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PART II: Translation and Export of Scandinavian Design in the 20th and 21st Centuries

Chapter 6

The Myth of the Little Red Cottage: the Circulation of Vernacular Romanticism in Scandinavian Architecture in the Twentieth Century.

Mia Åkerfelt

This chapter focuses on the representation and mediation of the vernacular form of the red-painted cottage in Finnish and Swedish architectural culture. Based on an examination of a wide range of material featuring such cottages, this chapter explores the important role of this building type as a mediator of transnational as well as national ideas during a period of almost 150 years. The tracing of how the idea of the red cottage developed historically reveals how an architectural type that originally had a marginal role in the vernacular culture of Scandinavia became codified as something that could define each nation's architecture. When re-circulated back into the international context, it could be inscribed with ideas about Scandinavian characteristics as a combination of history and future, continuity and modernization.

Keywords: vernacular romanticism, architectural discourse, Finnish architecture, Swedish architecture

The little red cottage with white trimmings, melting into the Nordic forest landscape, is one of the most enduring archetypes of Scandinavian architecture. In Finland and Sweden, where most of the red cottages are found, the building type featured frequently in architectural

debates in the twentieth century. Despite the fact that it was rarely included in the architectural canon, it was given a mythical status as part of the origins of Finnish and Swedish building culture. However, the red cottage became common only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the idea of it as something genuine and formative can be traced via a variety of contemporary ideologies concerning nationhood and the vernacular. The myth of the red cottage is a good example of how international ideas about vernacular romanticism were incorporated into Scandinavian architectural discourse, adapted to local ideological needs and later fed back into international discourse, now transformed into something specifically Scandinavian. The traces of this process can be found in a wide range of material, both scientific and aimed at the general public, from the mid-nineteenth century until today.

The aim here is to trace the evolution of the idea of the red cottage as something genuinely and intrinsically Scandinavian, focusing on the ideological contexts in which it was mentioned. Analysis of the values inscribed in the building type require an understanding of vernacular romanticism as a nationalist construct based on internationally circulated ideas. The main questions this chapter seeks to answer are how interest in vernacular architecture came to Scandinavia; why such ideas were adopted and adapted to the Scandinavian ideological framework; and how they were later re-circulated in an international context, now branded as something typical ‘Swedish’ or ‘Finnish’.

The image of red cottages as something profoundly Scandinavian provides a multi-faceted case study in regard to the translation of transnational ideas. When the red cottage started to appear as an ideal for architecture in a multitude of writings in the late nineteenth century, it was not yet common in a Scandinavian vernacular setting. However, the discourse routinely described such cottages as an age-old tradition cherished by agricultural populations in Sweden and Finland. This discrepancy between historical facts and ideological writings is

the main starting point here. Theoretically, my work follows the historiographic tradition in architectural research, tracking the development of an idea via archival material and contemporary texts. In a Scandinavian context, this methodology has been used, for instance, by Johan Knutsson and Sten Rentzhog in their research into how the vernacular was presented within an architectural or museological context.¹ Since the red cottage was a phenomenon created first in nationalist writings and not in real life, the historiographic approach contributes to an understanding of both the historical development of the building type and of the processes behind its establishment as an enduring symbol for nationalist movements in Sweden and Finland.

Despite the frequent association between red cottages and Scandinavian culture in general, the cottages themselves can mainly be found in Sweden and Finland. The development of the idea of the red cottage can roughly be divided into three main phases: an early national romanticist/modernist phase from the late-nineteenth century until the Second World War; a nostalgic phase during the post-war years; and a post-modern phase that began in the 1970s. A discussion of the international development of vernacular romanticism as a set of ideas provides the foundations of this study.

Vernacular Romanticism in the Nineteenth Century

In the early 1800s, interest in both the national and regional began to grow as a result of developments in politics, science and philosophy. At the time, the German interest in local heritage and culture grew amongst the educated population, resulting in the birth of the

¹ Johan Knutsson, *I "hemtrefnadens" tid: Allmoge, nationalromantik och konstnärligt nyskapande i arkitektur, möbler och inredningar 1890–1930* (Stockholm: Nordiska museets förlag, 2010); Sten Rentzhog, *Friluftsmuseerna. En skandinavisk idé erövrar världen* (Stockholm: Carlsson Bokförlag, 2007).

Heimat movement. Barbara Knorpp has traced the origins of the movement to the enthusiasm for national history that followed the wars of national liberation after 1819.² Knorpp's research focuses on the development of the concept during the Age of Romanticism, when it became an expression of the longing for a united German nation.³ From the 1820s, *Heimat* associations and museums were founded all over Germany, and the movement reached its peak in the years after the foundation of the German Reich in 1871, and again in 1918.⁴

Sweden and Finland had a long history of economic and ideological exchange with Germany, making the latter an important conduit for ideas of nationhood. It was not, however the only source. In Sweden, an early example of the adaption of international ideas about the value of the vernacular can be traced in the circle around the intellectual Carl Johan Love Almqvist (1793–1866). Inspired primarily by the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), he formulated and disseminated his ideas on an ideal life as a Swedish Christian yeoman, combining religious observance and honest labour.⁵ In Finland, writers such as Johan Jakob Tengström (1787–1858), Johan Ludvig Runeberg (1804–1877), Zachris Topelius (1818–1898) and Johan Vilhelm Snellman (1806–1881) emerged in the early decades of the nineteenth century. They took influences primarily from the German sphere, particularly Hegel's ideas on the nation and its representation via nature and vernacular culture.⁶

² Barbara Knorpp, 'Heimat museums and notions of home', *Journal of Museum Ethnography* 22 (December 2009) 9–21.

³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵ Mathias Bäckström *Hjärtats härdar: Folkliv, Folkmuseer och minnesmärken i Skandinavien 1808–1907* (Möklinta: Gidlunds Förlag, 2012), 121–8.

⁶ Julia Donner, *Kasvitarhasta puutarhakotiin: Naiset kotipuutarhan tekijöinä Suomessa 1870–1930* (Helsinki: Helsingin yliopisto, 2015), 62–4.

German ideas about local history and its preservation became influential across Europe in the mid-nineteenth century. In the field of architecture in Sweden and Finland, German publications and periodicals were important sources of knowledge within both education and practice.⁷ Pattern books, such as Friedrich Eisenlohr's 1849 drawings for ornaments based on studies of German vernacular architecture, became popular and widespread as a part of the development of the Swiss style in architecture.⁸ These ideas were adapted for the needs of the receiving countries, for instance by Georg Theodor Polychron Chiewitz (1815–1862) who introduced the Swiss style with local adaptations in Finland in the early 1850s.⁹ Sometimes Scandinavian scholars or artists active in Germany collected material from their home region and published it in German, disseminating this information both within international circles and back home. Here, works by Norwegian artist Johan Christian Dahl (1788–1857), especially his collection of engravings of Norwegian stave churches from 1837, are a typical example of how ideas were visualized and circulated between European nations.¹⁰

The desire to find each nation's distinctive national characteristics, both in language and visual culture, resulted in a host of documentation and preservation projects. By this means vernacular culture became widely understood as the core of the nation; it was also

⁷ Timo Jeskanen, *Kansanomaisuus ja rationalismi: Näkökohtia Suomen puuarkkitehtuuriin 1900–1925, Esimerkinä Oiva Kallion kesähuvila Villa Oivala* (Espoo: Helsinki University of Technology, 1998), 105–7.

⁸ Mathias Bäckström, *Hjärtats härdar: Folkliv, Folkmuseer och minnesmärken i Skandinavien 1808–1907* (Möklinta: Gidlunds Förlag, 2012), 86–7.

⁹ For an extensive discussion of Chiewitz's role, see: Anna Ripatti, 'Printing a new architectural style in mid nineteenth-century Sweden', *The Journal of Architecture*, 25/7 (2020) 873–900. doi: [10.1080/13602365.2020.1828995](https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2020.1828995).

¹⁰ Johan Christian Dahl, *Denkmale einer sehr ausgebildeten Holzbaukunst aus den frühesten Jahrhunderten in den innern Landschaften Norwegens*. Dresden: J.C.C. Dahl, 1837.

perceived as threatened by the international forces of modernity. Initial interest focused on immaterial cultural forms, such as fairy tales and music, and moved on to material heritage in the latter half of the nineteenth century.¹¹ Regionally, different strategies were developed to collect and visualize cultural heritage, though these movements across Europe shared common ideological roots and learnt from each other's tactics. Alongside publication, one popular method for presenting newly documented material was exhibitions, which allowed the general public to learn about their own national vernacular heritage. Such displays could also be used to communicate national distinctiveness to an international audience, becoming popular features at world's fairs where they contributed to the development of international practices for exhibiting the vernacular.¹²

The Red Cottage in Architectural Practice

As mentioned in the introduction, the prevalence of the red cottage in architectural writings of the late-nineteenth century predated the widespread appearance of the building type in vernacular settings. The ruddle itself - iron oxide pigments that produced the distinctive red appearance - had a very practical history which began long before its use in a Scandinavian aesthetic context. In the Middle Ages, ruddle was used as a preservative for wood, mainly on roofs or waterspouts.¹³ The idea of painting houses red for aesthetic reasons was imported in

¹¹ Bäckström, *Hjärtats härdar*, 36.

¹² Rentzhog, *Friluftsmuseerna: En skandinavisk idé erövrar världen*, 36.

¹³ In Scandinavia, the origins of ruddle production are traced to the Swedish region of Dalecarlia and the Falun copper mines where the pigment is extracted as a by-product of the mining process. For more details on the pigment itself see, for instance, Per-Anders Mårdh, 'Historik', in Per-Anders Mårdh, ed., *Röda Stugor: En bok om rödfärgens egenskaper, om recept och tillverkning, om husen och traditionen, om rödfärg idag* (Stockholm: Byggförl., 1990), 12. Other sources for the history of the red colour are Margareta Kjellin and Nina

the seventeenth century by officers returning to Sweden from Northern European war campaigns. They were inspired by the redbrick architecture they had seen on the Continent and wanted to give their wooden, previously unpainted, mansions a similar effect.

By painting the log frames of their mansions red, while giving the trimmings a coat of white, beige or grey linseed oil paint they could, at least in the colouring, imitate the Dutch and German brick and sandstone castles they admired. This local interpretation of an imported and adapted style inspired the wealthier classes across the country, and the red colour spread to churches and vicarages. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, ruddle was also used on merchants' houses in the towns and in military residences.¹⁴ When weather boarding became more widespread around 1800, oil paint with its multitude of colour options became popular among those who could afford it, while ruddle became the colour of cheaper buildings and poorer households.¹⁵ However, the vast majority of people in the countryside could not afford even ruddle until the latter half of the nineteenth century and painting vernacular houses red only became common in Sweden in the 1870s.

The historical development of the use of ruddle in Finland followed a similar pattern to Sweden, but only became widespread in a vernacular setting in the 1930s.¹⁶ Ruddle was mainly used in urban areas in southern and western Finland in the nineteenth century, slowly

Ericson, *Den röda färgen* (2nd edn, Stockholm: Stora kopparbergs bergslags aktiebolag/Bokförlaget Prisma, 2004).

¹⁴ Sten Rentzhog, 'Drömmen om den röda stugan', in Kjellin and Ericson, *Den röda färgen*, 21–45, and Mårdh 'Historik', 9.

¹⁵ Rentzhog 'Drömmen om den röda stugan', 31–2.

¹⁶ In Finland, there have been fewer surveys focusing on the colour red; instead they tend to discuss vernacular architecture in general, with only brief mentions of colour. For instance, in Risto Vuolle-Apiala, *Hirsitalo ennen ja nyt* (Helsinki: Kustannusosakeyhtiö Moreeni, 2012), the colouring is mentioned more generally in connection with other methods of painting vernacular houses.

spreading towards the eastern border in the early twentieth century. Until then, villages were mainly grey (Figure 6.1). Interest in red cottages was an idea adopted via Swedish publications on regional architectural history and ideal architecture, both of which drew heavily on ideas originating in Germany. Consequently, the practice of painting farmhouses and rural dwellings red was first adopted in the Fenno-Swedish regions, whose Swedish-speaking minority had a close connection to the Swedish cultural sphere. Beginning in the 1890s, articles urging the rural population to spruce up their homes by painting them red were regularly published, often circulating in several newspapers during the same month.¹⁷ By the 1920s and 30s, these regions were often described in the Fenno-Swedish press as ‘colourful’, in comparison to the Finnish-speaking regions, which were still predominantly grey.¹⁸ In Finland, mentions of ruddle increased during the 1930s, with newspaper coverage suggesting that its usage peaked just before the Second World War, when the red cottage had spread to most parts of the country.

Vernacular Romanticism: the Scandinavian Context

Since the red cottage was not a common sight in Sweden and Finland during the late-nineteenth century, the question remains as to why it was presented as an ideal in writings on vernacular culture? The answer can be found in the translation of international ideas about vernacular heritage to the different national settings. Across Europe, each established nation

¹⁷ See for instance ‘Punatkaa huoneenne’, *Uusi Aura* (20 Sept 1900). This anonymous article urges the rural population to tidy up their houses and paint them in order to create a more sightly impression of the Finnish villages.

¹⁸ ‘Genom Österbottnisk bygd’, *Åbo Underrättelser* (22 April 1926). Describing a journey to Vörå, the anonymous author depicts the Finnish-speaking counties he was passing through as grey, with small, low cottages, while the Swedish-speaking county of Vörå boasted handsome, large, traditional farmhouses, all painted red.

– as well as regions aspiring to nationhood – delved into its local vernacular heritage to find a national character. Initial linguistic and musicological research developed, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, into wider studies of material culture, including dress, objects and buildings.

Inspired by displays of national costume and vernacular crafts at world's fairs in the 1860s and 1870s, local ethnographic collections and museums were founded in Scandinavia.¹⁹ Artur Hazelius (1833–1901) was a key actor in the development of Swedish heritage preservation and the founder of the Skansen outdoor museum in Stockholm. In his youth he had read Almqvist's writings on the idealization of vernacular culture, and throughout his life he followed international publications on the topic of national heritage.²⁰ Fearing that the vernacular culture was rapidly changing as a result of industrialization and modernization, Hazelius wanted to intervene so this heritage would not be irrevocably lost and opened the Skansen museum in 1891.²¹ The open-air museum had an enormous impact on both the Swedish and international field of heritage preservation and became an important source of inspiration for Swedish national romanticism.²² Here, buildings from different regions of Sweden were presented, all furnished with genuine objects, telling a story of regional vernacular heritage from all parts of the country. International interest in Hazelius's work made Sweden an active participant in, rather than merely a recipient of, transnational discourses on vernacular heritage preservation and national identity.²³

¹⁹ Maria Björkroth, *Hembygd i samtid och framtid 1890–1930. En museologisk studie av att bevara och förnya*. Papers in Museology 5. (Umeå: Umeå Universitet, 2000), 41.

²⁰ Ibid., 164–5.

²¹ Rentzhog, *Friluftsmuseerna*, 24.

²² Ibid., 30.

²³ Ibid., 35–48.

According to Sten Rentzhog, the emphasis placed on vernacular material in Swedish cultural discourse can be understood in part as a desire to strengthen the sense of nationhood amongst the Swedes and develop their love for the motherland. It was hoped that this feeling for the nation, expressed through cultural heritage, would unite the people by helping them to feel both solidarity with and responsibility for contemporary society and its policies.²⁴ These conclusions are shared by Maria Björkroth, who has traced the origins of the different Swedish associations involved in the preservation of local culture. Her research shows that interest in vernacular culture was not so much a conservative longing for the past, as it was a way to create the prerequisites of a new age. If national history had previously focused on the Crown and the elite, it now turned towards the story of the common people, especially after the dissolving of the union between Sweden and Norway in 1905. The history of the majority was to be told, and the majority culture in an agricultural society, such as Sweden, was of course vernacular culture – represented by the dwelling of the well-to-do freeholder, the red cottage.²⁵

The situation in Finland shares traits with both Swedish and German developments, but, due to the political situation in the late-nineteenth century, interest in vernacular culture had a different role. Here, it became not just an expression of national unity, but of resistance against the occupying powers. After the war of 1808–1809, which saw the territory of Finland transferred from being part of the Swedish kingdom to a grand duchy within the Russian Empire, the Finnish elite were inspired by contemporary European ideas on nationhood and began the process of constructing a Finnish nation. Knowledge of national nature, geography and history became an important tool for spreading awareness of the

²⁴ Ibid., 28.

²⁵ Björkroth, *Hembygd i samtid och framtid*, 41, 48–9.

nation. It was in this context that research into local vernacular culture took root as part of the pursuit of national independence.²⁶

In the late 1890s, the Russian government attempted to dismantle Finnish self-rule through a policy of extensive Russification. The tense political situation underscored the importance of educating the general public in all things national. Hence international ideas about the vernacular were transformed into a tool of resistance. Through education in local and national history, the Finnish educated classes aimed at raising the awareness of the wider population and incorporating them into the nation-building project. These years were fruitful for heritage research, which contributed much-needed information and ideological material to the national project.²⁷

Due to Finland's bilingual history, debates on what constituted 'proper' Finnish cultural heritage led to heated discussions between Fenno-Swedish-speaking and Finnish-speaking researchers. Since the majority of Finnish people were Finnish-speakers, the national view on cultural heritage came to be substantially based on Finnish-speaking regions, particularly that of Karelia in eastern Finland. Just like the region of Dalecarlia in Sweden, and indeed many heartlands embraced by the nation-building projects of Europe, Karelia was not as industrialized as the rest of the country, and thus researchers believed that it had best preserved ancient national culture.

Fenno-Swedish researchers, who belonged to the declining Swedish-speaking minority, wanted to strengthen the position of this group nationally and used local cultural heritage to do so. By uniting the highly heterogenous Fenno-Swedes of southern and western Finland under one common identity, they hoped to win greater influence within national debates. The long history of Fenno-Swedish vernacular culture, which could be traced back

²⁶ Ibid., 44–5.

²⁷ Stenfors, *Suomalainen kotiseutuliike 1894–1944*, 29.

to the twelfth century, became important in terms of legitimizing Fenno-Swedish claims for belonging. In a political climate where the general opinion was that Fenno-Swedes should give up their language and culture in favour of Finnish, the red cottage was put forward as an alternative national vernacular.²⁸

Red Cottages as Historicist and Modernist Constructs in Architectural Discourse

When international ideas about the value of vernacular heritage were filtered through contemporary challenges in Swedish and Finnish societies, a visualization of what constituted distinctive national character emerged. This visualization was embodied by the red cottage, which became understood as the very essence of Swedish or Finnish architecture. The red cottage as a symbol was then easily projected to an international audience as something typical for the countries and their cultures. However, the red cottage was not a fixed symbol with a constantly recognisable value. Instead, its meaning was re-interpreted within architectural discourses throughout the twentieth century, depending on which new international ideas and ideologies it was combined with. There are two main ideological frameworks which adopted the red cottage as an ideal and adapted it to their own needs: nationalist movements with a historicist view on architecture and modernist movements with an interest in building functionally and efficiently.

It was within the context of national romanticism that the idea of the red cottage as an age-old Swedish tradition was coined. The red cottage was made into a symbol of all that was

²⁸ See this author's previous research on the Fenno-Swedish minority's ideological use of architecture to strengthen the unity of the lingual minority: Mia Åkerfelt, 'In between the neighbours – Negotiating a Fenno-Swedish identity through type-planned houses by Bostadsföreningen för Svenska Finland 1938–1969', *Finskt museum* (2018), 6–27 and 'Cultivating Fenno-Swedishness – The rural private garden as expression of a minority identity in the post-war decades', *Bebyggelsehistorisk tidskrift* 76 (2019).

positive in vernacular culture and, by extension, the nation. The meanings ascribed to the red cottage during the twentieth century can be roughly divided into three main phases: the early national romanticism of the late nineteenth century until the Second World War; a nostalgic phase during the post-war years; and the post-modern phase that began in the 1970s. All three phases idealized the red cottage and interpreted it as the quintessential Swedish/Finnish building. However, the positive values ascribed to it varied in the different periods, although the periods overlapped each other as well as existed in series.

Initially, the red cottage was, first and foremost, a symbol of the person who was imagined inhabiting it: the freeholder, who had inherited and tended his land for generations. The independent farmer was a central construct of the national romantic movement's ideals. He was thought to be the steward of tradition and highly conservative in outlook, which was perceived as a guarantee for societal stability and a protection against 'bad influences' such as socialism.²⁹ He was also the opposite of the 'cosmopolitan', the idea of a rootless citizen of the world, a term often used in a disparaging manner about persons not participating in the national project.³⁰ This contributed to the Swedish *ryggåsstuga*, a red cottage which was open to the rafters within, becoming the symbol of primordiality in architecture.³¹ This interpretation was established by the first researchers in regional heritage. When they set out to find the most genuine vernacular culture, they looked to Dalecarlia, which for historical reasons was seen as one of the last bastions of true vernacular culture, untouched by modernity. The region was also the location of the Falun copper mine and the ready

²⁹ See Åkerfelt, 'In between the neighbours', 14–15 and Knutsson, *I "hemtrefnadens" tid*, 10.

³⁰ Daniel Laqua, 'Introduction: Cosmopolitanism and the Individual', in Grace Brockington, Sarah Victoria Turner, Daniel Laqua, and Charlotte Ashby, eds, *Imagined Cosmopolis: Internationalism and Cultural Exchange, 1870s–1920s* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 2019), 15–34 (19).

³¹ Knutsson, *I "hemtrefnadens" tid*, 189.

availability of red pigment meant locals had been using it to paint their houses. Due to the symbolic value of the region, the architecture found there became interpreted as the archetype for the Swedish national vernacular, despite its regional specificity. The idea was particularly emphasized by the Skansen museum, to which old Dalecarlian buildings were moved and prominently displayed for both Swedish citizens and international tourists.

The ideal of the red cottage was additionally popularized and spread by the art of Carl Larsson (1853–1919) through his depictions of *Lilla Hyttnäs*, the home he decorated with his wife Karin Bergöö-Larsson (1859–1928) in Sundborn, Dalecarlia. *Lilla Hyttnäs* also appeared in the writings on ‘proper’ home culture by the author Ellen Key (1849–1926). Both the Larssons and Key were part of intellectual circles who considered contemporary urban life as something negative and turned instead towards the ideology of the international Arts and Crafts movement. They emphasised the ideal qualities of life and culture in the countryside, combining them with the definitions of national heritage presented by the Swedish national romanticist movement. Larsson’s art was disseminated across Europe and the USA, communicating the idea of the red cottage as something typically Swedish. Key was inspired by the Larssons and the ideals presented in her writings often drew their visual inspiration from Carl Larsson’s art. Her 1899 book *Skönhet för alla (Beauty for All)* became hugely influential as an authority on home décor; with the translation of the book into Finnish it became one of the core texts of Finnish interior design discourse as well.³² Here, she combined the aesthetics established by the Larssons with contemporary scientific theory on education, hygiene and eugenics. The ideal homes she proposed took the form of sparsely furnished apartments, bathed in sunlight and fresh air, easy to clean and decorated with vernacular furniture and objects. Like Larsson’s work, Key’s publications attracted

³² Minna Sarantola-Weiss, *Sohvaryhmön läpimurto: Kulutuskulttuurin tulo suomalaisiin olohuoneisiin 1960- ja 1970-lukujen vaihteessa* (Helsinki: SKS, 2003), 73–4.

significant international interest, helping to spread ideas about the Swedish vernacular and the red cottage.

However, it was the regionalist novel *Storgården: En bok om ett hem* ('Storgården: A book about a home') by Karl-Erik Forsslund (1872–1941), published in 1900, which was seminal in disseminating the idea to the Swedish population in general.³³ Forsslund was a keen advocate of the national romantic movement in Sweden and he founded a school where ideas about safeguarding local heritage were taught as part of the Swedish youth movement. This aimed to keep young people within rural communities and stem the tide of those emigrating abroad or moving to the cities. The novel describes the well-tended farmhouse, ruddled and with white trimmings, as the ideal existence for the contemporary human.³⁴ Forsslund can be understood as another key actor in the development of the red cottage idea, since he introduced the conservative national romantic ideal of the red cottage into the working-class movement, thus spreading it beyond the intellectual classes.³⁵

Within the working-class movement, the ideal was tied to the crofter and smallholdings movement, which in the early decades of the twentieth century campaigned to give the landless rural population a detached home (*egnahem*) or a smallholding to tend. These small farms should, it was suggested, be equipped with a red cottage. A multitude of type-planned drawings for such single-family homes were made during the 1910s and 1920s in both Sweden and Finland.³⁶ This was seen as a means of countering both emigration and the rising interest in socialism.³⁷

³³ Karl-Erik Forsslund, *Storgården: En bok om ett hem* (Stockholm, Wahlström och Widland, 1900).

³⁴ Rentzhog, *Friluftsmuseerna*, 68.

³⁵ Björkroth, *Hembygd i samtid och framtid*, 117.

³⁶ Rentzhog, "Drömmen om den röda stugan", 43.

³⁷ Björkroth, *Hembygd i samtid och framtid*, 103.

These ideas influenced thinking on the red cottage in Finland as well. As mentioned, vernacular culture had been at the centre of resistance to Russification, since conflict between the language groups made uniting around a common history of the elite troublesome. The Fenno-Swedish elite led the way in adopting the Swedish idea of the red cottage and including it in the Finnish national discourse.³⁸ Since there was a ready exchange of ideas between the Swedish-speaking educated classes in Finland and the Swedish cultural sphere, authors like Key, Larsson and Forsslund were read and their ideas adapted. To disseminate these ideas to the wider public, articles on the beauty and benefits of ruddling vernacular buildings were widely published from the late 1870s onwards. For instance, in *Arkitekten* ('The Architect'), the main architectural journal in Finland, regular articles on the values of vernacular housing and ruddle, as well as reviews of Swedish, German and British publications on vernacular buildings, reform housing and the Arts and Crafts Movement, were reviewed throughout the first decades of the twentieth century.

When the idea of the detached house as an ideal dwelling for the working classes in both town and country gained popularity in the 1910s, there were several prominent architectural competitions for type-planned drawings for small farmsteads and houses in the countryside. The best-known example was the Otava publishing house's 1913 drawing competition for small houses in the countryside. The competition's aim was to generate modern artistic models to be used mainly for summer houses for the middle classes, as well as for year-round dwellings. A total of eighty-one competitors participated, and the best drawings were published in the booklet *Oman Kodin Piirustuksia: Otavan palkintokilpailusta 1913* ('Drawings for a Home of Your Own from the Otava Competition in 1913').³⁹ Most of

³⁸ Åkerfelt, 'In between the neighbours', 15–22.

³⁹ *Oman Kodin Piirustuksia: Otavan palkintokilpailusta 1913* (Helsinki: Kustannusosakeyhtiö Otava, 1913).

the drawings depict picturesque buildings in national romanticist or vernacular styles, while the majority of building descriptions suggest that they be painted red or tarred (Figure 6.2).

National romantic interest in red cottages peaked in the 1920s and 1930s. In Sweden, a team of art historians, architects and museum activists published a tribute to the colour red in *En bok om rödfärg* ('A Book About Ruddle').⁴⁰ Here, the national romantic construct of the red cottage was presented from different perspectives, further cementing the idea that the red cottage was something intrinsically Swedish. In Finland, these decades saw the implementation of ruddle in vernacular architecture on a larger scale. During a time of rapid industrialization and migration towards the cities, the red cottage was now described as a symbol of resistance to modernization and societal instability, instead of as a means of resistance to Russification.⁴¹ A year after Finland became independent in 1917, the country was launched into a civil war fought between the 'red' socialists and 'white' bourgeoisie. The aftermath left the country deeply divided and struggling with the construction of a new nation. Addressing some of the causes of working-class discontent was seen as vital to prevent further social unrest, the new crofters' legislation of the 1920s being one of the foremost examples. This policy was influenced by both Swedish and international models for addressing the perceived problems related to the rural working classes. In Finland, as in

⁴⁰ Axel L. Romdahl, Sigard Erixon, Cyrillus Johansson and Johan Lundberg, *En bok om rödfärg* (Stockholm: Stora Kopparbergs Aktiebolag, 1932). The first two chapters in particular are full of descriptions of the perceived 'Swedishness' of the red-coloured cottage.

⁴¹ See, for instance, the speech by A. Relander, 'Rapport och festtal från sångfesten i Lovisa'd', ('Report and transcription of the opening speech at the music festival in Lovisa') in *Hufvudstadsbladet* (27 June 1910). This was one of the first times where the full concept of the *Hembygdsrörelse* was presented to a larger, Fenno-Swedish audience. The speech included all the main ideas of the movement, including a lengthy discussion on how the properly maintained, red-painted home was a safeguard against turmoil and crisis. The text was later circulated in most of the Fenno-Swedish newspapers.

Sweden, the ideal of a small red cottage projected the values of the independent freeholder onto groups which had previously been landless and highly mobile. One of the most common ways to spread such values was through articles and short stories in newspapers or journals aimed at the new smallholders, which described the red cottage as the ultimate goal in life, reflecting its owners' new prosperity and propriety.⁴²

The Soul of Rational Architecture

The second main ideological context for the adoption of the red cottage was, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, Scandinavian modernism. When the ideas of the international modernist movement reached Scandinavia in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the impact was initially fairly marginal on architecture, which at that time – especially in Finland – was dominated by a more conservative, classicist style. Since the new style met with some resistance from the general public, modernist architects worked instead to adapt international ideas to suit their national frameworks, reframing its visual expression by contextualizing it within local architectural culture to show that the idea was not that alien after all. Examples from vernacular culture were foregrounded, and the red cottage, in particular, was put forward as a good example of what functionalism in architecture was all about.

This approach was most prominent in the various texts on ideal housing produced and spread by modernist architects. In the 1931 Swedish trailblazing modernist manifesto

⁴² See, for instance, the anonymous article 'Måla edra gårdar!' ('Paint your houses!'), *Österbottniska posten* (4 June 1926); Martin Ingo, 'En rundtur i Västanfjärd' ('A tour of the Västanfjärd municipality'), *Västra Finland* (9 April 1925); or the more ironic text 'Röda stugor' ('Red cottages'), *Hufvudstadsbladet* (19 June 1928) where the author retells an anecdote that shows how the Finnish-speaking smallholders became interested in painting their houses red only when they were able to buy them instead of renting them, thus displaying their new prosperous situation as landowners.

Acceptera ('Accept') by Gunnar Asplund (1885–1940), Gregor Paulsson (1890–1977) and Sven Markelius (1889–1972) and others, the vernacular tradition was paradoxically described, on the one hand, as something false and, on the other, as the most genuine architecture there was. The assertion of falsehood, according to the authors, stemmed from the imitations of vernacular architecture that had been fostered by earlier national romanticism. They considered it particularly problematic that new residential architecture focused so heavily on the appearance of vernacular buildings rather than on how they functioned, as was the case for many of the type-plans for national romantic detached houses.⁴³ When vernacular architecture was discussed again towards the end of the text, the modernists underlined different aspects of the vernacular – straightforwardness, moderation and amiability – that could be found in rural houses, particularly if you looked at plans rather than aesthetics (Figure 6.3).⁴⁴ In this context, the value of the red cottage was adapted. Now it was not so much the visual appearance that was in focus, but the functionality of the building type, where the simplistic and highly functional colour was a part of the concept.

These ideas also inspired Finnish architects and were spread, in particular, by organizations involved in developing better housing in rural areas. Here, the ideals were not as rigid as in *Acceptera*. In Fenno-Swedish circles the vernacular tradition became intertwined with modernist ideals into a form of 'vernacular modernism'. One example of this is represented by the production of *Bostadsföreningen för Svenska Finland* ('The Housing Association for the Swedish parts of Finland'). The association's ideology was connected with the pro-Swedish movement, whose main aim at the time was to prevent Fenno-Swedish migration from the countryside. By providing local communities with type-

⁴³ Gunnar Asplund, Wolter Gahn, Sven Markelius, Gregor Paulsson, Eskil Sundahl, and Uno Åhrén, *Acceptera*, (Stockholm: Skolan för bokhantverk, 1931), 45–6.

⁴⁴ Asplund et al., *Acceptera*, 175.

plans for modernist wooden vernacular houses, it was hoped that the inhabitants would be more willing to stay in their ancestral regions. The association developed an extensive housing programme in the late 1930s and early 1940s with a special focus on improving the situation of women by advocating home improvements which made work around the house less demanding. The most modern parts of the buildings were the plans, where modernist ideas about efficient and hygienic dwellings and housekeeping shaped the division of space, while the exteriors remained more traditional in order to blend in with the vernacular buildings around them.⁴⁵ This process involved the integration of new international research into home economics with forms drawn simultaneously from modernism and vernacular sources. As we have seen, those vernacular sources had also been filtered through interaction with Swedish, German and English thinking on heritage and the Arts and Crafts Movement.

Ideologically, the red cottage was of great importance to the association. Its members often constructed their arguments for rural home improvement around the idea that modernism was in essence just a continuation of old traditions. In her 1944 article ‘Bygga och Bo’ (‘Build and Live’), Eva Kuhlefeldt-Ekelund (1892–1984), the main architect of the association, echoed the thoughts presented in *Acceptera* when she stated that the modern aims of housing construction were built on the same foundation as the vernacular tradition: simple and sound matter-of-factness in design and correspondence between plan, living habits and needs.⁴⁶ She argued it was important to preserve vernacular architectural traditions and simply to enhance them in order to reach more acceptable standards of living.

⁴⁵ For further discussion, see Åkerfelt, ‘Cultivating Fenno-Swedishness’, and ‘In between the neighbours’.

⁴⁶ Eva Kuhlefeldt-Ekelund, ‘Bygga och Bo: Några riktlinjer vid planeringsarbetet’, *Lantmannabladet* (2 June 1944).

Such articles frequently asserted the idea that people must combine old traditions with modern comfort. In this context the use of ruddle on the walls was encouraged, since it was cheap, a useful preservative and made new houses blend into their environment.⁴⁷ When the association had the opportunity to build a full-scale model house for an agricultural fair in 1946, it was of course painted red (Figure 6.5).⁴⁸ By the 1960s, the modernist movements in both Finland and Sweden had turned towards the construction of large-scale housing projects in urban areas and vernacular references gradually disappeared from their discourse for a time, only to reappear within the post-modernist movement.

A Nostalgic Interest in Red Cottages

In the years after the Second World War, representations of the red cottage continued to build on the now well-established idea of it as an age-old national tradition. While the first decades of the century had focused on the vernacular as a starting point for constructing a better future, the post-war years saw an ideological shift in the perception of the red cottage towards nostalgia. In this period, the red cottage was mainly found in popular culture or type-planned housing, while its role within the professional architectural field diminished. High-profile architects still discussed the building type at times but, especially in the 1960s, the main focus of the professional field was to explore prefabrication and mass housing.

In the decades after the Second World War, popular media in Scandinavia expanded greatly with the production of magazines, postcards and posters aimed at regular consumers or tourists. In visual culture, the red cottage often had a prominent position. For instance, the postcard illustrated in Figure 6.4 combines the first lines of the well-known poem and song,

⁴⁷ See, for instance, Anna-Lisa Stigell, 'Nytt vin på gamla läglar: tankar om våra lantbostäders utnyttjande', *Samarbete*, (18 December 1941).

⁴⁸ '14.000 besökare på utställningen i Yttermark i går', *Vasabladet* (30 June 1946).

Litet bo jag sätta vill ('I Dream of a Home of my Own') with the imagery of vernacular romanticism. The poem, written in 1844 by Elias Sehlstedt (1808–1874), was re-popularized when in 1890 Larsson illustrated a collection of Sehlstedt's poems, edited by Carl Snoilsky (1841–1903). Set to music by Alice Tegnér (1864–1943), the poem was frequently sung in schools and was later recorded in various imported music styles including swing and pop. Its verses describe how the male protagonist envisions marital bliss, giving detailed descriptions of his future wife, children, cattle, home and home-life.

In Finland, the experiences of the Second World War contributed to the interest in the vernacular as something particularly emotionally resonant. The nostalgic concept of home continued to be seen as a guarantor of societal stability and in this context the red cottage stood for the good old days, not for development. Such ideas were visualized by some of the period's most popular illustrators, including Martta Wendelin (1893–1986) and Rudolf Koivu (1890–1946). Both were highly productive artists who designed thousands of postcards, posters and illustrations for Finnish magazines such as *Kotiliesi* ('The Home Hearth'). In these illustrations, the red cottage as an archetypical element of the Finnish vernacular tradition was presented as an established fact. For instance, when the artists depicted rural landscapes, the main buildings were red with white trimmings, not grey as they had been just a few decades earlier.⁴⁹ The same period saw a rapid increase in migration from the rural areas of Finland to the urban centres in the south, as well as emigration mainly to Sweden. In this context, the pictures of the red cottage functioned as a reminder of the home region and

⁴⁹ See, for instance, the survey studies by Sari Savikko, *Muistojen koulutaulut* (Helsinki: Tammi, 2008); Esko Pietilä, *Rudolf Koivun postikortteja* (Helsinki: Rudolf Koivun ystävät r.y, 2007); and Tuula Karjalainen, *Ikuinen sunnuntai: Martta Wendelinin kuvien maailma* (Helsinki: Werner Söderström Oy, 1993) for an insight into the visualization of the red cottage in these contexts.

its rural heritage for those who had moved to the newly built high-rise suburbs around Helsinki to find work.

The next new phase of interest in red cottages emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s within the broader cultural shift from modernism to post-modernism. During these years, post-war ideas about the red cottage were further layered with a combination of ideals collected from the earlier periods. It came to symbolize activism as well as nostalgia and was presented as the residential architecture of the future. Within the post-modern movement, it was seen as a means of resistance against the modernist architectural paradigm. By once more turning towards local vernacular culture, it was hoped that better dwellings would be developed. This followed criticism of the modernist practice of constructing large high-rise suburbs in the vicinities of cities in both Finland and Sweden and focused on the mental health problems that such suburbs were perceived to generate. By building houses where nature could be reached by stepping out the front door, inhabitants would feel less isolated from both nature and neighbours.⁵⁰ Furthermore, the red cottage was well suited as a symbol for the emerging movement in ecological awareness. It was suggested that returning to the countryside to dwell in a traditional manner and tend one's own garden would have a lesser impact on the environment.⁵¹ The ideal building in this new context was, of course, the red cottage with its traditionalist associations.

During this time, sales of prefabricated detached houses sky-rocketed in Sweden and Finland. Since the beginning of the prefabrication industry in both countries, the market for single-family homes often followed the same styles as in the idealistic type-plans presented within the housing-reform movements, typically houses based on vernacular tradition. In the

⁵⁰ See, for instance, *Akkitehti* journal from this period: the topic is discussed in length in 3 (1973), while 1 (1981) is a thematic issue on vernacular architecture.

⁵¹ Sarantola-Weiss, *Sohvaryhmön läpimurto*, 120–2.

sales catalogues of the 1970s and 1980s, it was often stated that the red cottage was the most quintessential Swedish form of dwelling.⁵² The difference here was that the buildings were now being marketed to middle-class suburban consumers with the implication that they could own their own house and garden, just as the freeholding farmer had at the turn of the century. Furthermore, the red cottage in its prefabricated form was transformed into a status object, representing its owner's economic achievement in escaping the high-rise suburbs and moving to an environment that was perceived as healthier.⁵³ At this point, the red cottage had been widespread for a period of about fifty years, which in a sense made it traditional for the younger generations building their first home.

The Image of the Nation?

These examples from history sketch a picture of a meandering ideological path for the red cottage. It, and its connotations within the traditionalist or nationalist movement, can be understood as a symbol for the unity of both the society and the nation that it was made to represent. Based on the contexts in which it was discussed, it is possible to interpret its meaning as lodged within the visual aspects of the cottage – the red colour itself. Buildings could vary in design, but they all had a common colour, evoking the idea of unity across the nation and continuity with the national past. With its origins in German Romanticism, the idealization of vernacular architecture within Scandinavia was imported through heritage and folklore societies and from there spread into architectural discourse. According to these examples, the values connected with the red cottage varied over time but were consistently

⁵² Richard Edlund, ed., *Kataloghuset: Det egna hemmet i byggsats* (Stockholm: Byggeförlaget, 2004), 121–30.

⁵³ Leif Jonsson, '1900-talets kataloghus: från statlig styrning till marknadsanpassning', in Edlund, *Kataloghuset*, 47–9.

positive. National romantics saw it as a genuine expression of nationhood and nostalgia. Modernists saw it as a forefather to the modernist, type-planned, detached houses. Post-modernists saw it as a means of resistance to the urban building schemes of the 1960s and 1970s. But what place does it have today?

To grasp how the image of the red cottage is disseminated today, popular applications such as Pinterest and Instagram, as well as official tourism websites in Finland and Sweden, can give us an indication of its cultural positioning. Across these forms of media, the red cottage is still visually connected with the images of the two nations, especially amongst private users on social media. However, it is far from the only type of architecture connected with the concepts of Swedishness or Finnishness. On Pinterest and Instagram, the red cottage is mainly seen in connection with traditions like Christmas, with summer-houses, or in relation to pins on ‘rural style-interior décor’. At the moment, most hits for search terms in English like ‘Swedish/Finnish house’, ‘red cottage’ and ‘vernacular architecture’ give results depicting art nouveau villas of the early twentieth century, or contemporary architectural design; only a few red cottages appear. The results are much the same if the search terms are translated into Finnish or Swedish.⁵⁴ On official tourism sites like *Visit Sweden* and *Visit Finland*, the red cottage is rarely mentioned separately, but can be seen in illustrations for articles on what to experience when in Finland or Sweden. On the Swedish pages, the red cottage is described in a few articles, mostly as an illustration for something traditional or as

⁵⁴ As an example: on Pinterest, a search for pins with the search words ‘Swedish house exterior’ produced 351 pins in September 2020. Of these, 50 in fact depicted things other than what was indicated by the search terms, like interiors where no exterior wall colour could be seen, greenhouses, chicken coops, landscapes without buildings or other miscellaneous structures. 107 depicted the exteriors of red cottages, which left 194 depicting other types of building exteriors. These were either early twentieth-century Jugendstil villas or contemporary architectural projects.

a short notice on the ‘Swedishness’ of the red cottage.⁵⁵ On the Finnish pages, the predominant imagery is of pristine nature or Lapland in winter, while the architecture depicted is mainly urban. This would indicate that today the red cottage has a position as a known, but not-so-trendy, image of the Scandinavian vernacular.

Based on an examination of a wide range of material featuring the red cottage, it is possible to conclude that the building type has played an important role as a mediator of transnational as well as national ideas during a period of almost 150 years. The tracing of how the idea of the red cottage developed historically has revealed how a type that originally had a marginal role in the vernacular culture of Scandinavia became codified as something that could define the nation’s architecture. When re-circulated back into the international context, it was inscribed with ideas about Scandinavian characteristics as a combination of history and future, continuity and modernization. The nationalist movement was skilled in adopting international ideas and adapting them to meet local needs. In this context, the red cottage was useful in the sense that it could be given different inflections within a mainly traditionalist context. It functioned as a symbol that was thought to unite the people around the idea of the nation, urging them to live out a life of educated citizenship, creating a new nation based on historical values. The idea of the red cottage, as both traditional and modern, was a trope the modernist movement made use of when introducing the new international style to the local market. Once established as something traditional, the red cottage meandered between popular culture and the professional field of architecture, depending on when its inscribed values were needed in a new context. In the post-modern search for a

⁵⁵ ‘The Swedes and their Summerhouse’, Visit Sweden, <<https://visitsweden.com/what-to-do/culture-history-and-art/culture/lifestyle/we-being-stereotyped/>>, accessed 11 September 2021.

suitable dwelling for the urban middle classes, as well as within the awakening environmental movement, the red cottage shifted meaning once again. And today, when it is featured, it represents something genuinely local in the storytelling of national marketing campaigns directed at a globalized world. This is despite being created from a patchwork of international ideas which flowed into and out of the Nordic countries over the last centuries.

Illustrations

Figure 6.1. The buildings at Stundars local museum in Mustasaari, Finland, represent the Ostrobothnian vernacular tradition from the days before the red colour became common. Credit: Mia Åkerfelt.

Figure 6.2. Runar Ekelund, drawings for a small summer cottage in the archipelago from the Otava publishing house's 1913 architectural competition. The architect stated that the house was to be painted with ruddle and have white trimmings. Source: *Oman Kodin Piirustuksia: Otavan palkintokilpailusta 1913*, 35

Figure 6.3. Page from the *Acceptera* manifesto, 1931. Its authors considered these functional rural buildings to be the true vernacular, stating that they embodied 'straightforwardness, moderation and friendliness – our tradition'. Asplund et al., *Acceptera*, 174.

Figure 6.4. Anonymous postcard, probably Swedish, from the mid-nineteenth century, connecting the first lines of Elias Sehlstedt's poem on the dream of marital bliss, *Litet bo jag sätta vill*, with the image of a red cottage.