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## THE INTERPRETATION OF SEA IN URBAN PLANNING AND EVERYDAY LIFE: THE CASE OF HELSINKI

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The problem of this study is how nature is defined in the city. The questions of nature have been widely neglected in urban geography. In recent years the discussions of environment and sustainable development have increased the interest to nature in urban studies. In this project this broad question is focused to the city and its relation to the sea. The waterfront can be seen as a reflection of society's relation to the nature. The making of built environment and urban life in new urban areas are processes of power. In the case of waterfronts the meaning of nature is manifested in arguments concerning city's and citizens' relations to the sea.

The city of Helsinki lies on the coast. Therefore the sea and the planning of Helsinki are entangled together. The development of Helsinki's waterfronts is related to the wider processes of recent changes in location strategies in shipping and industry. The land-use of waterfront-areas is under redefinition. The public interpretations of nature and sea will be studied through analysis of planning documents of Helsinki.

The empirical focus of this study is a waterfront housing project near the centre of Helsinki. In this area, Ruoholahti, which is planned by the City Planning Department, the analysis of private interpretations of nature and sea is done by depth-interviews of residents of this area. In these interviews personal relations to nature and personal housing history are concerned important when studying the meaning of urban nature.

**Key words:** Waterfront, City, Nature, Helsinki

### Introduction: Excavating the Nature in the City

The problem of this study has grown from the idea of urban nature. The conceptual categories of nature and environment have been neglected in contemporary urban studies. It is especially interesting that this has been happening in urban geography, inside the discipline of geography which traditionally examines the relationship between humans and their environment. One reason for this is the academic division of labor. In urban studies nature and environment have largely been seen as an scene for social events, not a problem itself. Problematization of nature has not been work for urban geographers.

In urban social geography the theorization has been emphasized on space and place. In these discussions of the problem between agency and structure social theorists have become aware of the meaning of space and geography for social life (GREGORY and URRY 1985; KOBAYASHI and MACKENZIE 1989). These discussions are only now beginning to proceed on the arena of nature.

The problem of nature in the city is an unexamined field in urban geography. Much of the urban geography has been dominated by spatial, quantitative and economical perspectives. Also in contemporary cultural geography the city has been seen from a socio-cultural perspective which has excluded nature from the social study of the

cities. One reason for this could be the urge to be separated from historical-materialism. It has been argued that the modern environmental problems are culminated when we in our thinking separate the concepts of nature and culture. This process is conceptualized as alienation and through this process humans - as individuals - have become distanced from their natural origins (KATZ and KIRBY 1991: 263).

Operationalization of such a theoretical problem in one study is big challenge. I have approached the problem by studying the meaning of sea to Helsinki through history, as the sea has always been significant for Helsinki. This has been starting point in the study where the question of the nature in the city is studied through the case of Helsinki and sea. This problem will be analyzed from two different angles. The first part is the study of urban planning in Helsinki. In this part I concentrate on the public interpretations of nature and sea which are created in the sphere of planning. These interpretations can be studied through a discourse analysis of planning documents (for example KENNY 1992; TETT and WOLFE 1991). In the second part the aim is to study how the urban dwellers experience the relationship between city and sea. The empirical focus of the study is one of the Helsinki's new waterfront-housing projects, Ruoholahti. One possible method for collecting information of people's relation to their environment is depth-interview (BURGESS, LIMB and HARRISON 1988a, 1988b). The first part of the study is in preparation, the second phase starts in the end of 1995. The analysis of the interpretations from both parts of the study can possibly make visible the differences which cause conflicts in local urban planning. The basic questions are all focused into Helsinki:

- What is the interpretation of sea and waterfront in public urban relationship to nature?
- How is the Finnish relation to nature interpreted in the case of waterfronts?
- What is the meaning of sea in constitution of identity and in private relationship to nature?
- How are private experiences of nature filtered to urban life?

These are the main questions of the whole study. In this paper my purpose is to clarify shortly the theoretical ideas which have affected the study and then illustrate the particular place of Helsinki where the studied processes take place. In the end I present possible hypotheses for the empirical case study.

The question of waterfronts is widely discussed in geography and urban planning (e.g. HAHN 1993; HOYLE et al. 1988; PRIEBIS 1992a, 1992b). Usually waterfronts are examined from the perspective of economy, image marketing or gentrification. In Helsinki the regeneration of waterfront differs from the big metropolises. First of all, the whole problematic of waterfronts came actual in Helsinki only in 1980s because until then there was enough land available for construction. Also the need for new port has become actual now and the discussion about the place of the new port is currently going on. This process releases areas from the inner-city waterfront. In the same time the legislative reforms concerning environmental impact assessment are

influencing planning process. These make the questions of waterfront topical in Helsinki.

### **Theoretical Background of the Study**

This study is part of a project in which the relationships of political and economical power to civil society and nature in the city are examined. The methodological background is inspired by British locality studies of the 1980s and their Finnish counterparts done in the early 1990s. However, the perspective has evolved into a more culturally sensitive direction. The discussion in Anglo-American cultural geography (e.g. BARNES and DUNCAN 1992; DUNCAN and LEY 1993) has given new perspectives also for the methodology in urban geography. This is important in times when the roles of subject and representation have been widely questioned. The universal subject of white, middle-aged, middle-class male is being taken apart.

How to study nature in the urban context with such premises in the domain of planning and everyday life? An important starting point for this study is nature as a conceptual entity. The aim is to study the interpretation and meanings of nature, not the physical nature. This can be compared to the process of understanding a book. It is done through interpreting the meanings of words, not analyzing their shape or frequency (SAYER 1992: 35).

In lay thinking nature is often considered as something which is not very visible in the city. This controversial argument reveals embedded ideals of western concepts of nature. Nature is usually seen as the opposite to city because city is something which humans have made. Also, it is not rare to draw a parallel between concepts of country and nature. In the previously mentioned juxtaposition city usually represents culture. Conceptual separation of nature from culture has happened when we have become urban beings (FITZSIMMONS 1989: 108). Nature is said to be one of the most complicated concepts of western culture. My purpose, therefore, is not to define the concept of nature in urban context but to find some particular interpretations through which it might be possible to develop our understanding of some urban problems.

In recent years nature and city has been dealt in many projects. William CRONON has studied city of Chicago and its relation to surrounding nature in a praised and criticized monograph (CRONON 1991, and his critics in *Antipode* theme number 1994, 26: 2). There is also interesting research on urban growth and its relation to environmental questions (CARLIN and EMEL 1992). In Odense, Denmark, a 5-year "Man and Nature" research program has been established. It includes projects concerning nature, urban history and literature (KRISTENSEN et al. 1993; *Man and Nature* 1993).

Urban planning is a powerful profession which combines political, economical and professional power in order to transform our environments. Planning can be analyzed in different ways. Traditionally planning has theoretically been divided into theories of planning and theories in planning (CAMHIS 1979). In this work planning is

understood as an arena where values, opinions and targets are struggled and negotiated into form of plans or instructions. In other words, planning is a discursive field which is in continuous change. It is important to identify all the agents participating in the planning process. Then it is possible to analyze their arguments. This kind of work demands qualitative methods like discourse analysis (RYDIN and MYERSON 1989). However, the analysis of planning reveals only one side of the conceptions of urban nature. I have conceptualized this side as public interpretation of nature. Public is in this understood as the official view of society. The second sphere is the collective interpretations of nature. These are expressed in different forms of national culture. Traces of them can be found for example in myths, literature and art. This kind of material is not included in this study. However, some locally interesting examples can illustrate the particular problematic of the study area. The third interpretation of nature is a private one. It is constituted in the sphere of everyday life and done individually. This sphere is examined in the second phase of my study.

### **Some Aspects of Finnish Conceptions of Nature**

In Finland the forest is a crucial element of nature and our images of it. Many artists from the time of nation-building are famous because of their portrayals and interpretations of Finnish forests. The music of Jean Sibelius is connected to our wildwood, painters Akseli Gallen-Kallela and Pekka Halonen have in their landscape paintings used forest themes. Finnish literature has also drawn ideas from forests and countryside. Urban milieu and cities, on the contrary, have inspired only few Finnish artists and writers. City is not a part of Finnish national landscape (ILMONEN 1992: 36). However, these myths are changing. Finnish Ministry of Environment published 1993 an illustrated book which listed 27 national landscapes and 5 of these were urban milieux (Ympäristöministeriö 1993).

The meaning of forest is important for the official image of Finland. The newly built residence for president of Finland is located on a forested cape in its own privacy a couple of kilometers from centre of Helsinki. The name of the place and the building is "Mäntyniemi" meaning "pine cape". The meaning of forest is highlighted also because of its importance to Finnish national economy. The developing of wood-processing industry is considered to be the only way to get Finland out of the economical crisis.

Late urbanization and low population density are also factors which condition Finnish concepts of nature. Major part of Finnish population has direct family ties to countryside. Many skills which are related to agriculture and hunter-gathering are familiar to Finnish urban people: fishing, hunting, berry and mushroom picking or making firewood. It has been argued that Finnish cultural relationship to nature is defined through benefit and therefore there is no difference between nature and "nature". There is only one nature (BENGS 1992: 75).

This concept of nature was interpreted in urban planning in 1960s when the big migration from countryside to the cities happened. People whose ideas of life came from an agrarian society wanted to experience nature at their home door in the city. This problem was solved by building housing estates in the forest. It is possible to say that in Helsinki there is a invisible border between inland forest culture and coastal sea culture. In this controversial claim culture is quite freely defined. This separation is currently breaking when the urban waterfronts are having new importance as areas of housing. The dominant concept of the relation between nature and city is changing and urban planning is the sphere where it is legitimized.

### **Short History of Planning and Waterfront Land-Use in Helsinki**

The location of Helsinki is derived from the authoritative order from the King of Sweden in 1550. In that time Finland was part of Swedish kingdom. Helsinki was established as a trading place to compete with Tallinn (Reval) on southern coast of the Gulf of Finland. Russia, Sweden and Hanseatic League were the forces which were competing in Baltic trade. Helsinki was originally located on the estuary of the river Vantaa. There was no economic base for living in Helsinki so the king had to order people from other towns to move into Helsinki. This policy was not successful and the early years of the city were a struggle for existence. Timber and wood were the main export goods, but they had to be transported from the inland. In 1640 the city was moved to its present place which was considered to be a better harbor.

In the beginning of the 18th century Helsinki was a little town with 1700 inhabitants. The waterfront of the built-up area was full of wooden storehouses and jetties. In the year 1800 there were 7000 inhabitants and built-up area was less than one square kilometer. Land-use on the waterfront became denser and landscape looked more "urban". Waterfront had no special social or aesthetic meaning. For example the slaughterhouse was still in the middle of the city on the waterfront. Industry began to grow slowly and the first dock was founded in those times. The rest of present Helsinki was countryside and only in few places on the waterfront forest and cliff was changed to fields and meadows.

In the middle of the 19th century the population had grown to 21 000. That time was the eve of industrialization in Helsinki and industry began to conquer city's waterfronts. The shipbuilding industry on the south-eastern side of the built-up area expanded. In south-west there was a brewery, in north-west a sugar factory and in north-east a ceramic factory. The facade of the city began to be appreciated and the slaughterhouse had to move on the edge of the city. Land-use on the waterfront was not anymore based on demand for water. Seashore became to have other uses and meanings. There was a hospital on the western shore of the city and near that was new cemetery. University had it's botanical garden just beside city's centre facing the Töölönlahti-bay. In southern point of the city's cape was Helsinki's first park on the shore.

In the year 1900 port and railways had taken over the shores around city. There was more industry and the amount of population was 79 000. The main railway was built from the middle of the city's centre to the north. The city's harbor railway which goes around the cape of Helsinki was built in the turn of the century. The city was bordered by the railway and it was also a borderline between built-up area and the wasteland on the shore. Port activities were centered on the northern side of the town, which is separated from city's centre area by a narrow strait.

The first half of the 20th century was a time of fast growth for Helsinki. In fifty years the population grew to 368 000. Industry and port activities spread and more land on the waterfront was needed. Large areas of sea were filled in the south-western and north-eastern sides of the city's centre (KARIVALO 1976). This process has been going on up to these days but is now over because the new port is going to be outside city's centre. Although industry began to move out from the center in 1960s the waterfront areas were reserved to the end of the 1980s. Helsinki is the biggest port of importation in Finland and the growth of shipping kept the demand for port area in high level. In the middle of the 1970s city was worried about the decreasing population in the inner city and in the General Plan of Central City Area of 1976 one of the main goals was to stop that development. Waterfronts were noticed as a solution to this problem in the beginning of the 1980s when city examined alternative uses of shore areas. Recreation and housing have been the two competing alternatives. In housing the idea of welfare state and strong tradition of centralized planning have favored public housing. Therefore, private development corporations have not effected directly to the planning of the waterfronts. However, the unofficial contacts between city and developers are still unexamined.

The meaning of sea and waterfronts for the image of Helsinki became clear in the end of the 1980s. In the General Plan of 1992 one main theme for future development of the city is "Marine Helsinki". This idea is realized by developing the passenger port, building of the new housing areas, maintaining grand marine entry scenes and starting projects of ecological marine living.

### **Waterfront Projects in Helsinki**

There have been several waterfront projects in Helsinki during last 20 years. First of the new waterfront housing areas was Merihaka, an artificial cape one kilometer north-east from city centre. It was built in 1970s. Merihaka was built as a modernist high-rise area in the style of big metropolises. There are the only 12- and 16-storey apartment blocks in inner city. The traffic was planned to be on two levels, cars on the first level and pedestrians on the second level. Merihaka has been criticized for its inhumane scale and unnatural, concrete environment. The waterfront itself is linear and right-angled. On one side there is a little marina.

The next project was in Katajanokka, an island which lies on the eastern side of city centre. In Katajanokka it is possible to find an urban milieu from the beginning of this

century. It is also a part of Helsinki's passenger port with connections to Stockholm, Travemünde and Tallinn. On the waterfronts of Katajanokka there are warehouses from early years of 20th century. The new waterfront housing area was built in the end of the 1970s and in the beginning of the 1980s. The idea was to build dense urban milieu with contact to older parts of the area. There are 3-5-storeyed houses covered with red tile. Street and parking lots sever apartment houses from the quay and from waterfront park.

During the 1980s the construction of apartments was centered on north-east and east suburban areas of Helsinki. In the end of 1980s the next waterfront project started in Pikku-Huopalahti 5 km to north-west from city centre. It is a bay-area between the inner-city and suburbia. The first houses in new Pikku-Huopalahti were finished in 1990. In Pikku-Huopalahti the idea was to build an urban milieu with good environmental qualities. The coastline with promenade, square and cafe is reserved for inhabitants. The construction of the area is still uncompleted.

In Helsinki's eastern suburbs is one of the latest waterfront housing projects, Vuosaari. This area was non-built coastal forest. The project represents the new idea of building a typical Finnish forest-suburbia on the waterfront. The area is currently under construction.

Chronologically the next one is Ruoholahti which will be the case area of my study. This new waterfront housing area is going to be joined with the inner city and it is built on landfill. Until recently there has been industry, warehouses and port activities on the area. The regeneration process started in the early 1980s when planning of the area started by changing the land-use from harbor and stock area to housing purposes. The area is planned to form a single whole with old central city area. The idea of maritime city is carried out by building waterfront promenades and canal which halves the area. First blocks are ready but the building of the area continues to next decade.

There are other new projects which are just started or are under planning. In eastern suburbia is the area of Herttoniemi, a former industrial area from 1930s where the construction work started in last winter. In this project the idea of waterfront is still developed further. Two major waterfront projects, Arabianranta and Viikki, are under planning. The first one is an old industrial site of ceramic manufacturing. The construction is planned to start in nearest future. The second one, Viikki, is an area with potential of conflict. Viikki is a preserved bird sanctuary and the new housing is planned right next to it. New bio-technic science-park will also be built in the area. The original location of Helsinki is between these two project areas.

## **The Need to Analyze the Planning Process of Waterfronts**

The public interpretation of nature in context of urban planning can be traced from planning documents, official records and other archive documents. In the case of



Helsinki these processes can be followed through this century. The problem of defining a relevant time span for this study depends not only on the material but on the time when modern urban planning started in Helsinki. Finland was under Russian rule from 1809 until its independence in 1917. However, under Russian rule Finland had autonomy and thus independence was not a mark for new era in urban planning. However, for architecture it was meaningful, and the nation-building of that period changed a lot of Helsinki's street scenery. The first general plan which included whole city was made in 1911 which can be considered a starting point for modern planning in Helsinki. However, for a more detailed analysis of the urban waterfronts in Helsinki, a relevant time span of study could be from the General Plan of 1970 to these days.

In Finnish urban planning it is possible to find somewhat a colonial conflict. Finnish government traditions owe much both to Swedish and Russian rulers. The meaning of central administration is emphasized in Finnish culture. This administrative culture meets traditional Finnish culture of nature in cities, which were villages until last century. The lack of public discussion about planning projects is partly caused by this juxtaposition. Even in these days of negotiation planning the head of Helsinki City Planning Office has hoped that planning could be done in "windless space" i.e. without outside disturbance. This illustrates the viewpoints of the public planning and it also underlines the need for analysis of the planning process and the arguments which are used. If citizens are considered as troublemakers in planning process, their possibility to participate in defining of the nature in the city is threatened.

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