

# FINLAND

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## Conservation of the built vernacular heritage in rural and urban areas

The Finns are said to originally have been settlers and they love to foster this myth even nowadays. The idea derives from the time when vast areas of the country were inhabited by families that practised swidden culture. The uninhabited forest was slowly conquered from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Later, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the slash and burn cultivation was practiced even on a larger scale by the descendants of the first settlers. During this period many traditional farming methods and building types were developed. A typical view of the rural landscape is still one farm yard in the middle of its fields, surrounded by forest. The farm yard is the basic unit of a rural settlement. The patterns of the settlements owe much to several land divisions that have been implemented during the past three centuries.

The earliest land division was an open field system of the southern and southwestern parts of the country, elsewhere the land was divided in larger units. The "big deal" – a general parcelling – was executed throughout the land, starting in the southern parts in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and continuing until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From 1848 on a new general division system, the "new deal", was introduced (*uusjako*). This parcelling is still being executed in the northern parts of the country. After these operations the early settlements also lost their first dense pattern. In some places the earlier pattern can be traced using the old division maps and modern maps, and sometimes seen in the landscape as ditches or fencing.

The rural village is traditionally roughly divided into categories characterised by the location or pattern of the settlement. A row village (*rivikylä*) is typical of the western and other flat parts of the country. A hill village (*mäkikylä*) built on the slopes of a ridge or hill is typical of the eastern and central parts of the country. In a road village (*raittikylä*) the houses are built close to each other and to line the roads. This type can be found throughout the country. In a group village (*ryhmäkylä*) even 20 houses could form a dense and irregular pattern.

The basic unit is a house that consists of several separate buildings. The buildings have developed in the traditions connected with the soft wood techniques – horizontal log and light timber frame techniques. The traditional building materials are still available within a short distance. The buildings are covered with pitched roofs. The basic building techniques and yard forms which were originally created and developed in the rural buildings, were later adopted by all buildings, public and private, rural and urban. The influences from outside spread in rings, from the towns and municipal centres to the rural places.

Fishing villages on the shoreline of the gulfs of Finland and Ostrobothnia are characterised by the barren and stony shoreline, piers and log buildings built of wood, the lay-out of the fields and yards that are common also in the inland country, and the land division in a comb pattern to form long and narrow lots to allow every house the immediate approach to the shoreline. The biggest of these villages built their own gathering halls and churches. The fishing village is the best preserved of all types, with only some of the social features lost in recent decades.

The most "urban" village type is the municipal centre that was actually born in the 1860s when the land trade was freed and the local administration established. The new village centre was built around the church by the new settlers, house by house to line the roads leading to the church. The buildings were executed in the same pattern as the rural types, the techniques being the common carving and sawing techniques, but the houses received the most modern wallpapers and weatherboarding and were equipped with modern technical installations.

Since the 17<sup>th</sup> century those towns we now call wooden towns were built on a gridiron plan. Many of them grew slowly and remained small for centuries. The common sign of a town, a town hall, was built much later and the surrounding wall is still missing. Only the regular plan and the right to trade distinguished the early towns from the villages of the countryside.

A picturesque and popular type of vernacular settlements in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century is a workers' housing area, which grew adjacent to a town around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These areas did not originally have a strict plan, building regulations or building trade like the neighbouring towns. Sometimes the workers literally built whole areas themselves, as is the case in the sawmill workers' areas. The workers were allowed to take as much material free from the sawmill as they could carry. They adopted building types and horizontal log techniques from the small houses of the agricultural countryside, but soon they were taken over by more modern light timber constructions. These communities are still characterised by simple lot division, houses built by the first generation of settlers, open lots and mature vegetation.

All vernacular settlements developed slowly in our terms and reached their peak in the traditional way of building during the 1930s, when the numbers of buildings of a yard and the numbers of yard groups in a village were highest. It was possible to find almost urban villages consisting of hundreds of buildings, inner roads, and a social system. The first signs of modernity might have already come to the village, in the form of an early white functionalistic merchant's house or co-operative's shop.

### How the settlements have met the development

Since the 1960s the countryside has been suffering from a severe structural change due to integration and rapid urbanisation and a decline process, the end of which cannot be seen. Especially in the peripheral areas of the country and of the regions, abandoned houses form a prominent part of the building stock and the rural landscape, as the population rate is still falling in these areas. During the after-war period not only many traditional buildings but also building types were lost and the high diversity of the agricultural landscapes was ruined. The traditional settlements have often lost their most vulnerable elements, such as fences and ornamental vegetation. The open fields are neglected or turned into forestation areas. New buildings have been built, but

only seldom has local tradition been given a priority in the selection of materials and techniques. Also the building types have become universal. Problems of redundancy and of impoverishment of nature's diversity have developed because of the rapid diminishing of the fields and of the flora and fauna of the pasture land. In the village areas the direction of the development is the same, though the speed of decline is not as fast as in the real countryside. Remedies have been sought for the illnesses of the rural areas. Housing and tourism seem to be able to offer some solutions. Many villages are also counting on their cultural heritage and on their value as cultural heritage, judged by the many grass-root level projects in the country. At least some villages want to keep their heritage and everyday life.

In an active rural village the main buildings are kept in up-to-date condition, the many store houses are left, the yard is embellished with plants and fences, the landscape has been cleared from bushes and decorated with fencing and spots of meadows. Much of the work has been done in a traditional "talkoo" organisation, with voluntary work among the villagers, which supports the preservation of the social values in the village, or by man power services.

Planning was introduced in the 1950s in the densely populated areas, e.g. municipal centres and some bigger villages. Because of the modern town planning principles of the open town, we only have fragments left today of the municipal centre villages preserved in their pre-war form.

A handful of wooden town areas have been saved as examples of this type of settlement thanks to subsidised loans and grants and town planning regulations. Many of the earlier workers' housing areas have been integrated into the towns as fashionable suburban areas. Now these areas are inhabited by the third generation after the builders. The present inhabitants' ties to the area are loose or do not exist.

### Establishing conservation ideas

The long research tradition in ethnology and other related sciences has provided us with the framework of the knowledge on vernacular building. To take up one example: the basic units of the villages, the yards, used to be divided into two categories, the irregular or open yard (prevailing in the eastern and central parts of the country), and the more or less regularised yard (prevailing in the southern and western parts of the country). The recent study of Prof. Niilo Valonen's research documentation and manuscripts has led to a much more developed classification: the two main categories – the closed yard and the open yard – are each divided into several subtypes.

Oral tradition of the vernacular has continuously been collected since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The files have become voluminous and are used in research work. The work for opening the files to a wider public use began in the 1990s. The use of the large files for conservation has started and resulted in a growing number of studies on building traditions.

Since the beginning of the architects' training – during the National Romantic era – one of the teaching methods has been the production of measured drawings of existing buildings. Though the classical vocabulary of architecture was popular at the very beginning, vernacular buildings have eagerly been measured by many generations of architectural students. This heritage has proved to be an immense source for the studies and it has opened many eyes to the beauty of the vernacular. In the 1990s the vil-

lages of the sea coast were documented and drawn by students. Some years ago when the eastern border was reopened the researchers could return to the places that had been documented at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Since the 1970s inventories of the built cultural heritage include single buildings, areas and groups of buildings. Urban settlements are well covered in various inventories, but a survey covering vernacular settlements is missing.

Since the 1980s the vernacular has been one part of the research on architecture – the distinction between popular and vernacular is not very clear in Finnish – and many results on the villagescape and landscape have been published. Also the problems of planning and building in a village have been approached in the studies.

In the mid-1990s it was noted in the plant inventories that our plant diversity was severely diminishing due to changes in agriculture. Several projects were established to promote the safeguarding of the traditional endangered biotopes. The projects have resulted in a national inventory, the legislation for their preservation and the authorities' possibility to fund their maintenance. They have not yet proved to be competitive with the modern methods and form one drop in the main stream of integrating agriculture. The loss of the open landscape – due to the integration process – is a bigger worry than the loss of small pieces of traditional pastureland.

The administration supports the conservation of vernacular settlements by providing the general framework for preservation legislation, planning and building laws, nature conservation law and subsidising. The preservation legislation of 1985 gives possibilities to protect single buildings, groups of buildings and areas or landscape areas. The practice of protecting groups of buildings and larger landscape areas has not been implemented due to a lack of arguments for these types of monuments. The planning and building law and the state subsidies to rural areas

**Table of Procedure**

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| SHARE THE RESPONSIBILITIES<br>with local actors (people who stay, live or work in the area)                               |
| DETECT THE THREATS AND PROBLEMS<br>especially short term judgement and temporary fashion                                  |
| THE STANDPOINT<br>is that there is only one past and many possible futures  |
| THE AIMS<br>would create and reinforce<br>the historic continuity,<br>local identity and<br>high quality of the landscape |
| THE TOOLS<br>provide people with knowledge, total conception and wise judgement   |
| THE GOAL<br>all the opportunities for living and people's traditional crafts are secured                                  |

The table is based on Johanna Forsius-Nummela, *The rural landscape and its cultural and historical values*.

have again been changed to meet the new situation within the EU. The densely built areas in municipality centres and towns are preserved according to the regulations of the planning and building legislation.

A sad fact is that traditional skills and crafts necessary for constructing vernacular buildings and, especially, for conserving vernacular monuments and buildings, were about to die out in the years of rapid urbanisation and standard housing. In the 1990s we experienced a boom of courses on traditional crafts and building. The demand is huge and the gap of skills will probably be filled. It is only very difficult to find enough skilled people to teach traditional materials and methods. However, establishing an institute for building conservationists will contribute to the number of specialists in the long run.

During the past decade various awareness programmes have been set up to make the heritage visible and to highlight its meaning and expressions in everyday life. European Heritage Days, several national and regional prizes for a preservation activity of the year, annual "village of the region" competitions, countryside programmes, research programmes have brought into daylight the values of the vernacular and listed the most valuable areas. The programmes for the rural landscape deal with common ideas of conservation: planning, responsibilities, standpoints, aims, tools and goals.

### Conservation practice

The development of conservation of the vernacular follows the same lines as the conservation of single monuments: The first targets of conservation – in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century – were single masterpieces, such as wooden churches of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries that were the first vernacular buildings to be regarded as ancient monuments. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century the scope was widened and also some prominent buildings built by laymen like large farmhouses were the next buildings to belong to the higher category of monuments. In the 1960s areas including several buildings and sites reached the status of a monument. Until the 1980s exemplary specimens of different types of buildings and sites were thought to preserve the tradition if saved from demolition. Today we think that the few examples or reserves, be it single buildings or groups of buildings, do not serve the goal of conserving the vernacular. Also the ideas and various invisible phenomena behind the actual building – for example craft skills – are part of the vernacular heritage that needs to be preserved.

After a long period of "hard" new building and improvements resulting in drastic changes to old buildings, a "softer" approach was introduced for the first time by some conservationists and architects in the late 1970s. The traditional repair ideology has been studied and also gradually explained to the users and designers through handbooks and training courses since the late 1980s. It has been accepted only with difficulties among the builders and owners. Also small subsidies have helped to turn the repair ideology towards the same goal since the 1970s.

Conservationists continuously meet the same problem: the inhabitants of a village or new house owners do not know the history of the place or house and cannot relate to it or recognise its values. Awareness programmes may have brought people to think about the values of heritage in general, but implementing them in the practical repair and conservation work is still rare and requires an educated eye. In order to fill this gap we will

need closer co-operation between professionals in the conservation field and those in education and training.

Practical conservation work was formerly based on every man's skills, on laymen who were trained at the building sites, on a few specialists and some common *talkoo* work. Construction materials used to be mainly local, but the use of imported materials has grown throughout the history. For a long time building work has been regulated by legislation and regulations from the government and the municipalities, though the building allowance was introduced to the countryside only in the early 1960s. The quality of building has also been regulated by public funding.

The models for further discussion have presented the common sound principles of using the biggest possible amount of the existing structure, of an execution in the most effective and practical way possible, an imitation of the existing parts or good practice and a certain willingness to decorate. Written codes of practice were formerly rare and only used by some craftsmen, the recipes of the painters being examples. The influence of written information in various guide books for both, laymen and craftsmen, has grown during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Finding and rewriting the unwritten codes of practice have proved to be important when working on the vernacular and on settlements. When a designer joins a project, he often aims at keeping the frame and the form, at copying the existing forms and at finding uses for the abandoned buildings. How these ideas are translated into the language of a builder is a task to be tackled in the future.

In the post-war period, when many buildings of the countryside were abandoned by the inhabitants who moved into the towns, the likely loss of important examples of traditional buildings was solved by dismantling, storing and re-erecting an example of a building type at a museum site. Hundreds of local open-air museums were created in this way. Soon it was seen that the results were not always good: the technique of moving destroyed parts of the buildings and the "natural" environment of the building was lost. It was followed by a recommendation that the buildings should be re-erected at a site resembling the original site, for example re-erecting a water mill close to a river, a granary close to a farm yard, etc. The new open air museums provided ideas of how to restore vernacular monuments at a time when the number of industrial building materials was growing.

Today we are faced with serious deterioration problems of these buildings and the lack of technical and financial resources to maintain them. Only some of the most important buildings of the local open-air museums have been newly restored, now with the ideas of gradual restoration and traditional and original building techniques. Although the dismantling and moving can be argued, we are lucky to have this collection of traditional buildings around the country. Together they are an important source of information on traditional building techniques, which would have been lost at the site. Moving the buildings from a site to another is a tradition that derives from the early settlers' time. The man – or girl – who left the house received his/her dowry as logs. He/she dismantled his/her log building and re-erected it on the new home site. In our time the habit of moving old buildings to serve a new purpose on a second or third site has increased.

Generally, in politics and discussion, we seem to be ready to accept the conservation of our rural areas and its components. What we now have ahead, is the implementation, the work on the

regional and local levels, in all fields of conservation from principles and awareness to training and wise application of repair and maintenance techniques. Many doubts can be raised, however, because all the resources are decreasing in these fields and in rural areas.

In the denser vernacular settlements, for instance the municipal centres and the suburban areas, the conservation principles and methods can be very close to what is understood of conservation of historic towns and areas. Based on the ideas of the Charter on Historic Towns the conservation process of vernacular settlements would be widened with more specific studies and conclusions on the characteristics or key features of the area and serve the planning phase. On the most practical level the skills of the participants are essential. How the refined organisation and knowledge of building and repair developed by several generations of owners, craftsmen, designers, and administrators will be passed on will unavoidably be seen in the resulting work done on the buildings and in the areas.

In former times we would have demanded answers to conservation problems from the authorities: by increasing public support and funding, by improving and strengthening the legislation, and by making the authorities feel more responsible for the

development. Considering the situation today, we should instead see the problems from the local point of view, that means find more integration and more co-operation with experts and actors, focus on awareness and the values of conservation and in that way find commitment and responsibilities, a better use of the existing funds and adapt relevant models for this work. Furthermore, the work should support the people who live in the conservation targets.

As a model I see the discourse between three classic participants of conservation: the owner/user, the building and the landscape, and the guiding specialist. They develop the conservation process together. For the conservation of vernacular heritage I could imagine this process to be as full of life as the target itself. In practical conservation work the same tools can be used as in the past, together with renewed and new tools: the work will be done by ordinary people, specialists and joint voluntary *talkoo* work. Materials will be local and imported. Regulation will be provided by laws, regulations and subsidies. Think models will present new ideas (for example ecological thinking, recycling) while the old models (for example saving the old, imitation, practicality, willingness to decorate) will survive persistently.