

Reappropriation of an Alienated Space

Commitment to a Cultural Heritage Project from within the Lifeworld

Håkan Berglund-Lake

Department of Humanities, Mid Sweden University, Härnösand, Sweden

hakan.berglund-lake@miun.se

During the last few years an EU-project is in progress in the former sawmill community of Marieberg, near the outflow of the Ångerman River. The purpose of the project is to preserve and protect the physical traces of industrial activities at the place, and bring them to life. The project was created and is carried on by inhabitants of the place; in other words, the preserving activities occurred, and still do, in the life-world of people living at the place. My focus is on the consequences of this preserving work. I use a phenomenological approach to elucidate how people from within their lifeworld, not only struggle to preserve the cultural heritage *per se*, but struggle to preserve the sense of the place as their own.

Reappropriation of an Alienated Space

Commitment to a Cultural Heritage Project from within the Lifeworld

Not far away from the outflow of the Ångerman River, the Marieberg sawmill was established in 1862. The place was carefully selected considering the excellent harbour condition of the place. The sawmill was founded during a period when the expansion of the sawmill industry was most intensive. In the area one of the largest sawmill district in Sweden was situated with approximately forty sawmills running at the same time, producing enormous quantities of wood products for the world market. As a consequence of the industrial production with its need for manpower, small communities were arising around the sawmills with dwellings and schoolhouses, later also with village shops, association premises, sports grounds, etc. It was a prospering community until far into the 20th century. But in the beginning of the 1970s the story came to an end when the Marieberg sawmill was closed down. The closure was an effect of the decline of the forest industry in the entire industrial district of the Ådalen valley, which Marieberg was a part of. During this time the journalist and writer Mauritz Edström, born and raised in the district, visited this area and noted in melancholy: "He who remembers the clouds of smoke [from the pulp factories and saw mills] and the swarming crowd of people in the 30s and 40s, the journey in the Ådalen of today is like travelling among ruins, in the poetry of disintegration" (Edström 1978:59, my translation). This retrogression has proceeded without compensation from any new industry establishing in the area.

Like most of the places abandoned by the industry, the majority of the buildings in Marieberg have been pulled down, and the machinery has been dismantled and carried away. Remaining at the place are overgrown foundations, sunken barges, and piles putrescent in the water left to corruption. There are only a few traces reminding of the industrial activity at the place. Depositions of the industrial activity exist in the landscape only as fragments of an epoch gone by for ever. Yet, in a comparison with other former sawmills and sawmill communities, Marieberg stands out from the rest. Here you can find, among other remains, a whole housing environment of workers' barracks complete with storehouses preserved from the end of the 19th century. These characteristics have motivated the Västernorrland county administrative board to appoint Marieberg to a cultural reserve in the spring of 2004. However, the county administrative board did not take the initiative to preserve the buildings; there was an initiative taken from persons living at the place. A few years before, an EU project called Kjöjaviken Cultural Heritage was set up, with the purpose to preserve and protect the physical traces of the industrial activities at the place and bring them to life.

There are many similar projects going on in Sweden. It seems to be generally held that this commitment to the cultural heritage of the industrial society is an outcome of a feeling that we have left a historical epoch behind us. Scholars preoccupied with issues on modernity usually describe this phenomenon as a consequence of the quest for roots, permanence and predictability in a society where people experience insecurity, fragmentation and boundlessness.

However, my concern in this article is not to scrutinize whether this view offers an explanation to the causes of the increasing commitment to the cultural heritage. Thus, my aim is not to analyze what the place is as an idea, a cultural construction or as a narrative. Instead, I will illuminate what consequences the preserving work will have for people living at the place. I will use a phenomenological approach to elucidate how people from within their lifeworld, experience and treat dilapidation, erosion, and destruction of a physical environment, which they are tied to with strong feelings of connectedness and belonging. Expressed in another way, this article is not about the struggle to preserve the cultural heritage

per se, but the struggle to preserve the sense of the place as one's own, which of course should not be taken literally. It is possessions we call ours, regardless of whether they imply a legal ownership or not. As Edward Casey remarks, "it is more deeply a question of appropriating, with all that this connotes of making something one's own by making it one with one's ongoing life" (1987:191-192).

The following discussion is based on interviews with inhabitants of the place, the project leader, and members of the board of the local history association. Moreover, the discussion is also based on my own experiences of Marieberg from being there in person. In my encounter with people, things and the physical environment of the place I have tried to expose myself, through my body and senses, to the possibilities and the limitations that everyone lives with in his or her quest to sustain life at the place.

Caring of One's Own House

It is now more than thirty years since the Marieberg sawmill ceased to run. At the same time more than a hundred workers, all at once, became unemployed. Unfortunately, no other jobs appeared in exchange. Nevertheless, the village still exists; the sawmill is gone, but people are still living at the place. In fact, there are many of them, both survivors and people who have moved in.

People stick to their house and place, not under compulsion, however, but at their own options. There is always an option to move to other places where jobs are offered. As has already been noted, many choose to live at the place and make use of the opportunities that they consider exist within their reach. For example, people support themselves by combining different sources of livelihood, like casual works, long-distance commuting, jobseeker's allowance, social allowance, early retirement pension, change of work duties, and self-sufficiency (cf. Hansen 1998). There is always a matter of guaranteeing the influx of ready money to the household, and force the expenses down.

Obviously, people live in Marieberg. Most of them live in owner-occupied houses, which are situated along the lane through the village. The houses are cleaned, repaired, rebuilt, enlarged, and repainted; the gardens are looked after, and the fences kept up; things are put in order; rubbish and lumber are burned or carried away; firewood is carried home, cut, split and piled. What we observe is a constant occupation with things, which make everyday life work. However, this caring in quotidian life, as Kimberly Dovey notes, "is more than just a utilitarian concern". "It is through this concerned involvement that our world is disclosed and appropriated" (1985:37). In other words, by cleaning, moving, repairing or storing things, people appropriate the place; that is, make it one's own.

This process of making something one's own, by investing work into a place, leads the thoughts to Karl Marx' account of labour. He notes that in the process of making a material object, or cultivating land, time and energy will be put into it; the maker will experience the object "as natural prerequisites of himself, which constitute, as it were, a prolongation of his body" (Marx 1964:89). For phenomenology, this is "a kind of incorporation of the world into our selves" (Dovey 1985:37). William James discussed this linkage in a similar vein. He said that "a man's Self is the sum of all he CAN call his", which includes not only his body, but also "his clothes, and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands, and yacht and bank-account" (1890:291).

Thus, experientially, people are not able to abstract the physical environment from themselves. That is to say, the places one acts in and upon, like the things one uses, "merge with and become indispensable parts of one's own being" (Jackson 2002:66). In sum, the attachment to place is experienced as an extension of the self. However, this does not mean a static entity, but an ongoing dialectic. Our relationship to the place is always lived, "animated and reanimated by the presence of the lived body in the mist" (Casey 1997:241).

However, the process of appropriation is not delimited to a private sphere; it also extends to a wider area, which not necessarily is about work but still implies bodily involvements. Through the familiarity of routinely walking the same routes, and by sojourning in the public area of the community people will appropriate it. After all, much has been changed in the public environment of Marieberg, which I soon will return to. When the sawmill was running, there were lots of landmarks, nets of routes and boundaries, which people had active relationships to in their daily movements away from home and back again, in their continuous movement between private and public realms.

In these movements certain buildings or other physical objects become points of reference and orientation because of their constancy and their immobility, experienced as pre-established and inert. This substantiality and tangibility made it possible for the inhabitants to encompass their everyday world in a design of entrances and exits, borderlines and passages, between different places, spatialized in varying layers of anonymity and intimacy.

But the question is; what happens to people when they are facing the decline and erosion of the common space, a physical environment so obvious and self-evident to everybody living at the place? What happens when ties to the public space are radically changed because of the sawmill production has ceased, acquaintances have moved away, buildings have been abandoned, industrial premises have been demolished – when "all that is solid melts into air", to use a phrase from Marx (Berman 1982).

Alienation from a Familiar Space

In spite of the fact that people to a large extent stay on in Marieberg, there are more people who move out of than into the village. There is a decrease in population, which has now gone on for a long time. Only 60% of the dwelling houses are places of residence throughout the year, while the remaining are summer places. Thus, only a small number of the dwellings are completely abandoned. People with ties to the place refuse to sell. Instead they keep the houses as summerhouses, which they maintain and take care of, and in that way they preserve them.

Yet, empty and abandoned houses exist. There are houses where the facing paint flakes, the roof leaks, the railing disrepairs, and the garden becomes overgrown. However, the decay is worse in territories once owned by the sawmill company, and which at the present time are owned by persons living in some other places. They constitute a sphere in which local people have no rights or powers. Such territories make up a space where "they" don't do anything.

As a matter of fact, when a property is never used and is never taken care of, brushwood, bushes and grass will soon take over. Before the EU project was started in Marieberg, this process had gone on for a while without any measures from the owner. What we can see happen to abandoned places is that they draw rubbish and lumber from other places. Under the cover of thick vegetation, and owing to the marginalization of the territory, dumping grounds for rubbish, scraps, and garden wastes appeared at many spots in the area.

These processes of decay, overgrowing with bushes, and expanding dumping grounds, I think erode the sense of belonging to the place. The familiarity of the place where one lives is shattered. It is a loss shared with others. People feel that they have lost a familiar part of their material environment but also a vital and intimate part of their personal lives. This will be seen as an attack on places they call their own, and an insult to the self. People feel like victims of foreign forces outside their governance.

In spite of that, few people complain. The prevailing behaviour has for a long time been to turn one's back to it, avoid talking about it, and to make detours passing by. I think these are strategies to delimit the suffering from loss. People try to regain some sense of control by shutting their eyes to the fact, albeit imaginative and illusory. "This denial of reality", as

Michael Jackson points out, “is as much a coping mechanism as ‘facing’ or ‘accepting’ reality” (2005:109).

When the project was started local people had for a long time turned their backs to large areas, which they considered were beyond their opportunities to exert influences on. Typically, in such situations people tend to withdraw and retreat to their houses, as places of intimacy and privacy, which they can trust and manage.

Reappropriation of Common Space

The most impressive building in Marieberg is the former managing director’s residence, in popular parlance called the Castle (*Borgen*), which changed hands in the end of the 1990s. At this point the building was in bad condition. Shortly, the new owner realized that almost every building in the village from the sawmill epoch was in great need of renovation. At the same time he received information about a possible way to get funding for projects with aims to use remains from former industrial activities in order to stimulate new businesses and spirits of enterprise. Simultaneously, he succeeded to involve members of the local history association in the matter. An application was formulated and handed in. Soon the application was accepted, and means for the project were granted. The purpose of the project was to prevent the buildings at the place from disrepairing: in the first place the old workers’ barracks from the 1870s. Moreover, in the buildings the plan was to start new activities as a museum, a café, a hostel, artist studios, and art galleries, in an attempt to attract visitors to the place.

However, most of those living at the place did not seem to be particularly interested in becoming part of a tourist resort. Yet, there were always many people who attended when the project leader called them to work, to clear, to burn or carry away rubbish and lumber, and to restore – activities that demanded a great deal of work. Thousands of hours of unpaid work were put into these activities. Obviously, people commit themselves when they observe that something was done with the physical environment. As a consequence of the efforts, it is now possible to view the water from the lane through the village, to berth boats at a functional landing stage, and to be spared to witness how the buildings gradually are collapsing. My point is that the driving force for people to commit to the project is not based on an interest in preserving survivals from times gone by, nor in supporting entrepreneurs at the place, but based on the need to reappropriate the space that they for a long time have been alienated from. Hence, they want the houses and places in the communal space to be regenerated, and by that augment the space for life for those living at the place.

This is what we can see happen in the project. But just before the project was brought to a close, the people committed to the project, and also everybody living at the place, were hit by information from the authorities. It was found out that the land was polluted. The statement was felt as a backlash, as a throwback.

Backlash

The clearing of the brushwood had been done within a strip of land, 1 500 metres by 200 metres, between the lane through the village and the river. That is the area where the former sawmill production took place, and where the timber yards were spread out. Within this area there is only one building remaining from the sawmill epoch, the drying house, where the boards and planks were quick-dried. During the period of the project the drying house had been thoroughly restored and transformed from a blot, or eyesore, for the village, to a handsome building, giving room to artist studios, and art galleries. In the area footpaths and information boards had been prepared, narrating the history of the place.

Just before the period of the project came to an end the Kramfors municipality took on the responsibility for the environmental control of the area where the sawmill was once located.

With the purpose to form a basis for the future planning and use of the territory, the properties of the ground were carefully investigated. Unfortunately, the result of the investigation revealed frighteningly high levels of environmental pollution in the drying house and in the ground where the warehouse for boards, the timber yards and the sawdust dump had been situated earlier (Sweco viak 2005). Until further notice, the authorities prohibited all activities at the place, which implied that the drying house with studios and art gallery had to close, and guided tours in the area had to cease.

Undoubtedly, the ground is polluted, which all involved - authorities, property owners, associations and individuals - have to handle in one way or another. All agree that the existing circumstances require a thorough decontamination of the drying house and the ground in different spots in the area. But the question is in what way and for what purpose. Obviously, the perspective differs concerning who the observer is. From the horizon of the local residents, as has just been mentioned, the necessity to carry out the decontamination is fully realized. They can also accept that they will be prevented from the use of the area more or less permanently. Apart from the undesired consequences this will have for the enterprising at the place, the prevention from the area has no apparent effects on people's everyday life: they have no claims to be able to physically stay inside the former sawmill area, except when they need to pass through in purpose to reach the waterside. Nor do they consider the contamination as a threat; undesired of course, but not threatening. Indeed, the contamination has been a part of the place for more than half a century. People have lived with it without being affected. A previously executed sample shows no extra absorption of toxic substances in the bodies of people living at the place, and in the bodies of people who during the last twenty years have regularly sojourned in the area of the former sawmill.

In the writings of the investigators we find another emphasis. The environment of the place is described as polluted and less predictable. It is a discourse conveying a sense of environmental disaster, a continuing process of uncontrolled contamination, which may be said is given moral meanings besides its biological properties (Innerstedt 2007). The manner to term the area polluted and by that condemning it, effects how the area will be appreciated by prospective visitors and others. The local people are afraid that this attention on environmental pollution in the place will give rise to an adverse image of Marieberg which will stigmatise the village as a risky, dangerous and undesired place to stay in and to live in. This is an image that the local residents do not recognize and refuse to bear (Sahlén 2007).

Faced with the disparaging rumours, and the uncontrolled spread in other places and in other contexts, people are standing defenceless, without any possibilities indeed to do anything; they just have to treat the consequences. Thus, what is considered uncontrollable for the local people is not the environmental pollution, but the expected spreading of negative rumours that the discourse of contamination may give rise to. Today, in the encounter between authorities and the local people, there is an ongoing struggle for preferential right to speak and define concepts of reality, which we not yet can predict the outcome of. For people living in Marieberg, it is a matter of being able to exert influences on how the area is described. Ultimately, it is a matter of refusing others, outsiders from a distance, without any concrete attachment to the life lived in Marieberg, to reach a position with power to determine the destiny of the place.

References

- Berman, Marshall 1982. *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. London: Verso.
- Casey, Edward 1987. *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

- Casey, Edward 1997. *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*. Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press.
- Dovey, Kimberly 1985. "The Quest for Authenticity and the Replication of Environmental Meaning." In David Seamon & Robert Mugerauer (eds), *Dwelling, Place and Environment: Towards a Phenomenology of Person and World*. Dordrecht, Boston & Lancaster: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
- Edström, Mauritz 1978. *Mitt Ådalen*. Stockholm: Liber.
- Hansen, Kjell 1998. *Välfärdens motsträviga utkant. Lokal praktik och statlig styrning i efterkrigstidens nordsvenska inland*. (With an English summary.) Lund: Historiska Media.
- Innerstedt, Fredrik 2007. *Föreningen sitter i väggarna. En kvalitativ undersökning av ett textualiserat f.d. sågverk*. (Unpublished master thesis.) Gothenburg: Gothenburg University, Department of Conservation.
- Jackson, Michael 2002. *The Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression, and Intersubjectivity*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press.
- Jackson, Michael 2005. *Existential Anthropology: Events, Exigencies and Effects*. New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- James, William 1890. *The Principal of Psychology*. Vol. 1. New York: Henry Holt.
- Mariebergs f.d. sågverk. *Fördjupad förstudie*. Sundsvall: Sweco viak (29 november 2005). [Cit. Sweco viak 2005.]
- Marx, Karl 1964. *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Sahlén, Jan 2007. "Marieberg – bästa miljöoffret i Sverige." *Tidningen Ångermanland*, the 4th April 2007.