

ARTICLE

The Cinematic Land of Tapio: Suburban Finland Reimagined

Essi Viitanen*

The paper examines how the suburban spaces of Tapiola in Finland are cinematically reimagined in Jaakko Pakkasvirta's film *The Green Widow* (1968). The film was produced during a time of rapid urbanization, the development of the Finnish welfare nation, and the birth of the Finnish suburb. The design, renaming, and construction of the Tapiola area especially became an exercise in creating a visual representation of the welfare policies and thus quite literally contributed to the building of a nation. This official vision of Tapiola is challenged by Pakkasvirta's *The Green Widow*. The film focuses on the lived experience of the suburb from the point of view of a housewife and constructs a very different visual world. The relationship between the concrete built environment and the cinematically-imagined one become competing versions of reality.

In 1968, Jaakko Pakkasvirta directed his first solo feature film, *The Green Widow* (*Vihreä Leski*). The film features drug use, peeping toms and a lesbian couple, but it was not these that sparked the fervent public debate around the film. It was the cinematic setting and Pakkasvirta's depiction of new suburban landscape that caused such uproar in the press. *The Green Widow* was set and filmed in Tapiola, a then new suburb just west of Helsinki, Finland. It follows the daily life of housewife Helinä Lehmusto as she cares for her family in increasing isolation from the society surrounding her. At the time of filming, Tapiola was the epitome of new modern architecture of the welfare state; , and Finland's first garden city.

This article firstly discusses the Finnish welfare state's process of building space, identity, and belonging through architecture and design. This vision of a new society is then

investigated through the cinematic reimagining of the same setting. Despite being shot on location with minimal interference in the physical surroundings, the cinematic suburb Pakkasvirta conjures up is a world apart from the glossy images of Tapiola showcased in architectural posters. Cinema can give us a nuanced impression of the tension between the planned environment and the lived experience of the suburb. In film, Tapiola's inhabitants can enter the space and interact with their surroundings, revealing that planned environment and lived experience are like circles in a Venn diagram with very little overlap. The built and the cinematic environments struggle to find common ground. Discrepancies between these conflicting representations of space draw uprisings questions of power and access within the welfare state.

Making the model

The Green Widow is set in suburban Tapiola, some 8 kilometers from central Helsinki. It was Finland's premier garden city designed

* Department of Scandinavian Studies, UCL
essi.viitanen.10@ucl.ac.uk

with a unified town plan. The building works began in 1952 and it was planned and financed by Asuntosäätiö, a building society made up of a number of welfare and housing organizations. The layout for the town plan was chosen by a public design competition that was won by architect Aarne Ervi. Ervi's design consisted of 'three residential neighbourhoods of approximately equal size, each with a mixture of terrace houses and tall flats built to a fairly low overall density among trees and winding roads' as Richards (1966: 90) describes. In the 1960s, the population of Helsinki was growing annually by 10,000 new inhabitants and this type of 'dormitory town' was seen as a modern answer to housing needs. It was built as a beacon of modern Finnish housing development. Richards (1966: 18) compliments Tapiola for its high standard of architecture and landscaping and cites it as providing 'reassuring evidence that forethought is being exercised' in managing the sprawling urban population of Helsinki and its surrounding areas. The development of this modern area was tinted with idealism, a new home for the welfare nation. The selling points of this welfare state show home were clean lines, spacious layouts, and close proximity to nature. The crisp white high rises were surrounded by forest, as 50 per cent of the town plan was to be kept in its natural state. Roads and paths between houses were wide creating a spacious layout with ample parking. There were playgrounds for children sheltered between the houses. Tapiola was built as a model town.

Tapiola, however, was not an isolated building project, but a major component in the development of the Finnish welfare nation. In the 1960s, Finland went through a period of rapid change marked by a shift in social structure, as the mechanization of traditional farm work forced people to leave their rural homes in search of work in the cities (Standertskjöld 2011). In 1950, 67 per cent of Finns lived in the countryside, but by 1970, the figure had dropped to 49 per cent (Vahtola 2003: 410). The empty-

ing of the countryside coincided with the development of new social policy to build Finland into a welfare nation. This was strongly influenced by Pekka Kuusi's 1961 book *1960-luvun sosiaalipolitiikka* in which he outlined a model for social policy including state-backed healthcare, pensions, and childcare. Women joined the workforce in greater numbers driving more extensive and readily-available childcare facilities (Standertskjöld 2011: 12). The Finnish family was moving away from the rural extended family and into an urban nuclear family. Cars became commonplace after the automotive industry was released from government control in 1962 (Standertskjöld 2011: 12). This too placed new demands on the urban infrastructure and begun to alter the Finnish landscape. The combination of building the welfare state, urbanisation, and changes in technology drastically altered the everyday life and family dynamics of Finnish people. It was this combination of lack of housing in Helsinki, the rise of private motoring, and development of social services that laid the groundwork for Tapiola. As a state-funded development it played a part in quite literally building an identity for welfare state ideals.

The construction and development of Tapiola can usefully be described as an act of 'placemaking'. Richard Marback (2011: 58) describes placemaking as 'a material act of building and maintaining spaces that is at the same time an ideological act of fashioning places where we can feel we belong, where we create meaning, and where we organize our relationships to others.' In the case of Tapiola the process of placemaking went as far as developing a whole new name for the area. The land on which Tapiola was built was previously known as Hagalund, sharing the name of a local manor house. The Asuntosäätiö decided this Swedish name was not suitable for the new garden city, both because the old manor house kept its name and because of the fear of associating the area with the North Stockholm slum of the same name, as Heikki von Hertzen (1984:

52) recalls. The new name for the area was chosen through a public competition. Out of over 4000 entries, a total of nine hundred and seventy-eight names, the Asuntosäätiö chose Tapiola. The name Tapiola was taken from the Finnish national epoch *Kalevala*. Tapiola was the god of forest and the territory he ruled over was also known as Tapiola's land, Tapiola. Von Hertzen (1984: 52) reminisces how apt the name was as 'the new town was after all built on virgin land, for the most part covered by sturdy Finnish forest, a real kingdom of Tapiola.' (Rakennettiinhan uusi kaupunki neitseelliseen maastoon, jonka suurimmalta osalta peitti jyrkävä suomalainen metsä, oikea metsän kuninkaan Tapiolan valtakunta.) The new houses and suburban setting were given their own mythologically-inflected identity, whilst simultaneously erasing a part of history in the process. Despite the Asuntosäätiö's hopes, the Swedish-speaking population continued to use the name Hagalund instead of Tapiola.

Modern design for a modern era

The social changes in Finland in the 1960s were also accompanied by changes in architectural practice. Town planning and architectural design were harnessed to cater to the demands of the newly urban masses and their cars. Inspired by Otto-Iivari Meurman's 1947 book *Asemakaavaoppi* (1954: 215) that had originally theorised independent suburban settlements outside city centres, town plans were developed into larger and more unified entities. The emphasis in designing housing areas thus moved towards constructing communities. The architectural designs of the time were dominated by standardisation through the use of modular units. Concrete became the building material of choice. Roger Connah (2005: 182) argues that during this time in Finnish architecture 'systematic thinking was married with the neutrality expected from social equality'. Housing was designed in accordance with welfare state's egalitarian ideals. Colin Wilson (1992: 12) described the suburban building projects of

Finland as 'a happy moment in history, the self-awareness of a growing nation somehow became encoded and embodied in architecture.' Building the suburbs was an act of forging the welfare nation. The carefully-designed aesthetic was to become a visual representation of the new policies, and of a new time. In a quest to hastily provide essential housing for the newly urban population, Finnish architecture drifted away from Aalto's connection to nature and the senses, and towards the functionalist aesthetic of mass-produced housing blocks. The scale of development and design were supersized.

The job of designing the Tapiola town plan, housing and public buildings were given to architects selected through an open architectural competition. The group of architects chosen shared a functionalist aesthetic in their design and an interest in the possibilities of concrete as a building material. Along with Aarne Ervi, this group included Aulis Blomstedt, Viljo Revell and Aarno Ruusuvoori. When architectural theorist Scott Poole (1992: 12) writes about the architects trusted with designing Tapiola, a sense of austerity and functionalism comes across in his language. Poole (1992: 12) described how the work of architect Aulis Blomstedt is 'aimed at purifying architecture through intellectual consideration' and 'asceticism, simplicity, and silence were essential to his idea of architectural form'. Of Aarno Ruusuvoori, who designed the Tapiola church and parish centre in 1965, Poole (1992: 31) wrote:

His architecture at that time and to this day remains uncompromising and devoid of sentimentality. There is no narrative, no longing for another idyllic time, and no representational content. The hard edge of strict geometric forms creates a distinct boundary between his architecture and the natural aspect of things – a distance between civilization and the forest.

It was modern design for modern policy. The boundary between nature and architecture

was maintained in Tapiola, as most of the forest remained in its natural state, only interrupted by the brilliant white geometric block housing rising in stark contrast amongst the trees. The hub of services and commerce Tapiola Centre boasted a water feature, tower, and shopping plaza. These features, designed by Aarne Ervi, gave the Tapiola a centre, and a recognizably individual style. It gave the area its character.

The carefully designed and crafted identity of Tapiola was not restricted to the Finns inhabiting it. Postcards were made of the area highlighting the beauty of its architecture. One such card from the 1960s shows a compilation of five images that portray the buildings of Tapiola bathing in sunshine, surrounded by impeccably kept lawns, and tall trees. The focus is drawn to the well-planned beauty of the buildings; there are no people in the images. Tapiola became a staple of state visits showcasing Finnish design and architecture, as von Hertzen writes (1984: 340). Foreign officials were driven around in a fleet of black cars and introduced to Finnish government-funded housing, regular people living in Tapiola, and of course the sauna. The garden city became a calling card for a new Finnish way of life. The vision for the area had travelled through policy makers, to the blueprints of the architect and hands of builders into a real place, with its own name, identity, and finally inhabitants.

Cinematic Tapiola

Pakkasvirta's cinematic Tapiola differs dramatically from this architectural ideal. The film begins with the camera panning through lush natural woods to reveal the edge of a shiny Chevrolet parked in front Aarne Ervi's water feature complete with fountains. The pan moves higher to observe the buzzing suburban landscape of Tapiola accompanied by a soundtrack of melodic violins and piano. A series of slow pans drift across houses, motorways and children playing on a sunny summer day. Crowds of people pass through the screen, along them

a blond woman with two children. The scenic portraits of the Tapiola landscape and inhabitants end with a young woman speaking into a microphone held by an out of shot interviewer. 'Thank you, I do enjoy living here. It is so nice walking around here, a good place to live. With a husband and a child, what more is there to desire?' ('Kiitos, Kyllä minä viihdyn oikein hyvin täällä. täällä on niin hauska kävellä ja on hyvä asuinpaikka. Mies ja lapsi, niin mitä muuta kaipaa?') The style in which *The Green Widow* introduces Tapiola echoes the public information films, such as *Contractors and Builders (Rakennuttajia ja rakentajia)* (1953) or *New Housing Areas (Uusia asuntoalueita)* (1957), that originally introduced the Finnish public to the same suburban areas. The official vision of Tapiola shines through the shots of architecture and is repeated in the statement of the interviewee. The interviewer remains anonymous and out of frame, only present via the visible microphone. The film takes on the voice of a documentary. The camera then singles out the previous blond woman with her two children from the crowd and follows her into the fictive narrative of the film. The camera drifts away from the carefully framed postcard like shots of Tapiola as it gradually moves closer to Helinä. The documentary style of the interview is left behind and the camera becomes an invisible observer. The woman interviewed does not reappear. She is not a part of the fictitious world of the film.

Pakkasvirta introduces Tapiola as a stylised show home for the welfare state, but then steers the viewer towards the darker side of life in the area. Helinä bridges these two worlds of Tapiola: the one printed on postcards and shown to foreign officials, and her own personal experience of life in the suburb. She leads the viewer away from the familiar landmarks of Tapiola Centre, through a shadowy forest to her flat in a multi-storey concrete house. On the accompanying soundtrack a man sings, 'people live in their houses, like beetles' (*Ihmiset asuvat kodeissaan kuin koppakuoriaiset*). The docu-

mentary style and familiar polished imagery of Tapiola give way to one individual's story set in their personal experience of that space.

Dark forests of the garden city

The lush forests of the garden city are transformed into oppressive places with lurking predators. The parks and forests in *The Green Widow* are not quite the areas for sports and play that head of Asuntosäätiö Heikki von Hertzen (1984: 131) envisioned them as. Pakkasvirta's forest is the dark underbelly of Tapiola, a space of threat and losing control. Beyond the ordered rows of pristine white houses is a shadowy place outside the realms of social control. It is where peeping toms and adulterers go, and along them Helinä. However not all forests are sinister in *The Green Widow*. A flashback to the forest of Helinä's rural hometown shows the sun shining, her naked on the grass with her husband, at ease and uninhabited in her environment. In this forest, she is the one holding the binoculars and observing her surroundings. It is only the suburban forests of Tapiola that are threatening and uncomfortable. Tarmo Malmberg (1968) described the constant presence of the peeping tom in *The Green Widow*'s forest as a kind of fairytale troll, 'an evil ruler of the forest, a reminder of primeval force' (metsän paha haltija, muistutus alkulähteistä). Tapiola, the ruler of the forest, is transformed into a troll. As the facade of Helinä's life as a good housewife comes crumbling down, finally she walks into the woods and invites the darkness in.

Watchful eyes and bleeding realities

The theme of surveillance follows throughout the film. Helinä is being watched by a man in the woods, listened in on by a market researcher, and checked up on by her husband. In the forest the camera angles take the peeping tom's point of view peering up at lit windows from the darkness of the woods. The viewer joins the market researcher in his radio control room to listen in on women. Helinä is constantly followed, watched and regulated. The viewer is

privy to the delicate inner workings of market researcher's radio control room, pulsating dials, flashing light bulbs and whirling aerials. Pakkasvirta creates a fictitious big brother watching over the suburbs. We see close-ups of technical details and a wall covered with a map detailing the movements of the housewives. As the viewer is allowed into this clandestine space, or to share the peeping tom's view from behind a tree, we become the voyeur. We are made aware of, and a part of, the structure of surveillance that looms over Helinä. We are given privileged access to spaces exerting control, to hidden gazes that follow her. We hear the radio signal that monitors her everyday. When the web of surveillance tightens around Helinä and she is distressed the background sound of her radio signal becomes overwhelming, filling the space with its relentless beeping. We hear her distress pulsating through the radio. As Eero Tuomikoski (1968) wrote in an article about *The Green Widow* 'We live a fear-filled life. The structures of society are above us.' (*Elämme pelonsekaista elämää. Yhteiskunnan rakenteet ovat yläpuolellamme.*). The structures of surveillance range from the erotic male gaze of the peeping tom to the prying questions of the research specialist. They keep a watchful eye over Helinä and her attempt at holding up a facade of happy family life. The market researcher's voice narrates a sociological study of the housewife's family dynamics and role in society. The structure of surveillance the viewer is complicit in becomes a structure of society looking in on its inhabitants.

The Green Widow plays with levels of reality and versions of truth. The tension between the documentary and fiction established in the beginning of the film continues throughout allowing for characters to penetrate the divide. The film covers several instances that challenge the time/space continuum of the narrative. When we are watching TV with Helinä and her children, flickering images of cowboys fill our screen as well as complete

with the rounded edges of the television set. We move from observing her to watching the television show on a shared fuzzy screen. This shift in perspective is made clear by decreased image quality and the screen within a screen effect. At times the narrative voice of the researcher overlaps with fiction. When Helinä dreams of her own murder, the style of storytelling is the same as her reality. What is true, what is fantasy, and what is documentary meld into one another. Layers of fiction are built upon one another. The authoritative voice of the market researcher leaves his sheltered and privileged control room to appear in Helinä's living room. The divides between reality, fiction, fantasy, and documentary are brought together and allowed to bleed into each other. To add to the blend of reality, and fiction, cinema and surveillance, Pakkasvirta borrows themes, such as the man spying on women in the woods and the housewives' alcohol abuse from real-life news headlines from the suburbs of the time.

This blending of documentary, surveillance, and fantasy create a Tapiola where reality becomes elusive. The official Tapiola as a crowning glory of Finnish housing and architecture is lost in Pakkasvirta's *The Green Widow*. The much lauded forests and healthy green spaces become dark threatening domains of peeping toms and illicit affairs. Pakkasvirta shows an alienating and threatening Tapiola of bare landscapes. Rather than play with her children at the communal playground, the mother walks her children to play at the side of a muddy barren logging area. The setting of *The Green Widow* is easily recognisable as the real Tapiola, but the way it is recreated onscreen tells a very different story from the official take on the area. The wide paths become alienating, lush forests threatening, and the new suburban lifestyle lonely. The film unveils the everyday life of the environment drawing a divide between the planned and the experience of lived space. The cinematic exposes the unpredictable human interaction with the spaces of Tapiola.

Blending visions of the real

Michel de Certeau (2011: xviii-xix) writes in *The Practice of Everyday Life* about the misappropriation of language through speech and likens it to redefining planned spaces through the act of walking. Describing looking down at a city grid de Certeau (2011: 93) argues 'the panorama-city is a "theoretical" simulacrum, in short a picture, whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices.' He goes on to describe how the act of walking recreates and redefines the parameters of the urban space, drawing a personal and intimate map of paths and observations. This shift in perspective exemplifies the division of the planned and lived spaces. This is where the cinematic can offer insight into the experience of the lived space. Whilst policy documents develop the plans for a new welfare state and architectural blueprints draw out the stage for this change, cinema gives us a tool to explore these spaces through the human interaction experienced within them. It brings the human into the equation, both through characters onscreen and director behind it. As de Certeau's urban wanderer, the camera reappropriates its surroundings as it moves through the landscape. It weaves amongst the buildings developing its own interpretation of the space. The difference between the planned environment and the cinematic landscape that Pakkasvirta creates in *The Green Widow* teases out parallel readings of Finnish suburbs. The vantage point ranges between those of the architect or town planner, to that of the inhabitant and director. The carefully curated and planned spaces become misappropriated on screen.

The film's controversial reinterpretation of life in Tapiola provoked a public debate that questioned the architectural design of suburbs, the emerging suburban lifestyle, and even the social policies of the Finnish welfare nation. After *The Green Widow* was released, it functioned as a catalyst in the press questioning the future and development of the Finnish suburbs. Some critics argued that

the film was not a realistic representation of suburban life, whilst many felt the portrayal was honest and touching. What most of the commentators did agree on, however, was the film's importance in questioning the suburbs and their design as a whole. As Velipekka Makkonen wrote in *Contactor* (1968):

The Green Widow takes place in one of those Finnish garden cities that have sprung up in the past few decades, where architecture itself dictates the majority of life conditions for those imprisoned in them ... *The Green Widow* depicts the psychological violence, whose origins are impossible to define, but that is present in both human and surroundings.

Vihreä Leski tapahtuu yhdessä noista suomalaisista viimeisten parinkymmenen vuoden aikana syntyneistä viherkaupunginosista, joissa jo arkkitehtuuri sinänsä sanelee suurimman osan niiden vangiksi joutuneiden elämisen ehdoista. Vihreä leski kuvaa henkistä väkivaltaa, jonka lähde on mahdoton yksilöidä, mutta joka kuvastuu paralleelisena sekä ihmisessä että miljöössä.

Makkonen (1968) goes on to note that it would be a mistake to read the film as direct critique of suburban town planning, but rather as a portrait of an individual tied by society. The film challenges the official vision of Tapiola by showing how the experience of living there differs from the ideal lifestyle envisioned for it. Pakkasvirta makes visible the experience of lived environment and adds his version to the competing and conflicting versions of the reality of Tapiola. As always in the case of film, *The Green Widow* offers a framed and edited version of reality, one that it even plays up to with its structural shifts. Similarly to the architectural blueprints, the vision of space is mediated through different channels and viewpoints. Pakkasvirta's strength being in

bringing to life characters of the area, the community the welfare nation was working so hard to build. As Matti Luoma (1968) wrote as a response to the film, 'This is how people live. Their problems are worth examining. These are the difficult consequences of urbanisation'. (Näin elävät ihmiset. Heidän ongelmansa ovat tutkimisen arvoisia. Tässä on eräs kaupungistumisen vaikeita kasvannaisia.)

The strong reaction that *The Green Widow* provoked is not surprising. Tapiola was not simply constructed of concrete and the problem of representing it truthfully becomes a matter of capturing its identity, society, and meaning. The development of the area, which was a massive government-backed project, also inevitably ties its identity to the building of the Finnish welfare nation. When Pakkasvirta transforms a pleasant area to a hostile environment he is unavoidably critiquing much more than the architectural design. Transforming the garden city into a maze of dark forests and homes into a patchwork of balconies with people gazing back into the woods in solitude recreates Tapiola's land from utopia to dystopia. The fears of a society facing change in all aspects of life, most importantly in redefining domestic life and the home, become visible onscreen. As in the film, the cinematic world that Pakkasvirta creates onscreen allows for the experience of the space, the fears and uneasiness of a new way of life, to bleed into the official imagery of Tapiola.

References

- de Certeau, M** 2011 *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Connah, R** 2005 *Finland: Modern Architectures in History*. London: Reaktion Books.
- von Hertzen, H** 1984 *Raportti Kaupungin Rakentamisesta: Tapiolan arkea ja juhlaa*. Espoo: Länsiväylä Oy.
- Kuusi, P** 1962 *1960-luvun sosiaalipolitiikka*. Porvoo: WSOY.
- Luoma, M** 1968 '...on ainakin yhden keskustelun arvoinen', *Aamulehti*, 28 January.

- Makkonen, V** 1968 *Contactor*, 2.
- Malmberg, T** 1968 Uuden elokuvamme maisemaa. In *Ylioppilaslehti*, 3.
- Marback, R** 2001 Learning to Inhabit Writing. *Composition Studies* 29(1): 51-68.
- Meurman, O I** 1954 *Asemakaavaoppi*. Helsinki: Otava. p. 215.
- Pakkasvirta, J** (dir.) 1968 *Vihreä Leski*. Filminor.
- Richards, J M** 1966 *A Guide to Finnish Architecture* London: Hugh Evelyn.
- Ritari, E** (dir.) 1953 *Rakennuttajia ja rakentajia*. Suomen Filmitöiden Seura.
- Roivas, V** (dir.) 1957 *Uusia asuntoalueita*. Oy Filmiseppo.
- Standertskjöld, E** 2011 *Arkkitehtuurimme Vuosikymmenet: 1960–1980*. Helsinki: Rakennustieto Oy.
- Tuomikoski, E** 1968 *Aamulehti*, 30 January.
- Vahtola, J** 2003 *Suomen Historia: Jääkaudesta Euroopan unioniin*. Helsinki: Otava. p. 410.
- Wilson, C** 1992 Introduction: Finland and Tradition of Modernism. In Poole, S (ed.) *The New Finnish Architecture*. New York: Rizzoli, pp. 11-17.