

# Taking up Residence in a Historic Town Hall Building

The Relocation of a State Institution from Copenhagen  
to a Small Town in Rural Denmark

By Birgitte Romme Larsen

“We are carrying out the largest redistribution of state jobs in recent history – moving state jobs to those parts of the country that badly need more growth and more opportunities. Denmark must not be split between development and dismantlement.” On 17 January 2018, these were the words of the then Danish Prime Minister, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, at a major press conference held at Christiansborg, the seat of the Danish Parliament (Statsministeriet 2018, my translation). Here he presented the second and final round of a comprehensive national policy initiative to redistribute state jobs from the capital of Copenhagen to the Danish provinces: *Better Balance – government workplaces closer to citizens and enterprises*. This initiative was launched in 2015 by the centre-right government in the wake of a decade characterised by increasing centralisation of the Danish public sector, causing a significant reduction in the number of state institutions and public sector workplaces located outside the country’s larger cities. This development can at least partially be attributed to a major structural reform in 2007 (Dybvad 2015), which merged Denmark’s previous 271 local municipalities into 98 larger municipal entities.

While Danish attempts to redistribute state jobs from centre to periphery had been sporadic and on a limited scale prior to the *Better Balance* initiative, this is not the case in the rest of Scandinavia. From the 1950s to the present day, the relocation of government workplaces has been a more regular and widespread practice to support national cohesion between urban and rural districts in Norway and Sweden (see, e.g., Nilsson 1992; Trondal & Kiland 2010). Meanwhile, the recent *Better Balance* in-

itiative constitutes the most comprehensive ever geographical redistribution of government institutions in Denmark: during 2016–19, a total of 7,927 state jobs (equivalent to about one-fifth of total state jobs in the Capital Region of Denmark in 2015), spread across 89 state institutions, were relocated to 51 smaller towns across the country (Finansministeriet 2018). In this article, I invite readers to journey to one such small Danish town, where a state institution was relocated in 2019, casting light on this local migratory encounter as seen from an everyday, ethnographic perspective.

Previous studies and evaluation reports on the outcomes of the above-mentioned decentralisation initiative primarily address questions such as: “How much did the relocations cost?”; “How did they affect productivity?”; “How much did absence due to illness increase?”; and “How many employees moved with the workplace, how many commute and how many resigned?” (e.g., Christensen 2020; Djøf 2016; Finansministeriet 2018, 2019; Rambøll 2017). In addition to their focus on quantifiable outcomes, what all these questions have in common is that they focus on the *internal* relationship, so to speak, between the relocated government workplaces and the state itself – as opposed to the more *external* relationship between the workplaces and the various towns and areas to which they are relocated. Put differently, the existing questions on the matter form a sort of enclosed knowledge circuit, asking how the relocation has impacted the various state institutions – and thus, ultimately, the state itself.

Although the purpose of the *Better Balance* initiative was precisely to “con-

tribute to creating activity and stimulating development in *the surrounding area*” (Finansministeriet 2018: 3, my translation and italicisation), few studies and reports currently exist that focus on the relationship between relocated state institutions and their new surroundings. These comprise quantitative macroeconomic studies and impact analyses of the effects on local labour markets and employment rates (Balance Danmark 2020; Christensen 2020; Javakhishvili-Larsen et al. 2018). Examining existing studies on the redistribution of state jobs in a wider Scandinavian and European context, such as Sweden, England or Spain, overall, they are likewise characterised by a quantitative and macroeconomic approach to the relationship between relocated state institutions and their new surroundings (e.g., Andersson 2005; Faggio & Overman 2014; Jofre-Monseny et al. 2020). In other words, reviewing the current literature in Denmark and beyond reveals a knowledge gap in terms of qualitative and microsociological studies of the everyday encounters between relocated government workplaces and their new local social and cultural environments. This article contributes to an incipient closing of this knowledge gap.

Applying an anthropological and cultural-analytical approach to the topic of redistribution of state jobs, the analysis presented in this article forms part of a broader ethnographic case study following the relocation of the government workplace *Nota* to the rural Danish island of Lolland. Housing 80 state jobs, *Nota – the Danish Library and Expertise Center for People with Print Disabilities* – is a knowledge centre and library under the Danish Ministry of Culture that produces audiobooks, e-books

and braille books for those who have difficulty reading ordinary printed text, such as those with dyslexia or visual impairments. In October 2019, *Nota* moved to the small town of Nakskov (12,500 inhabitants) in western Lolland, where the workplace took up residence in a large building from 1876 located in the central town square, which Lolland Municipality sold to the state in conjunction with *Nota*’s relocation. In Nakskov and beyond, the building in question is considered of special local historic interest, having served for 130 years as *Nakskov Town Hall*. With the aforementioned Danish municipal reform in 2007, this function and 140 years of municipal sovereignty in Nakskov came to an end as seven municipalities on the island of Lolland, including the historic Nakskov Municipality, were merged into one: Lolland Municipality.

The case study of *Nota*’s relocation to Nakskov, which this article forms part of, is based on ethnographic fieldwork spanning 2019–20. As already touched upon, the overriding purpose of the study was to create a base of socio-cultural knowledge about some of the many complex but previously unexamined local outcomes of the recent Danish policy initiative relocating state institutions from urban to rural areas – seen in an everyday perspective. Hence, the overall research question addressed by the case study was: how is the relocated government workplace *Nota* received at the level of everyday local life, and how does the arrival of the workplace affect local social and cultural environments in its new surroundings?

To include the perspectives of both the relocated state institution and existing local residents, during my ethnographic field

visits in Nakskov, I divided my time equally between Nota's new domicile in the former town hall building and the surrounding town community. During the time I spent inside the historic building, I wanted to examine – from a workplace perspective – how day-to-day life at Nota played out and took shape within its new local environment. Here, the primary methods of data collection were ethnographic participant observation and “deep hanging out” (Geertz 1998); semi-structured qualitative interviews and informal conversations with employees; and various forms of document analysis (e.g., the guest book, a guided tour manual, job adverts, internal evaluations). During the time spent in the town of Nakskov, I wanted to examine – from a local community perspective – how the emergent neighbourly relationship between Nakskov and Nota took form and was institutionalised. Here again, the primary methods of data collection were ethnographic participant observation and “deep hanging out” in local public spaces and the immediate surroundings; informal conversations and semi-structured qualitative interviews with local townspeople, including key local figures and representatives of relevant associations; various forms of document analysis (e.g., letters from local associations, minutes from public meetings); and webnography (e.g., local debates about Nota's arrival on the town's Facebook page). Furthermore, the comprehensive national, regional and local media coverage (newspapers/radio/television) that has surrounded Nota's move to Nakskov forms an important part of the overall data material. I conducted a total of 25 semi-structured qualitative interviews, each lasting 1–3 hours, with a cross-section

of Nota employees, local residents and other relevant key persons, subsequently transcribing the audio recordings in full. In addition, I produced about 300 computer-written pages of ethnographic fieldnotes based on my detailed recollections of recent informal conversations and participant observations. This assembled body of ethnographic data was subsequently analysed through inductive coding and the identification of recurrent cross-cutting themes and patterns within the material.

In this article, I focus in particular on one such recurrent theme, identified through inductive examination of the data material. This concerns the ways in which Nota taking up residence specifically in the former Nakskov town hall building proves paramount in shaping the local encounter with the workplace – and hence also in shaping Nota's everyday workplace arrangements inside their new domicile. Applying the perspectives of both the relocated state institution and existing local residents, in my analysis of this prominent theme in the ethnographic material I especially draw on theories of materiality and time and how these dimensions intersect in social life (e.g., Bille & Sørensen 2012; Miller 2010; Sjørølev 2013; Sørensen 2016). With Nota's physical occupation of the historic Nakskov Town Hall, the building is given a new function and thus a new beginning. However, as we will see, this beginning is not simply a linear addition to the building's past and cultural history – it also reawakens and reactualises this past, both directly and indirectly. As mentioned, this revitalisation of local cultural history in itself proves to have a crucial impact on Nota's day-to-day workplace arrangements, both materially and socially.

With respect to the historic town hall, I first unpack how, in practice, a dual ownership is established between the state and local townspeople. It is within this dually owned space of their new domicile that Nota must operate and manoeuvre as a workplace. Next, I argue that, at the same time, the fact that it was precisely the former town hall building – regarded locally as Nakskov’s cultural-historical “inner sanctum” – in which Nota took up residence interacts with a regional and national historical context that extends beyond the building itself. This context concerns the Danish municipal mergers in 2007 that, as mentioned previously, brought to an end Nakskov’s 140-year status as an independent municipality. I show how this specific historical event, with delayed effect and renewed vigour, became of central importance in shaping both local expectations and social relations with regard to Nota’s reception in Nakskov.

Hence, while the reasoning behind the initial decision to relocate Nota from Copenhagen was to promote national cohesion, conversely, the article fleshes out how Nota is compelled to tread carefully to be accepted locally, acknowledging Nakskov’s cultural history and “social memory” (Connerton 1989) of its sovereign past. The article hereby brings cultural history – and cultural-historical materialities – alive as something that not just “is”, but that is constantly interpreted, told, used and remembered in service of various contemporary purposes and, as such, comes to take up the role of a living actor within a given present (Damsholt & Mellempgaard 2017). Likewise, cultural-historical events are both shaped by and play an active part in shaping the present.



1. Map of Denmark, highlighting Lolland Municipality. Illustration: Wikipedia (released into the public domain by the copyright holder).

### **Fighting for State Jobs and Fighting for the Old Town Hall**

Lolland Municipality is located on the western part of the Danish island of Lolland, in the southern area of Region Zealand, and covers an area of 886 square kilometres. The municipality has two larger town centres: Nakskov (12,500 inhabitants) to the west and Maribo (5,500 inhabitants) to the east. The latter has served as the seat of local government since the establishment of Lolland Municipality on 1 January 2007 – the day when seven smaller municipalities on the island (including Nakskov Municipality and Maribo Municipality) were merged into one.

In 2007, Lolland Municipality had 48,642 inhabitants, falling to 40,103 in 2022, making it one of the municipalities in Denmark with the steepest decline in population in recent decades (Lolland Kommune 2019). In

part, this is due to the high ratio of elderly citizens in the municipality, which leads to an excess of deaths over births (ibid.) and to the municipality having the country's smallest workforce as a share of population (Lolland Kommune 2017). In addition, there is significant out-migration among the municipality's younger inhabitants, who often move to Denmark's larger towns and cities to get an education. Moreover, a significant part of the in-migration to Lolland Municipality is associated with an expense, as – in line with other Danish rural and peripheral municipalities – more people receiving public benefits have moved *to* the municipality than *from* the municipality. Today, Lolland Municipality has the country's largest share of new residents receiving long-term public benefits (ibid.). Together, the increase in the number of older people, the out-migration among young people, and the ongoing in-migration of citizens receiving public benefits contribute to a pronounced structural imbalance in the municipality's economy – with an expenditure on public benefits more than 50 per cent higher than the national average (Jensen, Jakobsen & Bolvig 2019). Overall, this has meant that, today, Lolland, and especially Nakskov, is widely seen and used in Danish national media and popular culture as a clear example of the increased geographical imbalance between centre and periphery in post-industrial Denmark (Ledstrup 2021). In fact, in contemporary Danish popular culture Lolland and Nakskov are frequently assigned the role as peripheral Denmark's (*Udkantsdanmarks*) “locus classicus” (Sørensen 2016).

Meanwhile, Lolland Municipality has a vision for 2030 of “a new Lolland” in the form of “a self-sustaining Lolland that has

found a new balance” (Lolland Kommune 2016, my translation). This vision rests partly on hopes that the Fehmarnbelt Tunnel under construction between Lolland and Germany will create local jobs, growth and an influx of new residents, and partly on the municipality's endeavours to attract state jobs from the capital area. Since 2007, among Denmark's sixteen peripheral municipalities,<sup>1</sup> Lolland Municipality has lost by far the highest number of state jobs (Balance Danmark 2020). This represents an underlying problem in relation to the municipality's pronounced structural imbalance, which the elected mayor of Lolland Municipality described as follows during a debate on Danish national radio: “When [as a result of centralisation] you remove those jobs from an area, then also you remove well-educated and well-off people, leaving behind empty houses that fall in price and thus become attractive to other sections of the population – then you really start to shift around the national population” (DR 2020, my translation). There was therefore no hiding the joy at the mayor's office when it was announced at the aforementioned national press conference launching the final stage of the *Better Balance* initiative in January 2018 that Lolland Municipality was to receive 111 government jobs – 80 of them through Nota's relocation to Nakskov.

While there was great joy at the mayor's office in Maribo over the planned relocation of Nota, there were more mixed feelings among Nakskov's inhabitants once it became known that, in order to make room for Nota, Lolland Municipality would sell the former Nakskov Town Hall to the state. As mentioned previously, this building had been the administrative centre of the now



2. The historic Nakskov Town Hall, sold to the state by Lolland Municipality in 2018.  
Photo: Birgitte Romme Larsen (2020).

defunct Nakskov Municipality for 130 years, ending with the Danish municipal mergers in 2007. Hereafter, the building housed shifting municipal administrations under the new Lolland Municipality, including the Administration for Children and Youth, which resided in the building right up until its purchase by the state in 2018 and has since relocated within Nakskov.

The sale of the old Nakskov Town Hall generated strong emotions among the local townspeople, with news articles and editorials regularly appearing in the local newspaper with headlines such as: “Should we let changing times erase all traces of our history: the town hall and its old coun-

cil chamber are part of the town’s DNA” (*Folketidende* 2018a, my translation), and “An emotional sale: the town hall means something for Nakskov townspeople’s sense of identity” (*Folketidende* 2018b, my translation). Feelings did not only run high on the pages of local newspapers, but also on the town’s Facebook page, in the form of statements such as: “Selling Nakskov’s former town hall to the state to make room for Nota is selling the town’s soul”, and “If we continue to sell off the family silver, we will have no history left” (my translations). Indeed, as the above reactions show, many Nakskov residents still feel a close connection with the former town hall building and its old council chamber.

Meanwhile, 170 kilometres away in Copenhagen, Nota's employees followed the local debate in Nakskov. Prior to moving, this led Nota's manager to comment in the local newspaper: "I have been following the debate, and people from Nakskov have also rung me up. I truly understand that people want the town hall to be preserved – and we will do everything we can to take these feelings into account. For it really *is* an absolutely spectacular town hall, which we will do all we can to preserve. However, we must also have room for our employees" (*Folketidende* 2018c, my translation). As the manager's words suggest, as a cultural-historical material space, the former Nakskov Town Hall and its council chamber now need to accommodate both Nota's employees *and* the townspeople's enduring feelings of attachment. In the following analysis, I flesh out how this *dual ownership* of the historic town hall comes to impact not only how Nota is received locally, but also how Nota must organise everyday working life inside the building.

**“Never Before Have I Seen More People Queueing for a Guided Tour than for a Free Beer”**

In October 2019, a year and a half after the state's purchase of the former Nakskov Town Hall, Nota moved in – following a period of state-funded renovation. Whereas the arrival of a large state institution as a neighbour in the middle of town was something that the people of Nakskov were not used to, it was equally unfamiliar territory for Nota to suddenly find itself in the role of “a neighbour” – whose local presence and existence was noticed and responded to by the local surroundings (see also

Larsen 2022). Or, as one Nota employee explained to me:<sup>2</sup>

Whereas in a big city you can be very anonymous, that is more difficult in Nakskov. And we have never had such a visible role before – in Copenhagen, in an old brick building in a somewhat forgotten industrial district on the outskirts of the city. I mean, I don't think *any* of our neighbours there had any idea who we were. Here, it's a bit like being the new kid on the block: how should you behave? It may well be that we are a government workplace, but we really *are* neighbours with the entire town now, and that places an obligation on us. On top of that, because we now live in this historic building – an iconic building to many in Nakskov – we cannot just ensconce ourselves behind the thick walls of the state. We *have* to get involved in town life.

Consequently, the staff at Nota wanted to celebrate moving in by inviting the townspeople to an opening reception – an event that would be “completely down to earth”, they underlined, with live jazz and free hot dogs and draft beer in the town square. As one Nota employee later pointed out: “It *had* to have popular appeal [*være folkeligt*]. Because there were lots of rumours about Nota by that point – ‘maybe we were in fact part of NATO’ [the vowels O and A exchanged], some claimed”. Despite a steady downpour all day, 1,700 people attended the event. Nota's employees took turns tending a number of information stalls set up for the occasion in the town square, ready to talk to interested guests about the work Nota performs. Meanwhile, guided tours took place inside the newly renovated former town hall building. The information stalls and the stall with free hot dogs and draft beer were well visited, but the longest queue was for the guided tours, the day's most popular activity. A local radio

station had a four-hour live broadcast from the event, with the journalist telling a Nota employee at the end of the day: “Never before have I seen more people queueing for a guided tour than for a free beer.”

When I placed myself in the line for guided tours, I overheard several conversations among the waiting townspeople about “what might have been done to the inside of the town hall and its council chamber”, whereas few seemed to wonder what sort of work Nota was going to be carrying out inside. Several people in the line spontaneously began to share with one another their memories of getting married inside the council chamber, or of when they, or their children, attended the annual ceremony in the chamber marking their graduation from Nakskov High School. Conducting both civil marriage ceremonies and the graduation ceremony inside the former council chamber had remained local traditions right up until the state purchased the building in 2018, even though from 2007 onwards the building no longer served as Nakskov Town Hall but housed various municipal administrations under Lolland Municipality. Together, the many individual narratives shared in the queue formed a “social memory” (Connerton 1989), pointing *back in time* in relation to the old town hall building in front of us. Meanwhile, with the goal of introducing Nota as a new workplace in town, Nota’s opening reception in itself could be said to point *towards the future*. As we shall see, this co-existence of disparate times – or this “plurality of unfinished durations” (Sørensen 2016) – was particularly apparent during the guided tours.

During the opening reception, I participated in three identical guided tours, care-

fully recorded in fieldnotes. Of the seven scheduled stops on the tour around the inside of the historic town hall – now Nota’s new domicile – the longest was always in the former council chamber. Furthermore, on each tour there were impatient visitors who simply left their group and went ahead on their own to reach this stop more quickly. Similarly, after seeing the council chamber, some visitors did not participate in the rest of the tour through Nota’s braille printing press, office areas, library space etc. Inside the old council chamber, the various Nota employees who served as guides all emphasised how the room had been carefully renovated in order to “preserve as much of the old chamber’s expression and history as possible”. Among other things, they pointed out the carefully renovated parquet floor; the preserved dark-stained panels extending halfway up the walls; the gently cleaned original curtains; and the decision to keep the room’s antique cast-iron stoves, hatstand and chandeliers. As one guide explained to participants: “Although the room will now house our meetings at Nota, we have wanted to preserve as much of the council chamber’s soul as possible.” There was only one element of the chamber’s original interior that Nota had chosen not to keep; namely the giant base-mounted, semicircular table in solid oak, which had been custom-built on site around 1920, with bulky matching armchairs. However, as the visitors surveyed the unfurnished room, they were reassured by the guides that Nota was awaiting the delivery of an order of Danish designer furniture, which had been carefully selected to fit the ambience of the beautiful old council chamber.

Meanwhile, it was not only the Nota-employed guides who focused heavily on



the old council chamber's history during the guided tours; this focus was even more apparent from the various questions posed by the visitors, the vast majority of whom were local townspeople. These questions consistently concerned *previous* local traditions inside the council chamber – as opposed to Nota's *future* activities, using the room as a workplace. The questions raised were particularly centred on two issues. *First*, whether Nota would be willing to make room for the annual graduation ceremony for students at Nakskov High School inside the old council chamber. *Second*, whether local residents would still be able to get married inside the chamber if they so desired. The Nota guides all responded that they would love to help keep the tradition of holding the graduate ceremony in the chamber alive, whereas they were more hesitant regarding marriage ceremonies, replying that, as a workplace, Nota had not yet reached a decision on this matter. A few months after the opening reception, one Nota employee addressed the topic, telling me: "Well, we really want to be accommodating and cooperative. But we also must not forget that this *is* a workplace – and that we must be able to function as such."

Overall, it was very clear during the opening reception how the old town hall and its council chamber formed a collective reference point among the townspeople of Nakskov. Indeed, Nota had taken up residence in what many in the town consider *the* most culturally and historically significant local building in Nakskov. As one local resident stated during an interview: "For many people in Nakskov, the old town hall is a sacred building, a sanctuary – and its council chamber constitutes the innermost sanctum!" It was equally diffi-

cult to overlook this cultural-historical role when stepping inside the building, with the old town hall functioning as a living actor in the present (Damsholt & Mellemgaard 2017). As one Nota employee explained: "It feels a bit like if you had bought an old country estate with a ghost in the basement – you always have to remember to feed the ghost as well".

As Daniel Miller (2010) has pointed out, the older a building is, the more likely there are to be ghosts – and in very old houses, he argues, at times it might even be the ghosts who are the real homeowners. Therefore, Miller describes how the owners of centuries-old houses typically develop various strategies for addressing their lengthy history, which, he writes, is especially apparent when it comes to furnishing (ibid.:95). For instance, should one decorate with period-appropriate antique furniture, should one buy modern and perhaps more practical furniture, or possibly something in between? This dilemma also proved central in the case of Nota, as illustrated by the following excerpt from an interview with an employee:

Out of respect for the ambience in the old council chamber, we at Nota wanted to pick new furniture that somewhat resembled the original furnishings. But in reality, Nota has made a mistake by insisting that we *had* to choose such bulky designer furniture [in line with the bulky aesthetics of the original furniture]. Because you can't move it around, and therefore not very many people can be seated in there. It would have been smart if, occasionally, we could instead set it up like a cinema layout. Because we would actually like to host, for instance, some author events in there, where maybe around 30 townspeople could come and join. But we can't do that because our furniture is simply *so* heavy – you can hardly move the chairs and tables. And the lighting is also cumbersome, as we only

have the old chandeliers in there. This must be how it feels living in a castle – it’s not very practical.

It is clear that Nota would like to create a new, functional workplace, but at the same time, they feel obliged to take “the soul” of the old council chamber into consideration (as one Nota employee put it during one of the guided tours at the opening reception). As the above quotation illustrates, at times these dual considerations prevent Nota from using the space as they would like to (which, paradoxically, includes inviting the local population into the old council chamber that they hold so dear). Along similar lines, Inger Sjørsløv has described how, when you take up residence in an existing building, you also move into a material framework that “already contains inbuilt thoughts and intentions – and which has a history and bears traces of its former residents” (2013:56, my translation). In this way, insofar as they are not newly built, all houses host past inhabitants and their daily routines, Sjørsløv states (*ibid.*).

Hence, while a conveyance of property points towards new possible worlds, it simultaneously also points back in time to various past affairs beyond the control of the new owner. Sjørsløv (2013) stresses that one of the main ways in which such past affairs may manifest their continued importance is with regard to precisely the question of ownership. I argue that Nota’s opening reception, more than anything else, cemented this issue: *ownership* was something negotiated between Nota as a workplace and the local community in Nakskov. For instance, as mentioned, several visitors left their guided tour group, instead wandering around the building on their own. Some of these visitors further-

more ignored the barriers that Nota had put up to keep people away from corridors containing removal boxes, opening closed doors into offices “just to see what they looked like now”. When caught red-handed by Nota staff, they justified their actions by stating that that specific office had once been *theirs*, back when they themselves had worked in the building.

In short, as Sjørsløv (2013) also discusses, with respect to the conveyance of property, there are many things one can inherit, or that can be thrown in. In the case of Nota, as the above examples show, this includes inheriting other people’s continued sense of ownership. The Nakskov townspeople’s continued sense of ownership of the building is accompanied by a series of inherited obligations, with which Nota’s employees find themselves duty-bound to engage. I have shown how this sometimes leads to staff feeling trammelled by their own material choices, for instance of workplace decor (such as when having chosen bulky, heavy furniture out of respect for an inherited perceived obligation to preserve the old council chamber’s “soul”). In order to flesh out this recurrent theme of dual ownership in my ethnographic material, the analysis has thus far primarily zoomed in on Nota’s *new* furnishings. I will now turn my attention to the historic council chamber’s *original* furniture – and its analytical relevance for better understanding the “plurality of unfinished durations” (Sørensen 2016) that we see at play in the local community’s encounter with Nota.

### **Storage of the Historic Council Chamber Furniture as an Anchor for Identity**

When Nota moved into the former town



3. Nakskov Town Hall's council chamber, 1966. Photo: Nakskov Archives of Local History.

hall building, the local historical archives – *Nakskov Archives of Local History* – decided that the council chamber's original, custom-built furniture should be preserved for posterity. As no other obvious places were found to install the furniture in Nakskov, the local historical archives thus rented a large, climate-controlled furniture storeroom to accommodate the chamber's giant base-mounted, semicircular table in solid oak and its bulky matching armchairs, paid for by Lolland Municipality. Removing the furniture from the town hall building prior to Nota's arrival was no simple matter. The huge table had to be sawn in half and a crane used to lower it from the building's first floor through the council chamber's large windows. The removal of the furniture received a lot of attention in Nakskov and, once again, emotions ran high in the local newspapers, where one could find news articles and editorials with headlines such as: "Clearing of the council chamber in Nakskov Town Hall: Sad day for the town's pride and joy" (*Folketidende* 2018d, my translation). In the town's Facebook community, public

feeling was wistful, as illustrated, for instance, by the following short, candid remark: "It's so sad, the heart is ripped out [cracked-heart-emoji]". The heart here, I suggest, is to be understood partly as the commentator's own heart, partly as the old town hall and council chamber constituting the very heart of the town. For, as one local resident wrote in Nota's guestbook during the opening reception: "Dear Nota, I wish you a wonderful journey into the heart of Nakskov" (my translation).

Two years after the clearing of the old council chamber, while I was visiting the Nakskov Archives of Local History, a local resident and member of staff told me: "It was sad to watch the furniture being removed, yes. But the rest of the council chamber is preserved, only the furniture is missing – and now that it is being stored, the council chamber can actually be re-established at *any time!*" As social and cultural beings, we humans often surround ourselves with various objects of sentimental value – things that we do not really have a need for in our daily lives, but that we cannot say goodbye to either, and which we therefore typically end up storing in attics or basements (Sjørsløv 2013). As Sjørsløv stresses, this becomes apparent when clearing the estates of the deceased, where the next of kin can often choose to store inherited items for a number of years, after which it becomes easier to either throw them away or let them find their place in a new context. Sjørsløv defines this procedure as the things being given "an intervening period" [*en mellemtid*] (ibid.).

Meanwhile, as expressed by the employee at the local archives, the decision to keep the old council chamber furniture in storage did not seem to be centred on in-

tentions of integrating it in a *new* context at some point in the future. Rather, the “intervening period” in the storeroom seemed intended to enable the furniture’s re-integration in its *original* context – a full re-establishment of the council chamber as was. Hence, as shown, whereas the negotiations of ownership, as manifested during Nota’s opening reception, revolved around *dual* ownership of the historic town hall and its council chamber, the local imaginary of returning the old council chamber furniture to its original setting instead speaks to a return to *full* ownership. Yet, during my visit to the local historical archives, everyone I spoke to agreed that “this will probably never happen”, but “now the opportunity is always there, at least” (should Lolland Municipality one day buy the town hall building back from the state).

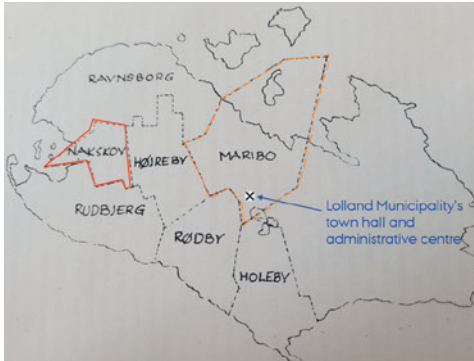
As such, the storage of the furniture points back towards an ongoing past, meaning a past that is being continuously (re-)constructed, addressing what contemporary archaeology has termed “the relation between material traces and that which has been lost”, or “the tension between the absent and the present” (Sørensen 2016, my translations). At the same time, the furniture storage also points forward towards an unknown future (one which, ideally, will undo past losses). In this way, I argue that the preservation and storage of the cultural-historical furniture comes to play the role of “an anchor for identity” (Bille & Sørensen 2012). More specifically, I will now show how this relates to the specific town identity attached to the historic Nakskov Municipality, dissolved by the Danish municipal mergers in 2007. This is a sensitive local-historical topic that Nota unwittingly rekindled with renewed vig-

our when taking over the former Nakskov Town Hall.

### **The Reawakening of a Loss of Municipal Identity**

When we as humans attach special significance and status to objects as worthy of preservation for anything other than practical reasons, such as in the case of the original council chamber furniture, this care for the objects often supports the formation or maintenance of various social, ethnic or national identities (Bille & Sørensen 2012) – or, I would add, *municipal* identities. Bille & Sørensen write: “The preservation of an object is thus not only a matter of ensuring its continued existence, but also of securing an anchor for identities, feelings and ideologies” (ibid.:136, my translation). In this way, the preservation of cultural-historical objects represents a careful selection of a particular past that is believed to be of importance to the present. As such, these objects might come to serve as “sources of narratives about who a particular group is and about what happened in the past” (ibid.:149, my translation). In the case of the original council chamber furniture, I argue that its preservation as local cultural heritage becomes a source of the narrative about Nakskov as a long-standing sovereign town municipality – brought to an end after 140 years with the formation of Lolland Municipality in 2007. Many people in Nakskov have experienced this as a loss of sovereignty, feeling they are now governed by “the politicians in Maribo”, the site of the new municipality’s administrative centre.

Emotional attachment to regional administrative entities such as counties or municipalities (and dissolutions and merg-



4. The seven local municipalities, including those of Nakskov and Maribo, which in 2007 were merged into Lolland Municipality, highlighting the placement of the new municipality's town hall and administrative centre. Drawing: Ole Benny Helvig (Det Gamle Trykkeri 2006), graphics inserted by Birgitte Romme Larsen.

ers of such entities) is not a topic that has received much attention in social and political science (Frisvoll 2016; Zimmerbauer & Paasi 2013). Nonetheless, municipalities do not exist in a vacuum, but are intricately entwined with local and regional identities (Frisvoll 2016). Thus, while municipalities can be dissolved administratively, they often continue to play a central role in local and regional consciousness long after this dissolution. As such, municipal mergers do not only involve economic and political processes, but also cultural and identity processes (Frisvoll 2016; Zimmerbauer & Paasi 2013). Consequently, administratively dissolved municipalities often retain a presence in local cultural and social life, as expressed through “a need to perform the identity of the region even after its deinstitutionalization” (Zimmerbauer & Paasi 2013:38, my italicisation).

In the case of Nakskov, I suggest that continuing to hold marriage ceremonies

and graduation ceremonies in the old town hall's council chamber following the municipality's dissolution in 2007 has played a pivotal role in precisely such social and cultural *performance* of a historic municipal identity. With Lolland Municipality's sale of the building to the state in 2018, I thus argue that many people in Nakskov felt that this opportunity for continued performance of the identity attached to the historic Nakskov Municipality was being taken away from them. To counter this, they proposed to Nota that marriage ceremonies and graduation ceremonies still be held inside its new domicile. I likewise argue that the storage and preservation of the original council chamber furniture functions as another way of trying to cling on to the opportunity to continue performing this municipal identity (if not now, then perhaps in the future – “should Lolland Municipality one day buy the building back from the state”).

Hence, municipal identity is more than instrumental and, as Zimmerbauer and Paasi underline: “Regardless of the decision-making where administrative borders or regional names are decided and removed, the established regional ‘us’ and ‘them’ may remain strong” (2013:38). The municipal identity that remains attached to the historic Nakskov Municipality implies precisely such a profound “us and them” distinction. In this respect, for the residents of Nakskov, the neighbouring town of Maribo represents the municipal “other”, who it is assumed wants to marginalise Nakskov and is therefore perceived as a “threat”. Immediately prior to the formation of Lolland Municipality in 2007, this perception was evident in Nakskov; for instance, in how local resistance to the

administrative merger was not so much directed at the state itself and its centralising municipal reforms, but at the neighbouring Maribo Municipality (for identical findings in Norwegian and Finnish contexts, see, Frisvoll 2016; Zimmerbauer & Paasi 2013).

When “the politicians in Maribo” sold the historic Nakskov Town Hall to the state in 2018, this added fuel to local perceptions of Maribo, the administrative centre of Lolland Municipality, as the threatening municipal “other”. During my fieldwork in Nakskov, it was difficult to overlook how, subtly but unmistakably, conversations with townspeople on the topic of *Nota’s taking over of the old town hall* constantly and on their own initiative switched to the topic of *Nakskov’s loss of municipal identity* (and the role played by Maribo in this regard). This is illustrated by a local resident’s prompt reply when asked a general question about *Nota’s* relocation:

One has to understand the backdrop for *Nota* moving into the town hall. And that backdrop is the Danish municipal reform in 2007. When, to our great frustration, we learned that we had to share a municipality with Maribo, here in Nakskov, we felt that we were somehow being attacked, you know. And then, on top of that, when the new municipality’s town hall was located in Maribo, even though Nakskov is twice the size, it *really* led to a negative atmosphere here in Nakskov – it *really* did. The loss of the seat of local government, *that* function being taken away from our town hall building... oh, that was a *huge* smack in the face for people in Nakskov. It was like “what the devil, now Maribo is running away with our municipality”. And I myself was deeply shaken by it. I felt a loss of identity – the fact that now we did not have our *own* municipality any longer. It took years for the town to recover! And for some, it isn’t over yet... And with *Nota* coming, all of this is now being rekin-

dled. Because now, Lolland Municipality has decided to *fully* dispose of Nakskov’s old town hall – they [the politicians in Maribo] have now sold the actual *physical* remnants of the centre of power in Nakskov [the town hall building], from back when such a thing actually existed in Nakskov. Thus, with *Nota* moving in, all sorts of emotions are in play – because they have moved *right* into the middle of this whole backdrop.

The above account, I argue, illustrates how the rivalry between Nakskov and Maribo is specifically focused on the right and power to define the *centre* and the *hinterland* within a new and larger municipal structure. With the dissolution of Nakskov Municipality in 2007 and the town of Nakskov not being assigned the role as the administrative centre of the new Lolland Municipality, it went from being a *municipal centre with its own hinterland* to suddenly finding itself forming *the hinterland of another municipal centre*, namely, that of Maribo. The residents of Nakskov hereby experienced what might be termed a loss of alignment between town and municipal identity. It is precisely the loss of this composite identity that has been reactualised and rekindled by *Nota’s* occupancy of the former town hall. Since the deinstitutionalisation of Nakskov Municipality in 2007, this building has served as a symbolic “anchor” (Bille & Sørensen 2012) for the aforementioned composite town and municipal identity – an anchor that has inevitably been disturbed by *Nota’s* arrival and takeover of the building.

## Conclusions

In Denmark, a major national policy initiative was implemented in 2016–19, redistributing almost 8,000 state jobs from the capital of Copenhagen to the Danish

provinces: *Better Balance – government workplaces closer to citizens and enterprises*. Applying an anthropological and cultural-analytical approach to this topic, in this article I have taken the reader to the town of Nakskov (12,500 inhabitants) on the Danish island of Lolland, where the government workplace Nota, with 80 employees, was relocated in October 2019. Based on a broader ethnographic case study of Nota's relocation to Nakskov, in this article I have particularly focused on how it has impacted the local encounter with Nota that the workplace has taken up residence in precisely Nakskov's former town hall. Applying the perspectives of both the relocated state institution and existing local residents, I have drawn on theories of materiality and time and how these dimensions intersect in social life (Bille and Sørensen 2012; Miller 2010; Sjørsløv 2013; Sørensen 2016).

The article has shown how Nota's occupation of the historic Nakskov Town Hall has given the building a new beginning. However, it is not simply a linear addition to the building's past and local cultural history; it also – both directly and indirectly – reawakens and reactualises this past. This reactualisation and revitalisation of local cultural history in itself proves to have a crucial impact on the shaping of Nota's everyday workplace arrangements inside their new domicile. First, the analysis showed how, in practice, a dual ownership of the historic town hall and its council chamber was established between the state and local townspeople. It is within the scope of this dually owned space that Nota must now manoeuvre and function as a workplace. Second, the analysis unpacked how Nota's taking over of the old town hall – regard-

ed locally as Nakskov's cultural-historical "inner sanctum" – furthermore interacts with a regional and national historical context that extends beyond the building itself. This context concerns the Danish national municipal mergers in 2007, resulting in Nakskov's loss of its composite town and municipal identity after 140 years as an independent town municipality. With delayed effect and renewed vigour, this specific local cultural-historical event proves of central importance in shaping local expectations and social relations with regard to Nota's settlement in Nakskov.

As discussed in the article, collective memory is often accentuated and maintained through materialisations (Sjørsløv 2013). In this respect, the local "social memory" (Connerton 1989) of Nakskov's previous municipal sovereignty can be said to have materialised in the town hall building itself, not least its historic council chamber. Nota taking up residence within precisely this material framework therefore inevitably reactualises and rekindles the historical event that deprived the town of this sovereignty: the formation of the new and larger Lolland Municipality in 2007 and the location of its administrative centre and town hall in the neighbouring town of Maribo, rather than Nakskov. In other words: when Nota moves into the historic Nakskov Town Hall, it finds itself right in the middle of a local field of tension. The roots of this tension are entirely unrelated to Nota – or to the national policy of redistributing state jobs for that matter. Instead, the tension is rooted in Nakskov's loss of alignment between town and municipal identity, caused by the dissolution of Nakskov Municipality in 2007. Ever since, the former town hall building has served

as “an anchor” (Bille & Sørensen 2012) for this now historic, composite town and municipal identity among the people of Nakskov. As one local resident put it, Nota has moved *right* into the middle of this whole backdrop. The analysis has revealed how this complex situation gives rise to a “plurality of unfinished durations” (Sørensen 2016) within the scope of which Nota must manoeuvre and function as a workplace inside the historic town hall. With respect to the larger national *Better Balance* policy initiative, aimed at counteracting state centralisation, the plurality of durations intrinsic to Nota’s relocation to Nakskov is thought-provoking for at least five reasons, which I will conclude this article by pinpointing.

*First*, while the Danish *Better Balance* policy was launched in 2015 to correct the national structural imbalance between centre and periphery through the redistribution of state jobs, Lolland has its own internal dynamic forces between centre and periphery – not least between the towns of Nakskov and Maribo. When Nota takes over the former Nakskov Town Hall, it breathes new life into and adds new dimensions to this local tension between centre and periphery. This adds to and complicates the far broader national issues of structural imbalance that *originally* drove the decision to relocate Nota.

*Second*, while the reasoning behind the initial decision to relocate Nota from Copenhagen was to promote future national cohesion, conversely, the article has fleshed out how Nota is compelled to carefully acknowledge and navigate Nakskov’s cultural history and “social memory” (Connerton 1989) of its sovereign past to be accepted locally.

*Third*, this means that, whereas the national redistribution of state jobs was intended to compensate rural districts for the centralisation caused by the Danish municipal reform in 2007, relocating Nota to Nakskov seems to have done little to heal these wounds. Instead, it has reawakened and amplified this very same reform – by disrupting the physical and symbolic core of an enduring local municipal identity.

*Fourth*, I hence propose that, fundamentally, the local encounter between Nota and Nakskov did not *begin* with the actual arrival of the relocated workplace – and its occupation of the very “inner sanctum” of the town of Nakskov. Instead, I argue that this encounter’s specific layers of meanings and terms of interaction were *already* entrenched in local collective memories and regional imaginaries concerning past centres and peripheries, embedded in historical events both inside and outside what was once Nakskov Town Hall – and now the domicile of a relocated Danish state institution.

*Fifth*, and finally, this means that if we as researchers are to generate a more fully fledged body of literature on the various outcomes of state decentralisation initiatives than is the case today, future studies should not one-sidedly pertain to the national relocation of state institutions as first and foremost pointing towards new *future* balances between centre and periphery, starting from the time of the actual relocation. The placement of government workplaces seems equally to point back towards the vast impact of all the local cultural-historical structures *already* in place – including the many enduring power balances in local and regional histories relating to precisely the matter of being at the centre or on the periphery.



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## Notes

- 1 Since 2007, Denmark's 98 municipalities have been divided into four types: "Urban municipalities" (*Bykommuner*) (35), "Intermediate municipalities" (*Mellemkommuner*) (18), "Rural municipalities" (*Landkommuner*) (29), and "Peripheral municipalities" (*Yderkommuner*) (16, including Lolland Municipality).
- 2 Throughout the article, statements quoted from interviews and informal conversations with Nota employees and local townspeople in Nakskov have been translated from Danish to English by the author.

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