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### **WHY WORLD CULTURAL HERITAGE?**

**Democracy, local participation and knowledge production in the world culture nomination of Farms in Hälsingland, Sweden**

**by**

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Around the world there is a rush in nominating tangible and intangible sites for UNESCO's World Culture Heritage List. The requirements for nomination are that the sites have "universal value for mankind", that they are unique and authentic, and there is a need to secure the sites' sustainable development by opening them up for the tourist industry. Sweden has a total of fourteen natural and cultural heritage sites on the list, one of which is a natural site, twelve are cultural sites, and one is a mixed site. It was anticipated that the large timbered red-painted farmhouses of Hälsingland in the north of Sweden would be listed in June 2009. ICOMOS, however, came to another conclusion and deferred the nomination.

The nomination process has lasted for over 10 years and has been a painstaking process involving the local communities and the county administration board in the county town of Gävle. The local people are partly thrilled, because they assume that there is money to earn when they open up their homes for tourists; an income that for some is badly needed because of the deterioration of the buildings due to the high costs of renovation. But some are openly critical to the entire enterprise, which is seen as a status project for some politicians and threat to the landscape by disturbing the harmony between the built environment, people and the natural landscape. In a cultural heritage nomination process, a complicated interaction arises between expert knowledge and local knowledge, which generates insights that are crucial to capture and dress in words to be able to formulate a successful world heritage proposal and not the least to make it operational.

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In May 2009 ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) deferred the Swedish nomination of *Farms and Villages in Hälsingland*. The nomination was meant to be dealt with at the UNESCO World Heritage Committee assembly in Seville at the end of June 2009.

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The nomination was turned down on almost every item ranging from the key concepts authenticity, uniqueness, representativity, and outstanding universal value to a lack of consideration of the socio-economic context. ICOMOS “deferred” the nomination rather than declining it and gave the Swedish authorities the possibility to refine the nomination. ICOMOS presented some recommendations for improvements (Document No 1282. 2009). This is where we stand today and this paper will give the background to the outcome.

In the fall of 2007 the Swedish National Heritage Board (RAÄ) sent in its last nomination in the foreseeable future to UNESCO’s list of World Heritage –Farms and Villages in Hälsingland (2007). The world heritage list now numbers a total of 890 sites of which Sweden has 14 in total (<http://whc.unesco.org>). Representatives of ICOMOS visited the sites of Hälsingegårdarna in the summer of 2008 and spring 2009 to secure, according to the statues, that the nominated objects were protected and managed according to regulations and to furthermore, evaluate the physical, economic and cultural values that were presented in the nomination text. The procedure is that ICOMOS evaluates the nomination in relation to the criteria of the World Heritage convention. They write a report based on their findings and decide whether to forward the nomination to the UNESCO World Heritage Committee or not. The committee members, from 21 countries, meet once a year to decide whether a suggested nomination should be approved or declined. If an object is declined, there are almost no possibilities to get a second chance to be incorporated in the list.

## FROM INITIATIVE TO APPLICATION

The Swedish application is compiled by the international secretary at RAÄ who has many years of experience with previous successful world heritage nominations in Sweden. RAÄ prepared the nomination based on data from the county curator who is an architect. The application consists of descriptions, explanations, maps, maintenance, protection and illustrations in accordance with UNESCO’s Operational Guidelines that give detailed instructions on how to formulate an application. It is always a loss of prestige if an application is denied. An application from Sweden has never before received this kind of response from ICOMOS and it is appropriate to say, in the light of the new circumstances, that the County Administrative Board of Gävleborg is facing a delicate situation after such a long and arduous process. It took almost 10 years to produce an application from the time that the RAÄ approved Hälsingegårdarna. This can be compared to the nominations of the sites Falun and Kopparbergslagen that were contemporaneous nominations for world heritage sites and were accepted in 2001. The proposal of the Hälsingegårdarna was first formulated by a native of Hälsingland in 1999 in a letter to the RAÄ. But before the letter was sent, the proposal was presented to the then director of Hälsinglands Museum and the county curator who both dismissed the proposal on indistinct grounds. The matter took a new turn when RAÄ in a letter which was also forwarded to the County Administration Board and The Ministry of Culture urged the proposer to further develop the argument in collaboration with the County Administration Board in Gävleborg (RAÄ 302-1000-1999).

## FIELDS OF TENSION AND THE CULTURAL ECONOMY

The county of Gävleborg consists of the provinces Hälsingland and Gästrikland and Gävle is the seat of the county government. There is a certain tension to be discerned between the local population in Hälsingland including the owners of the culturally historical farms in

Hälsingland called Hälsingegårdar and the authorities in Gävle. A great deal of the local population in Hälsingland have a historically dependent skepticism to authorities in all its different forms. In the application there is a weak tone of tension that can be discerned if one has followed the process and has had contact with the parties concerned. The proposal from the County Administration Board has an obvious lack of voices from the farm owners despite the explicit mentioning in the text of the importance of a close collaboration with them.

UNESCO Operational Guidelines demand local participation. In the proposal there is a list of the different local collaborators which is very sympathetic. Nevertheless, it may appear that the world heritage nomination is not only about the farms and the places *per se*, but rather function as means, or a front, to achieve a certain status and maybe get access to financial resources in the form of EU-grants and others. There is nothing wrong with these intentions as this is the way it is done in the rest of the world. There are great economic interests in world heritage, but it is important to stress that the proper order would be that the farm owners benefit of that money, resources and prestige materialized in work opportunities and projects instead of going to clever cultural entrepreneurs, middle-men and administrators who sell their vision of the place. In the worse case scenarios, they are neither rooted there, nor do they have deep knowledge about the place. It might be easy to forget, that the nomination of these farms began with recognition of their international value and that these culturally historical buildings were jeopardized by lack of funding for maintenance.

Neglected preservation and maintenance have not been attended to in any large extent with the many EU-millions that have been spent on different projects with their focus on rural development involving the farms. Excellent but damaged porches and portals as well as interior design from the 19<sup>th</sup> century by local craftsmen are in urgent need to be restored or to make a copy of. The permanent demand from the owners of Hälsingegårdar is financial support for maintenance and restorations in order to facilitate and promote sustainable economic development.

The world heritage nomination is estimated to have cost 15 million Swedish Cronas (approx. 1,5 million EURO) according to the county curator (Dagens Nyheter 2008-07-20). The culture economy, however, does not seem to give preference to the farm owners' economical and practical possibilities to straighten ramshackle buildings, stabilize house foundations, put new roofs on the large barns and to conserve beautifully carved porches and delicately ornamented Forsa-doors, eliminate mildews and damp damages, or, acquire adequate knowledge and education. Hälsingegårdar are in great need of academic research as well as acute conservation and maintenance.

## RESISTANCE AND DISTASTE

UNESCO emphasizes the importance to anchor the world heritage discussion on the local level to avoid a von-oben approach. Nevertheless, the investigation of Hälsingegårdar was early imbued with tensions between the local people and the County Administration Board. It is common that tension arises in the negotiations between authorities and local people during world heritage investigations. Basically this is about who has the preferential right of interpretation (the last saying) in combination with local economic struggle for access to resources. The Swedish process shows similarities, but also differences to other world heritage nominations around the world (Turtinen 2006, Saltzman 2001 & 2002). But foremost, a site must always be situated in its historical, economic, cultural and political

context, which in its turn means that every nomination process has its special characteristics and themes influencing the outcome and profile of the nomination. In the case of Hälsingland, the work was initially characterized by confusion, lack of competence, social skills and local participation, which unfortunately resulted in the rather hasty and superficial world heritage proposal. The criteria for Hälsingegårdar were unclear from the start.

In the Northern parts of Sweden the lack of nobility and upper class culture has stamped the society and created a relatively weak social stratification. In the 19th century it can be read from the narratives of the county governor that the people of Hälsingland was more difficult to govern than the population of Gästrikland. Such a parish mentality still seems to be present in this part of the country. Parish mentality exists all over the world (in Italian campanilismo) and might explain to a certain extent the difficulties for the parties to co-operate effectively. It becomes difficult to join forces, when everyone stubbornly sticks to his/her own business instead of seeking compromises and co-operation towards a common goal that would gain everyone, even the culture heritage tourist industry. But to flatter and subordinate oneself, or brag, does not fit a person who belongs to a farm that has been in the family since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. And they are many in Hälsingland. Moreover, the initiator of the world heritage nomination was a hälsing “from the people” which has certain advantages from the perspective of UNESCO as the Operational Guidelines stress the importance of local relations and consent. For the County Administration Board of Gävleborg the proposal, however, seems to have come from the “wrong direction”. The proposal came from a private person in Hälsingland and not from the county curator in Gävle. This circumstance might have colored the process in its initial phase.

### ”WRUNG OUT DISHCLOTHS”

The County Administration Board of Gävleborg has since the 1990s meritoriously carried out a number of projects associated with “displaying, protecting and maintaining” Hälsingegårdar, but it was first ten years later that the world heritage topic was brought to the fore and implemented in the projects. During the 1990s, the world heritage idea attracted more and more attention and when the political elite realized that a nomination would benefit the area some voices spoke out louder than others and claimed ownership of the idea. The troops were gathered and when the county curator was retired he remained as a regional world heritage expert and an agronomist with no or little academic training in cultural heritage research and cultural studies was recruited for the position as county curator.

The proposal RAÄ approved in 1999 coincided with the national interest X202 from 1974 in the parish of Forsa, municipality of Hudiksvall. The 1999 proposal was postponed due to several reasons. Firstly, the area still lacked the necessary prescribed laws of protection, which were due to a combination of the county’s neglect and the local politicians’ lack of interests for the topic. Secondly, the county met with opposition from the local people in Forsa. After a wild “heritage meeting”, the representatives of the County Administration Board returned to Gävle as “wrung out dishcloths”, narrates one of the participants. This incident indicates that there was an urgent need for letting multiple voices speak out about the process and be met with respect and trust.

At the same time we should carefully watch our steps and not let the local knowledge be the only governing voice in projects of this magnitude. There is a tendency to glorify local knowledge and “sneak about” because one is afraid of offending the local people. This would

be just as much a mistake as allowing the authorities in Gävle to solely governing the process. Culture heritage experts, politicians, administrators, culture entrepreneurs and owners of Hälsingegårdar all contribute to the knowledge on how we best carry out complex projects of this kind. These different, complimentary and even contradictory knowledges must be recognized, analyzed and made operational on all levels. Such an approach demands that each party is prepared to let their knowledge be deconstructed and scrutinized and maybe discarded in order to enhance the quality of the nomination as a joint effort (Aronsson 2007). It also demands a transparency and distribution of information – also the unpleasant information that could upset people. We suggest a true dialogue between the parties, which is much more complicated and strenuous than a *von-oben* approach or an approach of compliancy.

## A SERIAL NOMINATION

The serial nomination of 15 objects that made out the proposal to the World Heritage Committee was an emergency solution and a response to the problems and difficulties the County Administration Board of Gävleborg and RAÄ had encountered in their first meetings with the local people. The stated aim of the proposal was to place the architecture of these large farm houses on UNESCO's World Heritage list. The houses should furthermore be evaluated and located in their natural context. Among the objects are: the very large private owned farms of Jon Lars and Pallars in Långhed in Alfta parish; the museum farms Ystegårn in Hillsta in Forsa parish and Karls in Bondarv, Järvsö – both built in an ancient foursided square form enclosing a grassy courtyard. Villages that were nominated are the county's culture reserve village Västeräng in Delsbo with the farms Ol Ers, Ersk Mickels, Schäftners and Bommens with the neighboring villages Vi, Ås, Tomta and Mora, Fjärdsätter, Åkre and Duvnäs. The last mentioned are known as "Delsbobygden". Nominated are also the villagemuseum of Rengsjö and the farms of Erik Anders and Västergården in Asta, Söderala parish. Våsbo, a summer pasture in the parish of Ovanåkers, represents the indispensability of summer pasture for cattle breeding. Trolldalen and Växbo mill represent entrepreneurship with flax production as a lucrative and complementary source of income for the farmers.

The objects are scattered in the landscape. They represent an architectural variety and present different constellations of ownership. Each municipality is represented with at least one world heritage site, which might be more a sign of equity thinking and lobbying than aspects of preservation. Some of the proposed world heritages sites are privately owned and run as farming and forest enterprises. Other sites are public museums. The selection of objects consolidates the myth about Hälsingland as a landscape inhabited by well-off farmers, rather than the landscape that we encounter when studying the area maps and parish records of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We suspect that this kind of discrepancy between facts and a consolidation of a mythical landscape can be found in many of the global world heritage sites around the world. This is in accordance with David Lowenthal (1998) theoretical model on how heritage relates to history. Lowenthal states that "Heritage is known as just demonstrated, in ways utterly unlike history. Like medieval relics, heritage is sanctioned not by proof or origins but by present exploits" (1998:127).

## THE MYTH OF HÄLSINGLAND CONSOLIDATED

Consequently, the nomination that has been prepared and finalized by RAÄ and the County Administrative Board of Gävleborg mirrors a wishful official image based on a corresponding selection of research results on the farms from different disciplines. In its Executive summary

and the Justification for Inscription the nomination states that nowhere in the world there are as many well-off farmers who have built such great houses in order to manifest their social position in the agricultural society. The preference of building large is in line with the nowadays antiquated article published in *Bebyggelsehistorisk tidskrift* 5/1983 by Fredric Bedoire and Lis Hogdal in 1983 “Storbönder. Gårdar och befolkning i Voxnans dalgång”. This article was republished in 2000 as an offprint financed by the County Administrative Board of Gävleborg and it has been used as a scientific background text for the proposal.

The argument that the farmers in Hälsingland have built large to mark their social position leads to a false conclusion in so far as also landless in Hälsingland have built bigger than peasants in the south of Sweden. Furthermore, the farmers in Hälsingland were in the highest degree actively involved with the industrialization, that according to the arguments of Bedoire and Hogdal (see above) they were hesitant to. The entrepreneurship of the farmers, as already mentioned, played a crucial role in the accumulation of wealth to the farmsteads. To a certain extent the wealth was also spread to the landless population because as employees on the farms they were involved in the production of linen and other industrial enterprises.

A more functional explanation to their preferences of building large houses (even for the cattle) can be found when looking at the practical circumstances of every day life in Hälsingland. Lumber of great length from the forests have been available for rich and poor alike to be used for house building in Hälsingland at all times. The houses of the landless as well as a wealthy farmstead could have an elegantly carved porch and imposing interior decorations styled by skilful local craftsmen, most of them landless themselves. For a hälsing the large buildings is the normal state of building, but people unfamiliar with this architecture, problemizes the size of the farms. Building large, hence, was a tradition and the norm in Hälsingland among both the well-off farmers and the landless. By ignoring the relatively weak social stratification in the north of Sweden one misses the point of connecting the right for all to build large with the modern Swedish well-fare equality model. The very Swedish preference for a red wooden house of one's own might have its historical explanation in this early non-formulated but existing equality ideology (Harnesk 1990).

The Swedish well-fare state has largely been based on a landless working class with its roots in the 19<sup>th</sup> century rural society. In Hälsingland the landless were in majority during this century. The landless owned their houses located on the outskirts of the villages on the fringe of the forest or on other rugged land. They were called “utanvidsfolk”, “outsiders”, but nevertheless they were integrated in the norm system of society, its value grounds, codes, aesthetics and economy through their work as craftsmen, maids, farmhands, day workers, soldiers and as “help women” who were hired for cleaning, baking, textile handicraft and other duties. In Hälsingland there are buildings of the landless and small farms that have earned a place in the nomination. In the proposal the homesteads of the landless population are treated as if they were the outcast of society (only large wealthy farms are nominated) but in reality they were a strong element in the socio-economic and aesthetic landscape of Hälsingland. Thereby the nomination misses a focal point in the concept of Hälsingegårdar.

## INTERIOR DESIGN ART DEFUSED

The painters and carpenters are found among the landless, who were in majority in the countryside of Hälsingland during the 19<sup>th</sup> century when most of the large farm houses of today were constructed. They have created the high quality entrance porches, portals, doors

and an exceptional interior design art of outstanding international class and quality born and generated within the a preindustrial rural society or at the fringe of industrialization. These excellent carpenters and painters have been noticed by the art historians Lars Stackell and Manne Hofrén, but their research has not been emphasized in the proposal to the world heritage list. The illustrations in the proposal are surprisingly thin considering that Hälsingland is famous for its colourful high quality folk art.

Surprisingly, more effort has been put on the inserting of empty quotes that simply confirms the buildings uniqueness and grandeur. We find that the proposal would have gained by inserting illustrations of e.g. a richly carved Forsa-door, an elegant porch from Ljusdal, a furniture typical for the Alfta master carpenter Olof Brunk, and flower-paintings by the tenement soldier Anders Ädel and the peasant painter Jonas Hertman trained by a town painter – often appraised as work by fraternity artisans from the town, but in reality produced by the local craftsmen (Andersson 2000).

The County Administrative Board of Gävleborg leans firstly on the myth of Hälsingland as an ideal landscape of well-to-do farmers (storbönder) and secondly on its special interest in the wealthy vernacular architecture of the area. The proposal mirrors to a large degree these special interests, which can readily be seen from multiple and irrelevant drawings of frames for windows and doors. Moreover, the interiors with wallpaper get an unreasonably large space although they are not specific for the vernacular architecture of Hälsingland, but are present in different social spaces in Sweden and many other countries.

#### SPECIAL INTERESTS AND GLORIFICATION

The proposal would have gained on an in-depth critical close-up examination. It has little connection to the more recent culture heritage research findings and to the necessary broadening of the analysis to gender, power and class perspectives. The comparative outreaches are unsatisfactory due to the lack of comparative material from the magnificent vernacular architecture found in the world, for example, at the Black Sea in Turkey, in Romania and Switzerland. The connection to academic research is weak and consequently new and highly relevant texts and insights have not been effectively communicated. This would have lifted and profiled the grandeur of Hälsingegårdar and toned down other less important aspects presented in the proposal.

Unfortunately, the proposal is an example of the lacking of research competent staff at many of Sweden's county administrative boards and RAÄ and thereby creates a space where knowledge is based on personal interests and arbitrariness rather than on scientific systematic knowledge. There are several factual errors in the proposal text, for example, that an artistically unskillful family from Dalecarlia who earned their living as painters in Rengsjö during the 19<sup>th</sup> century had a great impact on the interior design in Hälsingland. On the other hand the high quality interior design of Jonas Hertman originating from the 18<sup>th</sup> century has not been communicated in a satisfactory manner although he was a native of the area where he successfully established himself as an artist.

The Operational Guidelines demand that the applicants prove the uniqueness of the proposed objects. In the case of this proposal, the words have literally been overused (e.g. on page 5 these words are to be found 6 times), which have the counter effect on the reader, as these key words are not well-founded in the text. As already mentioned, ICOMOS came to the

conclusion that the uniqueness and authenticity were not proven in the proposal of Hälsingegårdar from the County of Administration Board in Gävle.

In accordance with the demands of the Operational Guidelines an almost indefinite number of investments, preservation plans and protection of the historic buildings in Hälsingland have to be realized and reinforced if the nomination would have been accepted. The proposal anticipated that the countryside must be prepared for a sharp increase in culture tourism and the University College of Gävle should introduce new courses on Hälsingegårdar and vernacular architecture. A new information centre is also planned. Again, these proposed plans are not in harmony with the reduction of the Hälsinglands Museum in Hudiksvall that has been degraded from a professional culture-historical museum to an amateur museum lacking personal and financial resources. Hälsinglands Museum is the natural node around which the world heritage nomination would revolve by functioning as a knowledge bank and information centre and with museum pedagogic educational activities. The County Administration Board has not strengthened the position of this museum as a visitor's venue. With our inside perspective, we fear that the many promises in the nomination will never be realized, at least not on the soil of Hälsingland.

Finally, the cover sheet shows a winter picture of Norrgården in Flatmo, Forsa parish. It has the tight dignity that characterizes Hälsingegårdar. It stands above it all as if it contemplates over the business of world heritage nominations. Norrgården lives up to the saying of UNESCO". It is important to underline a fundamental principle of UNESCO, to the effect that the cultural heritage of each is the cultural heritage of all". The temple of Borobudur in Java and Norrgården in Sweden are both powerful testimonies of human dreams, ambitions and development. They are both worth preserving.

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