

FINLAND

Finland, with only 5.2 million inhabitants, is one of the largest countries in the European Community, located at the northern limits of settlement, being the northernmost agricultural country in the world. The climate is harsh for agriculture, and the Europe-wide directives have typically been planned for much warmer central European conditions. For these reasons up here the survival of the living countryside is critical.

Today we have an increasingly mechanised, semi-industrial countryside, marked by low-cost metal sheds, 'dryer' towers and rounded grain silos, as signs of a living countryside. A smaller and smaller workforce is required. The old wooden houses have a diminishing role in the new system; the built rural environment is in danger of losing its memory.

In the 19th century, just before the beginning of urbanisation and the mechanisation of agriculture, Finland's mostly rural population grew up in villages in ever larger houses. From the 1860s, this situation began to change. People moved to the rapidly growing industrial cities in Finland, but also went to the USA and Australia.

This process has increased since World War II. The modern motorised countryside did not need the number of horses or labourers. By leaving the traditional economy behind, we are losing many of our traditional rural log house types, such as boat houses (eg for wooden church boats), stables, cowsheds, sheds, various types of storehouses, barns, drying barns, smithies, even

the number of 'pair-room houses', once so numerous, is diminishing in Finland. Wooden fences, piers and bridges are also in grave danger.

In the countryside, the old wooden main buildings are the last type to go, as buildings that are still in use survive the best. Often people have built their modern single-family houses next to them. Sometimes the old buildings are used as 'summer cottages'; sometimes not even for that purpose. In many cases people have left their farms altogether. Diminishing use also affects traditional open rural landscapes as in many cases they are closing in from vegetation regrowth.

As families may have lived on their farms for up to 20 consecutive generations, it is often emotionally difficult to rent them out, and quite impossible to sell the farms. As a result, even the main buildings are now threatened by a lack of maintenance.

Finland has several sub-cultures of extensive rural log houses, the best known in the Ostrobothnia and Carelia regions, but also elsewhere. The bigger the building, the more expensive is its upkeep – and the more likely its destruction. These large houses were originally built by large families, today there may be only one person with the upkeep of the place.

Problems with wooden buildings normally begin with leaking roofs – and taps. The basements tend to move due to frozen ground, and old, cracking chimneys are especially dangerous. However, renovation work can also be dangerous, as the wrong



The West Façade of Isotalo ('Big House') at Tunkelo village. It is one of the biggest Finnish rural main buildings in central Finland (photo: Aaro Söderlund)

type of new windows and doors as well as crudely added external heat insulations too often distort and swell the fine old façades. Additions of modern sanitary services break up the floor plan, not to mention the effect of modern annexes. Even a new overly waterproof paint will effectively rot any wooden house.

Wooden buildings tend to be destroyed totally, whether by weathering or by burning, unlike stone houses, which can possibly be restored even after they have lost all their wooden parts.

Another clear speciality in the traditional Northern wooden building culture is that its building material has been in constant slow rotation. Houses were often moved as entire buildings to new sites and/or for new purposes, or as parts of buildings, or as logs for spare parts, from house to house, moving from a higher quality use down to lesser uses. Finally such reused building material became firewood. This explains why wooden buildings are often not 'authentic' as they tend to have elements from some other, older houses.

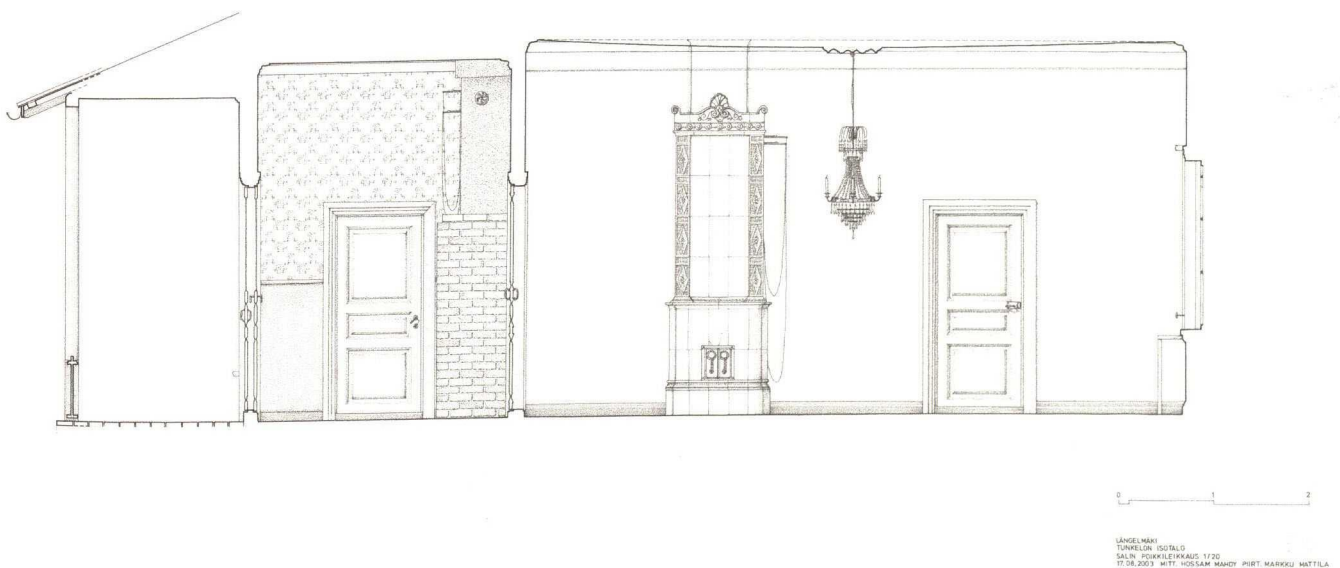
This suggests that there may even be room to adjust some international assumptions in restoration, such as expressed by the Venice Charter, that stresses an insistence on original building materials in a heritage site, based on the natural assumption that it would be built of solid, stable material like stone. The insistence of the authenticity of the building fabric would paradoxically end the authenticity of the wood building tradition based on recycling.

One may wonder what is the real Heritage at Risk. Should the risk be sudden, or can slow processes also cause acceptable risks? Perhaps we may agree that it does not really matter whether the risk is fast and noisy or silent and hard to notice, if we measure them by their results – built heritage that is irretrievably lost.

ICOMOS Finlan



The Pirtti (Great Hall) and fireplace of Alanen farm's main building, near Isotalo (photo: Aaro Söderlund)



Section of the Salon of Tunkelo Isotalo (© Dr. Hossam Mahdy, Egypt and Markku Mattila, Finland 2003).