

# Sacred Symbols in Suburbia

## Analysis of a Place Development Process<sup>1</sup>

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The meaning of space, place, and local identity has become a theoretical issue of increasing interest in the later years of social science. I wish to take part in this discussion about place by asking an empirical question: What kind of relations to place do people who live in the suburb of a large Norwegian city have? How can a planning process reveal such relations?

As an example, I will describe a place development process which took place in a suburb of Oslo. This paper is based on our evaluation of the cultural project which was implemented in that suburb during 1994–97 (Sæter and Ulfrstad 1998). The methods we used to gather data from this process included interviewing the key persons involved, carrying out surveys, studying documentary evidence, and attending meetings and functions in an observer's role throughout the project period.

In this paper I wish to describe the local debate which ensued, when the project planners presented their ideas for changing the landscape both physically and symbolically, in their effort to create local meeting places. My aim is to discuss this place development pro-

cess, looking at it as a local encounter, or confrontation, between the planners and the inhabitants and their 'dwelling values'.

I shall begin by describing the background, i.e. the cultural project in the suburb of Furuset in Oslo, which gave rise to the study on which this article is based.

### **A cultural project, its aims and objectives**

In 1992–96 an increased interest was expressed in the plans for cultural policy in Norway in bringing professional art to people living in the largest cities, especially to those living in the suburbs of Oslo. The supposition was that people living in the suburbs did not have access to the pleasures of professional art despite the biggest art institutions being located in Oslo. In recent years, the government's cultural policy has also shown greater concern for the physical surroundings in towns and for residential areas in the countryside. The intention has been to teach the Norwegians to take an interest in their surroundings, especially in the way public buildings, service buildings (e.g. petrol stations) and the public open spaces are being constructed.

In addition to the government's aspirations in the field of cultural policy, the local administration of the suburb of Furuset wanted to use art as a means of fighting back, not only against "loss of place", but also against juvenile crime and the inhabitants' tendency to leave the suburb in their leisure hours to, for instance, to visit the big shopping malls outside the city. The problem facing the suburb was one of becoming "emptied". The question of how to create a local identity and local interest for the suburb now became a local issue. With its 28,000 inhabitants, the suburb is one of the biggest in Oslo; people from all over the world have come together here, constituting a multicultural society.

National and local aims were combined in the suburb of Furuset: The Norwegian Ministry of Culture, the Municipality of Oslo and the local administration of the suburb were interested in channelling "cultural resources" into the area. A project was started in 1994, which was to be completed in 1996.

The objectives for the project were:

- to develop existing meeting places and build new ones
- to develop the places aesthetically, in accordance with local tastes and interests, in collaboration with professional planners
- to develop different kinds of cultural activities
- to develop new ways to show professional fine arts in a suburb.

Another important objective was to gain some experience in managing cultural efforts locally by developing a local cultural administration for the 25 local governments of the city of Oslo, and running a kind of pilot project in one of them.

The objectives were meant to reach a multicultural society, different local interests and 'place habits', with a special interest in the children's situation in the suburb, but also all the other people living there, both children, youth and adults. Without getting any further into the discussion about aims and objectives, I would simply like to state that linked to the different cultural activities, be it fine arts, different cultural activities, or the development of architecture/physical surroundings, there was an implicit wish to create "local culture" in a

broad sense of the expression, such as new kinds of social relations, and tighter links between people and places, in a kind of identification process. We can sum up by saying, somewhat metaphorically, that the political aims at different levels were to create "places" in an imaginary reality of "spaces", or thoroughfares. One of the main strategies in making this was to initiate collaboration between local groups and actors and professionals from outside.

Before dealing with the development processes in this particular context, I want to present the theoretical perspective I use on "place" here.

### **Place is always social**

There can be various perspectives on what constitutes a place, from visual or figural qualities, to personal feelings of belonging to a place, or to collective and social aspects. In my perspective place is constituted by social actions and relations. Place is a social rather than a figural or just a personal event. I want to show how this can be reflected theoretically.

In architectural theory, the issue of place has been discussed most thoroughly by the Norwegian architect Christian Norberg-Schulz (1976). In his perspectives of place he focuses on the *genius loci*, the "spirit of the place". By the concept "*genius loci*" place is seen as a geographical unit defined by buildings, topography and historical points; figural elements and their internal spatial relations, caught in a sort of poetic feeling. This concept on place is first and foremost a visual, or aesthetical, perspective on place, and an essentialistic perspective on place.

The concepts of "*genius loci*" do not sufficiently capture the different sociological dimensions and dynamics of the place, decided by actions and perceptions linked to the different groups of inhabitants' everyday use and practices. The place is linked to permanence of collectivity. The place creates you, and you can create the place through collective actions and rituals (Asplund 1985:183). Therefore the place is always social, it has a collective voice. "To hurt a place is to hurt the people who live there", Asplund says. The deep sensing of a place is also a deep feeling of participation (*ibid*), but also contestation and differences in perspectives and habits. Places are open in time and space, but filled

with certain movements, experiences and perceptions of different groups of people belonging to a certain area, for a longer or shorter period of time. Even with an open definition of place, the fact is that some special social processes take place, just there:

... A place is formed out of the particular set of social relations which interact at a particular location. And the singularity of any individual place is formed in part out of the specificity of the interactions which occur at that location (nowhere else does this precise mixture occur) and in part out of the fact that the meeting of those social relations at that location ... will in turn produce new social effects (Massey 1994:168).

People living just here create the place, mentally, socially and materially, and the place creates peoples' perceptions of the place and their everyday acting patterns. The place, like any other social reality, is as open and dynamic as any other social system, but has at the same time its special characteristics.

In my study of the great international project on "land art" in Northern Norway, Artscape Nordland (Sæter 1995, 1996) I found that the local people called some landscapes or artefacts "sacred" when confronted with new disquieting works of art.<sup>2</sup> These were landscapes or artefacts which the local people related to their common past. I have found that the sacred qualities of a place, or the sacred elements in a place, do not become truly visible or openly articulated until the stranger, be it the artist or the planner, intends to change the landscape or manipulate the artefacts, thus threatening local values. Doreen H. Massey (1994) arrives at the same conclusion:

Whether all these values are consciously articulated in legal or behavioural terms does not seem to be the crucial point. In fact, they are not often brought to consciousness until they are threatened: normally they are part of the fabric of everyday life and its taken for granted routines. (Massey 1994:167)

The everyday perception of a place as part of "the fabric of everyday life" could be a relationship which has developed through social practice and the use of the landscape in a kind of "centering process", creating invi-

sible bonds between the people and the place:

Centering is... an ongoing process, the insiders view on place. Looked from outside places are nouns like housing, land use, activity flows, political boundaries. From inside it has to do with a creative process articulated by people living there themselves: The meanings of place to those who live in them have more to do with everyday living and doing rather than thinking... Bulldozers respected few of those invisible boundaries or sacred symbols of social space... (Massey 1994:171).

In my study of the land art project in Nordland I saw how people argued for their landscape and symbolic values in local debates over sketches and pieces of art. The arguments were based on a long-lasting social and emotional "centered" relationship to the mountainous landscape or local artefacts, be it in rural or urban areas of the region. People living here very often used the notion of sacred about their landscapes when arguing how they felt that the sculptures or installations threatened existing landscape values, either through the message conveyed by the expressions of monumental art, or the way these sculptures were placed, or through the transformation of symbols, or a combination of all this.

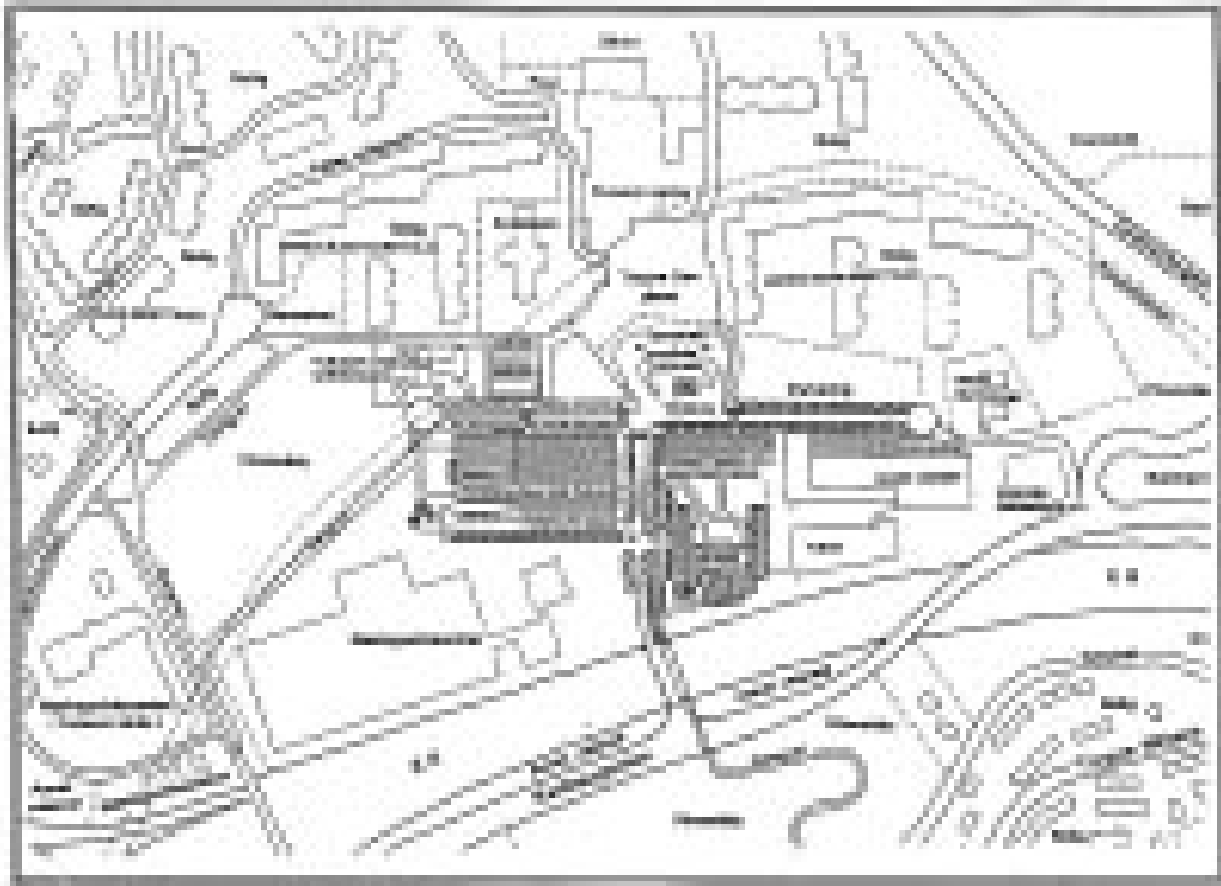
The kind of suburb that I focus on here is often seen as an area of thoroughfares, or a "housing machine" with empty outdoor spaces rather than areas with certain appreciated place qualities. My question is: Is it possible to identify place characteristics in a suburb of blocks of flats and minor buildings, in a multicultural area in the biggest city of Norway? Is it possible to find something like sacred elements representing a common past here? I want to put light on the issue in the following.

### **Some place traits in the suburb**

Before looking at the special planning process, I will describe a few of the "place traits" of the suburb, as expressed by modern day rituals, symbols and signs – traits which will become even more pronounced in the planning process.

#### The ceremonial place

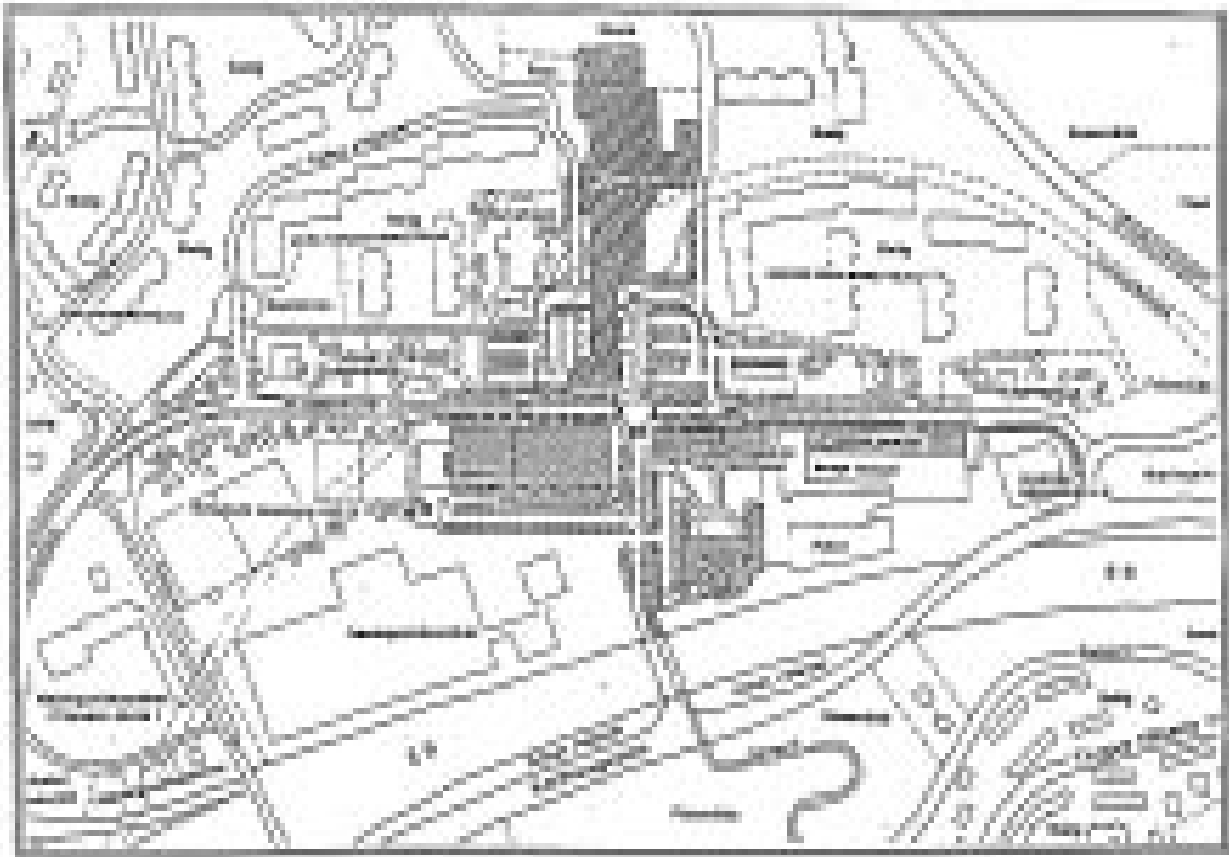
Recently, prior to the launching of the cultural project,



the suburb had collectively created what I call their local ceremonial place at the centre. Trygve Lie, a local celebrity and the first Secretary General of the United Nations, was born in this suburb. He was a member of the Labour party, a party, I presume, supported by many of the inhabitants of this suburb. Before leaving Norway, he meant a lot to the local sports organisations, and he has meant a lot to the suburb symbolically, too, by being that internationally known man of mark. The municipal administration and some housing co-operatives of the suburb have prepared a small area in front of the mall entrance. In this area stands a statue of Trygve Lie. The place and the monument were inaugurated by the King of Norway in 1994, and every year on United Nations day, 24<sup>th</sup> of October, a ceremony is held in order to commemorate and honour Mr Lie, but also

to celebrate the suburb as a multicultural society. The place is also an important part of the annual festival of the suburb, and the leisure organisations in the suburb use the place for their cultural activities involving children. Apart from this, the feelings for the place are associated with the fact that it was created through local initiative, and thus represents a common investment both economically and emotionally.

The place of Trygve Lie is a local effort to create a new relation between the suburb and its inhabitants. In a landscape of coming and going, "the space of transition" near the tube station, people in the suburb have created a symbol of collective unity. In seeing the figure of Trygve Lie on your daily trips, you are reminded at the same time that Furuset can nourish and stimulate you, individually and collectively. The symbol is there to



tell you that the suburb is a bearer of traditions, traces and memories, and also that it has open relations to the outside world.

#### “The Green Suburb”

There are lots of open spaces in the suburb, which were created through space planning at the time when the areas of blocks of flats were being built, and also natural green spaces, such as forests and hills around the suburb. The concept “The Green Suburb” was originated by the local administration of the suburb, and introduced in colourful folders and local maps for nature trips which follow ancient historical tracks in the forests surrounding the suburb. Being “The Green Suburb” is a strong identity for the local people, also expressed by a strong local interest in parcel farming (linked with

a big 4 H farm) and nature trips, and, in recent years also landscaping in connection with an animal farm in a smaller part of the suburb. Also part of the green suburb are the car-free zones close to the blocks of flats and general housing areas, which in recent years have been even more fiercely protected by the local people due to the expected increase in the amount of traffic caused by the new airport outside the city.

“The Green Suburb” tells us about values at the crossroads of nature and culture. It is a planned suburban area which was built according to the planning values of the early seventies, when new models of compact urban housing were combined with fresh air and man-made and natural green landscapes. And the local people defend this combination (which could be clearly seen in the heated discussion which took place at a public

meeting, where the planners presented their new plans for the area); they have a town-like place to live, but they also have places for practising their “green interests”, like parcel farming, nature trips and car-free public spaces.

The place markers of today are the social activities in the area, like parcel farming and nature trips, but the local administration and the local history organisation also try to link these green interests to historical features by creating, by means of maps and catalogues, a reflexive place identity of traditions and permanence. The suburb has an image of being a modern multicultural living area, with some traditions worth presenting to the inhabitants in visual form in order to “sell the place ” and to create a community by superficial means.

### **The planning process**

As part of the cultural project, the local administration asked a planning firm to prepare an analysis of the central area of the suburb, in particular the area surrounding the biggest local mall and the nearby tube station. Included as one of the objectives of the cultural project, the wish and aim of the suburb was to develop the local centre, not only by giving it new functions, but also new visual and spatial qualities. There was also an ambition to let this centre give the people of the whole suburb the feeling and experience of belonging to one central area where they could find both services and leisure activities, i.e. an area which would be more of a leisure and service centre than merely a shopping centre.

#### **The architectural gaze**

The planners needed to find a key for their planning, which would gather the suburb together. The suburb was symbolically, practically, and socially divided in two by a highway, but divided also by different housing traits and traditions, and minor local mall areas.

While analysing the suburb, the planners – consisting of architects and engineers from private planning firms, the central planning department of Oslo and the local administration<sup>3</sup> – found the suburb difficult to “read”, and the primary aim was to make it “more readable”, an expression used by the planners in their

planning documents. According to the planners, the visual aspects that needed to be created were symbols of multicultural identity and symbols of the history of the suburb. The concepts of order and wholeness were also used by the planners to describe the planning values for this area, all visual orientations connected to local needs, such as a larger number of service offices, shops and sport areas. The visual mapping also needed to be related to the functions of accessibility, to break the impression and experience of a divided suburb. The plans particularly emphasised access to the local centre.

After a period of research, the planners presented a vision for the whole area. The key to gathering the suburb together into a kind of unity was that of accessibility: to plan new roads for walking and bicycling, but also to allow better access by car to the local central mall. A suburb divided by roads, should, according to the planners’ vision, also be gathered together by roads. But the way the roads were designed to run, not only ran against the wishes of the inhabitants, but also against their local values and symbols, a point which I will come back to later on.

Another approach was to concentrate both old and new activities into the centre area. This would mean building a new sports complex, as well as integrating a mosque into the area. The Muslims owned a building site here, and there was already heated local discussion about the plans of building this house of strange religious worship. It was evident from what the planners had to say in the matter, that they were not entirely happy with having the mosque erected in close proximity to the everyday functions of the suburb, but that they had to find a solution, since the religious group had a formal right to the place. This solution was found in cooperation with the Muslims’ own architect. At last they were able to make changes to the building site, which meant, for instance, that the mosque was going to be built further away, on the periphery of the centre.

Let me try to sum up the planners’ approach: They wanted to make the suburb, especially its central area, more readable, and create an urban situation by gathering the buildings together to a more mea-

ningful whole, and also to make this centre more accessible by road. They even chose to call the new road a "miljøgate", something like "environment street". In making these plans the planners ran against important local interests. At the same time they concurred with some other local interests, such as making the mosque less visible.

In short: the planning values were mainly based on visual planning criteria for creating a new centre area, rather than values based on dwelling and local perspectives of change. In the following I will demonstrate the local reactions to these visions and plans, and comment on them.

### The inhabitants' view on the place

The reactions to the plan were rather strong. Arguments against the plan were expressed in local meetings, in the local newspaper and in public hearings of the plan. I have participated in the meeting where the plan was presented, and I have studied the documents of the hearing. A lot of voices from different groups and single persons were heard, like the housing cooperatives in the area, the local private organisations, single voices of inhabitants, teachers, the local newspaper, the local parcel farming organisation, etc. Most of the local utterances observed showed resistance towards the plans.

The plan as a whole had both symbolically and physically some implications that touched some sacred values of the suburb. The planners made some conflicting choices: The new road that was designed to run into the heart of the suburb was also planned to run across the site of the Trygve Lie monument. The planners had not discovered the importance of this place to the inhabitants of the suburb. People living here could not accept the destruction of the sacred place and the sacred values of peacefulness and multicultural coexistence, destructed by introducing cars into the car-free zone and the ceremonial place.

And how could people living here call their suburb "The Green Suburb" if the plans of bringing cars close up to the housing areas were realised? some of them said. To make more roads for cars was to go far beyond the identity of being "green". Furthermore, the

whole cultural project was first and foremost supposed to benefit the children and young people of the suburb. The road would destroy the safe way to school for many children. The question people were asking was: "Is this cultural development project not, after all, a project for the children of the suburb?"

After our evaluation study was finished (1997), I still get information on the process. A graduate student made a sociological study in the area, where issues concerned the qualities of public spaces in the suburb were studied. Through her study we saw that the housing cooperatives in the area still fight for the green suburb and the place of Trygve Lie. The local administration invited to a new public meeting in 1998, where the inhabitants walked in the area to learn to know the plans in a better way. A lot of people met, across cultural diversities in habits and colours. Interviews with some of them show like this:

– I think it is ridiculous! There are enough roads here, I can not at all see we need an "autostrada" from here to Ellingsrud, or somewhere. We can use the roads as they are, even if they are a bit crooked. And they even call it an "environment street" ... This street has nothing to do with environmental qualities, they destroy the nature, playgrounds and meeting places outside. A better milieu for cars, is what it means. ... We had a huge demonstration this summer, with a fantastic participation. The question was who among us liked the plans, there were just two persons liking it, the rest did not... The good thing about the demonstration was that both "Norwegians" and immigrants were there. I think it is a pity that immigrants do not engage in politics, but this case they were engaged in (Inhabitant)<sup>4</sup>

There is a broad interest in the changes in the area. Our data tell us that a lot of inhabitants near the centre area look upon the new planning grip as "ridiculous":<sup>5</sup> There were enough roads in the area, according to the inhabitants, they did not need this centre street. This idea was an "architectural idea" from somebody from outside not knowing the place values, as one inhabitant says in an interview. The restructuring of the area has started according to the plans. Trygve Lie will be moved to another area, and the cars will run up to the centre building.

## The planners' viewpoint

In interviews with the planners they admitted they had overlooked the sacred values of the suburb, such as the ceremony place, for instance. When launching the plan in a small local meeting, the planners described the philosophy of the planning process like this:

– We have concentrated on one thought, which the inhabitants have found very strange; “4 H” has been the main culture and place here...We have looked at the place through a planners' eyes. We have presented something very clear and definite, and we have allowed people to relate to it. We have received quite a number of negative reactions; some people think we have hidden the mosque, and perhaps we have, ...and perhaps we have treated the place of Trygve Lie too harshly, too. The process in itself, however, is important for the people who live here. We could discuss the development of the place further, since this has shown that people have wishes of their own... (One of the planners)

The planners stress the importance of presenting something clear and definite, even if it is in conflict with local values, habits and wishes. The message, from the planner's point of view is: It is far more important to be clear than to listen to a multitude of local voices. Local people are free to react to the plans, and changes can be made at a later stage. The planners were also of the opinion that changing plans after local protests is a way of strengthening democratic processes.

The question is, however, if the inhabitants are able to participate in real discussions on plans like this. Studies show there are difficulties among different groups of inhabitants in maintaining real insights in planning documents, it takes some time to understand how it turns up in reality (Sæter 1999). Michel Conan (1995) also finds that important groups are often excluded where plans are debated, and they do not participate over time. Another question is if the planners find it fruitful to invite inhabitants in discussions like this.

There were some local actors invited in the planning discussions in this case, see footnote 3. But the planners chose the simplest top-down way, where most of the inhabitants participated with reactions rather than ongoing actions as part of the process.

## Some conclusions

Based on the planning experiences in this suburb, conclusions can be made at two levels; both with regard to the question of place, and with regard to the question of planning. In this study both aspects are closely linked together.

I call them strangers, the land artists in Artscape Nordland. In calling these actors “strangers” I refer to Simmel and his short essay on the stranger arriving and staying in a place, keeping “a bird's eye view” on the place (Simmel 1971). Simmel also describes an exaggerated type of this figure, which could apply to the artist, but also the planner:

He is the freer man, practically and theoretically; he examines conditions with less prejudice, he assesses them against standards that are more objective, and his actions are not confined by custom, piety, or precedent (ibid:146).

As Simmel sees it, this outside position may add some new positive values to the place. But just being more “objective”, not interested in the local customs and piety, the planner may also be, not the stranger in the (positive) perspective of Simmel's, but a kind of outsider not seeing some important aspects which ought to be part of a planning process (Buttimer 1992).<sup>6</sup> The sacred elements of the place can easily be overlooked, and this will have consequences for both the process and the result.

The study shows how places can be created in the suburbs, first and foremost by the inhabitants themselves. From the reactions to the planners' plan we were able to observe some local values relating to a certain area. We could see that these values were linked to the history of the area, but also linked to recent initiatives taken by the inhabitants themselves, in the case of the ceremonial place, for instance, as a kind of re-subjectivisation process, or reflexive practice (Lash and Urry 1994, Pløger 1995), where local identities are “re-invented” or strengthened in a process of globalization.

The reactions have shown that people living in the suburb are likely to have strong feelings for their surroundings, feelings akin to belonging and identity. There are several links between the inhabitants and



the physical features, buildings, landmarks, monuments and roads in the area. As I see it, this example has shown that the values of a place can not exclusively be seen as visual, or figural, or like a *genius loci* concept, but must be seen and interpreted in relation to social functions, action patterns and collective feelings. The landscape in town areas, as well as in rural areas, is perceived to be part of the everyday activities; the place is a place to live in, created by social practices. These social practices – not the planning or the architectural approach – are the markers of the place. We have also seen that the markers of the place can be linked to ceremonial values. The monument and the small place in the heart of the suburb were tightly linked to the hearts of the inhabitants, more or less consciously, I suppose, but made more conscious by the strangers' intention to "attack" this ceremonial place, this common ground for rituals. The suburb in Oslo, like the landscapes in Nordland, does have some sacred places.

In this example, the planner had an opportunity to analyse local place values and local symbols in advance, as far as this was not planning for new dwellers, but planning for an area with established structures, rituals and symbols. The local culture was however partly registered by the planners; "4 H is the culture in this suburb", the planners said, sounding dejected. The "green values" and local habits did not go well with the planners' aims of creating an "urban situation", as if this should be competing concepts.

Heidegger (1971) tells us that "you can not build without dwelling". In my view, there is a hidden methodology for planning in such a perspective, which you can apply as a planner without having to move to the area you are going to change.



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## Notes

1. This paper was first presented at a planning conference in Arkitekthøyskolen/NIBR in Oslo in October 1997. This is a revised and developed version. Thanks to ethnologist Marit Ekne Ruud, Byggforsk, and philosopher Sigurd Ohrem, for later comments.
2. Repetitive collective actions, like different kinds of local rituals or commonly perceived artefacts and landscape elements, can in certain contexts be given the value of sacred, or the symbols of the 'conscience collectif', constituting societies, which Durkheim links to the sacred (Durkheim 1915/1995).
3. Some local interested parts, like organisations and businesses with building plans in the area were participating in the planning meetings. In a couple of questions representatives of the housing cooperatives were asked to give their points of view, too. But the various groups of inhabitants were not represented in the planning committees.
4. From an interview made of Frøydis Johnsen in her study in the area, Johnsen 1999:102.
5. Not just "Ben B. et Co" as there is a tendency to say in the local administration, referring to a local left actionist and politician, eager in local matters.
6. Doreen Massey (1994) mentions some problems in distinguishing between inside and outside perspectives. The problem of distinguishing between inside and outside in place studies, may be to draw too strict a line around an area, in some sort of conceptualising place as closed and excluding «the other» (Massey 1994:152)

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