

PAULINE GARVEY

# The Norwegian country cabin and functionalism: a tale of two modernities

The mountain or shore-side cabin (*hytte*) represents a common leisure form for a significant proportion of the Norwegian population. Its roots can be traced to the decline of farming society, growing urbanisation and an emphasis on the outdoor life as part of 20th-century state modernising projects. Throughout this modern history, and through periods of accelerated social change, the cabin has represented an 'other' form of domesticity. This paper makes the argument that far from representing an escape from post-industrial consumer society, the *hytte* prompts evaluation, comparison or negation of normative domesticity for its occupants. Many priorities such as getting back-to-nature and living the simple life are achieved best, paradoxically, through their material manifestation. Routine and rupture, and discourse surrounding farming culture artefacts are central in evoking contrast.

**Key words** country cabins, Norway, modernity, routine, material culture

## Introduction

There is a sketch occasionally found in Norwegian print media, which seems to be popular and is frequently re-worked, that casts a critical eye on a widespread Norwegian tradition. It features a cartoon character who starts by commenting on the labours of the Norwegian population. A population, he recounts, who work long hours for a high standard of living, decent career and educational prospects. Why then, he questions, do these same people work so hard in order to spend their free time in cold primitive cabins where there is often an outdoor toilet and no running water?

This sketch, which refers to the popularity of holiday cabins, called *hytte(r)* in Norwegian, is superficially puzzling. Its logic suggests that leisure is to be enjoyed as the 'other' to contemporary lifestyles and a consumerist logic; that the more crude and uncomfortable an experience the more authentic it is. Yet, this logic is all too familiar to an Euro-American readership: rural romanticism has been variously attributed to a 19th-century European intellectual traditions, reinforced by more recent responses to the alienating by-products of industrial society and urban life (e.g. Macnaghten and Urry 1998). However, overarching concepts such as rural romanticism masks local articulation, and here the Norwegian peasant tradition is significant and comparatively unique (see Sørensen and Stråth 1997). In a country that can take its place among the wealthiest market economies in the world, Norwegian farming heritage occupies

a central position in national, cultural and political imaginaries. Witoszek (1998: 17) argues that by the mid-19th century three indisputable references for Norwegianness were established: the fjords and mountains as iconic of Norwegian identity, the farmers as carriers of a deeply-embedded value system, and the constitution and its national day of celebration as signifying the national will.<sup>1</sup> This Nordic romanticism pivoted on the peasant, not as a romantic, utopian figure, 'but an increasingly active participant in economic and political processes' (Stråth 2004: 9). As Mary Wollstonecraft reported 'the woods are full of philosophers, not nymphs' (in Witoszek 1998: 27).<sup>2</sup> Even more than in neighbouring Scandinavian countries, the Norwegian farmers' role in local government was central in the construction of Norwegian social democracy (Stråth and Sørensen 1997: 7; Trägårdh 1997: 257–8). Farming culture, then, does not represent continental associations of subordination or feudalism, but continues to a degree to represent a 'progressive historical force' (Sørensen and Stråth 1997: 8; Stråth 2004: 10). Stråth argues that as prototype of Norwegian citizenship, the peasantry was formative in the modernisation of the north (2004: 11). Within this context, the emergence of cabin-culture marks an interesting social moment within the decline of farming society, its replacement with burgeoning urbanisation, an emphasis on the outdoor life as part of broader nationalising strategies and lastly a politics that assumed a self-consciously modernising objective. Current scholarship on the Norwegian cabin codify it as an outlet for sports activities, nature appreciation, family connection and refuge from modern social stresses (Vittersø 2007; Kaltenborn 1998; Kaltenborn *et al.* 2005; Müller 2007). While these points are undoubtedly true, what is missing from such accounts is situating the country cabin *within* the 20th-century modernising project. This paper is based on three research visits to the Norwegian town of Skien between 1998 and 2006. The main fieldwork period represents 18 months of ethnographic research, in which I conducted 58 interviews on the material culture of the home. Subsequent visits focused on the cottage and included ten households that allowed me compare their permanent, family home with their holiday cabin. This research complements an increasing scholarship on second homes in Norway, yet adds to it by focusing on the material form of the cabin itself. To foreign eyes the materiality of the *hytte* is exceptional and striking.

In placing the cabin within a broad domestic context it evokes a commentary on modern living in surprising ways. Until recent decades the 'simple life' characterised cabin consumption. As a tourism outlet it was idealised in deliberate 'contrast to the more "hedonistic" nature of the charter trip' (Vittersø 2007: 268). Particularly amongst the middle classes, cabin life represents "'back-to-nature" primitiveness and outdoor recreation' (Grimstad and Lyngø 1993, quoted in Vittersø 2007: 268), in which 'history, culture and communing with the physical environment' are central (Kaltenborn 1997, quoted in Vittersø 2007: 268). A large number of Norwegians possess holiday cabins: in 2006 there were 379,000 holiday houses in Norway, and approximately 40% of the population have access to holiday homes (Denstadli *et al.* 2006, quoted in Vittersø 2007: 266). We are told that '[S]econd homes are part of Nordic heritage. Nowhere in the

1 'Ved midten av 1800-tallet finner vi tre praktisk talt udiskutable referenter for norskhet: Fjellene og fjordene som emblemer for Nasjonal Identitet, bøndene som bærere av de Dypnorske Verdier, og Grunnloven av 17. mai som kodeks for den Nasjonale Vilje' (Witoszek 1998: 17).

2 'Skogen "er fulle av filosofer, ikke nymfer"' (Witoszek 1998: 27).

world is second home ownership as common as in the Nordic countries' (Müller 2007: 193).

What follows is firstly an historical overview of cabin culture in Norway, and brief discussion of case-studies. Next I situate the cabin in the context of the post-war period when domesticity loomed large in a period of accelerated social change. Considering the cottage side by side with housing projects, variously codified under the term 'modernism' or 'functionalism', one can see that the cabin as a material form was curiously an absent presence in Norwegian domestic policy. As a leisure destination, its broad popularity came later, but the holiday cabin and particularly the outdoor life it promised was valorised in modernist architectural circles in the 1930s and beyond<sup>3</sup> (Findal 1995: 48; for a discussion of outdoor life see Frykman 1993; Löfgren 1999; Nederlid 1991; Pihl Atmer 1998). Looking at it less as a vehicle for outdoor activities, however, and more as a physical presence in the countryside or on city margins, one can see that the *hytte* throws light on 'other' forms of housing such as normative domesticity and everyday, routinised living. The everyday has been invoked since post-war decades as a means of 'making sense of particular kinds of cultural change in Western societies' (Moran 2004: 53). I focus on Moran's argument, who in turn draws heavily from the work of Henri Lefebvre, in comparing accelerated modernism and the consumer boom of post-war Europe on the one hand and the residual unexamined nature of everyday, routinised life on the other. Moran focuses on the everyday as representing a sphere of life in which the apparently universalising process of modernity is shot through with historical survivals and local differences. He argues that the everyday opens up 'modernity to historical difference, showing how it carries within itself both survivals from previous eras and the possibility for further change' (Moran 2004: 56). However, this relationship to history is concealed beneath the invisibility of the everyday, the fact that it 'evade[s] the grip of forms' (Lefebvre 1971: 182). This perspective dovetails with Lefebvre's identification of leisure pursuits and the break as ways in which individuals seek to escape from the monotony of daily life and the dreariness of work, despite these activities also being commodified – and alienated (Gardiner 2000: 84). In recent years growing scholarship has focused on the 'escape' from consumer culture (e.g. Cohen and Taylor 1992; Crouch 1994) – with the second home as a prime example of 'getting away from it all' (Chaplin 1999). Kaltenborn (1998, see also Kaltenborn *et al.* 2005) suggests cabins represent a growing desire for a 'vacation' from modernity. In view of contemporary society's many demands, he contends, one can view the cabin as such a refuge from modern urban living. I suggest instead the cabin represents more a negation than flight from everyday existence. Because of its complex and myriad associations the country cabin is revelatory of the problems of modern life and normative domesticity. For some, it provides the necessary environment to re-evaluate priorities and domestic routines. For others, the cabin represents a refutation of materialism, which paradoxically, is constituted best in a material form.

3 Bensinstasjoner, idrettsanlegg, hotellanlegg og hytter var en del av den fritidsarkitekturen som vokste frem i henhold til det økende behovet for rekreasjon. Funksjonalismen passet maskinalderen og fritidskulturen som hand i hanske (Findal 1995: 48).

## The cabin

'A small, simple wooden house' is one definition of *hytte* in a Norwegian dictionary (Grimstad and Lyngø 1993: 45). And for many it conjures up images of primitiveness and the country idyll. Contemporary cabins stem from a variety of origins including farmhouses, forest huts (*skogsstuer*), mountain huts (*setre*), tourist and sports-club overnight centres (Gardåsen 1999) and emerged when industrialisation was first felt, when farms, and their associated semi-nomadic practices of bringing livestock up to mountain pastures, began to decline. Farm cabins, especially those in the mountains, decreased from the late 19th century when growing urbanisation led to the depletion of some communities in rural Norway. At the same time one finds increasing emphasis



Plate 1. Cabin interior.

on a romantic turn to nature and winter sports as part of a larger focus on nation building and urban romantic perceptions of nature. In a 1999 article entitled 'Show me your cabin and I'll tell you who you are' (*Vis meg din hytte, og jeg skal si deg hvem du er*) in the magazine *Hytteliv*, it is said that the first cabin to be built in the Grenland district of Norway – where Skien is located – was constructed in 1897 as part of a general thrust towards outdoor life and skiing (Gardåsen 1999: 58). Much of the impetus behind this movement came directly from the city when boat and railway travel facilitated a growing focus on 'leisure'. The Norwegian tourist board (*Den Norske Turistforening*) was similarly founded in 1868 (Gardåsen 1999; see also Löfgren 1994).

In written descriptions of 'cabin-culture', we are told that it developed in Norway first as a 19th-century bourgeois pursuit: urban elites such as scientists, artists and writers, anxious to broaden their horizons, organised tours into untamed nature (Swensen 2002: 4). By 1900 it was *de rigueur* for the Scandinavian bourgeoisie to leave town for a rural or coastal existence (Löfgren 1999: 120). At first only the moneyed classes had sufficient financial resources to take up lodgings in mountain farms, and built extravagant bases for hunting and fishing (Kaltenborn 1998). In addition, Löfgren details existing rural traditions of moving out to more basic quarters in the summer, which facilitated rental agreements with the urban elite (Löfgren 1999: 126, see below). Well-heeled families deliberately sought out a back-to-basic life of the working farm or village community. To 'colonise summer' for the primitive and simple – such as in rented farmsteads – marked a shedding of convention, much to the astonishment, and occasionally resentful awe, of observing locals (Löfgren 1999: 124). After the war, however, summer cottages and fishing lodges were utilised by a broader social base – the new middle class fleeing over-civilised, over-urbanised winter life (Löfgren 1999: 124). Norwegian cabin culture equally has urban roots with 'cabin towns' or working class colonies situated close to large towns in the early 20th century (Kaltenborn 1998: 122). An abundance of land and late urbanisation made it easier for middle- and working-class families to procure a cabin. The holiday cottage came to represent a viable leisure resort for 'ordinary people': the years preceding the 1960s are described as the 'self-builders' period': some inherited land, others bought it cheaply from relatives (cf. Jor 1996). Some individuals I interviewed have retained either the building or the land that was first occupied by this generation. These individuals describe cabins laboriously constructed with whatever material came to hand in the difficult decades following the war. For these informants the cabin started off as a permanent home to fulfil family needs during a period characterised by housing shortage. Only later did some of these houses become holiday cabins.

Cabins during the immediate post-war era tended to be bare and stark, and as was the case for many family homes, lacking the comforts of plumbed water or indoor toilets. However, the cabin as an imaginary often still retains this primitive legacy and is represented in splendid isolation, in the mountains or close to the sea, and as to some degree primitive. Even those cottages that seem quite basic might have a generator and septic tank out back that provides electricity and indoor plumbing. A common idiom – but one with many actual exceptions – presents an ideal of the rustic, and of the romantic non-modern.

As a material artefact, however, the cabin has changed radically in recent decades: what was once very simple is now evolving in ever-elaborate directions. Contemporary cabins have similar standards to permanent homes in terms of domestic infrastructure and appliances. And media discourse hives in on enhanced cabin standards, particularly

in mountain regions (Kaltenborn *et al.* 2005, in Vittersø 2007). A focus on large, elaborate or luxurious cabins and their corresponding price tag has been followed by public debate. Registered concern tends to focus not only on new projects but also the upgrading of older cabins (Vittersø 2007: 271). Several Norwegian counties now limit the size of newly built cabins. Vittersø comments that the content of this public conversation must be placed against 'the traditional Norwegian ideal of the primitiveness of outdoor recreation and holiday homes' (2007: 271). This traditional ideal is currently challenged by counter demands for convenience and most newly-built cabins are as comfortable as permanent homes. Public opinion often remains circumspect however and ranges from a valorisation of austere living to the argument that possessing a country cabin is little more than an exercise in conspicuous consumption.

As leisure is increasingly viewed as integral to consumer culture (Schor 1992; cf. Rojek 2000) or as a commodified practice, it is not surprising that second home ownership is often equated with luxury consumption (Marjavaara 2007: 312). Nonetheless it is common for second home occupants to view their holiday activities as a rejection or subversion of commodified society. In her study of British home owners in France, Chaplin presents 'a group of people who appear to have deliberately placed themselves outside the parameters of mass consumerism in relation to two of the key commodities of postwar society, namely the home and holidays' (1999: 42). The means by which they achieve this aim is by 'an act of disengagement from paramount reality' (1999: 42), an escape from a market-based rationality of everyday life to the refuge of a dream home. This disengagement from the stresses of work-and-home routines comes in the form of subversion and simulation. Chaplin's informants underscore practices that assuage the imbalance of everyday life, such as blurring the boundaries of production and consumption: work and leisure become intertwined, time constraints associated with professional work are transgressed. Experiencing the inconvenience, simplicity and hardship entailed in a pared-down existence is felt by Chaplin's informants as authentic and non-commodified (1999: 46). It is perceived as more 'real' than daily life even though Chaplin notes that informants concede and reflect on the roles they play as a simulation of peasant life.

The lack of electronic goods such as television and computers is an essential component to the 'self-conscious rustic minimalism' (Chaplin 1999: 50) of the second home existence and here there are some similarities with the Norwegian situation. Vittersø (2007) equally finds not only electronic appliances such as TV or internet but even labour-saving technologies such as plumbed water in domestic negotiations over what activities are proper for the cabin. Amongst my respondents I found similar discussions over appropriate consumption. For some, what is desirable, suitable or acceptable for the cabin is a mirror-image of home. For example, when I interviewed Ellen, a forty-year-old mother of two at her home and in her cabin, she stressed that the decoration of each was planned to differ. They had just completed re-decorating the *hytte*, she explained. It had been practically re-built from an older structure and there had been quite a to-do about it all. They went from shop to shop, scanning all the possibilities, even though they knew exactly what they wanted – 'typical *hytte* furniture, pine of course'. Whilst professing a dislike for pine in her living room, Ellen was equally adamant that it was the only appropriate furniture for the cabin. However, despite their general consensus, she and her partner differed as to precisely how much attention should be paid to the interior decoration. One point of contention emerged in the guise of pink curtains – a remnant of the previous cabin which clashed with the

new red sofa. Despite her protestation, Ellen's partner was unyielding that the curtains should remain, maintaining that the cabin is a testament to imperfection, relaxation and consequently a jumble of haphazard furnishings. As we sat in their new cottage, surrounded by new furnishings and the smell of fresh paint, Erik insisted that perfection in decoration defies the simplicity of the *hytte*: 'the curtains will not be changed' he stated dogmatically when the subject arose. We see similar contrasts between home and cabin in the case studies below.



Plate 2. Cabin in rural setting.

## Case studies

### Anne

Anne is a woman in her mid-forties. Unmarried and living alone, she has a very busy routine in a professional career. Settled in Skien, Anne lives close to her mother and three sisters, and in 1989 the four of them decided to purchase a local *hytte* together. This arrangement runs relatively smoothly, with a common fund covering the financial expenses for upkeep and maintenance. On one occasion, Anne and I made the journey to the cabin, where she underlined the arbitrary quality of its decoration. The sofa was given to them by someone who didn't need it any longer, the television was an old one and the stereo was donated by a friend. Anne emphasised that she would not choose any of those things, but instead likes to see the *hytte* as a place to get away from domestic worries. She describes the cabin as primitive, away from the town, out in midst of peace and nature – a place to relax. Regardless of the television, stereo and microwave, the *hytte* – or at least the appreciation of it – is very much framed as unaffected. She pays no attention to the ornaments or hand-embroidered wall hangings: they don't matter,

she asserts, the *hytte* has no materialistic qualities. It is about a simple life.

Anne: I don't know why I haven't thought about it until this minute, I don't want things here which I value . . . it is like with the stereo, we have that here because my sister's partner offered it to us to put here and it seemed silly to say no, but even though I am so fond of music, I would rather not have it here, at least not have it visible, have it in a wooden cupboard or something.

Researcher: Do you use it, seeing as it is here?

Anne: I might bring some CDs down with me here, but I wouldn't bring just anything down, I wouldn't bring like the *Rolling Stones* or something, I wouldn't bring rock or pop, but I might bring down classical music. Last time I was here, I had some Norwegian folk music here.

Anne's sister by contrast would like to make a lot of changes to the cabin. She does not like the interior colour because it is blue, which echoes the blue of her family home. In addition, she already possesses pine furniture, resulting in an uncomfortable correspondence between both houses. Anne's sisters are considering converting the cabin to a real 'old style *hytte*' with panelled walls and traditional rose-painted motif, while her own ambitions extend only to having plumbed water; 'I want it practical too'. She would like to add a loft, and take away a 'really terrible' leather sofa. Alternatively she considers replacing the TV, stereo and phone with a small radio. Equally books and certain genres of music are inappropriate for *hytte* life, she feels, and she is careful to take her reading material with her on her return home.

## Martha and Per

Martha and Per are a middle-aged couple who live in Skien. They have a spacious house that was built in 1986 and which is filled with 'modern, new furniture'. They say they are contented there and have no wish to move, but do enjoy their frequent trips to the cabin, a half hour's drive away. Their cabin was built in 1921 by Per's grandfather and has four bedrooms, upstairs a small kitchen and a living room is divided into two. It is painted white and is nestled along the side of a hill, making it hidden from the road. It does not yet have indoor plumbing and the toilet is housed in an outhouse around the back. Per can recall summer holidays spent with his sister and parents squeezed into one room when he was a child. At that time, it was located far out in the country and necessitated a train journey as well as a boat ride to reach it.

In their family home the couple have plush carpets, leather suites and brass ornaments, whilst in contrast the cabin betrays a more frugal hand. In the cabin's living room, one finds a selection of wares from the early 20th century, such as clusters of photos that trace the family history from the progenitor to Martha and Per's grandchildren. Amongst the furnishings stand a hardwood cabinet and a dining table and chairs, as well as a velvet sofa and matching high-backed chairs along the adjoining wall. These pieces belonged to Per's grandfather. The couple have supplemented the furniture with some miscellaneous oddments such as a hanging lamp picked up at an auction, and another 'old-style' paraffin lamp that hangs over the dining table. Despite the attention to detail and relative fiscal worth of the antique furniture, the couple designate the cabin as a space apart from daily domestic living. This observation emerged in discussion with



Martha when we returned to their home:

Researcher: Would you consider having those old things at home?

Martha: No, it wouldn't suit, no you'd have to . . . no. The whole house, the roof, walls, the wallpaper, the carpets and – out there it is decorated like a shore-cabin with a painted ceiling and painted floor. So the old things suit much better there and the furniture out there is much bigger. We would have to lower the ceiling and change everything if we were going to bring that furniture in here.

Researcher: Is there anything the same here as there?

Martha: No, nothing at all. The furniture in the cabin is from Per's grandfather and from when they were young and the suite has been there since 1921 and was inherited by his aunt, so the things are very old and come from that time, and so you wouldn't see those in houses today.

Researcher: But do you like old things?

Martha: For the cabin, yes.

Researcher: And for the house?

Martha: No, we wouldn't, we decorated this house (family home) in the style which was popular at that time and we have had it the same since.

Decoratively the cabin conforms to the original 1920s aesthetic with one glaring exception: Per's living room, a room dedicated to housing a hotch-potch of sentimental pieces he picked up over the years. Here he claims 'the *bytte* is totally different, it is where you relax and also it is decorated in a totally different way, at least my part, it is my relax corner, you can do what you like . . . you could never have it like that at home'. He continued:

Per: Oh there is a spoon which we hung up. And this doll hanging from the ceiling, her name is Paula as my mother made her and there was this song at the time called 'hi Paula' and then I named my car after her too so my car was called Paula. And the doll hung in the car. I sold the car and I was so stupid to do it as it was so old and you wouldn't be able to find it again. It is a nightmare to think about it. And this glass also has a story to it when we were on a boat trip with Martha and her brother and his wife, and Martha said 'tonight we will only have one drink, one is enough' and so he and I drove up river and bought these litre glasses and I filled it with vodka and the rest with coke and said so kept it to only one drink. And all the other things here, I could talk about all of them and each has a funny story. My father's galoshes for example are here too on the ceiling. They call this room 'Per's soul'.

Galoshes, skis, beer glasses, dolls, photos of his old car, a shell picked up when he was a boy. Here Per has created an environment that allows him to indulge in memories of the past and sentimental reminiscences. The cabin provides a frame for this sentimental excursion, and is materialised through the development of this room. The family home, he qualifies, signifies his married life and responsibilities, his achievements and failures as a father, worker, family man. Here on the other hand, his thoughts delve in another direction.

Feelings of nostalgia and family lineage emerge forcefully in this case study, and in line with controversies over the appropriate size or luxuriousness of the cabin, one could codify it as pertaining to forgotten traditions – something lost in the rush to modern consumer society. Time spent with family is often one reason given for cabin enjoyment: rushed snacks throughout the year become leisurely family meals (Vittersø 2007). Divergent significances of cabin and home routines are often described in terms of binary opposites. Martha, for example, explained that although she values ‘old things’ aesthetically, she categorises them as ‘*hytte* style’ and therefore unsuitable for the domestic space. The crucial objective, she says, rests on integration. Those who don’t have a cabin adopt and merge this style with the rest of their interior, reconciling the traditional and modern features into a viable coherence. Some achieve this coherence, others fail:

There has to be other colours, and flowers and candles in between, it can’t be all wooden, otherwise it is a *hytte* rather than a home. Some will have pine and old things but don’t manage to create an environment around it – but those who do – with dried flowers and green plants – create an environment around it, then it can be great.

The crux of Martha’s point is central to the negotiation of oppositions and integration within the home. A parallel fashion which is popular in Skien generally relates to an interest in and collection of antique farming-culture objects. This was confirmed by Jorunn, who is without a cabin but professes to warm to that environment because ‘it reminds me of old-fashioned things, of a time when things were better’. Although controversies over conspicuous consumption in cabins frequently fracture along tradition versus modernity lines, however, I argue against such a dualism. Not only because discrete categories such as modernity or tradition more often serve to obfuscate rather than clarify, but also because the cabin and permanent home seem less like separate entities than mirror images, refracted over changing socio-economic circumstances. In representing the cabin as a product of traditional heritage or vehicle for modern conspicuous consumption, the *hytte* is neither ‘authentically’ traditional nor iconically modern. Perhaps because of its apparent contradictions it is uniquely of its time.

## **The modern home**

Placing the cabin within the mid-20th-century context, one sees that what is particularly interesting about this period in Norwegian political history is the place of domesticity in forging a new modern society. While some refer to social changes experienced within European society during the inter- and post-war period as a transition from traditional to consumer society (for a French example, see Segalen 1994), others refer to modernism in Scandinavia as the harbinger of ‘rationalisation of different aspects of economy, the labour market, [of] education . . . [and] family life’ (Frykman 1993: 260). In Norway this movement can be seen in new directives in social policy, chiefly driven by the Social Democrats who gained power in 1935, and is pertinent in a consideration of housing policy. Specifically owing to a post-war housing crisis, public housing was subject to intense social commentary and political intervention. Concomitantly with the 1930s and the introduction of international influences such as functionalism, the

face of design in Norway changed (Wildhagen 1988).<sup>4</sup> Designers at this time set about to create ‘high quality social housing’ incorporating ‘basic utility furniture solutions, simple dinner and coffee services and cottage industry rugs’ (Wildhagen 1988: 219). Economic planning was a key aspect of this socially oriented approach to design, and Norwegian design professionals, policy makers and politicians took a keen interest in the practical and economic implications of large social housing programmes. The question of housing soon became firmly established as a pressing social issue: it ‘was to be organised so as to attain maximum “hygiene efficiency”, as it was called. Light, pollution, housing density – everything was considered and converted to technical standards, and expressed numerically’ (Seip 1991: 40).<sup>5</sup> The planning and design of houses and blocks in accordance with a functional ethic perhaps receives most academic attention, but a similar ethos can be found in furniture design and mundane items of domestic material culture. The home became the palate for experimentation as well as the flagship for a modern Norway.

Between the two world wars architects distinguished the political aspirations of functionalism as socialist in intent, and found in professional journals such as *Plan*, from the non-political functionalism based purely on ideas of style and called *Funkis*. *Funkis* was a Scandinavian version of functionalism – less rigid than international styles and softened slightly with the use of pine (cf. Findal 1992). While many contemporary commentators view the movement as popular only among the professional elite, interestingly, architectural comment maintains that modernist, functionalist architecture affected almost all levels of Norwegian society: ‘[T]o a great extent it also formed the inspiration for ordinary houses in provincial towns and rural communities well beyond the normal area of architects’ operations’ (Nordland 1992: 253). The stated aim of this form of architecture was to be practical, to fulfil functional needs but also to remain inexpensive and available for ordinary people (Nordland 1992: 253). ‘Objective’ standards, we are told, promised to alleviate the housing crisis and mass deprivation, and attacked emblems of old world hierarchies in its wake. An international style, eulogising technological achievements and possibilities over traditional ornamental genres of architecture, was in favour: to only build on historical precedents would be misguided, wrote a noted economist Ragnar Frisch, as precedents were no more than an ‘echo from the past’ (Seip 1991: 40).

Scandinavian modernism as a design movement has come under critical scrutiny since the latter half of the 20th century, with particular stress placed on its congruence with a specific political vision (Glambek 1992: 17; Christensen 1992a: 54). Equally, however, this material provides one with a glimpse of a dominant discourse surrounding domesticity in inter- and post-war Norway. We see the emphasis on practicality and function in the rationalisation of the domestic space (Melby 1989). Being modern was not only defined in terms of the design, fittings and accessories of the home, but also in the activities and roles which were played out there. Additionally, however, there

4 Particularly after the Second World War, the old social programme of the association of applied arts was revitalised, and the journal *Bonytt*, which became the mouthpiece of the design community, was launched in 1941.

5 Although there was virtually no public control of the housing market prior to the First World War, measures such as the regulation of rent by law were introduced in the post- and inter-war period. The Labour party embraced the problem as one of its most urgent, and took steps based on universal welfare to provide a home for all members of society (Gudbrandsen 1992: 53).

is another side to the story of housing in Norway. Consider a passage as outlined by Christensen below:

The same day that the animals were sent to the *seter* (summer farm), the whole, emptied cow-shed was washed inside. The roof and the top half of the walls were chalked and the lower part was whitewashed. And the family moved in and stayed there all summer. Beds were put in the stalls and sheep pens. The grandparents had their own stall and the children slept in the sheep pens . . . And the living room stayed cleaned and unused until they moved back in autumn. (Christensen 1997: 12, translation mine)

Christensen's example highlights the dynamic between different types of housing in the 1930s, where a tradition of moving in summer to a more primitive life was common. As he points out, for the narrator of the reminiscence above, visiting his grandparents was like moving back in time. Otherwise he lived in a modern home with electrical appliances such as cooker and radio and the pride of the family was their car which they used on holidays (1997: 12). Christensen's example illustrates nicely that while architects in the decades following the 1930s designed a functionalist domestic aesthetic designed to break from the constraints of tradition, parallel customs existed in tandem with a new modern ethic. Already from the first decades of the 20th century, Grimstad and Lyngø (1993) have documented the building of whole cottage-villages by the Norwegian working class and the cabin was sufficiently familiar and popular that Prime Minister Einar Gerhardsen was given a *hytte* as a gift from the Norwegian workers movement for his 60th birthday in 1957 (cf. Jor 1996). As Christensen comments, the people he describes were aware of the improved housing conditions elsewhere in the country but maintained their old customs nevertheless. The narrator 'lived at the same time in a modern and old-fashioned world and was familiar with both' (1997: 12). Nor was this narrator unusual. Löfgren documents 'old rural traditions of moving out to summer quarters, to live under more primitive conditions' (1999: 126) in 20th-century Sweden, while Norwegian writers comment that 'In Norway we have long traditions of moving in summer, right back to the old farming society' (Bergan and Dysthe 1994: 71). In summer we are told farming families used to move out of the house, to either another building on the farm or to the farm's summer residence: others again used the shed, moved to the mountain cabin or to a cabin along the coast (Bergan and Dysthe 1994: 71). And while Christensen's example is from the early 20th century, I suggest the significance of his message has a wider reach: the summer dwelling as an alternative image of normative domesticity has a long history.

## The traditional home

It is perhaps understandable that it is rarely against a background of evolving modern domesticity that the cabin is discussed. More readily, the cabin becomes in print what it appears to represent in practice – a thing apart from the nuts and bolts of existence, a sphere distinct from daily living. Continuing as a negative reflection of the family home, a quality of difference is established through cabin routines and decorative themes. However, although a great variety of objects and buildings can be housed under the term *hytte*, to foreign eyes, a surprising homogeneity dominates. One can see this

quality in decorative trends: pine is ubiquitous, new furniture in old style, used hand-me-downs or aged heirlooms of real fiscal worth combine in the cabin environment to form a recognisable *genre*. Skien furniture retailers can pinpoint a number of decorative styles that are common: dark reds or greens or patterned durable fabrics, corner sofas with distinctive pine frames, heavy pine tables and carved benches are diagnostic (see Plate 1). Much of the furniture bought for the *hytte* is cheaper than that of the permanent home and decorative themes that characterise the cabin are called *hytte preg* or cabin-style. The cabin style is not confined to this sphere but owes its distinction to the extensive use of untreated pine and rough textured fabrics. Farming culture traditions are similarly evoked through pine panelling, paraffin lamps, painted wooden bowls, iron chandeliers, pocket knives and embroidered wall hangings. Form and texture is important: grey, rough and heavy wooden furnishings and red fabrics suit the relaxed style, while more ornate and expensive fittings tend to be found in the family home. Despite the consistency in *hytte* style, however, many point out that cabin decoration should be hapless, accumulative and unreflexive. While some informants point to items that would never be tolerated at home, others identify furnishings that were 'donated' to the cabin because they were unwanted elsewhere. In many cases, decorative themes acknowledge traditional nostalgia, with wall hangings, rose-painted<sup>6</sup> decorated bowls and farm implements. However, in addition to the consistency in decoration, there is another similarity that dominates perceptions of *hytte-preg*. This response departs from the decorative and refers to references to movement, change and a fracturing of the everyday.

## Routine and rupture

Ideas of temporality pervade cabin experience, but not only in ways that hearken to bygone eras. If transition and the ephemeral are hallmarks of contemporary life, the cabin represents another, complementary commentary on a use-and-throw-away (*bruk og kast*) existence (see Plate 2). Frequently this transition is identified as a movement in space from one mode of life to another. The shift from primitive to convenient and comfortable cabins bears witness to realigning priorities. Vittersø argues that the ideal of back-to-nature and simple living is 'challenged by new ideals, desires and demands' (2007: 278). He continues that 'the ideal of the primitive cabin has to give way to the ideal that the cabin primarily is a place for social gathering and outdoor activities' (2007: 278). While traditional activities and norms are under threat from demands for convenient holiday homes and commercial activities, the cabin does not remain frozen in time but its significance flexes and shifts 'in contrast to everyday life' (2007: 278). For Vittersø's informants this contrast is nowadays less about primitive versus convenient and more about social activities and family time. As a material form the cottage is constantly altering, but as a contrast to the everyday it remains the same.

More than any quality of peasant heritage or measure of consumer spending, the cabin is consistently described as a break from routine. This break can come in many guises: some express it in terms of a nostalgic faith in bygone eras, while others value it wholly in terms of the rupture it signifies from the stresses and cares of 'normal' living.

6 A particular form of traditional ornamentation, native to the province of Telemark, where Skien is situated.

Therefore, whilst the consumption and visitation of the cabin is highly structured, it is also not necessarily *habitual* in the same way as the family home. This feeling is expressed in responses that focus on the cabin as an escape from the everyday, fracturing the drudgery of routine. The ideal *hytte* forms part of a dynamic in which home life should be routinised, cosy and occupied with immediate claims and cares, the cabin should be rough, irregular and representative of diachronic family histories and long-term goals. Everyday existence, informants assert, is composed of recurrence and routine, whereas trips to the holiday cabin provide what daily life cannot. It is in the *hytte* one can retreat from daily monotony, leave behind the stresses of modern-day living. Most of all, the cabin is described as the antithesis or even antidote to the 'routine' that characterises modern life.

There are different ways of thinking about routine. Looking at the making of Scandinavian tourism in the 18th century, Löfgren argues that the wilderness has become 'a new kind of emotional space, an experimental zone where norms, habits, and routines of bourgeois city life could be stretched a bit, transgressed, and even questioned' (1994: 108). Taking a more extreme view, Lefebvre argues that modern social experience is obscured behind the routine, unexamined nature of everyday life (1971: 68). Lefebvre was prompted to write his early work in the face of post-war boom in which one found the transformation of living spaces into conspicuous displays of modernity in the form of new electrical gadgetry, synthetic fibres, streamlined surfaces and designer décor (cf. Moran 2004). The everyday, on the other hand is characterised by recurrence, found in everyday facts such as 'furniture, objects and the world of objects, timetables, news items and advertisements' (1971: 27). In other words, it consists of the routine mechanisms of daily life associated with ordinary people. Everyday life, he argues, is made up of recurrences; gestures of labour and leisure, mechanical movements both human and properly mechanic, hours, days, weeks, months, years, linear and cyclical repetitions, natural and rational time (1971: 68). This form of recurrence acts as a mirror image of work life and obscures our vision of modern living. By virtue of its very ordinariness – and invisibility – the 'everyday offers a corrective to the spectacularising discourse of modernity, its self-promoting emphasis on the latest design or technological innovation' (Moran 2004: 54). It is experienced in monotonous rows of planned housing in satellite towns; long stretches of identical-looking motorways and dual carriageways (Moran 2004: 55). Lefebvre's approach to the everyday emphasizes the 'relentless standardization and routinisation of modern life' (Moran 2004: 56) and is scathing of the life that it represents. Whilst I would differ from Lefebvre's castigation of everyday life, the emphasis on routine as of central importance in understanding modern social experience is significant. Modernity is obscured behind this habitual unexamined nature of everyday life (1971: 68) but it is this quality of ceaseless habitualised recurrence that makes it difficult to conceive of or describe in theoretical terms (Gardiner 2000: 87). In the face of the post-war boom, he suggests, modern forms of domesticity have become tyrannical, presenting us with new expectations about stylishness, cleanliness and efficiency' (Moran 2004: 53). However, both the routinisation of everyday life and the break provided by equally structured leisure forms is accorded with some potential as a critique of modernity. For this reason, he argues in later works, it is necessarily being integrated into the cycles of production and consumption (Gardiner 2000: 91).

Physical movement aids in the experience of difference or rupture, a transition that is manifested in diverse ways. As informants assert, in travelling this physical distance, routine associated with home is replaced with freedom or self-determination. Although

the transition from urban to rural is highly stressed, the creation of a break in regular everyday life is given as driving this movement. One woman expressed it thus: ‘when we get away (*kommer bort*) to the cabin, we go to have something very different. Everything is simpler in the *hytte*, we don’t have to be careful about things’. It is the emotional aspects of awayness that is stressed, although this quality is commonly enhanced and evoked by its physical enactment. Being away conjures sentiments of authenticity, ‘back to nature’, associated physical labour, problems and perseverance. Living without all or some of the luxuries of the modern age, going away in order to appreciate what one has when one returns. For some the cabin totalises diachronic temporalities, representing a way of being that is returned to and carried over generations, one that idolises a different or parallel form of existence. In a Norwegian ethnological study of the cabin, one informant expressed it thus:

Life in the cabin is more real. It comes probably because it is closer to the earth. Problems up there are lighting a fire, collecting water, finding food and preparing it, collecting post, tidying up and around the cabin, the joy of walking on the grass feeding the birds and sitting looking at them . . . in other words, one has time to be human. (Else NEG, *Norwegian Ethnological Research Institute* 28274)<sup>7</sup>

Another drew direct comparisons with daily life in drawing together an intoxication of feeling evoked through freedom and release of cabin and country living. The dualisms between urban and rural appear particularly evocative in this instance:

An intoxication of feeling – it is too strong! To come to the *hytte* means that I have left my sorrows and worries in the town. They bother me little up there. They feel small and insignificant in relation to how they feel in the town. (Else NEG, *Norwegian Ethnological Research Institute* 28274)<sup>8</sup>

## Conclusion: bringing the *hytte* home?

In this paper I argue that cabin culture occupies one thread in a larger modern weave. A brief perusal of the 20th century shows how domestic doctrine eulogising the modern has waxed and waned; in the inter-war period modernism was influential in professional quarters; since the 1960s fashions valorise the traditional in domestic arrangements (see Christensen 1992b). For much of the 20th century, post-war cabins were necessarily simple and it is only in recent decades that many holiday cottages have become as comfortable as the family home. After the post-war period the housing crisis abated, and greater disposable income shows in consumer spending – especially since the discovery of North Sea oil reserves in the 1960s. A little earlier in France, Lefebvre was raging against the consumer boom, the ‘Ideal Home phenomenon’, in which living spaces

- 7 Livet på hytta er mer ‘ekte’. Det kommer vel av at det er mer jordnært. Problemene der oppe blir; å fyre, sørge for vann, få tak i mat og plassere den, hente posten, rydde og rundt hytta, glede seg over å kunne gå rett ut på gresset, mate fuglene og sitte og se på dem . . . alt dette sier vel med andre ord at ‘man har tid til å være menneske’.
- 8 Følelsesrus. Det er for sterkt! . . . Å komme til hytta innebærer at jeg har lagt igjen sorger og bekymringer i byen. De plager meg lite der oppe. De føles små og betydningsløse i forhold til hva de gjør her i byen.

were transformed into conspicuous displays of modernity. By contrast, he suggests the everyday is the less glamorous other to this phenomenon and is experienced in monotonous rows of planned housing in satellite towns. Recurrence and routine are features that Lefebvre emphasises as characteristic of everyday life but the increasingly routinised nature of leisure again deflects our attention away from contemporary social experience. According to Lefebvre therefore, leisure activities are also commodified and alienated, yet rather than accept that modern life represents a false consciousness that 'ensnares the masses', he suggests that the desire to transcend the routinisation of everyday life is an expression of a real need to withdraw from the ills of modernity (Gardiner 2000: 85). Herein lies the possibility of radical dis-alienation with modern life (Gardiner 2000: 85). In view of increasing scholarly interest in leisure and escape from consumer culture, it is not surprising that some look to second home activities as a form of subversion from post-industrial society (McIntyre *et al.* 2006). The escape that Chaplin describes represents 'the desire for a changed way of life [that is] realized in the context of the rural environment and constitutes a shift in relative values' (1999: 50). Amongst my respondents the realisation of different activities does not signify divergent values, more the appreciation of what is not achieved within daily life. In popular descriptions of the *hytte*, common ideals of simplicity and primitiveness denote a physical other, a physicality that has traditionally been borne out through its location and the material asceticism. Part of this idealisation of the cabin derives from its historical origins – occupying an alternative domestic space when Norwegian society approached its current status as a wealthy consumer society. Specific forms of consumption are commonly associated with the modern era, characterised by the use and throw away (*bruk og kast*) mass-produced variety which necessarily underline a perceptual disjuncture between modern life and responses to it. From this perspective, one codification of the cabin could be as an icon of tradition in an otherwise modern era. Alternatively one could suggest instead we are witnessing a transmogrification of the modern into the traditional. But again this binary is an illusion: the cabin is as much a product of daily life and normative domesticity as it is a product of its escape.

Many informants place most stress on trips to the holiday cabin as providing what daily life cannot, it is other to the family home and its attendant anxieties. Consistently the logic of cabin life is popularly portrayed as a negation of domestic priorities and routines. Negation is not the same as escape: as refracted on to the cabin, the routines connected to normative domesticity are keenly felt when broken. The cottage becomes the space where broad domestic values are assessed and compared. Despite the apparent paradoxes, worries over the environment, back-to-nature impulses and rejection of consumer society are achieved precisely through cabin consumption. As Vittersø (2007) suggests, despite or because of the increased comfort that characterises *hytte* living, the cabin is now appreciated in other ways.

Integration, routine and rupture are core categories that summarise attitudes to the cabin. While controversies thunder over its material constituents, the cabin's place in providing rupture in a life otherwise characterised by routine and integration remains unquestioned. Indeed, a version of the cabin style can be found in cellar rooms throughout the country. These cellars are strikingly similar to the *hytte* and one comes away with the impression of 'home-cabins', replete with pine panelling and rough textured chairs. Even the manner in which these rooms are used – for informal parties and teenage get-togethers – strikes one as *hytte*-like. Pre-eminently the *hytte* exists in its construction as 'not everyday', as different from normative domesticity yet intimately



connected to it. As the material form changes its significance continues to be engendered through the activities that take place there. Through the notion of rupture informants underline a break from modern living – routine broken, modern stress postponed, a disjuncture in everyday life. And in breaking the routine of modern living, individuals are evaluating the present in different ways.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Olav Christensen, Oslo University, for reading earlier drafts of this paper. In addition I am grateful for comments and suggestions from *Social Anthropology's* review process, which were also most helpful.

Pauline Garvey  
National University of Ireland, Maynooth  
pauline.a.garvey@nuim.ie

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