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From obscurity to heritage: Canonisation of the Nordic Wooden Town

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ABSTRACT

Art historian Juan Pablo Bonta has presented a nine-step model for analysing how the interpretation of architectural oeuvres becomes canonised. We suggest that in terms of the built heritage, canonisation and heritagisation are essentially the same process, so Bonta's model can be used for analysing heritagisation processes. This article testifies to this assumption by examining how the interpretation of historic Nordic wooden towns became stabilised in Finland. The concept was introduced in the 1960s to describe the Nordic urban heritage that was threatened by massive town development projects. The identification of the heritage category enabled the preservation of some remaining wooden districts. Examining this process allows us to discuss the role of expertise in the building preservation. In the case of wooden towns, experts' early recognition was a crucial precondition for the preservation of the heritage, which enabled novel generations to form a living relationship with it. Seen through the experts' writings, the heritagisation process of the wooden towns also reflect the expanding scope of the built heritage discipline. Based on our findings, the canonisation model is applicable not only to the individual oevres, as Bonta addresses, but also to broader built environments and, more conceptually, to heritage categories.

Introduction

Heritage preservation is an attempt to preserve, conserve and protect buildings, objects and environments of historical or cultural significance. An official status as a 'significant' heritage object is usually a precondition for such preservation. The significance is typically defined or authorised by heritage experts, whose role in this process has been widely discussed and criticised in the heritage studies literature (see for example Smith 2006 or Hølleland and Skrede 2019). In this paper, we analyse how the heritage status is construed in the expert discourse. We approach the expert-driven heritagisation as a form of canonisation. In the 1970s, art historian Juan Pablo Bonta (1975, 1979) introduced a step-by-step model on how the reception of significant architectural oeuvres becomes canonised. The nine steps in Bonta's model allow to examine heritagisation in an analytical way. There have been other attempts to define how the process proceeds, as discussed later in this article. However, we find merit in Bonta's model in how it identifies the earliest steps of the process.

We testify to the applicability of the model to heritage by using it to examine how the heritage status of the 'Nordic Wooden Town' was established in the scholarly literature and how its interpretation developed in Finland. Analysing developments over a hundred years, we identify how the concept of the wooden town emerged from the expert discourse, how the experts recognised and solidified the heritage category, how the definitions of this category influenced the preservation of individual sites,

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how the heritage status was received by the wider society, and how changed interests eventually led to reinterpretations. Our findings propose that the accumulation of experts' attention on a specific heritage object, site or category plays a major role in how heritage becomes recognised by the wider society. This is influenced by the authorised nature of the heritage discourse (Smith 2006), which follows from the specialised division of labour and the significant role of specialists' work in modern societies in general (Hølleland and Skrede 2019). Heritagisation can also start from within local communities or other groups without professionals being the first party to identify the heritage as heritage. We are, however, inclined to believe that it may be difficult for such an interpretation to break into wider consciousness and acceptance, in case this is sought after, without the expert recognition. For the wooden towns for one, the timely expert intervention was crucial for some of them surviving from demolition, which enabled more and more generations to establish living relationships with the heritage. The canonised definition of heritage is also critical, as it usually directly impacts how the heritage is managed (see for example Jones and Holden 2008, 15). Tracing the meaning-making process in detail can help elaborate the socio-cultural premises that underlie the one interpretation that eventually acquired a dominant position. This in turn can reveal whether those premises – and the canonised interpretation – are still valid today, or whether there is room for re-evaluation.

Heritagisation as Canonisation

Today, heritage is seen as a socio-cultural construct and a product of the present. It is increasingly associated with a process-like nature (see for example Harvey 2001; Smith 2006; Harrison 2013a, 2013b), often referred to with the term 'heritagisation' (Sánchez-Carretero 2015, 11). Heritagisation encompasses the production of the cultural meanings of the heritage (Ronström 2008, 7; Birkeland 2017, 61; Coomans 2018, 130) and the framing and explaining the fragments of history to the contemporary audience (Immonen 2012, 144). It turns objects, places or practices into cultural heritage through for example selection, naming and evaluation (Beatriz and Beltran 2016; Sjöholm 2016, 26) – activities that are often conducted or directed by heritage experts. Active heritage management operations that homogenise or amplify heritage with display or beautification can also be seen as a form of heritagisation (Walsh [1992] 2011, 135–139; Jones 2010).

When heritage becomes heritage in the hands of heritage specialists, the process can be likened to canonisation. In art history, canonisation refers to artworks becoming a part of art history's canon. In art historian Juan Pablo Bonta's (1975, 1979) model, the formation of a canon is based on the accumulation of experts' recognition, which takes place in the literary scholarly discourse. Due to the authorised nature of the heritage discourse (Smith 2006), we argue that these premises largely apply to heritage, too. Bonta intended the model, a text analysis framework, primarily for tracing how the consensus about a new piece of architecture is formed in the scholars' writings. He used Mies van der Rohe's functionalist Barcelona Pavilion (Figure 1) as his case study. However, Bonta's own reference to interpreting 'an old form from a new angle, as if it were new' (Bonta 1975, 66) suggests to us that the interpretation processes of old buildings, that is, built heritage, can be similar to those of new oeuvres. This inspired us to relate Bonta's model with heritagisation.

There have been other attempts to define the phases of heritagisation, or 'patrimonialisation' in the Francophone literature (Davallon 2014; for an overview in English see Morisset 2010, 55), or in terms of tourist attractions, the steps of 'sacralisation' (MacCannell [1976] 1999). Dean MacCannell's ([1976] 1999) process of 'tourist sight sacralisation' includes five phases: 1) naming; 2) framing and elevation; 3) enshrinement; 4) mechanical reproduction; and 5) social reproduction. Jean Davallon (2014), in turn, proposed something similar to explain heritagisation: 1) recognition of value of the object; 2) production of knowledge about the object; 3) (official) declaration of the heritage status; 4) public access to the site or object; and 5) transmission of the object to the future generations.
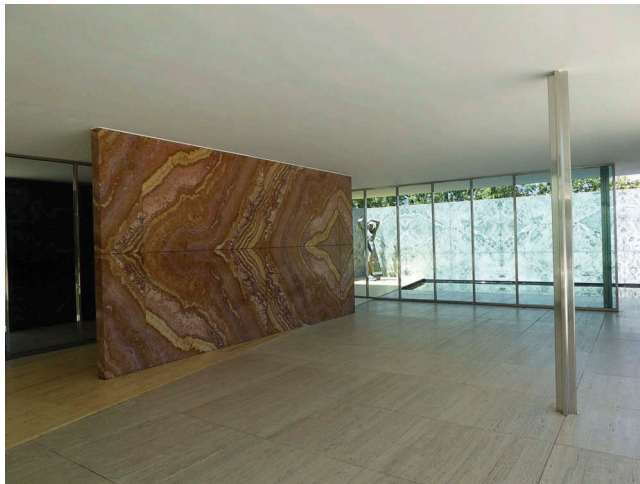
Figure 1. J.P. Bonta used Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona pavilion as a platform for studying the canonisation process. The building was built to act as the German Pavilion for the 1929 International Exposition in Barcelona, Spain. It was torn down less than a year after, but it continued its life in art historians' writings. The pavilion was eventually interpreted as one of the key works of Modernism, and it was reconstructed in the mid-1980s. Photograph by Ardfern, downloaded from Wikimedia Commons and published under the license CC BY 3.0.

All the three frameworks are premised on the idea that there is usually a certain chronology in how the interpretation develops. What we think MacCannell's ([1976] 1999) and Davallon's (2014) models omit are first, the analysis of the steps preceding the 'official' recognition of the heritage, and second, the developments after the canonisation that may lead to replacing old interpretations with new ones. Renewing interpretations may be considered as re-heritagisation and, in some cases, de-heritagisation – phenomena recognised by some authors in the heritage discipline (e.g. Bernbeck 2013; Sjöholm 2016), yet somewhat scarcely investigated. Since heritagisation takes place in the present, it is as much a result of today as it is of the past (Coomans 2018, 130). So, when conceptions change in the present, this change is reflected to the interpretations of the past, which explains why previously unacknowledged objects become recognised as heritage or existing heritage becomes viewed from previously overlooked angles. In terms of built heritage, the scope of preservation has been continuously expanding, meaning that more and more previously overlooked buildings, building types, environments and heritage categories have become recognised as heritage.

Bonta's model

Bonta first presented his canonisation model in the 1975 essay 'An anatomy of architectural interpretation', which he extended into a lengthier book 'Architecture and its interpretation' (1979). The phases of the process he outlines are essentially the same in both books, although slightly differently named and arranged:

(1) **'Blindness'**, characterised by a general ignorance towards the value of the object, apart for a few pioneers recognising its significance. In the case of wooden towns this phase lasted until the mid-1960s.

(2) **'Pre-canonical responses'**, that is individual, different but equal interpretations none of which outweigh the others in authority. The future canonical interpretation may already be out among them, as it was with wooden towns for over sixty years, but remained far from unchallenged. Neither this phase nor the previous one is recognised by MacCannell ([1976] 1999) or Davallon (2014).

(3) **'Canonical interpretation'**, a consensus about the object of study. Interpreters may use different wording but the content of the interpretation remains essentially the same, making it collective rather than individual. This corresponds partly to MacCannell's ([1976] 1999) 'naming' and Davallon's (2014) 'recognition'.

(4) **'Authoritative interpretation'**, where the prestige of a recognised authority affirms the 'correctness' of the interpretation. The wooden towns' status was asserted definitively when a representative example was included in the UNESCO World heritage.

(5) **'Classification'**, where the interpreted object is put into the context with other similar objects. For the wooden towns, this took place in a cross-national research project.

(6) **'Dissemination'**, where the canonical interpretation breaks free from the academic circles into the consciousness of the general public, which strengthens it further. This corresponds to MacCannell's ([1976] 1999) 'social reproduction' and Davallon's (2014) 'public access' and 'transmission', making this phase the last one they recognise.

(7) **'Silence or oblivion'**, as the reiteration of the same interpretation starts to seem banal and uninteresting. Consequently, the oeuvre egresses active discourse, which focuses instead on other items.

(8) **'Reinterpretation'**, which restarts the interpretation process and which can be likened to pre-canonical interpretation. Reinterpretations bring the object back into focus and emerge as a result of changed cultural needs and interests, which is reflected to the research into wooden towns, too. The phase could also result in de-heritagisation or re-heritagisation (cf. Bernbeck 2013; Sjöholm 2016).

(9) **'Text analysis'**, an interest in the formation of the canon that can help identify changes in the meanings of objects and the foundations these interpretations were laid on. MacCannell ([1976] 1999), Bonta (1975, 1979), Davallon (2014) and our work represent this step.

Some interpretations may be associated with more than one step because the phases influence one another (Bonta 1975, 66–9). For example, the content of given pre-canonical interpretations, certain authoritative interpretations and the canonical interpretation may be identical. Despite the general chronology, more than one phase may occur simultaneously amongst different sub-groups of people (Bonta 1975, 72). The understanding of the significance of the object can vary between the experts and the general public, the experts of different but related disciplines, or between different schools of thought within one discipline.

Case: Finnish wooden towns

Timber was the principal building material in the Nordic countries until the early twentieth century. The concept of the 'Nordic Wooden Town' was introduced in the 1960s to describe the historical centers of small and uniform Nordic towns that were threatened by massive town development processes (Figure 2). A great deal of this wooden heritage was indeed replaced with concrete buildings. However, the remaining Nordic wooden towns are now recognised as globally unique cultural-historical monuments, the most representative of which (Figure 3) are included in the UNESCO World Heritage List (Vahtikari 2007, 107–8). The Finnish heritage conservation discipline was developed hand in hand with the recognition and preservation of wooden towns (Mattinen 1985, 9), which makes the 'wooden town' one of the most significant endogenous heritage concepts in Fennoscandia.

The material for the case study consists of a body of professional literature on the wooden towns, such as representative books, articles and reports from different decades. We study the texts closely to see which qualities of the towns were highlighted at different times. We also look into how the texts link together and how they contribute on one hand, to the heritagisation of individual towns and on the other hand, to the stabilisation of the heritage concept of the 'wooden town' in general.

Figure 2. The wooden district of Amuri (Tampere, Finland) under demolition in 1970. Photograph by Ensio Kauppila / Vapriikki Photo Archives.

Figure 3. Wooden town of Old Rauma is enlisted amongst the World Heritage by UNESCO. © Photograph: Olli-Paavo Koponen.

Canonisation of the wooden town

Blindness: wooden towns prior to the concept

There was no need for the concept of a 'wooden town' prior to the mid-twentieth century because more or less all Finnish buildings were wooden (Kärki 1999, 105; Mattinen 1985, 9). Building in stone and bricks was supposedly pursued throughout the centuries, but it was never actualised in a large scale. City fires were frequent and destructive, so the lack of fire safety was the principal reason for disdaining wooden buildings (Suikkari 2007, 42). The personal preferences of rulers, Swedish kings, also confirmed the status of stone as the most desirable building material (Gardberg

1964, 209). Nevertheless, ordinary people could usually only afford to build out of timber, so stone and brick buildings remained rare, but wooden houses were sometimes made to mimic their architecture (Koponen 2006, 35).

In the late nineteenth century, architects begun to investigate medieval churches, castles and other stone and brick buildings conceived as national monuments (Helander 1997, 176–7). For decades, the focus of preservation remained on individual buildings. The first to use the term 'wooden town' in Finnish ('*puukaupunki*') may have been the architect Juhani Vikstedt in his 1926 book on Finnish urban history. However, his use of the term was not systematic or analytical. Vikstedt's (1926, 49, 61) interpretations of given towns and neighbourhoods as 'wooden towns' remained unique for a long time. It was no wonder: wooden towns were after all ubiquitous. Blindness can occur in the form of silence (Bonta 1975, 60), and it did. In a less global world, where most interactions between nations took place with neighbouring countries, the worldwide unique- ness of the Nordic wooden towns was probably not particularly apparent. The first to recognise the significance of Finnish historic towns were the painters of the late nineteenth century (Vahtikari 2007, 101). For example, artist Louis Sparre wrote the Swedish-language pamphlet 'Det Gamla Borgå' ([1898] 1979) advocating the preservation of the old town of Porvoo.

Up until the 1960s, however, only singular prestigious buildings were seen as potential conserva- tion objects, and ordinary wooden houses were certainly not considered as worthy of preservation (Mattinen 1985, 56). Bonta (1975, 58) wrote: 'when a work of architecture … departs from culturally established patterns, it is not enough to see it in order to understand it.' Equally, when a work of architecture has yet to turn into heritage, when it is part of the mundane built environment, its value is hard to recognise. As heritage, wooden towns did depart from 'culturally established patterns' of what was understood with heritage at that time, that is singular monumental buildings. Smith (2006) has defined this traditional, authorised understanding of heritage, delving particularly into the tension between material and intangible heritage. However, even though the wooden towns were material and as such, a conventional form of potential heritage, 'a process of collective clarification' and a verbalisation of their meaning (Bonta 1975, 58) had to take place before their heritage value could be appreciated.

Pre-canonical responses and class identification

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the urban regulation that had for centuries been adapted to the traditional small-scale architecture was renewed to permit manifold building volumes in the hope of urban development (Mattinen 1985, 22). WWII delayed the expected urbanisation, so the wooden towns remained as mostly undisturbed until the 1950s (Mattinen 1985, 122; Koponen 2006, 35). In the 1960s, a mass migration from the countryside launched housing deficits in towns, so a motive to implement the plans emerged. Simultaneously, increasing prosperity raised the number of private cars and households' expectations on the comfort of housing. So, new developments were also initiated on the outskirts of towns and the retail trade sector sought to traffic junctions. Residents and shops were drained out of wooden towns. (Mattinen 1985, 121; Hankonen 1994). Blocks of flats were expected to replace the wooden houses promptly, so they were no longer maintained. Even the formerly high-end houses were rented temporarily to low-income residents. (Mattinen 1985, 118).

When the townscape started to change, the contrast between the traditional, low-rise wooden buildings and the emerging, modern high-rise concrete city became perceivable, and the use of the concept 'wooden town' started to make sense (Figure 2). If until then the society had esteemed mineral construction materials, wood became now appreciated for the first time in history for its own qualities: as a generator of traditional townscape, architecture and building methods (El Harouny 2008, 24). The destruction of wooden towns was already underway when museum officials recognised their potential heritage value (Mattinen 1985, 122). Because of the prospect that the wooden towns be obliterated completely, the Finnish Heritage Agency launched a documentation

programme in the early 1960s. Remarkably, the Agency did not expect the buildings to be preserved; the interest in them was primarily art historical. (Mattinen 1985, 153–54).

The paradigm shift occurred over the 1960s in the wake of a growing international movement for the preservation of urban heritage. Preservation was gradually taken on the agenda of urban planning, with an increasing interest in complete streetscapes and townscapes (ICOMOS 1964; Jokilehto [1999] 2011, 289–92). Up until the 1970s, practical conservation was still highly discriminatory: only a handful of the most prestigious buildings were kept, with an emphasis on public buildings. Stylistic representativeness and purity were seen as important factors (Mattinen 1985, 14). Later it became evident that the evaluation of the historical buildings was 'too aesthetically biased' (Kärki 1993, 71), another feature characteristic to the authorised heritage discourse (Smith 2006, 3).

The aspect of loss may amplify the significance of heritage (Holtorf 2015). Indeed, the Nordic wooden towns were assigned with the meaning of heritage in the clearances that started in the 1960s, when the extent of the potential loss became apparent to the heritage experts. The creation of the 'wooden town' concept was an essential part of their recognition; without having a name for a phenomenon, it is almost impossible to promote it (El Harouny 2008, 40). The exact emergence of the term 'wooden town' has been dated to 1964 (Koponen 2006, 35). Then, the Swedo-Finnish historian C.J. Gardberg (1964) published the article 'Städer i Trä' ('Towns in wood') in the Swedish Review of Architecture, in which he discussed the characteristics of Swedish and Finnish wooden towns. The same year, the term was used for the first time in its emerging meaning in Finnish by the young art historian Henrik Lilius (1964). Three years later, the art historian Sten Rentzhog (1967) published a book called 'Stad i Trä' ('Town in wood') in Sweden. In 1969, the question of the wooden towns gathered the heritage conservationists across the Nordic countries together in order to create the 'Nordic Wooden Town' project. The start of the project defines the emergence of the wooden town as a heritage category, since the characteristics and members of the category were defined for the first time. In the beginning of the project, a fair deal of wooden towns still existed but there were virtually no plans to preserve them (Mattinen 1985, 118). As a result, several Nordic wooden towns got thoroughly investigated, their preservation was actively lobbied, and dozens of reports were published (Mattinen 1985, 13; Koponen 2006, 36). The first urban plans to actually preserve some of the more mundane wooden building stock were drawn at the end of the 1960s (Mattinen 1985, 27). So, while some of the wooden towns were already in the classification phase (Step 5 of the model) the canonisation process of the wider concept was only in the pre-canonical phase (Step 2).

The preservation challenge of wooden towns that was identified tentatively in the 1960s was taken into a wider discussion in the 1970s. In 1972, the Finnish Architectural Review published a special issue on wooden towns. It was undoubtedly a result of 'Nordic Wooden Town' project, summarising its themes and presenting many of its 29 reports published so far. The magazine reached a very different audience than the project. Most of the active members of the project were young radicals, whereas the Architectural Review, published since 1903, represented authority and prestige. The magazine's decision to dedicate a whole issue for one topic can be considered as an 'authoritative interpretation'. Many who advocated for the preservation of the wooden towns, such as the young architectural scholar Vilhelm Helander (1972, 34–5), did it with social arguments. The criticism of gentrification – a topical debate across Europe – was an important argument for Helander and his colleague Mikael Sundman (Helander and Sundman 1970) for protesting against the demolition of historical districts. Though, by the 1970s, the kind of social structures that the wooden towns originally emerged from no longer existed, because Finland had developed into a Nordic welfare state in the course of the twentieth century. Free-of-charge education and other social security benefits enabled social migration for a growing number of Finns in an unforeseen way, giving birth to new middle classes (Finnish Heritage Agency 2019). So, the low-income period was a relatively short phase in the history of the wooden towns, which were characteristically mixed throughout their earlier history.

In the meanwhile, many wooden towns were demolished and rebuilt based on modern town planning ideas. Wooden neighbourhoods were associated with an unpleasantly high housing density and an unsatisfactory standard of equipment. Fire safety, too, was still seen as a reason to disdain them.

(Helander 1972, 31). It is striking that the significant advances in fire fighting over a century and the substitution of electricity for fire in lighting, heating and cooking had had no impact on this argument. These should have been the kind of changes in issues 'worthy of concern' (Bonta 1975, 65) that would have been a valid reason for abandoning the argument. Therefore, contrasting houses from mineral materials to 'wooden shanties' regardless of the actual qualities of the buildings seems to represent a prolonged prejudice, that is, a canonised cultural construct. It resembles what Bonta (1975, 71) titled as a 'verbal tradition': a process where the relation between the object and the interpretation is eventually distorted.

Nevertheless, the Nordic Wooden Town project attracted a lot of publicity and prestige, and influenced the preservation of several wooden towns (Mattinen 1985, 80). The preservation was still not directed at the buildings but rather at the spirit and scale of the wooden town. The goal was to preserve the underlying town structure. A gradual renewal was sought after (Figure 4) in order to ensure a due process for the current residents. The dimensions of the existing buildings were examined to formulate suitable principles for the architecture of new buildings that were to replace the old ones. (Mattinen 1985, 107–15). The earliest urban plan aiming at the extensive preservation of wooden buildings (more than 200 of them) was the one drawn for Porvoo in 1974 (Mattinen 1985, 27).

The discourse of the 1960s and the 1970s was clearly pre-canonical. The heritage objects (wooden towns) had been recognised, and in describing their traits, the earliest authors focused on the 'characteristics ... which determine meaning' (Bonta 1975, 66), not yet the meaning itself. Then, the discourse shifted to how and through which characteristics the significance is attached to them: the scale of the towns, the population that inhabits them, or the authentic material evidence. There can also be negative responses in this phase (Bonta 1975, 60). In the context of heritagisation, this means denying the heritage value of the object or site. In wooden towns, the negative responses
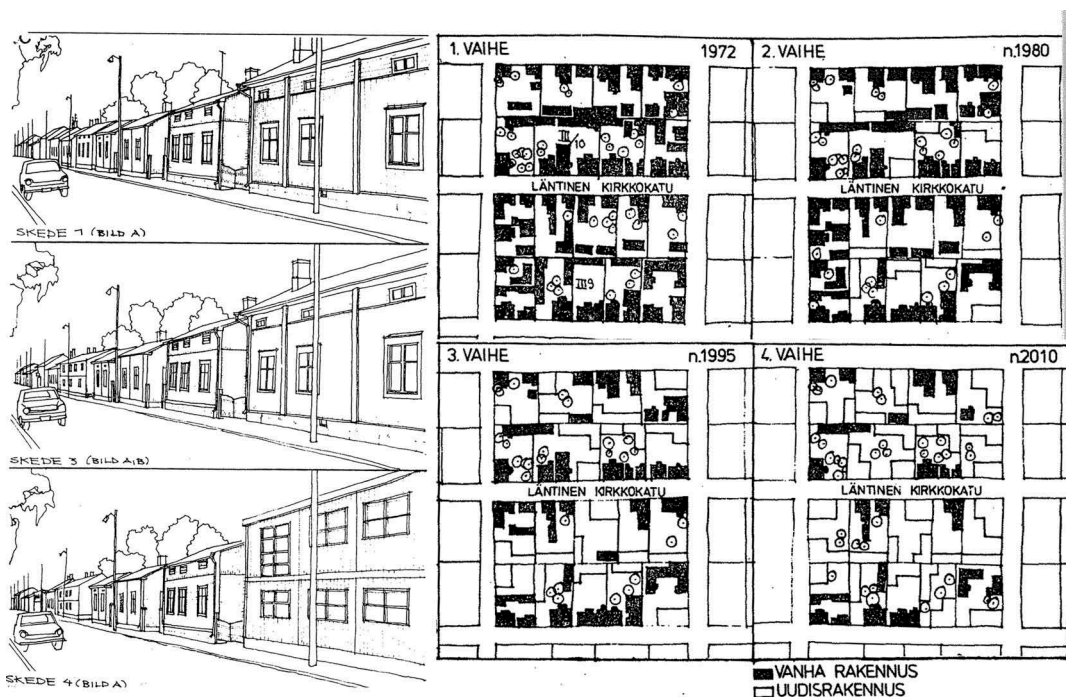
Figure 4. Drawings display the idea of a 'slow renovation' that was favoured by the preservationists. The building stock was expected to renew, but slowly, over several decades, and the new buildings were supposed to respect the traditional scale of the wooden town. The drawings were created as a part of a study assignment in Helsinki University of Technology, and they were published in Finnish Architectural Review 6/1972 p. 48. © Riitta Jalkanen, Jukka Kullberg, Leena Lukkarinen, Taru Tyynilä, Lauri Törhönen.

largely took the form of action: many towns were almost completely demolished. For those that escaped the demolition, the implications of the pre-canonical theoretical discussion actuated in urban planning. In the 1960s, planning aimed at preserving the small urban scale, not the actual buildings. In the 1970s, the focus shifted to keeping at least some buildings from demolition.

The class of the Nordic wooden town was identified in the literature very early. Gardberg (1964) discussed both Finnish and Swedish wooden towns, to which Rentzhog (1967) included Norway. The Nordic urban history was for the first time recognised as a special expression of the European urban history. The categorisation also denoted that whatever could be done in favour of wooden towns' conservation in, say, Sweden, could perhaps be repeatable in the Finnish or Norwegian contexts (cf. Bonta 1975, 69). Nevertheless, areas that are geographically and culturally comparable to the Nordic countries, such as the Baltic countries – then part of the USSR – were excluded from this clustering. Notably, the Baltic wooden towns (Figure 5) still lack a similar status as the Nordic wooden towns.

Authoritative and canonical interpretations

In 1980, the first Nordic wooden town, Røros in Norway, was enlisted amongst UNESCO World Heritage (UNESCO n.d.-a), a listing of the highest authority. The Nordic Wooden Town project was culminated in this nomination: the significance of the Nordic urban heritage was officially recognised internationally. In Finland, an inventory of nationally significant heritage sites, which included many wooden towns, was completed in 1979, but the listing had no immediate effect on their preservation (Mattinen 1985, 24).

By 1985, the wooden town had become established as a heritage concept, though. This is shown by architect Maire Mattinen's (1985, 9) work, which takes a historical perspective on the wooden towns' preservation. Also in 1985, art historian Henrik Lilius (1985) published a book about the history of the Finnish wooden towns. Lilius defined the concept based on the towns' historical origins as agrarian trading towns and ignored the wooden towns of the industrial era. Focusing on development between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, he looked into the planning history and the typology of the towns. Despite the book's elaborate scope, its role was different from those targeted at the professional audience. The fact that the book was trilingual and distributed by the largest bookstore in Finland enabled the concept of 'wooden town' to become more widely known and discussed.

So, the scholarly definition of the wooden towns and their significance started become entrenched and distributed to a wider audience. This represents a turn from authoritative inter-pretations towards a canonised interpretation. Despite the emerging establishment of the canon, the towns themselves were still far from safe. Construction companies, which had acquired plots with old wooden houses in hopes of building high-rise buildings on them, demolished the houses promptly if the idea of preservation was introduced. Many involved buildings also burned down,

Figure 5. Baltic wooden towns resemble the Nordic ones. Aizpute, Latvia. © Photograph: Signe Pucena.

and it is debatable if the incidents were accidental. Such episodes continued at least up until the 1990s. (Mattinen 1985, 17; 58; 82; Ronkainen 1997). This battle over the wooden towns only strengthened their status as heritage worth of preservation. As the valuation of the wooden towns increased, the middle class opted to return to them (Mansikka 1995, 91). It should be noted, though, that the wooden towns' current degree of gentrification varies significantly. The distance to growth centres is a major determinant for the housing prices.

Even if the buildings were becoming increasingly protected in preservation orders, their material authenticity and integrity were seriously threatened by inept renovation. The new middle-class owners had the motivation and the financial resources to have the work done (Mansikka 1995, 94), but the aims and means of renovation (for instance with regard to energy conservation) were often incompatible with the historical values and characteristics of the buildings. Builders no longer mastered the traditional techniques but resorted to the materials and technologies of industrialised construction. So, it was feared that the recently salvaged wooden towns would be devastated before the essentials of traditional woodworking could be recollected. The same problem was seen to apply to infill building. In the mid-1980s, both the practical conservation and the infill construction were still seen as future challenges. (Mattinen 1985, 120, 122). The work begun with the development of principles for infill construction, as this task already had a background in the principles drafted for replacement construction in the 1960s. A focal Swedish publication, 'New Houses in an Old Town' ('Nya hus i en gammal stad'), was translated to Finnish in the 1980s (Balgård 1982). Remarkably, the Finnish title was amended to incorporate the term 'wooden town', not occurring in the original title. In the wooden towns, the architects Tore Tallqvist (1983), later a professor of architectural history, and Elmar Badermann (1990) carried out studies to unveil the properties of architecture that could inform infill buildings. In practical conservation, the first Finnish actors referred to Swedish authors, such as Sören Thurell and Ove Hidemark. Panu Kaila, a Finnish architect, professor and conservation specialist, started teaching wood conservation in Finnish architecture schools in the late 1970s. In the years to come, he published numerous of books about conservation and popularised the topic.

Although the Norwegian town Røros has been listed as UNESCO World Heritage in 1980, in a way the status of the Nordic wooden towns was finalised only after the Finnish Old Rauma was lifted on the list in 1991. While the World Heritage Convention represents an effort to define and preserve universally significant heritage, it is also an important means of international diplomacy (Vahtikari 2007, 97). When Sweden and Finland ratified the Convention in the 1980s, ICOMOS encouraged the Nordic countries to prepare a joint list of candidates for the UNESCO World Heritage list that would encompass the unique characteristics of the Nordic heritage. Røros had been listed primarily as a mining town, not a Nordic wooden town, despite the fact that the wooden material was also seen as an important feature (UNESCO n.d.-a). Thus, the 'Nordic wooden town', already canonised as a type of heritage, also needed its representative. Finland was chosen to make a proposition, and the selection of Old Rauma took place on the national level (Vahtikari 2007, 107–8).

Since Old Rauma was chosen as an exemplar of the Nordic wooden town, we can draw the canonical interpretation from its description. Rauma was described as 'an outstanding example of an old Nordic town constructed in wood' and 'one of the most expansive examples of northern European architecture an urbanism' (UNESCO n.d.-b), so the defining characteristics are the wooden building material and the uniformity and wide coverage of the community. Besides the well-preserved and representative architecture and town structure, the functions were emphasised: Rauma was valued because it was still a 'living' commercial and residential area (UNESCO n.d.-b). These notions can be distilled into two main features that characterise the canonical interpretation of the wooden town. Firstly, it is an architecturally homogenous and harmonious ensemble of historical small-scaled wooden buildings. Secondly, it is an urban area with a 'small town' spirit. This passes on through the functions and the morphology of the town. So, the wooden town is a historical city center that has largely preserved both the historical buildings and their 'original' functions.

Dissemination

In the early 1990s, Finland fell into a deep economic recession, which brought construction activities into a halt. This denoted a natural breather for conservationists. The Nordic Wooden Town project celebrated its twentieth anniversary, inspiring commemorative publications (such as Kärki 1993, 1999 or Santaholma 1996) on the conservation history of the wooden towns. The purpose was also to follow-up the results (Santaholma 1996, 6). The publications enforced the canonical interpretation but added very little to the discourse, which is typical to the dissemination phase: 'to have one more book was like getting another medal' (Bonta 1975, 69). As they were published by the Ministry of the Environment, they also represented one more round of an authoritative interpretation.

During the dissemination phase, the canonical interpretation is transferred from the academia to a greater audience (Bonta 1975, 69). Dissemination leads to the intensification of heritage management operations, since more actors accept the heritage values. In wooden towns, this process started already in the 1980s. Yet, it is characteristic to the duration and challenges of the propagation phase that in 1996, it could only be stated that 'the importance of preserving the heritage of the wooden towns is now understood in the whole country *moderately well*' (Santaholma 1996, 7, italics by us). For one, in 1997, emeritus professor of contemporary architecture Seppo Valjus still ridiculed the heritage conservationists' community as 'a rot preservation association' (Ronkainen 1997). This kind of incongruity between the society's subcultures is typical to the interpretative process, so the dissemination still serves a purpose (Bonta 1975, 72).

Via silence and oblivion towards reinterpretation

Even though two new major research projects on wooden towns, now funded by the European Union, were initiated in the late-1990s and early 2000s, they did little to develop the interpretation. Instead, they simply consolidated it further by repeating the established canon. This is natural, as the canonisation denotes that it becomes hard to view the object in any other light, but reciting the same ideas ceases to make sense before long (Bonta 1975, 71). In the latter project, though, the Baltic wooden towns were for the first time studied alongside the Nordic ones – a fact that proposes some reinterpretation.

More significantly, the 1990s witnessed a sudden revival of interest in new timber construction. It was informed by Central European and North American developments in contemporary timber engineering and enabled by a change of attitude towards wood construction by both the general public and the policy-makers (Siikanen 2008, 15–20). One outcome was the so-called 'dense low-rise' trend in urban planning and building design. Inspiration was looked for in the historical wooden towns, whose density had until then been seen as a defect (see for example Karjalainen, Koiso-Kanttila, and Heikkilä 2002 and Figure 6). It was obviously underlain by the earlier discourse regarding the infill building of wooden towns. When historical wooden towns were finally valued, new kinds of areas, even completely new ones, became designated as 'wooden towns' (El Harouny 2008, 24). Thus, while the investigation of the historical wooden towns fell almost into oblivion for a decade, the heritage served another cultural purpose by acting as a model for new architecture. As Bonta (1975, 73) points out, interpretations change when interests transform.

After the oblivion phase of the 1990s, the new millennium brought about some critical and re-interpretative elements to the scholarly discussion. Olli-Paavo Koponen (2006), whose work is the last significant publication on wooden towns' infill principles, questioned the contemporary benefits of the concept of 'wooden town'. He (2006, 36) deemed the concept strategically successful in the past, as it enabled the preservation of some wooden towns. He also acknowledged its role in placing the Nordic urban heritage in a global framework and convincing international and local authorities of its value. However, Koponen (2006, 37) believed the concept to be artificial and already outmoded, suggesting that the Finnish urban heritage should be reconsidered from more versatile viewpoints. The risk with classifications is indeed that they may lead to the overly simple

Figure 6. Urban heritage reinterpreted (below). The district of Länsiranta in Porvoo (built in 2003-2010) is an expression of modern wooden town movement in Finland. Inspiration for the district was looked for in the local building traditions (above). © Photographs: Olli-Paavo Koponen.

interpretations of their members. In heritage management, oversimplification can mean the kind of artificial selection and purification of the charasteristics of the heritage that for instance Walsh ([1992] 2011, 135–139) and Jones (2010) have previously identified. In Old Rauma, many brick buildings were demolished or endangered (Kärki 1967), because they were not wooden and thus not considered as an essential part of the wooden town. The geographical limitation excluding the Baltic countries is another instance of a debatable categorisation. These are just two examples on how canonisation can mislead even professionals, but they emphasise how important reinterpretations can be for the survival prospects and management of built heritage.

Elisa El Harouny (2008) was perhaps the first to focus on the experiential values of wooden towns as residential areas. Her work was followed by other studies that tap into how the built heritage is presently used (for example Huovinen 2017; Lillbroända-Annala 2010; Karhunen 2014; Kivilaakso 2017; Haanpää, Puolamäki, and Karhunen 2019). These studies underscore how highly the wooden towns are valued by their users, testifying to the towns' journey from ignored to outstanding. Yet, it is symptomatic of the power of canonisation that even some researchers who aim at reinterpreting the 'wooden town' (such as Dumitrescu 2015, 7, 113), still end up using the concept in a rather conventional manner (Dumitrescu 2015, 66, 78).

Concluding discussion

In this paper we have explored how wooden towns became canonised as heritage in Finland from the 1960s onwards, and how the phases of heritagisation can be understood with Bonta's model in more detail than with other frameworks, such as those MacCannell (1976) or by Davallon (2014). The model is premised on the idea that experts have a focal role in how a canon is formed, which seems a justified assumption also in the context of heritage given the specialised division of labour in our societies (cf. Smith 2006 or Hølleland and Skrede 2019). Our case study outlines how the experts' attention, opinions and definitions indeed guided how the wooden towns gained their heritage status. In some of its features, this process may resemble the authoritative exercises of

power that heritage experts are often critised for (see for example Smith 2006). Yet, in the case of wooden towns, the early opinion favouring the preservation was rather marginal even among the heritage professionals. It was also very weak against the powerful societal actors, such as politicians, urban planners, property owners, banks and the construction industry. The heritage discourse remained arbitrary for long, until the heritagisation reached the threshold between pre-canonical and canonical and the discussion became self-reinforcing. Old Rauma's nomination to the World Heritage List in 1991 was the culmination of the heritagisation of the Nordic wooden town, so we were able to draw the canonised interpretation for the entire heritage category from UNESCO's description of Old Rauma.

The heritagisation of wooden towns took place during great ruptures in societal development, art history and building preservation. The process itself was conventional in how it fell into Bonta's model, but the subject of the heritagisation was a radical choice for that time. This is because the towns were not monuments – the typical conservation objects (Smith 2006) – but modest everyday environments inhabited by ordinary people. Continuous expansion of definition of the built heritage gathers more and more buildings and environments under the scope of heritage preservation. Today, such a development occurs in the context of post-war modernist built heritage. Scholars have recently highlighted some examples of this type of architecture, including residential buildings and environments, as potentially valuable heritage. While the residents of these neighbourhoods usually appreciate their built environments, their value is not accepted more widely in the Finnish society. In response to these buildings being increasingly demolished, the Finnish Heritage Agency has initiated a project for opening up a discussion about the significances of Finland's modernist heritage, such as public service buildings and residential areas of the post-war era. The heritage was named as 'Built Welfare' after the Nordic welfare state. As this categorisation and labelling relates to the invention of the 'Nordic Wooden Town' concept, it leads us to propose that Bonta's model could be a useful tool even before the interpretation becomes entrenched, despite the fact that Bonta himself placed the analysis of the canonisation as the last phase of the process.

Our case study exemplifies how Bonta's model can be applied to the analysis of an entire heritage class as well as one or more of its members. Like the other existing analysis frameworks, our study using Bonta's model presupposes that the naming of the heritage category is a significant operation in the heritage-making. We could testify to this by recognising three consecutive, partially parallel phases from the heritagisation process, which brought out the reciprocal relation between individual heritage objects or sites and the broader heritage category they belong to. First, the first wooden towns (Old Porvoo, Old Rauma), called 'historic towns' at the time, were acknowledged as worthy of preservation. Second, along with the valuation of these particular towns, the 'wooden towns' were identified as a distinct heritage category. Third, more and more sites entered the realm of heritage simply because they were considered as members of this category. It also occurred that sites became managed as idealised, stereotypic members of their category, and the more complex nature thereof was disregarded. So, the canonisation of the wooden town concept and category and that of the individual sites was a two-way process, in which developments on one level informed and accelerated those on the other level. This phenomenon can have both positive and negative impacts for the heritage, positive in that more heritage is recognised and preserved, and negative in that the features of the heritage may become stereotyped and 'purified' (cf. Walsh [1992] 2011 or Jones 2010). Nevertheless, our findings on the conservation history of the wooden towns leads us to believe that experts' recognition is in fact crucial in the early stages of heritagisation. As it was with the wooden towns and now with the built heritage of the Nordic post-war welfare society, the need for a label often emerges from a threat directed to the members of the category. Experts are likely the first to identify the threat in its whole extent, since they tend to possess a wider picture of demolition and conservation patterns on a greater geographical scale. Without the experts identifying the wooden towns as a particular type of heritage, fewer of them would obviously remain. The preservation of these areas, then again, has enabled novel generations to form living relations with them.

Disclosure statement

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