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**Stable property and permeable spheres**  
**Property and inheritance in Danish single family houses**  
*Draft*

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**Abstract - Workshop 14 – Housing and Social Theory**

***Stable property - permeable spheres***

*Setting out from the anthropological conceptualization of property, the paper will discuss recent theoretical developments in the understanding of property in contemporary welfare societies. Property is regarded as a “..’cover term’ for how human beings regulate their relations to the things which they value” (Hann 2007: 290). On the basis of ethnography from privately owned Danish single-family houses, the paper will discuss the complexity of relations, rights and obligations encompassed within the ‘cover term’ property as related to the ownership of a family house. Values are understood and talked about by owners and house inhabitants in ways, which reveal that economics and feelings can not be separated. The market value of the house is indistinguishable from other kinds of values related to past and future. The issue of inheritance and conceptualizations of values related to this concept will be in focus. The paper will argue that the house as property represents a kind of stable foundation for the transfer of moral and material values between ‘permeable’ spheres. It will also argue that there are generational differences in the ways in which the issue of inheritance related to house values are conceptualized.*

The idea of the permeable and porous as applied to house and home is a good inspiration in dealing with house as property in space and time, and in understanding how the social and the material interact, folded into and constituting one another. In my title and abstract I focused on the issue of property as a material object represented by the house, but also in the good anthropological sense as deeply embedded in the social, so that property is to be regarded as a “bundle of rights” (Hoebel 1964) as much as a material object pertaining to individual subjects. In a more empirical sense, the single family house inhabited by people who own it is an economic asset to be counted with in peoples lives over generations that is, in a perspective of continuity. For most middle class families in Denmark, it is the greatest economic asset they come to possess in their lifetime. Middle class people’s fortunes in life are invested in, or represented by, their house, often the one that is their home, but it may also be a second home, a summer house, or in some cases a secondary house or flat that they own but do not live in. Since houses are the main fortune, their economic value represent what most people are able to bequeath to their children and grandchildren in terms of inheritance.

Inheritance, continuity and the transfer of values over generations require a *temporal* perspective in analysing the meaning of houses. Permeability and porousness are in a temporal perspective to be viewed as the ways in which social relations over time are established and maintained, changed and reconfigured by way of the transfer of material and immaterial values. In the process of transfer, spheres are crossed. I am inspired by the thinking of spheres in a traditional anthropological sense (Bohannan 1963) such as from a market sphere into a relational sphere of vice versa, exemplified for instance by the case of an old person who dies and leaves a house or a summer house, to which the heirs attach childhood memories and strong emotional values, and which to them belong within a family-values-and-sentiment sphere of social exchange, but which at the death of the owner has to go on the market, and thus shifts into another sphere. Other examples are the transfer of values and possibilities from the market sphere as represented by the equity value of a house and into spheres of activity, like investment in education as I have dealt with elsewhere (Sjørsløv 2008). There are moral sentiments and sense of social obligations attached to such transfers.<sup>1</sup>

Permeability and the porous are as just interesting metaphors when dealing with *space*, as when dealing with time. And then again, as we know from classical anthropology, space and time are in a philosophical as well as a social sense, inseparable (Munn 2004). In this context I thus prefer to talk about spacetime. When I first chose the title *Stable property, permeable spheres* I was thinking of the house as the material property representing stability through its physical presence in space, whereas the metaphor of the permeable applied to the perspective of spheres. Since, I have thought further, and it now seems inevitable, or it would be unwise not to use the applicable metaphors of the permeable and the porous to think spacetime, or timespace, temporality and spatiality together. The overall ambition is to juggle with questions raised within recent anthropological aims to develop new theories, about the role of the material in the social and vice versa, and in the present context, what I am aiming for is an understanding of social order.

### **The spatiality and temporality of property**

The house as property is about relations between and across generations. It is about values passed on through inheritance and in material as well as other forms. First, the focus on inheritance puts the emphasis on the time perspective of spacetime. In economic anthropology, property is seen as always invested with meaning and embedded in social relations (Hann 2007). From the present perspective the question is, which kind of role does property play in maintaining continuity over time, and from a more phenomenological perspective, how is the materiality and space of the house an object of temporalization in peoples lives. Childhood home is an emotionally loaded

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<sup>1</sup> The project within the framework of Center for Housing and Welfare is called Inheritance and Property. It investigates the hypothesis that in Danish contemporary welfare society there are family relations and relatedness and moral values which influence housing conditions through the role played by inheritance, particularly the economic value of house ownership. The other hypothesis is that a transfer of values takes place from generation to generation and that this transfer influences the choice of housing and the attachment of value to the house.

thing for most people. Whether the childhood home was owned by the parents or not is perhaps not so significant in the creation of emotional attachment – or perhaps they are – but in any case, objects of the house that are passed on, or attempted passed on, are significant. “This chair/table/lamp or clock pertained to your grandfather”, or “this was the first piece of furniture your father and I bought when we married, don’t you want to have it?”. Objects of the house are markers of time and the house itself is a temporal entity that represents (or *is*) a milestone in people’s lives, and in this respect also a stability-producer. “We built it when we were very young...” “it was just after the war...” etc.

Economists discuss whether and in which ways people release their housing equity for consumption in their older ages, or invest negatively in their property by neglecting their houses in favor of consumption, or they present the idea that some may seem to aim to exchange care and consideration from the children and grandchildren (their heirs) for the wealth represented by the equity value of their house (Lauridsen et al. 2009). My approach and the way the interviews point, is a bit different, but closely related to these issues. Stephen Gudeman is one anthropologist working with economics who argues that even the most individualist of modern capitalist societies is constructed on a “base” of human sociality that can never be captured through concepts such as utility maximization and transaction costs (Hann 2007:307). Other anthropologists try to advance the loose notion of embeddedness (op.cit. 308) by elaborating the different layers of analysis necessary to investigate the role of property. I should like to suggest that the temporality of property in social relations of kin and relatedness (cf. Carsten 2004) is taken into consideration in dealing with embeddedness. The meaning of and practices surrounding inheritance and bequeath is a good place to start.<sup>2</sup>

### **Inheritance in Denmark and a few cases**

The issue of inheritance is an underexposed field in Danish welfare society, both in public and political discourse (ref. *Arbejderbevægelsens Erhvervsråd*). There may be several reasons for this. One could be that the facts about the unequal distribution of inheritance values in the Danish population (which have been revealed recently in a statistical research) goes against the predominant self-understanding of Denmark as an egalitarian society where “few have too much and fewer too little” as it is said in self-praising songs of a bit more than a century back.<sup>3</sup> Another could be that money and

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<sup>2</sup> A four-layered model developed by von Benda-Beckman et al (2006 in Hann op.cit.) specifies different aspects, or layers, for understanding property regimes. Norms and values of cultural traditions, political and legal regulations, social relations of property including inheritance rules, and practices which may or may not reinforce the other layers. Property must be analysed on all four layers. The von Benda-Beckmans also reject the application of the dichotomy public/private and argue for the recognition of more relative publics (ibid.).

<sup>3</sup> According a statistical study (by Arbejderbevægelsens Erhvervsråd), the average citizen in Denmark inherits 600.000 Dcr. (aprox. 80.000 Euro). However, the variation is great in a society that usually boasts of being one of the most egalitarian in the world. Heirs to

feelings are incompatible spheres in the self-conception of romantically influenced modern people. In 18<sup>th</sup> century England the issue of money was not underexposed. So and so many pounds a year, as we hear in Jane Austen's novels about eligible marriage partners and the sense and sensibility in making the conventionally as well as emotionally right choices in life. Money and love were perhaps separate spheres, but the satisfaction and completion of the story is when the two spheres unite, in Jane Austen's stories in a marriage that pleases the female heroine as well as live up to the social conventions and preferably moves her up in society. And to remain for a moment in the world of fiction, a more recent example is a popular Norwegian novelist, Anne B. Ragde, who in a trilogy about the very contemporary daughter of a farmer and her troubles in making choices about what to do with the farm when her father dies, and her sense of responsibility for kin. At some point someone says to her about a young guy who helps her out on the farm and wants to be her lover, "he wants you *and* the farm, there is nothing strange or wrong in that, it's the way it is and always has been on the farms here". The heroine herself is hesitant to accept him because she thinks "he wants only the farm".

Enough of that. The point is that material property and feelings whether of love of responsibility, are not as separable spheres as we might like to think in our romantic ideas about who we chose to marry or not marry, and in our ideas about modernity's individualized life choices in general. They are not separate spheres, in fact they are quite permeable, or porous.<sup>4</sup>

The legislative facts on inheritance in Denmark are that until Januar 2008 when a new law of inheritance came into force, the law reflected obligations towards biological children as the primary heirs. In the new revised law of inheritance the spouse is entitled to half of the inheritance, and cohabitating couples (in non-formal marriage), may bequeath all to their partner. One of the motives for a revision of the law concerning inheritance was to put cohabiting partners on par with formally married spouses. The new law has thus taken changes in the family pattern into consideration, like the serial monogamy and the so-called bonus children that come with new marriage alliances. In Denmark nowadays, about 100 billion Dcr. (aprox. 14 billion Euro) change hands through inheritance each year. Few people make a will, and lawyers estimate that a third of the money go into the "wrong" hands, i.e. that others than those who would be

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house owners inherit on the average 2 million Dcr., heirs to non-owners on the average eight times less (<http://www.aeraadet.dk/media/filebank/org/Kom-arv-jsj.pdf>).

<sup>4</sup> Economists in the Center for Housing and Welfare are currently engaged in analytical work drawing on The Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE), which is a multidisciplinary, cross-national database with micro data on health, socio-economic status and social and family networks of more than 30,000 individuals aged 50 and over. The SHARE surveys ask respondents about gifts given and the chance of leaving inheritance. Gifts given and the chance of leaving inheritance seems to be positively affected by the size of housing wealth, but not affected by the size of financial wealth. There also seem to be indications of a strong intergenerational transmission of the inclination for ownership (Lauridsen et al. 2009).

intended by the deceased are the recipients of the inheritance. Lawyers of course use this information to motivate people to create wills.

The main principles of the new legislation are

- limiting the compulsory bequath to biological children
- expanding the right of spouses
- expanding “paper-less” non-formally married partners rights to inherit each other
- expanding the right to dispose of one’s fortune through will

In a wider comparative perspective which includes non-European and more traditional societies, the law reflects the fact that economic assets do not belong to the kin in a temporal perspective of continuation in which the individual is so to speak the guardian of the fortune of the kin group, as for instance in the house societies analyzed by Lévi-Strauss (cf. Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995). Economic assets are relatively individualized, and open to choices, as is reflected in the modernized law, which leaves more up for individual choice than the old one. In general it reflects a strengthening of the horizontal relations between spouses or cohabiting partners at the expense of the relations between parents and children. However, one thing is law. People’s ideas and values, as they come out in the interviews, still reveal moral sentiments directed towards the joint support to the next generation. They also reveal, however, the idea that there is no obligation on the part of the parents to not use what they want to use of their economic assets, including spending the equity value of their house to “live out their dreams” as far as possible. A popular saying these days goes, “if I leave anything at all, it is because I made a miscalculation” – meaning that I intend to spend every penny before I leave this earth. The provocative tone in this statement is significant, since it is – or surely was earlier on – morally expected that you *did* leave something, or in other words of the pre-industrial peasant society (which has in some respects been a moral model in Denmark long after it seized to be the predominant mode of production) the moral rule that the individual in one generation was the guardian of the lineage property. When testing the saying in interviews about leaving nothing, no one has yet answered with an un-mistakable yes, that’s my attitude! All are moderate and balanced in their views on this matter.

In her book from 2006 *Plausible prejudice* Marianne Gullestad sees the family as imagined along the lines of Benedict Anderson’s nation as an imagined community. This, she says, is because “interpretations of family relations are generally framed by specific unacknowledged conventional understandings (Gullestad 2006: 155). She quotes Scott Lasch for saying that the family is perceived as a haven in a heartless world, along with, we might add, the home as a “helle” as we say in Danish, a safe spot in a risky world. Gullestad’s focus in this book is not the family as such but the nation and its boundaries. The nation is often seen as a family writ large. Important as this perspective on nation and family is - boundaries, exclusion mechanisms - this is not the road I am going to take here. I want to take Gullestad’s point about looking in more than one direction in order to understand the present (Scandinavian) world. On the basis of her work with modern Norwegian families and children, she emphasises how home making is often used as a means to symbolically express family solidarity. “A morally good home is often symbolically signalled by means of an aesthetically nice home” (162). Conversely, in terms of family relations, there are a lot of ambiguities to be detected in how these are

seen by people and practices in the modern welfare society. One significant quote is by an elderly lady who says “I manage very well on my own, because I have children and grandchildren who help me out” (162). On the whole, her examples reveal how, as Gullestad says, “For parents ... the mode of successful transmission of moral values is changing from request for obedience to complex negotiations” (164). New kinds of adult parental authority are at play, and “..good parenthood is dependent on the ability to receive new knowledge from those who are to be guided and to develop common frames of reference together with them” (166).

In the few but long interviews I and my student have conducted so far, the picture that emerges is one of respectful relations, downplaying of conflicts, downplaying of riches and the values of property, but at the same time a strong consciousness about the potentiality of these and the role it should play in transfer the relations between generations, particularly in the “middle” generation.<sup>5</sup>

I want to illustrate some of the issues that this work in progress have raised before I return to the more broad and general thoughts on space and time in understanding the role of house property and inheritance values in family relations.

### *Mary and her descendants*

Mary is a woman of 82, a widow, who lives in a small town some 50 kilometers outside Copenhagen. Her son and daughter-in-law live very near by, and her other three grown up children also live not far away, while the grown up grandchildren live in Copenhagen. Her house is built and sold to her by her son, who is a carpenter. This is somewhat unusual, but in other respects Mary and her kin are not un-representative of the development that has taken place in Danish society during the last century, namely a house-movement from farm to single family house in a suburb or a smaller town, and then to flats in Copenhagen (by the younger generation), where first and foremost educational opportunities are the draw factor. Mary is showing a picture of the farm on which she lived with her husband until 2005 and where the four children grew up. They gave up the farm and moved into this house, somewhat to her sadness, although she downplays that in the interview, but according to her son and daughter-in-law, whom we also interviewed it was not easy to “drag her out of there”, meaning make her move away from the farm. Her husband died soon after. Her living room is full of memories of life on the farm. What her living room as a whole reveals, may be regarded as a collection of objectified memories in an elaborate temporal and spatial housescape.

Mary is very conscious of kin and has compiled a book of photographs, letters and descriptions of the family several generations back, and she has given a book to each of her seven grandchildren. Mary’s son and daughter, Bjarne and Birthe, have three children, two of whom still live with them, the third is studying in Copenhagen to be a midwife and lives in a small flat.

Mary is very time-oriented, more backward than forward, not surprisingly considering her age. She proudly tells us that a relative of hers has traced the family back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century (*slægtsforskning*, research on kin back in history, is very popular in Denmark). It is almost impossible to get her to address the questions of the interview, she

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<sup>5</sup> The research focuses on four generations, one born 1925-1935, the “middle” born 1945-1955, the other “middle” born 1960-1975 and the youngest born 1980-1995.

prefers to talk about the history of her family on the basis of the book she has prepared and which she shows with pride. Her own parents owned a farm of about 45 acres, her husband came from a much smaller place, and they lived together for 50 years on the farm on the picture. When they sold it, they had enough to buy her present house at 1.2 million Dkr. And then she had to pay for the funeral of her husband, a considerable expense. She lives of her state pension, but has a permanent loan offer from her bank, which she prefers not to use. She is glad that she has paid out the house and does not have to pay rent. Significantly, when taking leave of the farm, when they had to sell it because of her husband's bad health, they would have wanted to sell it to the youngest son, who was interested in continuing with the farm. But, as she says, "but of course one can't sell it to one of the children at a good price...." *"man skal ikke gøre forskel"* – one has to treat the children equally. This is a strong moral obligation, which goes through other interviews as well. Mary abstains from her own interest, which is that the farm remains in the family, in order to treat the children equally in terms of inheritance. When she dies, the four of them will inherit the value of her present house in equal shares. As for continuity in terms of material house organisation, it is significant, that her son and daughter in law, whom we also interviewed began with a tiny space to live on, just as Mary and her husband had done themselves, and expanded over the years, and ended up having the house prolonged so that they could have two "kviste", dormers in the attic. Her son and daughter-in-law have done precisely the same.

Mary thinks that young people consume a lot. She does not say so straight out as a criticism but leaves the sentence hanging in the air. Her point of reference is a time when "not everything could be achieved" and she had to save up for months to get a new winter coat. She speaks highly of education, and when her children were studying, one to be a mechanic, they lived at home until they had finished their education. After that, they have been economically independent. When asked whether they "help each other" economically, she hears it as whether they help each other in practical matters, which she confirms they do. Did they then have to pay for food and lodging, when they were living at home? Yes, she says, but just a little "to learn that it costs...".

What we in Danish call "mærkedage" is very important to Mary. *Mærkedage* are marked days, days of celebration, birthdays and weddings, silver weddings of her children, the couple near by have just celebrated theirs. She writes songs, and when asked about whether she would like to pass some of her things, things she has from then farm, on to her children, she says yes, she would, and at their silver wedding, she had a bawl of silver engraved with their names and the date, and gave this as a present along with a table cloth of her daughter-in-laws own choice.

When later on we interview her son and daughter-in-law, they say, "Mary always wants to give us something when we go there". They say it in a light tone, but do not try to hide the fact that they are a bit tired of this. What do they do about it then? They mostly take it and say thank you, and then they leave it in the attic if they can't use it. "She never asks" they say, meaning she never asks what became of it, and she does not complain if she never sees it in their house.

This case shows many different aspects of family life with property across generations, more than I can go into a this place. In the present context, I want to emphasize two issues. One is the folding of time and space and the ways in which it is almost impossible to speak about the two in-separately. The other is what I am tempted to

term super-decency. Generations are considerate to one another, but they are also independent. They find ways of being decent, respecting the independence of the other, while still doing what they themselves think is morally right – saving, not throwing away things – or on the other hand, consuming, spending the money from granny on drinks with the friends, and although what she gave may only be enough for one drink at the prices in Copenhagen bars nowadays, they show gratitude according to what they know this money represents for the old ones.

Birthe, the daughter-in-law of Mary, is 46 years old. Her parents both died in 2005 and she inherited one fourth of the value of the small farm they had, which was 300.000 Dcr. (approximately 40.000 euro). She says:

“Well, my father and mother, they were like that,... you were certainly not supposed to spend more than you had, and your were expected to leave a bit behind (an inheritance), I think so, I think it was a bit of a pity for them that they did not get the opportunity to spend more, but we inherited a little more than 300.000 crowns, at that time we were back in shape economically [she and her husband had lost money on a farm] and we did not need that money, you might say, but then we finished the reform of the house, and perhaps we had not done it so quickly if... and we also had a new car and my sisters did more or less the same, they bought new furniture or changed the car, it has not been anything crucial for us that we received that money”.

Birthe and her husband Birger have very recently finished the expansion of their house, so that they now live in a fairly big house with generous space on two floors. What I want to call attention to in the quote above is the fact that Birthe downplays the importance of the money, although it is pretty evident that they have profited by it. Until they finished building of the house, they lived with three small children in a very small space (just as did Birger’s parents, Mary and her husband once). I see Birthe’s modesty and downplaying as another example of a moral attitude that emphasizes independence without being ungrateful - a sort of super-decency.

### ***Jonas and his family***

Jonas is 22 years old and lives in this flat, which he shares with a friend, a girl, but not his girl friend. His parents live in a fairly big house in Jutland, and his sister, Elsa, live in a flat owned by their parents. Jonas is a typical creative, artistic, dynamic and a bit anarchistic young man. He likes to drink, his friends say, and go out, he works as a DJ, and he has lived in Berlin for a while like many other young people in Copenhagen these days. His parents in Jutland equipped him with a fully furnished flat, furnished with stuff they had saved in the basement of their big house, and which they had shined up and made ready for him, when he moved out of the house in the provincial town in Jutland that he comes from. He was to live in the same town, but that did not last long. None of this furniture is with him now. What he has (as the photos show) is something he has found himself in different waste containers in Nørrebro, Copenhagen where he lives. He would like his parents to buy the flat he lives in, which is an *andelslejlighed* a corporate community flat, but when we interviewed the parents, they said, no way. Firstly, it is not

a good investment, secondly, Jonas has to find out what kind of education he wants to take before they invest in him, so to speak. They did not say that straight out, but they did emphasize education and a clear future perspective as a precondition for putting money into his housing situation. Not that they were critical of his life at this point, on the contrary, they were obviously proud of their creative son, but the thing about education as a future guarantee for safety and a good life, which is conceptually linked up with material spending and investment, is a strong one. This is repeated in other interviews as well. On the whole situation of Jonas at present, the parents at some point said “We need to have a serious talk with him soon”. This need was also related to the situation of their other child, a daughter six years older than Jonas.

Jonas parents had already invested, namely in the flat inhabited by his older sister, who has finished her education as a nurse and who is married and has a daughter of three. This is what in Denmark is called *forældre køb*, meaning “parent-buy” that is parents buying property, usually a small flat in Copenhagen, and renting it out to their grown up children, often at a low price. Elsa, Jonas sister, paid 3000 Danish crowns a month (approximately 400 Euro), a truly symbolic amount for a rather splendid flat, chosen by her parents in negotiation with her, but with her father’s say as the last, on the basis of very rational thinking. A well-structured flat for two people living independently, placed in a neighbourhood where it can be resold, in short, handy for the purpose and a safe investment. Elsa does not have anything from her home, she says, but then she thinks again and opens the cupboard, full of inheritance in the form of cups and plates (photo). For her, it is not so much objectified memories in an elaborate housescape as it was for her older Mary. For Elsa it is rather objectifications of a respectful, but also negotiable relationship with her parents and other kin – who want her to have this, but who will not order her to use it.

Listening to three generations, what strikes is the decency and tolerance, and consideration with which they talk about the other generations, but then also the way they act independently and not always in accordance with the expectations of the other generations. The overall picture, though, is one of harmony. Birthe and her sisters and brothers and their spouses did *not* quarrel at all about the division of things from their parents’ house, she says, and there are several examples of the same kind.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, ideas about grown up children having to “fight for it”, “not get it too easily”, “know that it costs” seem to be predominant. But also a general idea in the well to do middle class of which there is a high percentage in the Danish population, that there is no real lack of anything. This is the middle generations (ages 40 to 60) however, not the old ones. The young (20 to 30 years) are not irresponsible. They are pretty used to getting, if not what they want, certainly what their parents in negotiations seem to think they *need*, but they are also aware of limited resources, as when Jonas, who spends on his drinking, is painfully aware that for the moment he is, as he says, “in minus”, meaning that his

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<sup>6</sup> I am aware of the methodological problems implied in interviewing as a stranger for a few hours in peoples homes. I am grateful to the families who have let us into their homes. They have all been open and seemingly confident in our presence, but that does not alter the fact that it is to be expected that family conflicts and difficulties are downplayed in a relatively short conversation with a stranger. I am aware that this represents shortcomings to the ethnographic material.

bank account shows that he spent more than he has. Most young people would ask their parents for loans, but not to buy anything. Loans to buy material property like loans for buying a flat, yes, mere consumption, no.

Summing up, there is both property transfer and *non*-transfer between generations, and the anthropological literature on exchange, based on the original insights of Marcel Mauss, can no doubt make us wiser on this point. For instance, *forældrekøb* – parent buy – may be interpreted as “keeping while giving” in line with what has been analyzed by Annette Weiner and related to authority. In the same vein, there are inalienables, such as for instance a silver bawl with the marks of a silver wedding inscribed. Inscription and names have precisely the effect of making this thing un-transferable, or inalienable (as has also been analyzed by Weiner). It can not go on the market, at least not for the first many years. Finding personal objects like photographs of recent date or things with names or other personal markers on flea markets (which are hugely popular in Denmark) to many people signal a kind of amorality. “How could they part with that”, implicitly, did the heirs not have any respect for those from whom these things derive? Then there are also more easily transferables, like furniture of no significant value.

Significantly, the house as such is transferable. Many old people who have to depart with their house would like to keep it in the family, but often they can't, because like Mary they can not afford to give other siblings the same as the value of a transferred house to one of the children. In other cases, the children would like to keep it but can not afford it, and it seems like everybody knows, that this is a kind of sweet dream that can not be clung to, and in not a few cases also, the younger ones, and sometimes the older ones as well, are secretly glad to get rid of an unpractical store house of not evenly attractive memories.<sup>7</sup>

With all the individual differences and an overall picture of decency, or super-decency, along with negotiations along the lines of the statements by Gullestad, the ethnography of property transfer in houses leaves us with the general question about the role of transfer of values in maintaining social order. Marcel Mauss taught us that the gift, the material object that is exchanged between groups and individuals creates and upholds social relations and thus ultimately contributes to the establishing of social order. But what about the exchange and transfer of the special gift that is inheritance? And what about the role of exchange in modern societies that are so often characterized as individualized, fragmentary and up-rooted? I do not have answers to all these questions, but I think it is fair to raise a question about social order in relation to this ethnography, and I think the role of property in a spacetime perspective is a good place to start in searching for other aspects of life in modern society than the more often emphasized.

### **Conclusion and perspectives**

In studying and theorizing property, anthropology has not come forward with any new grand theory of its own. A state-of-the-art review of property studies emphasizes how the micro-level ethnographic perspective that looks at concrete social relationships rather

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<sup>7</sup> A summer house which has been in the possession of the family for generations is a different story, but this is a sidetrack in the interviews. This aspect may be supplemented by the ongoing research by Mark Vacher and others.

than formal legal categories and disembodied individual agents, dominate, and through such kinds of studies “expose the hubris of the dominant property paradigms of recent decades” (Hann 2007: 310).

What is property’s role in creating sociality, collectivities and social order? First of all, it is an exchange object, and it may be transferred into other value spheres. The kind of property represented by a family owned house is to be understood within a framework of spacetime and social relations. It may still be a bundle of rights, and it is no doubt useful to analyze property issues in relation to markets, liberalism and post-socialist societies, as has been done in much recent literature on property (Hann; Humphrey and Verdery). As related to middle class people in Danish/Scandinavian/European households, it seems clear, however, that it can not be separated neither from a micro-perspective nor a spacetime frame, and that its role in society as in families point towards perhaps new understandings of social order.

In the course of preparing to analyze the interviews, I have thought of a number of ways in which house property inheritance should *not* be conceptualized. I have gone through several ideas in order to so to speak eliminate them from the enquiry. One way which would be in line with much contemporary anthropological thinking would be employing the concept of subjective agency and look at peoples manoeuvrings, strategizing, navigating perhaps, within a structural field of formal laws and unwritten rules. Another approach would be by way of modernity theory (Giddens and others), or perhaps Ulrich Beck, with a perspective of risk and safety in the modern global world. I have also thought of ritual, this being one of my long time interests, but although I do have at least one example of a minimalist ritual transfer of values, the most palpable is the fact that there is so little ritualized, unless perhaps you chose to see the way parents move and help their children establish themselves when they first move away from home as a sort of everyday secular ritual. This could probably be done, and on the whole, I am not saying that these approaches might not be useful. However, it seems significant to me that the way the ethnography points so far, is one that I would rather subsume under the label of social order. This is a concept that has been with anthropology from the start in a variety of forms such as structure, norms, values or function (Nadel 1963), but as a concept as such it has disappeared somewhat from the scene along with the holistic understanding of culture and the durkheimian ideas about society as founded on consensus. However it is time to revoke the curiosity and wonder about “what keeps society together” as it was formulated in classical (durkheimian) sociology and anthropology. This is also what the people interested in sociality and materiality ask (Pels et al. 2002). In other words, what is it that we do *not* know about life in late modernity, when we emphasize individualism, fragmented lives, brake down of kinship relations and traditional values? If neo-liberal society’s ideas about property and the market points towards the “possessive individualism” coined by MacPherson on the basis of John Locke, and if we agree that such an attitude, let alone the market, can not keep society together, what is it we must look for in order to understand how in spite of all - globalisation, immigration, multiculturalism, uprootedness and rapid changes - people seem to be living pretty much according to implicit values and moral rules that are passed

down from generation to generation, while at the same time being high consumers *and* regarding each other as independent and autonomous creatures.<sup>8</sup>

In the Danish families of the study, home making takes place in a continuous house-spatialization as well as temporalization, in which objects and subjects are drawn into a collective world that stretches beyond the concrete house (for instance the childhood home of young people) and into their present abodes, as well as the older generation and the middle one incorporate relations outside the house both in time and space into their home-making practises. In a temporal perspective, an analytical understanding of value transfer across generations takes place through subject agent's choices and reflections and negotiations. So obviously there is agency and perhaps navigation involved, but there is also something else. It is this "something else" that needs to be more closely addressed. What is it beyond legislation, formal laws about inheritance, social structures and habits that demand that young people leave home at the age of not much more than 18, that old people do not expect to live with their sons and daughters and in-laws? What is it beyond formal and informal structures and agency that sustains the picture of orderliness and super-decency which emerges from the interviews and cases I have presented? Is it enough to see it as good old habitus? Or is it time to find some new concepts by digging back to old ones perhaps. This should be concepts that help conceptualize social relations around property in spacetime and people in their permeable homes and porous houses, where property values, objects, rights and relations are constituted and reconstituted in transfers between spheres. I see them doing this in manners that point strongly towards some kind of orderly pattern in which moral values *and* not only negotiations but also silent practices that do not completely conform with those values are done, to everyone's knowledge, but with a silent consensus not to speak about it.

Property creates and is a stabilizing factor in social life and maintains forms of collectivities by being itself both stable and permeable in the sense that it is transferable, and in the sense that it is crosscut by relations of subjects and objects. Property is an aspect of social relations. The interviews point towards a certain modesty surrounding economic assets, a downplaying of wealth, but they also show that property values are by no means neutral. There are strong moral values attached to them, which are however, seldom directly expressed.

In seeing it as social order, I want to emphasise embeddedness, but I also want to keep the idea of spheres, but in the strict sense of separate economies along the lines shown by Bohannan, but more in line with Max Weber's ideas about the relationship between economic and material values on the one hand, and immaterial, moral values on the other, a value sphere and a material sphere here being the precondition for seeing how they interact. As an object of norms and values, the privately owned house interchanges with the norms of values of society at large. Individual acts not only conform with, but contribute to the maintenance of social order while at the same time giving something back - prestige, salvation, probably not in the sense of Weber's protestant ethic, but satisfaction at being a morally good person as expressed in giving. Recent attempts to

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<sup>8</sup> Values like independence and autonomy are highly praised in the upbringing of children and young people in Danish/Scandinavian culture (Anderson 2009).

capture the social from new angles, such as Bruno Latour's *Reassembling the social* represent positions that are certainly not durkheimian, but which sees the social and order as constituted by networks and assemblages of a more or less temporary kind. Yet, the ambition is the same, and as Latour says, the tradition represented by Durkheim and the tradition from Gabriel Tarde which is the one taken up by actor network theorists like himself, can be reconciled "the second being simply the resumption of the task that the first believed was too quickly achieved" (Latour 2007: 14). Latour's ideas are highly inspiring in dealing with the interaction of the social and the material, but a view of the social as assemblies and networks is a reduction which may miss issues of social cohesion, order and moral values as pointed to by older theories. It may be wise to recall what John Law says in his light criticism of networks all around. What is it we miss, he asks, when we look at networks? (Law 2008). In a similar vein, I should like to ask what is missed by looking at the social in modern life as largely fragmented and individualised.

I suggest that we take up some of the classical sociological issues from Durkheim, and others and rethink them in the light of new theory in order to capture the social order and how it is constituted and internalized into individuals in the family and in the house. Stability is a good word in this respect. Stability may be *emically* - that is on the basis of people's own ideas and concepts - understood as lying in the physical and material and the relatively steady value of house property - in spite of crisis and all. Analytically, however, stability is a much broader term and point towards the issue of social order, decency, or super-decency, and moral values. This is a kind of stability, which can only be maintained through permeability. Values have to be transferable, subjects have to be changeable and analytically viewed as acted upon as well as actors themselves. House property inheritance seems to be a useful micro-entity for studying stability as social order, constituted as it is in spacetime and through permeable spheres.

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