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## CIVIL ENGINEERING IN THE FINNISH COUNTRYSIDE IN 1920S AND 1930S – SELF-HELP AND PLURIACTIVITY IN THE DOMESTIC SPATIALITY OF THE SMALL FARMS.

### INTRODUCTION

After the independence in 1917 and the Civil War in 1918 the Finnish nation-state and society had to be constructed on the basis of agrarian livelihoods, since majority of the people were living in the countryside and most of them were smallholders. The former tenement farmers got legislative right to purchase the land they were cultivating at the beginning of the 1920s and the state subsidized these purchases. Simultaneously industrialization, urbanization and modernization were progressing on an increasing pace. More and more people from the countryside were moving to cities and industrial communities in search for jobs and steady income. Work in the countryside was seasonal, dependent on weather and the land and thus insecure. In addition, the standard of living was poor. At the same time, for example the mechanization of agriculture gradually changed the patterns of work. Hence, the mixed pressures on habiting and housing in the countryside had to be addressed.

The attempts to modernize the smallholder home were part of modernist social reform that was aiming to improve the inadequate standard of living among the smallholders. In the beginning of the 1920s over sixty percent of the Finnish had livelihood in agriculture and forestry and during the interwar period over 37 000 new farms were established within the state-controlled settlement activities.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the number of landowners doubled between 1918 and 1930 from 150 000 to 300 000.<sup>2</sup> The promoting of the smallholder-ideology, a cultural ideal, was based on concepts of national traits that were formed within the nationalist

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<sup>1</sup> Palomäki 2011, 53–71, 74–75.

<sup>2</sup> Hannes Gebhard, 'Nykyaikaisia suomalaisia pienviljelijäkoteja', *Kotiliesi*, Joulunumero/1930.

movements of the nineteenth century. Politically the ideology was rooted between socialism and capitalism and aimed to socio-economic reforms.<sup>3</sup> However, the transnational modernization, another cultural ideal, posed a threat for the ideal lifestyle of peasants by offering another way for their socio-economic progress. Consequently, these opposing ideals had to fitted together and one manifestation of this emerged in the civil engineering of rural homes. In addition, the constructional advisory work that was provided by the agricultural societies had transnational roots as well. In the latter half of nineteenth century especially Sweden and Germany had been the role models for Finnish planning experts.<sup>4</sup> For example, Swedish architect Gunnar Asplund who was well known in Finland, advocated originally for mixing the tradition with modern in the facades of public housing projects. He also noted, that functionalism adjusted well with the ‘living and happening’ environment. Historian Deborah Ascher Barnstone has framed a concept of ‘anti-modern modernism’ for analyzing this mix of two ideals. This was a “pragmatic mix of modern and traditional architecture”.<sup>5</sup>

In the interwar period the Finnish state together with farmer’s associations promoted self-help in order to provide better livelihood and habitat for the farmers. Various studies, textbooks, pamphlets, articles and public lectures were produced as ‘help to self-help’, for civilizing and educating the farmers. This paper will discuss the civil engineering of the Finnish small farms in the 1920s and 1930s from the viewpoint of how pluriactivity was promoted by the experts, such as architects and engineers, in these materials. Furthermore, it will explore the concept of pluriactivity through the spatial arrangement of the small farms. The paper will consider questions such as *“How the promoting of dispersed livelihood was presented in the type-plans and textbooks for smallholders of the interwar period?”*, *“How the ideology of self-help was applied with pluriactivity?”* and *“What was the role of pluriactivity in modernization of the small farms?”*

## DISPERSED LIVELIHOOD IN THE TYPE-PLANS AND CONSTRUCTION MANUALS

Pluriactivity in this paper encompasses the various agricultural livelihoods, in which the smallholders participated because they could not support themselves only by cultivating grain. Pluriactivity was common

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<sup>3</sup> Kuisma 1999, 20–21; Henttinen 1999, 50–51, 54–61. Although, inner political disputes existed in the co-operative movement as well. Especially after the general strike of 1905. Henttinen 1999, 68–80. Very similar developments were going on in Eastern and Central Europe, see Eellend 2008, 35–36.

<sup>4</sup> Mertanen 1989, 114.

<sup>5</sup> Barnstone 2014, 89–91. Barnstone’s case is Breslau (Wroclaw) in Germany, but she notes Sweden as well as an ‘unique’ example in mass housing; ‘Pohjoismaiset rakennuspäivät 1932. Yleiskatsaus päivien esitelmäohjelmaan.’ *Rakennustaito* 17/1932, 260–261.

practice among the crofters before the twentieth century: in addition to the grain cultivation the crofters did for example lumbering during the winter times, did handicraft, raised domestic animals and cultivated home gardens. However, in the early twentieth century, all this was incorporated within the rural scientific management and domestic science.

Domestic spatiality of the farmstead was arranged in order to promote the most efficient ways of performing the domestic and agricultural work.<sup>6</sup> For example, the traditional way of furnishing the main room, in which the furniture was placed in the vicinity of the room's walls, was presented as an exemplary way for modern rural home decor.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, domestic production was compared with manufacturing industries and consequently the experts promoted the concept of cottage industry in parallel with them. In addition, the ideology of house as a machine was well known in Scandinavia in 1920s. Functionalism had many proponents in the Nordic countries, but experts and laymen had also considerations about too heavy formalism of it.<sup>8</sup> The number of rooms in rural home increased from the average of 1-2 to 2-3 in the first decades of the twentieth century, thus indicating functionalist division of domestic space. In the interwar period the 2-3 room house -type was the most common in type-plans and guidebooks.<sup>9</sup>

#### SELF-HELPING PLURIACTIVITY

As most of the farms cultivated less than 20 hectares, the income from grain was not sufficient.<sup>10</sup> However, the cultivated area, the house garden and the domestic animals together were usually adequate for supporting the household. Thus, the agricultural societies provided the farmers education and enlightening for establishing modern productive farms.<sup>11</sup> The relevance of the construction manuals was expressed by the fact, that buildings formed a significant share of the total capital of the farm.<sup>12</sup> Approximately forty percent of the capital of smallholder farm was bound to the buildings. According to the contemporary agronomist V.A. Arola, this was by far larger amount than in any other European country. Thus, 'self-help' was the way to achieve cost-effectiveness in rural construction work.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Lefebvre [1974] 2013, 38–39. My understanding of the rural domestic spatiality is based on Henri Lefebvre's definition of produced spaces.

<sup>7</sup> Gustaf Strengell, 'Huonekalujen ryhmittelystä', *Kotiliesi* 18/1934, 632–633 ja 655.

<sup>8</sup> Sven Markelius, 'Ratsionalisoimispyrkimykset nykyaikaisessa huonerakennustaiteessa', *Arkkitehti* 5/1928, 71.

<sup>9</sup> Mertanen 1989, 111.

<sup>10</sup> KA, PKA, C:5, Johtokunnan Pöytäkirjat 1922–1934, 16.2.1929, Liite no 2. According to the statistics of 1920, 77,7 percent of Finnish farms were under 10 hectares; Saarikangas, Mäenpää, Sarantola-Weiss 2004, 98–99.

<sup>11</sup> Pohls 1999, 513–515.

<sup>12</sup> Henttinen 1999, 132.

<sup>13</sup> V.A. Arola, 'Maatalouden rakennustoiminnan taloudellisesta suunnittelusta.' In Siikonen, Heikki, *Pienviljelijän rakennusoppi*. Helsinki, 1935, 5, 9.

The rural advisory work and funding was basically two-pronged: the cooperatives led by the central cooperative *Pellervo* and the agricultural societies were providing these. Finland had twenty-two provincial agricultural societies and 901 local ones, with 57 000 members, in 1920. By 1940 the numbers were respectively: twenty-two, 1 577 and 174 460, all within three national associations.<sup>14</sup> The main focus of the provincial agricultural societies was to improve the techniques of farm work.<sup>15</sup> Hence, the national agricultural associations jointly produced a collection of type-plans in 1931. According to a source, over ten thousand copies of these plans had been sold by 1932.<sup>16</sup> Type plans were targeted for smallholders and had to be used in order to receive state's housing loans.<sup>17</sup> The aim of this 'help to self-help' was to improve the quality of living in the countryside, as well as to improve the efficiency of domestic and agricultural work. Thus the reformation of the domestic space was deeply connected with modern scientific management.<sup>18</sup> Besides advisory work and manuals, education was offered within agricultural courses organized by the societies.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, efficiency and productivity were stated along health and comfort as guidelines for modern rural home.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the idea of farmstead as a unit of production connected well into the modernist views house as "a machine for living".

#### PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE ROLE OF PLURIACTIVITY IN MODERNIZATION OF THE SMALL FARMS

Although, the concept of 'self-help' is explicit in the records and publications of the agricultural societies, what did it actually encapsulate? Keeping in mind the financial and educational help that was provided for the farmers it might be reduced to the mere initiative of the individual. On the other hand it is evident that the farmers were not passive in the first place. Consequently, 'self-help' must have something to do with the ideology of modernization and progress. It is like there existed an unspoken assumption that the 'self-help'

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<sup>14</sup> Laine 1948, 65; see also Pohls 1999, 446, 510.

<sup>15</sup> Pohls 1999, 510–511.

<sup>16</sup> Siikonen 1932, 3–4, 6. See also Ivars, Knapas 1991, 118–122; Mertanen 1989, 74–76. Various type-plans had been produced in Finland since 1860s and construction manuals for farmers since 1890s.

<sup>17</sup> Mertanen 1989, 68.

<sup>18</sup> Johansson and Saarikangas 2009, 12. The authors state that home and habitation are always connected to the surrounding cultural and societal norms and meanings.

<sup>19</sup> KA, PKA, Da:1, Kirjetoistheet (1927–1969), 26.2.1938. Kirje Maatalousministeriön asutusasiainosastolle. Kirje oli vastaus em. osaston 10.1.1938 lähettämään kirjelmään nro 147. S.H & S.S.A; Asutustilallisten opintokurssit. Ohjelma ja kustannuslaskelma –liite.

<sup>20</sup> Nieminen & Esti 1931, Alkulause, 5–6. The book one of the examples in which modernization and the "requirements of modern age" are explicitly connected with self-help. However, the authors remind the reader to rely on professionals "if he wasn't completely sure of his own skills in construction work –especially with the plans of the building(s)"; A.V. Nieminen, 'Maatalousrakennusten rakentamistavoista' *Rakennustaito* 20/1922, 175–176.

contained more or less conscious willingness of the farmer to commit himself/herself the doctrine of (rural) scientific management and modern society. In this regard, pluriactivity is displayed as a negotiating concept between the pressures of modernization and the traditional countryside customs. Partly it maintained the continuances in traditional agrarian livelihood, but at the same time it endorsed the gradual modernization of the farmstead. Thus relating to 'anti-modern modernism'.

As function and activity can be used as synonyms, one can scrutinize rural domestic functionality in the sense of (pluri)activity. Moreover, one can assume that the concept of function has more passive nuance than the concept of activity. Thus, making functionality relate more to structural formations and activity to everyday practices. Functionalist principles were the basis of rural domestic diversification. By altering the main room's functionality the experts believed that domestic and agricultural work could be intensified. Furthermore, by labeling domestic spaces a structure of spatial practices was formed. These structural labelings were supported by educating and civilizing the farmers into modernity. Consequently, the relations of structural spatiality and of the everyday practices was constantly redefined by experts and laymen. In this conceptual sense, pluriactivity was connective concept *and* practice.

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