

The Nordic as Point of Reference in Habitus and Culture

Hjørdis Egner

LIVING IN THE NORTH

However, as the quintessential art-architect Louis Sullivan observed, 'once you learn to look at architecture not merely as an art more or less well or more or less badly done, but as a social manifestation, the critical eye becomes clairvoyant.'¹

“**T**he Nordic” as a focus in architecture may be regarded as a social construction, possibly motivated by the need for establishing an identity in a challenging world. The term ‘Nordic’ is not merely a geographical marker but rather a theoretical expression of the idea of otherness. Throughout history and over time the notion Nordic has varied in meaning as well as in extent.² We are not confined to looking at Architecture in the North but we focus on different aspects of otherness in architecture as seen in a specific area in the North, ideographically and politically constructed.

The objectification of artefacts and architecture from their subject is representative of the way art historians and architectural historians have thought about architecture,

another way of dealing with the matter may be using sociology as the basis for discussion. The notions Habitus and Field, outlined by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, may prove useful when thinking about natural conditions and mental and social adaptability.

Three main subjects of habitus and field can be the key elements in the discourse: nature, morals and democratic ideals. In the study of the narratives in national history, educational training and the virtues in the professional field, these habitus elements seem characteristic.

Habitus and field

From the outside, for example as seen from the rest of Europe, the Nordic countries have obvious similarities which cannot be discerned when you are on the inside. At the conference *EU and the Nordic* held in 1992, the French sculptress Vera Szekely pointed out that artefacts and architecture in the Nordic countries seem to possess certain qualities that you do not find on the Continent. When Europe has a tendency to intellectualize matters, the Nordic countries seem more prone to make use of both heart and mind – balancing an intellectual and a bodily approach.³

The spiritual elements of the Nordic culture, be it within science or art, seem to be very strong. Szekely concluded by emphasizing the fact that artefacts, like art and architecture, are the results of human abilities and human *creative forces*. Differentiated human practices are due to differentiated human behaviour, opinions and even anatomies.

So what is it about the habitus and the creative forces that make artefacts in the Nordic countries that is different from the same aspects in the world outside? Do we have any indications of possible distinctions?

According to Bourdieu one must escape the realism of structure and objectivism without falling into the trap of subjectivism, which is incapable of taking into account the necessary role of the social world. In order to succeed in this effort we must return to mere practice, to the site of the *opus operatum* and the *modus operandi*, of the objectified products and the incorporated products of historical practice, of structure and *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1990).

The conditions associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. Objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor.

Bourdieu, 1990

For Bourdieu it was essential to reveal the underlying forces of practice, not as an objectivist historical 'fait accompli', nor as an *opus operatum*, but rather as a 'coincidence' of different structures of habitus, where coincidence is limited by similar or homologous habitus impressed by a group's lifestyle, class background, education, and bodily experiences.⁴ Habitus may be regarded as a personal life story turned into nature, although denied as such: our unconscious memory. Each agent, wittingly or unwittingly, produces and reproduces objective meaning. According to Bourdieu "the schemes of thought and expression he has acquired are the basis for the *intentionless invention* of regulated improvisation" (Bourdieu, 1977:79).

One's personal habitus is formed from the genetic beginning in a continuous relation to society and culture, and one's personal ability to respond to external demands and possibilities is dependent on habitus. When considering the habitus of an architect his or her professional education and training supports and extends the existing habitus by adding the professional skills required. Different architectural schools have, however, tried to keep the hegemony of the field of architecture, with their specific profiles of professional virtue and an idiomatic style as answers to cultural and social demands. The Bauhaus group taking Ruskin's virtue 'the innocent eye' as one of their fundamental ideas may be seen as an unconscious awareness of habitus.⁵

Bourdieu's other term 'field' is used to denote where professional activity and behaviour take place. We may associate the field with a battleground or a playfield; a field of competition or a space within which a particular force can be felt at work.

According to Bourdieu, a social field exists when a limited group of people and institutions fight about something they have in common. One example is the the field of literature, within which writers, critics, editors, publishers, readers etc. inside the boundaries of a mutual value system fight each other about what is 'good literature' and who are 'good authors'. The participants in this fight are found in institutional contexts, newspaper editorial offices, publishers, scientific institutions, educational systems, academic institutions and so on and so forth. What is at stake is taste, recognition, power to judge etc.

Broady, 1998 (Translation by the author)

In order to understand the field of architecture it is necessary to emphasize *illusio*, i.e. the professional faith in the values stated by the field. "Being obsessed with the game, investing one's 'libido' in the game, one is 'prepared to die for a theorem'; not taking part in the game at all, indifference will rule and *illusio* will appear as illusion." (Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu and Callewaert, 1994; Albertsen, 1998).

Illusio may be regarded as necessary to be able to concentrate in trying to manage complexity and also to be able to express ideas and argue in their favour. The competition in the field is a driving force with focus on other competitors rather than on the outside world. Non-visible factors in this competition are politics, economy, and social forces; talking about a client is taboo, so are direct references to the

outside world as they nearly always appear in euphemistic terms.⁶ Another chief characteristic of the field, according to Bourdieu, is field autonomy. It seems clear, however, that most artefacts are dependent on respondents and most of them are developed in an intricate pattern of interaction between creative forces, cultural symbols and authority in a climate of economic and social power (Eide, 1931).

Building an identity

In the discussion of the national element in architecture the significance of place is not new. The discourse in Norway at the beginning of the 20th century may serve as an illustration of the topic. At this time in history national feeling was very strong and the architecture in Norway was influenced by socio-political issues of nation-building, just like in Finland, Germany and Italy.⁷ It was supported by a renewed interest in the past, with roots in romantic ideas of nature, myths and history.⁸ The debate in architectural circles at the time shows the Norwegian architects demanding a genuine Norwegian form, and in all the Nordic countries there is a demand for something specifically Nordic.⁹ Obviously the romantic regionalism which could be found also was a result of influence by the ideas of Pugin, Ruskin and Morris. The architecture should reflect honesty and authenticity in terms of norms of modesty, and moral in architecture has been transformed into using plain constructions and natural materials, to be understood as indigenous materials, more or less rural ones. But in new commercial buildings stone material was used, as a symbol of the genuine spirit of the nation, the granite being a suitable stone material for the Nordic countries (Ringbom, 1987).

People in the Nordic countries seem particularly related to nature and climatic conditions. There is an abundance of myths and cultural references to the sea, the mountains, water, ice, and snow, and to the Nordic light, the twilight and the darkness. People seem to have bodily and intellectual references to these factors in common, as part of their habitus; an inherent natural approach to natural materials such as stone and timber way back from their childhood and in their everyday experience. The Norwegian Architect Magnus Poulsson expressed his depending on nature like this:

Of substance I am a hunter – a bit of a poet and quite a black-and-white artist. Ideas have never come to me while I have

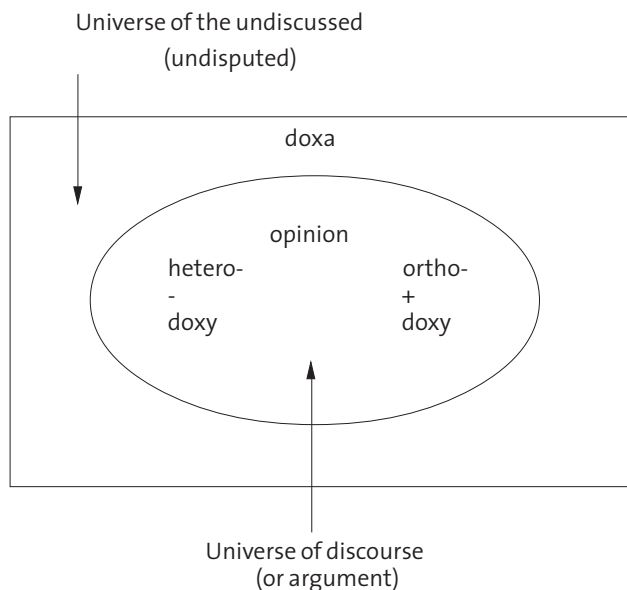
been sedentary. My legs have to be active and it is amazing how one's imagination is at play when hunting with a gun or a fishing-rod, roaming through mountain beeches and willows. I then make use of my pencil and embroider the most beautiful poems. If buildings are involved I scratch my ideas, walking.
Poulsson, 1951 (Translation by the author)

An anonymous commentator in *Hofvustadsbladet*, a Finnish daily, made reference to the use of stone materials in saying that the only thing that remained for Finnish architects was to strike a harmonious balance between their work and “our characteristics as northerners, our ethos and our nature. We are a serious-minded people, our nature is serious, even melancholy: If our architecture is to belong to us it must be given a serious and severe character” (Ringbom, 1987). Gesellius-Lindgren-Saarinen and Sonck managed to achieve this goal.¹⁰

Architectural education in the North

The habitus is per definition something personal, a way of behaving rooted deep in one's personality with an immense repertoire of possibilities of behaviour, but also with an inherent instinct with respect to what cannot be done, in other words an unconscious ethical adviser and a tacit consent. Habitus thus constitutes a limitation of capacity. For an architect or a designer the way he or she conceptualizes is dependent on the professional habitus in response to given circumstances and questions. In the professional degree programmes at university architectural history, theories and predominant apprehension and virtue will be absorbed and the skills necessary for future practice will be trained and drilled (Schön, 1983). In this way the young architect will be formed and his total habitus adjusted, perhaps into *Doxa* (Bourdieu, 1977).

However, the habitus of younger architects may entail the ability to uncover changes in social behaviour and society, and thus they may be able to act more adequately on such signals of change than elderly colleagues with a habitus formed during another period of time. The reluctance of senior architects to change their style may be regarded as a consequence of their habitus and their own social network which shares their values and interpretations. In a different personal habitus there may be seen some of the same experience due to cultural conditions, social background or po-



Doxa, orthodoxy, heterodoxy
(Bourdieu 1977:168)

litical forces. All in all the habitus seems to be orchestrated without a conductor as a collective experience.

The collective experience which constitutes the 'right' solutions forms a tradition. This tradition is gradually transformed as new thoughts and norms are absorbed into the 'consciousness' of the profession. If decisive changes suddenly occur in set values uncertainty will arise and it will be more difficult to educate. Lund, 1991 (Translation by the author)

Education has been a vital factor in the shaping of a mutual Nordic ground in the architectural habitus. Until an architectural programme was established in Trondheim 1910, Norwegian architects were mostly educated in Sweden, Germany, Britain or Denmark. Some Norwegian architects educated at KTH brought the 'Swedish style' back with them and their personal architectural style had a definite Swedish flair to it, different from the style of Norwegian architects educated in Berlin at the same time.¹¹ Endeavours of finding a Norwegian form were in line with the spirit found in the other Nordic countries, notably in Denmark and Sweden, and this was one of the reasons why people chose to be educated in these countries. Much of the Norwegian architecture that has been regarded as Norwegian was in fact Nordic import (Aars 1931).

By way of example, Magnus Poulsson was strongly connected to Sweden through his friendship with Östberg and Westman, through his education and also through living in Sweden for several years. Both as a human being and as an architect Westman was his ideal, and they shared the ideas of frankness, honesty and absolute confidence in own ideals (Ahlberg, 1958). Looking to Denmark we find that even Danish architects to some extent worked in Sweden and Finland for a period of time after having completed their education.¹² Typical network connections were forming a mutual Nordic understanding of the Nordic, growing out of the Nordic architectural meetings from the beginning of the 20th century and onward.¹³ These meetings were highly regarded across the borders, and in 1937 the Danish Order of the Dannebrog was assigned to the Norwegian architect Arne Eide in honour of his outstanding work in favour of a Nordic communitarism in the field of architecture.

To understand other traces¹⁴ found across the borders within other fields, it is necessary to go back in time to grasp the layers of unconscious understanding through national myths, religion, and social conditions, through habitus.

Behind even the simplest house lie a number of choices that cannot be made without the existence of a set of values. Whether one chooses the one or the other solution depends on the cultural environment of which one is part.

Lund 1991¹⁵ (Translation by the author)

At the beginning of the 20th century one hundred years of national consciousness was brought to a climax in Norway as well as in the other Nordic countries. There was a striking interest in the use of wood and the old timber traditions. Norwegian students of architecture took part in drawing classes located in Norwegian valleys by the turn of the century, staged by Herm. M. Schirmer. His vision was that the understanding of this former Norwegian timber architecture and the way the houses were constructed, should provide young people with new impulses to create a new art of building, making honest use of new materials required by the demands at the time. "New challenges would have to be met with the same spirit and in a similar manner as the old Norwegians had met theirs" (Aars et al., 1931). Similarities are seen in the Nordic field; Östberg had travelled in Swedish valleys to study verna-

cular buildings with a view to acquiring an architectural understanding (Cornell, 1965).

Whilst quite naturally the chief interest in architecture had long centred on large monumental buildings, at the opening of the 20th century a more general interest arose in domestic architecture: both the *town house* in its different forms, the *villa*, and the more particular *country residences*. Now it was the older Danish middle class architecture in town and country which became the object of ardent study (Varming, 1912).

Homologous Habitus and egalitarian principles

Going further back in history trying to understand evolution and changes that have taken place, we can take a look at a map of the Scandinavian countries and Finland in the Middle Ages. There are only a few cities to be found in what we might call an urbanised territory.¹⁶ This pattern remained more or less unchanged up to the middle of the 19th century, mostly due to commercial restrictions. At the beginning of the 20th century most people still lived under rural conditions and still crafts and architecture in the north mostly was regarded as barbarism.¹⁷ With less specialisation of crafts and as a necessity of economic conditions architecture was plain and simple in comparison with continental examples.¹⁸ This modesty of life Brochmann calls *The gospel of contentment* (Brochmann, 1972).

Emigration to America was at its peak in Norway as well as in Sweden about the turn of the century. New farmland seemed more attractive than urban life in poor conditions at home.¹⁹ In Sweden 'The National Association against Emigration', founded in 1907 tried, to great extent, to encourage small farmers and farm workers to build their own homes, the 'Egnahem' movement. In 1907 Ivar Tengbom declared that the main task for the architects was to build 'simple houses for simple people' (Wetterberg, 1992:165).

In Denmark the cultural leftist and social democratic ideas were predominantly connected to the cities and the movement which focused on the equality of man and everyone's right to partake of the cultural benefits.²⁰ Urbanisation, however, was extreme, and new answers were required. A few years after the turn of the 1900th century the rationalist writer and architect Sigurd Frosterius declared that the search for forms had entered a new phase. The national issue would be superseded as a formative force by social dynamism. "National art

will be replaced by an art of the classes born under the sign of cosmopolitanism" (Ringbom, 1987).

In the functionalist period morality was one of the answers to the many social changes, with a new demand for social consciousness and honesty as professional virtue.

We should all have an understanding of the way a society develops, and the origin of each building should not be left to chance, but be organised. This understanding should be all the more natural as it is not the delight of gods, princes and noblemen, but the well-being of all humans that the modern architecture tries to serve.

Ellefsen, 1931 (Translation by the author)

The consolidation of democracy in the Scandinavian countries, Iceland and Finland in the 1930s was the last foundation of modern understanding of the Nordic countries, and the final distinction from the Baltic and the Northern German area after WW II. These areas, however, due to earlier cultural and commercial connections, were having a preference for using plain masonry according to demands for honest use of the materials.

Regionalism versus internationalism

Today the Nordic traditions seem challenged by new technology, new materials and urbanisation. The new materials are seldom natural Nordic ones. Baudrillard points out two levels of cognition of an object, one on the technical and another on the cultural level. Through production, consumption, ownership and personification the technological object always enters into a cultural system, this process may be called The Process of Consumption (Mattsson, 2002).

In 1921 the Norwegian author and Director General for Cultural Heritage Dr. Harry Fett tried to analyse the building tradition in the country at large, without making negative references to something provincial:

In later years people have attempted to distinguish between the two concepts civilisation and culture. Culture means the tip of the plough and refers to the earth and the cultivating of the soil, whereas civilisation points to cities, to *civis* the citizen. Civilisation has taken residence primarily in the cities of the world, where they in recent years have created a special type of human being, intelligent and irreligious, with a strong compulsion to expand and with a belief in external progress.

Culture on the other hand, is represented in the archetype of the old, headstrong farmer who builds on set forms and formulas, who desires neither expansion nor progress. He has no wish to be intelligent or knowledgeable, he wants to be wise. The civilized human being directs his energy outwards, whereas the cultivated human being directs his inwards.

Fett, 1921:25²¹ (Translation by the author)

With associations to 'Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft' Harry Fett points out the struggle between the provincial and the central; tradition against forces of modernity and change; national stability influenced by international trends and market conditions. In Bergen on the west coast of Norway, the English and American romantic style of Arts and Craft had still considerable influence during the 30s, known as the Bergen-school, whilst at the same time the discourse in the capital was connected primarily to Sweden and Holland and the rise of functionalism as *illutio* and style. The indigenous house was becoming obsolescent as the new style of functionalism was seen as the new utopia.²² A comment by the municipal chief architect of Oslo, Harald Aars, may illustrate the architect's dilemma in implementing international solutions to the conditions of the north:

Finally we have reached the point where Norway participates in the huge orchestra that is trying to give the form and colour of the marvellous rhythm and melody of the 20th century in stone, glass, concrete and steel. [...] and what is now at stake is above all to stick to this foundation and not blindly copy

everything that gets to us from the outside just because it is modern. We should test it against our domestic traditions. What is real and true in the South is not necessarily real and true in Norway. Aars, 1931 (Translation by the author)

The Norwegian architect Georg Eliassen later formulated that after all mistakes it was necessary to go back to the conditions given by the local spot to get the ground under the feet (Eliassen, 1931).

Conclusion

Today we are talking about the necessity of competing in a global context; fifty or a hundred years ago the debate was just as intense in its focus on national and Nordic values as opposed to international ones created by the market and general technical changes. One conclusion might be that culture forms an interplay of values and references which may differ in the centre from those at the outskirts, in Bourdieu's terminology "The village-market dichotomy" (Bourdieu, 1977).

The architect's ability to play the game is dependent on skills acquired through education and experience which forms the player's habitus and his *illutio*; acquired in training and participating in the field. The questions of the time filter some elements of habitus on a base of certain shared values. As new references create new social and professional connections; an unambiguous Nordic distinction may thus require a set of references through set values, statuses and interests incorporated in a Nordic habitus.



Hjordis Egner, Architect MNAL
PhD-student at Oslo School of Architecture and Design
egnerark@online.no

Notes

1. From an article in the *New York Times* quoted in Upton, D. (1998).
2. We normally talk of five 'swans', i.e. five Nordic countries, but the Nordic Council, founded in 1952, now has five members and four associate members (Greenland, Åland, Island, Faeroe Islands and Laplanders). At present the Baltic countries and NW-Russia are given status as observers. Glambek points on the former tradition of including Northern Germany and the Netherlands among the Nordic countries, a meaning often to be seen in German sources. The De-Stijl-artist and journalist Theo v. Doesburg used the notion this way. By extension of meaning the notion "Nordic" has been used for all countries North of the Alps (Glambek, 1997:8).
3. This commonly made Kantian distinction between the body (nature) and the intellect, nowadays seems to be abandoned in favour of a more holistic approach to life (Rorty, 1980).
4. Simmel regarded the social integration as a result of collaborate actions of will in the individual. The social order is thus of a different character than the natural order, it is realised by action of the individual; it is the "interior" rather than the "exterior" (Simmel and Edholm, 1995).
5. But according to Kant: "Innocence is indeed a glorious thing; only, on the other hand, it is very sad that it cannot well maintain itself and is easily seduced" (Kant, 1785). Uskyld er en deilig ting, men det er bare så leit at den ikke holder seg særlig godt og lett blir forført (Kant and Storheim, 1983:404).
6. In her thesis Bloxham Zettersten emphasise the relations to the client (Bloxham Zettersten, 2000). So does Pallasmaa in his writing about Villa Mairea and the client-architect relationship between the Gullichsens and Aalto (Pallasmaa, 1998). These examples are representative for the outside observations of an author.
7. It is an apparent paradox that the same tendency could be observed in Denmark and Sweden. Still, a national explanation has been brought forth, namely that renewed interest in romantic regionalism might have functioned as a consolation after Sweden's loss of Norway and Denmark's loss of Slesvig. (Antonsson and Lundin, 1982). Also Wetterberg is pointing at Sweden's need for national sources of pride (Wetterberg: 45).
8. In Norway the National Heritage Association was established in the late 1800s, and around the turn of the century Folke-museet in Oslo and Skansen in Stockholm were both opened. Nordiska Museet may be seen as erected in the spirit of this time as well, though founded on existing collections.
9. The national indicators and von Herders notion of national and nationalism are discussed by Uffe Østergaard (Østergaard, 2000). The topic is also discussed by Palm in relation to Westman's style and different terms such as primitivism, milieu-related primitivism etc. (Palm, 1954:267).
10. Also in another way they exposed national references, using animals as decorations corresponding to German art traditions.
11. In Norway the Swedish-influenced style was represented by Bjercke and Eliassen, Magnus Poulsson and Arnstein Arneberg. Bjercke and Eliassen had been assistants at Östberg's office; Eliassen for several years (Cornell, 1965). Poulsson worked for some time at Westman's office before he returned to Norway in 1910. The German influence was represented by Chr. Morgenstjerne and Arne Eide, educated at Charlottenburg, Berlin about 1903–04. Morgenstjerne also held a degree from Illinois University, Chicago, Nicolai Beer had his education from Copenhagen.
12. Kay Fisker and Rafn both worked with Asplund and Lewerentz from 1917, and Fisker stayed with Lewerentz for several years. Afterwards he stated that this period had been significant for his understanding of architecture for the rest of his life (Eriksson, 2001). Another example is Eva and Niels Koppel working at Aaltos office (Pallasmaa, 1998).
13. In 1909 such a meeting was held in Finland and the participants visited Hvitträsk. This excursion was later reported by architect Sparre in the Norwegian publication *Arkitektur og Dekorativ Kunst* (Sparre, 1909).
14. "Carr himself sometimes used the word "evidence" in places when he should have retained the term "source" (trace), thus finding himself in the paradoxical position of apparently arguing that the evidence is both there before it is used but that it only really becomes evidence when it has been used. The way out of his Carr-Elton debate is therefore to be consistent and not use "evidence" ambiguously. By which I mean we simply remember the salient points: a) the past occurred; (b) traces of it remain; (c) these traces are there whether the historian goes to them or finds them or not; (d) evidence is the term used when (some or other) of these traces are used "in evidence" on behalf of (some or other) argument (interpretation) and not before. Evidence therefore, as opposed to traces, is always the product of the historian's discourse simply because, prior to that discourse being articulated, evidence (history) doesn't exist: only traces do (only the past did)." (Jenkins, 1991).
15. The quotation begins as follows: "To explain an action or a perception it is necessary to go far back in time. The values and ideas on which a culture is based are apparently much more stable than what people in the post-modern world tend to believe".
16. Norway had but eight small cities at the time, whereas the territory that is now Finland had only six. Sweden had no urban places north of Hedemora and Gävle, but around 30 such urbanised areas in the triangle constituted by Visby, Uddevalla, and Uppsala. In Denmark (including Skåne which is now part of Sweden) about 80 small cities (købsteder) were registered (Schück et al., 1933).
17. "Alles, was vom Norden in die Kulturwelt des Mittelalters einbrach, wurde als Barbarismus gebrandmarkt und abgelehrt,

- so sehr widersprach es den gängigen Auffassungen von Kunst und Kultur" (Gebhart, 1938: 14–15).
18. "All trades, arts, and handiworks have gained by division of labour, namely, when, instead of one man doing everything, each confines himself to a certain kind of work distinct from others in the treatment it requires, so as to be able to perform it with greater facility and in the greatest perfection. Where the different kinds of work are not distinguished and divided, where everybody is a jack-of-all-trades, there manufactures remain still in the greatest barbarism" (Kant, 1785: 388).
 19. Bourdieu would have pointed to the habitus as advice to the farmers.
 20. This movement had much in common with "the religious revival" (gudelige vækkelser), the visions of Grundtvig and the radical thoughts of the circle around the Brandes brothers (Almerud, 1991).
 21. The original Norwegian text reads: "Man har i de senere aar søkt at skille de to begreper civilisation og kultur noget fra hverandre. Kultur betyr plogspids og peker mot jord og jorddyrking, civilisation peker mot byen, mot civis, byborgeren. Civilisationen har faat sit hovedsæte i verdensbyerne, og har i de senere aar skapt en egen mennesketype, intelligent, irreligiøs, med sterk trang til expansion og tro paa ydre fremskridt. Kulturens urtype er den gamle stædige bonde som bygger paa faste former og formler, ønsker hverken expansion eller fremskridt. Han vil hverken være intelligent eller kundskapsrik, men vis. Det civiliserte menneske har sin energi vendt utad, det kultiverte indad."
 22. The first group may be seen as a struggle for eutopos (the good place), the latter with Utopias. Meyer points at Utopia as the link of outopos and eutopos, "nowhere" and "the good place" (Meyer et al., 2003).

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