

Meaning of home

– Rebuilding postwar Northern Norway

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In this paper I would like to present a project Norsk Folkemuseum, Museum of Norwegian cultural history is about to launch. The museum's mission is to preserve and disseminate knowledge of life and lifeforms in Norway. What does it mean to be Norwegian? A major part of the museum consists of an open air museum in which buildings from various regions, urban and rural, in Norway are displayed in a setting which aims to show how people lived and live and how they organized their daily life. A central focus is to discuss what home has meant and means to people.

Although the ambition is to show variety both social, regional as well as through time the Northern parts of Norway are missing. The obvious absence of Northern Norway, we seek to improve/replace, by a closer view on the characteristic buildings of Northern Norway and specifically the postwar period. The buildings of Northern Norway were characterized by the way people made their life subsistence. The region was and still is distinguished by a multiethnic population and diversity that is particular for Northern Norway. Norwegians, Sami, Finns and Russians have habituated the region long before the national states drew their borders. Language, religion and subsistence have been particular to the various ethnic groups. People have made their subsistence on fishing, farming, often a combination, trade. Most people lived in scattered settlements or small towns.

Northern Norway is a region deeply hit by incidents during WWII as this part of Norway was totally deconstructed at the end of the war. This makes the region an interest of research in order to enhance a deeper understanding of what home means to people, and in the end share this knowledge with the museum visitors.

The postwar period is of specific interest. Thus Norsk Folkemuseum aims to study how the Northern part of Norway was rebuilt in the postwar period as this region, one fifth of Norway, was totally reconstructed on the principles of unity and wholesomeness.

The project thus has **two main purposes**. We want on the one hand to look deeper into the meaning of home by studying a region where many people lost their homes.

Second we want to study the specific rebuilt houses and whether the ideas these houses were based on, were realized and to what degree.

1. Loss of home

Home means a lot to people. Many researchers have made a point of this, and shown what home means to people. Norwegians are said to be among the people who invest most in their homes, economical, emotional and spending much time. At the same time we experience that this meaning has several, and diverse expressions.

Is it the standard of housing that differs, or the feelings we put into our homes? Often we make a difference between people with a home, and the homeless. But as the Norwegian artist Jonas Bendiksen has visualized, there is no difference. Also the so-called homeless, people who for one reason or the other has lost their house, organize their daily life around a home, and this home, even if it might seem to have no economic value, it is of great importance and meaning to the individual. The meaning of home is to many people not the house or the dwelling, but the emotions connected to the "house". Thus it is of importance to make a division between house, dwelling and home.

- A house is an economic investment
- A dwelling is the house you live in and the way you organize the house
- A home is the life you live in the house, the people who live in the house and the ties between the inhabitants and the emotions we have to the house.

A situation where the meaning of home is highlighted is when people for one reason or the other lose their home. Not to mention when nature destroys houses, or due to human destruction, whether they are planned and willed in order to develop an area or as a result of acts of war which destroy people's homes and force them to flee. People experience this all the time. But what knowledge do we have of how

people experience this, of how they survive and find new footing? How do they live on with their loss at the same time as they rebuild their lives?

In Norway as over most of the world planned migration, movement of larger numbers of people happen every now and then. A highway is being built, a railroad expanded, sites are renovated, all incidents that cause houses to be demolished. Peoples are forced to move, and they lose both their house and their home. In these cases the movement is planned and people have time to prepare for their new life.

Most of these projects are also of a smaller dimension compared to what happened in Northern Norway at the end of World War II, when the population of the region was forced to evacuate.

What happened? Finnmark and Nord Troms burn 1944

On October 28th 1944 Hitler ordered the population in Finnmark and Northern Troms to evacuate immediately. As the Russian forces were moving westwards, the German troops had to withdraw. In order to make it difficult for the Russian troops, Hitler ordered the destruction of all buildings and constructions in the area. The result was that one fifth of Norway was demolished. The Russian forces coming to liberate Northern Norway were to find nothing that could give them foothold.

All in all 11 000 dwelling houses were burnt down, 5 000 farmhouses, as well as industry, shops, hotel, hospitals and churches were demolished. Roads, bridges, quays, boats and lighthouses were destroyed. The destruction was total.

Two thirds of the population, about 50 000 persons, were forced to evacuate immediately to western and southern parts of Norway. Resisting the orders, one third hid in caves or gammer, cottages made of turf in the mountains as they hoped the country soon would be liberated, and help from the exile government and the allies would reach them before winter came.

This incident has been characterized as the largest catastrophe in Norway in modern times, but none the less little research has been carried out. Neither on the actions late fall and winter 1944/1945, nor and even less, on the postwar process rebuilding the region.

Rebuilding Northern Norway

The exiles started to return homewards a couple of months after peace was declared. Even though the government was worried that people probably would not return, they feared even more that people would return before they could require proper housing and supplies. And people did return soon. Although the authorities denied the return of the population till sufficient housing and supplies were established, most of the population returned in 1945 and 1946. More than one third returned the summer of 1945. This immense pull to Northern Norway, back to home, shows how important home is to people. Even though there was hardly anything left to return to, the inhabitants were eager to return, provisional housing was established. Vast supplies enabled society to get back to nearly normal rather soon, but at the same time rebuilding permanent housing and infrastructure took more time, and many had to live in barracks through most of the 1950s.

2. So what about the permanent and planned rebuilding of Northern Norway?

The development of postwar Norway was based on the ideology of unity and equality. The aim was to establish a welfare state, much inspired by the Swedish “Folkhem”. Another aim was to follow up the cooperation between political parties, private enterprise, and organizations, a cooperation which was strengthened during the war.

During the postwar period, the late 1940s and 1950s the social democratic party governed the country, and this period as a whole is characterized by raising living standards and the establishment of welfare for everyone. Every citizen should have a reasonable standard of living, housing, income and healthcare.

The ideas the Norwegian society was based on were positive, but creating a unified society also meant a will to make all citizens equal. Minority groups should be assimilated, all citizens should be Norwegianized, there was to be one state religion, minimum support to private schools, one broadcasting company.

To secure a proper rebuilding, a rebuilding as you probably understand of vast dimensions, in an area where almost everything was lacking, in

a region far north with a long and cold winter, an organized reestablishing of the region was necessary and carried out from 1946.

A housing Directorate was established in Oslo to secure the rebuilding project, and organized architects, prepared proper drawings and a national Housing bank was established to provide for financing the private houses.

70 % of the rebuilt houses were based on plans developed by architects, and people could choose among about 100 various types of houses, and they were allowed to adjust the predesigned houses to their own needs.

But even though people could develop the house and influence on the process, the houses and the communities that were reconstructed, were the result of a planned process. The settlements were not, as the previous places self-grown. They were planned and characterized by unity. Some might say uniform, simple, plain houses. Regulation and order characterize the settlements.

The original rebuilt houses had a simple planning, a three or four room plan, one-storey houses or one and ½ stories. A high basement usually increased the impression of small, but relatively tall houses.

The design of the houses was based on functionalistic ideas, plain interiors and modest use of materials.

Simplicity, moderation, functional planning and plans, social equality and uniform buildings are other characteristics.

The rebuilt areas had much light, openness and green areas in the towns and settlements. In the towns, the gardens were larger than previous. And most often there was only one house on the property. Houses were placed on a line, all with the roof pointing in the same direction and a specific distance from the road. The houses were rather uniform, in shape, size and choice of materials. Variety and difference were created by choice of color.

The rebuilt houses are part of the national history of a time of hardship, of crisis. An organized, rational rebuilding and reconstruction of the country as a whole was necessary at a time when people lacked

goods of all kinds. Goods were rationed up till the end of the 1950s. Rebuilding the northern region as it was before the destruction was out of the question, and would probably have taken far too long.

The rebuilt houses are **key objects** as they

- a. give a concrete expression to the ruling ideology of the postwar period.
- b. dominate the rebuilt postwar Finnmark.
- c. tell various stories, both of the war and of what happened in northern Norway, as they replaced what was destroyed
- d. are important documents of building the welfare

Through these houses both as expressions for rebuilding a region and these houses as expressions of the homes that people created, we seek to investigate to what degree the apparent uniformity covered diversities such as ethnic, gender, religious and economic differences.

How did the inhabitants express the particular, their identity, what they had in common and what separated, their differences, or did they strive for unity and equality?

The loss of home has been investigated in some other projects, but most of these have been **planned** displacements of people. They have been presented, known to come for several years. Although planned, and the purpose understood, the impact on people the burdens they had on people's lives, were hard to cope with, the displacement affected many individuals, but all the same a limited part of the population, and a limited area or region. Not the least, even though these people lost their houses, their neighborhood, they could in the understanding of home to a certain degree hold on to their home.

People's feeling of belonging, of attachment is tied to the region, the neighborhood, the house and the belongings. The more you can bring along to your new house, the more they can preserve their previous home.

Migration and moving is a characteristic trait, of our culture. People have at all times been on the move, most often seeking for something

better. Better housing, better economy, or because of political or religious reasons. Most of us have lived various places through life. The forced evacuation from Finnmark was compared to most displacements, of a quite different dimension, and it was carried out in a short span of time. People were totally unprepared for an evacuation, not to say an evacuation to be carried out in such a short time. They were not prepared for the total destruction which followed. The destruction caused a personal crisis for everyone involved, and because so many shared the same experience we can label it a collective crisis, (Swensen 1998:118), carried out by the occupied forces.

The displacement exposed the population to live through change and adjustment to new surroundings. They were to experience various phases such as disruption, deportation, the vacuum of waiting, return home, reestablishing previous life, planning, expectation, rebuilding and building a new home and adjustment to their surroundings. (Swensen 1998:120-122)

A history forgotten?

Today, 70 years later many people in Northern Norway point to the fact that this is a forgotten history. That Norwegians point to the cheerful days of liberation in May 1945 and forget that a whole region had experienced a freedom with great costs. Not so many lives, but a freedom where they lost most of their belongings, their house, their fishing boat, their cattle, in fact everything except life and family.

A history restrained?

The Norwegian historian Arvid Petterson published the book «*En fortiet historie*” a silent history. He points at the silence concerning the destruction and the forced evacuation. He like many other children grew up with parents who denied talking about these incidents. They wanted to look forward, to place the past behind. Silencing the difficult past and their experiences was their way of coping with the hardships.

This was intensified by the politicians in Oslo who stressed that people should look ahead, rebuild and build Norway for a better future. The

past should be placed behind. Thus they restrained difficult feelings and emotions.

The silence encompassed the postwar assimilation policy and Norwegianization. In their struggle to be Norwegian, they suppressed their identity. During the last decades this silence has gradually come to an end. Especially among the Sami we see an awakening.

The great history

In Norway many people lack knowledge of these incidents, but at the same time this is the great story which everyone talks about up north. An element which is striking, visiting a house in this region, is the almost total lack of elements of some age. The houses contain hardly any old things. There is little or nothing to tell about family history, of ties to the past, except perhaps a couple of old family portraits. And even so striking, are the houses, houses from the 1950s, some newer in between, newer houses built in the 1970s and 1980s breaking the uniformity though.

How does one create belonging, attachment, identity when you have lost most of what you had, most of what expressed who you were? What makes one's belonging, identity? What expresses who you are, which group you are part of, who you affiliate with, who you identify with?

Overarching goal

Postwar Norway was based on ideals of equal rights, benefits and welfare for everyone. It is claimed that the postwar houses erased and hid social and ethnic diversity, in the region. The vast, planned rebuilding of the region created a visual equality and uniform houses, giving the impression of a homogenous society. Social and ethnic differences in the population were not visual and obvious through the houses. Many denied their ethnic background.

Through interviews and fieldwork we hope to enlighten to which degree and how the postwar ideals were reached. Central questions are to be whether society became more homogenous, or whether the social and ethnic differences were preserved.

Today the rebuilt houses appear as characteristic signs and expressions of identity in Finnmark and Northern Troms based on functionalistic ideas, and as the first concrete expression of the welfare state that grew in the postwar era. Hopefully the interviews will widen our understanding and break the one dimensional picture of the region, and not the least bring the populations experiences of the welfare state into the open.

How do we gain knowledge?

In cooperation with local museums and organizations we plan fieldwork in Northern Norway the coming year. Our ambition is to document the rebuilt houses, and reconstruct their history. We will study the buildings, but not the least and crucial will be talking to people in the region. We seek to interview various groups, people of different ages in various parts of the region. To reach a broader part of the population, questionnaires will be distributed. But the conversations, interviews with individuals will be the most important way of gaining insight in the meaning of home in the postwar period.

- How did they experience the rebuilding process?
- How was living in a rebuilt house?
- How were the houses developed and adjusted to the inhabitants' way of life?
- Which part did architects and planners play in the process? As experts, they represented the authorities? To what degree did they listen to the populations needs for a suitable housing?

This insight will give us knowledge of the incidents at the end of the war and of the reconstruction of the region, as well as document a central part of the Norwegian welfare state. The documentation to be collected, will secure important information on how we can preserve and develop these specific houses and modernize them in order to make them into houses for the future. Last but not the least, the documentation, not to mention the understanding we gain will be of great importance for selecting, and rebuilding one of these houses at Norsk Folkemuseum. And to decide which stories to be told.

Rounding up

A rebuilt house will be a suitable object as a starting point in our dissemination of the incidents in Finnmark and Nord Troms at the end of WWII, of the process of establishing the welfare state and of daily life in the region. By placing a rebuilt house from postwar Finnmark in the open air museum, we will not only fill in a geographical gap in the museum dissemination, but we will preserve a house that represents a collective trauma. Preserving and disseminating the difficult and questionable parts of our past is the responsibility of a national museum. The problematic stories are part of the national story.

In the end this project will force us to reflect even more on the meaning of home, and whether museums can preserve homes. We can preserve the houses, we can display the dwellings. But can we manage to display or rather disseminate the meaning of home?

How do we share our insight into the meaning of home?

Litteratur:

Bull, Edvard: Cappelens Norges historie bind 14

Dahl, Hans Fredrik: De store ideologienes tid 1914-1955. Norsk idehistorie bind V. Aschehoug 2001

Hage, Ingebjørg. Som fugl Fønix av asken? Gjenreisningshus i Nord-Troms og Finnmark. Gyldendal 1999

Husbanken Gjenreist og særpreget. En planleggings- og utbedringsveileder for hus og steder i Nord-Troms og Finnmark HB 7.F. 25, 2008

Swensen, Grete: Hjem anno 1998. i Roede, Lars, Morten Bing og Espen Johnsen: Slik vil vi bo. Hjem og bolig gjennom 500 år. Norsk Folkemuseum 1998