

**House Vocation**

**The social and the material in Danish single family houses.**

*Draft, not for quotation without consulting with the author*

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This paper is about the social and the material in Danish single-family houses. From 1960 to 1980 around 1,5 million people moved from the cities out onto the bare fields of what since became suburbs. Here, they built their houses and planted hedges around their *parcels* which gave the name “parcelhuse”, *parcel houses* to the characteristic suburb house. Today, 59 % of Danish families live in an unattached house that they own (Vestergaard 2005), and in Danish self understanding this life form is deeply associated with normality. A house with a garden around, mostly one, but sometimes two stories high, inhabited by a nuclear family consisting of a married couple and their two children (1,8 is the average birth rate in Denmark), a car in the garage, and perhaps a dog, this is more or less considered the incarnation of Danish normal life.

I want to talk about some of the ideas behind the project *housing in time and space* which focuses on single family houses in Denmark. However, I want to set off in a completely different part of the world and talk about *fetishes*, and the houses they live in, in the West African country Benin. I do not want to imply that Danes are fetishistic about their houses. The argument aims to be more subtle, but I believe the fetish as a material object is inspiring to thoughts about relations between people and things, or in a broader term between materiality and sociality.

An illustration from the town Abomey in Benin, West Africa shows a house inhabited by a figure, which appears to be a material object in the shape of a human. In the second illustration, four men are seated around this figure, which appears to be sort of a “chair”, or rather an anthropomorphised chair. It is obviously an object of worship as revealed in the different kinds of stuff - oil, chickens eggs - that have been sacrificed to it. The figure is the god Legba, who guards all boundaries and marks out space related to collective identity. Legba is found in small houses along the roadside all over Benin. He marks the entrance to cities, market places and compounds (Augé 1988). This particular Legba is the guardian spirit of the town of Abomey, the old centre of the famous kingdom of Dahomey before and during the French colonisation (Sjørøsløv 2005). As an object of worship this god is a fetish, that is an animated object that is considered a person rather than a thing, and as fetish in the European way of thinking this figure is the incarnation of the spirit of matter (Pels 1998).

The attitude of the people who relate to this fetish reveal how people elaborate the categorical distinctions between objects and persons in their personifying objects and objectifying persons. Another dimension of this figure is the fact that it is an instruments in “rooting” (in Danish *at slå rod*). Legba shows how material objects are powerful tools in manifesting attachment to places, whether it is land, city, nation, people, or house. Legba lives in a house. This god is almost always covered by a roof; he lives in a kind of house and has a shelter built over him. Being a god of the borders, the god represents both differentiation and “rooting”, or anchoring, ”fastening” (in Danish ”*at fæstne*). The fact that he lives in a house adds to the significance of this god as an agent of creating roots and provides part of the inspiration to set out from the role of this fetish figure in aiming to understand the role of the house as a physical materiality in time and space.

To build a house is to create roots. Migrants are often found to create roots or maintain links with the place they came from by building houses that they return to once in a while. At the same time, to build a house is to make some kind of compromise with the future. I shall illustrate that by quotes from interviews with inhabitants of Danish single family houses, and then come back to the inspirational role of Legba at the end.

### **Danish one family houses and social relations**

In the project of which our research is a part, the focus is on single family houses (*parcellhuse*). Even so, the truth is that these houses, many of which look pretty much the same (photo), are the most popular habitations in Denmark. They were the ideal aimed for by many families when the majority of these houses were built between 1955 and 1973 (graph). There was a vertical boom, as the graph shows, and the ”parcel house” has in recent years come back in fashion among young families with small children.

The household is a place defined by specific social relations. The material space of the house reflects the preferred social relations, namely, in the case of the ”parcel house”, two grown ups in one bedroom, and two children, each in their room. This may be a trivial observation, but in a wider comparative light, it is not so self evident. Some of the comparative cases that have informed the way of looking at our data are the Maloca, the Amazonian common house, and the famous Kabyl house of Northern Algeria, the study of which has become one of Bourdieu’s classics. In contrast to these, the one

family house is a close frame around a nuclear family for whom the house is a basis of recreation, but whose members work somewhere else. It is not, as the Maloca, a spatial frame for a whole community, nor is it, as the Kabyl house a frame for a unit of both production and reproduction. It is a frame for a unit of reproduction and relaxation after work, work that takes place elsewhere.

Houses are frames for people's lives to be lived in, but houses and their spaces also shape people. Houses are not only frames *for* people, people are framed *by* houses and the things they harbour, at the same time as people project their own emotions, dreams and hopes onto the things and the spaces that constitute the house. It is the specifics of this dialectic that we aim to identify in the project.

As two drawings by man and wife respectively show, different family members mark internal borders differently. For the man in the house, the garage is big, and at the outer end of it, there is a place for solitary reflection ("fordybelse"). In the drawing by the woman the garage is more integrated into the home as such, and she has written "practicalities" on the drawing. What our collection of these kinds of drawings show, however, is perhaps even more significantly than these gender differences, that family members agree to a very large extent on the zones that are differently marked. Space shapes behaviour, and behaviour shapes space, and what the collection of drawings show is that people *do* differentiate between cosy areas and more public areas (red and green), between areas of mess and more tidy areas (blue and yellow), pretty much without shaking their hands. In terms of the horizontal relations inside the house, the relations between its present dwellers, it is important to have a well structured, ordered, comfortable life in harmony between man, wife and children.

Another thing that came out in these drawings is the fact that there is to a large extent consensus about orderliness and mess, and which zones are marked by what. In general it seems that these houses are quite tidy, or at least that their inhabitants are attentive to the orderliness and tidiness of the house. In a sense, Danish families have no back stages in the Goffman sense of the term. All is to be ready to be shown, and every corner of the house is supposed to be - in principle - "open to the public", even though strangers do not seem to go there there very often. Also, orderliness and safety seem to go together. The house is a significant material symbol of large scale *control* of life, and at

the same time short scale loosing control, so to speak, because it is also a place for relaxation and “being one self”.

As space shapes and is shaped by social relations, in the same vein, space and time as a sense of continuity and as expressed in vertical relations that reach beyond the present house dwellers - both backwards in time and out into the future - come together in the house. While the physical walls limit inhabitants to the nuclear family, the house encompasses more relations than those between the actual house dwellers, even if these be imaginary relations. Some of these go back in time.

An elderly couple live together in a house they have had for more than twenty years. The woman has collected a lot of stuff from her mother and grandmother, while the man still considers his real home - the place that for him is “most home” - the one of his childhood. He is 73 and has lived with his wife in this house for many years. They have raised their three children there, who have all now left home, and they tease each other about their links to the past, links that are manifested through things and heritage for the woman, and through memories of the “real” home for the man.

In order to understand whether and how houses represent continuity in other ways, we also asked people whether it meant anything to them who would take over the house after them. We had a light hypothesis that by asking about heritage, both whether the house itself was inherited or whether it contained things of inheritance, and also whether people thought of it as something to be passed on to their children, we could find out if and how the house signified continuity in some respect. We did not expect modern Danish families, many of whom were only in their thirties and with small children, to think about their house as something to be passed on to the next generation. Neither did we expect many “parcel house” dwellers to have inherited their house from parents or other relatives. However, the vague idea that there is some connection between the house as property and stability and material root-making on the one hand, and senses of continuity on the other, does seem to be confirmed in the interviews, although in more indirect ways.

A woman, A. was asked whether it meant anything to her who took over the house after her and her husband. She answered:

”Both yes and no, because when we are gone, what do we care; but that which we... like built up, well, you might think that it would be nice if it were continued, like in the spirit of ”well, this is where A... lived, Christ, how it looks nowadays!” – It is this thing about reputation you know.”

Asking more specifically about things of inheritance, or things to be passed on to the next generation, most inhabitants say that they do not care much, but some, particularly women, say that they have some things from their grandmother, a vases, cups, a few pieces of jewelry. Significantly, photos are important. A young woman of 28, S. has kept her wedding dress and photos of ancestors in the spare room, which is only used for guest. Her husband does not like “these romantic things” as she says. She says,

“I would like to have a wall with pictures of the whole family. It is important at there are pictures of the family, it means a lot to me. Especially after I have become a mother myself I have found out how important it is to have a good family.”

She mentions these pictures both when asked about the atmosphere, the soul of the house, and when asked if there is anything that should be passed on to the next generation. Although she is young, she is still conscious of kin in a sense which may be seen as representing continuity

Women in particular are the bearers of continuity through things. Much more than looking backwards, however, the answers pointed to the element of security, safety and what I call a compromise with the future that was represented in the house. The safety of children had high priority for those who had children still living in the house, but also for those whose children were grown up and had moved away. The material property and the concrete value it represents in terms of “free value”, was mentioned by several as a security: “If something happens”, as they said, “we will be able to help”.

These brief examples testify to the fact that there are moral values attached to houses and things. The equity value of the house, the ”free value” (*friværdi*) as it is called in Danish, is a much talked about issue these years in Denmark. When asked about the significance of the equity - and in spite of the fact that newspaper articles these years

(Extra Bladet 3. of June 2006) emphasise the fact that some people chose to “spoil themselves” for instance by building a new bath room, a “wellness room” for themselves, the overall picture in the interviews is a different one. This is revealed in the case of the elderly couple with three grown up children, who answered the following:

“We talked about... that the children are actually going to inherit, and when the new cheap loans came out, we decided to give them a Christmas present. So, we took up a new loan of a couple of hundred thousand in the house. We considered it a *forskud* – a down payment - on their inheritance. They were really pleased that Christmas night, they could not believe it...”

The couple tell the story about how they gave their two children each a check of around 12.000 Euro, wrapped up as a huge Christmas present.

There will surely be a lot more to be said about the significance of these different themes related to the house as the results of the project are analyzed more in depth. I have only been able to touch upon a few themes here. I am presenting these pieces of quotes to indicate the broader lines of thought in our work. Before I move on to the attempt to identify certain cultural models that come out in Danish – or perhaps Scandinavian – people’s attitude to their houses, I want to sum up without further argumentation, the general picture that has formed itself upon analysing the material so far.

Safety, and control over the house and its members, at the same time as keeping it the frame for relaxation inside, is predominant features of people’s articulations of the meaning the house has to them. The house is a significant material symbol of large-scale control of life; of responsibility for kin that reaches both back in time to the things of grandparents (sometimes, for women mainly) and forward in time to children and security of the future. It is also on a smaller scale a significant symbol of control as expressed through orderliness and tidiness and collective structuring of zones in the house.

House construction and home decoration are frames around family life. They express, create and maintain relational and moral values. Within the house, the creation and maintenance of boundaries on which the family agree are materially, symbolically

and emotionally important, and the learning of these boundaries and zones within the house are a significant part of the civilizing of children.

### **Cultural model, Scandinavia/Denmark**

The Norwegian anthropologist Marianne Gullestad confirms the idea that Scandinavian notions of home are deeply embedded with moral and emotional sentiments related to safety and continuity. “The image of solid house construction promises safety and stability in a changing world” (Gullestad 200x).<sup>1</sup>

Our material points towards a strong sense of cooperation and consensus among man and wife in what I chose to call *house vocation*, implying all the practices and sentiments related to the house, from selecting and building or rebuilding it to the continuous decoration and redecoration, maintenance and resetting of the value it represents. Although “vocation” may seem a strong term, I think it is justified as a metaphoric image of the moral obligations implied in much of the joint and comprehensive efforts attached to acquiring and maintaining a house and distinguish it from “housework” which designates more limited housekeeping such as cleaning and maintaining order in the traditional sense. Housework was traditionally women’s business, and to some extent still is, although the great majority of women in Denmark work outside the house, but house vocation is precisely a *joint* effort, which – also sustained by Marianne Gullestads findings - is not only that which comes out of marriage, it is also often what keeps the couple together (Gullestad 1993). Women are still to some extent the moral centers of the home, and women are often the most *explicit* bearers of continuity in terms of keeping photos of grandparents etc. and wanting to have photos of the children through their different life stages up on the wall. That does not mean that men do not have these sentiments. In the older generation, at least, the

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<sup>1</sup> Gullestad is interested in the political role and aspects of home construction, and she argues forcefully for a metaphoric link between the boundary setting of the home and that of the nation. In Norway, one of the recent prime ministers has used the metaphor of the house for the nation, (“the Norwegian house”.)

informant who gave his grown up children a large sum of money as a Christmas present, does not seem to be a rare case of a man whose sentiments about home are still related to the home of his childhood. However, the significance of the traditional role of woman in housekeeping has been overrun by the joint house vocation of the couple. Harmony between man and wife is paramount and reflected to a large extent in joint house vocation.

Sometimes, objects are kept in the home, which represent intersubjective relations to imaginary relatives - deceased, former friends, perhaps even former spouses – and this tempted me to come up with a term of the home as an imagined micro community, inspired by Benedict Anderson's famous term for the nation. In the house, things, objects, substitute the media and statistics, which in Anderson's interpretation are some of the elements that keep the nation together. But while listening to the interviews, this hypothesis gradually changed. I think the term *moral community* is more pertinent. First of all, if the signs of such imaginary relations are there at all, they are often hidden and downplayed (excepting the family portraits that some have – and many others would not dream of having), and secondly, most often such symbolic objects are excluded in favor of things that enforce communality, the inward centripetal forces that sustain the nuclear unit.

Basically, as in Gullestads Norway, the single-family house dwellers in Denmark are very home centered. The amount of home decoration television programmes testifies to this (Mecklenburg 2005). Gullestad says, "Often an aesthetically 'nice' home is used to visualize a morally 'good' home" (Gullestad 200x: 115). So, if aesthetics, and we might add tidiness, is equivocated to morality, what is the significance of the fact that Danes have little "back-stage" in their homes? It has to be regarded in connection with the fact that homes are very bounded in the sense that they are not open to strangers. This is somewhat paradoxical. The home has to be nice and aesthetically pleasing, but few people are admitted there. So, the home decoration, the aesthetics is mostly for the family's own sake. For some time, I thought that the fact that bathrooms are now being redecorated, often at very high expenses, could be interpreted in relation to the break down of the distinction between public and private (or that the two are infolded into each other (Raahauge *forthcoming*; Stender 2006)), so that the bathroom as a showpiece could

be seen as a sort of performative privacy (Sjørsløv 2007). But I am not so sure about this interpretation any more. Those who sell the stuff needed to create it, as was confirmed to me in a recent dialogue with producers of toilet seats, call the new bathroom the “wellnessroom”. The decoration and reformation of bathrooms is just as much another family-self-care, and a confirmation of the house vocation harmony and joint efforts at general wellbeing within the house.

Gullestad discovered through interviews with families in a housing area in Bergen that “The materiality of home improvement both symbolizes and is meant to create good sentiments.” (200x:116). For heterosexual couples the division of work is usually highly gendered, she says, but our findings also point to joint projects...

The position of home is on the whole being reinforced, and Gullestad relates it to threats to the nation, modernity, immigration and the need to create boundaries in new ways. The boundary around the home is being tightened, as the boundary around the Danish nation is certainly being tightened.<sup>2</sup>

*I Danmark er jeg født, der har jeg hjemme* – “In Denmark I was born, there my home is” says Hans Christian Andersen in one of the most popular songs of the Danish song treasure. The Danish nation is politically being regarded by the strong right wing forces as one big home (and emphasized by the canonization of cultural heritage, a project initiated by the Ministry of Culture). That does not mean that all house dwellers regard the nation that way, nor that they vote for the Danish People’s Party (*Dansk Folkeparti*), which represents the most extreme version of this idea. But there is a link, as Gullestad has shown in Norway, between the notions of home and the metaphorical ideas about the boundaries of the nation. Both are based on that cultural model of self hood that

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<sup>2</sup> In their endeavours people use metaphors, of language, but also by other means, f.i. the substance of food and, significantly, “food” in the form of sweets. A recent newspaper article said that Danes have a kind of world record in the consumption of sweets, and that this is very much related to the “hygge”, the cosyness aimed for within the home. The metaphorical sweetness of home (Löfgren) is being sustained in a most literal way by the intake of considerable amounts of calories.

places all that is good and sincere, authentic and real in the *inside*. Strong values are attached to “being oneself”, an expression that is linked to the inner, to a downplaying of outer appearance, and pointing towards core values as being metaphorically placed on the inside. In relation to this strong cultural model, the home is the place where one can be oneself (*kan være sig selv*), which means relaxing, not having to put on roles, not pretend etc. But this is also a *moral* thing. As the “inner” of the person is the real, the authentic, the inner of the house as a home also represents the authentic in a moral sense.

As we know from Mary Douglas, in a basic sense, people in general create boundaries, around their bodies, their homes, their nations. Gullestad even contains that the Norwegians are marked by a *passion for boundaries*. While this may not be quite as true for Danish one-family house dwellers, it still leads us back to where we started, to Legba, the god of boundaries, differentiation and – as fetish – the rootedness provided by materiality as such.

### **Back to Legba**

In connection with a renewed anthropological interest in materiality (cf. Miller 2004), the fetish has gained new attention as the example *par excellence* of a phenomenon that transcends categories of persons and objects and of spirit and matter (Pels 1998). Miller’s sums up the role of the material as

”..... objects are important not because they are evident and physically constrain or enable, but often precisely because we do not “see” them. The less we are aware of them, the more powerfully they can determine our expectations by setting the scene and ensuring normative behaviour, without being open to challenge. They determine what takes place to the extent that we are unconscious of their capacity to do so” (Miller 2004:5).

The basis for this kind of thinking about objects was laid by Bourdieu in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), and further back in anthropological history by Marcel Mauss’ insight into the role of the material object of the gift in establishing social relations. Bourdieu showed how people are socialized by way of objects, spaces, relations and

everyday things placed in significant categories; the less tangible was grounded in the more tangible and vice versa, all of this beautifully exemplified in the Kabyl house, which analysed at the same time structural relations between people - men and women – and between people and things, rather than dealing with the creation of home in a more phenomenological sense (cf. Miller 2005:8).

As Bourdieu's work also shows, cultural models differ in their attachment of meaning to materiality. Legba worshippers of Benin no doubt see the material of their anthropomorphized god differently than the house dwellers in Denmark see the physicality of their houses. Yet it may be worth while looking for dimensions that go across cultural models, or at least take inspiration in comparing and elaborating the differences between them. Cultural models shape people's relations to things. The fetish Legba is an anthropomorphized thing, an object-god for which it is difficult to find any direct parallel in the Danish single-family house, since there are no house gods in Danish homes, and the house itself is not a god. However, that does not prevent the house from being an object of constant care and treatment of different kinds. Through the joint efforts I have suggested to term house vocation, decoration, rebuilding and the constant shaping and forming according to the needs of the family, the house is in some ways being dealt with along the same lines as the fetish, namely as something organic and a constant object to human agency. While the agency of human beings create the life of Legba in his house, and the agency of the god is vice-versa considered determining for the agency of the people, house walls and the things within them create the lives of human beings in the Danish single-family house and help them transform these into dwellings, just as the agency of the house inhabitants form and shape the material frames.

People's relationships to their material surroundings is a complex one, and in taking a cross-cultural view, both the complexity and the particularity of the cultural models may stand out more distinctly. The house is not anthropomorphized, and it would be a foreign thought to Danish house dwellers to "feed" things and think of them as having some magical agency of their own. Nonetheless, and to sum up, people anywhere shape their lives and express relations and significances by objectifying. That specific objectification which is in Denmark called the "parcel house" is *not* just - as local self understanding would have it - the most functional self evident frame for normal family

life of one man, one woman and two children. It is a thing whose significance and role as an object of agency merits as much distanced and analytical attention as does the fetish.

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