

Housing and the corona crises in Finland

Diverging or converging city-countryside relationship?

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As in most of Europe, the pandemic became a part of the everyday life in Finland in mid-March this year. By enforcing the Emergency Powers Act, not in use since World War II, the government closed down schools, universities, restaurants, cafés, and public facilities such as libraries, museums and swimming halls. Everyone who was able to was ordered to work from home. For many people over 70, who were encouraged to self-isolate in their homes, and for those taking part in the “white collar quarantine” (Woods 2020), the natural step was to take advantage of the rural homes that a great number of Finns possess.

Finland is a country of multilocals, as one million out of the total population of 5,5 million owns a rural home (Statistics Finland 2020a). In practice this means, that although the majority of Finns are registered in their urban homes, rural second homes account for the predominant dwelling type in countless municipalities in the countryside of Finland. The actual number of residents spending their everyday life in those municipalities is thus difficult to estimate (Hiltunen & Rehunen 2014). However, the strategy to spend the lock down in nature was halted by the Emergency Powers Act. To avoid the spread of the virus from the Helsinki Metropolitan Area to the rest of the country, the government closed the borders of the Uusimaa province for three weeks, making it impossible for residents in the largest city region to travel to their homes in the countryside. Leaders in rural municipalities further pleaded to people in cities to stay put, and keep away from the rural areas, as they were afraid the health care systems in sparsely populated areas would not be able to handle a large amount of Covid 19 related hospitalizations (Nykänen 2020, Virtanen 2020). This brought into light one of the very paradoxes of multilocal life in Finland. Residents can only be registered in one municipality, and consequently have the right to health care and to vote solely in this location. Multilocals are statistically invisible in their rural

homes, although these homes for the individuals often are in no way “secondary” (Hiltunen et al. 2013). Further, the lockdown exposed contradictions between permanently rural and multilocal residents. The demonization of “contagious” multilocals from the Uusimaa province became so serious, that the President of Finland appealed to the nation saying that while “protection” had “turned into rejection”, the common goal of the nation should be to fight the virus, and not to develop prejudice (From the President’s pen 2020).

Nevertheless, the media has also highlighted the city-countryside dichotomy, by actively reporting about new trends in Finnish migration patterns. “The corona crises made Finns move from larger cities to rural like municipalities. Many realized their wish to move to the countryside”, the National broadcasting company YLE, for example, headlined in an article which explained the remarkable growth in migration to small towns during April to June this year (Kluukeri 2020). To emphasize the divide between city and countryside, a columnist at Yle claimed “During the corona crises people turn to the virtues of the countryside, because the countryside represents morals, and cities ruin” (Siltamäki 2020). There is speculation that the effects of the closing of the borders made people re-evaluate what in fact is their primary home, and that many now chose the countryside in favor of the city. At the same time, it has also been emphasized that the corona crises finally made remote work a real option, allowing people to realize their dream to live in the countryside. Remote work has been a much hoped for cure for the ills of depopulation in many areas, but until now remote work has remained limited, often due to the demands of Finnish employers to see their employees in the office on an almost daily basis. Real-estate agents further recorded an increase in the sales of both traditional summer houses by the sea or lakes, as well as in old rural single-family

houses that until the crises have been difficult to sell. People in cities seemingly show an interest towards rural homes (Toppinen 2020). In Helsinki, however, there are no sign of a setback for the appreciation of urban life. One of the most celebrated corona-related interventions was for example the reconceptualization of the monumental Senate Square into an area for pop up restaurants during the summer. Statistics further show an increase in property sales in Helsinki, and rising prices (Statistics Finland 2020b).

Moisio (2020) has emphasized that evidence of the corona crises altering the trend of urbanization in Finland is poor. There is no verification that the competitiveness of small towns or rural areas would have increased. However, the corona crises seems to have underlined the multitude of housing preferences in a country that has been known for its monotonous culture when it comes to housing practices (Kortteinen et al. 2005). It has revealed that mobility and multi-locality are elemental features of contemporary urbanization and perhaps more than ever emphasized the interdependence of cities and rural areas in the Finnish context.

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