

Crafting Nordic Spaces in Scandinavian in the United States¹

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How are Nordic Spaces crafted in the Nordic Countries and in the United States? How do such spaces give shape to cultural heritage? Drawing on theories of materialization and ritual performance, this paper discusses vernacular gifts as a form of materializing relationships, crafting bonds and delimiting boundaries between regions and museums in the wake of migration. By highlighting vernacular gifts from individuals and groups to Scandinavian museums in the United States, I would like to address how gift exchange maps out boundaries, between inside and outside, below and above, distant and close, near and far. The paper will show how gift exchange plays a creative role when Scandinavian museums craft relationships with particular regions, nations, and areas recognized as Scandinavia and *Norden*.

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VERNACULAR GIFTS:

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Nordic culture produces stuff and stuff framed as Nordic produces Nordic culture, also outside the Nordic countries themselves. This stuff comes as a single object and as collections, of families and communities, and as effects of movements that people make through migration from one place to another, and during their way through life. The stuff dealt with in this paper treats the vernacular collection through the lens of gift-giving and migration from the Nordic countries to the United States.

Gift-giving and vernacular heritage

Gift giving is an act that holds the promise of furthering relationships. The idea of reciprocity, in particular, has its own heritage. Within the Nordic realm, the principle for generating relationships through reciprocity appears, for example, in the Kalevala and the Poetic Edda.² In a similar vein, anthropologist Marcel Mauss' analysis of the relationship between gift and community demonstrates that reciprocal gift-giving maintains and furthers moral relationships, builds trust, and fosters solidarity.³ Although Marcel Mauss' analysis of the relationship between gift-exchange as a moral act and the making of community has been questioned, I suggest that his idea can be fruitfully applied to the relationship between cultural institutions and their donors.⁴ His work shows that there is a myriad of reasons for exchanging gifts but that the ultimate reason is to create cement for society. What role does gift-giving play in shaping Nordic spaces in the United States? When thinking through things that are presented as gifts, the ideas conveyed by Mauss shed light on the competitive, as well as the political, aspects that the exchange of gifts seems to entail.⁵ It shows that the act of gift-giving is culture specific as well as creative. It make a difference how the gift is composed, packaged and presented and by whom. Gift-giving is a matter of performance.

Drawing on the works of Richard Schechner, I understand performance as an activity that is framed, highlighted, and displayed. This is the case for gift-giving and gifts. Further, I follow folklorist Richard Bauman in understanding performances as acts that assume responsibility to an audience. Thus there are two kinds of performance at work here: the cultural institution where objects interact with viewers and then the fact that gift-giving is an act which integrates thought and hands-on action.⁶ When studied as performance, gift-giving both reflects and generates social and cultural circumstances beyond what takes place onstage.

Gifts may be small or large and play a role in many situations all over the world. Focus is here on museums and their donors. Many collections that make up the museums of cultural history in the Nordic countries were originally gifts. In Sweden, some of these were expensive treasures from residents of authority and monetary wealth and donated by philanthropists in

² It says: "with weapons and weeds should friends be won, as one can see in themselves, those who give to each other will be friends once they meet half way" (The Poetic Edda: 40).

³ Mauss, Marcel [1959] 1990: *The Gift: Forms and Reason of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Translation: W.D. Halls. London: Routledge. Pp. 39–46.

⁴ Derrida, Jacques 1992: *Given Time*. Translation: Peggy Kamuf. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. p. 14. Miller, Daniel 2001: Alienable Gifts and Inalienable Commodities. In: Fred R. Myers & Annie E. Coombes (eds.), *The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture*, pp. 91–118. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.

⁵ Latour, Bruno 2005: *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: University Press. Henare, Amiria J. M., Holbraad, Martin & Wastell, Sari (red.) (2007). *Thinking through things: theorising artefacts ethnographically*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge

⁶ Schechner, Richard 2006: *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. Second edition. New York & London: Routledge. p. 2. Bauman, Richard 1992. *Performance. Folklore, Cultural Performances and Popular Entertainment*. Ed. Richard Bauman. New York and London: Oxford University Press, p 41-49.

commemoration of their owners. Other gifts, however, had divergent biographies, as reflected by the lists of gifts published in the Nordic museum's annual *Fataburen* until the 1970s. One of the most prominent examples of gift-generated collections is Husgerådskammaren in Stockholm, a repository for official and unofficial gifts to the Swedish royal family. It is interesting that the same gesture of gift giving is chosen to strengthen ties between emigrants and their homeland.

Gift exchange is important to the Scandinavian museums in the United States, non-profit organizations with a mission to preserve and display Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish, Danish and Icelandic culture outside the Nordic countries themselves. Based on gifts from immigrants from Scandinavia, their descendants, and from collectives that remained in the Old Country, these collections highlight the selective process that characterizes heritage making, epitomizing both the chosen particularities and the leftovers. The gifts in the Scandinavian museums in the United States often include objects from several spheres, which make them intercultural performances.⁷ The ways in which individuals and collective selects this material and composes it into collections that are given to Scandinavian museums can be seen as the first aspect of crafting (vernacular) heritage.

Vernacular Gifts

For many years, also within Folklore and Ethnology, the vernacular has meant something handcrafted, with a history diverging from the canonized and formal, made by local resources, and shaped by local knowledge and practices.⁸ When we think through these things and follow them over time, the vernacular is malleable to its content. In the 1960s and '70s some communities in the Midwest dedicated to arts and crafts (e.g. Decorah, IA and Lindsborg, KS) as well as to the settlers' origin, the vernacular took the form woodcarvings and folkcostumes but also faux facades and benevolent symbols from the Old Country. This deliberate manufacturing of heritage created a certain compression of Nordic nostalgia. In the 1970s and 80s billboards with Swedish, Norwegian and Danish flag-colors visible from cars and landmarks such as giant Dala horses, oversized trolls, water towers shaped like coffee pots along with re-assembled timber cottages and windmills from the old country emerged as materializations of ethnic culture.

This type of vernacular did not have a patina of tradition that defined older models of immigrant heritage, such as, for example, the dug-outs, log cabins, saunas and churches built by the first pioneer Scandinavians of the Midwest. Neither did they resemble peasant culture and folk art, which was thought of as vernacular in Scandinavia. Out of this combination of Old World and New World factors emerged a vernacular style that assembled in material form the distinctive cultural and social patterns of the Midwest.

This development in the Midwest was both an effect of and a contribution to social and cultural change in the United States as well as in the Nordic countries. The notion of what could be considered vernacular changed, also theoretically. In defense of what was then referred to as ugly architecture, for example, the authors of *Learning from Las Vegas* argued to include the commercial in the sphere of vernacular.⁹ From now on, the vernacular would

⁷ Schechner, Richard 2006: *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. Second edition. New York & London: Routledge. p. 315.

⁸ Glassie, Henry H, *Vernacular architecture, Material Culture*, Philadelphia, 2000; Jackson, John Brinckerhoff (1994). *A sense of place, a sense of time*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press; Museum of International Folk Art (N.M.) (2004). *Vernacular visionaries: international outsider art*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press.

⁹ Venturi, Robert, Scott Brown, Denise and Steven Izenour [1972] (2007). *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*. Abingdon: Routledge. Cashman, Ray, Tom Mould and Pravina Shukla 2011. Introduction: The Individual and Tradition. In: *The Individual and Tradition: Folkloristic*

include the pre-fabricated, serial produced such as billboards, plastic flowers, pink flamingos and assemblages of ready-mades. Among the immigrants from the Nordic countries and their descendants this type of vernacular combined what may be termed Venturi, Brown and Izenour's loud and pervasive billboards with symbols recognized as Scandinavian in America. It seems as if the terms for the new vernacular created a platform also for the Scandinavians to take seriously the aesthetics of the contemporary and often over-the-top expressions. Emerged did the billboard flags and dalahorses, giant coffee-pots, over-sized trolls, windmills and serial-manufactured Dalahorses and Viking ships etc. For Scandinavian towns in the rural Midwest, however, appropriation of this vernacular may be seen as a having resonance in the open space, which demanded orientation and as a consequence of the complex combination of an expanding highway system in the 1960s and 70s, urbanization, commodification of culture and revenue from car-borne tourists. These changes of the landscape paired with the increased interest in ethnicity in the wake of the Civil Rights movement. It was this complex combination, I believe, that encouraged artists, businesses, and city councils to remove the last Coca-Cola signs, and look to the town settlers in a heritage process that would transform their American small towns into Scandinavian destinations.¹⁰

In recent decades, the vernacular emerging from this tradition has moved into museum institutions, often as gifts and often as items combined into collections.¹¹ It is this particular way of crafting collections for display at a museum, I suggest, that make up the second aspect of the vernacular (heritage) gift. This methodological aspect is prevalent not only in the historical association's museums of these small towns, but also in displays in larger cities. Examples in this paper are drawn from the Nordic Christmas displays at the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis.

Christmas – the Ritually Crafted Nordic Space

While each Scandinavian museum focuses on the heritage of one particular group in their everyday permanent exhibitions, Nordic spaces may emerge at Christmas, as evident at the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis. Since the 1980s, Ewa Rydåker, a volunteer at ASI invites the Nordic neighboring organizations to participate in the annual Christmas exhibition, where representatives from each country decorate a room for a Christmas dinner. Bruce Karstadt, CEO and President at ASI explains this event,

There have always been the Nordic Christmas rooms. But it was certainly in existence 1990 (when he became director of ASI) and then sort of a well-developed tradition even by then. So members of the Finnish, Danish, Norwegian, and Icelandic communities had long been asked, and were helpful to create a Christmas table, a Christmas room... They come from organizations in

Perspectives. Ed. Casham, Mould and Shukla. Indiana University Press. P. 1-26.

¹⁰ Gradén, Lizette 2003: *On Parade: Making Heritage in Lindsborg, Kansas*. Diss. Stockholm: Stockholms Univ.

¹¹ The Vesterheim Museum in Decorah, Iowa, was founded in 1925 and is recognized as the most comprehensive museum in the United States dedicated to a single immigrant group. The Danish Immigrant Museum in Elk Horn, Iowa is one of the more recent, founded in 1983 but opened to the public in 1994. The Nordic Heritage Museum in Seattle was founded in 1979 and Swedish American Museum in Chicago in 1980. The Turnblad Mansion, which became the American Swedish Institute in 1929, is one of the oldest museums and was explicitly a gift to the "Swedish people in Minnesota and their descendants" from newspaper publisher Swan J. Turnblad. The mansion, originally Turnblad's home, was reframed as a domestic space where Swedish culture – literature, arts, crafts and music – could be developed, and later as a public place where first Swedish-American and recently Danish, Norwegian, Icelandic and Finnish culture would be displayed. Thanks to curators and directors at these museums for sharing this information with me via email, meetings, and conversation.

Minnesota, but I'd say probably they're all native. They're all ex-patriots. The Icelandic representatives usually the consul-general and his wife from Iceland... The Finnish representative is usually... might be a Finnish-American, a second-generation. Dane., usually a native Dane... Norwegian might be a second- or third-generation.¹²

The volunteers describe the displays as follows:

The Swedish display

The 2010 Swedish Christmas dinner table is set in honor of the June 19th 2010 wedding of Swedish Crown Princess Victoria and Mr. Daniel Westling. The table centerpiece is inspired by the Royal Wedding banquet table arrangements in Stockholm. White Christmas roses enclose the mirror island, supporting brass Skultuna candelabra and a Rörstrand soup terrine and serving dishes. The items: Rörstrand china, Orrefors Chrystal, Gense silverware, Klässbol's linen are all from the ASI collections.¹³

Danish display

The Danish Christmas display 2010 was designed by a group of Danish and Danish American volunteers living in Minneapolis and demonstrates early modern furniture design in Denmark. Walnut and maple table by Danish master cabinetmaker Thorald Madson, Windsor chair by Ove Boldt and produced by Fritz Hansen in the 1940s, and dining chairs designed by N. O. Moller in the 1950's. The latter remain in production. The cabinet was also made in Denmark in the 1940's of Cuban mahogany with beech trim details. The table is set with Danish blue on white Royal Copenhagen porcelain, with Danish Raadvad stainless utensils. Handmade thread and needle table cloth and crochet napkin holders. The tree is decorated with handmade felted ornaments, and felt and crocheted nissernes are displayed throughout the room. Paintings depict what is described as "typical Danish landscapes; farm scenes and parks".¹⁴

Finnish Display

The Finnish Christmas display is presented by a group of volunteers representing Finnish cultural organizations in Minneapolis. They tell the story about their display which features a table set with fine china, paper napkins and silver cutlery: At Christmas Eve (Jouluaatto), Finland is in the long winter night season known as kaamos when the only light is that reflected from the moon and snow. Santa (joulupukki) and his reindeer live at the tundra in the far north, (Korvatunturi). His visit, anticipated by the children who sit at their own table where a tree is decorated with a gingersnaps (piparkakku), a cookie heart for each child, the traditional Santa in the middle of the dining table is dressed in fur and reindeer skin, not bright red. In anticipation for Santa's arrival, they form a circle and sing, Tonttujen Jouluyö - Santa's Elves Christmas Night. When he arrives, they sing to him, Joulupukki - Santa. They are usually accompanied by a fiddle or Kantele. The tree has been decorated the evening before the Christmas Eve festivities often with decorations made of straw and wood. The dinner is the time for the more special traditional meal, rather than on Christmas day. Many entrees include fresh or smoked ham, casseroles of potatoes, carrots and rutabaga followed by

¹² Interview with Bruce Karstadt, ASI October 2010.

¹³ Display by Ewa Rydåker, with assistance from Margaret Nelson, and ASI curatorial volunteers.

¹⁴ Room designers: Susan Jacobsen, Renee Showalter Hansen, Shelly Nordtorp-Madson and Sarah Maas. Table setting by Dorothy Dahlquist and her daughters Susan Brust, Linda Jeffrey and Corrine Lynch. Felt ornaments from Danish Handmade Design, courtesy Lisbet Franc. Furniture courtesy of Danish Teak Classics, Steve Swanson.

a selection of baked pastries, Christmas tarts, cardamom bread, pepparkakor and chocolates - Joulutortut, pulla, pipparkakku, suklaa. Like the Swedish and Norwegian displays, the Finnish emphasize Christmas food.¹⁵

The Iceland display

The Icelandic Christmas displays is the smallest of the five Nordic Christmas displays and showcases items solely from Iceland which belong to the her family. The designer explains: The ornaments on the Christmas tree are from Iceland and most are handmade. The glassware on the table is from Glerá Berg, an Icelandic glass factory. The ceramics are also from Iceland, and the tablecloths were handmade in Iceland.

Four of the thirteen Jólasveinar (Christmas lads) are represented in the display. The Jólasveinar live in the mountains and start to arrive in town, one a day, thirteen days before Christmas Eve, the last one arriving that morning. They leave little presents for the children in shoes that the children have put on the windowsill the night before. Or, if the children have been naughty, they leave a potato, or some reminder that good behavior is better. Then they start departing for home again on Christmas Day, and the last one departs on Prettándinn.¹⁶

Norwegian display

The Norwegian Christmas room sticks out from the other displays. Presented by one Norwegian family in Minneapolis it enacts materially a domestic story in a public space:

On the table and in the case behind the table you have settings of family treasures. The blue and white dishes were a gift from Ingeborg Roed. She had collected them in flea markets in Paris where she worked as a cook in the 1930's. The purple and white dishes were a wedding present to my parents in 1938 from my mother's aunt who had collected them over many years. They are Rörstrand Lila Spets and always appeared on our family's table for the most festive of events. The Porsgrund Farmer's Rose is perhaps the most recognized pattern for Norwegians i utlandet. The silverware pattern is Th. Martinsen's Vidar. The Christmas tree in our home usually appeared on Christmas Eve, although some years were busy so it arrived a few days early. I always thought the lights were magical. I loved just staring at the tree, wishing and dreaming.

The candle holders were from my mother's childhood home. In her childhood home, the tree was cut fresh from the forest and the candles were always lit. Next to the tree were buckets of water and sand just in case! My mother decorated our tree with paper Easter Lilies, the Jesse Tree symbol for Mary. It was a tradition that her mother had adopted while living in Iowa for three years, before returning to Norway where she met and married my grandfather. In honor of both my mother and her mother, I continue to make the lilies each year. The skis were my father's. During World War II, he served seven parishes in Eidsberg fylke. During the summers, he went from place to place by motorcycle. During the winter, he skied. Check out the bindings! Can you image how many ankles bindings such as those have broken? The cloth on the coffee table was a gift to me from a dear friend many years ago. The image of the Wise Men coming to worship the Christ Child has always fascinated me. I was delighted to be given this piece.

Although shaped for the same purpose at the same time in the year, the five displays that make up the Nordic Christmas rooms at the ASI come forth as different in character and material. Performed as Swedish is the dream of the Royal Christmas, utilizing fine items the

¹⁵ Room designers: Kathleen Laurila and Marlene Banttari for Finnish Cultural Activities, Inc. Dishes, glassware, flatware: FinnStyle, Minneapolis. Accessories: designers.

¹⁶ Display designer: Margrét Kristjánsdóttir Arnar.

volunteers have hand-picked from the ASI museum collection. The Danish display comes forth as an invocation of a middle class Danish Christmas and performance of modernist Danish furniture design but also serve as display window for Danish handicraft and Scandinavian antique stores located in Minneapolis today. The *Nisse*, which is recognized as a pan-nordic icon in the United States and the paintings on the wall; farm scenes and parks provide the links to the Danish peasant past. Overall, it seems like it is dream of the urban modernist Danish Christmas that is performed. As always when an entire county's traditions are to be performed there is always an emphasis on certain selected aspects and time periods. In this case the Finland performed is comprised of the Northern and Eastern parts. Although it is dark in the Nordic countries in December, it is not quite kaamos (*mörkt dygnet runt*) in the western and southern part, as a Finnish friend visiting the museum display has pointed out. To play the Kantele on Christmas Eve invokes *Kalevala* romanticism. The Christmas food varies depending on where in Finland one live, but the rice pudding, baked ham, carrot- potato and turnip casserole, ginger snaps, and Christmas stars (*smördegsbakelser med plommonsylt*) are regarded as typical Finnish Christmas food in Finland also today. The "codfish", is particular to the coast. Decorations of wood and straw are common in Finland and still widely used. Moreover, according to the Finnish folklore in Finland, the Finnish "julgubben" is not particular "jovial" but traditionally solemn and strict. In later years, however, julgubben, in Finland just as the Swedish mischievous "tomte" have been influenced by the American Santa, and re-created as much friendlier. In the materially less lavish but verbally very rich Finnish display at ASI it is the imagined and sensory saturated rural Christmas that is performed, accompanied by some stereotypical Lapland and Karelia references. Like the ethnic theme towns of the Midwest, the exhibition in its part and whole condense values and bring together spaces and aspects that do not necessary co-exist in the Finland itself. The Icelandic and Norwegian stick out from the other displays by highlighting family items from overseas, and in the Norwegian case, items described as family treasures that come with stories of why they are treasures – stories in which gifts and gift-giving play a central role.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, which by no means is finished, I have tried to exemplify in which ways gift-giving from individuals and groups plays a creative role in shaping Nordic spaces in Scandinavian museums in the United States. Produced by individuals and groups and taken together, these Christmas exhibitions are materially dense and rich in symbolism. They may be understood as compressions of Nordic nostalgia in similar ways as the vernacular that developed as part of shaping the ethnic towns in the Midwest from the 1960s and onward. Yet these indoor spaces are different. Lack the oversized, bold vernacular typical to outdoor public displays, the museum displays are domestic. In these Christmas rooms are combined vernacular culture of various times; the handcrafted and antique along with commercial and mass-produced items. In the process of making these displays, the volunteers invest their time, share their stories, and select and literally move things from both private and commercial spheres into the museum space, re-enacting previous gifts in a gift-giving act to the museum.

In the space, once the home of Swan Turnblad, these items are brought together and reframed as Nordic heritage. These spaces include various cultural spheres; the religious, the commercial, the home-spun and combinations of these. As displays, each Christmas room is carefully planned – by volunteer guest curators who together craft and shape their imaginary Norden at Christmas time.

The volunteer teams at ASI work with gestures that are personal and immediate. As such these individuals and groups' making of the Nordic Christmas display can be viewed as gift-exchange – the museum grants the space and the volunteers the visibility and recognition.

This gift-exchange engages several audiences: the volunteers themselves, the museum staff and director, friends and family, and the museum visitors. For their efforts the givers receive a response in return from these audiences, a moment of lingering, and often a comment or a story from management, staff, family and the visitor. It is the reciprocity of the act in which the communicative strength is generated. Moreover, when the volunteers take photos of one another during installation of their exhibitions, they place themselves in the space they have created. Just like people place themselves in front of the cabins at Skansen – it is not only performance. They engage physically with the space. In this sense they have created a convincing displacement. The participants are both enactors of the space and performers in it. They become part of their vernacular gift and heritage in action. Hence, it is not only the content of the collections and exhibitions but also the methods through which heritage is crafted, that creatively invoke these American museums as Scandinavian or Nordic.

By understanding the vernacular gift as a way of materializing transatlantic relationships, I have tried to show how it engages discussions about heritage making as well as museum heritage practice. These multiple performances raise questions about the malleable relationship between object, giver, recipient and the “thing” at stake. In this exchange of gift-giving performances, the selected things are transformed into potential objects of identity through their (inter) acting and building relationships, also between the museums and their donors. It is though a need to reflect over the symbolism of the Vernacular Gift, that it has gone from being what both Henry Glassie and Robert Venturi call vernacular to having entered high-brow institutions in the form of selective collections and handcrafted performances and thereby gained a voice in the politics of heritage.¹⁷

Similar to an actor on stage performing emotions for an audience to perceive, the vernacular gifts performs affection, allegiance, honor, submission and diplomacy and more.¹⁸ These processes of stringing performances from various walks of life, different countries and regions together in the Christmas displays suggest that vernacular gifts and gift-giving could be seen as an expanding form of heritage preservation, exploring how these materializations blur boundaries between domestic and public spaces, forge or split generations, sustain and challenge images of the Nordic countries, re-compose transnational relationships, and open doors to malleable Nordic spaces also outside the Nordic countries themselves. As such gift-giving may be understood as producing vernacular heritage, a process that may simultaneously challenge and recreate the formal and canonized by feeding it novel diversity.

¹⁷ Glassie, Henry H, *Vernacular architecture, Material Culture*, Philadelphia, 2000; Venturi, Robert, Scott Brown, Denise and Steven Izenour [1972] (2007). *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*. Abingdon: Routledge; cf. Jackson, John Brinckerhoff (1994). *A sense of place, a sense of time*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press

¹⁸ Schechner, Richard 2006: *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. Second edition. New York & London: Routledge. p. 57.