

Summer Cottages in Finland

The cultural construction of life, space and national identity

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LIVING IN THE NORTH

This article deals with the public and socially-constructed myths and ideologies concerning summer cottages in Finland.

My aim is to explain how this seemingly common, everyday phenomenon plays a part in the construction of Finnish national and architectural images and their spatialization.

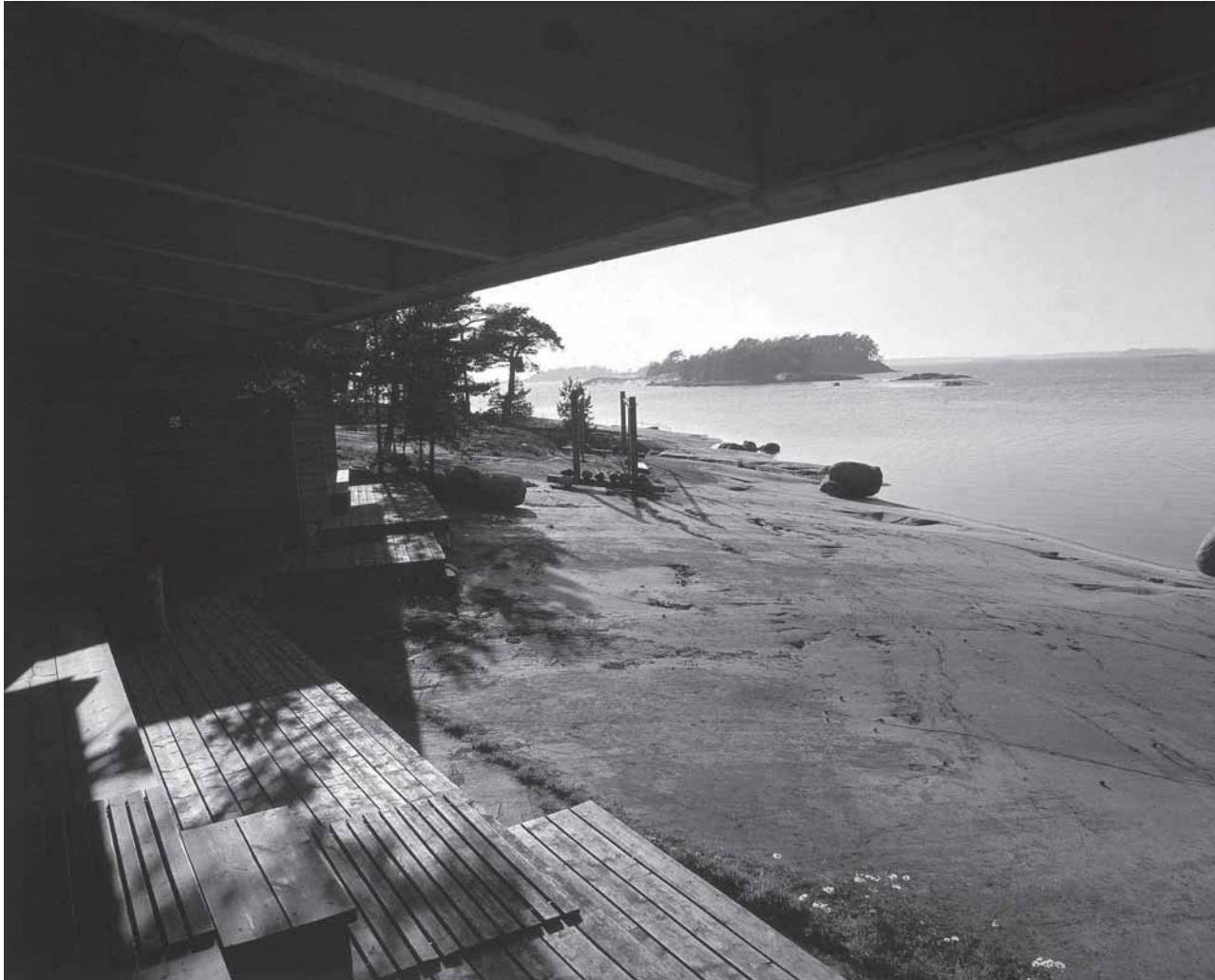
There are approximately 461,400 summer cottages in Finland today. With a total population of 5.1 million, this means that almost every fourth household owns a cottage and even more have access to one, since cottages are increasingly used by extended families (*Statistics Finland*, 2003).

In Finland owning a summer cottage and spending time there is seen as being a part of normal life and having very few elitist connotations. The development of the activity is a consequence of a number of factors, including Finland's internationally late but rapid urbanization after the Second World War, migration from rural to urban areas, and the increase in leisure time and the general standard of living (Vuori, 1966). The peak years of cottage building were the

1970s and 1980s, when more than 100,000 cottages were built each decade. But even today some 5,000 new cottages are being constructed every year (*Statistics Finland*, 2003).

The most obvious motive for having a cottage is considered to be the desire to enjoy the short Finnish summer in the best possible environment: in the countryside, surrounded by trees and next to a lake or seafront. Furthermore, the cherished Finnish sauna tradition is a central part of the cottage experience. The Finnish cottage either is a combination "sauna-cottage", where all the spaces are under the same roof, or has a separate sauna building. The cottage idea, both as a lifestyle phenomenon and as an architectural form, was developed before the Second World War, but it was only after the war and the subsequent post-war crisis that the cottages really became popular among all social groups in society.

Having a cottage is also said to entail nostalgia for one's own or past generation's former rural home region, as well as a wish to be lord of one's own manor, away from oppressing city life and the suburbs. The Finn's mentality and self-understanding has until recent years been strongly bound to nature, the countryside and agrarian values. As Short



1. Lingonsö, Barösund archipelago. Kaija and Hekki Sirén (1968). Sirén Architects.

(1991) has argued, societies exist and rule in a certain place at a certain time and their history and geography constitute the context from which they are constructed. Concepts of countryside, wilderness, and the city are always parts of the national environmental ideology and help to build national identities and nations as a whole. They are widely used and reproduced: in fact, they are so common that they are not easily noticed. In Finland, rural landscapes, and especially a summertime view of the patchwork of forests and lakes, are almost self-evident characteristics (Klinge, 1984). Thus it is tempting to claim that the summer cottage has been used as

a means to construct Finnish national identity. The unique Finnish environment, with a summer cottage in the very heart of it, has become part of the national landscape, which is transmitted as a part of the Finnish meta-narrative, as well as operating as a carrier of that narrative (Vilkuna, 1997).

Nature, forest, shore

As already mentioned, according to Short (1991), the countryside, wilderness and the city are used in the national romantic vocabulary. They also define summer cottage culture. A cottage is situated away from the city in the middle of an

imagined wilderness and is considered to be a carrier of an agrarian tradition in the otherwise urbanized world. Because these concepts are culturally constructed, the way they are defined varies according to the historical situation and the group or person that uses them. There is not one single nature, wilderness or city, but many.

For today's cottage culture, even if its philosophy has some roots in Roman villas, the countryside manors of the European gentry and the old Finnish tradition of a seasonal change of dwelling, the first important definition was the way nature and culture were opposed to each other during the emergence of the bourgeoisie culture between the late 18th century and the beginning of the 20th century. It meant economic growth and spreading possibilities for new groups of people. It also raised the question of the search for the original human state, which emerged with Jean Jacques Rousseau's writings. He focused attention on those qualities that had been oppressed: the child, the primitive, and the ordinary people (Vogt, 1998; Rousseau, 2000). Similar themes may also underpin the villa culture, interpreted as a search for the true self (e.g., the return to one's playful childhood, the imitation of the first man in his hut, and the urban bourgeoisie's wish to share a common heritage with the ordinary people in rural areas). This meant a new arrangement of time between the city and countryside. Time was divided into an "unnatural" working time in the winter in the artificial, man-made city and a "natural" or "authentic" leisure time in the summer in the countryside. Thus the family, unspoiled nature, and the summer cottage provided an intimate contrast to public urban life (Löfgren 1979).

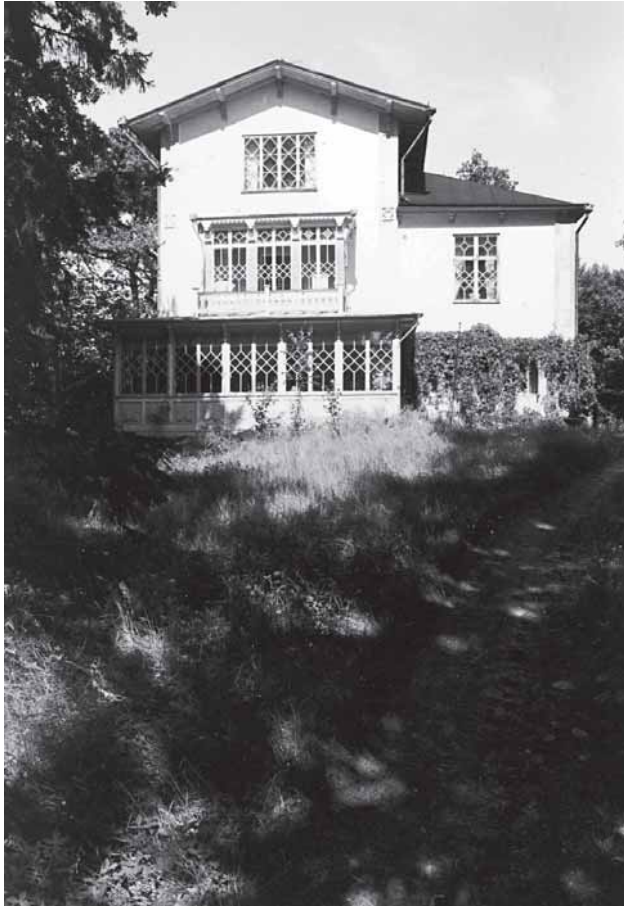
The second step in cottage culture happened during the era of National Romanticism in Finland. It was then that the Finnish-speaking identity was associated with inland woods and forest-covered areas, and when villa construction adopted some of the "Finnish" features that it still retains today. The bourgeois villa owners in Finland had been affluent city bourgeoisie, often the Swedish-speaking elite of the country, whose interest was focused on the archipelago and coastal regions inhabited by the Swedish-speaking peasantry. During the national rising the romantic search for such Finnishness that could be described as original and pure led to expeditions into the inlands and eastern Finland. The vast forest wilderness, "the land of a thousand lakes", was to become the essential Finnish environment. The forest



2. Helenius sauna cottage, Viljo Revell (1954). Museum of Finnish Architecture.

was seen as both heritage and future; it was connected with mental, religious and economic values (Kuusamo, 1984). Also, the choice of areas and villa ownership corresponded to the existing linguistic borders (Eklund, 1985). The fine arts as well as the applied arts were used consciously in constructing the Finnish national identity. It was thought that Finland as a nation should have cultural artifacts that people could feel belonged to them (Tani, 1995). This also meant a conscious effort to create architecture that could be defined as Finnish. "Finnishness" was indicated by the villa's location beside a "wilderness" lake, the lack of neighbours and other people, the preservation of the "woody" appearance of the plot, and the preference for a bare log exterior (Julkunen & Kuusamo, 1983). The ideal of this villa type was exemplified in the wilderness studios of artists, for example, Emil Wikström, Akseli Gallen-Kallela, and Pekka Halonen. It was from houses such as these that the new villa architecture became popular (Wäre, 1991).

The third step that led finally to the notion of a classical Finnish summer cottage was the development of functionalism in the 20th century. This entailed the simplification and popularisation of the cottage after the Second World War, as well as situating it very near the shoreline. The



3. Villa Roma on the island of Ruissalo near Turku, by Georg Theodor Polichron Chiewitz (1851), was the first cottage-type villa in Finland. Turun Maakuntamuseo.

cottage became a simple base to live in, by the shore in the middle of wilderness. Moreover, simplicity and practicality were just as much design principles as moral values, and they suited the nationalistic ideas of Finnish architecture very well. It also meant that the sauna became the domestic equivalent of spa culture. In the sauna of Villa Oivala (1932) the spaces for cooking and sleeping were joined under the same roof with the actual sauna spaces in order to create a place for weekend use. Its model later gained familiarity through popular architecture, and thus can be considered one of the prototypes of the Finnish summer cottage (Jeskanen, 1998). The sauna and its usage, combined with the National Romantic ideas of Finnish heritage, made it seem traditional that the sauna should be on the shore. But that was not the

case: in the agrarian tradition, the sauna was situated near the water well, and only occasionally on the shore. Swimming was not a common practice among the rural people.

At the turn of the twentieth century, water was not only considered healthy, it was also seen to symbolize something very primitive, and houses built on piles above the water were thought to be the most primitive and original form of habitation. This had to do with the romantic ideas of Pacific cultures and archaeological findings of the so-called lake dwellings in Switzerland. This Romanticism inspired, for example, Le Corbusier in his designs and writings. A house at the shore had come to represent Rousseau-like ideas of noble primitivism in modern architecture (Vogt 1998). It seems that cottage culture brought the sauna, swimming and cottages together, in the spirit of primitive pureness.

Myth

As already mentioned, the summer cottage is considered to represent something that is originally Finnish, having its roots in the traditional Finnish way of life. There is no reason to say this is untrue, but it is a partial truth, which hides the historical context. There are certainly parts of tradition present at the cottage, but there are also characteristics that are clearly new and modern. For example, the idea of constructing the cottage in the middle of a forest didn't belong to the rural tradition. Constructing a home near the woods is rather a new, romantic, international idea, although the mental connection to the forest has otherwise deep roots in the Finnish heritage (Linkola, 1981). Even the architecture expresses the difference. The "typical Finnish cottage," the model that has been most popular for many years, has a log construction, a single storey, a loft, and a saddle roof facing towards the shore. It has a traditional appearance but actually very little in common with a traditional Finnish rural house. Its shape and aesthetics have various origins, both international and national.

It is also often said that the shoreline is *the* traditional place to habit in Finland. For instance, a direct line is drawn from the traditional habitat to the modern cottage in the Ministry of Environment's draft guideline for planning on the shorelines (Ympäristöministeriö 2003). In the guidelines it's described how summer cottages have emerged from the agrarian way of living near the shoreline, where there have been "good conditions for agriculture". This kind of univer-



4. Lasse's Villa, Finnström, Lars Sonck (1895). A view through a bull's eye window. Museum of Finnish Architecture.

salized description hides both the historical and geographical variations of traditional habitation in Finland. In the agrarian world there have been areas and times where building near the shore has been avoided due to the climate and safety reasons. To build as near to the shoreline, with as direct a connection to the water as summer cottages have, has not been universally common in the traditional agricultural life in Finland.

This development accords with the way in which, according to Barthes (1944), myth works. A myth seems so natural and innocently obvious that it hides its historical background and the social and political context to which it belongs. It is a value that robs images of their historicity. As

Barthes puts it, “The very principle of myth [is to] transform history into nature.” (Ibid. p. 201). It is a social construction; it is formative and unchallenged (Short, 1991). Anything can become myth. Myths are semiotic systems at the second level. That is, the myth of a summer cottage takes a first-level sign, a cottage, as a type of building and adds to it a new signified, which in the case of the Finnish summer cottage is a set of nationalistic values, such as the belief that to be a Finn is to love nature and long for solitude (Barthes, 1994). Hence, the myth of the summer cottage is also about the Finnish need to keep up the traditional rural way of life. That also means preferably having or wanting a closer relationship to nature than to people.



5. Oivala sauna on the island of Villinki, Helsinki, Oiva Kallio (1932).
Museum of Finnish Architecture.

It has to be kept in mind, however, that although myth makes ideological speech, moral values, or aesthetic shapes seem like innocent and natural facts, it's not something untrue. The enjoyment that the cottage life brings is not a lie, nor is it based on a lie, but neither is it based on a natural fact arising from the Finnish tradition and heritage. The myth also has a unifying effect (Barthes 1994).

The love of nature and spending summer at a cottage, going to the sauna, and taking a swim in the lake is objectively good, but it also unifies Finns. The simple cottage life has been thought of as an expression of equality. Architect and professor Aulis Blomstedt (1957) wrote how avoiding city and seeking closeness to nature brought Finns together at every social level. Blomstedt also claimed that every "normal Finnish family usually owns a boat, an outboard motor, and a

summer cottage". This was, in fact, untrue. The standard of living that Blomstedt described was certainly beyond the means of the majority of Finns in the 1950s. It's possible to speculate that for Blomstedt the concept "normal family" meant a middle or upper class family. But the claim had also a barthesian mythical content: the myth was that the cottage-like habitation was the most Finnish, the most desired way of living. During that era in the 1950s most Finns lived in the rural areas, many in quite small houses that could be described as cottages. People also used small boats for transportation and fishing. According to Finnish myth, the people living in the countryside were the fortunate ones, whereas for the city dwellers summer cottage life gave the opportunity to join the idyll of the former. All Finns become cottagers. In this mythology city wealth in a way didn't count. Cities were not "Finnish", they were foreign, unavoidable characteristics of modern life where people lived only because they couldn't make a living in the countryside.

According to Blomstedt, because of the close relationship with nature in Finland, a man of nature and a man of culture are permanently combined in one person. The scientist-professor turns into an old-time fisherman and leaves all traces of the lecture hall atmosphere behind in the city. This idea exemplifies what has been said about the Finnish culture: on the one hand there was a need to be a part of the achievements of European cultural history, and on the other there was a need to emphasize the difference and the uniqueness of the Finnish culture (Knuutila, 1994). Hall (1999) has described the European tradition of banishing nature to the colonies. In this way, representations of the wild, the other, were used to define European culture. In Finnish nationalism these two exist in the same person. According to Romantic ideals, the Finn didn't turn to other cultures or places in search of the primitive. On the contrary, the primeval forest was there on the doorstep and the noble savage was only sleeping during the work period, waiting to be awoken when cottage life begins.

The Summer Cottage as a Part of Spatialization

With the help of Henri Lefebvre's (1991) theory of spatialization, the idea that every society produces its own space, it's possible to see how the spatiality of the cottage and its mythical character is produced and the ways in which the

cottage itself produces social action. It's clear that the summer cottage has spatial significance and a productive and social role in Finnish society.

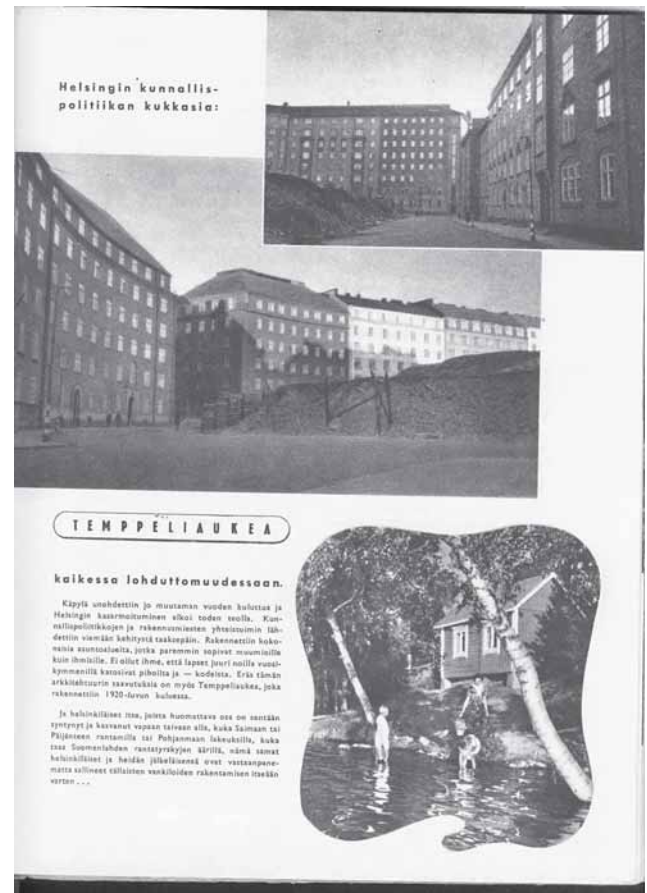
In *The Production of Space* (1991) Lefebvre states that “(social) space is a (social) product”, and that “every society produces a space, its own space”. This production he calls spatialization and defines it as a dialectical process between the triad of 1. *Spatial Practice* – space in everyday life; 2. *Representations of Space* – professional, bureaucratic, expert space, including discursive power; 3. *Spaces of Representation* – ‘representational space’, space as it might be, as a fully lived space. In the case of the Finnish cottage, this means that there are interactions between levels: i.e. 1. The cottage as a part of everyday life; 2. The legislation, planning, etc., that has power over constructing and using the cottage; and 3. The cottage as an experience.

The product, the cottage as space, is at the same time a materialization of the socially-constructed arrangement and a mediator of the social constructions. This means that those social myths that I have described above have their spatial-material forms as a cottage. They affect the way in which the cottage is experienced and the aesthetic choices that are needed to produce that experience.

They also play their part when the legislation and planning regulations are formed. It's often noted how the traditional value of landownership in Finnish culture has affected the land use and building legislation, for example in those directions that guide the preparation of the official plans for shorelines (*Maankäyttö ja rakennuslaki*, 2000). Another example is the way in which the romantic idea of solitary nature experience affects the practice of shoreline planning: it is recommended that the number and density of cottages should be reduced in those places where cottages would become easily visible *to each other*, in order to maintain the feeling that each cottage is isolated. The practice leads, for instance, to reducing the number of cottages that can be built in bay areas, although favouring cottage building in such a location could spare the seascape in general. It also leads to connecting the social and nature factors in an undefined way (*Ympäristöministeriö* 2003).

The City and the Summer Cottage

The cottage itself, then, produces social action, when cottagers arrange their life in the spatial reality of the cottage.



6. Page 21 from the book *Koti vaiko kasarmi lapsillemme* (A Home or Barracks for Our Children?) by Heikki von Hertzen, 1946. The book, in which Hertzen criticized the urban environment and sought new ways of town planning, had a huge influence in Finland.

As a result, spaces are divided “into significant nodes and points, places” (Shields 1991, p. 47).

Places and images connected to them, “place-images”, create a mythological system in which different places are set against each other. These images get their meaning from difference, from ways of distinguishing one place from another. There are also specific activities associated with the different spaces, i.e., special places for special activities (Shields 1991; Urry 1995). The city and the summer cottage create a pair of places that are spatially separate and distinct in both meaning and function. However, their significance lies not only in their distinctiveness but also in the physical and mental transitions that occur in the movement between the two places.

As described above, nature and the search for natural experiences constitute important parts of Finnish culture. According to the modernist ideology of space, every function should have its own space. A direct result of this is the application of zoning principles to planning (Taylor 1998). Functional zoning, combined with the dichotomy between city and nature, has placed nature outside the so-called artificial environment of the metropolitan city. Nature has its own environment, out of the city, and human culture has its own areas, ranging from the agricultural environment to the villages, small towns and metropolitan cities. The most appreciated environment in Finland has been the "true", so-called wild nature, which until recent years has served as the most idealized surroundings of the summer cottage.

It has been crucial to the Finnish cottage myth that being at the cottage is experienced as being alone in the middle of nature. This has also meant that the cottage should not be situated in a village, at least not in a village of cottages. This image of a cottage and its surroundings creates a sense of isolation from other people. In short, you feel alone in the wilderness, and your neighbours feel the same in their cottage only 100 metres away. The summer cottage architecture supports the dichotomy between the city and the cottage. A city should look like a city (Vilkuna, 1997), whereas a summer cottage should look like a cottage, which is defined as characteristically different from the city architecture (Löfgren, 1999). In Finland, the authorities usually don't accept log-construction architecture for urban or suburban housing, even though people might like it. On the other hand, concrete or brick constructions are not at all popular in cottage building, although in principle there are usually no restrictions on using such materials.

In the myth of the city, the dichotomy between city and nature makes the presence of nature in the city problematic. The way the environment is experienced is also socially constructed (Shields, 1991). The socially constructed myths and environmental ideology also affect the personal environmental experience: one could, for example, look at the most beautiful sunset by the sea in Helsinki, and enjoy it, but at the same time imagine how much more beautiful it would be at the cottage. This may be because the summer cottage is experienced as *belonging* to nature, whereas the city is not. This leads us not only to make the experience of nature more authentic at the



7. Model "Ranta-aitta 20" ["shoreline storehouse"], from Rantasalmen Huvilavalmistamo Korhonen Oy. An example of modern Finnish prefabricated cottages of Oivala's sauna type.

cottage, but also doubt the authenticity of nature and nature experiences in the city.

The perceived need for people to be close to nature led to serious efforts in Finnish town planning to create forest towns as a combination of modernist architecture and garden city ideology. Some of them, such as the garden city Tapiola, in Espoo near Helsinki, were deemed architecturally successful. But for the Finnish myth even the nature that those green, relatively sparsely developed suburbs provide is not always enough. The reason may lie in this socially constructed, national environmental ideology, in the perception that nature in the city is simply in the wrong place – an anomaly. If one follows Douglas' (1979) theory that dirt and pollution are "things in the wrong place", it's possible to claim that in order to be considered acceptable in modern Western societies, nature in the city has to be tamed and domesticated in a park, where nature has been cultivated, because otherwise it either will be considered polluting, just like city pigeons and seagulls, or will itself be polluted by the city in the way that wild animals that intrude into the city are considered disturbed.

Travelling to the Summer Cottage

The change of scenery from the city to the countryside seems to be worth the hard work and saving of both money and time for the summer cottage vacation. Earlier I described how nature is constructed in opposition to the city, and vice

versa. This dichotomy nurtures different meanings, activities, moods and experiences associated with each of the two places. Cottage is one mark of the modernization process reaching and changing the traditional countryside. Although such seasonal migration was characteristic of the traditional way of life in Finland, time and activities were never differentiated into work and leisure. This is not all there is to it, though. The movement between different places also seems to play an important role in the cottage ideology.

The movement from the everyday environment and home to the summer cottage is not only a passage between two different places but also a transformation of one's state of mind (Löfgren, 1999). Travelling to the cottage is experienced as a passage to an original, more primitive way of life. It is a ritual passage to a different zone of experience. According to Shields (1991), the journey to beautiful places becomes a part of the vacation experience. Travelling prepares a cottager for the cottage mood, which is an emotional state, a precondition for experiencing the beauty of nature or other characteristics of cottage life. The journey, the rest areas, the lunch stops, and petrol stations; all these act as transitional places. The congestion on the highways before the national holidays, especially before Midsummer Night, adds to the ritual character of the journey. De Certeau (1988) writes that "walking about and travelling substitute for exits, for going away and coming back, which were formerly available by a body of legends... the legends that used to open up space to something different." (ibid. pp.106–107). He argues that Western cultures today seem to have a limited variety of place-related legends or other transformation rituals that could open up the same place or space to a different zone of experience. Because of this, a small town or village dweller, or even the farmer, builds and uses a summer cottage, although his or her everyday surroundings would be perfect settings for the same thing. The cottager's space is thus divided between the everyday home and a leisure cottage, both of which nurture specific activities, moods and experiences.

The meaning of having a summer cottage

After the 1950s, Finland turned from a mainly agrarian to an industrial society, where most people live in cities. Urbanization occurred very quickly. In 1950, 40% of labour worked in primary production; in 1975 only 15% did so. The post-war era also meant the creation of the Nordic

welfare state in Finland as well as an emphasis on equality among all groups in society. The summer cottage had a role in this development, too. From the urbanization point of view, it was considered to be an opportunity to return to the former homesteads. It has to be noted, though, that the cottage is an imitation of country life, but often also, moreover, an imagined version of it, involving an heroic aura of war stories and wilderness settlements, not memories of the poor and struggling life. This becomes evident in a 1970s Finnish film "Kahdeksan Surmanluotia" [Eight Deadly Shots]. It is a tragic story, based on a real incident, in which a small farmer, fighting for survival against insurmountable odds, ends up shooting eight policemen at the door of his house when he thinks that everything is lost. In the film is a conversation between the farmer and his wife in which the wife suggests that they should sell the farm and move to the city. The husband answers: "They wouldn't pay anything; there is no lake nearby; not even the summer cottagers would buy this." (Saaristo, 2002, p. 144).

The summer cottagers wouldn't buy the farm because it wasn't on the shore of a lake or the sea. This is what often has been happening in the countryside: former small farms in the interior are left empty and decay, while new cottages are constructed elsewhere on more suitable plots. Inland villages become empty, while shorelines, which represent wilderness and primitive nature, are being cultivated. But this nostalgic process has seemed necessary. Hayden (1986, p. 102) has described how "the settlers didn't cherish the memory of their crude shelters". That can happen only after the memories of the poverty of rural life have vanished. Löfgren (1999) has written about the nostalgia of return in cottage cultures. For many of the Finnish first generation cottagers, this would have meant going back to a place of hard times, even failure. The nostalgic exploration of the cottage myth is a productive way of dealing with this. It makes cottage life a ritual; it creates the possibility of living the past the way it *should* have been. This works at both the individual and national levels.

Having a summer cottage finds its inspiration from the nostalgic gaze towards tradition. It's a part of a Finnish nationalistic and romantic meta-narrative and it also expresses the modern world view. At the same time, it also belongs to a production of space that has its own culture, traditions and rituals that characterize modern Finland.



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Abstract

In Finland owning a summer cottage and spending time there is seen as being a part of everyday life and has very few elitist connotations. It's a consequence of a number of factors, including Finland's internationally late, but rapid, urbanization after the Second World War; migration from rural to urban areas, and the increase in leisure time and general standard of living. The most obvious motive for having a cottage is considered to be the desire to enjoy the short summer in the best possible environment: in the countryside, surrounded by trees, and next to a lake. Furthermore, the cherished Finnish sauna tradition is a central part of the cottage experience.

Having a summer cottage is also said to entail nostalgia for one's own or past generation's former home region, as well as a wish to be lord of one's own manor, away from oppressing city life and the suburbs. The Finns' mentality and self-understanding has until recent years been strongly bound to nature, the countryside, and agrarian values. Societies exist and rule in a certain place at a certain time, and their history and geography constitute the context from which they are constructed. Concepts of countryside, wilderness and the city are always parts of the national environmental ideology and help to build national identities and nations as a whole. They are widely used and reproduced: in fact, they are so common that they are not easily noticed. In Finland rural landscapes, and especially a summer-time view of the patchwork of forests and lakes, are almost self-evident characteristics. Thus, it is tempting to claim that the summer cottage has been used as a means to construct Finnish national identity. The unique Finnish environment, and a summer cottage in the very heart of it, has become part of the national landscape, which is transmitted as a part of the Finnish meta-narrative. A cottage is situated outside the city, in the middle of an imagined wilderness and it is considered to be a carrier of an agrarian tradition in the urbanized world.

