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Graesse, Malin; Savola, Kaisu

Nordic Revival: Crafting Rural Development in Finnish and Norwegian Design Discourse

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between what in the 1960s and 1970s was considered ‘traditional’ ways of life and the urbanised areas of the central south of the country grew. These conditions produced social differences and inequality, not only between what could be considered social classes, but also between the centre and the periphery of culture and power.

This chapter draws attention towards how these circumstances caused two different factions within the Finnish and Norwegian design communities to ‘look back’ to the origins not only of their professions but of rural regions and traditions in their respective countries. We argue that these factions can be understood as reviving the ideology behind the Arts and Crafts movement. By exploring the teaching activities of the Finnish designer and educator, Harry Moilanen and the designers in the social research group behind the Nord-Odal project (1968–1972) this chapter shows how Nordic design discourses in transition contained voices who saw the heritage of the Arts and Crafts movement and, more specifically, its Nordic counterparts (the Norwegian Home Craft movement and the Finnish Craft Organisation) as a viable option for a more just future. Furthermore, we argue that this revivalism expressed a specific definition of a national identity tied to the rural regions of the respective countries. By supporting the traditions and livelihoods of these regions, the designers presented in this chapter saw themselves as producing resilience towards accelerated centralisation of both political and cultural power.

‘Political actors first, designers second’

In the late 1960s Finland, designer and educator Harry Moilanen was concerned with the relationship between design and politics, and the way the design community should approach the role of politics in relation to design (see Figure 5.1). Moilanen, a committed socialist, designer, teacher and journalist, urged designers to be ‘political actors first, and designers second [...] because to design is to engage in a socially dubious activity’ (Siltavuori 1970, 80). According to him, one of the most urgent issues in the increasingly industrialised and urbanised Finnish society was the state of rural regions and the disappearing lifestyles and livelihoods of their people. He became aware of the issues of the countryside, such as unemployment, bad living conditions, poverty and alienation, working as a reporter for YLE, the Finnish Public Broadcasting Company, making a radio programme called ‘Everyday Lives of the Workers’ (*Työläisten arkea*).

Moilanen thus wished to direct attention towards the problem and consequences of increased centralisation. Concerned not only with the issue of unemployment and the disappearance of pre-industrial and pre-urban ways of life, Moilanen worried about the loss of the particular type of knowledge and skill at work in rural craft traditions, and he emphasised that these issues were fundamentally intertwined. This is evident in how the recording and transmission of what was defined as disappearing skills became part of the curriculum of the course called ‘General Principles of Design and Communication’ (*Suunnittelun ja viestinnän yleiset perusteet*) Moilanen was teaching at the University of Industrial Arts in the 1970s and 1980s. According to him, on the one hand, the course aimed at making future designers become aware of societal problems and issues. On the other hand, the goal was to learn how to utilise knowledge and skill sets to mitigate these problems.

As a part of his work as a journalist, Moilanen travelled across Finland interviewing people living in rural areas about their lives and struggles amidst a changing cultural

and economic landscape. Moilanen empathised with what he saw, and wanted to make it known that the workers ‘had their own thoughts and ideas about their lives and problems. Their voices are just not heard’ (Härkönen 1985, 1). To what extent he managed to communicate this message, or make voices heard, remains unclear, but in his attempts to empower the rural regions, Moilanen and a changing group of colleagues and students arranged countless workshops around different parts of Finland during the 1970s and 1980s with the purpose of revitalising traditional craft techniques and developing small-scale cottage industries that would allow the rural population to increase their income and keep on living in their home regions. Planning and carrying out these workshops often became part of the ‘General Principles of Design and Communication’ course, and design students arranged and participated in workshops exploring Karelian soapstone, blacksmithing, traditional weaving techniques from Eastern Finland, boat building from the Western archipelago, and burl sculpting from Northern Karelia, to mention a few. The programmes of the different workshops varied: some were about recording and transmitting disappearing skills, others about designing new products to be made and sold by farmers in order to increase their income, which had plummeted due to industrialisation (see Figure 5.2).

For example, a project in Eno, North Karelia, lasted throughout the 1970s. The starting point was to find out whether the local farmers’ craft skills could be developed into a second source of income to replace other, traditional incomes which had disappeared due to industrialisation and mechanisation. According to a report from the project, the Eno population had lived in a natural economy until the end of the



Figure 5.2 Resulting products of a workshop focused on leather barking and sewing, 1970s. Location and photographer unknown. Harry Moilanen’s archive, Aalto University Archive.

Second World War. Thus, handmade objects and tools still played an essential part in people's everyday lives, and craft skills, such as weaving and blacksmithing, had not yet disappeared (*Kansankäsityön elvyttäminen Enon kunnassa*, Harry Moilanen archive, Aalto University Archives).

The Eno project was started in 1974 by a group of students and teachers from the University of Industrial Arts led by Harry Moilanen, who began recording local craft techniques and patterns. Eno craftspeople were interviewed, and their making process and the finished objects were photographed (see Figure 5.3). The interview tapes and photographs were intended to be archived so that they would be available for anyone interested in learning traditional craft. This way, a continuation for Finnish craft traditions could be ensured. What happened to these records remains unclear, but according to the project report, this work continued until 1976, when a survey among the Eno population was made to map out the craft skills and the interest to employ them in order to generate a regular income.

Over 300 people participated in the survey, of whom 150 were interested in developing their craft practice towards something that would produce a livelihood. Throughout the process, a plan was made for how to organise the cottage industries in Eno in a way that would make it productive and profitable for the craftspeople. As a successful example, the report mentioned a contemporary cottage industry network in the Turku archipelago in Western Finland, where seventy craftspeople shared resources including a possibility for material deliveries and a small shop. At the time of writing the project report, the intention was to arrange craft courses in Eno, either to get new people interested in craft-making, or to deepen existing skills. In spring 1979, the goal was to organise courses in product development and establish a craft centre, with workspaces, deliveries for raw material and tools, and a shop. Unfortunately, remaining sources do not reveal just what, if anything, became of all of these ambitious plans. However, by 1982, similar initiatives, workshops and projects had taken place in countless villages and small towns, such as Suomussalmi, Ylä-Kainuu, Juntusranta-Ruhtinaansalmi, Selkoskylä-Pyhäkylä, Alavuokki, among others (Moilanen 1982, 21).

In the wider context of Nordic policy-making throughout the 1960s and 1970s, scholars and politicians became concerned with the decline of livelihood in rural areas. In Finland, a committee was formed in 1963 with the task of defining the so-called 'developing regions', a term describing areas struggling to follow the rest of the country in terms of economic growth and increasing welfare (Moisio 2012, 157). In addition to recognising and defining these regions, the goal was to secure them funding for development and administration. The Finnish state began to make considerable investments in building basic material infrastructure in rural regions, such as roads, hospitals and schools. Furthermore, municipalities were given the responsibility by law to arrange the services expected to be offered in a welfare state (Moisio 2012, 153).

Almost simultaneously, in 1966, Norwegian social scientist Ottar Brox published the book *What is Happening in Northern Norway (Hva skjer i Nord-Norge)*. Here, Brox expressed his concern about the social and economic situation in Norway's northernmost region (Brox 1966). While the book discusses in length the problems of the nation's economic model for the region, Brox also proposed his own solution for the current situation: cottage industry. It is interesting, but perhaps not surprising, that the idea of craft and cottage industry unfolds as a possible antidote to the

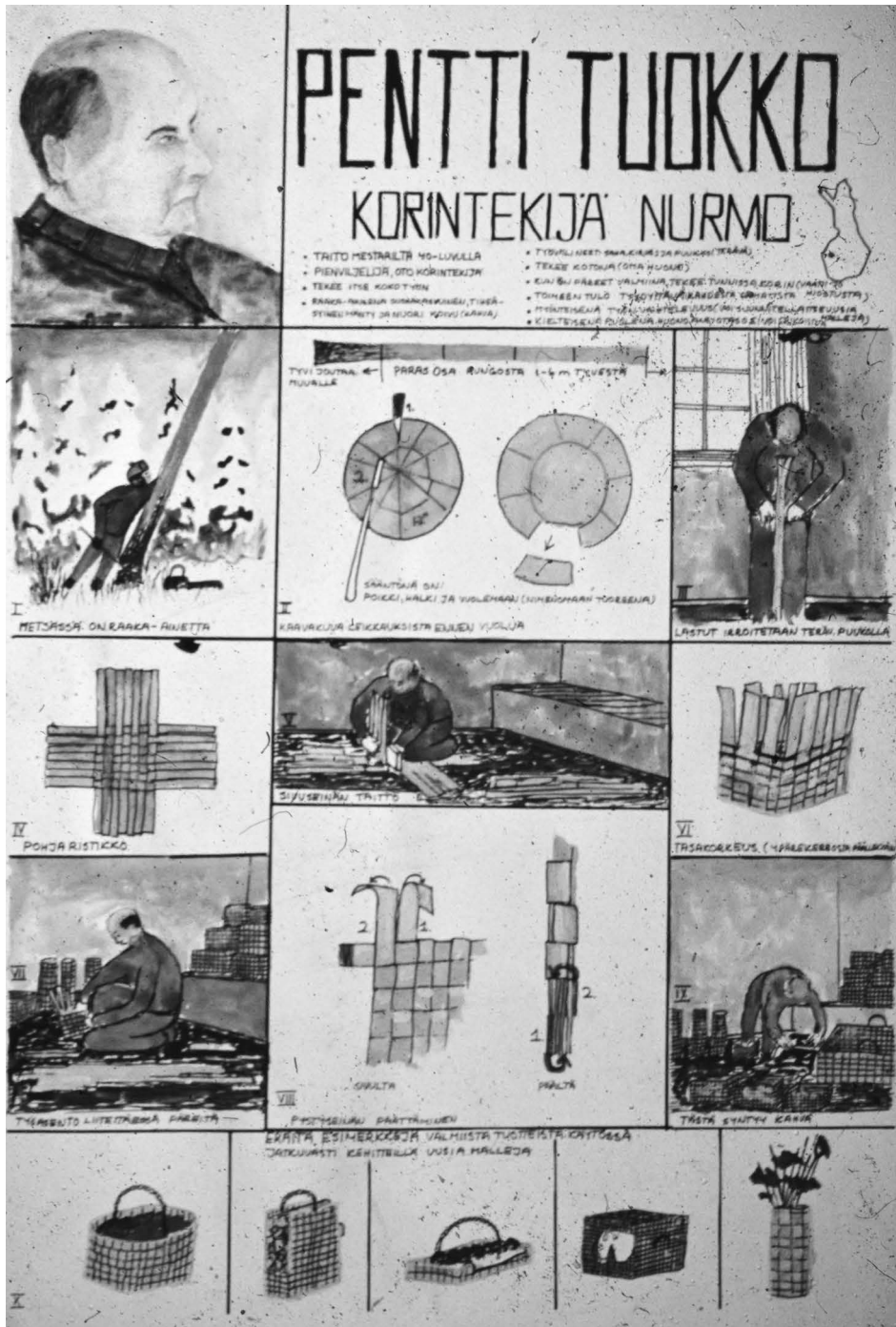


Figure 5.3 Student assignment depicting the work of Pentti Tuokko, a basket weaver from Nurmo in western Finland. 1970s, maker unknown. SVYP archive, Aalto University Archives.

accelerated centralisation interesting, because of the author's disciplinary affiliation, but not surprising because of the relationship between design and industry, which will be discussed later on.

According to Brox, while situating large- or semi-large-scale industrial production to areas with little material infrastructure or technical expertise would do little to mitigate the difficulties facing local communities, which at this point were reduced to producers of raw materials, small scale industry in the form of cottage industry would build upon already existing expertise, knowledge and lifestyles (Brox 1966). Towards the end of the 1960s, these ideas were mobilised by a group of scholars in the Nord-Odal project, an interdisciplinary study of the social and economic situation in rural Norway commissioned by the Norwegian Ministry of Social Affairs (*Sosialdepartementet*).

The goal of the project was to plan and execute an alternative model of employment for rural areas with little or no existing industry, and at the same time provide a work environment for people with social or physical disabilities. Parts of this goal materialised through the Austvatn Craft Central, a small-scale factory for serial production of handmade goods. In 1970, the Nord-Odal project scientists contacted renowned Norwegian textile designer Sigrun Berg (see Chapter 12 for more on Berg). The idea was to establish a craft production hub, organised as a cooperative. The aim was to present a model based on needs on the 'grassroots' level, it was therefore imperative that the initiative would not be perceived as being imposed upon its users by outside forces (Midré 1973).

The design ideology behind the Austvatn Craft Central was not only a revolt against the market-driven and fashionable concept of 'Scandinavian Design', but also an alternative to the contemporary Norwegian crafts discourse, whereby craft practitioners wanted to situate themselves closer to the political, aesthetic and economic framework of fine arts (Midré 1973, 206). Sigrun Berg, together with Olav Dalland and Rolf Harald Olsen, two young designers involved in the creation of the Craft Central, aimed towards what they understood as a revival of the original framework for craft and design described in the Nord-Odal project report:

[...] grounded on crafts, and it was meant as an option for employment within its local community. We were going to focus on an organised form for small-scale serial production. We regarded the hub as the heart of a system of production, and this system should utilise local resources.

(Midré 1973, 207)

This formulation leaves little doubt that the group found inspiration for a model for small-scale industry in the ideology of the Norwegian Home Crafts Movement (*Husflidsbevegelsen*) of the 19th century. As Kjetil Fallan has suggested, home craft is associated with the rural areas because of its origins as a subsidiary economy, while at the same time providing people with quality goods for their own use (Fallan 2017, 19). However, as Fallan also argues, the Norwegian Home Craft Association (*Husfliden*) was enrolled into the national market economy during the course of the 19th century, because of its appeal to urban elites (Fallan 2017, 19).

As a design initiative, the people behind Austvatn Craft Central saw the origins of home craft, and how it originated within the 'natural economy of the agrarian community' (*Naturalhusholdningen*) where resources were allocated by sharing, direct

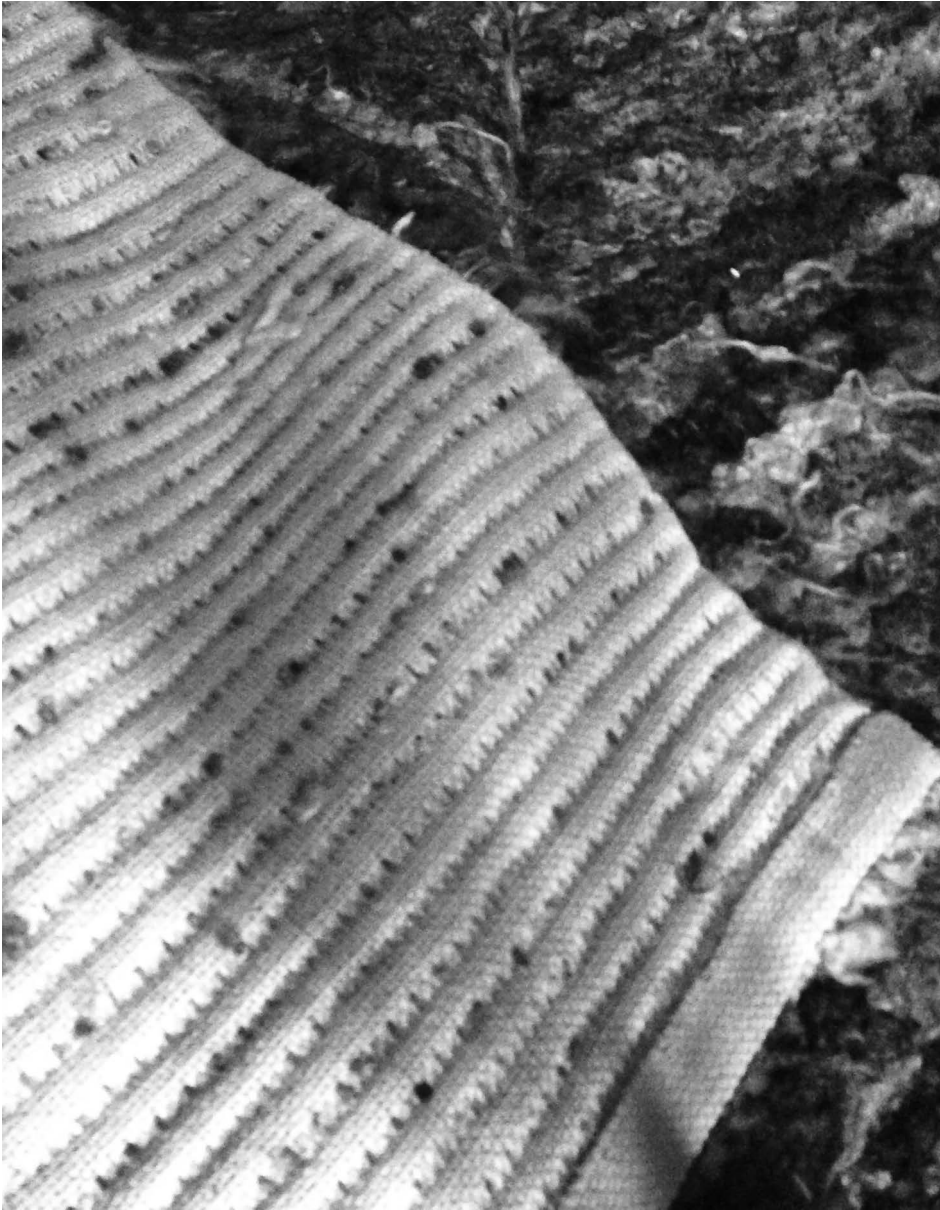


Figure 5.4 Details of the front and back of Odalsteppet, designed by Sigrun Berg. Image: Malin Graesse, with permission from Olav Dalland, 2016.

bartering or according to traditional customs, as a natural model upon which to base a small-scale factory for the serial production of quality goods (Midré 1973, 207). In other words, the Austvatn Craft Central sought to accommodate both the plight of ‘the periphery’ by offering a viable source of income for rural areas with difficult social and economic situations, while at the same time bridging the gap between crafts

and design coming to fruition in Norwegian design discourses in the 1970s by organising their activities as a small-scale factory for the serial production of hand-made goods of high quality. Case in point was the craft central flagship product; Odalsteppet (see Figure 5.4). The Odalsteppet was a custom-made flossy wool carpet woven by beating raw wool into a cotton backside. The raw wool was inserted between each cycle of the weft crossing the warp and then beaten into place, creating a flossy but durable surface with a stable cotton backside (Dalland, personal communication, 2016).

The raw wool was to be selected without attention to composition or patterning in order to produce a carpet that appeared as a total and unified wool fabric. As such, the Odalsteppet was more of a technique than a design, and each product would differ in nuance and texture. It was Sigrun Berg who came up with the design of the carpet, and her attention to technique rather than pattern unified traditional skills and knowledge with the tastes and sensibilities of the 1970s consumer. The fact that the Odalsteppet drew on existing skills and traditional techniques of handling, and caring for, raw wool implies that the craft central mobilised some of the same design thinking as Moilanen utilised in his quest for a design which not only collected and protected rural craft traditions and skills, but also put these in motion in order to give agency back to the areas threatened by accelerated centralisation.

However, unlike Moilanen, the Austvatn group aimed at mobilising these skill sets, traditions and knowledge as a means of production in an industrial age. This is where the comparison between Moilanen and the Austvatn Craft Central diverge significantly. Despite their common socialist ideology, Moilanen a self-proclaimed Marxist-Leninist and the young Dalland and Olsen inspired by Maoist ideology (Olsen, personal communication, 2017), the idea of what ‘the periphery’ was and should be differed not only because of two disparate approaches to the politics of the autonomy of rural areas, but also because of two different attitudes towards craft and cottage industry. However, it is this divergence of attitudes towards *making* that we will now direct attention to. Because, while there is a common origin behind this particular ideology of making, of the origin of craft in the rural setting, the mobilisation of craft as social aid interestingly reveals different ideas about the binarity between ‘the centre’ and ‘the periphery’, while unravelling questions of power, identity and agency.

Reviving craft as industry’s ‘Other’

Coming back to the issue of designating a growing interest in ‘the periphery’ in the 1960s and 1970s design discourses as a sort of ‘revival of craft’ serves two purposes in this context. First, it aims to situate the relationship between rural and traditional craft practices within a historical context where the heritage from applied arts and crafts movements, both globally but also regionally, is at work. The Norwegian Home Crafts Association and the Finnish Crafts Organisation (*Käsi- ja taideteollisuusliitto*) were crucial precursors and influences for the ideology and activities at work in both Moilanen’s work and the Austvatn Craft Central, if not expressly then at least contextually. Both the Norwegian Home Crafts Movement and the Finnish Crafts Organisation had from the outset been deeply involved in providing frameworks, infrastructure, and distribution channels for home craft traditions and practices to function as viable sources of income, and at the same time marketing traditional craft as viable and desirable design objects.

The second reason for designating the 1960s and 1970s interest in the periphery as ‘a revival’ in the contemporary design discourse is to unite a modern definition of craft, taking the general application of the Arts and Crafts Movement as precursors of modern craft as the point of departure, and including its hankering for ‘the periphery’ as an ideal place for the production of true and honest goods. Glenn Adamson has described this to be the co-emergence of industry and craft, which occurred not because craft was industry’s ‘other’, but because craft is the origins of industry (Adamson 2013, xiii). As such, according to Adamson, the invention of craft must be understood as in kinship with the industrial revolution due to craft’s role as the main producer of goods before the advent of mechanical mass production. Modern craft, he argues, occurred as a systematic annotation because of its nature as mechanical production’s ‘other’ (Adamson 2013, xiii). In other words, the invention of the binary between craft and industrial production relied upon industry’s urge to distinguish itself from the craftsmanship of the past.

This last part is an important contextual backdrop for a discussion about who has the power to create an image of a *rural identity*. Despite the recent critique of the Arts and Crafts movement’s apparent anthropocentrism and romantic inclinations towards a pastoral utopianism of ‘the past’, the relationship between a romanticised, or at least ideologised, idea of ‘the rural’ is at work when both Moilanen and the Austvatn Craft Central utilised what they understood as traditional craft practices to designate autonomy to the periphery. Thus, the question of who has the power starts to take shape. However, far from pinpointing the ideas and activities of Moilanen and Austvatn Craft Central as reactionary, the purpose here is to accentuate how, within a context of Nordic design discourses in transition, there were voices addressing the historical heritage of both design and sociality. In other words, both Moilanen and the Austvatn Craft Central, perhaps driven by the socialist ideology forming their activities, their heritage and their visions, understood that social inequality was situated and not universal.

Moilanen’s intention was to stop, or at least change, the course of ‘development’ in order to preserve traditions and ways of life. In doing so, however, he was also guilty of imposing his own ideas, and ideals, about traditions worth preserving and lives worth living. According to Moilanen, ‘domestic colonialism’, by which he meant the way in which capitalism was suffocating local cultures and ways of life, was one of the most urgent issues in 1970s Finland (*‘With whom do you feel your solidarity’*, seminar programme, undated, Ornamo archive, Aalto University Archives). By calling urbanisation and centralisation ‘domestic colonialism’, Moilanen put Finland’s rural population into a victimised position, likening it to forcefully occupied and exploited countries and cultures.

It is true that while rural regions increasingly became seen as ‘developing regions’, state power was represented in citizens’ lives in a new, more visible way as welfare services advanced and became available for all citizens (Moisio 2012). However, this also meant that everyone would have access not only to better living conditions in the form of electricity and running water, but also better quality of life through education and healthcare. Undoubtedly, this was done by capitalist means of economic growth fuelled by industrial production and consumption, which, for a great number of people, meant that their way of life was not possible anymore, forcing them to flee their home regions in search of other ways to make a livelihood. Nevertheless, Moilanen did not take into consideration those who welcomed the change. Perhaps they did not

fit his image of rural craftspeople living the kind of life that he found admirable and worth pursuing.

This image of rural life is perhaps exactly what is at work in Moilanen's designation of 'the periphery' as a special place where knowledge is preserved and archived. It is tempting to consider Moilanen's thinking as a romanticised version of a nation, which at the time was literally situated between two conflicting global ideologies. However, one should be careful of assigning this type of meaning behind Moilanen's project. Instead, we suggest one lingers a little on his description of the relationship between the centre and the periphery as 'domestic colonialism', because colonisation will always designate an imbalance between those who have the power to define, and those who are defined by it. Taking into consideration Moilanen's efforts to collect, archive and transmit the knowledge and skills in rural crafts tradition, it becomes clear that his project was not only one of asserting the power of the designer, the problem-solver, on to the peoples of rural Finland. He wanted to address the issue of power relationships in its totality.

The kind of threat to the total sum of the Finnish people that Moilanen saw was not an erasure of the individual for the sake of a universal Finnish or socialist identity. It was the threat of accelerated centralisation, which would erase traditional social spaces and life practices of a country. At the heart of this was the issue of making the way people had made their lives, through their crafts and individual cultures, shaped their identities as part of a whole. The centre's excretion of power, in the form of erasure of autonomy, an autonomy that had everything to do with the way people expressed themselves creatively and *made* tools and goods perfected through centuries for the execution of their lives, was at the core of Moilanen's definition of 'domestic colonialism'. Crucially, through the archival material uncovered for this research, we never learn how the rural communities and their people wished to shape their lives. The only voice that is able to provide an account of the events and their importance belongs to Moilanen.

Unlike the concept of 'domestic colonialism', the mobilisation of *making* through the Austvatn Craft Central must be understood as a way of accommodating a centralised narrative, while at the same time aiming at preserving livelihoods in 'the periphery'. Although the aim of the Craft Central was to provide means of employment, the recording and preservation of traditions and the cultural particularities of the place and people living there seems not to have been a main objective. As such, and within the context of a governmental programme of rural politics, the ideology behind the Nord-Odal project was one of providing aid, more than examining agency and identity. This aid was based on an idea of helping people in the places where they lived, with the means and skills available to them. Despite the effort, the aid was given from above.

To put this in context with Adamson's claim of craft being industry's other because it provided modern industry with the means of designating its own space, Austvatn Craft Central seems to, if not exactly succeed in its objective to revive the origins of craft and design, then at least bring this revival to the surface. However, by doing so, by addressing the relationship between industry and craft in a context of the identity politics of the urban and the rural of 1960s and 1970s Norway, the project also brought attention to a binarity between the two. While Moilanen addressed what he called 'domestic colonialism' as a means to criticise the way the centre asserted power on the periphery, the ideology behind Austvatn Craft Central, firmly grounded in

the origins of the Norwegian Home Craft Movement, seemed to reinforce a national identity of a nation built by the conjugation of small and isolated areas, separated by tall mountains and deep fjords. As such, despite the socialist objectives of flat hierarchies and self-determination, craft still became industry's other in two modern market-driven nations.

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