

indigenous villages – ideas for future living?

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Introduction:

In recent years, cities and villages appear all over the world more or less similar. From North to South, from West to East, the built environment appears in similar patterns, with similar architectural features, exchangeable, built in a so called international style. Such an international style has its roots in Europe, where it is the consequent continuance of building traditions of its cities and towns. Since this “steel-glass-glossy stone” built environment is identified with modern life, with fortune, international architecture is nowadays found all over the world.

Coupled with this development is the phenomenon that vernacular built form exhales almost everywhere. An old, traditional environment is often recognized as backwardly, uncomfortable and unhealthy to live in. Thus, old structures are abandoned, fall into disrepair and are replaced by new structures. However, it must be assumed that the built environment is the consequent answer to life and natural environment. The vernacular built form results from a particular landscape with a particular climate, economic and social system. It was developed over generations, always by being adapted to the needs of the people living here. By using local materials, constructive solutions were developed that best react to climate and natural environment. Furthermore, vernacular built form - from the houses to the settlement, village and town – is reacting to the social needs of a society. Due to the lack of superior planning strategies, mostly coming from outside, places and spaces are designed according to the many actions that take place in the public open as well as in the private retreat. Spaces for drying crops, dividing game, holding various ceremonies, and so forth will be implemented in the village or town layout.

Since each society has developed its very own solutions, the built environment appears manifold and represents a distinct way of living and working in an area shaped by the environment and social and economic circumstances. In the following, the case of the round villages of Northern Germany will be discussed to outline above described idea.

Building traditions of the Hannoversches Wendland, Lower Saxony, Germany:

The Lower German Hall House, or how it is termed in house research, the “Niederdeutsches Hallenhaus” or “Niedersachsenhaus”, is a very old type of building, which can be traced back to the Stone Age. The distribution area of the hall house generally lies in the whole area of Northern Germany and stretches up to the Netherlands. Certainly, an old type of building such as the discussed dating back to Stone Age (Johannsen: 1979) has developed local sub-variants. In this contribution the administrative district Lüchow-Dannenberg north of Hanover is observed, where not only hall houses are largely found but, too, a particular village form arose, the “Rundling”. Landscape, climate, but also cultural background of the population in this district, seem to be

responsible for the appearance of house and village. Therefore, it is important to look at these factors more detailed in order to understand the unique socio-spatial pattern.

The roughly triangular administrative district Lüchow-Dannenberg north of Lower Saxon's capital Hanover lies west of formerly Slavonic areas. It is bound by two rivers namely the Elbe and the Jeetzel (Johannsen: 1979), surrounded by marshlands. The summery and wintry floods cover some 10 000 hectares of forests and fields regularly with knee deep water (Kulke: 1969) and for 200 days a year most villages perched on top of small hills had no connection by land but only by boat (Johannsen: 1979).

Around Christi the district was inhabited by Langobards (Kulke: 1969). In the time of the migration of nations Slavs pressed westwards into the East German lowland plain and moved on west in several stages during the 5th and 6th century and settled down in the here described area and preserved their cultural independence. These people, the "Wenden" used their old language up to the 18th century, their cultural heritage and their preferred way of farming, namely cattle racing. Today the native population is well integrated into the German society and only names of villages, corridors and landscapes remind of the original background of its old residents.

Looking at geographical and economical factors it has to be noticed that round villages arose only in areas with Slavonic population integrated into the German national territory. For a long time scholars discussed whether it could be traced back to German or Slavic origins. Contemporary observations in house research state that round villages were formed in late medieval times, long time after Slavonic population settled down here. Since such round villages did not come up in other regions with Slavonic population, German administrative aspects seemed to play an important role, too: round villages merge farming ideas from Slavonic groups, namely cattle racing, with agriculture, preferred by German authorities (Johannsen: 1979). Additionally, the availability of fertile field floor seemed to be important. The tax system of German landlords in the 12th and 13th century led to the necessity of a higher density of the villages. Presumably, Slavonic natives lived once in scattered hamlets. The tax system of German landlords led to the necessity of a higher density in the villages in the 12th and 13th century. Over the decades, these were more and more regulated, adapted to the area and merged to short rows or bows, which resulted in a relatively densely populated district (Meibeyer: 1964). Rural population generally was excluded from municipal guilds, and thus was not allowed to live in towns and cities. In the turn descendants had to share land of their ancestors and divide courts. From 1500 on this process started everywhere in the Wendland, and led to relatively small farm plots. It seems that fat pastures and meadows were responsible for a higher population that still could earn their livings. Therefore, "Rundlinge" appear only in the central Wendland, the marshlands, where natural conditions suffice a survival of the farmers.

The village plan is the spatial expression of the ideas for working and living of the "Wenden". Their particular way of living together on the one hand and the natural conditions, as well as the fact that the rural population was excluded from living and working in towns and cities, shaped this extraordinary village (Fig 1).

The plan of the nuclear village as a whole follows the model of concentric rings within which the various functions of work and living have designated spots. The centre of a "Rundling" is formed by

a nearly circular village green with oaks and other high trees; further buildings, shelters or other furnishing are, however, missing. The huge hall houses edge this village green, with their gables facing the centre. The hall houses screen off the private areas of the courts. Occasionally gate houses are set up alongside the border to limit undesired glimpses. The courts are wedge-shaped, with the narrow side to the village green and the other as a limit to the surrounding countryside. Gardens with the hall houses and outbuildings are, too, following the principle of concentric rings. The inner ring adjacent to the village green is reserved for the massive hall houses, followed by – as much there is a lack of space inside the hall house – stables for horses, barns for equipment and storehouses as well as baking houses. Further away sheepboxes and pigsties are arranged, according to the gradient of odour emissions (sheep dung was collected in the boxes during the winter and taken from there in spring, for example). In a next ring beehives were set up close to the fields. The outmost ring of the courts was the border of the farms, sometimes marked by a gate barn, or by simple fences. The village as a whole is enclosed by woods, gardens, and fields leading into the open countryside. Locations for primarily smell and noise intensive outbuildings, such as hay dry plants of silo containers, are not determined after farm membership but to the main direction of wind. These facilities are to be used by all members of an entire village and thus farm membership is of no importance (Meibeyer: 1964).

The Rundling has not only a particular shape, but consists also of a unique building, the hall house. In house research a building corresponding to a single-room strategy is described as a hall house, and – according to its appearance – “Niederdeutsches Hallenhaus”, “Niedersachsen Haus”, or Lower Saxon Hall House (Fig. 2). It is a wooden frame building with walls filled with clay, loam or bricks and consists only of one single, big hall. The various functions of every day life of a farmer’s family, such as living, working, storing and keeping livestock are done in designated places within such a hall house. Although the areas are not divided by partition walls or similar from each other, the inside of the house is organized strictly and thus not chaotic at all (Johannsen: 1979). Nevertheless, all functions of life and work are summarised in this one central hall: it is threshing place, milking place, meat-smoking place, stable, store and storage area for equipment, next to areas for living and house working. All these functions are neatly separated, however without any dividers or walls. From a central point, namely the fireplace, all is well overlooked, like belongings, cattle as well as the work and hustle and bustle of the residents. This principle of overlooking all has proved to be very sustainable and, as it seems, was given up re-willingly and only relatively recently.

The massive dimensions of the hall house indeed stamped the appearance of the nuclear villages, the Rundlinge. However distinct and extraordinary house and village appear, the real driving force for the appearance was the introduced way of life and work. It can be argued that the design of a village or house plot is responsible for a certain use of the building generally, and that a social structure is simply forced by it. This is obviously seen in the Lower German Hall House, since there is a tempting logic of the use within these buildings. This “social structure”, as termed here, will be examined in the following paragraphs.

The inside of the building is formed by a big, open space, which has no partition walls or other fittings. The interior is nevertheless subdivided in various areas. The big hall is divided into two areas, the “Groot Däl” and an orthogonal lying “Flett” (Fig.3). The “Groot Däl” is means and pivot for all farming activities that can be done indoor, such as milking place, fodder place, storage

space or harvest processing place. Along both sides of the "Groot Däl" stable areas are detached, divided by rows of poles, but still open to the central area. Cattle and horses are accommodated here, probably to benefit from the body heat of the animals, at least in the first place. In later examples, when dimensions of the hall houses got bigger, this factor did not play any role, nevertheless also then cattle was not banished from the house.

Orthogonal to this part of the hall lies the "Flett", the part of the house for residents with domestic and daily routines. It is the place of living, coming together, cooking, eating, sleeping, washing as well as the space for housework. All duties are strung besides each other however without a spatial separation. It can be assumed that the complete domestic life took place here in the open of the hall. Only the beds are put in wall closets with sliding doors (Fig.4). These "Schlafluchten" seem sensible when considering that only one open fire was the only source of heating. During the night time it would be dangerous to hold the open fire. The small "Schlafluchten" could be held warm by body heat, at least tolerably. Besides, the beds "disappear" during the day and do not block the space in the "Flett"; a solution which could add to the use also in modern loft conversions. Merely farm hands had their beds in another place of the house. Their sleeping boxes lay close to the stable area for the horses, which gave them the ability to watch the horses on one hand, but also to prevent "immoral" activities during the night time.

Centre of the house forms the open fireplace, which is in early examples only a small sinking in the ground. Even in later examples the fireplace is hardly more. Since there is no chimney or other smoke outlet and smoke is distributed in the whole house, this building type also is called "smoke house" (Lindner: 1999). The fireplace is of special significance. It is certainly the hearth and cooking place as well as the only source of heat, at least in the early examples. With the lack of chimneys smoke was distributed in the whole house. It, too, was dangerous in the latently fire endangered buildings: the wooden framed construction on one hand was endangered itself.

Besides, crops and hay were put up to the loft area of the houses. This all was responsible that the hall houses regularly burnt down. However, the open fireplace was only given up re-willingly. The benefits of a "smoke-house" predominated. The escaping smoke protected harvest from pest and insects. Besides, meat and sausages were hung up on top of the fireplace and thus were conserved by smoking. Therefore, chimneys were included relatively late.

Besides, the fire was the centre of the rural life (Fig. 5). Sitting together around the fireplace for meals and in the evening was socially important. But its function went beyond this: all important events were also held here. Contracts were sealed, the bridegroom led his wife around the boiler hook as a sign that she could participate in his possession as of now. The domiciliary rights were passed on from father to son and from mother to her daughter-in-law. Victims of persecution were protected from pursuers by touching the boiler hook (Beckenrath: 1921). The borders of villages were closed from boiler hook to boiler hook. The fireplace consequently lies at a special point of the hall house, namely at the crossing of "Groot Dör" and "Flett". Being the most important area of the hall, the fireplace was decorated richly with decorative dishes made of loam, wood or brass, all splendidly ornamented. Besides further representative elements, such as an oak table, chairs and boxes all ornamented with wood carvings. One chair was placed directly next to the fire, provided only for the farmer's wife. From here she not only could watch the fire but could control the events and activities in the whole house.

As shown above, the concept of the hall house is highly organised and not chaotic at all, although all is happening in only one big hall. This inner organisation is, too, continued in the outside of the

house. The "Groot Dör", the main entrance lies at the end of the "Groot Däl". It is big enough to move livestock, harvest and machines in and out. It is, too, the highly visible because decorated element of each farmhouse, facing the village green. In many other regions within central Europe, the gate where such farming activities take place are believed to be minor ones, dirty and anyway not worthy to be in the main façade. Stables in the adjacent regions will be oriented to the dirty back street and thus the work related entrance is a simple gate. In "Rundling" villages this is different. The representative main entrance is combined with the working and farming related gate that connects house and village green. An explanation may be found in the logic of the ground plan, as well as the natural environmental factors: the farming related area, the "Groot Däl" lies close to the main entrance to avoid long ways with the heavy equipment and livestock. For activities carried out in the further off "Flett" longer ways are of subordinate importance. It too, seems to be a sensitive plot to place the "Groot Däl" next to the village green when looking at the natural environment: "Rundlinge" are built in a permanently flood endangered area, where only villages are perched on small hilltops. Therefore, livestock is led to the village green in first place, to then bring them to the pastures.

As pointed out above, the plan of the nuclear village, the "Rundling", is also subject to a special spatial concept. The strategy of the nuclear village is not arbitrary but extremely organized according to its various social functions. The roughly round village green forms the centre of both, the built village and the social nucleus. It is enclosed by the gable sides of the hall houses which give the village green its characteristics by displaying the richly ornamented facades. In concentric rings the various areas are attached, arranged by their social and economical importance. The border to the surrounding countryside is formed by a greenbelt, with adjacent fields, pastures and meadows. The social logic of the "Wenden" is mirrored in the ground plan of the hall house, the court and finally in the layout of the entire village. House, court and nuclear village thus can be seen as a unit paying respect to the traditions of living, working and social ideas of the "Wenden".

Conclusions:

The Rundling villages and hall houses are not any more sufficient for today's needs of residents. In the Wendland, as mostly everywhere in Central Europe, farms are declining and villages are mainly populated by employees of adjacent bigger cities, commuting between work and home. For this new population, hall houses are much too big and do not match with their lifestyle. The few remaining farms, however, have much bigger livestock, machines are too massive to be stored inside the hall houses, harvest is also too much for storing under the roof and finally the lifestyle of citizens seems to be more stylish and adorable than the traditional way of life and work in a hall house.

But with the disappearance of the hall house and the Rundling and by replacing it with architecture deriving from an international architecture a certain way of life with and in a natural environment gets lost. Although no one will want to live in a massive smoke house with only one small and open fire place, still lots could be learnt from these old structures. Since such buildings are adapted by many generations, lots of knowledge is embedded here, too. Thus it would be a sensible solution to not only conserve such old buildings but transform them into modern architecture. They should and could be sources of inspiration for buildings and village plots in this area, building on the traditions of the region that had the time to develop over more than 2000 years.

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Figure Captions:

Fig 1: typical Rundling villages

Fig 2: A typical Niederdeutsches Hallenhaus

Fig 3: the constructive development of the hall house

Fig 4: A "Schlafucht", the typical beds in hallhouses. Since they are closets they are invisible over the day

Fig 5: The open fire place as the centre of social and economic life as well as the centre of the house from a constructive point of view