Second homes: 'House Lives' across borders

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Sofie Kyllesbech
MA student, Institute of Anthropology
University of Copenhagen
sofiekyllesbech@hotmail.com

Abstract:
During the last couple of decades, second homes abroad have become continually more popular among Danes as well as other Europeans. Many people today choose to live in and with houses across borders. Second homes demonstrate new ways of travelling as well as dwelling which challenges the conceptual division between being a tourist and being at home; of creating routes as well as roots.

The paper presents an ongoing anthropological study on Danes' second homes in six popular housing areas in Spain (Costa del Sol and Mallorca), Italy (Garda lake surroundings, Tuscany) and Thailand (Pattaya and Hua Hin). The empirical data was collected during spring 2009 and consists of qualitative interviews and participant observation in second homes and their surroundings as well as visits in the informants' primary households in Denmark.

The paper aims to debate how second homes can be understood within social theory. The term *house life* is suggested in stead of *home* in order to conceive the way houses are *lived* - not necessarily as homes but sometimes even as oppositions to being at home. The theoretical outline of the analysis is that houses are both something people live *in* and perceive the world *with*. In this perspective, looking at second homes abroad, connections between the individual and the world emerge. Seeking further analytical and theoretical insights, an outline for debate has been developed evolving around how connections between the local and the global and between time and place are materialised and lived *in* and *with* second homes abroad.

Keywords: Second homes; house life; space and place; social theory

Introduction
This paper presents initial results and theoretical perspectives from an ongoing anthropological study about second homes abroad. The study is part of a broader project about second homes which has been initiated by the Centre for Housing and Welfare at the University of Copenhagen. Seeing that buying second homes abroad has been an increasing tendency in Denmark (as well as other wealthy countries of the world), this research focuses on how this phenomenon is experienced and perceived as meaningful to the people who live in and with these houses.

The fieldwork
The study is based upon four months of anthropological fieldwork involving qualitative semistructured interviews and participant observation in and around 22 second homes in Costa del Sol and Mallorca in Spain, Pattaya and Hua Hin in Thailand and the Garda Lake
and Tuscany in Italy. 16 of the informants were also visited and interviewed in their primary home in Denmark. Furthermore, expert interviews with real estate agents and Danish residents in each area have been included in the contextual data as well as internet pages of second home owners, Danish networks and real estate companies in the six areas.

The people
The interviewees range in age, from 28 to 87 years where the majority are between 40 and 60 years, which is also area dependent/geographically specific. Moreover, the study includes mostly couples since buying a second home abroad is apparently not something people do alone. Several of the second homes are shared between more than one couple. Usually these couples have known each other for a long time, e.g. are childhood friends or are related. Some hire out their second home when they do not use it. However, it is not common practice. Whereas there is a very clear distinction between summer cottages in Denmark that are hired out and those which are not, hiring out a second home abroad has no significant impact on the house design or functions. Though one couple inherited a second home which has been in the family since 1968 and another was there for the first time this year, most of the houses were purchased within the last 5 years.

Multiple House Lives
Since the second home is not a very well studied phenomena, this study is primarily explorative; it is focused on describing the phenomena and it is concerned with how second homes should be grasped within social theory? During the fieldwork the concept of house life was developed realising that many second homes were not necessarily perceived as homes or, if they were, perceiving them as homes were not among the most valuable qualities of the second home. Therefore, the term house life is suggested. In this understanding, a second home is considered a material construction in and with which people live their lives. By this definition, the materiality of the house and the dynamics of social life are emphasised and understood as interrelated. Furthermore, the term life highlights that a house becomes meaningful not by what it is but by the life that is lived in and with it.

Accordingly, a theoretical distinction is made between living in a house and living with a house. When living in a second home, a social space is created facilitated by the materiality of the house and the social relations and actions within it. The anthropologist Alberto Corsín Jimènes defines this as capacity: "Space is no longer 'out there', but a condition or faculty – a capacity – of social relationships. It is what people do, not where they are" (Jimenes 2003:140).

Furthermore, in the second home, the temporality of social space becomes very clear because the second home is actually empty most of the year. Thus, I will also employ Nancy Munns concept of time-space which defines as "a symbolic nexus of relations
produced out of interactions between bodily actors and terrestrial spaces" (Munn 2003:93). In this study, it is even further relevant to consider not only the temporality of space but also the perception of time in different spaces.

For these reasons, I understand life in the second home by conceptualising it as a timespace with a capacity for particular relations and activities.

When understanding life with a second home abroad, I will focus on how a house puts the homeowner in a particular relation to the local surroundings. Accordingly a core element of a house is that it has to be situated somewhere; it is therefore also to be understood as a physical place. Inspired by a phenomenologist approach, I am interested in looking at how living with a second home creates both distance and nearness to the adjacent world.

Further adding the word 'multiple' has two different purposes. Firstly, every house life differs from the other. However, it also indicates that the study participants have very different house lives in their different houses; the primary home, the second home, maybe even the third or the fourth home, having different perceptions of social space, time and place.

Three houses
In order to give an impression of the houses in this study, the informants own representations of them will be used. Every time homeowners were visited, they were asked to take three photos representing the house. Here the first two photos from three houses in Thailand, Spain and Italy will be shown and described including initial analytical reflections on them, hence, exemplifying the huge variation in the houses and the house lives. Afterwards, a discussion on the common qualities of the second homes will follow, moving from the terraces to the thresholds and the surroundings of the houses.

Thailand, Pattaya

This house is situated in the countryside approximately one hour from Pattaya. It is a very typical house in Thailand, being a villa with a large living room, a master bed room and a guest room inside the house and a small piece of grass, a swimming pool and a shadowed terrace outside. The plot is surrounded by a clear fence and
situated in a small densely build, gated community employing a guard and a project manager. Typically, houses are modular constructions leaving some influence on the house design to the buyers. Accordingly, they end up with a considerable building percentage. As all the houses I have visited, this house is newly built in a new community project. This one is still not finished and currently only three people live in the community which consists of 42 plots.

On this picture the homeowner has captured the house from the outside. The angle is significant, as it captures where the family live their lives in the house; on the terrace with a look to the pool. Many of the participants in Thailand did not take interior photos at all which provides an important insight into how these houses are used or not used.

Here is a master bed with a typical Thai bed cover. The picture illustrates two significant things: 1) The interior has very little importance during the daily life in the house; 2) the Thai style décor has much importance. In Thailand, the interior of the houses are usually used for sleeping; it is not a place you spend your time during the day. Houses are often sparingly furnished and decorated similar to large hotel rooms. Whereas the homeowners consider it important that the houses are build in a Western standard, similarly it is very important to them that the decor and furnishing is Thai style.

**Spain, Costa del Sol**

This picture shows a roof top terrace in an apartment building approximately 500M from the sea in Benalmadena at Costa del Sol in Spain. Similar to other participants' perception, the terrace is considered to have tremendous importance to the owner of this house which is underpinned by the participant choosing to take the first picture in this location. Again the outside space is perceived as an important part of the house even though the design of it is
considerable different. The building is build during the 60s or 70s in a highly anonymous functional style that probably could have been built almost everywhere.

The same impression of being wherever emerges when looking at the interior. This next picture exemplifies this by capturing the living room where there are no items that the homeowner considers ‘Spanish’. This glass fish is bought in Italy “because it’s beautiful” as the man of the house puts it. It indicates that Spain is more of a neutral background than an exotic culture as was the case in Thailand. Thus, its value is not in its culture or landscape, it is primarily in its easiness of creating the house life they want.

**Italy, Tuscany**

This house is situated in a small village in the mountains of Tuscany. The house is from the 17th century and the homeowners have spent 2 years restoring it. The first picture shows a view to the terrace in front with mountains in the background. The whole house clearly illustrates an appreciation of the surrounding scenery and of what they considered to be Tuscan / Italian culture.

The next picture is of the railing on the staircase which they restored “in accordance with the house” as the woman of the house puts it. It shows how they appreciate what they perceive as the authenticity of the house by spending considerable amount of time restoring and displaying the house and its items. Interestingly, it coincides with how they perceive their Italian surroundings in general, as authentic.

Looking at these very different houses, it is apparent that the homeowners have highly different purposes with and perceptions of what is valuable in a house to incorporate in the
house life they want. At this stage, three main preferences by living in and with a second home emerge: The exotic, the accessible and the authentic. In brief, in Thailand, houses has to be what they consider ‘European’ standard with controllable items from the exotic Thailand while in Spain, the well known is prioritised and in Italy the authenticity is preferred. However, despite being very different houses in very different areas, owned by very different people, these second homes abroad have quite a few common qualities.

**Terraces**

First of all second homes are getaways. They all serve as places for relaxation. This becomes particularly palpable when looking at the terraces. These are the areas in the second homes where most life is carried out during the stay as the pictures above also capture. Thus this area is the strongest symbol of being in the second house as opposed to the primary house. Whereas the interior of the house is utilised to more practical matters such as eating and sleeping, the terraces have no particular functions; the house owners feel they can do exactly what they want here. Therefore, it is interesting to zoom in on the terrace. The participants describe the life on the terrace as a life where “time is still” and they “can really relax”, “have no plans” and “not do anything sensible”. Experiencing that they do not have to ‘use’ their time for anything productive when spending time here results in a feeling of timelessness.

This perception of time is interpreted as a cyclical time where every day repeats itself incorporating no significant plans or activities. No plans also leaves room for spontaneity; seizing the day. The informants describe it as the possibility of spontaneously going for a ride or dropping by a friend's house or a favourite café. In this sense, life in the second house is perceived to be both repeated and spontaneous even though it mostly consists of few very small events.

The second home and the terrace, in particular, also functions as places for get-togethers; it is a timespace where friends or family spend quality time together experiencing their relations becoming denser and more intensive. This is clearly reflected in the house; guest rooms and extra beds are must-haves and especially terraces are designed for these types of social gatherings. Interestingly, the terrace signifies a timespace with a particular capacity of being together, even when being separate as this woman with a house in Spain explains it:
"And then we have a terrace of 80m2. That's wonderful! And it's designed so that I can lie over there relaxing and reading a book without noticing the people in the other end. It's nice, I mean, being together apart you know" (my translation)

The qualities of getting away and getting together that are shown above primarily reflect the life in the house, if considering the well-bordered terrace as part of the house. Interestingly, accordingly, the house lives in the second homes are primarily considered to be valuable due to their 'secondness', their otherness to the lives lived in the primary home; their elsewhereness. Actually, this is a Danish context because the house life for this part becomes meaningful as an opposition to life in the primary home in Denmark (though similar oppositions between the primary and second house life in other 'rich country' contexts are likely to be found).

However, the second home does not only become meaningful in terms of its secondness, it is always situated somewhere. Hereby the homeowner is linked with that particular location. Accordingly, I will now focus on the gates around which the houses meet their surroundings.

**Gates**

A significant portion of the houses are clearly bordered from their surroundings either through actual gates or by the organisational manner of the outside space. This applies especially for the houses in Spain and Thailand. In the picture below is a man with a house at Costa del Sol who has arranged the furniture on his balcony allowing him to turn his back to the surroundings:

As Anne Bottomley explains (Bottomley 2009), people have a need for private space in order to value public space. This is also the case with the participants in this study; they need a clear definition of private space for them to meet the outside surroundings which the gates and the like provide them.

Moreover, the utility of these fences are not always to keep something out. It is
also important to keep something in and hereby marking a private space. Looking at the picture below, a border creating a space separating the house from the empty fields is visible.

These borders are interesting in that they exemplify separation as well as meetings. Furthermore, they are very tangible examples of the way a house is both protected by and a part of the particular surroundings. This leads to the next area of interest in this paper which concerns the life with the house, why the focus will now be on the interaction with the surroundings through having a house.

**Surroundings**

Having a second home means interacting with local surroundings in a very different way compared with tourists. Even though, they are not inhabitants – at least not on a full time basis - the second home owners develop a feeling of belonging in that they know their way around the local community and area, they are familiar with local places, e.g shops or local bar restaurants and in addition sensing and recognising the sounds and smells around them when spending time at the terrace.

Another form of interacting with the local community is by practicalities of buying, building, decorating and living in the house. These activities encourage relationships with the local community which underpin the house owners feeling of belonging. Usually the real estate agent, the project manager or the gardener are the most important gatekeepers to local networks.

Furthermore, the homeowners achieve experiences through the interaction with the local community that they consider unique. These experiences are defined partly on the actual incident and partly on the way the homeowner perceive the particular incident. Hence, it is significant that difficulties concerning the practical activities mentioned above usually are perceived as cultural experiences.

In this way, the second home not only become meaningful in terms of its 'secondness', it is also an instrument to meet the local surroundings with. Hence, through en sense of belonging in the landscape and local community, the second home becomes meaningful for the home owners in terms of its 'somewhereness' or to put it differently in a particular local context.

**Initial conclusions and further perspectives**

Second homes abroad are time-spaces with a capacity for getting away and getting together. When 'getting away' into the second home, a space is created where time and relations are perceived differently than in the primary home. Conversely, time and relations become meaningful in reflection of the life in the primary home where time is linked with
productive purposes and people are perceived as having less quality time together. In this sense, the second home becomes meaningful in terms of its 'elsewhereness'. Furthermore, second homes are ways of engaging with the surroundings, being part of the landscape, knowing people and places and gaining the status of having a house. Hence the second home becomes meaningful because of its location in a particular place; in terms of its 'somewhereness'.

Thus, second homes become meaningful in very different contexts, being the Danish in terms of being elsewhere and the local in terms of being somewhere.

In my further research yet another context will be explored, namely the global contexts. The increasing amount of second homes abroad cannot be understood without being considered in the context of globalisation. Living with several homes is a way of dwelling in the world utilizing global opportunities such as mobility and communication. To the homeowners cheap air tickets, frequent flights and internet serve as necessities for this kind of modern dwelling behaviour. In my further research, an elaboration of how second homes becomes meaningful in a global context is therefore inevitable. However, at this stage I will only conclude that the global context very clearly plays a role as a basic condition for the study participants and that their dwelling behaviour is in fact examples of global living not only utilising but also creating global relations.