



Memories of My Town

*The Identities of Town Dwellers and their Places
in Three Finnish Towns*

Edited by

Anna-Maria Åström, Pirjo Korkiakangas & Pia Olsson

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Introduction

The articles in this book are part of the results of a research project financed by the Finnish Academy and entitled “Town dwellers and their places”. The title refers to the relation between urban ways of life and the urban environment, and this is discussed from different viewpoints. It should be pointed out that the urban environment is not seen merely as the geographical location of, or background for, human activities and daily life, but as a complex structure consisting of time-stratified meaningful experiences. The urban environment may be seen as a conglomeration of places whose meaning is derived from human experience and individual interpretations. As a concept ‘urban environment’ is unambiguously defined, and in fact, the words seem to contradict each another. The paradox is that ‘urban’ is used for the built environment, whereas ‘environment’, in Finland, is often understood to mean the natural environment; urban equivalents could then be parks, esplanades, marketplaces.

Thus, in the relations of townspeople to places, and in their experiences, both the built environment and the elements of nature play a role. Contextually, the urban environment may also be thought to refer to the full network of social and economic relations, the local community and its material items, which make up life in towns and which provide it with meaning. But urban culture is in itself the focus of our investigations, through the experiences of the town dwellers.

As people in urban milieus relate themselves to the environment, this takes place on many levels, where especially the time level becomes problematic. Time is of course layered also in the environments themselves for instance as buildings from different times. The built environment can in itself be looked upon as a kind of collective history. Thus, the environments are carriers or witnesses of times past. But environments can only reflect this history through intermediation. The buildings speak only to those who can recognize what they tell and it is only the individuals, the town dwellers that experience urban time itself, the time they live in but through their memory also times passed. In this past some elements take symbolically dense expressions. Through reliving or narrating their experiences, these symbolically important factors in the narrations will be outlined for investigations. This is the kernel of this book. Our intention is to explore how the

memories of town dwellers keep the histories of their town alive and how the memories function as cornerstones for the individual orientations in urban environments. Personally experienced time is the missing point in many town planning strategies (Lehtonen 1997, 14–17). Contrary to the focusing on the immediate present our intention is to explore urban identity processes that take the “wanderers in times” to the past of their towns for the sake of their present orientations. The flaneurs of big cities have been considered to be explorers of change and beholder of historical memory (Frisby in Tester 1994, 95); our contributions concerning also smaller towns in Finland will show that this is line with what urban dwellers are also in environments of smaller size with nature luring behind the corner.

Experiencing time through the memories give stability to the conception of urban space. The great memories of pioneer times in areas of suburbia might thus be due to the fact that there is no history before the new inhabitants shaping of it. In these areas “history started” with the inhabitants. On the contrary more central urban areas might have their social practices that the newcomer or tourist experiences as a stabilizing factor in itself. It is however seldom reckoned that such practices have a history of their own that have undergone considerable changes not the least in the second half of the 20th century.

Thus, the urgent need to recapitulate former stages becomes understandable. Those who have experienced former urban stages cannot ignore them; on the contrary they are part of their individual identity and unless the memories get no affirmation, the feeling of loss becomes even more inevitable and immediate. When radical changes then take place in such environments the constructions of new buildings themselves can be seen as a way of ignoring the identity of the place as felt by those who know its history. Hence the often very emotional defense of certain threatened areas by new constructions can be more understandable.

Urban places and roots

Urban culture, the urban way of life, exists in different milieus. The different authors of this book illustrate this fact through their choice of three different towns for the study: Helsinki, the capital, Jyväskylä, a medium-sized town in central Finland, and finally Vyborg, a town in ceded Karelia. While these towns are different cultural environments, their histories also present different mosaics that the townspeople have to relate to. The history of each town runs parallel with the history of its townspeople. Here, then, lies the tension that we want to analyse. How have the townspeople experienced the changes in their towns, what are their reactions to the disappearance and changing character of places? What does the memory of these places mean when they are thought of today?

The articles all set out from a dialectical relation between the towns and their inhabitants, so that the towns, and living in them, are seen to affect the life courses of the residents, but also in such a manner that their ideas and

memories of the towns are, in the present, projected back on to the remembered towns and the various places.

In ethnological research, the spatial identity of the individual, and his or her different ways of mastering space, are considered to be focal. The relations between townspeople are also seen as reflecting the development of urban culture. For example, different parts of a town and different places obtain a cultural character of their own. The present articles look for the spatial patterns of the townspeople, in memory and today, and for the differing conceptions of urban space that are articulated in interviews and in the townspeople's own narratives of their town.

Another of the main themes of this book is that the inherently heterogeneous social and spatial urban patterns are transposed into 'images' of the towns, of the districts and places, to which people have different attitudes. The fact that these images exist, and that it is possible to place oneself into them, gives both stability and freedom to the experience of urban space. It can also be maintained that the social differences which always exist in towns are toned down by means of common everyday techniques, so that daily life becomes free from friction. Such mechanisms do in fact come out in the narratives and remembrances on which the articles are based.

At the same time, it is striking how the places described, and towards which the narrators have deep feelings, in themselves offer experiences which require no intermediaries or catalysts. This, too, has to do with the memories which are in continual existence in people's relations to space. The informants themselves make comparisons between lost milieus and present ones, as well as giving their opinions on future or planned milieus.

The issues comprise both entire milieus and single elements. The concept of 'loss' gains importance through the nostalgia which sometimes accompanies the memories of the townspeople. For their local identities, some places hold more symbolic value than others, and such cases are also analysed in the texts.

Since the time span covered in the book is several decades, the history and the cultural history of each town provides a background which also permeates the reports. The urban history which gives the book its structure rests on the idea that during the 20th century, the towns have run through a series of development where different types follow one another: beginning with a wooden, grid plan or a stone built town in square blocks or traditional town, going through the stage of a functional town, that took place in Finland especially in the 1960's and 1970's, and ending up in a post-modern town, where functions have again been dispersed. At the post-modern stage, a new meaning is attached to urban culture and historical surface. Our historical perspective has been achieved as we present Vyborg as a long-lost grid plan town, the central parts of Helsinki as a similarly constructed town in development, and also coloured by post-modern features and additionally through a newly built district, whereas Jyväskylä is both a wooden town, a modern town, and the finishing point of the industrial era, but with various cultural streaks which make it a receptacle of numerous memories.

Some of the articles focus on the memories of the townspeople and descriptions of these stages. In his spatial theory Henri Lefebvre talks about

the level of lived space, which refers to the level of social practices as a space governed by the senses, including imagination, symbols and utopias (Lefebvre 1991). He emphasizes the significance of images by observing that building take place on the basis of papers and plans, but urban activity is modified according to visual stimulation. Thus the force of imagination must be taken into account also concerning memories that town dwellers hold of their towns.

The concept 'townspeople' has subtle nuances. Insofar as our ethnological material consists of different voices, we want to stress the polyphonic character of the texts. Here, the 'common' or 'ordinary' townsman's voice is heard; but the persons speaking are always individuals with life histories of their own. Therefore, the tension between the *individual* and the *collective* becomes another pervading theme in the discussion of memories, values, and urban customs and norms, as expressed in the narratives. Also how the signification processes take place are then important and how they continue over a lifespan.

There are two ambivalent dichotomies which embrace the urban reality of today, and which constitute eternal poles in urban discourse, in town planning and in the consciousness of the townspeople. We are referring to the tension between *anonymity* and *sociability*, and to the tension between *change* and *constancy*, today perhaps in the shape of the prevailing *consumption ideology* and the *longing for roots*, sometimes in the form of the past, sometimes in the form of less complicated circumstances. Within this field of tensions, the townspeople adapt their patterns into a daily urban practice. We have also tried to locate these life patterns with their autobiographical depths, which means that certain places have been experiences in a long life span, that embraces also the changes that the places have undergone.

The voices on the past through the dwellers of different towns thus belong to a historical restoring and affirming process that lie parallel to but is not so often appreciated by official history as more than a certain flavor. As will be shown in the studies the existence of the memories nevertheless constitute the memories of the towns in a manner similar to reminiscences for individuals. An example of this is the nickname for Helsinki, Stadi that symbolizes the former traditional way of life in the capital. The notion of it can be found in all sorts of circumstances signalling that there was a life here before this hectic present, a life with its own peculiarities that also the newcomer might gain to know and is invited to explore. At the same time this name hold in it all aspects of time, the past, the present and even the future in a more subtle way than the official name Helsinki.

The memories and ideas from 'previous times' often underscore a multifunctionality of the towns and urban environments as well as an urban ready made fabric that the young generation socialised into. The kind of 'traditional urbanity' that comes out from our examples from pre-functionalist times is one that is nowadays also sought for, for instance when pondering of planning practices (Radović 1997). The outcome of all sorts of mixtures of old and new urban forms ultimately depend on if the economic and logistic systems support them or not. In our cases we want to move in different historical

times as to show both the complexity of urban areas in the past and today and the importance of the notion of space as the key factor for producing a multi-functional urban culture. In all articles the appropriation of space is narrated as happened at a minimum of moving around over large distances. Thus time and memories are concentrated to certain culturally dense milieus.

Remembrance and reminiscence

It is essential, in individual and collective memories, that the individual or individuals can appropriate the past and thus strengthen their individual or collective identities. In general, remembrances comprise small episodes or events, and in remembering them, the informant builds up a logical entity which may, for example, consist of his or her individual life story. These recollections are illustrated with the contents and experiencing of events, images which are part of the informant's personal history, and which are vital parts of his or her personality and identity. When recalled into memory, the events are re-lived, and the reminiscence is accompanied by a strong sense that what is remembered is true and corresponds in detail with what really took place. In recalling things to memory, the informant attaches the events to a specific time and place, although the formulation of that time and place requires interactive association between numerous loose details. The sphere of life of the informant, and the resultant identification with a place, where both individual and collective images and memories characterise the place, ties these memories to a given time and place; the images and memories of the place are in fact also a localisation of the informant's self.

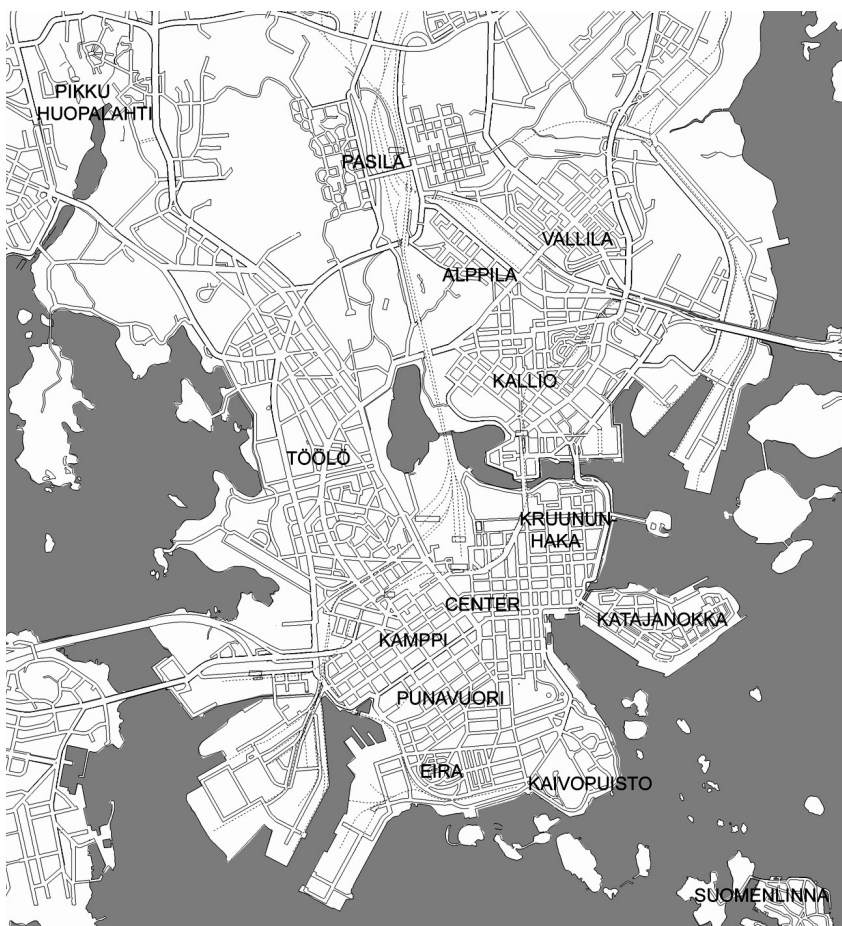
Memories tend to be individual and based on personal experience, that is, largely autobiographical. Nevertheless, autobiographical memories may be supplemented, or transformed, with features of collective memory: in remembrances and reminiscences, the private and the collective meet and cross in relation to one another. The collective or social character of remembrances is based on the fact that as individuals, our community influences our memories: the community in which we live and act will determine the guidelines for what is worth remembering or what we are supposed to remember. In fact, our identification with a community and its events is so close that we may actually 'remember' things we have never personally experienced, and our experiences may be tinted by issues which, at the outset, had no connection at all with the actual experience.

The opposite of remembering is forgetting, and the identification and study of forgetfulness is connected with remembrances. Nostalgia, as a way of remembering, has its own dichotomy: it holds both remembering and forgetting. As a matter of fact, anything from the past may evoke nostalgic feelings, as long as it can be recalled as something positive or pleasant. What is remembered may not, at the time of experience, have been thought worth longing for, but nevertheless, it may, in the course of remembering, achieve a nostalgic tenor. This type of nostalgia often comes up in situations of change, especially if those changes have not fulfilled expectations. However,

all memories do not contain a nostalgic element, but nostalgic memories are often accompanied by a feeling of something lost and by some degree of longing to have the past back. Nostalgia has, in fact, been compared with homesickness, a wish to return to a state which is felt to be safe and which can be mastered. Nostalgia is always accompanied by an emotional load, and the remembrances are expressly coloured by details which evoke a nostalgic feeling. Experiencing times gone without a nostalgic touch is thus rare. Nevertheless the remembrances together constitute a collective history of each town explored, that fills the gap between official history and individual narratives. Thus a new dimension to the history of each town will be given.

The towns

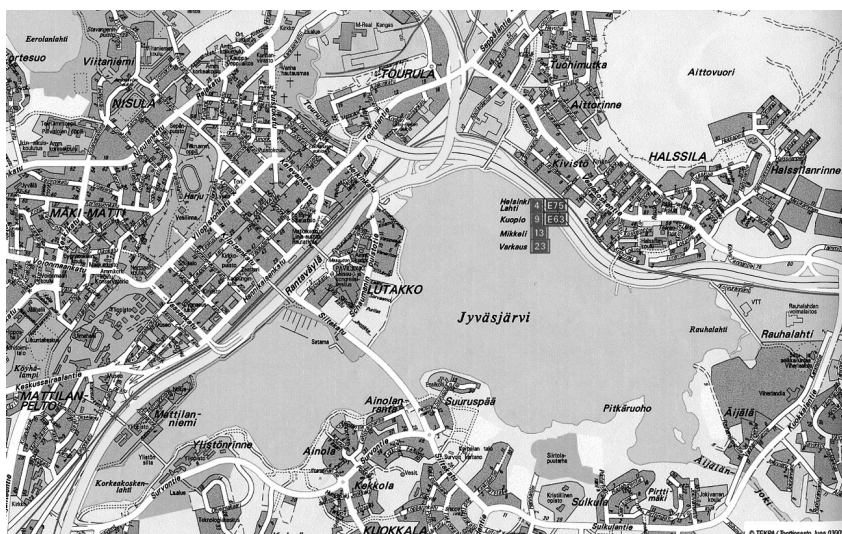
The attraction of the capital, Helsinki, comes out in the continuous population increase. The only breaks in this trend come in the war years of the 20th century and in the periods of serious economic stagnation. In 1966, the



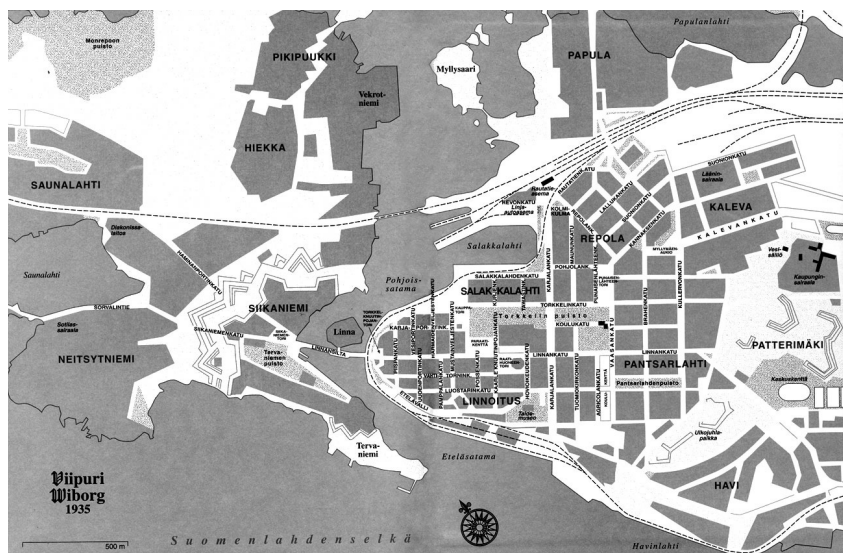
The research area in Helsinki.

population figure surpassed half a million for the first time, and in the period from 1946 to 1989, the overall population increase was about 44 %. Nevertheless, in the 1920's, 1960's and the 1980's, strong suburban growth and a population increase in adjacent regions also detracted from further growth in the central districts of the town. The polarisation between different districts, that is, the specialisation into districts for specific groups, continued after the Second World War, strengthening the symbolic significance of the different residential areas. There was almost no major change in the structure of livelihoods until the 1950's, and the majority of the working population, about 25%, then still worked in industry. Towards the end of the 1950's, the importance of industrial employment gave way, while service occupations began to proliferate, and new residential areas began to be built. The era of 1960's also meant a new opening to international influences. The fact that Helsinki forms the capital of Finland means that since the 19th century major national institutions and sites of cultural life has been situated here, a trend that is still continuing. Again, in the last decades of the 20th century, the new technology made its home in the town.

The youngest of the towns included in the project is Jyväskylä, which was founded in a nearly uninhabited area in 1837, primarily to serve commercial interests in central Finland. The atmosphere of the town has been deeply coloured by the fact that the first Finnish-language secondary school was set up there in 1858, and a similarly Finnish-language teacher training institute in 1863. The latter was converted into Jyväskylä University in the 1960's. In the early 20th century, industry began with wood refining and, later, with metal industry. The industrial development profited from the location and the good communication lines. In the 1970's, absolute industrial employment figures went down, and the structure of business and industry changed. In the early 1990's, nearly one-fourth of all employment was in production. During the last few years, the fastest increase in the town is in the number of



The centre of Jyväskylä.



Vyborg in the middle of the 1930's. Informants' memories from their childhood refer mainly to these streets and quarters. The map is from the book "Wiborg – en stad i sten" by C. J. Gardberg & P. O. Welin (Helsingfors 1996).

people having taken a university degree. In the 1990's, the population figure exceeded 80 000. Jyväskylä has for quite some time been the tenth biggest town in Finland, by population figures.

In the context of this work, Vyborg, Finland's medieval town in match only with Turku, again, represents a lost town. In the early 20th century, Vyborg was the third biggest town in Finland after Helsinki and Turku, and in the 1930's its population numbered over 72 000. Before the war, one-third of the population earned their livelihood in industry and handicrafts. There were also garrisons placed in the town. In the Moscow Peace Treaty in 1940, Vyborg was part of the area ceded to the Soviet Union and again, after its reoccupation in the following war years the Finnish civilian population again had to leave the town in 1944, when it once more became a war arena. In the Paris Peace Treaty of 1948 Karelia and Vyborg were stabilised as Soviet ground, a situation that continues until today. After 1958, Finns have had the possibility of visiting Vyborg, but these visits only gained impetus in the 1980's and 1990's.

Notes on the background material

In 1996, the Tyrgils museum in Helsinki, specialising in the cultural history of Vyborg, initiated a project focussing on life and destinies in Vyborg (Wiborgsliv och Wiborgaröden). Interviews were made with 34 Swedish-speaking former residents of Vyborg, 18 of whom were female and 16 male, with an average age of 82 years. Socially, they belonged to the upper middle class. The interview questions were ranged on a time axle, from childhood, youth and young adulthood, to the evacuation of Vyborg and to the settling in a new

place. A precondition was that the respondents had lived in Vyborg for over or at least for nearly twenty years, that is, in the 1920's and 1930's.

The interviews ran through almost the whole life spans of the respondents, and the collection of material followed the life-history method. A few of those interviewed refused to talk about or remember the evacuation or their experiences of it. This is why some of the interviews ended in the year 1939, when the interviewee left Vyborg for the first time. Only very few would narrate anything about the years 1941–1944. This material has been annotated and is kept by the Society for Swedish Literature in Finland, in the Folk Culture Archives' collection SLS 1881.

The articles on Helsinki are based on a vast collection of responses to a series of inquiries, collected towards the end of the 20th century. The collection was made in order to record memories of after-war Helsinki. The respondents were asked to describe various aspects of life, particularly in relation to their own living environment. They were offered individualised questions as a support for writing, but it was also possible to send in individually formulated responses. The themes of the inquiries, made in 1996–1997, and the numbers of answers were as follows: Helsinki as a living environment (182 answers); The Helsinki of my generation (90 answers); The capital – my city (96 answers); and What does Helsinki mean to me? (128 answers).

The result is autobiographical responses, where the events of the respondents' private lives are intertwined with the changes occurring in the town. The most popular periods to describe were the decades after the war, when the respondents were children. This was also the stage when the urban environment was experienced as very near and idyllic, before future changes, which were often seen in a negative light. The centre of the city was often described through the eyes of a youngster or a young adult. Remembering the home town turned out to be a valuable experience for the respondents. All in all, 496 answers were received. The material reflected the heterogeneous social composition of the population, and all classes of society may be said to be represented among the respondents, although workers and middle-class people sent in most of the answers. They deal with experiences of time and space, the decades in after-war Helsinki, what happened and who did what, and the importance accorded to the town by the townspeople themselves. This material will in the future be kept in the Helsinki City Archives.

A special inquiry was made in 2000 of the residents of the Pikku Huopalahti district, to find out how people had adapted to this very recently built part of the town. The respondents were asked to describe the area and to expound on its image in the press and other media. The inquiry also focussed on the activities and movements of the residents in the area and outside it, and on the social relations. It turned out that the residents use numerous approaches to study, assess, organise and use their residential area, and the study aimed at pinpointing these approaches.

The articles on Jyväskylä are based on a variety of material. The most important of this material is the collection of autobiographical interviews, 60 in all, with male and female residents of different ages in different parts of the town, namely, Kuokkala, Kortepohja, Kangaslampi, Huhtasuo, Halssila,

Yläkaupunki and Seminaarinmäki. Besides this, eight residents have written down their remembrances, narrated their lives and indicated places that have been important to them. And, finally, five town planning specialists have been interviewed.

Another group of material from Jyväskylä consists of the townspeople's comments on and feedback relating to two planning projects: the renovation plan for the Kirkkokuisto area (102 comments) and the building plan for the Jyväskylä University Teacher Training Elementary School (Jyväskylän normaalikoulun ala-aste) (some 60 comments). Both plans have also been commented on by the public in the newspapers. In addition, newspaper writings and articles on town planning and the plans and strategy papers pertaining to the development of the town have been used as background material for the articles.

This introduction has been translated by Elwa Sandbacka. All the articles, except "Steps to the Past" by Pirjo Korkiakangas translated by Anna Rouhento, have been translated by Heidi Granqvist with Sarah Bannock as her language reviser. We thank them all.

Anna-Maria Åström

Pirjo Korkiakangas

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Memories of My Town is an exploration into how town dwellers experience their environment in a complicated way. As people in urban milieus relate themselves to the environment, this takes place on many levels, where especially the time level becomes problematic. The urban buildings and settings can be looked upon as a kind of collective history, as carriers or witnesses of times past. But it is only the town dwellers that experience urban time itself, the time they live in, but through their memories also times past. In this past some elements take symbolically dense expressions. Through reliving and narrating their experiences the symbolically important factors in this urban relationship will be outlined for investigations concerning three towns, Helsinki, the capital, Vyborg, the ceded and lost Karelian town, and Jyväskylä, a town with dense commercial and cultural dimensions in the middle of Finland. The aim of the book is to use different theoretical concepts as guidelines in analysing the different narrative texts.



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