

# Nordic Spaces in the U.S.: Three Examples of the Performance of Nordic-American Identity

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***Abstract:** How are Nordic spaces produced and maintained outside the Nordic countries? How do such spaces give shape to cultural heritage, delimit identities and draw boundaries via recognition of difference? Through three Nordic-American case studies we will investigate the theme of Nordic spaces in the context of traditional emigrant culture meeting with present day Norden (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden). Our case studies are focused on complex processes in which North American culture and Nordic culture are being fused as well as contrasted. As we aim to demonstrate, Nordic-American ethnicity can, despite its nebulous character, be an important factor for both individuals and collectives. While typically expressed in private and public cultural traditions, it is also a force to be reckoned with in the fields of economics and heritage politics.*

***Keywords:** Ethnic identity—heritage—performance—tourism—space / place*

What constitutes a “Nordic space”? One obvious way to answer this question is to refer to geographical places within the borders of the Nordic countries. However, in this article we want to draw attention to the multifold ways in which Nordic spaces are manifested outside of *Norden*,<sup>1</sup> or, to be more precise, how they are performed in North America specifically. Within the North American context, the concepts of “Nordic” and “Scandinavian” often overlap. Consequently, we decided to use the concepts interchangeably in this article.

Through three separate case studies based on our respective doctoral dissertations with some added new fieldwork material, we aim to investigate the theme of Nordic spaces in the context of traditional (Nordic) immigrant culture meeting with present day *Norden* as well as present day America. Our dissertations dealt with different examples of Scandinavian culture in North America, namely the Danish-American town of Solvang, California, the Swedish-American town of Lindsborg, Kansas, and, thirdly, North-American descendants of immigrants from Swedish-speaking Finland (Larsen 2006, Gradén 2003, Österlund-Pötzsch 2003). Our studies are based on extensive fieldwork that was carried out during the course of several years. Although the fieldworks were predominantly conducted in small town settings, the focus of this article extends beyond the geographical aspects of place.

In this article we wish to underline the diverse and complex processes in which American culture and Nordic culture are being fused and contrasted, and where the global and the local frequently collide. Although our case studies deal with different American-Scandinavian communities, they all emphasize the importance of visual and other sensual representations and performances. Furthermore, we want to go beyond the concrete and tangible places and deal with the temporal, the virtual, the imagined, and the fleeting experiences that are easily overlooked but, nonetheless, may have great importance for how people construct their identity.

Scandinavian Americans are a relatively well-represented ethnic group in academic literature. Here, we will only give a few cursory examples of studies related to our fields of Folkloristics and Ethnology. Albin Widén was one of the first folklife scholars to take an interest in Swedish-America. He did several fieldworks in Swedish-American settlements such as Lindsborg

1 With *Norden* (i.e. “the North”) in this context we refer to the states of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden.

(1948, 1972). Acculturation processes among the Swedish immigrants have been studied by Phebe Fjellström (1970), Barbro Klein (1980) and Lena A. Palmqvist (1984), among others. The town of Lindsborg has been a popular object of study for sociologists, folklorists, linguists, and geographers (Wheeler 1986, Danielson 1972, Schnell 1998, Karstadt 2003). As Gradén states, doing new fieldwork in a town that has already been the subject of extensive scholarly attention will inevitably prompt references to previous studies. The presence of scholars and their studies creates continuity in various ways—and it is not uncommon that people being interviewed refer back to their participation in previous studies and comment on approaches, techniques used, and the study results.

Our own dissertations and the present study add to the cumulative scholarship of Scandinavian scholars doing research on their own ethnic groups. The heyday of this scholarship took place in the 1960s in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement. As part of Richard Dorson's group of graduate students, Barbro Klein has written on different aspects of processes related to Swedish-American identity, heritage and place-making based on a case study in New Sweden, Maine (see e.g. 1980, 1997, 2000, 2002). Norwegian-American culture was documented in Theodore C. Blegen's edited volume of Norwegian songs and ballads (1936). Norwegian-American folklore has also been the focus of study for Jan Harold Brunvand (1957) and, more recently, Odd S. Lovoll (1998) and Orm Øverland (2000), among others. A recent volume edited by Philip J. Anderson and Dag Blanck (2011) offers perspectives on the similarities and differences between the Norwegian and the Swedish ethnic groups in North America. Regarding Danish-American culture a few key studies are to be mentioned here. The studies by Kristian Hvidt (1971, 1976) and Torben G. Jeppesen (2000, 2005) can be seen in continuity. Whereas Hvidt describes and analyzes the process of immigration at the turn of the century, Jeppesen provides a demographic, social, and cultural geographic survey of Danish immigrants and their ancestors from 1850-2000. Also of interest in this connection are Jette Mackintosh's (2001) study on Danish emigration and re-migration and T. T. Holm's (2000) study on Danish identity and the feeling of home. Geographically, most studies on Danish-American culture are centered in the American Midwest. Anders Linde-Laursen has contributed to the study of the Californian town of Solvang, (Linde-Laursen 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000). Finnish settlements in North America have also been the subject of academic research. Finnish-American culture has been studied from an ethnological and folkloristic

perspective by Elli Köngäs-Maranda (1979) and Päivikki Suojanen (2000), for example, and through an ethno-linguistic perspective by Pertti Virtaranta (1993). Cultural geographer Mika Roinila wrote his PhD dissertation on the sparsely investigated topic of Swedish-speaking Finn settlements in Canada (Roinila 2000). In our doctoral dissertations and elsewhere we have engaged more fully with this rich body of literature. However, within the confines of the present article we have deliberately focused on the empirical material from our own fieldworks and thereby continued the scholarly tradition of using in-depth ethnographic material in studying ethnic identity in North America. In a special issue of *Ethnologia Europaea* (2010 40:2), we presented case studies dealing with the performative aspects of creating Nordic spaces. Wishing to develop this theme further, we revisit the fieldworks for our dissertations inspired by a new theoretical framework. By joining our material in one article we are able to offer a wide range of examples to illustrate our investigation of what makes a Nordic space.

Before introducing our case examples we would like to briefly mention a few important concepts for our outline. As suggested by our choice of title, “performance” is a key concept for us. The folkloristic and ethnological approach to the study of performance has its roots in the field of drama and theatre arts; it covers communal events such as rituals and festivals as well as individual performances such as songs and narratives. The study of the multidimensional phenomenon of performance in everyday life has received increasing interest and often entailed a cross-disciplinary outlook (Gunnell 2010). The folklorist Richard Bauman usefully described performance as “an aesthetically marked and heightened mode of communication, framed in a special way and put on display for an audience” (Bauman 1992:41). However, what actually makes a performance can be defined very broadly as evidenced by performance theorist Richard Schechner who emphasized that any behavior, event, action, or thing can be studied “as” performance (Schechner 2006:40).

The central concepts of “place” and “space” have been defined in many different and often contradictory ways. Rather than siding with just one perspective we have deliberately taken inspiration from several alternative ways of approaching the questions of “place” and “space” in order to be able to address a wide array of themes. One such perspective is, following Michel de Certeau (1988), to emphasize the performances and practices that situate spaces—that is, seeing space as *practiced* place. In other words, spaces are characterized by the movement and action that go on

within them. While not directly applying a Certeauan model, our approach is similar in that we want to highlight the performative acts through which spaces are created and experienced. The strong focus on the performance of space makes particular sense in the context of immigrant culture. Successfully claiming ethnic space will inevitably entail an act of negotiation between “old” and “new” cultural expressions. In local traditions and practices the difference between the old and the new often becomes particularly poignant. As Gradén shows the performances of Midsummer differ between Swedish-Americans and more recent immigrants from Sweden, framing space in ways that are meaningful to these groups over time. In order to be embraced by a broader public, ethnic performances need to “fit” into the surrounding society, while at the same time demonstrating cultural uniqueness. As our studies underscore, performances of Scandinavian ethnicity tend to be in line with core American values and are therefore easily combined with an American identity (see Österlund-Pötzsch 2003, Gradén 2004).

We have found another useful point of departure in the writings of geographer Yi-Fu Tuan who conceives space to represent freedom and place to symbolize security. According to Tuan, space becomes place when we endow it with value and meaning (Tuan 2007:136). Therefore, if a place is primarily perceived through a spatial order with ethnic, in this case Scandinavian, coding, the positive connotations of place such as security, community and belonging will in most cases be inseparably linked to the ethnic cultural grid. Place identity is, thus, frequently fused with ethnic identity. This automatic pairing is naturally often contested and criticized, and brings up the question of how the parameters of ethnicity are set.<sup>2</sup>

Of particular interest to us is to see what kind of spaces emerge in the intersection of Nordic and American concerns, traditions and cultural heritages. In the American context, the Nordic element may become a vital ingredient in *regional* heritage politics. In these cases, the Nordic heritage is often given an official stamp of authenticity and becomes coupled with other motives such as tourist promotion, consumer culture, and affirmations of both personal and communal/local identity.

Let us give two examples from our material to illustrate this point. Firstly, in 2009, the Danish-American city of Solvang, CA, was designated a

2 We will not be able to deal with this important and complex question in this short article but have discussed it elsewhere (see Larsen 2006, 2009; Gradén 2003).

Preserve America Community. The “Preserve America” is a national initiative by the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation in cooperation with several U.S. departments among other institutions. The designation is intended as recognition of communities that have successfully profiled themselves in celebrating their heritage, by using their historical assets for economic development, and by encouraging the appreciation of historical heritage through heritage tourism programs, for example. Our second example concerns a series of porcelain miniatures modeled after houses and buildings in the Swedish-American town of Lindsborg, Kansas. The miniature series, by the name of *Christmas in Lindsborg*, strongly emphasizes Lindsborg’s branding as “Little Sweden U.S.A”. Many of the people who buy the series do so because they have personal memories connected with buildings depicted. Both of the examples above refer to places that have been singled out and whose “place value” has been made official in different ways. In other words, these places have been officially declared worthy of preservation, and of being reproduced and visited. Both examples are clearly American places—but American places that get a decisive part of their perceived distinction through their Nordic immigrant heritage. The complex interplay between Nordic and North American is what gives these spaces their specific character.

In the following case studies we want to further investigate this interplay but also demonstrate that Nordic spaces can, simultaneously, be found on many different levels in the North American context. In our material we found examples of how Nordic spaces, beyond being geographical places, are performed, themed, and imagined, as well as perceived as temporal, virtual, and ephemeral spaces.

### **The making of a Danish-themed place in California**

As far as I know, Denmark does not have the same attitude towards history as the U.S. Here, we preserve historic places by sealing them off from change, turning them into historic sites, museums, and putting them on lists. Solvang seems to be rather American in this sense, such that it is recreating an imagined past of Denmark that did not really exist. Thatched roofs and half-timbering aside, Danish towns of the vintage that Solvang aims to approximate did not have motels or teashops. (quote from Solvang visitor, Larsen 2006:207)

The small Danish town of Solvang (sunny field) in southern California is a former Danish settlement founded in 1911 by Danish immigrants coming

from the Midwest. Nowadays, Solvang is often referred to as “The Danish Capital of America,” and its main source of income is derived from tourism.

Since the inception of the town, Solvang has transformed and gradually become more and more “Danish looking,” but, possibly, less and less Danish in content. When Solvang was founded, it looked very different from how it looks today. In regards to architecture, there was nothing to see in pre-pictur-esque Solvang: nothing of visual interest that separated Solvang from other rural sites nearby. Today, Solvang is littered with windmills that do not turn, artificial storks that appear to be nesting on fake thatched roofs, half-timbered houses (on the front only), and other symbols referring back to Denmark.

In spite of its overt tackiness, Solvang is a place where both locals and tourists can nurture the feeling of attachment to homeland and celebrate the past, all the while having a good time shopping, eating, and walking around—or making a living off it. The architecture is part of the staging, exhibition, and promotion of the *Danishness* offered as “a little bit of Denmark.” The Danish immigrant history is there, but at the same time it constitutes an American phenomenon selling generic ethnicity and nostalgia. It is a *themed space* for tourists where local merchants continue to strengthen the Danish looks in order to make the most revenue and be part of the Californian experience economy. *Themed space* refers to “themed material forms that are products of a cultural process aimed at investing constructed spaces with symbolic meaning and *conveying* that meaning to inhabitants and users through symbolic motifs” (Gottdiener 2001: 5). Solvang as an ethnic themed city within an American context does not constitute an isolated phenomenon. Other examples are Swiss town New Glarus, Wisconsin, (Hoelscher 1998), Swedish Lindsborg, Kansas (Gradén 2003), and German Leavenworth, Washington (Price 1997). Other themed cities without the ethnic element are, for example, Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania (Dorst 1989) and the Disney-made town Celebration, Florida (Frantz and Collins 1999, MacCannell 1999, Wood 1998, 2002). By experience economy is invoked the popular concept of enriching customer experiences, often by theming, for economic gain (Pine and Gilmore 1999).

Recently, Solvang celebrated its centennial (2011) and yet again the spirit of “the old days” was re-captured. Pride of history was again reinforced as old pictures were dusted off and reprinted to boost the Danishness of the town. However, Solvang was awarded for all their hard work already in 2009, when it was designated a Preserve America Community. The Preserve America label finally acknowledges Solvang for what it is, namely a special “Danish” loca-



1. Solvang 2004. Photo: Frank Swanson.

tion and at the same time a folkloristic creation placed in a Danish settlement—a little bit of Denmark, Disney, and something else (Larsen 2006). In the following I will summarize the series of events that led to what Solvang is today.

Solvang was discovered by *The Saturday Evening Post* in January 1947 (Jennings 1947).<sup>3</sup> The sudden nationwide attention was an important event in Solvang's history, and by searching the archives it is possible to get a good picture of what commotion and reflection this article caused in the small community. The romantic article depicted a small town with old-country charm and ruddy-cheeked citizens, and described the history of the area, as well as the Danish customs kept alive in this tucked away gem. In addition, it was illustrated with postcard pictures showing blond children and adults in folk costumes, the church, a baker in action, people folk-dancing in the park, and the headmaster of the high school wearing a Danish outfit while cheerfully smoking a pipe and proudly displaying the guest-book. One caption said: "Near-by Hollywood could not have created a more exquisite set-

3 *The Saturday Evening Post* was an American weekly magazine published in the United States from 1821 to 1969. It was a conservative mainstream publication often illustrated by the famous Norman Rockwell.



ting than the founders of ‘Little Denmark’ chose for themselves, in the lush Santa Ynez Valley against a backdrop of mountains” (Jennings 1947: 28). It is interesting that the attention directed to Solvang so blatantly played off the issue of theatricality by mentioning the “Hollywood set.” It is also noteworthy that although the journalist portrayed the locale as a “Hollywood set,” he did it in an admiring way, not out of indignation. Scholarly tourists have later commented on the overt theming of California in a less admiring way (Eco 1986; Baudrillard 1988a, 1988b, 1988c).

The article was not meant as a tourist advertisement, but had a similar effect. The image of a welcoming, idyllic, Danish-American town with healthy glowing Danes roused the curiosity of many travelers. Solvang decided to make use of this newly found national attention and “staged” an annual festival, *Danish Days*, with an open invitation to the outside world. The invitation was warmly accepted, and soon local merchants and civic leaders sensed the commercial value of emphasizing Danish traditions. Still today, *Danish Days* is celebrated annually and is one of approximately 3,000 annual heritage festivals in America (Hoelscher 1998).<sup>4</sup> According to one Solvang informant, *Danish Days* is the last thing going on in the Danish community to go beyond touristy” (Larsen 2006:221). It is a time for the community to regroup and reflect on their individual as well as common heritage.

Not surprisingly, the article in *The Saturday Evening Post* together with the new visitors, who started arriving only a few days after the article had been first published, stirred discussion in the small community. What was going to happen now? Were the Solvang inhabitants ready to share their small paradise with fellow Americans, and if so, on what or whose terms? Change had taken place overnight and the tourists demanded a visible Danish identity. A letter in the local newspaper warned:

Learn to live two lives, the exterior that pleases your visitors and in your dealings with others measure your lives as in the past by the golden rule. Then that other life; ‘a private world of your own—where no eager tourist may ever invade.’ An old country belief that roots of the community life come from the soil, simple ways, simple peoples ... (Southwell 1947:4)

The “two lives” alluded to a balance between a public life staged for tourist purposes, and a private, less spectacular community life. In the same issue

4 For a detailed account of the festival see also Larsen 2009.

of the newspaper, the importance of the message was underlined in yet another letter. Solvang and the surrounding valley had to make a decision on what to do about the new fame: "The tourists are here. And it is not yet vacation time" ("An Open letter to Solvang" 1947: 3). In the second letter the author lists pros and cons as to the merits of "Little Denmark." He touches on the closely knit social and economic life based on agriculture and warns against shifting to a tourist economy: "That way lies a complete disintegration of community life, and a 'feast or famine' economic life" ("An Open letter to Solvang" 1947: 3). The dilemma is obvious and the author concludes by proposing that the community ought to make a quick decision and then act upon it immediately:

Our community is small and the visiting groups are large. Offhand we can't think of any small community that has remained unaffected in a similar situation. Either they mushroom into a tourist resort with all the props and supports of a Hollywood production, or they are left with all the props and none of the audience. There is nothing quite so futile or quite so dead as a theater just after the audience has gone home and the lights have gone out ("An Open letter to Solvang, 1947: 3")

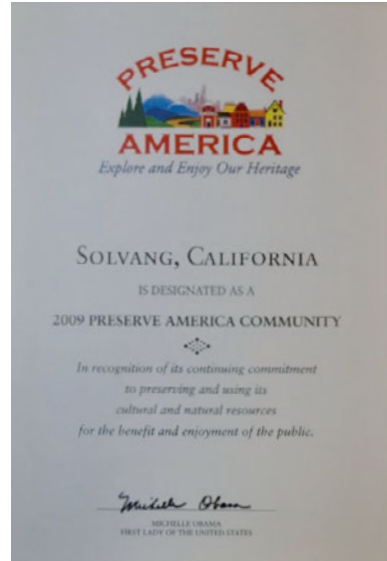
Note that the allusion to nearby Hollywood now has a negative ring. It is a production requiring props and audience. Solvang is now considered theater as opposed to a "real" place. Echoes of the discussion from 1947 can still be heard in Solvang today. The fine balance between keeping Solvang for its Danish-American population while making room for tourists is hard to strike. The fear of selling out the Danish heritage and becoming too much of a theme park is prevalent and has become part of the folklore of the town. In a childhood memory one citizen describes the scenario and dilemma of the town:

A car stops a little Danish boy on his bike to ask for directions: "Excuse me," the driver said. "Is this Solvang?" The young boy was caught unprepared, but he overcame his fear and responded: "This is it." "No, no," the man said holding up a colorful pamphlet that sparkled in the sun with pictures of windmills, storefront windows, and the *Little Mermaid*. "We want to know where Solvang is!" The boy gives them directions to the downtown, the driver thanks him, and the story is almost over: "Oh", he paused, "by the way, what time do the gates close?" "Gates, Sir?" "It is getting late, we don't want to pay for admission and not have enough time to see everything." I shook my head and began to pedal up Alisal hill on my way home, unable to muster any reasonable response. What did he think this place was, Disneyland? (Hoj 2006:42)<sup>5</sup>

5 For a more detailed account of this debate see Larsen 2010.

## 2. Solvang Preserve America Diploma.

Photo: Hanne Pico Larsen.



Yet, the economy of Solvang currently depends heavily on the tourist industry. The voices are many and loud in Solvang, and the discussion about what Solvang ought to be is complex. The townspeople never really made the choice of becoming a tourist location, but due to the impact of a single article, it turned into one. A visitor wrote:

It isn't just genuine pride that makes it unfair to accuse Solvang of selling its heritage for profit. It's also the fact that no one can manipulate a million people a year into going out of their way to pay a town hundreds of millions of dollars to act Danish. It is the tourists who have created Solvang and not vice versa, and they have demanded that Solvang exists because of what was lacking elsewhere. I am sure it is not a coincident that Solvang happened in the shadow of Los Angeles. (Lago 2004:125-126)

Whether it was pride of heritage, a calculated desire for a profitable heritage enterprise, tourist demands of various kinds, the inevitable organic growth of any small American town, or some combination of all of these factors, which made Solvang into what it is today, is hard to know. But the discovery of Solvang in 1947 became an important turning point for the community, happening literally overnight. Since then, Solvang has transformed and become a tourist destination in the heart of the Santa Ynez Valley, just one

of many themed environments on the beaten track of California. Solvang has done a good job of preserving the remnants of a Danish immigrant past. At the same time the U.S. government has rewarded Solvang by singling it out as an important place to be preserved. The U.S. American trend of “preserving America” was commented on by a Solvang visitor: “Here [the U.S.], we preserve historic places by sealing them off from change, turning them into historic sites, museums, and putting them on lists” (quote from Solvang visitor, Larsen 2006: 207).

### **American Miniatures—Imaginary Swedish Places**

“Here your opportunity to collect living American history. Hand-painted, porcelain, lighted replicas of the homes and buildings in the small prairie town of Lindsborg, Kansas. A town—like your hometown—proud of its heritage & history. A town full of old world traditions & charm. This collection of finely crafted replicas will awaken warm memories of a time gone by” proclaims the website for *Anderson Butik*, one of the main carriers of Scandinavian craft and souvenirs in the Midwest.<sup>6</sup>

*Christmas in Lindsborg* is a series of ten miniature buildings modeled after actual Lindsborg Landmarks. The intent of *Smoky Valley Charities, Inc.*, a non-profit organization founded by businessmen in 1996, was to raise funds to preserve and enhance the Swedish heritage and cultural traditions in the Lindsborg area. The first miniature was manufactured as a replica of Bethany Lutheran Church, which was built in Lindsborg in 1869 by the first settlers from Sweden. Each miniature can be purchased for approximately thirty dollars, and the series come with a royal blue sign with a red dala-horse in the middle. It says: “Välkommen till Lindsborg—Little Sweden U.S.A.” Among people living in Lindsborg in 1996 and in 2011, two of the miniatures in the series are often highlighted as being more Swedish than their counterparts. These two are The Swedish Pavilion and The Swedish Timber Cottage.

The Swedish Pavilion, also called *Den Svenska Herrgården* (the Swedish manor house) is 3 inches tall and 8 inches wide. The entrance to this miniature house is decorated with a wreath, and there are patches of snow on the roof. The façade of the miniature is pale yellow in color with white

6 Downloaded January 10, 2012.



3. *Christmas in Lindsborg. The Swedish Pavilion Miniature.* Photo by courtesy of Jim Turner.

trim. The veranda is decorated with green garlands and has a roof covered with tiles that are brushed with snow. Above the garlanded veranda hangs a carefully chiseled version of the 1904 Swedish coat-of-arms. The Swedish Pavilion is stated to be a miniature replica of the centerpiece of the McPherson County Old Mill Museum park complex, created by Swedish architect Ferdinand Boberg and Sweden's contribution to the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis, USA. When the exhibition closed in 1904, the pavilion was donated to Bethany College in Lindsborg Kansas, where professor Birger Sandzén from Sweden used it for teaching his art classes. The building was moved from campus to the museum site in 1969.

*Den svenska timmerstugan* (the Swedish Timber Cottage) is 4 inches tall and 6.5 inches wide, and painted *falun*-red with white trim, a traditional color for cottages in Sweden. Still today, the Swedish countryside is dotted with houses and barns painted in Falun red paint (*Falu Rödfärg*). This miniature depicts a building in central Kansas that has been created from material drawn from the forests of the province of Dalarna, built in Sweden, moved to Lindsborg in 1983 to bring "a little bit of Sweden to the Heartland." In Lindsborg *den svenska timmerstugan* originally served as home of *Ander-*



4. *Christmas in Lindsborg. The Swedish Pavilion in Old Mill Heritage Park. Photo by courtesy of Jim Turner.*

*son Butik* (a small shop) and the Anderson family who owned the shop. For the family, the cottage epitomized Sweden, and situated on the prairie this particular timber cottage was indeed unique. In the United States, both the pavilion and the cottage, which historically represent two separate classes, have the same value. Cast in miniature they are also equalized in size. As the use of the Swedish Pavilion and the Timber cottage demonstrate, the miniatures not only equalize size and erase distinctions such as class, but they also hold seasons, imagined places and ritual spaces in the United States and Sweden alike.

Material objects are an effective way of grasping things (Bronner, 1986), here of understanding how people, material culture and places are connected. Studying how objects are produced and used offers insight into cultural complexity. Of all things, the miniature is an interesting entrance into the study of creative processes, especially in the wake of migration. Small things are easy to store, and they are movable. Epitomizing convenience and control, the miniature as a form enables people to create installations of their own—imaginary spaces—poetic places for reflection. The miniature format is especially exciting since, by definition, it intensifies and re-



5. *Den svenska timmerstugan in Lindsborg. Photo by courtesy of Jim Turner.*

inforces values (Bachelard 1969:150, Stewart 1993:7-65; 1997:73-84). The miniature pavilion and the timber cottage articulate values and perspectives associated with Sweden in Swedish-America. Because there are no miniatures in nature, looking closer at the manufacturing and use of miniatures is a fruitful way of analyzing how people relate to Nordic spaces and how they intervene with them. Following Michel de Certeau's (1988) idea that performances and practice situate spaces as well as Erving Goffman's (1974) understanding that places are spaces that are framed through social frameworks, I suggest that ethnic place is a framed space that is meaningful to a person or a group over time. The miniatures become tools in negotiating Swedish spaces on both an individual and on a community level.

According to the president of Smoky Valley Charities, the largest category of buyers consisted of well-established Lindsborg residents, their relatives and friends and former Lindsborg residents who now live elsewhere. The sales manager explained that buyers were attracted to the pieces because they depicted actual places that people knew. Customers themselves agreed to that point. The residents I interviewed in the 1990s and in 2001 emphasized the significance of the miniatures depicting existing houses

that they had experienced. This emphasis was very much the same upon my return to Lindsborg in 2011. As the treasurer of Smoky Valley Charities explained it:

The miniatures can be grouped into smaller sets for individuals who may not have room to display the whole set. For example, Bethany Lutheran Church, Presser Hall and the Swensson house make a nice grouping for individuals that have a Bethany connection. The college began in the sacristy of Bethany Lutheran Church, the Swensson House was the home of Carl Swensson, founder of Bethany College, and Presser Hall is the main administrative building on campus and home to the Messiah festival. Likewise, you can group buildings found in downtown Lindsborg or buildings with Swedish connections for those people that have ties to Lindsborg in other ways.

In conversations with consumers of the *Christmas in Lindsborg* miniatures, they pointed out that the Swedish Pavilion and the Timber cottage were the most Swedish because these buildings were brought over from Sweden. A staff member at *Anderson Butik*, now located on Main Street, said that she would never buy any cottage model, but having her “own Swedish Timber cottage” was a memory of her working life operating the family business in Lindsborg and of visiting the province of Dalarna in Sweden. In other words, it is the experiential and emotional relevance of the miniature series in relation to practiced place that legitimizes and differentiates the series from more generic miniatures. The Christmas in Lindsborg holds experiences of everyday life in Lindsborg, but also of rituals.

The Swedish Pavilion, which most people in Lindsborg cited as one of the most Swedish of all miniatures, can be distinguished from the others because it merges seasons and holidays. With specks of snow on the pavilion’s roof and pruned green bushes in front the pavilion encompasses both summer and winter, combining them into one. The pavilion is marketed as a Christmas decoration even if green garlands decorate the veranda, bearing witness to Midsummer celebrations in Lindsborg. For many people in Lindsborg, Christmas celebrations evoke memories of times gone by. The celebration of *julotta* (Christmas matins) is an unbroken tradition observed since the arrivals of the pioneers in 1869. Many of the Swedish descendants use the Swedish *julbord* (Christmas buffet) to convey to younger generations where their relatives came from. When the Christmas holiday approaches in Lindsborg, the character of public spaces changes as well. Since the 1990s the city has put up banners with the text “*Guds Frid*” (God’s peace) and *God Jul* (Merry Christmas), adorned all downtown lampposts with oat-sheaves, and piped “Silent night” over the loudspeakers.



These are only glimpses of the Christmas that the Christmas in Lindsborg series attempts to convey.

In comparison with Christmas, the celebration of Midsummer held on the third Saturday in June is more recent. The organizers of Midsummer and its participants made a prompt distinction between Midsummer and Svensk Hyllningsfest, a festival started in 1941, now held biannually. Svensk Hyllningsfest resembles many festivals with an ethnic theme and attracts thousands of visitors from all over the United States and from Sweden. As a resident pointed out in 2011, “Svensk Hyllningsfest has become less unique in the past few years.” One woman called it “Chamber of Commerce Culture.” Several residents pointed at Midsummer as more of a community “for us who live here,” “a family celebration,” “slow pace,” “less commercial,” and for people “with ties to the town.” Compared to other celebrations, Midsummer was considered exclusive.

The highlights of Midsummer took place in front of the pavilion in the Lindsborg Heritage Park. Just before sunset families who identified themselves as Swedish or Swedish-Americans (by blood or by choice) gathered there. Besides the pavilion’s Swedish origin, its taupe manor house color, the white picketed fence, the sundial and the planted birch trees enhance the sense that something Swedish was happening. With its buildings and Swedish paraphernalia, this heritage park erased geographical distance, compressing time and space. This was the display and the museum-like installation that the miniaturized pavilion referred to.

The garlands that graced the veranda created further delineation. They demarcated what was considered Swedish and Swedish-American. For Midsummer the pavilion was decorated as carefully as the maypole itself. For the 1998 Midsummer celebration I accompanied the decoration committee when they went out to cut branches. While members of the Swedish Dancers, the high school dance group, and their parents decorated the maypole, the group decorating the pavilion raged over whether the pavilion should be decorated “in the Swedish ex-pat manner” or in the “Lindsborg Swedish manner—as they had always done it.” One group wanted to put branches in buckets and place them on either side of the veranda instead of wrapping garlands around the pillars of the veranda. Proponents of branches in buckets had either lived in Sweden or made summer visits there. For them it was important to decorate the pavilion in accordance with their experiences of how to decorate houses for Midsummer in contemporary Sweden. A majority of the group, however, rejected the idea of having birch

branches placed in buckets. In order to ensure that their understanding of what was aesthetically pleasing was correct, they had already driven 8-inch nails into the pillars of the veranda to hang the garlands evenly. The process of decorating the pavilion for Midsummer helped clarify that what was considered Swedish was separate from that which was Swedish-American. It also served to highlight different citizens' ways of creating their history locally, articulating tension between recent immigrants from Sweden and Swedish-Americans. The miniature pavilion intensified certain experiences and values while others were muted and discarded. Consequently, when the Midsummer celebration in Lindsborg is presented in miniature format, it includes the garlands resting on 8-inch nails driven into the pillars of this Historical Landmark building. The miniature pavilion is an example of how seasons and rituals are materialized and spatialized, reaching beyond the seasons and rituals themselves. It is also an example of how different groups negotiate the making of Swedish space. By combining these symbols into one entity an internal consensus is developed.

While the miniatures portray the town of Lindsborg as intact, unaffected and stable through times of continuous change, their fixed format stipulates people to articulate their own experiences in material form. This becomes clear when we see what happens with the miniatures in people's homes. A woman I visited in 2011 had arranged her Christmas in Lindsborg miniatures in a room she referred to as her "Swedish room," a screened-in addition to the house. The room was designed to resemble a one-room Swedish cottage. A couch, a table, a small television of older standard made up the core furniture. Basic furniture was accentuated by antique pieces. There were hand-crafted quilts, linen tablecloths, a wooden bench, as well as photos from Midsummer in Lindsborg and other Swedish holidays. The room provided a contrast to her large home featuring American contemporary design. The contrast between the home and the attached "Swedish room" resembles how a Swedish summer cottage may provide a contrast to city living. The woman states:

I've collected most the Swedish stuff and inherited some. We spend a lot of time, *out here*. And the last time we were *over there*, I said—I want a *Stuga*, so we had a local carpenter build it. (She pointed out the window to a *stuga* the size of a playhouse.) It was situated at the edge of the garden against a backdrop of open pasture. That *stuga* is just for our garden stuff. People remark on it though—they don't really know what it is. But I said, if you have ever been to Sweden you've seen it—either red or yellow. (Interview, October 11, 2011)



6. “Our Little Stuga on the Prairie”. Photo: Lizette Gradén.

While the miniatures placed on a table in the Swedish room provided an overview of the town of Lindsborg, a glance out the window provided a view of the playhouse-size *stuga*. Operating on different scales, the miniature display, the outdoor *stuga*, and her Swedish cottage room offer three perspectives of a Swedish cottage at once. When the door to her house is shut for everyday living, the screened-in addition provides a liminal space (Turner 1995), a room positioned between the indoors and outdoors, between the American home and the prairie. As a betwixt and between space, the screened-in addition invokes both Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little house on the Prairie* and the small 19th century Swedish farmstead— a little Sweden on the prairie.

In miniature landscapes the image of a controlled and manageable existence is reinforced. Selected time periods and events are combined into a suggestive installation. While the furthering of a place—a country, a city, a town, a farmstead, or an event—is a compilation of important symbols, the miniatures concentrate them even more. The miniatures epitomize all

of the previously separate settings and time periods simultaneously. As such, these imaginary spaces resemble museum displays and open-air museums such as Skansen in Stockholm and Maihaugen in Lillehammer; they structure knowledge and experience by giving it a spatial context. Even if the places, buildings and rituals are comprised of time and space, they are not unambiguous. Miniatures, however, reduce them to just that. Reflected through temporal displays in people's homes, however, the miniatures both reinforce and re-create Swedish and American cultural history. The Swedish history goes beyond an American phenomenon selling generic ethnicity and nostalgia. The miniatures reflect buildings that play a significant role in the town's history and the residents' lives. This is in line with Barbro Klein's call for folklorists to problematize the idea of a homogeneous Swedish national heritage in Sweden (Klein 2000). My wish here is to problematize the idea of a homogenous Nordic or Scandinavian or *themed ethnic place*. With the primary buyers being current and former Lindsborg residents, these miniatures appear to be part of a *practiced ethnic space* (de Certeau 1988), and place renders "what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful" (Goffman 1974:21). With individual and collective frames of experience, both space and place are bounded and determined.<sup>7</sup> When rearranged and displayed in private homes far away from their place of origin, the miniatures connect individual practices with Lindsborg community experience. They facilitated transitions between worlds, between the real and imaginary Swedish spaces. Moreover, the miniatures seem to expand Swedish heritage spatially and encompass people who may never have lived there.

### **Flexible and Ephemeral Spaces—Swedish-speaking Finn Ethnicity in North America<sup>8</sup>**

As demonstrated above, Nordic spaces in North America exist as physical places with a historical link to settlers from the Nordic countries, but

7 Email conversation with treasurer of the Smoky Valley Charities and the director of Lindsborg CVB in June 2012. According to both, primary buyers of the miniatures are people related to Lindsborg. As the treasurer has it, "[t]he reality of the initial order quantities required and the demand from people with ties to our little town were probably not realistically aligned."

8 This section is largely based on the article "The Flexible Space. Finland-Swedish Descendants in North America." *ARV. Nordic Yearbook of Folklore*. 2010, vol. 66, pp. 197-215.

also as representations of these actual places. However, Nordic spaces do not need to be place-specific in a geographical sense. In fact, private, non-localized, and decidedly flexible performances of Nordic space are typical features of contemporary Nordic-American ethnic identity. As argued and described in previous studies (see e.g. Österlund-Pötzsch 2003, 2010), the flexible aspect of Nordic-American ethnicity emerges clearly when looking at descendants of immigrants from Swedish-speaking Finland who may, for example, identify with Finnish, Swedish, Scandinavian or specifically Finland-Swedish ethnicity.<sup>9</sup> The empirical material for this study consists of interviews conducted with descendants of Swedish-speaking Finn immigrants living in the states of New York, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Washington, and the province of British Columbia in Canada. (1999-2004).

That Finland-Swedish identity in North America constitutes a useful example of the elusiveness and diversity of ethnicity is hardly surprising considering the complex nature of Swedish-speaking identity in Finland. The Finland-Swedes are by definition in a position of permanent “in-betweenness”—sharing their language with the Swedes in Sweden and their nationality with Finnish-speaking Finns, as well as maintaining many cultural markers of their own. A large number of descendants to Swedish-speaking Finns in North America have grown up identifying themselves as Swedish-Americans. Many have only discovered that their ancestral home was in Finland when taking up genealogy as a hobby. Consequently, participation in “ethnic events” for these immigrant descendants often entails a Swedish-American context.

Due to the fact that few of the Swedish-speaking Finn descendants interviewed in this study lived in communities where the Scandinavian presence was strongly felt, ethnic identity has primarily become a private matter to them. This closely corresponds to a visible trend among groups of European descendants in North America to associate ethnic tradition with the home environment, rather than an active participation in public societies and events (cf. Alba 1990; Waters 1990). This is, of course, not always the case, and there are also examples of when Finland-Swedish identity is connected with geographical places in North America, such as a number of

9 I have here chosen to use the term “Finland-Swedes” in line with the Swedish term “Finlandssvenskar.” It should be noted that Finland-Swedish immigrants and their descendants in North America often self-identify as “Swedish Finns” or “Swede Finns”. However, “Swedish Finns” is also the most common way to name the large group of Finnish-speaking immigrants in Sweden.



7. Official recognition of cultural heritage: the Ericksson farmstead in Rochester, Washington. Photo: Susanne Österlund-Pötzsch.

smaller towns that at some point have had a visible community of Finland-Swedish immigrants. However, the place connection may be even more concentrated and localized. For example, in the late 1890s, the Finland-Swedish immigrants Jonas and Maria Lovisa Ericksson settled in the little town of Rochester, Washington. Their descendants still own the farmstead that the Erickssons built. The farm has been placed on the National Register of Historic places by the U.S. department of interior. The National register of Historic places is the official list of the “Nation’s historic places worthy of preservation” (<http://www.nps.gov/nr/>). The owners of the farmstead are committed to maintaining their ethnic heritage and are active participants in the local annual Swede Day Midsummer Festival parade as well as being involved in many other Scandinavian and specifically Finland-Swedish events. The farmstead, as a physical place, reinforces the deeply personal link to the ethnic roots at the same time as the official recognition situates the farmstead in the larger context of American history. In a manner similar to the Scandinavian towns of Solvang and Lindsborg discussed above we

find a multileveled interplay between Nordic and North American aspects in the officially protected and singled-out Ericksson farmstead, albeit on a smaller and more personal scale. However, the process of fusion of Nordic and American spaces is the same in all cases. These are places layered with value and meaning (Tuan 2007).

However, for the majority of descendants interviewed in this study, ethnic identity tended to be connected with *temporal space-making*. Instead of “always” being there to the same extent, the Scandinavian element was associated with a distinctive set of circumstances, such as seasonal celebrations. In other words, practices bring out the space (see de Certeau 1988:117). This type of Nordic space-making commonly gathers many of the most popular “trademark” ethnic customs, as in this example of a Christmas-time Lucia celebration one informant has helped to organize for many years:

It has become a wonderful tradition because it used to be just the dancers would get up and the Lucia Queen comes through. Well, we’ve developed a story around it both biblically based and traditionally based. So we have people in three different settings in our church on the Saturday closest to Santa Lucia. And we serve all the traditional foods for the supper, and the cardamom bread and lots of good coffee. And then the *tomtes* [Christmas gnomes] come in and dance, and then the gingerbread-cookie, the *pepparkaka* [ginger snaps], the *pepparkaka*-dancers come in and dance. And there is a choir for the men and women of the church that are singing traditional Swedish songs. (SLS 2001:44)

Community events were still important for many descendants’ sense of Scandinavian identity. However, memberships in the type of ethnic societies that were of such importance to the first generation of immigrants have dwindled. Instead it is in the private sphere where ethnicity seems to be experienced most strongly. This was very much the case for Arlene, a third-generation descendant who liked visiting Scandinavian-American museums, festivals, and societies. While she emphatically underlined that she was very proud of her cultural background, she did not think it needed to go beyond the family: “I think that if you have a very special cultural background and if you just carry it on in your family, this very special vein, it doesn’t need to fit into any picture larger than our family” (SLS 2002:39). For many, ethnic tradition is closely intertwined with family tradition, and perceived as an intrinsic part of holidays and celebrations. The ethnic background constitutes a resource for marking important events, or “a very special way to enjoy life” (SLS 2001:44), as one descendant put it. The ethnic heritage provides a perceived element of uniqueness and authenticity, and distinguishes the festive from the everyday.

A way to combine being in one's home environment with an element of participating in a larger Finland-Swedish community is nowadays offered through the Internet. Importantly, the Internet is a very popular tool for hobby genealogists. Research into family roots in Swedish-speaking Finland is one of the key areas of expertise for The Swedish Finn Historical Society (SFHS) founded in Seattle, WA, in 1991. Although the SFHS has an office with an archive and library, there are no regular meetings for members. Instead, the society's journal and Internet pages connect a world-wide membership to the society. The SFHS homepage also hosts the on-line Finlander Discussion Forum, which serves primarily as a channel for discussing genealogical research and sharing information about Finland. In this way, the SFHS has created a *virtual space* for people to meet and learn more about their background (Österlund-Pötzsch 2003:59-65). This concept suits many descendants as SFHS provides something that is of personal interest but does not require a high level of commitment, unless one chooses otherwise.

Another form of virtual Nordic space in North America is of a more personal nature, and could perhaps be referred to as an *imagined space* or a space in memory. In my interviews and discussions with Finland-Swedish descendants it emerged clearly that many of them kept alive images of places in Swedish-speaking Finland through pictures, photographs and family stories (cf. Klein 2002:12f.). This type of image pertaining to actual places typically surfaced in descriptions of visits to "the Old Country." One informant, who explained that he had always listened to stories from his father's home village in Ostrobothnia with great interest as a child, discovered that he had recognized many of these places upon his first visit to Finland: "They were in my head already, you know, once I heard and saw them they came back. This is what they talked about" (SLS 1999:88). Several informants testified that finally visiting the places they had treasured as mental images since childhood was a very moving experience.

However, encounters with Nordic space are not always deliberately created or sought out. A different kind of space-making takes place on those occasions when certain elements fleetingly and haphazardly come together to create a "Nordic event." These distinctly personal experiences often deal with intangibles, and the Nordic space that emerges is consequently of an *ephemeral* nature. A typical experience of this kind is when one unexpectedly met someone of similar background (cf. Tuan 2007:141). Many of the Scandinavian descendants that I talked to described such occasions as cher-



ished and as engendering feelings of a shared bond, albeit if only for the moment. Most of the interviewed descendants testified that they paid extra attention when they saw a Scandinavian name, as did, for example, Robert whose father came from Swedish-speaking Finland:

If you see a surname that looks obviously Swedish I try to make that connection (...) I think it is just because you think it is in common. And also, you feel somewhat like a minority, in this area there's not a lot of, although there is probably a lot more Swedes in this area than a lot of others, but you know, it is a bond you love to make. (SLS 2001:50)

Ephemeral Nordic spaces are frequently awash with nostalgia and are closely linked with bodily embedded memory. The physical senses act as the key to a chain of associations and reminiscences. In the same manner as an ethnic sphere can be deliberately evoked through culinary signals, unexpected sensations might transfer a person to a Nordic space. Prompted by a chance encounter or by sensory experiences, Proustian doors to memory suddenly open and reveal images from a past steeped in Nordic culture. Katarine, a third generation Finland-Swede, was one of several people I talked to who described how music carried strong memories for them:

I got a CD (...) for Christmas, a Swedish one (...) I listened to these things and I said that it makes me sad. And [my husband] said, well don't listen to it if it makes you sad. And I said, no, I just really like it. Like "*När ljusen skall tändas där hemma*" ["When the candles are being lit back home"]. They are all sad [songs]. All these things, they are close to me. They touch me in some way where my son or daughter won't think, they don't pay attention to it. All that music, I remember all the music. (ÅEI 17)

Ephemeral Nordic spaces often seem to evoke experiences with deep emotional undercurrents that accentuate the ethnic associations:

[It wasn't always important for me to keep a connection to Finland-Swedish culture], it was my parents who made sure I had it, but I was quite willing to grow up as a Canadian and become Canadian, go to Canadian schools and speak English and teach in the schools of Canada. There was always a glimmer in the thoughts of those days and those cultures after my mother and my father died. You go down a street and hear a familiar Swedish song and it will stop you cold. Or smell something in a bakery that you recognize as Scandinavian. And it really startled. It was really important. (SLS 2002:47)

Through our senses we experience the surrounding world. Whereas we are usually well aware of the importance of sight and sound, we do not always realize our reliance on the corporeal sensations of smell, taste and touch in

interpreting space. The “now and here”-senses of smell and taste are connected with the part of our brain where memory and emotion are located (cf. Tuan 1974:10). Our relative defenselessness in controlling the chain of association thereby awoken makes these senses powerful components in our ongoing process of constructing the self. The quoted observation made by the interviewed descendant, “and it really startled. It was really important,” is telling. A strong intuitive reaction from within seems to say something about “who we really are.” What we experience as “genuine feelings” is therefore often valued in the same way that a heritage phenomenon perceived as authentic is granted value and importance (cf. Bendix 2000).

### **Conclusion**

In our call to pay attention to the many levels of space-making that goes on in the performance of Nordic ethnicity in North America we found that it served our purpose best to be able to offer three different perspectives on what we still consider to be the same phenomenon. Hence we have kept our three case studies separate instead of merging the material. In this brief outline, we have aimed to illustrate how Nordic space-making in North America involves a great number of different motives. Even when the Nordic space refers back to an immigrant past, it is never a case of a heritage frozen in time, but always a process connected with present-day concerns. Apart from studying how Nordic spaces are performed, we have aimed to demonstrate the multifold and complex relationship between ethnicity and place. Depending on the context and circumstances, ethnicity might be evoked to frame places, but places might equally be referred to in order to strengthen ethnic identity.

Through a number of concrete examples we have also highlighted the fact that Nordic spaces exist at many different levels simultaneously. People live and carry out their everyday lives in geographical places—in places such as Solvang and Lindsborg the Scandinavian element has become an intrinsic part of local identity. The Danish-American town of Solvang has successfully emphasized and capitalized on their Nordic heritage. This type of space-making based on a geographical place requires a careful balance between maintaining an ethnic space that locals can relate to, and simultaneously creating a themed space that will continue to attract tourists.

In Swedish-American Lindsborg similar interests are at play. Both Linds-

borg and Solvang are deliberately themed spaces that easily wake associations with theatrical stage sets. As exemplified in the case studies above, the discourse surrounding Solvang demonstrates an awareness of these parallels. Moreover, Solvang and Lindsborg provide compelling examples of the popularity and great efficacy of temporal space-making when it comes to maintaining Scandinavian ethnicity in North America. Solvang and Lindsborg have profiled themselves as “the Danish Capital of America” and as “Little Sweden in the U.S.” respectively, through temporal festivals such as Danish Days, Svensk Hyllningsfest and Midsummer festivities. Furthermore, the built environment of Lindsborg has inspired the miniature porcelain series “Christmas in Lindsborg,” thus enabling individuals to create their private, temporal—or more permanent—Scandinavian spaces in their own homes. Here, the freedom of individual space-making intertwines with the security aspect of communal place (Tuan 2007) in a creative act that expands beyond a themed space geared towards tourists.

The home and family as an arena for Nordic space-making is also demonstrated to hold great importance for many descendants of immigrants from Swedish-speaking Finland. Nordic identity, as well as other types of ethnic identity, is not always localized geographically but may also exist in private performances of ethnicity. As emphasized in both the case study on “Christmas in Lindsborg” and the study on the expressions of ethnic identity among Swedish-speaking Finn descendants, space-making can be a very personal project demonstrating individual creativity. Both studies also touch upon the level of imaginary spaces, that is, spaces referring to places that not necessarily have been visited. In Solvang, the imaginary has been taken even further into a consciously themed space.

Finally, we also want to draw attention to the fact that Nordic space-making may also occur when elements come together rather fleetingly and perhaps even unexpectedly. This is often a distinctly personal experience dealing with intangibles that are difficult to pin down. It is a space-making of an ephemeral kind that involves emotions and our senses. However, because these reactions seem intuitive to us they tend to be especially compelling.

As shown in the case studies above, examples of Nordic Space-making in present day North America are not isolated projects but a part of other endeavors, concerns and trends—social as well as individual. Viewing spaces as performed and practiced offers a valuable perspective for ascertaining some of the many levels of space-making that are at play in these processes.

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