INTRODUCTION

Owning, making and maintaining an attractive home seems to be increasingly important, at least in the Scandinavian countries. This is evident from the many new magazines on furnishing and home decoration, and from the statistics, which show that Danes today use almost one-third of their income on consumption related to housing (Statistical Yearbook, 1999). Although Le Corbusier once said that a house is a machine to live in, these figures, and our own everyday knowledge, tell us that the house is more than a functional shelter. To its residents it is a home. In this article we want to develop this idea and show what the house as a home signifies to its residents, and how it does so. These questions deal with the social meaning of style, fashion and architecture and with how people relate to the material structure of urban neighbourhoods, houses and furniture.

Modern consumer theory deals with experiences, motivations and reasons why people buy things and why different groups of consumers buy different things. In this sense it is a relevant theoretical approach for our research questions. Most studies of consumption have focused on the communicative aspects of signals and symbols in relation to social groups. Bourdieu, for instance, describes consumption and "good taste" as a way for higher social classes to distinguish themselves from the lower classes (Bourdieu, 1984) and he shows how residential neighbourhoods in this way form part of the symbolic power structure of society (Bourdieu, 1996). In contrast with this descriptive-based class-society analysis we find the post-modern perspective. This argues that societies are developing post- or late-modern structures where institutions from modern society, such as class, family and community, are under dissolution and where the individual therefore has to express and create his or her own individual identity (Beck, 1992). In this identity-creation, consumption of anything from houses to furniture and clothes is central. That discussion on modern versus post-modern consumption theory focuses primarily on the communicative aspects of consumption and thus leaves out the more functional aspects of ordinary consumption. It may also be questioned whether the strong focus on communication through material possession blurs attention on the objects themselves (Miller, 1995).

In this paper our primary interest is to investigate cultural variations in style and architecture in relation to housing. Questions of consumption are introduced and followed by the two main directions of our investigation. One is related to the way signals of social and cultural belonging are sent to the surroundings through choice of house and furnishing. What are the social patterns of these signals and how important are they for families? A main question here is to what extent the modern categories of social classes are
adequate or to what extent consumption patterns have to be understood in more post- or late-modern terms. The other direction of our investigation relates to the meaning that the house and its interior have for its residents. What are the fundamental aspects that constitute a home for different families and how is this related to the signal that the home sends to the surroundings?

In this paper the theoretical background of the project is developed. Consumption theories are then considered more closely and a specific tradition of housing studies and consumption is introduced. The empirical investigation is described and results of analysing the qualitative interviews are presented. The paper then explores how cultural background influences the type of neighbourhood in which different kinds of people settle, then elaborates on the relationship between the interior of the house and the identity of the house owner. Finally, the paper describes how families work to maintain and improve their house and what this means to their feeling of being at home in the house. The concluding section summarizes and considers wider issues concerning modern versus post-modern identity formation.

CONSUMPTION THEORIES AND QUESTIONS OF HOUSE, HOME AND IDENTITY

Consumption theories have developed over the last couple of decades and comprise the theoretical background for this article. In the 1970s, consumption was primarily seen as opposed to and relatively inferior to studies of production, whereas it gained more attention in the 1980s, and in the 1990s Miller even argued that consumption should be understood as the vanguard of history (Miller, 1995). In line with this development Featherstone (1991) distinguished between three phases of consumption studies: consumption as an appendage of production; consumption as a cultural act; and consumption as dreams, images and pleasures.

According to Featherstone (1991) consumption as an appendage to production reigned almost supreme until the early 1980s. Consumption is understood here either in the neo-classical economic sense in which the consumer is seen as a “rational man” endeavouring to maximize personal benefit, or in the critical Marxist tradition which perceives consumers as powerless and alienated from their own needs. Viewing consumption as a cultural act or as communication is the typical sociological or anthropological approach to consumption (for introductions see Campbell, 1995; Miller, 1995). Here the emphasis is on the structural way commodities are used to mark social belonging. The study of Douglas and Isherwood (1980) on consumer goods and Bourdieu’s work (1984) on distinction are the two works that have set the standard for how to understand consumption in this sense. Later studies have, however, focused more directly on the many different ways consumers interact with the consumption items and have shown how different subcultures use the consumption items to show differences and personal resistance to a hegemonic cultural understanding (Miller, 1995). These studies may thus be seen as part of a post-modern or late-modern understanding that depart from description of fixed social groups and fixed meaning attributed to different consumption items. Consumption as dreams, images and pleasures are the third approach to consumption and contains the characteristics of the post-modern consumer as a creative, playful individual who seeks individuality, freedom, pleasure and desires (Featherstone, 1991). Most of the studies presented through these three phases however, focus on what can be called spectacular or conspicuous consumption in the sense that it is visible and suitable for distinction and dreams. It has been argued recently that this is a one-sided view of consumption that ignores the majority of consumption, which is ordinary or routine (Gronow and Warde, 2001; Shove, 2003).

These phases refer to consumer studies as such, but if we look explicitly at consumption research on housing and urban questions, we may find the same line of development. Peter Saunders is one of the writers who most explicitly contributed to housing consumption research and most of his research has a special focus on the meaning of ownership. In the late 1970s he raised the question whether property ownership as a means of classification supports Marxist or Weberian classifications (Saunders, 1978) and later he argued that classifications based on access to means of housing consumption in fact supersede classifications of access to means of production (Saunders, 1984). In accordance with the general developments in consumer studies Saunders later focused on more cultural aspects of housing consumption with questions on the meaning and the constitution of the home (Saunders and Williams, 1988; Saunders, 1989). Saunders has been criticized for his liberalistic approach leading to over-emphasis of the possibilities of a free market. However, he should be credited with bringing questions of consumption into housing and urban studies (Warde, 1990; Miles and Paddison, 1998). More recent studies on housing and consumption have focused on cultural aspects of housing consumption and meanings of home ownership and have shown how normalization of ownership is followed by social stigmatization of tenants (Gurney, 1999a, 1999b). And finally, the parallel of the four phases the post-modern phase of consumer studies can be found in studies of urban gentrification and of shopping malls (Jackson and
Bourdieu distinguishes the concept of habitus to question the understanding of social classes in Bourdieu’s work. Bourdieu’s writing is extensive and our ambition here is not to display all its nuances or describe its developments, but primarily to introduce his three fundamental concepts describing human action, which are field, habitus and capital (Bourdieu, 1998). The concept of field refers to subject-areas with their own logic and with their own valuing of objects. Modern society is divided into a number of fields, each working autonomously, where values and positions cannot be transferred to another field without further ado. As an example the subject area of housing may be viewed as such a field with its questions of what a good house is, how different rooms are used, how it should be furnished, etc.

Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and field are mutually interdependent, as a habitus always exists in relation to a given field. The concept of habitus includes how human beings take in the structures of the field they are in and in this way habitus becomes a practical sense, an acquired system of preferences for how the world should be perceived and divided. Because habitus is built into the body during childhood so to speak, the relationship between agents and the social world becomes based on a pre-conscious and pre-verbal agreement. This in turn means that human action can be understood as something that has a goal without presupposing that the principle behind the action is a conscious seeking for this goal. Constitution of habitus is closely related to the social space where one grows up and by that related to the cultural and economic capital of one’s parents.

The concept of capital can be described with specific reference to Bourdieu’s analysis of taste-preference in France in the 1970s, as he has described it in La Distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu distinguishes between bourgeoisie, petit-bourgeoisie and the working class and he shows how taste-preferences in areas so different as art, food, sport, clothes and furniture depend on social and economic capital and by that on the social position you hold in society. What characterizes the taste of the bourgeoisie is that it demands a high level of either economic or cultural capital to be able to consume the specific products needed to make the bourgeoisie distinct from the lower classes. In contrast, the taste of the working class is characterized by the taste of necessity, and even though many working class families today have better economic conditions, the taste of necessity still acts through their habitus. The taste of the petit-bourgeoisie is marked by the wish to follow the taste of the bourgeoisie, however with minimal amounts of both economic and cultural capital.

With this class description Bourdieu paints a very static picture of western societies, and he has also been criticized for this (Gabriel and Lang, 1995:112). An important question is thus if his more general concepts stand or fall with this class description. Bourdieu’s own answer is that the actual principle of social differentiation will differ with time and space. What is universal and will not differ is that different forms of power and capital will stretch a social space and thus determine different taste preferences (Bourdieu, 1998:4–6).

On the contrary, the late-modern or post-modern approach to societal aspects of consumption focuses on the dissolution of the social classes and how this imposes a constraint on individuals to create their own biography and identity through consumption choices. From very different angles both Beck (1992) and Bauman (1997) supports this understanding and both of them emphasizes that the dissolution of social classes is not equivalent to a more socially equal society. On the contrary, Beck actually writes that today we witness greater inequality than ever. When this is possible at the same time as class identity disappears, it is because all levels of western society in the last couples of decades have witnessed a tremendous growth in wealth which blurs the fact that inequality in the same period has grown even more (Beck, 1992). Where Beck describes these changes as radicalizations of the modern society, and thus calls them late-modern, Bauman talks about a post-modern society. In this article, however, the differences between understandings of late-modernity and post-modernity are not viewed as very important, as the consequences in the two descriptions relating to consumption seem to have a lot in common as opposed to the more modern class-based understanding.

In the description of the differences between modernity and post-modernity Bauman emphasizes that where modernity is characterized by order and
security, individual freedom takes pride of place as value in the post-modern society (Bauman, 1997). It is a freedom that points towards self-realization and pleasure, and post-modern individuals are willing to sacrifice some of their security for this goal. In this hunt for self-realization and pleasure the post-modern individual is helped by a market, which is fundamentally organized for sustaining high levels of unsatisfied needs for incessant new experiences and emotions. Also Bauman focuses on inequalities in the society we are approaching, and according to Bauman it is exactly the ability to consume that is central to one’s place in society. Mary Douglas showed (Douglas, 1966/1970) that every society can be characterized by the borderline between what is dirty and what is clean, and according to Bauman the “dirt” of the post-modern society consists of those who cannot participate in the hunt between competing lifestyles, those that cannot consume. The “flawed consumers” as Bauman calls them are the dirt of the post-modern society, they are the new ostracized.

Bourdieu, however, also describes a group of consumers that are close to the characteristic of the post-modern consumer who seeks individuality, freedom, pleasure and the fulfillment of desires. This group are the trendsetters of the bourgeoisie and the petit-bourgeoisie who typically work in the entertainment and culture industry (Bourdieu, 1984). Because of the constant production of new consumer goods there is a need for this new class of cultural mediators who can transmit knowledge of the new goods through lifestyle magazines on indoor decoration and furnishing. These mediators have then the strange role that on one hand they identify with artists and intellectuals and as such they want to maintain the status of these groups. On the other hand they live from popularizing and spreading this culture and by this the culture is losing its potential for distinction. It is in descriptions of these new classes that Bourdieu’s work has typically been used to develop a post-modern understanding of social differences (Featherstone, 1991). In this way Bourdieu’s work can be used in both modern and post-modern understandings of consumption behaviour.

PROJECT DESIGN AND METHOD

The material used in this paper is part of the project “Urban Welfare”\(^1\). The purpose of Urban Welfare is to draw “maps” of the cultural, architectural, social and environmental city (Jensen and Bech-Danielsen, 1999, Bech-Danielsen et al., 2004). We use the geographical information systems (GIS) on demographic, social, building and resource data and we draw maps in a more figurative sense when we tell stories from everyday life in different parts of the city. The material in this paper reflects qualitative interviews from four residential neighbourhoods on the relation between cultural, architectural, social and environmental aspects of everyday life.

To understand the mechanisms and meanings behind housing consumption, we have focused on the middle and upper classes, those that have more economic consumption choice than the lower classes. As we are interested in the cultural variation related to style and architecture we have worked with neighbourhoods of detached houses that differ in architectural style and in relation to social class. We have chosen four residential neighbourhoods, two high-income neighbourhoods and two middle-income neighbourhoods, and for each of these types of neighbourhood, one neighbourhood with old villas and another with standard houses from the 1960s and 1970s. In each neighbourhood we have carried out three to four interviews with selected households. The selection of households was based on a qualitative visual inspection, selecting those houses with a style and size that best represent the neighbourhood they are located in. This means that we have chosen the big and exclusive houses in the high-income neighbourhoods, and the most typical style in the villa neighbourhoods. In the middle-income standard houses the choice was more random as the houses all look similar. In addition, we have tried to choose young and middle-aged families, giving low priority to senior citizens, though this was judged only from the outside appearance of the house and the garden.

Our procedure was to write to four addressees in each neighbourhood presenting our project and afterwards to telephone and ask them if they wanted to participate. In three of the neighbourhoods all those approached were positive, and agreed to participate, but in the high-income standard-house neighbourhood only one of the four households wanted to participate. So we had to send out more letters, resulting in refusals to participate from five out of eight households in this neighbourhood. In the other neighbourhoods none refused, but some were prevented from participating. So before the interviewing started, we already had indications of a more private and withdrawn attitude in the high-income standard-house neighbourhood compared with the other three neighbourhoods. This could also mean that the interviews conducted in the high-income standard-house neighbourhood might be atypical for this neighbourhood taken as a whole especially regarding questions of privacy and community.

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\(^1\)“Urban Welfare” is a joint research programme between Aalborg University, Danish Building and Urban Research and the Danish Town Planning Institute. For more information on the project see www.urbanwellfare.dk
Altogether the investigation comprises 13 qualitative interviews, four of them from the middle-income villa neighbourhood and three from each of the three other neighbourhoods. Eleven of the interviews comprised families consisting of husband, wife and children of different ages, with no children participating in the interviews. Two interviews were obtained with pensioners with grownup children, one of them an old woman living alone since her husband died. The interviews with pensioners also concerned the time when they bought the house and when they had children at home.

The interviews were conducted with an open-structured interview guide (Kvale, 1996) concerning choice of house and neighbourhood, state of repair, redecoration and furnishing of the house and use and meaning of the home. Furthermore those interviewed were asked to comment on photographs from other types of residential neighbourhoods, including the other three neighbourhoods in the project. The interviews were recorded on tape and afterwards thematically reported and partially transcribed. In most families both man and wife participated, in a few families only the wife. The interviews were conducted by the co-authors, a male and a female researcher, which at least in some of the interviews seemed to have a positive influence on the interview situation, as both the man and the woman in the house had one of the same gender to tell his or her story to.

With this project design we intended to gather some qualitatively different suggestions on what style and architecture means in relation to the home depending on social status and economic capability. It is important to note that those interviewed should not be considered as representatives either of the exact neighbourhood they live in or of the type of neighbourhood they live in.

In the following three sections findings from the interviews will be thematically presented inspired by theory and as well as informed by interviews. The first theme concerns how residential neighbourhoods form part of the symbolic power structure in society as described by Bourdieu. Here the question of identity is related to where to live. The next theme is looking inside the house: what meaning has style and aesthetic for the residents? This theme is about how to create an identity, once you have the house and here we see more post-modern tendencies together with more individual stories of material objects. In the third theme we concentrate on working with the house and how this process may influence the relationship between family and home. All together in these three themes we want to show the big variation in how the houses are turned into homes, and in what the home means to the residents.

IDENTITY AND CHOICE OF WHERE TO LIVE: A CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY OF THE TOWN

Why do people live where they live? Was it the neighbourhood or the house they chose and for what reasons? These were some of the questions we asked. What we looked for, among other things, was if residential neighbourhoods were related to specific local cultures or lifestyle groups, or if the house in other ways formed part of the symbolic power structure of the society in the sense used by Bourdieu. Describing the class structure, Bourdieu operates with economic and cultural capitals and this enlargement of the notion of capital is quite interesting in our perspective. It is obvious that economic capital may influence where one settles down simply by determining what one can afford. Though, as we will show in the following, more cultural aspects may also heavily influence where in the urban space you belong.

Wanting to learn about the specific culture of a local neighbourhood it may be informative to listen to those who feel that they are not a part of the local culture, those who, in one way or another, feel that they have placed themselves in the wrong residential neighbourhood. We term these “the strangers”. We meet the first stranger in the high-income standard-house neighbourhood. It is an academic family who work at the university and when they bought the house, they were actually “warned” by their colleagues: “We who work at the University live in Risskov” they said (Risskov is the high-income neighbourhood with old villas). The family however chose the standard-house neighbourhood because of the forest, which is very close by, and they have never had any regrets. However, when we asked what kind of people live in the neighbourhood, it was clear that they felt they were different from the other residents. As the woman said:

There are these bank cashiers who have done nothing but bookkeeping, which is not easy, I don’t say anything about that. Though they write down every penny and every centimetre should be as it is indicated, and that is incredibly disagreeable. Then there are many engineers who do not worry about little things, although they can be difficult too because there is not a problem that they can’t handle. And then there are the lawyers, (…) but there are not many from the university, (…). There are many here who know what it is all about, who can manage themselves and are very important, and probably have a lot of money.”

The woman obviously distances herself from the other residents in the neighbourhood, because of her education and work, and in spite of their money. To her it is obviously cultural capital that matters and with
respect to this she feels like a stranger in the neighbourhood.

In contrast to this description, the second story of strangers is from a family in the high-income neighbourhood with old villas. Here we met a self-made man who has worked his way up as a businessman. Most other people in this neighbourhood have a long education and especially the wife stressed that she felt “respect for this”, whereas the man felt more comfortable talking with all kinds of people. The family lives in a new villa built in the old style, and already before they moved in their neighbours looked askance at them because of this. From the beginning they said hello to all they met, but nobody returned their greetings. The family told how they now feel at home in the neighbourhood, and now they are invited when the professor or the doctor invites the neighbours, though they still feel different:

Woman: “We travel once a year with our caravan and everything. It is a bit atypical out here”. Man: “Yes, the others find that quite funny”.

Man: “I just started to high-pressure clean our flagstones in the garden. The neighbours think it is dreadful that we clean the flagstones, as they have enough to do cleaning their floors”. Woman: “Yes there we are also a bit different.”

Caravans and high-pressure cleaners (unless it is your gardener who uses it) do not belong in a high-income neighbourhood with old villas, and they may be the visible examples of what a stranger is in a neighbourhood like this. Though the family is very pleased about living in the neighbourhood and now feel accepted, they say that they sometimes miss people who are more like themselves.

These two stories were about how cultural capital may distance some residents of a neighbourhood from others. Other stories are about what reputation a neighbourhood has in the rest of town, and what that mean to its residents. A woman, who in all respects belongs to the high-income neighbourhood with old villas, told how all the residents of this neighbourhood were very conscious that they live in the “best neighbourhood of the city”, and they often mention some of the famous people who live here. She also said that they were aware of it if some people in the neighbourhood displayed their “poor taste”. The woman who told this, at the same time felt part of this attitude and reflected on it:

I have the same pleasure (about living here), although I can also distance myself from it, and look at it from outside. It is a bit crazy.

In contrast to this, the middle-income standard-house neighbourhood suffers from a bad reputation, at least according to some of its residents. One of the families tell how they, when they bought the house, had to defend the neighbourhood and justify to their friends and family why they wanted to live such a place. We asked what their defence was, and the woman answered:

That they should try to see what is inside the house instead of only looking at it from the outside.

This family agreed that the bad reputation of architecture is deserved. They do not think themselves that the houses are too beautiful. They bought the house as a temporary solution, however they have grown to like the social life in the neighbourhood and find this more important than the architecture.

In these ways we see how the house and the residential neighbourhoods form part of the power structure in society. You can signal to others who you are through the neighbourhood and the house you live in, but if you want to be part of the upper classes, you need more than just money to buy an expensive house. You also need the right education to be a part of the social life, and you need the cultural knowledge about style and artefacts. As described by Bourdieu this kind of cultural knowledge is something that the higher social classes are brought up with and has incorporated as an unconscious part of their habitus. In contrast the interviews also show that if you, due to other priorities, choose a house or an neighbourhood that has a lower status than the group you belong to, you have to justify both to yourselves and to others why you have done this, and this choice of house will influence your status.

IDENTITY, HOME-DECORATION AND FURNISHING: WHAT STYLE AND AESTHETICS MEAN TO THE HOUSE OWNER

The previous paragraph deals with how the built environment is a means of communicating power structure in a class society. As introduced earlier, however, late-modern theoreticians suggest that we are approaching a society characterized by the dissolution of class structure and other institutions of modern society. The argument is that with the loss of family, class and local community, the individual in late modernity has to organize, plan and secure his or her own life, and the individual has to stage and create his or her own identity (Beck, 1992). One way of doing this is obviously by means of interior design, as we know from home-decoration magazines. In the following we will outline a few examples of how to create and change identity by means of interior design, however we will also hear other meanings of style, interior design and appearance.

A woman told of an old cupboard that was a very
important piece of furniture to her because, as she said, it was the first piece she bought in her “personal style”. Before she had not thought so much about the style of things, she had just followed the tradition she knew from home, whereas now she was much more conscious of expressing and creating identity through furnishing and interior decorating. In this description we actually hear a women describe her own change from a modern to a post-modern consumer. Interior design is almost entirely the province of women and in our material it looks as if it is more important in the villas than in the standard houses. Some of the women told how they got ideas from magazines, but they stressed that they never “just” copied the ideas of the magazines, but adapted them into their “personal style”. Individualization and expression of the self are keywords here. However, more than being the only one, who has a special look, it is important to be the first to have it. We asked a woman if her friends might borrow her ideas:

Yes, they may. I would be proud of that, it is perfectly okay. However it is great to be the first, that’s for sure.

Not all the families however told this story of conscious identity-creating through interior design. To some of the women keeping the home tidy and clean meant much more than the style of its interior. One woman related how badly she felt if they had visitors at home and everything was not perfectly clean and tidy. They live in a very big and presentable house, but to her this just meant a greater obligation to keep it nice. With the risk of making quantitative conclusions on the basis of qualitative material, it looks as if especially women that originate from the lower social classes express the necessity for a clean and tidy home. This may be understood as the choice of necessity: to keep a nice and tidy home costs only a lot of work, to keep a special style requires both money and knowledge.

To others again neither style nor tidiness was important for the inhabitants. In one family the woman said (and we could see for ourselves) that the house was clearly marked by kids and animals, and that the family wanted it to be this way. We asked her if a house could be too nice and she answered:

Easily, very, very easily. That (a nice house) we would never be happy with, any of us.

The woman describes how she will clean and make the house more tidy, the first time new visitors come to their house. However when people know them, they have to accept that this is their way of living.

Our examples show that some women are very conscious of how the style of the interior decoration reflects and creates their identity, whereas others are not and some of them often change styles, whereas others do not. For those who do not think so much about style the question of cleanliness and tidiness may be very important. Following up on the discussion on modernity versus late-modernity we believe it is easy to find both trends in our material. It is obvious that the more economically fundamental decisions, such as what house to buy, still reflect a more deep-rooted class-power structure, whereas the interior design is much more easily changed, and thus suitable for a more playful attitude to identity. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that these interviews expose heavily gendered differences in relation to the aesthetics of the home. However, the empirical study also shows that too strong a focus on the communicative aspects of house and interior decoration fails to understand that some families may have a more use-oriented approach to their house, also described as ordinary consumption.

These examples of style and aesthetics are primarily related to the home as a whole. Single items in the home may, however, also have special meanings themselves. Birte Bech Jørgensen describes how the material of the home (furniture, etc.) is arranged not only according to function and aesthetics, but reflecting the symbols that are ascribed to different things (Bech Jørgensen, 1994). Symbols could be understood as social status or identity, as described in the previous paragraph, or it could be understood as a much more specific story related to objects. A man told how their Stelton ashtray had a special meaning for him because it had been his grandfather’s and because he works in steel himself. You could buy a similar ashtray all over the world, but this one was special to him. A woman in another family showed us a unique vase, which was very special to her because it was unique and because it was a gift from her husband. Some families have a lot of things that in this way have a special meaning to them. In other families they say that they could just go out and buy all their things again if their house should burn down. It wouldn’t mean a lot to them–apart from small things their children had made and the family photos. Still, in all houses things are also symbols and they were arranged according to this in the house. And these two stories remind us that some of the cultural aspects of materiality are neither specially modern nor post-modern. Family heirlooms and love-tokens have existed in pre-modern societies as well.

The houses may also have a story to tell to their residents. What we heard was that most people think that old villas are more beautiful, have more charm and even have a soul, whereas the newer standard houses are generally viewed as practical but too similar and predictable and some even find them directly unsightly. Some residents of old houses explain that the old house has a history, others say it is because of beautiful

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details or good craftsmanship and natural materials. To
know good material from poor and to appreciate the
history of a house may be analysed as identity-creation
and social communication of status. However in our
view it also has to be seen in a more phenomenological
light, as for instance Merleau-Ponty has described it
(Merleau-Ponty, 1969). Humans do relate directly to
the material world and it means something to them
whatever power structure, signals or personal stories
that are related to this material.

IDENTITY AND CREATING A HOME

Though most people agreed that the old villas were
more beautiful than the newer houses, or that they have
“something” that the new houses do not have, some
chose not to buy an old villa. And the main reason for
this was that there is too much work on the old houses.
Some residents chose not to buy an old villa because of
the maintenance work involved. Others find that this
work is a reason in itself for buying the house. One
woman explained:

One of the reasons why we wanted to move from the
apartment at that time was that we could see that our
sofa had become worn. And that’s what happen
when you sit in it.

In another family the woman described the same
reason, why they bought the house, kindly teasing her
husband:

You couldn’t polish the car more than you already
did.

These men and women explain that they simply want
to have something to do with their hands, though, as we
shall see, it is not just manual work to them. Where
interior decoration primarily was the field of women, it
is mostly men who do the maintenance work and in
families where the man was not a handyman, the
woman apologetically said that actually it was her who
did most of the practical work. The norm seems to be
that man and wife decides together what to do, the
woman taking care of the aesthetic aspects, whereas the
man does the practical work.

It may be discussed whether these heavily gendered
roles indicate a modern rather than a post-modern
perspective, as the modern structures of gender
obviously structure individual behaviour. According
to Beck, the family and the gender roles in late-
modernity are complex. As the family in late-modernity
is no longer taken as given, it is something you
need to work at to avoid the loneliness of living in an
individualized society. The more traditions erode, the
more hope is put on this relationship (Beck, 1992). This
means that the dream of idealized love in the nuclear
family may be even stronger in the late-modern society
than earlier and working to create a home can be seen
as a symbol of this dream. So even though fixed gender
roles relate to the modern society these heavily
gendered roles in creating a home may also be viewed
in a late-modern light as sustaining a family that is
under constant pressure of dissolution.

Marianne Gullestad has described this kind of
common project and its division of labour as a labour
of love (Gullestad, 1992). A man and a woman together
create a home for the family. This may partly
explanation why some people spend so much time
and money on their house and why they are willing to
ignore a low material standard for long periods of time
while they are building. Several of the families
describe how they, while making the home, lived in
the basement under very primitive conditions, for
instance with one common room for the whole family
and no kitchen. However they described this period as a
good time, because they were working on their home.
What these families do is not only to maintain and
decorate a house, it is also or primarily to build a home
and a family.

A man explained it this way:

The only thing I said to her (his wife) was that if we
buy a house, then we should marry (…) the home is
the core of the family, that’s what we gather around.

As a child this man had moved often with his family
and now he wanted to create a stable home for his
children. He had done a lot of work on the house, and
we asked if the house meant more to him because he
had worked on it. He explained:

Yes, this is my house (…) because I made it (…) I
have been in every corner of the house (…) every
flowerbed I have taken part in creating, every blade
of grass I made. Really this is mine.

It would be a great sorrow if this man had to sell his
house, and he happily recounted how his daughter once
asked when he would die, so that she could inherit the
house.

Not all families related this strongly to their house,
and not all wanted to use their entire spare time and
money on house maintenance. One family related that
they live in a cheap and easy-to-maintain house,
because they want to feel free, both free to do other
things in their spare time and economically free to
change job or take an education. The feeling of
freedom in itself can be a part of this as the man
explained:

To be tied to a place, that’s not exactly my style.

However, this does not mean that they do not like it
where they live or that they do not feel at home there.
The feeling of home to them, however, is much more related to some of the things they have in their home and to the neighbours than to the house itself. The woman expressed it like this:

It wouldn't bother me to say goodbye to this house tomorrow, if I could only move the neighbours with me.

A house and a home are not the same. A house is part of the material structure of society, whereas a home is a phenomenon made by its residents. A house is a physical frame for its residents while at the same time the residents mark the house and give it a special meaning by the way they maintain, use and equip it, by their daily activities and through the social relations in the house and in the neighbourhood. These activities and relations are what make a house become a home (Bech Jørgensen, 1994:201). As the interviews showed, people differ. To some families, it was important to put their own physical mark on the house, to others the social relations in the neighbourhood were more important, and to others again it could be the forest nearby that they mostly related to. Some people needed a house to reflect and to create their identity, whereas to others identity was not to be tied to a specific place. “Home” however meant something to them all.

CONCLUSION

Owning, making and maintaining a nice home is an important issue in most families. In this paper we have analysed 13 interviews, with families living in detached houses, concerning why and how the home and its decoration and maintenance is important to them. The analysis has shown that the home is a symbol in several different ways: the house with its style, size and location is an integral part of the power structure in society – urban structure and class structures reflect each other. In this way we have shown that social structures of modern society still heavily influence the area of housing consumption. However moving inside the houses looking at the interior design the interviews revealed a slightly more late-modern story. As class structure and individual identity may not be as fixed anymore, identity-creating through home-decorating has become a way to develop and express identity, especially for women. We have also described how home-decorating, maintenance and improvement may be a symbol of family-building, where the man and woman through this work declare their love for each other and for their children. This symbol of family building, with its clear gendered division of labour, on the one hand seems to belong to the modern structures of society with the family as its core institution. It may however also be viewed as a late-modern struggle to sustain a family that is under constant pressure of dissolution, a dissolution that could result in the loneliness of the individualized society. In this way we have shown that both modern and late-modern structures influence housing consumption.

The material structure of the home, which is the local neighbourhood, the house, the furniture and all other things in the house, thus in different ways are symbols of social life while at the same time fulfilling their practical use. In some families the symbols are very important either as status symbols, as symbols of identity or as symbols of relations within the family, but in other families the daily practical use of the home is the most important. This may be analysed as a difference between conspicuous consumption and ordinary consumption. Furthermore, there are also aspects in the interviews that show how people relate more directly to part of the material structure, for example the building. The way they talk about the soul of old houses indicates that the material in itself is important to them not only as a symbol of social relations or for practical reasons.

The interviews show us that there are many variations in what is considered the most important aspects of a home. To some the feeling of home was attached to the neighbourhood (for instance a forest or a beach), to some it was the social relations of the neighbourhood, to others it was the way they had worked with the house and created their identity through this work, and to others again it could be the things they put into the house. These variations include the fact that all families create a home through the way they handle and use the material structure in their everyday life, and in all families both modern and late-modern understandings of consumption suggest explanations for the way they do it.

The conclusion that the home is very important, though in different ways to different families, and that both modern and late-modern understandings can give explanations for the way people relate to their houses raises some questions for further research. Concerning modern versus late-modern understandings, our material showed that both types of explanation are relevant. The question is however whether this represents a development, in which late-modern trends are slowly replacing modern trends, or whether fundamental cultural structures of society are very stable and that only more superficial phenomena are changing. We cannot, of course, know this today. However, one way of dealing with it now is to look more closely at the types of houses and households studied. Studies of younger households for instance may be more indicative of future trends. Furthermore, the present study raises the question of whether the
trends described are specific for upper and middle-classes in detached houses or whether they represent more general trends as regards the meaning of the home. More broadly, findings of this kind may be important for housing and urban policy in any discussion concerning how and where to build as well as what to build. Finally, comparing different types of households on the question of the importance of the home may give valuable knowledge on the cultural meaning of home. Additionally it could be very interesting to do cross-cultural studies on this issue to investigate to what extent this is primarily a northern phenomenon, for instance by comparing Northern and Southern Europe.

REFERENCES
