

RENOVATION AS A THREAT FOR THE IDENTITY AND INTEGRITY OF KARJASILTA AREA

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Abstract The historical and cultural values of the post-war reconstruction period housing areas have been officially noticed just quite recently in Finland. At the same time the popularity of these areas has increased. It is feared that technical alterations of the old buildings will disrupt the uniformity and destroy the identity of these neighbourhoods. The Karjasilta neighbourhood in Oulu functions as a pilot area of the study.

In the beginning of 2008, a structured resident survey was launched as a part of a new research project, *Karjasilta as a residential environment and cultural milieu*. The aim is to shed light on the qualities and values of both the physical and social environments - scale, materials and social factors.

1. Introduction

After the Second World War more than 400,000 Finnish immigrants, veterans, war widows and their families were settled within a few years. Post-war reconstruction was implemented in so-called veteran's housing areas all over Finland without construction of temporary

barracks. A simple method of constructing economically, technically and aesthetically qualitative wooden houses was born.

Nearly every town in Finland has - or has had - a homogenous neighbourhood of type houses constructed during the post-war reconstruction period. The Karjasilta neighbourhood in Oulu in northern Finland is one of the largest. These areas can be considered the last period of construction in Finland's wooden town heritage.

Type drawings of single-family houses were designed by many different quarters after the late 1930s. Particularly the government and other public agencies compiled descriptions and model drawings of wooden single-family houses. Although it did not last long, the period of development of type houses guaranteed that the quality of reconstruction in Finland was good and did not lead to construction of temporary barracks. Construction was initially guided by various type drawings produced by the Settlement Committee of the Central Federation of Agricultural Societies in the early 1940s. Later, basic plans were designed by the reconstruction office of the Finnish Association of Architects, and still later type houses were designed under several ministries. Because it could be constructed entirely from wood, the single-family house with its variations was the dominant type during the period when construction materials were scarce.



Figures 1 and 2. A typical street of Karjasilta, 1940's (left). Aerial view of the Karjasilta neighbourhood, 2001 (right). (Niskala and Okkonen 2002, 87)

The new single-family houses differed in appearance from traditional Finnish construction. Their cube-like, tall shape was emphasised by a rather steep roof. The dominant building type was a 1_-storey, ridge-roofed building with a small, nearly square floor plan. The rooms were grouped around fireplaces and a chimney situated in the centre of the building. The facades of the building were clad with

uniform, smooth horizontal or vertical siding, the windows were quite small and the buildings usually had a small porch.

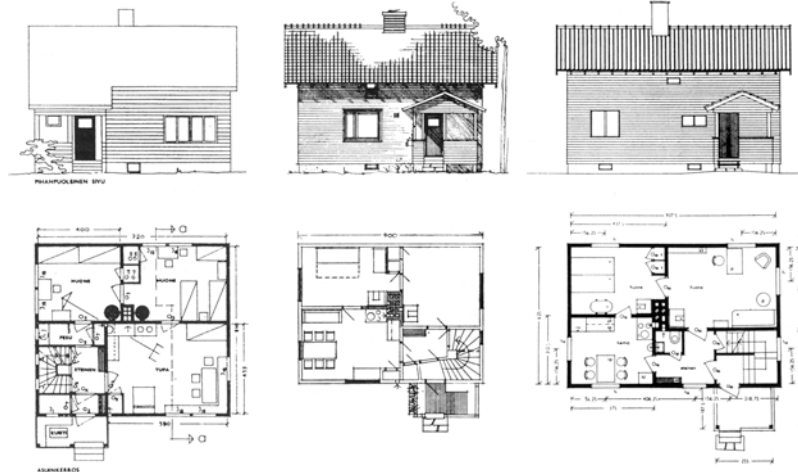


Figure 3. Some variations of the basic reconstruction period house.

Various applications of the same residential building type spread throughout Finland. They were used in rural settlements and urban reconstruction areas, where the rows of closely-spaced, uniform houses along the streets formed homogenous, town-like streetscapes.

The first houses were constructed in Oulu's Karjasilta already during the interim peace in 1940. The area's town plan was compiled in 1943. The town plan is simple and typical of the time: nearly equal-sized plots with specified building limits were located along straight or slightly curved streets. The overall appearance was uniform and homogenous, even though the area contains about thirty different variations of the type house, ranging from one to 1½ stories and from small to large. Different house types were grouped separately by construction phase. The goal may also have been to achieve a harmonious townscape. There are altogether about 500 wooden single-family houses in the neighbourhood, and the two-storey apartment buildings in the area bring the total number of residences to over 600.

2. Valuation of the areas and changes in valuation

2.1 UTILITY AS THE BASIC VALUE

Valuation of the post-war reconstruction period neighbourhoods has never been a certainty. At the time, construction of type houses was

considered a necessary way to solve the post-war housing problem, but the appearance of the buildings and their location close to the street were not generally praised, even among architects. For example, architect Alvar Aalto criticised post-war type house construction very strongly: *"It is apparent that five or twenty-five similar standardised houses can be constructed without reaction from the people, perhaps even fifty can be constructed; a hundred may already cause pressure, but in no way is it possible to construct several hundreds... ..it is not impossible that this short-sighted method of standardisation, borrowed from technology, is currently creating a new type of slum - this time a psychological slum."*(Aalto 1941, 75)

The most important value attached to them in the decades following their construction was utility, which in itself of course did not awaken any attempts of preservation.



Figure 4. Quotation from a book published in 1971: *"This type of house has been considered the worst step backwards in modern Finnish architecture. The beauty ideals of functionalism have been rejected; at the same time the single-family house with its high foundation and steep ridge roof is a travesty of the traditional low rural house..."* (Salokorpi 1971, 34) Photo A. Soikkeli

The young generation of architects condemned the veteran's houses in the 1960s and 1970s. The goal had become to construct flat-roofed, low houses with complex floor plans. As late as the 1970s, it was felt that the post-war reconstruction period residential areas created near the town centres would disappear. Wooden sections of town located

elsewhere in Oulu were demolished to make room for multi-storey apartment buildings, and it was felt that Karjasilta would follow suit.

2.2 AESTHETIC VALUES AS DEFINERS OF PRESERVATION

When around forty years had passed since Karjasilta was constructed, Renovation as a threat for the identity and integrity of Karjasilta area the significance of post-war reconstruction period type houses began to be recognised and, at least among experts, they began to be more definitely considered a part of the Finnish construction heritage.

A book published in 1989 that describes Finnish architectural art describes post-war reconstruction areas as follows: *"Those mostly 1 - storey cube-like wooden houses with their porches became established as such a natural part of rural or urban housing that they have become an archetype of Finnish living."* (Helander 1989, 23)

Karjasilta's current new town plan was compiled in 1979. It is not a preservation plan, but the explanatory notes of the plan include the clear goal of protecting and fostering the area. After the demolition boom of the 1970s it was considered sufficient to specify that buildings should not be demolished unnecessarily to make room for new ones. However, not even the explanatory notes of the plan take into account remodelling or management of the overall appearance of the area. They only state in general: *"When granting building permits, special attention must be placed on promoting preservation of the building stock."* (Description of town plan for town part of Karjasilta)

The veteran's houses are still considered everyday buildings that are valuable only locally at most - and even then as a neighbourhood and not as individual buildings. Many veteran's houses are demolished every year in Finland - a couple were demolished in Karjasilta, also, in the early 2000s. The sales ads for the buildings even enticed buyers to buy a "building plot containing a building to be demolished". Nevertheless, demolition is not the only threat to this type of building. Perhaps an even greater threat is posed by renovation without consideration for the characteristic features of these buildings. Often after renovation it is no longer possible to recognise the period during which the building was constructed or the type of building. This is a process that is ongoing in Karjasilta, regardless of the town plan's intent to preserve.

2.3 THE PROBLEM OF CONTROLLING THE PROCESS OF CHANGE IN RENOVATION

It is not possible to turn a town into a museum, nor should it be attempted. A town lives and changes. Preservation and conservation

always include the pronounced problem of controlling the process of change.



Figures 5 and 6. Neo-romanticism added to the facade in conjunction with renovation. Photo A. Soikkeli (left). Extension with more subdued details. Photo R. Suikkari (right)

The energy crisis of the 1970s labelled the veteran's houses as nearly unfit for living, and with the modifications that were made then the graceful simplicity of the buildings often had to make way for the bloated appearance created by additional insulation. The windows that were traditionally nearly flush with the facade were left in recesses as the walls grew in thickness. The desire to do away with the need for maintenance resulted in renovations in the 1960s and 1970s where the original wooden siding was covered with asbestos-concrete sheeting, which was considered maintenance-free. Extensions built during that period - today derisively called standard-of-living lumps - conflicted with the original basic shape of the buildings and fractured the streetscape and the area's homogenous overall appearance. Yet, even after these modifications the buildings were usually still recognisable as post-war reconstruction houses and could be restored during later renovations. Most often these extensions were hidden on the backyard side of the house.

The view of town planning and building preservation experts is that the current town plan does not provide sufficient guidelines for infill construction - new buildings constructed in the area differ in appearance from the row of old buildings. They rise slightly higher than the old buildings and their different roof angle makes them stand out like an exclamation point.

Experts are worried that the wave of renovating post-war reconstruction houses that began in the 1990s will destroy the identity of Karjasilta. The modernisation of the buildings and simultaneous construction of various additions and skylights are considered harmful to the uniformity of the area. In conjunction with the renovations, the type houses of the 1940s and 1950s are made to look much older than they are, which badly distorts the history of the buildings. Typical architectural features of the 1800s are added to the exterior of the buildings, meaning their simple facades are divided into sections with mouldings and the direction of wooden siding varies on the same building. In replacing windows no attempt is made to preserve the original pane size, and instead of using today's typical window types, small-paned windows that haven't been used in Finland since the early 1990s are installed. As a result, the house resembles a veteran's house in shape, but the details and type of siding bring to mind buildings from the late 1800s. After such modifications it is difficult to identify the period during which the houses were built. The houses become so-called traditional houses that nevertheless represent something not recognised in Finnish tradition. The modifications made during renovation produce buildings with surfaces and features that have never actually existed. Models for these building can be found in the detailed, decorative houses in the illustrations of Walt Disney's fairy tales. (Soikkeli 2005, 173-174)

2.4 TOWARDS CONSERVATION OF BUILDINGS

Only during the past decades has there been widespread awakening in Finland to a realisation of the value of old buildings and especially the neighbourhoods they form and the importance of preserving them. The simple buildings of the post-war reconstruction period are not easily included among old buildings that should be conserved; they are considered ordinary everyday buildings. The monotonous, plain houses with simple details do not awaken the same kind of protective attitude as do older buildings with cosy small-paned windows and charisma based on the decorative themes of historic buildings from different periods. Therefore, when renovating veteran's houses, preserving their appearance is usually not an objective. On the contrary, facades are intentionally modified to look more "valuable". There is fear that changes in the outward style and surface materials of these buildings will degrade the environment and also weaken the identity of the Karjasilta neighbourhood.

A lack of expertise and consideration in the renovation of these

buildings has already led to a blurring of the characteristic nature and layers of time in many town neighbourhoods. This process of change is ongoing strongly in nearly all the post-war reconstruction period areas in Finland, and especially strongly in Karjasilta. To ensure sustainable development, residents and experts need to find a common set of values and commit themselves to the rules of the game set up for the preservation of these neighbourhoods. To facilitate this we need to conduct an inventory of the physical building stock and examine the cultural atmosphere and the residents' values by means of a resident survey and interviews.

3. Research in reconstruction period neighbourhoods

3.1 RESIDENTS' VALUE BASE AS THE CORE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Nowadays the popularity of reconstruction period neighbourhoods has increased. The simple wooden frame structure allows technical alterations and infill architecture. The areas are located near town centres and services. At the same time the question of the future of these areas arises. The historical and cultural values of these areas have been officially noticed just quite recently. It is feared that modernisation of the buildings will disrupt the uniformity and destroy the identity of these neighbourhoods. This dichotomy has occasionally lead to serious disagreements between the residents and town planning professionals. To clear up these disagreements it is necessary to examine the residents' value base with respect to their own living environment. The aim is to also shed light on the qualities of both the physical and social environments - scale, materials and social factors - in experiencing the area as a good neighbourhood. The goal is also to increase the general understanding of the values of the whole area and strengthen the commitment of the local people. The Karjasilta neighbourhood in Oulu functions as a pilot case in this study on reconstruction period neighbourhoods.

3.2 RESEARCH PROCESS

In addition to an inventory of the built environment, local knowledge will be used to create guidelines for sustainable development. In the beginning of 2008 a ten-sheet structured resident survey with drawing tasks was launched as a part of a new research project, *Karjasilta as a residential environment and cultural milieu*.

The survey was delivered to every single-family house and two-storey apartment blocks in the residential area. The responses are being analysed with the help of an SPSS statistical software application and the open answers with an NVIVO software application. The drawings are sorted by theme to form visual mental maps. Some preliminary results can already be presented. The method was tested in several historical and modern Finnish town environments in an earlier research and EU project (Suikkari and Reinikainen 2006 a-b). In these projects a research method based on a *structured resident survey* was developed for use as a tool to evaluate the quality and environmental values of neighbourhoods. The impulse for this was the newly reformed *Land Use and Building Act* (132/1999), which emphasizes interactive planning.

During the next phase of the study we will conduct in-depth interviews of a few residents and town officials. The intent is to determine the significance of differing views and the residents' expectations and actual needs related to extensions and renovations.

Based on discussions held in conjunction with inventory and renovation work, there is a strong do-it-yourself tradition in the neighbourhood. Washroom facilities in particular have been small, inadequate and in need of renewal. The residents want to enlarge the old cold porch and take it into beneficial use. The residents shun involvement by the authorities, because by their recollection their neighbour was also able to do things without any supervision or official guidance. The variety of renovations also seems to be influenced by fads - balconies are built because neighbours have them.

4. Preliminary conclusions

Based on preliminary results of the resident survey, it is clear that also Karjasilta residents feel their neighbourhood is valuable. The area's scale is considered to be suitable and the area has both cultural and social values. Quite many feel their area is a very pleasant or even perfectly ideal milieu. Those who live in small apartment buildings are slightly less satisfied, but this appears to be dissatisfaction with the small size of the apartment. The neighbourhood itself is considered pleasant. The feeling of comfort is affected by the area's greenness and actively used yards. Reasons for insecurity include motor vehicle traffic and overly high speeds. Nevertheless, the neighbourhood is considered generally safe. The peripheral areas are considered to be a little less safe.

Only a few feel a veteran's house is poorly suited to modern living. The homogeneity of the area is quite commonly considered to be a cultural value that should be preserved. However, everyday life includes practical issues in which the residents' views differ from those of planning experts. These usually involve town plan regulations, the adequacy of the abbreviated construction method guidelines compiled by the town and the authorities' involvement in extensions and renovations done by the residents. People who have lived in the neighbourhood only a short time appear to be most critical of the authorities' involvement. For them, their own plot and yard near the services of the town centre are emphasised as the value base of the area, not so much the area's historical significance nor preservation of its uniformity. On the other hand, a significant share of the residents themselves brought up renovations and extensions that strongly change outward appearance as a negative feature. These residents have usually lived in the area longer and are committed to their living environment.

It is essential to find a common language between the residents and town planning professionals in order to come up with guidelines for sustainable development of these areas. The preliminary results of this research are a good start in this process.

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