

## **Well-being; How the living environments of others may improve it.**

Sabrina Frey  
Florida State University  
[www.sabrinalfrey.com](http://www.sabrinalfrey.com)

### **International study of Nordic cultures and their living environments.**

#### Introduction

The topic of people's overall health and happiness has been gaining increased attention and press in recent years. The proof that 'happy people live longer' has been given by many studies that investigate the contributions of subjective well-being (SWB) to health and longevity. Some studies have explored areas that may contribute to SWB such as health care systems, eating habits, and physical attributes among other factors. Many scholars define good cultures as those in which health and happiness flourish, so many economists are now incorporating findings from psychology and the behavioral sciences into SWB research. Thus, well-being is now increasingly recognized as a legitimate and important topic to understand and promote.

As one of a designer's primary responsibilities is to promote the welfare of his or her clients, it is reasonable to assume that it is also a designers' responsibility to investigate and add useful information to the body of knowledge about SWB and its potential connections to the built environment. As advocates for healthier environments it seems logical to research the living environments of societies who report an elevated state of SWB to evaluate how their values are expressed in their living environments. Further, could the manifestations of those expressions be a contributor to their elevated sense of well-being?

Global-scope surveys of SWB consistently identify residents of the Nordic countries as the happiest and healthiest in the world. These elusive societies are often noted as the most progressive in areas such as technology and education. However, little is published about how they live. These posters reveal findings from exploratory research into Nordic peoples' traditions and habits that are related to their welfare and elevated SWB. The research specifically evaluates how these traditions and habits are expressed in their living environments. In so doing, the study identifies residential elements that contribute to the perceptions of elevated SWB. The literary findings coupled with the qualitative research findings may help add to the interior designer's body of knowledge regarding improved well-being, an important but also sometimes neglected element of the health-safety-welfare paradigm.

The posters showcase living environment features and norms gathered from extensive interviews. The interviews with Nordic residents and the photographic documentation provided in answer to the research questions can be used by design educators to teach their students about global populations and the contributors to an elevated state of well-being. The posters will showcase examples and conclusions from the study and Sabrina will also be able to discuss the findings to help educators expand their understanding of SWB and the living environment.

## Summary

The inspiration for this study came from the researchers desire to better understand people and how we as designers can use the built environment to improve a person's overall well-being. Lifestyle changes come in many forms such as diet and exercise but what about the everyday spaces we inhabit? Learning about other cultures and specifically those who are consistently polled as having the highest level of subjective well-being (SWB) is the starting point for this long term research.

The review of literature for this study revealed that the Nordic countries' populations of Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Iceland consistently rank the highest among SWB polls (Gallup, 2010; Worldsbestplaces, 2010). Researchers suggest that SWB is likely the result of many factors. With regard to the Nordic country populations, four characteristics have been identified as primary values contributing to SWB by Lindahl (2005), Maagera & Simonsen (2005), Bird, Snitt & Pallasmaa (2005), Fjeld (2009) and Nelson (2004):

- Connection to nature
- Equality and fairness
- Simplicity
- Individualism and self-expression

These authors identified instances of these characteristics within these residents' lifestyle as well as in their cultures' predominant design philosophies. Although other values were noted by these authors, this research has focused on these four qualities for this study, as they show clear potential links to their influence on and expression within the built environment.

The first purpose of this study, therefore, is to explore if the four identified qualities within the literature review of nature connection, equality & fairness, simplicity and self-expression are indeed related to Nordic residents' personal housing choices. The second purpose of this study is to explore if these residential environment qualities have a sense of connection and/or influence on these resident participants' sense of SWB. The final purpose explores how those values might be expressed in participants' personal living environments.

This study allows us to further understand and evaluate Nordic peoples' traditions and habits and how they are expressed in their living environments. The study shows how the manifestations of the four specified values in their residential built environment contribute to their elevated sense of SWB. This qualitative research confirms these authors' ideas through surveys, interviews and photo documentation with Nordic residents themselves. Although the direct connection between Nordic lifestyles and SWB has been mentioned by authors such as Lindahl (2005) and Fjeld (2009), the validity of these statements from a design perspective but has never been evaluated further.

The findings confirm that the four identified values do play an important role in residents' well-being, although at a very subconscious level. Participants were notably surprised when evaluating their own environments and recalling the decisions behind the creation of said environment. Habits and patterns were well ingrained and understanding of the benefits derived from them was explained and displayed.

## Methodology

As this study uses a convenience sample, the study's conclusions are only generalizable to urban residents in Norway, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, and Iceland, with characteristics being employed urban dwellers with no small children. This study is envisioned as the first phase of a larger research project that has the ultimate goal of evaluating other top rated countries such as Australia and Canada to compare findings and group similarities.

A limitation of this study's sample is that the participants had to speak English and have access to a computer in order to communicate directly with the researcher during the interview process. This presented a bias toward those participants that are more learned, both generally and technologically. That is, participants must be capable of internet completion of the initial questionnaires, have a digital camera and be able to conduct a telephone conversation or communicate via Skype. Another unavoidable limitation is that the study was conducted during the winter months.

The 5 steps to completing participation included the following:

- *Step 1* – Read, sign and return via email the **Consent Form**.
- *Step 2* – Complete the **Well-Being Questionnaire** on the SurveyMonkey website:
- *Step 3* – Complete the **4 Pre-Interview questions** on the SurveyMonkey website:
- *Step 4* – Take at least **10 pictures** of your home that reflect the values described, paste one picture on the Photo Documentation sheet provided and fill out the information.
- *Step 5* - **Schedule** an interview time with researcher.

The results are being reported as a combination of descriptive statistics augmented by qualitative reporting. The interview data was transcribed for each interview and coupled with survey answers and pictures for complete evaluation, allowing the visual graphics to underscore emergent points. Where appropriate, quantities of responses will be reported in the case of similarities in the data for groups of participants. Thick, rich descriptions as well as direct quotes are being reported in order to illustrate key points so as to capture the context and meaning of respondents' reflections concerning their lived experience and SWB in connection with their residences. Frequency of responses and emergent trends were also gathered and reported.

Some of the challenges encountered included:

- Finding participants – Generally these populations are private and somewhat elusive, only through personal recommendations were participants willing to share their information.
- Time of year – Winter months included holiday vacation schedules to work around.
- Surveys vs. Interviews – Finding people willing to do the interviews rather than just filling out the surveys. Sometimes due to lack of confidence in their English skills.
- Filling out Photo Diary info – No problem getting the pictures back with descriptions but not in the specific format requested.

## Findings

### **Connection to nature**

1. Do you perceive that you experience a connection to nature in the personal living environment you have created for yourself? If so, how?

a. How do you perceive that your connection to nature relates to your well-being?

#### *Overall Results*

Connection to nature was acknowledged as one of the most important values in their lives. Even though in urban settings they typically live in apartment style buildings, all mentioned this as a key element in choosing their homes location. The following are comments noted about natures connection to their living environment.

1. They insist on large windows with views of nature
2. Easy access to natural elements such as a harbor, park or forest.
3. Convenient access to work via walking or riding a bike, preferably thru a park.
4. Plants and natural objects are normal decoration.
5. Embrace the natural course of the seasons, (darkness, cold, snow, sun, endless days)
6. Access and appreciation of solitude, with access to people when desired.
7. White walls are used to reflect as much natural light as possible during the long winters, not just the limited sunlight but moonlight and snow reflection as well.
8. Candles are used in place of artificial lighting in spaces not being used for specific tasks.
9. Natural wood finishes are prominent architectural features.
10. Many urban dwellers have isolated, minimalistic country cabins they visit regularly throughout the year, but mostly during summer .
11. Those who mentioned nature not being a priority acknowledge the need to see it and access it in some way, unconsciously drawn to it.
12. Most people use some form of radiant heating supplied by the city, but little or no air conditioning. Natural ventilation used whenever possible even during the winter months.

### **Equality and fairness**

2. Do you perceive that your sense of equality and fairness are tied into the personal living environment you have created for yourself? If so, how?

a. How do you perceive that your sense of equality and fairness relate to your well-being?

#### *Overall Results*

This value was ranked highest overall but most people did not automatically make the connection to their living environments. Their comments during the interview revealed several interesting unconscious social patterns.

1. Similar types of housing regardless of income or social status.
2. Homes average in size 65 to 90 m<sup>2</sup> (700 to 960 sq. ft.) 2 to 3 bedrooms with 1 bath
3. Evident in lack of external display of personal wealth and internal priorities.
4. People maintain residences for long period of time.
5. No family hierarchy observed, members are equals as are guests. ie: no head of the table
6. Personal status within the family is not demonstrated but shared equally among its members and spaces. Most bedrooms are of equal size and style.

## **Simplicity**

3. Do you perceive that your sense of simplicity is tied into the personal living environment you have created for yourself? If so, how?

a. How do you perceive that your sense of simplicity relates to your well-being?

### *Overall Results*

This value was ranked 3rd highest overall and all the participants mentioned it as being a part of their overall well-being in connection to their living environment.

Their interview responses revealed consistent comments and priorities.

1. Too much clutter is stressful.
2. Simply spaces are easier to maintain and keep clean.
3. Having smaller homes means collecting less stuff.
4. Items are chosen for functionality, long term usage and hold personal meaning.
5. Furnishings reflect true Scan Design (functional, accessible, stylish & long lasting)
6. Allows them time and money for more important pursuits.
7. High cost of living means items such as furnishings and accessories are more costly to purchase and replace without due consideration.
8. Storage solutions are important but items are not hidden away.
9. Color palettes are simple and act as a blank canvas for easily changing accessories.
10. Spaces are shared by multiple family members and serve various functions.
11. Lighting is mostly task lighting with few overhead lights in use regularly.

## **Individuality and self-expression**

4. Do you perceive that your sense of individuality and self-expression are tied into the personal living environment you have created for yourself?

a. How do you perceive that your sense of individuality and self-expression relate to your well-being?

### *Overall Results*

This value was ranked lowest overall and participants were split as to its importance. Their interview responses revealed varying views.

1. Many tastefully personalize spaces by displaying collections in artful ways.
2. All mentioned the importance of specific personal items.
3. Items are chosen for functionality, long term usage and hold personal meaning.
4. Eclectic design and personal taste rule these homes.
5. Even simple seeming chairs and cabinets are used for the long term and reflect true Scan Design longevity of use and classic styling.
6. Spaces are personalized with easy to change items such as pillows and covers.
7. Personal family items or homemade effects were most often presented proudly.
8. People entertain in their homes regularly, & spaces are flexible to accommodate.
9. People will express themselves within social confines or structure.
10. Personality is more privately displayed in their homes than publically displayed.

## Conclusion

As previously discussed the topic of people's overall subjective well-being is increasingly recognized as a legitimate and important topic to understand and promote. The results of this study may add to the body of knowledge in the interior design field as well as the environmental psychology and behavior fields. Its results could assist people worldwide to improve their state of well-being and lead happier and healthier lives.

Researching subjective well-being, living environments and specifically the Nordic populations of Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Iceland has yielded four identifiable characteristics or values by Lindahl (2005), Maagera & Simonsen (2005), Bird, Snitt & Pallasmaa (2005), Fjeld (2009) and Nelson (2004):

- Connection to nature
- Equality and fairness
- Simplicity
- Individualism and self-expression

This exploratory research into Nordic peoples' traditions and habits evaluates how they are expressed in their living environments. The study identifies residential elements that contribute to the perceptions of elevated SWB. The importance of these findings can be noted as implementable solutions to adjusting the mentalities of lower rated SWB populations.