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Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson

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Ritstjórar: Gunnar Þór Jóhannesson og Helga Björnsdóttir

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In a newspaper article written in 1899 the housing condition of the Icelanders is described in stark colours. The author describes Icelandic turf-houses as dark, ugly underground hovels. The author finds them impractical and unhealthy, as they have low ceilings, foul air, and a garbage dump is usually situated directly in front of the main entrance (Guðmundur Hannesson, 1899). A century later, when the Icelandic financial system collapsed in the fall of 2008, the image of the turfhouse as an underground hovel appeared in the media as the symbol of the setback the country had suffered! In this paper I want to discuss the Icelandic architectural heritage and how it has become a contested project at a time when governmentally sponsored initiative to reserve a place for Icelandic turf-house heritage on UNESCO’s World Heritage List takes place. At the same time when this happens, private enterprise, like the Icelandic Turf-house Project, is responding to new governmental cultural policy with its investments in cultural heritage. In particular I will discuss how the implementation of neoliberal cultural policy in Iceland has undermined the authoritative status of the National Museum of Iceland in relation to its role as the guardian of the Historic Buildings Collection and architectural heritage. Before I proceed, I would like to briefly mention the UNESCO World Heritage List. Iceland has signed UNESCO’s agreement of Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. The idea of the agreement is to archive and evoke interest in the preservation of the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity. Close to 200 countries, including Iceland, have signed the agreement which has enabled close to 1000 sites the list. This global initiative has been criticized by anthropologists and others as favoring conceptions of cultural tradition over cultural change, as well as for portraying culture as a national and political property (Scholze, 2008). It is a long process to become part of the UNESCO World Heritage List; the inscription process entails a nation-wide survey of candidate sites for nomination, followed by the enumeration of detailed justification criterion.

The negative strand towards turf-houses became in the late 19th and early 20th century a influential discourse about the modernization of Iceland. The elimination of turf-houses became a moral mission of modernization to improve hygiene and the general well being of the population. The turf-house was identified as a national problem and its elimination and replacement became part of state-led nation-building projects. As such the turf-house gradually became an emblem of “old ways of living” incompatible with modern society. In the 1920s specifically Icelandic architecture also emerged as part of the nation-building project but it did not use the turf-house in toto as a source for creating visual power. One reason for the rejection of the turf-house heritage for the nationalization project was the conviction that turf-houses lacked aesthetic qualities. For example, a newspaper article dating from 1936 stated that “a particular architectural style did not emerge in the Icelandic farm or churches. Isolation and poverty prevented people from developing such qualities, and they had to settle for a mere roof over their heads” (“Listirnar og”, 1936). As a result, a limited amount of turf-houses have survived; some of those that have became part of the Historic Buildings Collection of the National Museum of Iceland. The majority of those turf-houses are themselves from affluent farmsteads, rather than the modest turf-houses in which the majority of the population had lived for centuries. An
example of a local initiative that both complements and counters the work of the National Museum is The Icelandic Turf-house Project. In this paper I want to stress what the Icelandic Turf-house Project calls the “aesthetic atrocity” (Hannes Lárusson, 2006) of previous efforts by governmental institutions, such as the National Museum.

The Icelandic Turf-house Project is a restoration and an exhibition project about Icelandic turf-house heritage that aims to explore it from different vantage points, including the aesthetic. The Icelandic Turf-house Project is an example of a private enterprise. It is located at Austur-Meðalholt the site of a typical traditional farmhouse in the South of Iceland. In the last twenty years an effort has been made to develop and conserve the old farm, but few such farmhouses of that kind remain in the district. The intention is to create a cultural institution with the ambition to teach and exhibit turf-house heritage from at least three different viewpoints. First, is the aim of exhibiting the old farmhouse at Austur-Meðalholt which has undergone extensive reconstruction and development in recent years, eight buildings of different sizes form a homogeneous arrangement on the farm site. Secondly, a permanent exhibition featuring drawings, models and other visual materials will produce a comprehensive view of the evolution of the turf-house tradition over the centuries. The exhibition will be in a specially-designed exhibition-hall which is under construction. And third, the cultivation of practical skills which are of use in the maintenance of turf buildings and related structures is considered instrumental in the overall plan as a site for the preservation of cultural heritage.

Figure 1. The Flói Exhibition-hall, a part of the Icelandic Turf-house Project. Photo: Author

Neoliberalism and Cultural Policy

The struggle for independence and the struggle for economic and cultural development of the immediate post-independence period gave Icelandic society and its more powerful discourses quite a distinct corporatist character. This corporatism manifested itself in extensive government support for economic development and activity, the frequent involvement of local governments in the running of businesses, (for example fish plants), and the provision of guarantees from the central government for business ventures of various kinds. This changed with the election of a new government in 1991 which introduced the ideology of neo-liberalism to governance across the island (Ómar H. Kristmundsson, 2003). Now state sponsorship of economic activity was deemed morally wrong, because it skewed competition, and
was considered economically wasteful. Previously state run businesses where privatized, fishing rights were fully commoditized (Helgason & Pálsson, 1997) and a powerful discourse arose publicly of individual initiative, responsibility, and freedom (Árnason, Hafsteinsson, & Grétarsdóttir, 2003) – in which affected the cultural scene profoundly by introducing new cultural policy.

The new cultural policy aimed to reduce state initiatives and seek strategic alliances with private enterprise and municipalities to take the initiative in the forming official cultural policy and the implementation of state-supported cultural projects. That meant, for instance, that the Ministry of Culture, Education and Science allocated within the cultural sector some of its centralized power to sectors that became, as the rhetoric of the time stated, “active” agents rather than “passive recipients” of policy decisions. The new cultural policy framework had profound ramifications for cultural production and cultural practice in Iceland. For example, the number of museums and museum-related activities mushroomed. Many such new establishments became an integral part of the discourse throughout official channels that emphasized entrepreneurship and regional development. Correspondingly, the Icelandic government redefined its cultural borders and actively deployed various governmental bodies in an attempt to integrate and position Icelandic culture within the emerging global scene (Björn Bjarnason, 1995; Grétarsdóttir, 2010). In 2001 the Museum Council of Iceland (Safnaráð) was established as a legal entity, a gesture on the part of the Parliament that confirmed the structural and cultural policy change. Ideologically, these changes were supposed to serve several functions nationally and culturally; to strengthen economic development, to participate in increasing globalization, to preserve distinctive national culture and cultural identity. The neoliberal scheme managed successfully both to change the scene in terms of its policy and to restructure the financial economy of the museum scene. The government introduced, as part of contract managing (Ómar H. Kristmundsson, 2009), a new funding system intended to allocate funds to regional institutions and other cultural and heritage activities. Interestingly, previously established museums, like the National Museum of Iceland, were also officially encouraged to diversify in their financing, and as a consequence, they joined the more newly established museums and cultural initiatives in the market for private sponsorship. In the wake of these structural changes acting museum professionals reinforced their position by underscoring their professional commitment through the development of professional codes of conduct, as well as of definitions of concepts like museum (safn). Politicians and ministers became part and parcel of the endeavour, and echoed such commitments in the House of Parliament and the media. It is within this policy framework and change that we have to situate and discuss Icelandic architectural heritage.

Contesting Architectural Heritage

Since the advent of the new cultural policy framework the National Museum of Iceland has been forced to reinvent itself in every aspect. The Museum’s exhibition and exhibitions facilities have been reconstructed and new managerial practices have been implemented, such as, for example, the contracting-out of some of its previous responsibilities. For instance, in 2006 the National Museum contracted out to the National Architectural Heritage Board (Húsafriðunarnefnd) the supervision of

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1 See “Endurreisn Þjóðminjasafns” 2004. In some cases, the National Museum has contracted out portions of its collection. For example, the transportation collection of the National Museum is now located at Skógar Museum.
inspection and reconstruction of the Historic Buildings Collection, which had previously been managed by a specific department at the National Museum. The Historic Buildings Collection comprises close to fifty different edifices, which vary in scale and are located across the country.\textsuperscript{2} The origin of the Collection can be traced to the early 1920s, when the director of the National Museum was shocked by the poor condition of two stone churches and solicited funding from private sources for their reconstruction. Prior to the initiative he took to fortify the stone churches, the director had appealed, on two separate occasions in the 1910s, to the government of Iceland for financial support for the reconstruction and preservation of two turf-houses. Both attempts failed. It was not until 1931 that the first house was enlisted on the list of national archaeological artifacts (fornleifaskrá), and thus became the responsibility of the National Museum. Between 1931 and 2010 the number of houses that became part of the Collection increased considerably and is now close to fifty.

As mentioned above the Icelandic architectural heritage has become a contested project at a time when governmentally sponsored initiative to reserve a place for the Icelandic turf-house heritage on UNESCO’s World Heritage List takes place. The World Heritage List, grounded as it is in notions of localization, has among its principal criterion the requirement that the initiative for inscription must come from the local population itself, rather than the state (Scholze, 2008). The National Museum is cognizant of the importance of the criteria, however, attempts they have made to create a dialogue, or to reach out to local representatives and foster ownership and accountability in the articulation of the criteria, seem to have failed. For instance, a hotel owner and local authorities in the South-East of Iceland have disregarded any warnings by the National Museum and the National Architectural Heritage Board that construction plans for the hotel can endanger the chance of a local turf-house church in the area to be enlisted on the World Heritage List (Nikulás Úlfar Másson, personal communication, March 24, 2010).

\textsuperscript{2} The Collection can be seen on the Web at: http://www.natmus.is/minjar-og-rannsoknir/husafn-
\!/husin-i-stafrofsrod/
Similarly, any attempts by locally-based individuals, such as Hannes Lárusson and the Icelandic Turf-house Project, to attain a permanent role in the inscription process, has also failed. At the same time, the mobilizing efforts of individual or privatized enterprises on behalf of neoliberal governments have strengthened them, in the sense that they have been enabled by market-oriented curation to stake a greater claims on the role of guardianship over national culture. Such regional empowerment in cultural affairs has encouraged individuals, museums and other cultural institutions across Iceland to take initiative in representing national cultural history. Many such initiatives have not, prior to their establishment, sought any support of the National Museum or any other national cultural agency within the field of cultural heritage. As we have seen, neoliberal cultural policy has emphasized, where possible, the support of private enterprise within the cultural sector. This support has come in different forms which includes seeking advice in cultural matters outside of conventional institutional circles. This shift in policy has also had implication for the involvement of The Icelandic Turf-house Project in the domain of official curation and cultural guardianship. The former World Heritage Board (Heimsminjaskránrúunafnd) (between 2007-2009) approached the representative of the Icelandic Turf-house Project, Hannes Lárusson, in the fall of 2008, to write a memo on the prerequisites for the inscription process to the World Heritage List (Hannes Lárusson, 2009). The chair of the World Heritage Board at the time was the minister of justice, and instrumental in the implementation of the new neoliberal cultural policy. The new World Heritage Board, which is now chaired by the director of the National Museum, has yet not seen a reason to specifically discuss the memo.

Figure 3. Hof in Öræfasveit, South Iceland. The hotel in the back of the turf-house church, Hof. Photo: Author

Another interesting conflict between the National Museum and local enterprise, is to what degree it is possible to preserve Icelandic architectural heritage. The National Museum and local enterprise seem to agree on the importance of the concept of locality of the World Heritage List criteria but they differ when it comes down to defining what this concept actually means. On one hand the Icelandic Turf-house Project stresses the importance of the connection between theory and practice, at least in terms of building and reconstructing turf-houses. In fact, it argues that previous
attempts to articulate the heritage at the National Museum, has separated the two; that it has, in effect, turned practice into technique and theory into style. According to this view, the overall effect is that the ontological status of the turf-house is reduced; the ontology of the turf-house as a living, breathing, constantly-changing and even counter-ontological object disappears from discussion. In fact, the representative of the Icelandic Turf-house Project argues that “It is virtually impossible to preserve turf-houses without preservation of the practices, theory and ideology which is integrated in their construction” (Hannes Lárusson, 2009, p. 8). The National Museum takes a different approach altogether; as a national institution, it has sought to approach the subject’s historical and intellectual delimitations, with the intention to preserve knowledge about the turf-house heritage. Historically, the Museum has assigned wardens some authority for the maintenance of turf-houses within the Historic Buildings Collection and in more recent years, it has endeavored to address public the importance of collaborating with locals. The majority of the employees of the National Museum that participate in the actual decision processes of preservation and reconstruction have been intellectuals and/or administrators who have little or no experience in the actual construction of turf-houses (see for instance Hörður Ágústsson, 2000; and Rúnarsdóttir, 2007) - and therefore limited experiential and practical knowledge, which are essential for the turf-house as conceived by Hannes Lárusson and his various and occasional interlocutors in the development of The Icelandic Turf-house Project.

The emphasis on the importance of convergence between knowledge and skills is also evident in the approach that practitioners in turf-house building have towards the texture of material. For instance, the Icelandic Turf-house Project emphasises locality by arguing for a better sense of the diversity of the material being used in the houses in different parts of the country. It is argued that, turf is not just turf, and rocks are not just rocks! Each material is different in texture and visual appearance according to the location of its source. One instance of this outlook can be observed in the ways that Hannes Lárusson of the Icelandic Turf-house Project has characterized turf and material from an aesthetic and philosophical point of view. In an interview he explained the idea of material as follows:

The process of material degeneration is usually addressed by contemporary architects and others as a negative force. As a result, the tendency is to avoid using material in construction that is perceived as being unstable and having limited endurance. Turf, in particular, has been characterized in that way and is the main reason why it is not being used extensively in contemporary housing constructions. It’s considered unstable in resisting harsh weather conditions or earthquakes, for example. Such characterization of the turf is, however, a wrong approach. Instead, we should try to analyse the good qualities of the turf – which it unquestionably has in terms of insulation, visual aesthetics and environmental qualities to name just three examples. Interestingly, I believe that such approach can not be addressed without exploring the nature of every material which is continuous degeneration. Even the most enduring and popular of all building material like concrete and steel degenerate with time! (Hannes Lárusson, personal communication, October 10, 2009).

Such explicit philosophical explorations have not been part of the official preservation process of the Historical Buildings Collection of the National Museum or of any official discussion about the inscription process for the World Heritage List.

In the closing I would also like to mention practices of turf-construction, as these which are another point of conflict between the National Museum and local enterprise. The National Museum hired a Norwegian conservationist to rebuild Núpsstaðir Chapel, which is part of the Historic House Collection. An Icelandic local turfmaster who had been hired to assist in the process quit after disagreeing with the methods.
being used in the reconstruction. He claimed that the method „to tear down only that is considered absolutely necessary“ and then rebuild on top of that is not how he was taught the art by his father or grandfather. In addition, instead of rebuilding the Chapel as he, and others assigned to the work saw fit, the method directed of being used was to chalk each stone with numbers, and then position them in the exact place where it had been before. The local turfmasterr resigned from his post and has since not been part of any turf-house project on behalf of the National Museum, despite extensive work experience in the field, and despite the current avowed mandate of the National Museum to seek strategic alliance with experienced turfmasters (Víglundur Kristjánsson, personal communication, August 18, 2010).

Concluding remarks

Since its foundation in 1863, the National Museum of Iceland has been a leading institution for the preservation, research, and management of national cultural heritage. In 2001 the role of the museum was altered with new legislation which both reinforced and undermined the power of the Museum. Its role was changed from being a central authority in conservation, research and exhibition towards a more managerial role in terms of cultural practices, including architectural heritage. As a result, the architectural heritage has become a contested issue between the National Museum and private enterprise, as evident in the case of the Icelandic Turf-house Project. The contestation is amplified when reviewed in the context of the UNESCO’s World Heritage List project.3

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