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❖ **Simultaneous places: visiting, playing and representing Vimmerby, the village of Astrid Lindgren's childhoods**

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Introduction

This essay is based on a chapter analysing four visitor centres in and around the small Swedish town of Vimmerby, the birthplace of Astrid Lindgren, world renowned author of the Pippi Longstocking children's books. The Vimmerby area only has approximately 15, 000 inhabitants but receives around half a million visitors each summer. Visitors can see the birthplace visitor centre, the children's theme park, or several of the film and television locations nearby where films from her books were shot. The analysis explores the meanings and practices expressed by some visitors at these various places, discourses of a 'genuine' connection to the author and to childhood life, activities of child's play more or less as an imperative activity, as well as the practices of family snapshots and representations via digital cameras and mobile phones. In short, it establishes the simultaneity of activity that makes up the place and its visitors.

Driving towards the South Swedish town of Vimmerby, you find yourself passing through a great deal of ordinary small-town infrastructure. If you follow the road signs to the outer edge of town, you can make your way towards the theme park Astrid Lindgren's World (ALV) which occupies a relatively small area in its municipality. Continuing to the town centre, you reach Näs, the new visitor attraction built around Astrid Lindgren's childhood home, the farm that her family rented. Näs is sandwiched between residential areas from the 1960s and '70s, but consists of a modern building with large glass sections facing the road, next to an older whitewashed house and the old rectory. Behind these structures lie the red painted houses with their classic Swedish countryside look.

This essay is focused on the places in the town that have directly sprung from Astrid Lindgren's life and her children's books based on the adventures of Pippi Longstocking. My main interest here is how such sites communicate the perceived history and culture that they attempt to capture and how they are used. More specifically, I am interested in how a popular heritage attraction is communicated, how stories are created, and the opportunities for visitors to interpret them. Astrid Lindgren's books have been popular for decades so many visitors may feel a special relationship with her world. Because they are about childhood and children's experiences, the experience may be more 'personal' than the relationship that one may have with 'other' tourist destinations. Now I would like to welcome you to walk through ALV with me.

Coming to, or coming back

Astrid Lindgren's stories are familiar to most Swedes, as well as to many Danes, Germans, Dutch and visitors from many other countries including Australia. The stories belong to a literary heritage that can lay claim to a more global reach, with her books being translated into more than 100 languages worldwide. Astrid and family lived in her in the early 20th century, and the guide tells you that she re-purchased the house in the mid-1960s and began to reconstruct the rooms as they were when she was a child. The guide describes how this happened in a story that combines Astrid's story with a more general one of the post-war period. Childhood is highlighted and portrayed as mostly filled with fun, friendship and ingenuity, of parents' love for each other and for the children.

The guide points out that if we hear sounds from upstairs, this is not surprising, but that they do not come from ghosts as Astrid's relatives still own the house and spend time there in the summer. We are not framed as foreign visitors but are allowed to have a peek at something which is both historic and still in use. Two other visitors on the tour, a mother and daughter from Denmark, aged around 50 and 30 years old, seem happy but a little taken by the experience of having been in Astrid Lindgren's house. They say that her work was important to them both. The mother works with children and the daughter studied Astrid Lindgren and her books at high school. For them, it is an important experience to have come to the real place

where everything started, and to feel close to the author was paramount, regardless of how the place really looks or is organised.



In the barn there is an exhibition, created by Astrid's relatives, about the siblings who were also involved in Astrid's childhood. All had interesting lives and careers, all working with words in different ways according to the exhibition brochure. The story about childhood is told here in words, pictures and artefacts, but also of important literary, journalistic and political tasks of the siblings. The exhibition contains old texts, photographs and objects that occupy the entire top floor of the house. The siblings seem all to be creative products of the Swedish 1900s, having left farm life for both literary and political activities, and so presenting an image of social mobility and modern possibilities. You are confronted with a contrast in both terms of style and content when entering the visitor centre exhibition hall and exhibition, "The whole world is Astrid". It is large and modern, divided into a number of thematic panels centred on the author's life and her influence on the Swedish post-war period. Astrid is the independent and brave woman who speaks uncomfortable truths to the world and its politicians, creating a clear contrast with the story of her childhood home.

Näs gives a disparate impression: there are big differences between the various elements of style and narrative. Yet there is a kind of 'concurrency' in the experience, the multifaceted and ambiguous work together rather than being contradictory. Näs has several different styles and tells different stories, but there are some common starting points in the stories of Astrid: special parents and their loving marriage, fun and friendship, storytelling and stories, moving out into the wider world, creativity, accountability and impact on society, and return to childhood and origins. These are common threads in the description of Astrid Lindgren in the environment in which she partly re-created herself and that is now developing around her. Näs is perhaps a historic setting in a contemporary multifaceted space. Näs allows for both shared and private experiences, big and small stories - with a strong focus on the person, Astrid, but also offering the opportunity for visitors to meet their own personal reading experience from childhood.

Outside ALV, the parking lot is full of cars in orderly rows, but is relatively quiet and empty of people, although from inside you hear a composed sound of children's laughter, noise and voices. The environment becomes the built-up street from the book, Troublemaker Street, where the impression of street life and children is replaced with shopping sounds and queues at souvenir shops and ice cream stands. But ALV is not a shopping mall. If we continue to walk, we will soon reach Saltkråkan, based on the film set in Swedish idyllic summer island, with a ride in which we travel in small carts through several tableaux. We come across mechanical, lifelike replicas set in scenes with the 1960s characters, presenting memories from Swedish television and film history. But ALV is not an amusement park like Universal Studios in Los Angeles. Next we come to a children's slide running down the roof of the houses from another of Astrid's stories. Children are running back and forth into the houses, meeting costumed adults who play characters from the stories. In the middle of all this activity, parents carry ice creams, and operate digital cameras or mobile phones. We are moving forward quickly and end up in a quiet corner surrounded by trees and lush greenery, where the only activity on offer is a normal swing like that in any ordinary playground. But ALV is not just a playground.

After a while we begin to discern high voices, and suddenly a song is heard with that typical modern 'medieval' sound: a bit dull raspy base notes from the low strings, bagpipes and weak light touch of Jaw harp. It is a theatre play of Ronja the Robbers Daughter. A large crowd of parents and children sit in rows around the outdoor stage and are fascinated with the story. The actors perform with passion and professionalism. But ALV is not a theatre.

At the Pippi Longstocking house you can see a parent talking on their mobile while their children play in and around the house. The parent watches and describes the scene for the children's grandparents. Nearby are more parents with cameras and mobile phones: one witnesses the contemporary snapshot technique of the camera phone on the outstretched arm and with no time to compose the image. They take lots of pictures to capture the moving kids and some of the images may be sent directly to the grandmother, who also can feel present in the visit. But ALV is not a photo opportunity.

Some of the children playing in the house seem aware of parents and their photography, while others seem to play for themselves. In one corner is a chest that is almost full with drawings and letters, "til Pippi fra Laura" it says on a drawing of Pippi Longstocking. In another corner of the room is another chest, and it is half full of baby pacifiers. Above the chest is a

little boy telling his mother that the next time he comes, he will also give his pacifier to Pippi. But ALV is not a place for babies leaving their dummies behind.



ALV is, of course, all these things at once, with elements from the shopping mall, kindergarten, playground, theatre, amusement park, picnic site, a recreation park. But everything is kept within its respective, designated areas and the place has a remarkable ability to keep all these differences and activities in check and under some kind of control. In the queue for the rides at Saltkråkan I meet a Swedish family who are on their second day of ALV-visit: mum, dad, a nine-year old daughter and a five-year son on tour in southern Sweden. They are tired but happy, having, paid 1250 Swedish Kroner for a two-day ticket and want to get as much as possible out of the visit. The trip itself is quite expensive. The parents believe that ALV is mainly designed for children and it works best for ages six to twelve years – the nine year old became very involved in the stories, the 5 year old just tagged along. "He's having fun but does not understand why ...", they say.

Although ALV, with all its simultaneous activities and different types of site can give an impression of chaos rather than intelligible order, it works for the visiting family. This is precisely because it offers different possibilities: shopping, eating, playing, watching a show, taking pictures of the kids, and, of course, to handle easily the logistics of the visit. But we cannot help but reflect on the theme of 'simultaneity' – that is, how a site may include several different contents, be complex and ambiguous at the same time rather than uniform and easily understood. But is there nothing acts to unite ALV? And where did the Astrid Lindgren end up? The key to understanding ALV is to see how everything fits together around a hub of the (re)enactment processes related to Astrid Lindgren's stories, performed by several different people (children, parents, actors) at several different locations, and with a variety of purposes (staged play, experience, respect of vacation plans).

Can ALV represent a kind of direct experience independent of time and place, particularly from the child's perspective? If Näs stands for the Astrid Lindgren origin and history, the reminder and the construction of the present become something that must operate at ALV, a place where the links between personal history, time and Astrid Lindgren's stories are disappearing. The children talk naturally with the fictional character Anton Svensson of Katthult and have intimate conversations with Pippi and Karlsson on the roof in a very contemporary reality that might not be so dependent on stories. They create their history here and now. But is it then a 'visit' for the children? The boundary between the visitor/tourist child and the playing child is suspended, and it is obviously not the 'visitor' that can be the active participant in the fantastic activities of play.

The children in ALV are not just visitors (tourists, spectators) but can be "just a child", and that role is, of course, understood and perhaps even prescribed in Astrid Lindgren's books, as well as in modern child rearing practices. The child of ALV is one with instructions to play: maybe you could even say that the children are obliged to play in order for the ALV to live. Perhaps the play is staged and displayed, not only for their parents' digital memory and collective image making, but also for the design of ALV as a living space. It is the children that make the place, and it is they who are the sites re-created objects.

Creating the visit, making the site

What could be better for tourist destinations such as ALV and Näs than having visitors who, in advance, have a positive and deep-felt relationship with the place? There exists a desire to go there and experience nostalgia and the dreams of one's youth or, perhaps, one wishes for another, earlier and better world, another time, another life – the image of the happy childhood in an endless, safe summer. Can a tourist destination have better prospects than a meeting a world famous literary manifestation that so strongly manifests those values? Astrid Lindgren's stories are indeed part of a common heritage, but different personal relationships with them produce different reasons for visiting ALV and Näs. The personal experience may have already happened in our childhood reading, games and fantasies that may not so easily be reproduced. What can a destination based on this be: a confirmation that the imagination is "where fairy tales come true", as the slogan claims, an opportunity to play and become part of the stories, or a chance to check off a 'must' visit, a goal in a childhood travel directory?

Is what is re-created during a visit then, in question? It might be merely play, the engagement with the literary characters, or a staged memory of a reading experience? If the personal experience here is really the individual reader's encounter with the memories of readings, it may not have been necessary for this to have been made public or staged in a physical place. The ALV experience is a present defined space as a kind of enclave of play and imagination. Näs is 'about' Astrid Lindgren's own

story while also offering close proximity to the 'original' site of both her own origin as the author and the origin of the stories. ALV is trying to re-create a playground in the present. The sites are thus full of 'simultaneities' spanning the genuine, natural and spontaneous, as well as the controlled and orchestrated. But they do not necessarily compete, perhaps creating a balance between experience and involvement. Astrid Lindgren's story and stories, like "genuine" cultural heritage or cultural construction, offer something for everyone.

Here however, is also one of the dilemmas: the prerequisite for a sense of belonging and closeness is that you as a visitor can be something more than just tourist observer, and can create genuineness and authenticity. It requires a special kind of role-taking: to play the game of storied childhood, to participate in the stories or creating new digital family memories – and the most staged of this design is the children's play. Their role is prescribed and it is the children who have to play in Vimmerby for its child's play-designed places to come alive.

About the author

Kosta (Konstantin) Economou, Ph.D in interdisciplinary Communication studies at Linköping University, Sweden. In addition to his academic career, Kosta has produced and conducted a series of art and new media projects and collaborations, within the interest of creating public performances with interdisciplinary and cross media formats and critical theory. Kosta is currently Senior lecturer, programme director and Deputy Head of ISAK; Department for Studies of Social Change and Culture, Linköping University, Sweden.