

Role of the State in Directing Vernacular Architecture in 1928–1943: New materials and standard solutions in new settlements

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Summary

Abstract: This article describes changes in Estonian village life in the late 1920s and in the 1930s, when the state started standardising new farm buildings, and compact new settlements with infrastructures were planned on virgin lands beside ancient developing villages. Discarding different unsuitable standard projects, five projects were finally accepted in the middle of the last decade. The key words in this article are ‘fireproof material’ and ‘maintaining a traditional type of building’.

Keywords: Estonia, the 1930s, settlers farms, settlement of newly reclaimed lands

Information regarding the composition of the rural population of Estonia at the beginning of the 20th century is insufficient. Proceeding from the data of the 1916 agricultural census, around 2/3 of the country people of that time can be regarded as landless peasants who earned their living from farm work.

On 10 November 1919 the Constituent Assembly adopted the Land Act, which mandated agrarian reform. The main objectives of the Land Act were: a) to abolish the existing remnants of feudalism by parcelling out the manorial estates, thus rendering the Baltic-German nobility harmless; b) to satisfy the need for land of a great part of the population on the basis of the right of ownership, so that the people could support their families; c) to increase the output of agricultural goods, of which small holdings produced more per unit than large manorial estates.

As a result of the Estonian agrarian reform, 96.6% of the land belonging to the Baltic-German landlords was nationalised. Of the expropriated lands, 1.25 million hectares of forests and other lands not used in agriculture were set apart for the formation of state forests. The fields, meadows and pasture lands were divided into small holdings. 27,770 new dwellings, or 19.5% of the dwellings in use at that time, were built in the country between 1929 and 1939.

As the area of free agricultural land diminished when more and more lands of former manorial estates were divided into small holdings and additional allotments, difficulties emerged in connection with founding new small holdings (farms) and the continuation of settlement. The transfer of settlement to newly reclaimed lands required extensive land improvement and other work by the state. According to the data of 1929, there were c. 1,000,000 hectares of marshes and bogs in Estonia at that time. About 250,000 hectares of marshes were to be cultivated and settled.

Many new settlements (more than one hundred) were founded with state money (along with cheap long-term loans); the most well-known among them are Pikavere, Lepplaane, Pillapalu, Peressaare and Mustamäe.

In the 1920s, designing of farm buildings by architects became widespread in Estonia. Previously only very few rich farm owners could afford to order such projects. The trendsetter for farm architecture in Estonia was the Construction Service of the Agricultural Union of Settlers, State Tenants and Farmers, whose work has usually been studied on the basis of the collections *Maaehitusi* (‘Rural Buildings’) I and II, which were published by the Agricultural Union and give a good overview of what was planned in the 1920s. The striving for ancient forms is apparent.

Replacing historicism with an Estonian style added a clear political background.

In addition to the restoration of the bond with tradition, the features of modernism in the design of farm buildings are equally important. This was largely caused by the economic situation. At the end of the 1920s, cheaper clay buildings and fireproof cement stone constructions in the *nopsa*-style were promoted. Due to the increasing shortage of wood as construction material and rapid increase in the price of timber, construction activities had to be based on new principles. Several hollow-wall construction systems, which made it possible to erect houses cheaper than before, were developed for the use of fireproof building materials.

The first task of the settlers was the construction of buildings on their plots. The greatest problem here involved building the dwelling house. This was facilitated by the state loan, which was widely used. Those who applied for the loan had to follow several construction-technical regulations. The state started to impose requirements for dwelling houses. In the 1920s and 1930s, the state used indirect coercive measures, such as the obligation to submit a plan of construction when applying for a loan.

Usually the settler was not able to draw up a plan himself and he sent his request to the Construction Service of the Agricultural Union, where architects drafted the plan for the buildings. Thus, the architects had to observe building regulations in drawing up new model architectural designs for farm buildings and meeting the orders of settlers.

Mainly houses in which dwelling rooms and work and production rooms, usually cattle sheds, were under one roof were propagated. The cheapness of constructing only one building and the simplicity of tending animals in it was stressed. When drawing up new mod-

el architectural designs for farmhouses, the architects tried to use as an example the division of rooms of the barn dwelling (*rehielamu*), where the dwelling rooms (chambers, *kambrid*) are under the same roof as the threshing room and the threshing floor. Such a division into three parts can also be noted in the model farmhouses where dwelling rooms are at one end and the cattle shed at another and they are separated by a shed or a barn. Barn, larder and entrance hall were the work rooms that separated the dwelling rooms from the cattle shed. Having the manure storage room situated at the end of the house made it possible to build a dry cattle shed. Almost all model architectural designs recommended to the settlers also had rooms on the mansard floor. Unfortunately, in most cases the economic situation of the settlers prevented them from completing the second-storey rooms, or sometimes there was no intention of ever building the second-storey rooms.

Compulsory plans for farmyards were also drawn up with the plans for buildings. This meant having the whole farmyard designed by specialists.

At the end of the 1920s, the government had to solve emergency situations that were mostly caused by extreme weather conditions in the Pechory region between 1928 and 1938, which made the already complicated economic situation in an important region of the Republic of Estonia even harder. This resulted in the founding of the Leetse-Pallaste and Matsalu settlements. The founding of these settlements provided encouragement and experience for the internal colonisation financed and initiated by the state.

By 1930, it was clear that the settling of marshlands was inevitable. The founding of marsh settlements began and lasted for 12 years. The first such settlement was Pikavere-

Suursoo in Harjumaa, where the measuring and drainage works started in 1930.

At the beginning of the 1930s, work also began in at least 15 settlements, but all of them were considerably smaller than Pika-vere-Suursoo.

Contemporary theorists of settlement-founding have called the years 1929–1932 trial years because there was no relevant experience and it was necessary to find methods of working suitable for the new situation, and to try them out.

In 1933 the economic crisis reached its peak in Estonia and the number of unemployed persons reached a record level. A search began for ways to get out of the deadlock. It was decided to promote settlement, as it was the best way of fighting unemployment. 1934 is considered the breakthrough year because then the Government of the Republic declared settlement the most important means of fighting the economic crisis and unemployment. By 1934, 470 new holdings had been built in 20 settlements.

In the case of the buildings constructed by the Settlement Committee, the regulations followed the principle that the cattle shed, together with the dwelling room, should be constructed first and later, when circumstances improved, new dwelling rooms could be added to the house. The state constructed buildings on about a quarter of the plots on the newly reclaimed lands.

The main purposes of the large-scale construction directly organised by the state were the choice of the most practical types of rural buildings and their promotion in the country, the promotion of fireproof building materials and, perhaps most important, the acceleration and facilitation of the settlement process, especially in difficult settlement conditions. Thus the construction works, when carried out by the settlers themselves, lasted

for five or six years, but only two or three years when carried out by the state.

By 1934, 41 model architectural designs for the buildings for small homesteads had been drawn up. Eighteen designs were used when the construction was done on the initiative of the state. Eleven of them were for farms and seven for the construction of fishermen's and craftsmen's homesteads. They were developed from three or four original designs; each new version tried to eliminate the shortcomings of the previous design. In practice, the most widely used designs were the ones where all the rooms were under the same roof, because this type of building best met the requirements of a small holding. An attempt was made to find a design that could be built in stages, in separate parts, in accordance with the requirements set by the development of the farm.

At the beginning of 1935, three new designs for standard-size farm buildings, with all the rooms under the same roof and which could be built in stages, were drafted (C-III, C-IV, C-V), because the building plans described above, which had been used so far, turned out not to be the best for the construction of homesteads on newly reclaimed lands. Another important issue was the choice of building materials. In spite of the active promotion of cement stone, it was not very popular among those who built with the help of loans.

With unemployment on the increase, a novel solution for carrying out the settlement work as community placement was suggested in Lepplaane, in Pärnu County. In 1932, it was decided to resettle part of the unemployed of the town of Pärnu to a settlement to be founded in Lepplaane, in the Pärnu region. This turned out to be a serious attempt to send the unemployed to the country. Fifty-seven new plots were planned in the new settlement.

Unemployment turned out to be a great problem in Virumaa, where industrial regions such as the town of Narva, oil shale industries in Kohtla and Püssi and factories in Kunda and Aseri all cut down their production as the economic crisis deepened.

In the autumn of 1933, it was decided to found the settlement of Peressaare, with a total area of 1700 hectares, in the area of the Tudulinna rural municipality. In all, it was planned to establish 150 farms in the settlement. About 130 of them were founded. C-II, C-III, C-V, B-I and B-II were chosen as the design models for the buildings to be constructed first. Later, model C-IV was also used.

Until the 1920s, in Estonian villages, the trend was set by building traditions handed down from one generation to the next. The new construction-technical requirements worked out by specialists had a progressive effect. Although the building of the dwelling house separate from the cattle shed and other auxiliary buildings was practiced more and more widely, the buildings constructed in new settlements with all necessary rooms under the same roof should not be underestimated. At the beginning of the 1930s, the principles of choosing construction materials changed. Until the end of the 1920s, the main materials used were wood, and clay and stone from fireproof materials. The new trend was to construct buildings of cement stone, with *nopsa*-style walls. Another possibility was to use two kinds of construction materials (the dwelling house from wood, and the cattle shed from cement stone, or vice versa).

In spite of their numerous shortcomings, the model architectural designs drafted at the Settlement Board brought several positive innovations to the Estonian rural architecture, both in construction technology and in the division of space. In a relatively short

time, fireproof materials were introduced into the construction practice of Estonia, which drastically changed the appearance of the Estonian village. Very big changes took place in interior finishing. Interior walls were now whitewashed and covered with lime paints, which in turn helped to introduce new, contemporary hygiene standards.

Extensive use of model architectural designs in the rural construction work of Estonia in the 1930s has been considered a positive feature. It was the first attempt to use model architectural designs for farm buildings.

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