without also relating to it. To sum up: Place, space, and size loaded the Ibrahimović monument with meanings not possible to ignore.

From football icon to...

With the move to Malmö and the solemn inauguration, a discussion also started about what the monument actually symbolized and what message was conveyed through Linde’s depiction of Ibrahimović. As shown above, there is also a relationship between object, size, and place that is essential when a monument is interpreted, given meaning, and understood by different groups or interests.

Perhaps, with the help of the concept of referentiality – that is, how the sculpture is understood by different viewers/groups – one could also interpret the Ibrahimović monument as being interwoven with and personifying a modernist tradition, which carried values such as individualism, personal freedom, and uncensored diversity. Essentially, modernism came to stand as a symbol of democracy, which meant that an opponent of modernism could risk being perceived as an opponent of democracy. Could this be a way of understanding one of the conflict zones (prior to the Hammarby deal) in the interpretation of the monument? Against this (far-reaching) individualism, is the collective, communal tradition and belonging set to a city or to a football team? Or
a globalized world where the labour market and loyalty are international, partly EU-fenced, and where other rules of the game apply?33

This reflects the horizon within the local community and is outspoken in Ibrahimović’s own biography, when he writes about his future football dreams as a young player. The dreams went from the local teams where he played in Rosengård to Barcelona and Real Madrid. The city of Malmö was not part of Ibrahimović’s geographical imaginary world, and therefore slipped around Malmö FF, which belonged to the other and unknown world and part of the city.34 That also explains why Ibrahimović was not impressed when he was invited to play at Malmö FF, the most prominent team in the town, and perhaps also his future ambivalent relation to the team.

The clash became public in the (dominating) local paper Sydsvenskan, when two well-known cultural personalities interpreted the monument that was erected over Zlatan in October 2019. The debate was expanded to be about the transition from an industrial city to something other and, connectedly, the city’s identity. It turned out to be Zlatan against another MFF legend, Bosse Larsson (who played 307 matches from 1962–1979 and scored 119 goals):

“‘Bosse’ (Bosse Larsson) was a living symbol of the working-class Malmö where the team – regardless of whether it was Kockums (shipyard) workers in the process of building a boat or eleven football players – was bigger than the self.”35

In this interpretation, the individualist Ibrahimović became the opposite of Bosse, and therefore Ibrahimović is not a symbol of Malmö, and accordingly the monument should be placed in the young Zlatan’s neighbourhood in Rosengård as a source of inspiration for young people and football tourists.36

This interpretation was not unchallenged, instead Zlatan always stands up to an outdated Malmö image of working-class Malmö romance, relevant for more than 20 years. It is a different Malmö today, one that looks different and has different conditions than in the time of Bosse Larsson: ‘Those who claim to be interpreters of working-class Malmö are not able to relate to Zlatan’s class revenge as a child of immigrants’.37 This debate took place in September 2019 before Ibrahimović’s deal with Hammarby football club in October of the same year, which changed focus from identity and belonging to the club to betrayal and sharpened the tone of the debate.

**Sport history and collective memory**

In Sweden, football emerged in the early twentieth century as an arena for national and local community projects. Sport provided modern role models and fuelled feelings of unity and pride, and sporting success became a symbolic manifestation of cultural and economic progress. The emphasis of modern competitive sports on efficiency, measurability, records, and competition made it well adapted to the society of the new trade and industrial capitalist bourgeoisie.38 In Malmö, MFF, a former working-class football club that was closely linked to social democracy in Malmö, emerged as a uniting symbol, binding the bourgeoisie together with the city’s working class. Football historian Torbjörn Andersson argued for the existence of a specific historic ‘Swedish football model’, characterized by a strong emphasis on national unity and social harmony, as well as on fostering and disciplining the (male, and especially working class) youth.39 This ‘Swedish model’ was based on the amateur ideal and voluntarism, and Swedish football clubs still have strong ties to the public sphere and a relatively low degree of market dependence.40

The early sports arenas were simultaneously also imprinted with notions of gender. Gender historians have shown how sport emerged as a social space separated from women, at a time when the male hegemony was challenged by women’s demands for rights and participation in society.41 This history has continued to shape sport as a socio-cultural phenomenon into our time. However, increasing commercialization and globalization came to radically change the conditions of competitive sports during the last decades of the 20th century, not least regarding football.
Ideas on memory as collective and social – that is, not simply individual and autobiographical – were first developed by sociologists such as Durkheim and Halbwachs. History and memory here emerged as something that people can share, created and expressed through active memory-creating processes and the use of history.\textsuperscript{42} The collective memory traditions of sport have often been built around triumphs and heroes, in a nostalgic mythologization and canonization. There is a strong emotional language around ‘historical’ and ‘unforgettable’ events, where important players are named ‘legends’.\textsuperscript{43} Among today’s football supporters, there is an active use of the team’s history: the successes, the revenge, the foreground figures. For example, MFF’s supporters use the team’s history in the stands’ tifo performances, featuring former players, coaches and leaders such as ‘Hövdingen’ Eric Persson. Persson was the chairman of Malmö FF between 1937 and 1974 and is commonly regarded as one of the most prominent figures in Swedish football history. Persson had a crucial function as an integrating and uniting link between the city’s bourgeois and working-class men.

Sports scholars have explored the football stadium as a central space in the creation of collective identity and memory, for the team as well as for the city or local community.\textsuperscript{44} The stadium provides a spatial common heritage, a home and near-sacred place with a highly emotional charge that supporters might experience as deeply personal. It is a relatively permanent room where individuals, families, and generations’ relationship to their football team take place. In her study of the use of history among Swedish football supporters, Katarzyna Herd described the stadium as an ‘emotional museum’, a space where collective memories are expressed in ritualized ways.\textsuperscript{45}

\textit{The uses of sport’s history – a critical perspective}

Zlatan Ibrahimović’s placement in the sport’s historical tradition, as described above, is ambiguous. The tradition rests, on one hand, on locality – the place-bound, the team – and, on the other hand, on the national – the struggle and the showdown between countries. Paralleling the tributes, Ibrahimović has throughout his career been criticized for being an individualist who – contrary to a normative ‘Swedish’ football tradition – puts himself before the team. In a study of sports journalism in the early 2000s, Agneta Furvik found that Ibrahimović was consistently portrayed as an outsider in the Swedish imagined community. She noted that Ibrahimović was often described with adjectives such as ‘non-Swedish’, ‘cocky’, ‘cheeky’, ‘impulsive’, ‘spontaneous’, and ‘individualistic’.\textsuperscript{46} He unapologetically broke from the collective and humble ‘Swedish’ athlete tradition, instead becoming a global megastar.\textsuperscript{47}

In sport’s cultural heritage tradition, contemporary achievements are consistently measured against past sporting successes. In her book \textit{Playing on the Periphery}, Tara Brabazon developed a critical discussion on this idealization of past achievements and of ‘legendary’ players and coaches. For example, she argued that sports museums use artefacts and photographs too uncritically, in a way that simplifies and iconify complex contexts and figures. Triumphant moments are preserved for posterity in historical memory and chronicles, while failures and setbacks are obscured. Brabazon warned about the risks of an uncritical nostalgia for past ‘golden ages’ as imagining a simpler time, expressing nostalgia for a ‘more homogeneous’ society. In these forms of memorial practices, broader social and political aspects disappear, sustaining the self-image of sport as separate from political concerns, tides, and developments.

\textit{Playing on the Periphery} unfolds the role that sports history, as produced in the mass media and cultural heritage industry, plays in maintaining colonial and patriarchal worldviews, attitudes, and practices. The book examines the exclusionary practices through which those on the ‘periphery’ have been excluded from sport history: from participation, representation and recollection, for example due to gender, skin colour, or sexuality. Importantly, Brabazon discussed how nostalgic
stories risk hampering the design of new and more inclusive forms of identification and communities.48

The statue of Zlatan as a memorial and symbol

Zlatan Ibrahimović and his career can be placed in relief to a number of different, historically shaped contexts and processes of change: tensions between established historical traditions and new developments, the collective and the individual, the local and the global, idealism and the market. The Ibrahimović statue raised questions of belonging and representation to the fore: Who can symbolize what? Sweden? Malmö? Rosengården? MFF? What did the figure of this still-active footballer represent: Zlatan, the son of Malmö? The boy from Rosengården? The most successful player in Swedish football history? Or the global football star, without any specific local identity or loyalty? Ibrahimović appears as a symbol that can be filled with different meanings and values, while his life, as well as the Zlatan story continues.

The complexity and set of interpretive possibilities were further enhanced by the statue’s ambivalent origins. The creator, Peter Linde, preferred an earlier version of the statue, showing Ibrahimović doing his famous bicycle kick against England, but the player himself preferred the version that ended up becoming the statue. As Sydsvenskan’s Linda Fagerström pointed out, Linde’s sculpture is spaceless, ‘not intended to be in dialogue with a particular environment or a pre-conceived public space’.49 However, through the final location at Malmö Stadium, it was placed in dialogue with the memorial tradition of the place, to the team’s home and ‘sacred’ place. Hence, the revelation that Zlatan had bought into Hammarby provoked strong reactions. The purchase into an opposing team was perceived as a violation of the community, the home and homeland.50

Thus, the statue of Ibrahimović reminds us of the fact that the local dimension, even in the globalized football industry, still constitutes meaningful spaces where history and memory live on, are processed and renegotiated. Conflicts arise in the intersection between supporter-driven local culture focused on loyalty to the team and the place, and the global, individualist football culture with megastars, big money, and mobility.51 Herd emphasized that historical references here provide a counterweight, or counter-narrative, to today’s globalized and money-driven top football. Collective memory narratives linking the present to the team’s heritage and traditions construct historical linkages, enabling the maintenance of an image of some measure of authenticity and independence from the big business of global football. For MFF, Herd pointed out, working-class identity is crucial, linking the team with the historical industrial and working-class city of Malmö.52

The events and debate about the Ibrahimović statue raise broader questions regarding the usage of the history of sport within sport. It is a reminder of the fact that collective memory practices are ongoing, dynamic, and ever-changing, constantly created and re-created rather than settled or stable.53 From the beginning, the unclear purpose and target group of the statue brought an ambiguity about who it was supposed to address, as well as about which symbolic version of Ibrahimović should be kept in remembrance. History is never a finished reservoir to pour out achievements and heroes. Rather, these are cultural processes characterized by notions of identity, loyalty, and the delimitation of communities, and by both historical and contemporary – and changing – power relations.

There is a potentially democratic element in football as a cultural heritage tradition, going against the national tradition of remembering kings and political elites. The erection of a statue of football player Lennart ‘Nacka’ Skoglund, made by artist Olle Adrin and erected in 1984 in the district of Södermalm in Stockholm, was the result of an initiative of a social democratic politician of the municipality, specifically identifying the lack of memorials for popular entertainers among all the kings and others of the elite. Andersson commented that the statue, remarkably, has never been subjected to damage or graffiti, which is likely a testament to its popularity.54 In this way, sport has offered ordinary people some chance of being canonized.55 But this democratic dimension is
challenged – perhaps nullified – as players have become global media stars and seem to live far away from the everyday experiences of the ‘ordinary person’.

The proposal to place the statue in Rosengård can be seen as an attempt to create alternative narratives and new memory traditions in new places, as an update and adaptation to late modern society. However, it might also be interpreted as a banishment of that which does not fit into the narrative of a historically charged place, the team arena. Hence, it is a triumph of nostalgia for ‘old time’ football and football players.56

**Zlatan, Rosengård, and the betrayals: the otherness of Rosengård**

The story of Zlatan Ibrahimović has a complex relationship to a specific neighbourhood in Malmö, Rosengård, where he spent the formative years of his upbringing. Rosengård is a stigmatized 1960s housing area that has come to symbolize social problems in Malmö and Sweden and has also, at times, appeared in international media as a symbol of a failure of Swedish integration policy. Rosengård was part of large modernist national housing programme called the Million Program. In Rosengård one can find public art and sites connected to Zlatan Ibrahimović and it is also the place that is used as a backdrop when media wants to point to Ibrahimović as a role model for migrant youth in deprived housing areas.

The ambiguous connection between the Million Program and Swedish national identity and its focus on modernity is strongly connected to public opinion on Ibrahimović and his connection to Rosengård, Malmö, Sweden, and the world outside.57 Ibrahimović shares the same relationship to Swedish normality as Rosengård. Non-Swedishness, cockiness, authenticity, and raw talent have also been projected onto Rosengård and its inhabitants. In this case, place and person have merged into one unified story: that of outsiderhood to normal society. This outsiderhood has also defined insiderhood and Swedish normality. This is ultimately a story about complicated entanglements between identity and place on different scales concerning the individual, the housing area, the city, the nation, and an international non-placeness.

Football, in itself, has an element of place-boundness. The famous quote by Michel de Certeau – ‘Space is a practiced place’ – is certainly true of football supporters.58 In this meaning, place is a symbolic relation between the home turf of the team, the limits of this space and its overlap between other spaces in the city. In the same way as Rosengård has never been seen as a ‘normal’ part of Malmö, Zlatan Ibrahimović has not been seen as a fully worthy member of the largest football club in Malmö, Malmö FF, as shown by the recent debate around his investment in Hammarby. Accusations of betrayal, both in the past and the present, have been levelled by MFF supporters.59 But what is the nature of this betrayal? The answer can be found in the intricate interplay among class, place, and nation.

**Class, place, and nation**

Since place, in this meaning, also contains social relations and emotions, the individual is affected when the significant place is affected. Thus, the actions of individuals influence the meaning of specific places in the social consciousness. This illustrates the phenomena of ‘scaling’, which means that social phenomena change character according to geographical scale, which in the case of Zlatan changes from housing area to city to nation and possibly also to a global scale.60 The Zlatan Ibrahimovic ‘brand’ contains intricate connections and differences between these different scales.

An important aspect on the local scale is the notion of class. The historian EP Thompson claimed that ‘class happens’, and pointed to the meaning of place-bound social relations in the formation of class identity.61 The discussion around Ibrahimović illustrates the difference in geographical mobility connected to place-bound notions of class. The culture of football presupposes emotional attachments to place that are not visible to the same degree in other sports. As in ethno-nationalistic notions of belonging, community in football is connected to geographic place. The team, not unlike
a nation, does not need to reside physically on this place, but the place is still fundamental to identification.

Historically, ethno-nationalistic notions like these have been used as emotional leverage in order to make people act in the interests of the nation, or in this case, the team. In these identity processes, border lines are drawn between those who belong and those who do not. This tension between Zlatan Ibrahimović’s perceived outsiderhood and stereotypical Swedish national identity has been used in a lavishly produced television commercial for Volvo, showing Ibrahimović hunting for game in the snowy northern forests of the country. For his fans, this could be either seen as a sell-out or a confirmation of having arrived at the top of society.

This is the dilemma of the working-class hero: You can take Zlatan out of Rosengård, but not Rosengård out of Zlatan. This sentence adorns the entrance of a bike-pedestrian tunnel that leads to Rosengård and is meant to denote a strong emotional connection to Rosengård; Zlatan will not forget us, we who are still here! But it could also be read as a threat: We know who you really are! This volatile relationship might be illustrated by the events that took place when Ibrahimović made a visit to a football court in Rosengård named after him, Zlatan Court. When he arrived, some youths threw firecrackers at him and his entourage, forcing him to leave while making angry comments about the youths. The place deserted Zlatan.62

Rosengård, both as a social class and a place, must be left behind for dreams to be reached, for potentialities to be fulfilled. The price for this is a double outsiderhood, always being the potential traitor, the one who left and forgot, but also never reaches home, always outside, exceptional in a double meaning. The vandalism against the statue of Ibrahimović confirms this dilemma.

If we bring this to the local scale and watch the strong reactions from Malmö FF fans towards him investing in a Stockholm-based football club, Hammarby, we can see examples of the same emotional reactions: You have failed us, you have failed your roots, and above all, you have abandoned us!

The reactions become so strong because ethno-nationalism, besides place, also contains another very strong element of identity: the family. Whether it is about Rosengård or Malmö FF, the imagined blood tie strengthens the solidarity against external enemies. Those who do not have perceived blood ties must be symbolically adopted in order to take a place in the team. This adoption is always conditional: Is the member loyal enough or are the identifications fickle and deceitful? When place is betrayed, the imagined family is also betrayed.

**Placelessness**

Zlatan Ibrahimović personifies the class traveller who has abandoned the boundedness of place and has reached the very specific form of place in the international scale: the placelessness of luxury hotels, VIP airport lounges, and private corporate jets, all enabled by the global placelessness of the international economy.63 Specific features on the local scale become neutralized when they are scaled up. When Zlatan operates on the scale of international club football, the connection to Malmö and Rosengård becomes neutralized. The Swedish national sport channels on television adapt their broadcasts from international leagues to those that Zlatan happens to play in. The nation wants to see Zlatan play, regardless of what league he plays in. Young Swedish football players want to be seen wearing a sweater from the team that Zlatan plays in. In the spring of 2020, Ibrahimović pleaded for help in a fund-raising event connected to the COVID-19 crisis concerning ‘the country that I love’: Italy.64 For Zlatan himself, multiple identifications are possible, but for the place-bound fan-culture this is not the case. The place is the team, the team is the family, and betrayal of the place and the team is a betrayal against the family. Thus, the interplay between the different geographic scales creates a complicated game of identifications where global financial capital both interacts with and is juxtaposed to class-based local identities and ethno-nationalistic currents. The
The Zlatan monument: a mirror of a conflict-ridden Sweden in 2020

A monument is not an aesthetic decoration that takes place in the space of the city room; it is filled and refilled over time, with meaning and messages to present and future viewers and must therefore rather be understood as utility art, where the aesthetic value is subordinated to how it is interpreted and understood. The size and location of the monument of Zlatan Ibrahimović emphasized the built-in divergent messages and, together with the ambiguity of what the monument was to represent, soon made it filled with various messages, all of them loaded with a series of conflicts.

If the message was to highlight and focus on Zlatan as the football player, this immediately created a conflict with AIK’s supporters, as the proposal was to erect the monument outside the National Arena, which is also the club’s home arena in Stockholm, and in the same way with MFF’s supporters once it emerged that Ibrahimović had bought shares the Hammarby club. A football supporter simply could not physically pass the monument just outside the entrance of the arena without relating to it. Accordingly, the monument was loaded with a non-belonging in Stockholm (AIK supporters), or with the betrayal of the club in Malmö.

The other message that the Swedish FA wanted to send via the monument was that Ibrahimović represented a ‘feeling that anything is possible’. But separating the football player Zlatan from place and football team would prove difficult, if not impossible. From that perspective, the strong emotions that had emerged in the debate and in the vandalism of the monument raise deeper questions about the use of history, also in sports, the writing of history and its narratives, deeply interwoven with sports and the culture of football supporters. In that sense, a monument is just like history; it is alive and in constant dialogue with its contemporaries and is therefore something that ‘becomes’ in an ongoing being. Therefore, the ambiguity behind the purpose of the monument also creates an ambiguity about the narrative and the recipient of the monument, which ‘we, us, and them’ or ‘what’ is to be remembered? Conceptions of identity, loyalty, communities, and power relations all clash in the monument. The various proposals that emerged, in connection with the dismantling of the monument, to move the Zlatan monument from Malmö Stadium area (which was the choice of Zlatan), to Rosengård (where Zlatan grow up) also quickly turned out to be filled with potentially explosive emotional charges and identifications that further contribute to the image or narrative of Zlatan, Rosengård, and Malmö. However, there was also a minefield of tensions between different geographical scales, that places place-bound identities with their power and loyalty relations, which emanates from local class-based or ethno-nationalist communities in conflict with, and in opposition to, international big business on a global market. Therefore, the rejected proposal to place the monument in Rosengård can be interpreted as an attempt to shape alternative narratives and new traditions of meaning, in new places – an update and adaptation to a changed, late modern society.

It might also be possible to understand the Zlatan Ibrahimović monument as a mirror of a conflict-ridden Sweden in 2020, where questioned loyalties and growing class divisions also create strong communities of supporters, fellowships, and solidarities on a local arena.

Notes

1. MFF have won the national league 21 times and played in the European Championship Cup final in 1978.
2. Sjöholm Skrubbe, Skulptur i folkhemmet, 44.


7. Dabakis, Visualizing Labour in American Sculpture; Ellenius, Massornas monument; Johansson, Kampen om historien; Berggren, Giordano Bruno på Campo dei Fiori.


10. Sjöholm Skrubbé, Skulptur i folkhemmet, 153.


13. Ibid.


15. Fotbollskanalen, 3 June 2018. Fotbollskanalen.se is the most influential football website and belongs to Channel 4 and broadcasts football news and covers Sweden and Europe with around 1,063,607 unique visitors per week (2018).


19. Municipal executive working committee, Minutes, 12 November 2018.

20. Subject: Donation by the Swedish Football Association of a sculpture by Zlatan Ibrahimović to Malmö. Letter to, Municipal executive working committee, KSAU 12 November 2018. The three options for placement were already stated in connection with the donation.


22. Municipal executive working committee, Minutes, 12 November 2018; Malmö Culture Committee reference group for artistic decoration city of Malmö, Minutes, 23 May 2018; 3 October 2018; 28 November 2018; 11 February 2019; 30 April 2019; 2 October 2019.

23. Zlatan Ibrahimović’s feet are immortalized in a star imprint on the ground at the pitch along with his autograph. The facility was designed and designed by Christian Persia and Elzbieta von Semkov.

24. Municipal executive working committee, Minutes, 12 November 2018; Malmö Culture Committee reference group for artistic decoration city of Malmö, Minutes, 23 May 2018; 3 October 2018; 28 November 2018; 11 February 2019; 30 April 2019; 2 October 2019.


27. Sjöholm Skrubbé, Skulptur i folkhemmet, 286–288; Föreningen för resande av staty över P H Ling, 1907–1914, Malmö stadssarkiv.

28. The latter two vandalized on unclear grounds. It may have been an anti-feminist action by the radical right. Today they are exhibited at Helsingborg’s sports museum. Vandalism of public art is not uncommon and may have various causes or purpose, Sjöholm Skrubbé, Skulptur i folkhemmet, 278–288; Johansson, Konstguide, 99.


31. This does not mean that there were no other proposals for placement, but well placed Södertalje/Stor torget, the sculpture was filled with a symbolic meaning.

32. Sjöholm Skrubbé, Skulptur i folkhemmet, 190.

33. See, for example, Fever pitch! The rise of the Premier League, British documentary 2021.


35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.


Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Bibliography

Books and Articles

Documents: The City Council

*The Municipal Executive Board/Municipal executive working committee.*

Malmö stads beredningsorgan för offentlig konst, *protokoll*, May 23, 2018; October 3, 2018; November 28, 2018; February 11, 2019; April 30, 2019; October 02, 2019

Malmö Culture Committee

Malmö Culture Committee reference group for artistic decoration city of Malmö


Malmö Departmentof Culture

City Archivesof Malmö

Sculptures and monuments

*Karl X Gustav*, John Börjeson 1896. Stortorget, Malmö

*Pehr Henrik Ling* (byst) 1914. Gamla idrottsplatsen, Malmö

*Gustav Möller* (byst), Ivar Johansson 1952. Folkets park, Malmö

*Optimistorkester*, Yngve Lundell 1985. Södertgatan, Malmö

*Zlatan Ibrahimović*, Peter Linde 2019. (Stored in Malmö)

Newspapers/magazines


Ekelund, F. And M. Marisol. 'Zlatanstatyn borde stå på Rosengård'. Sydsvenskan, November 14, 2019.

Radio, television

Fotbollskanalen, June 3, 2018.


Angående: Donation av Svenska Fotbollsförbundet av skulptur av Zlatan Ibrahimović till Malmö. Tjänsteskrivelse till kommunstyrelsens arbetsutskott KSAU November 12 2018


Föreningen för resande av stats av P H Ling, 1907 1914

Furvik, A. 'Om fotboll och dess föreställda gemenskaper. En kritisk diskursanalys av tidningstexter om fotbollsspe-


Kommunfullmäktige, protokoll, September 1, 1984 (ang. Optimistorkesnern).


Protokoll, October 23, 2003


