

Irma Uuskallio

Prestigious dwelling places

A socio-cultural analysis of the prestige
of housing districts in 20th century Helsinki
and south of Tehtaankatu street

Summary



I The aim of the study

The purpose of the analysis is to find out which external factors have influenced the prestige of housing areas in Helsinki, how the prestigious areas and their location have varied in the city space throughout the 20th century and how these neighbourhoods have changed from an inside, inhabitant point of view. The study is multi-disciplinary in the sense that whilst being a study in urban sociology, it also borrows concepts and ideas from social and environmental psychology, human geography and architecture and, partly, their theoretical frameworks.

The study gives more substance (does away with) to the one-sided idea that housing preferences are determined only in terms of housing price. People's housing preferences are the sum of various other factors which make a difference, too. Over time, this has a broader significance for urban culture.

The study is both a historical synthesis and a local narrative of the 1990s. It specifies the characteristics of so-called prestigious areas in Helsinki over a century and provides, by means of a sociological urban study, an inhabitants' point of view of one such attractive area. The target of the study are the social content and narrative of prestigious areas, and these are studied at various points in time as expressions of class culture, ways of life and habitus and as an itemised reality, through architectural features and housing fashions.



Furthermore, the study looks more intensively into changes in how inhabitants value various housing areas (i.e. neighbourhoods) and what elements their views are based on use value, exchange value, social and symbolic value (Jean Baudrillard 1972). The values of interviewed inhabitants are interpreted and presented in terms of their “conceptions of the place”. This consists of inhabitants’ knowledge of the place (instrumental orientation), their emotional relationship to the place (expressive orientation) and their sense of place (cultural orientation).

The study produces a number of new theoretical assumptions and hypotheses for specifying the concept of a prestigious area. They have been compiled as conclusions in the form of a typology of inhabitants of prestigious areas (see pp. 4-5 and appendix 1).





II Housing preferences as expressions of class culture in 20th century Helsinki (conclusions from the historical part)

The existence of prestigious areas in a city reflects the occurrence of economically successful people and the inherent structural tendency of segregation that has taken various shapes over a century. Historism – the style ideal that prevailed in Finnish urban construction in the late 19th century – represented a European urbanism, a luxurious major city urbanism that remained the “new style” of the upper class and the bourgeoisie up until the early 20th century. The history of prestigious areas in Helsinki highlights, above all, the tensions between the inner city and peripheral areas. In the early 20th century, central Helsinki was still a high-status luxurious housing area. The best and most valuable housing grounds lay right next to the biggest and most frequented streets. At the same time, the word “suburb” had a bad ring to it.

Housing ideals in early 20th century Finland were taken from Central-European bourgeois ways of life. People’s choice of area was largely dictated by birth, social status and economic assets. Differences between social classes were great. In the early 20th century, individual inhabitant narratives about inhabitants’ profession, income, education and life-style could, to a great extent, be derived from where a person lived. At the same time, the role of economic, social and cultural factors for an individual’s life-style and housing mode was



obvious. The “economic” factor almost totally determined the social and cultural dimension, too, because economic opportunities were closely linked with social class and, indirectly, with life-style and housing mode. The tenure

status of dwellings did not altogether separate inhabitants socially, because rented housing was common among both gentry and workers. To the working class, the housing models of higher social classes represented a desirable way of living which, to most, was still sheer utopia. Various social classes were conscious of their own social, mental and physical place in the urban space.

Together with the process of Finland becoming nationally independent in 1917 and with other large social issues, the ideals of city planning and construction accelerated the spread of a new style, i.e. the national romantic vein born out of art nouveau and the Finnish folklore. Requiring, however, expensive construction methods, it blossomed for only a relatively short time. When the rationality and efficiency of Functionalism gained ground, the popularity of the Finnish Jugendstil or Art Nouveau declined for many decades.

The characteristics of Functionalism were bareness, simplification and simplicity. Its crucial visual message was discipline and straightforwardness, and its mental content underlined social equality and the philosophy of utility. Functionalism became an inherent part of the Finnish ethos, and its form idiom strongly influenced people’s ideas of what is beautiful.

With its simplifying expression, Functionalism stripped housing of its symbolic meanings and historical allusions. It penetrated the entire society and broke old social borders and class-distinguishing features in the streetscape. The one-sided social narrative of both location and housing on the bourgeoisie - working class axis lost much of its colour and vigour. The prestige of certain areas in the city centre that had been popular among the gentry up until the 1920s was contested by areas in the city’s outskirts or even outside it.

After the Second World War, Helsinki had to house tens of thousand evacuees from the areas in eastern Finland that Finland had been forced to cede to the Soviet Union. In 1945 these people made up almost ten per cent of Helsinki’s population, and these circumstances, along with a general change of attitudes, put housing prestige and locus into an entirely new light.

The rise of the “garden suburb” ideal in the 1950s increasingly highlighted the contrast between a densely constructed inner city and a spacious outer city – to the favour of the latter. In the 1960s, the triumph of ‘the new and the modern’ still looked uncontested. The spacious and nature-oriented way of constructing of the garden suburb enabled a rise in housing standards and the comfort of inhabitants. The close-to-nature location of suburban housing was an asset besides the high technological standards and other contemporary characteristics. In the early 1950s and 1960s, the word suburb had favourable connotations in Finland.

With extensive construction of large areas with element concrete blocks in the 1960 and 1970s, however, the drawbacks of the triumph of equality started to appear. These extensive suburbs were standardised and uniform in style, and individual architectural features were rarely used. Furthermore, people also started finding faults in the community structure and services of suburbs, and a stereotyped idea of the suburb as a housing environment was gradually born in people’s minds. To some, it represented what Bourdieu has called a choice of the inevitable. As a consequence of efficient suburb construction, the “place” as an individual housing space became anonymous and colourless, and emotionally indifferent.

After this period of monotonous construction, people started asking for individual features, variation and smaller scale. The consumer-oriented atmosphere of the 1980s made public image and information the crucial values of the day. The market reacted by creating a variety of new alternatives – for anyone who could afford them. The 1980s produced much new housing in a post modern spirit: small, colourful and neo-romantic. The rise of Neo-romanticism as an architectural style – as a new kind of non-historical Art Nouveau – to the position of leading ideal in housing construction contributed to, on one hand, the promotion and sales of a post-modern surface culture model and the practice of disposable construction and, on the other, to an old and durable “fashion of sustainable development”. Faster and faster people were able to fulfil their dreams through their housing choices.

Changes that took place in inner city housing in the 1980s reflected the trends of the time and changed the picture of urban culture. The stone blocks of inner Helsinki had a renaissance again with new connotations. Professionals of planning and arts, but other young and well-educated people, too, started to take an interest in old dwellings and old construction culture. The meanings of the old milieu were revised. In the relatively affluent post-industrial society of the 1980s, the construction strata of central Helsinki were treated like artefacts, whose market value rose with rising demand.

In Finland, it was only in the 1970s that consumption modes showing people's social status became possible, and the 1980s brought a "consumption feast for everyone". Modern totemism flourished and triumphed in the field of housing, too. The old construction strata in the old bourgeois districts became attractive. Little by little dwelling places turned into brands. The authorities and the professionals of the field endorsed this development, and consumers paid the bill. The market forces did their best to back the trend. The price gap between the most and the least attractive dwelling areas grew.

Post-modernism and commercial culture

A phenomenon relating to post-modern ways of life and housing ideals was the growing popularity of certain inner city districts usually of a low status initially. This phenomenon is often referred to as gentrification. Refurbished and efficiently promoted, these gentrified areas are also an expression of the popularity of an individual and service-oriented urban way of life.

Given the high level of housing prices in central Helsinki, living in the old stone centre of Helsinki is easily perceived as elite housing. Due to change in the social structure, prestigious areas function as arenas for upper-class, middle-class and so-called new middle class cultural expression in the city. Today, when the characteristics of the old class society have weakened, people express themselves increasingly through their consumption habits, their life-style and their will to emerge from the crowd.

The luxurious character of the research areas, Eira and Ullanlinna districts, rely on the sparseness of Art Nouveau in the city structure and a small-scale combination of style and construction – and on the rarity of this combination. The age of buildings, in its turn, provides patina and antiquity value. The combined effect of social, economic and cultural values imply exceptional prices. The cultural-historical role of the old stone city and the position of its buildings' aesthetic values in the field of housing culture have received little attention, perhaps because they closely relate to areas where investment in personal identity are considerable. Fitting well into its time, this phenomenon comes close to the consumption of art or arts items (e.g. Bourdieu-Wacquant 1995).

From the point of view of city culture, it makes a difference whether we conceive unusual housing assets as mainly economic luxury or, e.g., elitism in a social or cultural dimension. Elitism has had a strongly engaging role in society. Economy and social issues are closely linked to each other. They can be combined into a discourse that deals with dwellings and homes as trade-marked goods.

The overall commercialisation of culture concerns neighbourhoods of cultural and historical value crucially. The old construction stratum as merchandise is a relatively new phenomenon in Finnish urban culture. The sales promotion of housing has organically added the characteristics of symbolic capital to its message, which boosts the spread of fashions and the need to refine new housing needs for consumers that are increasingly eager for distinctions. Housing advertisements and ideas and values of real-estate agents shape the profiles of Helsinki's districts. They strongly determine and legitimise current values. The situation creates an illusion of separateness between buyer and seller, although in reality both act in the same direction. Fashion is never in the hands of the market forces only: it always has a link to society.

The ever-present force of materialism has been a characteristic of the post-industrial era. In the late 20th century, the idolisation of various capitals reached unprecedented dimensions in people's lives. The commercialisation of culture has converted our ideas of ourselves and our environment. In people's habits, the limits between workday and holiday, the material and the spiritual, the material and the immaterial were blurred – and transferred to vital arenas for cultural manifestation of the media society.

The post-modern consumption feast in the 1980s provided new opportunities for a change of identity. It was possible to try new life-styles. Players cruising from one field to another became a visible phenomenon of the new era. To many Finns, the consumption feast was perhaps their first chance to create a personal bond to their neighbourhood which was significant both economically, socially and culturally – although not necessarily culturally their own. As people's housing careers went on, symbolic factors relating to the locus took an increasingly central position in the values of inhabitants. To more and more people, their home in the city became a thing that could be appraised both in an economic and a social sense, a thing whose characteristics were determined by a growing and increasingly specialised group of professionals, the real-estate brokers.

Whereas earlier an individual's ties to his neighbourhood adopted certain social, economic and cultural class borders and had common measurements, these ties gradually became fragmented pieces of life's framework, pieces that could be converted and transferred rapidly according to the needs of the day. Less and less, your home or your neighbourhood would express your personal background or family history, your memories or emotions. They would even turn into objects that you could appraise from outside, separately from the rest of your life. Their task was often to show a socially approved position – or someone's dream of such a position.





III Qualitative part of the study: inhabitant typologies of prestigious areas

The discussion about locus in the socio-cultural section is multi-disciplinary. The study produces a number of new theoretical assumptions and hypotheses to define what the concept of a prestigious area in a major city is. They have been compiled as conclusions in the form of a typology of inhabitants in prestigious areas (i.e. neighbourhoods). The types emerging from the material function as both mental and demographic inhabitant generations where the 'traditional inhabitants' represent the oldest stratum and the 'players' the youngest one. Between these extremes we find the 'aestheticians' and the 'pilgrims', which differ to a greater or lesser extent from the extremes. The inhabitant typology also contains an interpretation of how housing-related values have manifested themselves and how, at certain points in time, they have been emphasised as values of use and exchange, and as social and symbolic values. The typologies specify, on one hand, the most crucial findings yielded by the research material and, on the other, the picture of internal cultural change in people's idea of a prestigious area.

The in-depth interviews were delimited only to those who own their home and those who had lived in the neighbourhood for at least four years. 31 people were interviewed, among whom 12 were women interviewed separately, 5 men interviewed separately and 14 husbands and



wives interviewed together. This material was divided, depending on how long they have lived in the neighbourhood, into “old inhabitants” (over 20 years in the area) and “new inhabitants” (less than 5 years in the area). On this basis, four heuristic inhabitant generations could be distinguished, ranging from the “traditional inhabitants” to the freshest newcomers (app. 1). The responses of the interviewees were analysed with regard to what internal cultural change had occurred in neighbourhoods. It manifested itself in inhabitants’ conceptions of the dwelling place. The set-up for comparing cultural change in prestigious areas was integrated into the material on the axis old – new inhabitants.

Several theoretic frameworks and interpretation theories lent themselves for the study and directed the shaping of the questions. Studies and writings (auto- and biographies, for example) were used. The reporting of the study has been a dialogue between theory and empirical findings. The ambition was to shape the target of the study using interpretations that differed from the earlier framework and to present them in the form of typologies, ideal types (Weber 1949). In the typology, observations have been combined into meta observations by the aid of which the matter is studied at a more general level. Statistical generalisation is replaced by theoretical generalisation, whereby conclusions are not made directly from the material but from interpretations of it. Those issues are more interesting that we are less aware of.

The typologies were shaped mainly out of theme interviews, narratives of inhabitants and the researcher’s interpretation of these narratives. The idea was to identify local identity both as an individual and a community-related category, as interaction between the inhabitant’s cultural capital and the neighbourhood’s social and physical world. The inhabitants’ idea of the neighbourhood consisted of elements of both a physical, a social and symbolic environment. This approach embodies Edward Soja’s (2000) idea of the need to study the ‘physically and empirically perceived, conceived and lived urban space’.



Type I – The “traditional inhabitant”

is someone born in the neighbourhood who have inherited their dwelling and whose ancestry for several generations goes back to Helsinki. In terms of class culture, these people belong to the Swedish or Finnish language inner circle of the ruling class or the bourgeois middle-class. Long roots in the neighbourhoods, a long process of enculturation, have implied a natural profound knowledge of the neighbourhood and strong identification with it. Such a local identity requires common norms, goals and values, and it can be identified in the habitus of the individual. The idea of the neighbourhood that these people have is shaped by the strength of the family strategy and the enculturation. Inherited cultural capital has been merged into life-style and class habitus. The local identity manifests itself primarily in non-economic epithets in the speech of these inhabitants. This identity relates to the home neighbourhood in its basic meaning, to a genuine and authentic idea of the neighbourhood and a deep commitment to the neighbourhood at emotional level, too (topophilia). The ideas of the neighbourhood of the original inhabitants are determined by symbolic values.

Type 2 – Professional aestheticians and romantics

Those fitting into the category of “aestheticians” are markedly aware of historical cultural values and appreciate them. They may be representatives of creative professions or other lines of business whose housing is characterised by cultural hedonism. This type is also characterised by their emphasis on the know-how involved in the constructed environment. Professionals of housing, these people “know” the good neighbourhoods. To these aestheticians, managing to get a home in a culturally and historically valuable neighbourhood is an achievement primarily as a symbolic value, but it may also include an economic dimension. Aesthetic values are also emphasised by representatives of the economically-administratively upper middle-class or the new middle class who have remained in their class or ascended socially.

The aestheticians’ conception of their neighbourhood is characterised by a strong, yet self-acquired knowledge of the neighbourhood and by solid topophilia that excludes all intentions of moving away. To them, the social world of the neighbourhood opens up through a small number of acquaintances, usually at professional level. For the rest, contacts with other inhabitants are indifferent. The aesthetician, who keeps a distance to the social world of the neighbourhood is particularly aware of differences between various city districts. His ideas of the neighbourhood are professional and the result of personal analysis, and they make a distinction with regard to suburbs.





Type 3 – Modern pilgrims – the neighbourhood as a dream and project of life

This type compares with the modern type of person to whom the dream of success and the fulfilment of this dream is their crucial meaning in life. The modern pilgrims are the crystallisation of the 20th century philosophy of efficiency, implementation and economic and social success. They are markedly driven by their belief that they can reach a better tomorrow. Their endeavour to rise socially may take the shape of a project for life. For these modern pilgrims, their home and neighbourhood are the result of persistent consideration, saving and accumulation of housing assets. Many years of scrimping and saving and moving from cheaper dwellings to more expensive ones have taught them to take an interest in and value their new neighbourhood and to increase their knowledge of it. When they have reached their goal, they have a permanent feeling of satisfaction of the achievement. A strong sense of success is characteristic of these modern pilgrims.

By paying the entrance fee, an expensive dwelling, the pilgrim becomes, at least in his mind, the member of the local inner circle. The individual consolidates his social identity and position. This type of inhabitant emphasises social status and tries to raise his own. The neighbourhood represents the illusion of the ideal life and life style. Satisfaction gained from the neighbourhood primarily refers to the social world.

The modern pilgrims, whose conception of the place imply a 'cultural goodwill', have a more superficial knowledge of the neighbourhood than the aestheticians. Their relationship to the inhabitants of their neighbourhood is distant. The only place they could consider moving would be some better address in the same neighbourhood. As a result of their own endeavours, their relationship to their own neighbourhood has become permanent. Their background is either middle-class or working-class, and their career shows social ascent. A social facade is important to them, and their ideas of suburbs are clearly negative. These people had personal experience of living in suburbs.

Type 4 – The economic player

is a manifestation of one of the main streams of the post industrial era and as such, the opposite of the modern pilgrims and a kind of passer-by. Short-term planning and hazard are characteristic of this type of inhabitant. Primarily, these gamblers accumulate economic wealth and gain symbolic value-added from their housing investments in becoming members of the community. The most important element is the satisfaction gained from gambling with high stakes on the housing market. These people look for new targets and wait for the right moment to sell their homes to get a good profit.

Theoretically, the extreme type of economic player could be a person who fulfils his material and superficial values and lives as an outsider – only concentrating on consumption. To him, his housing career means economic success and a means for social success. He may, for example, deny his personal background, such as his parents' social position. He has transformed or acquired his habitus to suit his own needs in life. A conception of the home and neighbourhood thus formed implies an inauthentic and illusory membership of the inner circle. It has been acquired by buying an address.

As a cultural type, these gamblers represent the dream of fast economic ascent and success, and they hang it out for display in a life-frame that they find suitable. They have not had the time to get acquainted with their neighbourhood – a place that you do not take any interest in is hard to internalise. Their knowledge of their neighbourhood is superficial, their feeling for the place is that of an outsider and their conception of the place is inauthentic. These people feel their home and neighbourhood is luxury and a visible social and material achievement. The struggle between symbolic and economic values is won by the economic ones.



The charm of old construction strata – the rise of environmental values

It is obvious that investment in a home in an expensive neighbourhood has, to many inhabitants, primarily been something else than mere economy. Thus, changes in the prestige of a neighbourhood can be seen, for example, as various identity meanings of the modern and post modern. The old neighbourhood can function as a protest against the pragmatism and everydayness of modernist aesthetic or, equally well, as a revolt against the populism and the entertaining-oriented and ephemeral character of post-modern architecture.

Only in the late 20th century did the glorification of novelty that had long prevailed in housing construction turn into an appreciation of cultural variation. A renaissance of the repair and maintenance of old dwellings followed. Individuality and class in construction combined with high quality had become rare in urban housing at large – they had been perceived as a kind of luxury, something for the elite. The old construction strata started to be seen as prestigious housing environments in the late 20th century, and also as a kind of novelty – a novelty where the durability and quality of the constructed environment both as a mode of construction and an aesthetic value were pronounced.

The popularity of old historical urban strata is a manifestation of the extensiveness and visibility of the modernist stratum in Finnish urban culture and, at the same time, a sign of how thin these historical strata are. To some inhabitants, the aesthetic values of old buildings represent high-brow housing culture and unmatched aesthetic values, and to others, they represent mere objects whose trade mark and economic value are the most important factors. Preference of small-scale old urban environments may be seen as counterattacks against the mainstream of regulating planning, against city planning as we have seen it and against an urban policy that emphasises efficiency and density at the expense of the human dimension.

The strength and popularity of the old stone city as a housing neighbourhood also relied on the background of the area's inhabitants and on the social-world-narrative derived from it. This was linked to idealised ideas of elitism and its manifestations. High-brow housing culture represented an attractive housing environment not only to the affluent and the aestheticians, but to people who made a housing career, too. To the latter, the environment indicated social ascent. In the late 20th century, the prestigious neighbourhoods in Helsinki provided a means to distinguish themselves for those

who felt that the old urban housing style would endorse their identity and social status or be a label of their social ascent. Typically, the old stone city would represent the end of a housing career, the fulfilment of a dream.

A prestigious dwelling place is also a challenge to compete for the urban space. Class struggle has turned into a struggle for the arenas of life. A high motivation for moving to a neighbourhood implied, at the same time, a subjectively charged appreciation of the place, a significant choice, even life-long endeavours.

In a cultural phase impregnated with the importance of public image and communication, knowledge of the history of the locus decreased, and the housing neighbourhood turned into a value in itself, an address-for-value. Thereby, the 'valued' would sometimes be the label that was glued on an otherwise meagre local narrative. The neighbourhood became a material for building your identity and, to some, material and environment-related even to the extent that the housing purpose of the dwelling area turned secondary to a fine address. There was an increasing shift of emphasis from the home onto the neighbourhood. A decrepit dwelling in a prestigious address became a better alternative than a good dwelling in a low-status neighbourhood. The reputation of the prestigious fed itself. Success became accumulated when the authorities, planners and real-estate brokers legitimised a neighbourhood's prestige. The buyer bought this, too, and paid the bill because the prize, the personal message going with the product, was desired and satisfactory. For buyers of dwellings, however, the problematic bit may be that the qualities of a neighbourhood reflect themselves in housing prices regardless of the qualities and shape of the dwelling itself.

It turned out that in Finnish urban culture, a prestigious environment no longer contains the same kind of uniform social and cultural narratives as in the early 20th century. Residence in prestigious areas is no longer determined by class culture but by consumption culture. Such housing has become the fulfilment of many dreams, a fulfilment that has been reached as a persistent personal project of life.

The message of the old constructed environment internalised by the inhabitants has, on one hand, changed from what it was at the time of construction and, on the other, turned into a reverse value against the mass construction practice that has been going on for so long. To many, the background narrative of the locus has been lost. And whereas earlier the essence of prestigious housing might have lain in a novelty of construction and style and a quest of harmony, a garden-like environment and a family strategy or, for example, in

glamorous high-society life with servants and chauffeurs, it now requires the additional factor of durability of construction mode and architecture, antiquarian housing, as well. Successful housing may also consist of new-found small scale housing or simply a frame of reference in life – justified by today’s ideological meta language, an exceptionally high monetary value.



Appendix I
Typology of inhabitants in prestigious dwelling places

Type of inhabitant	traditional inhabitant	aesthetician	pilgrim	player
personal background and characteristics				
class habitus	mostly the core group of the middle class	economic-administrative middle class or socially ascended new middle class		new middle class or social ascender
mother tongue	Swedish, Finnish	Finnish, Swedish	Finnish, Swedish	Finnish, Swedish
resident since	birth or very long	fairly recently or recently		recently
first own dwelling in	the same neighbourhood	a suburb or the stone city		a suburb or the countryside
forms of social life	privatised inner circle, nostalgia of <i>Gemeinschaft</i>			weak local commitment, post-traditional community
local participation	participates and takes an interest	does not participate but takes an interest		takes no interest
distinctions with regard to other neighbourhoods	no strong distinction	suburbs versus others	suburbs	suburbs
plans for moving	no plans	no plans, or to a finer house in the same area	little plans, or to a better address in the same area	indifferent
Conception of the place: knowledge of the place	self-evident, strong	adopted, strong	learned	superficial
topophilia	profound	stable	stable or indifferent	weak
sense of place	authentic, legitimate	high cultural goodwill		inauthentic
identification with the neighbourhood	a sense of belonging to the neighbourhood			a weak sense of belonging to the neighbourhood
predominant idea of the neighbourhood's worth	symbolic	social		economic
cultural reproduction of the dwelling place	return to one's roots	cultural hedonism, aesthetic values	fulfilment of a dream, a social achievement	economic profit the main purpose
the type of cultural reproducers	tradition-preserving (family strategies)	cultural reformers (cultural representors)		(accumulators of housing assets)
the role of the type of inhabitant in the field	gatekeeper	teacher	invader	passer by