

REFUGE OR RESOURCE: HOME AND NOSTALGIA IN POSTSOCIALIST ESTONIA

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this article is on nostalgia as it appears in the representations of home-decoration in postsocialist Estonia. This theme is explored, describing a dialogue and conflict between different versions of relating to the past. The empirical material comprises qualitatively analysed in-depth interviews and articles in home-decoration journals from 1997–2008. Examining some dimensions and mechanisms of nostalgia in this specific context enables to demonstrate how is transformation from Soviet everyday culture into Western consumer culture conceptualised through ideas about the home. I will suggest that in Estonian everyday life nostalgia is not only a form of escapism into the past from the uncertain present and identity problems, but it also works as a resource to cope with the traumatic past, negotiate and forge new identities.

KEYWORDS: home • postsocialism • nostalgia • consumption • heritage

INTRODUCTION

All through human history and culture the dwelling has been a complex of images that offer proofs or illusions of stability to a human being. It is one of the central integrators of a man's thoughts, memories and dreams (Bachelard 1999: 54). In contemporary Western world the home has remained an important arena that mirrors the interplay between society and individual, it is a way of organising everyday life and privacy. A home can be seen as social practice – it brings together the levels of ideology and everyday. Aesthetics, moral and politics meet in the dwelling (Saarikangas 1993: 30, 439). At the same time home is a focus of modern folk culture and mass consumption as a place for creativity and self-expression. Creating a home is increasingly closely connected with the creation of identity (Löfgren 1990a: 32).

Soviet society was based on the profound reconfiguration of domestic relations, the individual, the home and daily life as part of a larger demiurgic process of social reform. For Soviet ideology, the sphere of daily life and, in particular, the home, was the arena in which this fundamental restructuring of society was thought through and materialised (Buchli 2002: 210–211). Therefore, it can be also be seen as a key analytical context for understanding social change in postsocialist societies.

There are numerous studies that examine the rapid transformation processes in the Estonian political and economic fields. In the field of media studies, cultural sociology

and consumption some remarkable contributions have been published over the past few years (Lauristin 1997; 2004; Aarelaid 1999; Aarelaid-Tart 2001; Keller 2004). However, the relationship between social changes and the formation of new everyday culture has not been adequately studied yet. This article first provides a theoretical discussion on the relationship between domestic objects, memory and nostalgia. Secondly, it will describe the background for the situation in which diverse new identities and lifestyles started to take shape in the 1990s in Estonia. The article then proceeds to an empirical analysis of some more distinctive conceptions of home decoration that shed light on the different interpretations and functions of nostalgia.

MEMORY, OBJECTS AND NOSTALGIA

The domestic environment can be looked at as a constant signifying process in which temporality and spatiality are closely bound together. As people relate themselves to the environment, this takes place on many levels, but here especially the time level is in the focus of attention. Time is layered in the domestic space and so it becomes a carrier or witness of past times. But history is reflected only through the memories and interpretations of the inhabitants.

Objects serve as guideposts to orient the individual in, and personalise, both space and time. It is possible to examine nostalgia in everyday life through recollections concerning objects, since they carry along with them memories and personal histories. The object thus becomes the site of recollection, an expression of an individual and/or collective past (Korkiakangas 2004: 122). The narratives about artefacts demonstrate how their owners think about the connection between the past and the present. Their use sheds light on the relation between cultural continuity and change. Here personal history and the history of the nation are intertwined. According to ethnologist Ene Kõresaar life history interviews can help to open the symbolic aspect of an object. In case of a life story, the intimate importance of a thing to its user is essential, but in a wider context – on the level of life history, things express special relations that rule between life and society, different social and cultural practices in the community (Kõresaar 1998).

Things structure the life-course not only in biographical interviews or memoirs, but we can also find other forms of representation – family albums, collections of souvenirs, memorabilia or pictures on the wall. We can speak about the ability of things to condensate cultural knowledge (Löfgren 1990b: 201, 204).

Memory often appears in the form of nostalgia. Through objects nostalgia can be directed towards, on the one hand, very individual memories and sensations, on the other the emphasis can also be weighted towards the utility and practicality of objects that were formerly perceived to be clumsy and old-fashioned. For example, the non-modern may become desirable and modern when transferred into a new cultural context (Löfgren 1990b). Peasant culture may be adapted to what is seen as modern and contemporary. Objects can activate memories associated with varied atmospheres and feelings and can even appear as representations of a bygone era. Images of things develop into signs or symbols of a kind of communal identity such as that of the rural idyll.

The concept of nostalgia was coined in the 17th century, meaning a kind of severe homesickness. By the 19th century, a considerable semantic slippage had occurred and

the word began to lose its purely medical meaning – it gradually became less a physical than a psychological condition. What made the transition possible was a shift from the spatial to the temporal. Nostalgia was no longer simply a yearning to return home. Already in 1798 Immanuel Kant had noted that people who did return home were usually disappointed because, in fact, they did not want to return to a place, but to a time, a time of youth (Hutcheon 1998: 2). Thus, since time, unlike space, is irreversible, nostalgia becomes a reaction to that fact.

Nostalgia is a feature of Western modernity. It has been argued that modern nostalgia is due to an identity crisis or a weakness of self-confidence in the present, which is compensated by turning to an idealised past (Greverus 1979). Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw singled out three key requirements under which nostalgia develops (Chase, Shaw 1989: 2–4):

1. A view of time as linear and with an undetermined future, as is typical for modern Western societies.
2. A sense that the present is deficient, applicable to societies and cultures as wholes or to particular groups or individuals within a society; the undesirable state of the present is compensated by a turn towards the past.
3. Objects, buildings or images from the past must be available in order to become appropriated nostalgically.

In contemporary society, nostalgia is manifested on different levels. It is a characteristic of the present to imbue consciously almost everything with an aura of nostalgia (advertising, fashion, tourism, etc.). That gives us a consumable identity. Usually these types of nostalgic feelings serve commercial interests and thereby nostalgia has become a tool for manipulation. Arjun Appadurai describes the mechanism of contemporary nostalgia industry:

Rather than expecting the consumer to supply memories while the merchandiser supplies the lubricant of nostalgia, now the viewer need only bring the faculty of nostalgia to an image that will supply the memory of a loss he or she has never suffered. This relationship may be called armchair nostalgia, nostalgia without lived experience or collective historical memory. (Appadurai 1998: 78)

Ulrika Wolf-Knuts has demonstrated how nostalgia is frequently used by modern mass media, appearing in writings about food, textiles, home interiors, cosmetics and healthcare, gardening, tourism, etc. Using symbols like idyllic peasant cottages, scenic views, elements from childhood, symbols of peace and warm colours, evoke memories of childhood or at least culturally shaped knowledge of how it must have been in the good old days. Products are claimed to be “ancient”, “from pure nature” – genuine, clean and trustworthy. One finds nostalgia associated with all kinds of subjects, even horoscopes (Wolf-Knuts 1995). Nostalgia thus plays an important role in all branches of cultural industry.

Nostalgia is also an important characteristic of various ideologies. It is hereby important to note that nostalgia is a transideological phenomenon, for example, nostalgia for an idealised community in the past has been articulated by ecological movements as well as nationalist or even totalitarian ideologies. Nostalgia also emerges strongly in post-colonial cultures. In the case when nostalgia is used for the purpose of

nationalism, we can often talk about the invented tradition – the past is represented in images that are useful to us in the present and that reflect our bias and current concerns and are effective to mobilise people (Hobsbawm, Ranger 1983; Hutton 1999: 86). In the modern world the need for nostalgia is also often expressed through folklorism. Neither remains historical science seldom untouched by nationalist nostalgia, especially at politically unsettled times. Nostalgia inevitably appears as a defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals (Boym 2001: xiv).

Nostalgia has many dimensions that are partly overlapping and partly complimentary (Wolf-Knuts 1995: 187). It not so much describes the past, but is a way of transmitting values and ideas that are important in contemporary life. Nostalgia is a kind of play with time. It is typical that nostalgia awakens in situations where expectations and hopes have not been met. The force and most important quality that distinguishes nostalgic recollection from other ways of looking at the past is its ability to transform the everyday into something significant and unpleasant into something pleasant.

Nostalgia is an universal phenomenon and its mechanism is largely similar everywhere. The techniques that are used to evoke nostalgia are rich details, simplification, idealisation, sharp contrasts and intensification (Wolf-Knuts 1995: 208).

Due to its comparative nature, nostalgia connects the past, the present and the future. Nostalgic sentiments are expressed through similar mechanisms, but are always shaped by specific cultural concerns and struggles. Since there is no consensus in the Estonian society about the attitude towards the past, so is nostalgia not manifested in one single way, but through a multiplicity of ideas and practices.

THE HOME IN TRANSITION

In the case of Soviet Estonia both Western and Soviet conceptions and patterns were combined in private everyday life. It served as a “subterranean ‘reservoir’ of unorthodox and dissident practices and opinions” (Garcelon 1997: 317) as well as an arena of adaptation and collaboration in the Soviet system. It has been demonstrated in previous studies that the cultural disruption after World War II in Estonia, often emphasised by historians or political scientists, was not total in everyday life. To a remarkable extent, cultural continuity was carried on in the domestic arena, largely in a silent manner, through objects, patterns of behaviour and ways of organising and using the private space. Thereby, home-making became an important way of constructing privacy, individuality and security (Kannike 2002: 218; 2005; 2006). Building one’s own home or summer house with one’s own hands (and taking advantage of what actually belonged to the “system” with the help of trustworthy network) was a strong statement of self-fulfilment and a sign of a “true Estonian”. Also, the discourse on issues of the private sphere used the vocabulary that stressed its culturally distinctive meaning as a space where different cultural codes were applied.

The socio-economic changes in the 1990s – transition to market economy, privatisation of land and housing, opening up of everyday life to global patterns of culture and consumption – were accompanied by the sharp differentiation of lifestyles and mentalities in Estonia. Social scientists have emphasised a general turn from a collectivist culture to individualism as a characteristic feature of this decade (for example, Aareleid

1999; Lauristin 2004). Earlier homogeneous consumption has been replaced by diverse consumption patterns (see in detail, Lauristin 2004: 277–278).

In the mid-1990s when some social and economic stability had been achieved, a real boom of home-decoration broke out, marked by the mushrooming of respective shops and numerous home-decoration journals and newspaper supplements in 1996–1998. Those journals enjoyed and continue to enjoy great popularity. Ethnological fieldwork carried out at that time suggests that in everyday culture home did not lose its central position. It continued to symbolise important values and a remarkable proportion of time and money available was and is invested into the building, reconstructing and decorating of homes (Kannike 2002: 47). The readers actively respond to the topics discussed through their letters, sometimes as comments to articles, but more often describing their own experiences, dilemmas and solutions as they carry out their home-making projects. A yearly event that attracts much attention also in the dailies and television, is the “Beautiful Home” competition arranged by the journal *Kodukiri* and a real estate agency. The winner receives 50,000 EEK and much attention, pictures and interviews with the authors of the best projects are always published and thereby obviously influence the general understanding of how a “nice home” should look like. Over the past few years television programmes on home decoration issues have also become quite popular.

What is introduced and taught by mass media also sheds light on the general ideological orientation of everyday life. Importantly, discussions over problems of taste and aesthetics are frequently connected to debates on the cultural belonging of Estonians, about values, ideals and dreams. The practical advice of professional designers or people who have just completed renovation in their home or are in the middle of decoration process is very often combined with general debates on worldviews and identities. Seemingly trivial aspects of everyday environment and behaviour are thereby regarded as important signs of self-definition. This is not surprising, since, according to Lotman and Uspenski, the change of cultures (especially, in eras of social cataclysms) is usually accompanied by a “sharply increased semioticism of behaviour, whereby also the fight against old rituals may acquire deeply ritualised character”. At the same time not only the introduction of new forms of behaviour, but also the strengthened significance (symbolism) of old forms may give evidence of a certain change of the type of culture (Lotman, Uspenski 1993: 327).

Thus, home-making practice, re-structuring and re-modelling of private space also acquires ritual dimensions. Looking at the debates on domestic culture it is significant that a lot of the key concepts used here are connected with categories of time, history and memory. It is the use of historical or “historical” objects that provokes debates and often distinguishes different strategies of defining new identities. In those debates remembering is not neutral but acquires emotional colouring and a strong nostalgic character. Such nostalgia not only emerges in the verbal form, but also speaks through visual texts – the silent language of objects and pictures.

In this context, looking for the reasons why nostalgia appears as a central issue in debates about home decoration will also give another insight into the larger theme of history, memory and identity in postsocialist Estonia that until now has mostly been studied from the viewpoint of autobiographical narratives or political history and the public discourse (Aarelaid 1998; Kirss, Kõresaar, Lauristin 2004; Kõresaar 2005).

Through taste and aesthetics people consciously or subconsciously try to communicate status and social position. In a situation of social and cultural disorientation the attitude towards collective and personal heritage becomes a cultural weapon. So, not surprisingly, one also frequently comes across debates over “right” or “wrong” nostalgia in postsocialist Estonia. Accordingly, in discussions on home design there is a clearly articulated tension between change and constancy, consumption ideology and timeless values, traditionalism and modernism.

Studies on consumer culture in Estonian transition society have demonstrated that in the period 1995–1997 a shift towards the aesthetisation, postmaterialisation and increasing refinement of consumption took place (Keller, Vihalemm 2003; Keller 2005). Since then a part of the media functions as a legitimator of elite culture and taste, but a majority attempts to respond to the popular taste and mainstream fashion trends.

Until today there exist no clear-cut hierarchies of taste in Estonia, but different attitudes to memory and local heritage enable to distinguish between some common versions of home-making. Below, some approaches to the use and interpretation of nostalgia in home-decoration will be described. Of course, we have to keep in mind that in many cases we cannot speak about any consistent strategy at all. Available resources and family situation largely determine the space left for creativity and ideal solutions on the home front.

Version 1: Appropriating Local Heritage

Among Estonian intellectuals a home or a studio in a historical building was highly valued already in the Soviet time. Medieval construction details, painted baroque ceilings or *art deco* ornaments were carefully restored, the furniture was acquired from antique shops, ordered from designers or made by oneself. This was a strategy of symbolic distinction from the socialist reality filled with standard interiors and low-quality objects. Today we can see that many families representing creative or academic professions cultivate a distinctive lifestyle using the same resources, but now opposing to unifying consumerism and mass taste. In their domestic interiors solid and traditional urban architecture and conscious choice of authentic antique objects is combined with professional artistic creation. The interior must not necessarily be totally “stylish”, some degree of eclecticism and some room for improvisation is highly desirable. Continuity and the historical dimension are most important values here that provide the family with a sense of security. Renovation of such a house is not just practical home-making, but a mission.

In such homes family history may be displayed in the form of some objects or photos, but the symbolic meaning of older layers of local heritage is even more significant. For example, Epp, an artist who lives in a historic house in the old town of Tallinn, speaks:

It is important for a human being that you do not live alone here, that people have lived here before you too [...]. The centuries-old history of the house itself gives the background that cannot be found elsewhere. Unsymmetrical rooms, unexpected

niches and corners, old stoves, fragments of murals, etc. contribute a lot to the individuality of a home under a skilful hand. The objects and furniture that have come to the family over time have their meaning, their story that altogether make up the story of this family. Individuality and thrift offer a support in the nervous turn-of-the-century tumult. (*Kodustuudio* 1995: 4–6)

Families who have sufficient resources to buy a house often prefer a building of the 1930s in a green district like Nõmme in Tallinn or Tähtvere in Tartu. Reconstruction works in such a house are usually time-consuming, but the dream of a home in a “golden age” house usually keeps the owners going.

The home of Jana and Endrik in a stylish Nõmme villa is a perfect reconstruction of the 1930s world. Every door, window and floor was carefully restored or copied and the young family spent lots of time at antique fairs and shops to find authentic details. The furniture is either pre-war or in “old Scandinavian style. Wooden floors, light wallpaper with little motifs, light wooden panels, pastel and oak brownish colours.” (Kivi 2008: 18) The owners demonstrate a keen interest in the history of the house and its previous owners and a wish to identify not only with their physical environment, but also their values. Endrik says:

Wanderer [first owner of the house – A.K.] was the head of the Nõmme Home-owners’ Society. I would totally agree with most of his ideas and principles. He was worried about the roads and infrastructure of Nõmme, houses that were not cared of and gardens full of old stuff. (*Ibid.*: 18)

Raivo, a theologian and university lecturer also lives in a big house in Nõmme, built by a colonel of the Estonian army in the 1930s. This house is a compromise between strongly expressed nostalgia for the pre-war lifestyle, the practical needs of a family with five children and a desire for individual artistic expression. The ground floor represents a stylish 1930s interior with period furniture and is a perfect setting for listening to old tangos or romances that Raivo loves and a collection of old dolls. On the first floor the walls are dark red, the floor is painted blue and the childrens’ rooms are all different. Like other owners of a restored historical house, Raivo does not regret the money spent for that purpose, because “it was such a noble house, it was worth to be restored, you just had to do it.” (Toome 2008: 27)

Jaanus is a musician and tv-journalist who has decided to move permanently to his country-house in Hiiumaa. There is no electricity in the house, but the family fell in love with the place at first sight. “It was breathtaking. The coast, the nature, the birds. The only thought was: we have to get it.” (Kuldbek 2008: 10) In this case a nostalgia for nature is combined with a nostalgia for roots, because Jaanus’ ancestors come from Hiiumaa.

I feel a mental connection with Hiiumaa, the tradition that comes with the family and the names is rich and impressive [...]. This little village, the tiny community that I come from became incredibly important to me. I have my own sacred places there. [...] A well, a tree that was tall already when my mother was a child. (*Ibid.*: 12)

In the mid-1990s representatives of the economic capital also discovered historical old-town dwellings as well as former Baltic-German manor houses in the countryside. In

this case we usually have to do with a practical investment, but a moment of nostalgia is not of little importance here either. For Estonians as a peasant nation, the manor or the city palace of a nobleman has for centuries symbolised “good life” and “good manners”. Especially the 19th century Biedermeier aesthetics has remained influential for a long time despite modernist campaigns, and now once again emerges in the homes of the newly rich. Although the heritage used here is not Estonian in the strict sense – the town houses and manors were built by German nobility or merchants – it is perceived as symbolising national values and a distinctive Estonian way of life. So the way of life of the former upper classes is nationalised for economic, prestige as well as nostalgic purposes.

Version 2: Combined “Historical Style”

Compared to the previous examples, the design in such homes is more eclectic. These are often attempts to personalise a new industrially produced house or even a standard apartment in a (Soviet-time) block of flats. Typically characterised as “romantic style” in the press, the interiors display lots of handmade objects and souvenirs combined with pieces of peasant furniture and modern imitations of historical styles. The general impression is sometimes unacceptable for advocates of “good taste”.

Artistic production presented as art that actually is third-rate, tasteless and usually sentimental, is widespread among uneducated consumers of art. [...] The gradually deepening wish to own old furniture (prestige, image) can become a major stumbling block causing slips of taste. Dilettants should not try hand in this field. (Alling 1996: 12–13)

However, such homes are approved by mainstream home decoration journals reflecting their readers’ understanding that the “sense of home” and “warmth” are more important than clear-cut trends or uniform style. The inhabitants often draw their inspiration from foreign home decoration journals. “Old English” style with floral patterns, fluffy cushions and romantic curtains seems particularly popular. Strict modernist interiors are considered cold and uncomfortable.

Anne who lives in a Finnish pre-fabricated house reads lots of English, French and Italian home decoration journals, looking for interiors offering timeless cosyness, not minimalism.

Why should I feel uncomfortable on a hard and rectangular sofa? Or change a white cover even before anybody was able to sit on it? Oh no! But when she notices a round form, she is immediately thrilled. (Arak 2007: 10)

In descriptions of such interiors and in interviews with the inhabitants, family history and the “stories” of objects are discussed in detail and are clearly a priority. The owners here like to rearrange the rooms and “play” with things, but the home-decoration is never totally changed, because there are a number of “special” things that symbolise emotional continuity.

Our home consists of objects that are close to the heart and connected with memories; things that are associated with our hobbies, pieces of furniture that have

travelled with us from one place to another. [...] The wicker furniture comes from the maidenhood of the housewife. The old buffet was saved from being sent to the dump. The chest that serves as a table was bought from a crafts fair. [...] The renovation started gradually and in a way that the former atmosphere of the house would be preserved. There is still work to do for years. The owners are happy with this and say that work is most enjoyable when one can do it little by little. (*Kodukiri* 1998: 10–12)

Version 3: Individually Experienced Heritage

The homes of many young urban families and their attitudes to the process of home-making reveal the emergence of a new type of nostalgia. This attitude is not only characteristic of home decoration. It also reflects a shift in the general attitude towards folk culture and national heritage of this generation. For these people, an important part of their lifestyle is to do things with their own hands in the home and to feel and sense the past. Phenomena from the rural folk tradition have been revived here for cultural recycling. When the old and authentic is cleaned and exposed, it is mixed with personal artistic creation, international heritage and solutions of modern technology. Like in the previous cases described above, home-making cannot be a quick makeover, but a long process, a challenge that transforms not only the physical surroundings, but also the personality. For these home-makers there does not exist any general model of “good taste” or “authentic history” to be followed. Originality and individual investment of time and energy are considered most important.

So, for example, Suusi (a woman in her late 20s) who spent her childhood in a block of flats in Mustamäe longed for a “real home”. Before the birth of their child Suusi and her husband moved into the upper floor of a house with garden and tried to “please the house and its era” – the thirties – in their rearrangements. Suusi describes what an effort it was for them to “scratch the flat out from behind too orderly and straight wall gips and other too beautiful “euro”. [...] The minimalism seen in journals is not suitable for old wooden houses”. (Saabre 2005)

Kitchen cupboards had remained here in their full beauty of the 1990s. At first it seemed that they simply have to be thrown out. But economical thinking won: why produce rubbish and order another sawdust framework. [...] “I stained the wooden doors and the result was better than would have been, ordering new ones from a salon. Actually I rather support such eco-lifestyle. [...] The door bought from a shop got an appearance pertaining to the period: all that we needed was a brush, some paint and first of all the courage to make a move.” Stories about old pieces of furniture that were bought one by one from antique shops are also a natural part of that home. The generation of their parents considered such furniture old-fashioned and worthless [...] their dream was a flat with all modern conveniences. “But I grew up there and longed for my own garden and home in a wooden house with breathing walls more than anything.” (Ibid.)

Toomas, a marketing director, renovated a flat in a 100-years-old limestone house in central Tallinn:

The hardest work was the cleaning of stone walls. It took weeks to clean each of the walls. At first all layers of wallpaper and pasteboard had to be removed. Then finally came the plaster that I actually hacked off with axe. [...] But the idea for the curtains came from a bar in Miami and the idea for textiles in the bedroom came after we visited London: we wanted the bedroom to have a touch of boudoir. Most of the furniture is renovated Indian antique. (Kivi 2006: 11–14)

His wife Tiivi considers a special way of gardening very important:

There are big flower boxes behind the bedroom windows where in winter we have bonsais and heather, in the spring there are pansies, then marigolds and then asters. (Ibid.)

A couple in their early 30s, Mari, who has worked for an advertising agency and is now at home with two children and Erki, a public relations manager, lived in a flat in a suburb of Tallinn, but then built a new home – an environment-friendly log house 270 km from Tallinn.

We wanted a home where the wisdom of old traditions and contemporary facilities would be united. The house is 100 per cent handmade – curds paint, clay plaster, linseed oil, reed mat, old bricks and, of course, timber. We tried to use only local resources. Sewerage was built as a wet-area cleaner. (Pajula 2006: 22, 25)

The young couple advocates for a “natural way of life” – they eat only local food, teach the children various farmworks, etc.

In the city words often seem hollow, but here one speaks about things as they are. And many issues that bulk large in the big city seem quite empty from here. (Ibid.)

These examples illustrate a general tendency that in contemporary Estonia folk culture has become a positive alternative to the levelling tendencies and commercialised everyday life (see in detail, Aarelaid-Tart, Kannike 2004). Home-decoration may become a means of renewing traditional patterns of behaviour and thinking, using a code that is understandable in modern society. This is a longing for a past or a place that those young people have never personally lost. Such attitude is also closely connected with general ecological awareness increasingly popular among the young generation.

Version 4: Nostalgia Rooted in Personal Memories

In the homes of the elder generation we can often see a form of nostalgia associated with happy times in the past, with childhood, youth, lifetime hobbies, etc. In some cases time even seems to have stopped. The interiors of the 1970s or even 1960s may have remained unchanged for decades. There are also quite a number of homes where the furniture comes from pre-war times or is even older. While for the elderly owner a great part of the interior is associated with memories, at the same time whole rooms function merely as storages. The static nature of the home is a value in itself, providing the owners a sense of security, the highly appreciated “peace and quiet”. Frequently whole parts of rooms are dedicated to remembering. Such is for example a house in

Tartu, built by a university professor in the 1930s where now his elderly son Jakob lives in the same way as the family did 60 years ago.

In this home the original integral style has been preserved. One can hardly see a piece of furniture here less than a hundred years old. The large parlour has been kept as it was in the old times. [...] Even today the housewife lays the table in the dining room. There are hundreds of tiny things to which a contemporary man even cannot give a name. Here they are carefully kept and loved in their places. (Kivisalu 1998: 22)

Such a return to the past clearly has a therapeutic function. The desire to keep something unchanged reflects the aim to attach and strengthen one's identity by maintaining old features. Here the function of nostalgia as "a counter-force, a security and point of reference from which to view the present" (Åström 2004: 23) is most important. Such attitude is of course not specific to the Estonian transition culture, but characterises the conservative lifestyle of the elder generation everywhere.

But this type of nostalgia is not always associated with passive reflections and retreatment from contemporary life.

Steffi is an old lady in her 80s who has lived abroad for a long time and returned to Estonia some years ago. She mentions some "anchors of memory" in her home that are especially valuable, like a china coffee-set that she took with her when the family had to flee from Estonia in 1944 and that has accompanied her in her homes in Germany, Austria, England and Canada. Persian carpets remind her of her late husband whose family was involved in carpet business. But the nostalgic dimension of this home does not only involve material objects. For Steffi her collection of books and opera-videos are among the most important things that give her home its true feeling. Unlike that of Jakob, Steffi's home is not a "memorial museum". She likes to buy new things (as she can afford it) and has given a number of valuable items away:

She has given her grandmother's silver wedding crown to the Kadrioru Art Museum, some jewellery and expensive clothes to friends. "Why should I keep my long mink coat when it is too heavy for me to wear it now?" (Kivi 2008: 43)

In the homes of the elder generation one also comes across a more specific dimension of nostalgia that has largely been ignored by the home-decoration journals – nostalgia towards the Soviet time. In public debates on Estonian history the Soviet decades appear as the most controversial period and there is no consensus yet achieved over this time. In debates over the "nice Estonian home" the Soviet time has been used as a negative contrast from the late 1980s already, but recently the attitudes have become more ambivalent and nuanced. For a part of the elder generation the objects from the recent past symbolise a time that is not wholly appreciated, but in retrospect is felt to have provided relative safety and stability compared with the present day.

At the same time the design of the 1970s and 1980s has been discovered by the young generation in the context of global retro-trend. For them it represents the same sort of exotic as an old chest from a peasant farmhouse and since they do not have personal memories of that time, their attitude to it is more relaxed. Recently even the attitude to the most negative symbol of Soviet unified and impersonal everyday life in Estonia – Lasnamäe, an enormous district of block-houses in Tallinn – has acquired some nostal-

gic features. Compared with the sterile new suburban areas it appears more colourful, interesting and, paradoxically, even more private:

Sometimes I even feel sad when I remember the panoramic views. [...] Sunday walks to little shops selling weird Russian and Ukrainian goods, the downstairs neighbour who organised polyphonic evenings of Soviet songs with a piano accompaniment, the friendly Russian cleaning woman who was like a symbol for the whole house; a sense of home, but at the same time absolute anonymity, the possibility to hide from the surrounding world. [...] In my new home in the middle of urbanised district of summer houses I will never be so sheltered like in Lasnamäe. (Karu 2006: 17)

However, in reality most people would definitely not want to return to the Soviet everyday and there is no widespread Soviet nostalgia comparable, for example, with the widespread attitudes in Russia (see Boym 2001: 41–48).

Version 5: Contested Modernism

The first home decoration as well as “society” journals in the mid-1990s started to display homes of the new “elite”, mostly young businessmen, where the key words describing the design were *stylish*, *expensive* and *international*. In such homes – usually new houses in new prestigious suburban districts – there was little space left for the family’s own creative imagination. Even the smallest details were designed by professionals to make sure that everything was “right”. The owners clearly preferred not to be reminded of their earlier status and lifestyle. The family history was not “noble” enough to be put on display and signs of the Soviet period were eliminated as quickly as possible. Importantly, here, a modern minimalist interior did not primarily reflect the aesthetic preferences of the inhabitants, but a wish to change one’s image quickly and totally, creating a contrast to the late-Soviet massive and abundant furnishing style and demonstrate the adoption of a “European” lifestyle.

The following remark is characteristic of descriptions of such homes: “The few pieces of furniture taken from the old home are almost unnoticeable in the new spacious home.” (Kodustuudio 1997: 9) Trends are a priority here over memories and old objects, even if the latter are more practical than the new fashionable furniture. Contrary to the traditional Estonian way of keeping things “just in case”, here, if the old furniture or memorabilia do not fit in, they are thrown away. So, for example, a prominent interior designer describes the process of furnishing the new house of a bank manager:

In the living-room a painting in greenish-blueish colours was the starting point before all pieces of furniture. Only the old black piano had the honour of being taken to the new home. (Kadalipp 1996: 37).

Thus, here we can speak about strongly expressed counter-nostalgia where the emphasis is on “forgetting” or filtering the disagreeable aspects of the past. The modern interiors emphasise the positive (idealised) future that is contrasted to the backward past. However, such practice was not only praised and set as example, but also criticised as upstart’s behaviour and lacking common sense.

But by the late 1990s the “total look” trend started to crumble. The standards that

seemed desirable just a few years ago were now criticised as lacking personal touch, too cold and sterile. The previously “exclusive” materials now looked too common. Importantly, most critiques mentioned that the emotional and historical dimension was missing in those interiors.

Today there are few purely modernist homes in Estonia. Although it has become prestigious to order a minimalist project from a well-known architect, the family usually wants to decorate the interior by themselves and the principle “less is more” is rarely followed. However, it would be a simplification to equal living in a minimalist home with denial of history or personal memory. A house with bare walls and huge windows may serve as a perfect background for admiring the surrounding view and therefore, the desire to be in the middle of nature. This is just another form of nostalgia, not the lack of it.

On the other hand, some “modernists” argue that there are psychological reasons behind lifestyle choices. For example, a young business manager who owns a minimalist flat argues that the people who cannot live in a home without “anchors” of memories are just psychologically unbalanced and insecure. They are afraid of adventures and new experiences and therefore attached to moth-eaten furniture (Vool 2003).

Over the years people’s attitudes towards home decoration principles have become more relaxed and trusting one’s own taste is more common. People are no longer ashamed of their nostalgic feelings. For example, Inge, a middle-aged country woman writes to *Kodukiri*:

Earlier I always made the effort and tried to match things and colours. Tried to create order. Everything has to be in its fixed place. [...] But now I have finally realised that comfort, a cosy feeling for the family is more important than order and beauty. [...] I took out all the sweet things that are important and dear to me and my family, although they are unpractical and put them on the shelves and cupboards. It is not important whether they match with other things. The atmosphere and unexplainable sweetness that affect our souls are important. Let the trends be whatever they are, they do not make a real home. (*Kodukiri* 2005: 16)

CONCLUSION

Nostalgia is a special way of thinking about the past and the future at the same time. It is never merely a longing for the past, but also a response to circumstances in the present. This is combined with a system of values so that different times get different qualities. Thus, nostalgia is a phenomenon through which the pre-modern cyclical understanding of time manifests itself in modern folk culture – attempts to re-experience the bygone time and attribute the qualitative nature of time. The aesthetics of nostalgia is less a matter of simple memory than of “complex projection; the invocation of a partial, idealised history merges with a dissatisfaction with the present” (Hutcheon 1998: 3).

Outbreaks of nostalgia often follow revolutions and social upheavals. This was also the case in late 20th and early 21st century Estonia. However, the specific character and typology of nostalgia are of local character. Like in the Soviet time, nostalgia is a means of maintaining identity continuity in postsocialist Estonia. Everyday practice often liberates itself of the ideological discourse of “good taste” and the logic of com-

merce, producing its own norms and hierarchies. Similarly to the previous decades, individual work invested in home-making and reconstructing historical milieu is used to overcome cultural dilemmas and preserve cultural continuity despite social changes and identity disorientation. It is a physical, mental and emotional process of identity-formation.

While some forms of nostalgia reveal unity with previous periods, others are inspired by the new social reality. Alongside with the extremes – passive idealisation of the past or total counter-nostalgia there exist versions of home-decoration where nostalgia also functions as a resource of prestige, creative inspiration or therapy. It appears to be a framing device within which important cultural debates take place and issues of identity are negotiated. The ambivalent nature of nostalgia in contemporary Estonia is due to the specific local pattern of interwoven social and cultural processes. As in the home different times (historical and personal time, astronomic and emotional time) exist side by side, it remains a key arena for the dialogue between personal and collective memory.

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