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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Modernism in the woods: Soviet architecture for rural landscapes

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Abstract

This paper explores the urban-type reconstruction of Soviet rural non-agricultural settlements during the Cold War, focusing on timber production workers' settlements in the Republic of Karelia of the north-west Soviet Union. It expands current debates on late-Soviet mass housing by incorporating a rural perspective, examining how residents responded to architectural and planning decisions designed to urbanize their environments. Drawing on architectural blueprints, archival records, oral history interviews, and participant observation, the study argues that the design of workers' settlements reflected both state planning ambitions and the lived practices of their inhabitants. It asks why residents of rural settlements remained dissatisfied with urbanized lifestyles imposed through new design solutions and how their efforts to preserve subsistence farming revealed grassroots resistance. The analysis situates this resistance within the broader tension between two contradictory post-war Soviet policies: one promoting agricultural self-sufficiency through migrant labour benefits and the other pursuing urbanization for rural and semi-rural areas. By tracing changes in settlement design from the 1940s to the 1960s, the paper shows how evolving planning policies reshaped everyday life and exposed the limits of Soviet modernization in transforming rural identities.

Introduction

In 1973, Vera and her husband moved to the newly built logging settlement of Pyaozersky[1] in northwestern Karelia (1000 km north from St. Petersburg) from the settlement of Ledmozero just to the south, which had been built 10 years earlier. Constructed in partnership with Finland, this new settlement was the ultimate embodiment of urbanized modernism in the completely non-urbanized remote boreal forests. Apartment buildings of 5–9 stories with spacious furnished apartments equipped with automatic light switches, warm windows, washing machines, refrigerators, hot water, flush toilets, and private bathrooms. Several stores were operating in the settlement, which always had a variety of goods. Laundry services were available for everyone. Spacious, warm changing rooms with drying rooms were built for workers to dry their work clothes. The brand-new materiality inevitably created a new way of life, different from what Vera and the other new residents of the settlement were used to. Life in Pyaozersky did not require them to take care of firewood and stoves to cook and heat their houses, nor did it require them to grow vegetables or keep cows to always have enough food. They could now become real labourers whose wages could provide everything they needed. However, despite their absolute admiration for the new standard of living ('*When we arrived, I felt like washing the steps with soap every day because they were such a beautiful white. You walk into the entrance hall in front of the stairways and it's so beautiful, you might live right there*'[2]), the settlement residents were by no means ready to

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completely change their lifestyle. Instead, having moved into fully comfortable houses with excellent supplies, hot water, laundry facilities, and other amenities, the workers still asked the administration to allocate plots for private agriculture. Vera joined an activist group who initiated negotiations with the administration to allocate plots for private agricultural activities. She recalls that newcomers had no sheds, basements, and plots in the newly built settlement, as if they didn't need them because all vegetables were available at the store.

However, the 'day-to-day' mode of grocery shopping, which was customary for the urban dwellers, turned out to be uncomfortable for Vera and her family. Moreover, it was entirely ethically unacceptable. After a year of '*dragging potatoes from the store*,' Vera realized it was '*impossible to live that way*'. So she went to the chairman of the settlement council, and said: '*Why should we be freeloaders in respect to the state agriculture, to the rural workers, when we can make vegetable gardens here on one's own .... Why aren't we allowed to have vegetable gardens here?*' After a series of negotiations, the chairman agreed to allocate plots 10 kilometres away from the settlement, which were quickly filled with vegetable gardens and sheds. Having been allowed to grow vegetables on their small plots, the residents continued their pressure on authorities, now demanding to build sheds to store their crops inside the settlement, as the urban-style apartments had no storage facilities. As a result, a chaotically built block of barns, constructed with scraps and unusable materials, grew amid modern high-rise buildings, and the barns became home to chickens, pigs, and cows in addition to vegetable crops storage.[3]

This story, though individual, reveals the stubborn resistance ordinary people put up against the creation of a fully urbanized living environment within rural settlements in the late Soviet Union. This kind of resistance manifests an autonomy of behaviour within an imposed framework that, on the surface, seemed to leave no room for autonomy. In these examples, we see how the Soviet Union's persistent campaign to transform rural areas into urban environments encountered the agency of new rural residents – industrial workers at small enterprises in rural areas who were not peasants (neither in terms of class affiliation nor in terms of their role in agricultural production), but who were still actively engaged in rural practices. This perspective offers us a new vision of the Soviet rural population and Soviet rurality, which had previously remained in the shadow of the history of the more numerous traditional agrarian rural population.

Background

The post-WWII period saw mass housing construction projects across the world, and the historical case of the Soviet Union and Socialist bloc has received sufficient academic attention in this regard, although mainly focused on urban mass housing.[4] Observations made by historians of urban planning, however, are of great interest for the study of similar initiatives in rural areas, as new architectural solutions not only enabled rapid housing construction using prefabricated components but also led to a significant restructuring of social relations and practices among new residents. This transformation occurred through the creation of new material environments and the very design of both residential living spaces and shared non-residential areas. At the same time, researchers have long noted that an architectural approach possesses a particular transformative power per se and thus also serves as a form of ideology. However, while some researchers regard architecture as an instrument of coercion and violence, social management, and control through housing, others note that the built projects did not always lead to the results that architects and ideologists intended to achieve. In this sense, the puzzle of the historical interplay between architectural planning as a means of social engineering and the emerging agency of the residents remains the most complex and intriguing.[5] In the end, the historical outcomes of such an engineering arose from the actual and not always directly identifiable modes of perceiving, processing, and reconsidering the ideological message of new architectural imperatives by the inhabitants of the remodelled Soviet landscapes. Often, the reality was far from

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what was planned. For example, as Harris has shown, Khrushchev's mass housing construction, initially aimed at reducing the political charge of the housing problem, led to an even greater politicization of the issue, as well as significant resistance from the residents of the new houses. These residents suddenly revealed themselves not as grateful recipients of benefits from the state, but as political actors capable of consolidating to assert their rights.[6]

Residents of new apartments tended to produce new agencies in their interaction with new materiality, as the daily practices with which they filled the new apartments, houses, and neighbourhoods were also far from the effects expected by architects and Soviet ideologists. For example, despite the architects' efforts to break the communal apartment system, the newcomers reproduced in individual housing the relationships they were accustomed to in communal dwellings.[7] Below we will see the systematically similar behaviour of timber workers who found themselves in a completely new habitat and sought to replicate rural practices they were accustomed to as former peasants in a modernized urban environment.

As already noted, most studies of late socialist architecture and its impact on residents' practices focus on the legacy of large Soviet cities, while mass housing and architecture for rural and semi-rural spaces, as well as practices they produced, still remain underexplored. Although researchers have increasingly turned to rural mass housing, they have predominantly analysed collective-farm projects and other agricultural settlements. However, they leave aside the numerous rural and semi-rural non-agricultural settlements, where a significant part of the population of the USSR lived. Filling this gap, my article turns towards a specific type of Soviet semi-rural settlements – workers' settlements, still the least studied despite their large numbers.[8]

The research focus on workers' settlements offers a new vision of the Soviet rural space, which included not only the agrarian population of traditional villages but also the workers of many small industrial enterprises – gravel pits, glass factories, railway stations, peat extractors, and logging. Created as part of the industrial development, workers' settlements became the most widespread example of planned communities in the USSR. They fundamentally changed settlements' appearance, living environments, as well as habits, and customs of Soviet citizens. Over time, many workers' settlements merged into the urban boundaries of large cities, becoming small towns or urban-type settlements. However, most remained settlements in rural areas, with urban-style apartments, multi-story buildings, and a population of several hundred people.

Although the first workers' settlements appeared before the 1917 Russian Revolution, they reached their peak during the forced industrialization of the 1930s and later became the most common type of new settlement established in the USSR. Housing millions of Soviet citizens, they occupied an ambiguous position in Soviet administrative discourse. From the late 1920s until at least the mid-1940s, workers' settlements formed a separate category of settlements, belonging neither to urban nor rural areas, and were defined as settlements located outside city limits, with a population of at least 400 people, of whom at least 65 per cent had wages as their main source of livelihood.[9] In 1957, the intermediate administrative status of workers' settlements was revised. Settlements at large factories with a population of at least 3000 people, and with at least 85 per cent of that population consisting of workers, employees, and their families, were reclassified as urban settlements.[10] At the same time, most workers' settlements were of a smaller size and were reclassified as rural settlements. These were remote small settlements, intended to be modern urban spaces, but never reached a sufficient level of urbanity. Densely scattered throughout the rural space, such settlements became an important innovation of the Soviet period, forming a new type of semi-rural settlement in the USSR. While remaining part of the rural population, small workers' settlements differed from villages in that their inhabitants were not peasants but workers and enjoyed a number of rights and freedoms that were unavailable to collective farmers. Like peasants, the inhabitants of small workers' settlements usually ran village-type households, cultivating small plots of land, keeping livestock, hunting, and foraging. Like peasants, their livelihood strategies were largely based on environmental knowledge and a close connection to

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nature. However, unlike collective farmers, residents of workers' settlements were free to change their place of residence, as they had passports and received wages for their work.

Built to effectively accommodate the workers of industrial enterprises, workers' settlements were in many ways similar in structure and function to monotowns or company towns. An important feature of workers' settlements was their institutional affiliation as the enterprise was the de facto owner of all material objects in settlements (including houses, roads, schools, and stores).[11] Providing workers with scarce housing was the most important tool the enterprises used to attract workers and fight against staff turnover. Yet the settlements' role was not limited to the latter, since they formed a certain transformative environment that brought the daily routines of new workers, mostly former peasants, closer to the urban ones.[12] In this way, the types of living spaces developed by Soviet architects assumed both the effective labour mobilization and the arranging of a certain lifestyle through the settlement's material environment.[13]

In this sense, the case of workers' settlements has to be analysed in the context of a continual and well-elaborated Soviet discourse on the concept of unavoidable unification of the city and the village in the course of a narrowing cultural gap between them. This discourse originates from the works of K. Marx and F. Engels, in which they asserted that a classless society has to '*unite agriculture with industry, to contribute to the gradual elimination of the difference between the city and the countryside*'.[14] Apart from the classless rationale of this thesis, its logic was purely modernizing and progressive. Since the countryside tends to become more industrial thanks to industrially developed cities, it gradually gets rid of pre-industrial rural features and becomes more urban. As such, the idea of the backwardness of the traditional rural way of life compared with the modern urban lifestyle remained topical for social thought throughout the entire Soviet period. Moreover, bridging the gap between the city and the village was treated as the most crucial goal of the Bolshevik revolution and a principal condition for building the communist society. At the same time, as Miliausha Zakirova notes, the Soviet ideologists saw the practical solution to the village/city gap problem not so much in the development of existing cities as in the creation of new settlements by predetermined plans, drawn up on a scientific basis and in accordance with the goals and objectives of the state.[15]

High-modernist projects of this kind, aimed at constructing a new type of built environment within rural societies, presupposed a high degree of state control over rural construction. Yet, given that in the countryside the privately built dwellings (i.e., traditional peasant homes in agricultural collective farms) accounted for roughly 90 per cent of the rural housing stock, the state interventions intended to urbanize the rural environment were confined to mere 10 per cent of dwellings that belonged to state institutions (*vedomstvennoe zhil'e*).[16] Therefore, the purpose-built and state-owned workers' settlements of the 1960s–1970s emerged as the exemplary model of Soviet planned communities in the countryside. Consisting almost exclusively of state-owned housing, these settlements functioned as testing grounds for a new paradigm of rural construction. Although the residents of such settlements constituted only a modest fraction of the total Soviet rural population, far outnumbered by collective-farm peasants living in traditional villages (*kolkhozniks*), their absolute numbers were nonetheless substantial. If state-housed rural residents are estimated at 10 per cent of the rural population, the 1970 census data would place that figure at well over ten million people all over the USSR.[17]

This article extends the discussion of the social effects of mass housing construction in the late USSR by introducing the question of how workers' settlements' residents in rural areas accepted the architectural and planning decisions of late-Soviet architects and the tensions created in implementing the projects. Based on a range of sources, including architectural blueprints, archival documents on the settlement construction and maintenance, oral history interviews, and participant observation of livable spaces, I will show how the new houses' blueprints tended to shift dwellers' daily routines towards urban lifestyles. Yet, the residents responded with strong objection, aimed at preserving their agrarian practices and lifestyle. I came to the conclusion that the residents' critical perception of the new urbanized environment was not merely a reflection of

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their own peasant background. On the contrary, I argue that their tenacious commitment to providing land for homestead plots and permitting the construction of outbuildings was a paradoxical outcome of this very project of social engineering and emerged from a clash between two post-WWII Soviet social policies towards rural development with markedly contradictory aims. The first aim was to regulate labour migration of the early post-war years and comprised a wide range of highly attractive agricultural benefits to introduce new labourers, mostly former peasants, to the industry. The second presupposed the structured urbanization of rural settlements and arose from the consistent belief of Soviet ideologists in the inevitable transformation of these settlements into fully urban ones. In this context, the design and planning of settlements played a key role, reflecting the state's changing policies regarding the lifestyles of workers, which aimed to gradually transform the settlement's semi-rural dwellers into modern urban Soviet citizens within newly built landscapes. Based on this approach, the state initially expected to explore their dual identity as experienced agricultural producers and newly born industrial workers. Creating this kind of self-subsistance communities allowed the state to reassess funds from the centralized food supply to capital construction (i.e., building roads, houses, schools as well as industrial objects). Then, as a second step, the state expected the residents of the workers' settlements to gradually abandon agricultural practices under the influence of the forming urban environment. However, although the first stage was intended to serve as a stepping stone for the transformation of rural life towards urban practices, in practice, it strengthened peasants' connection to agricultural traditions. Having initially gained agency as migrants to industrial settlements from agrarian regions, the residents of workers' settlements proved not to be passive recipients of urban benefits from the state but motivated political actors who insisted on reshaping their new urban homes despite any deviation from original plans being banned.

Mass housing for workers' settlements: 1945–1970s examples from the logging industry

This article discusses one type of workers' settlements – *forest settlements* – those built to accommodate workers and employees of timber industry enterprises and which eventually became typical rural settlements in logging regions of the Russian North and Siberia. The emergence of an extensive network of logging settlements was due to the project of deploying a new type of industrial logging – year-round, large-scale extensive felling. The new type of production implied the recruitment of tens of thousands of workers from other regions of the USSR, as well as the transition from unskilled seasonal workers to a professional permanent workforce, who were to live permanently in the logging areas with their families. Although the processes under study took place in all logging regions of the USSR (Komi ASSR, Arkhangelsk and Vologda oblasts, Western Siberia, etc.), the focus of my analysis will be forest settlements in Northwest Karelia.

Design institutes affiliated with various industrial ministries, such as timber, metallurgy, and machine building, developed standard housing projects that guided residential development, with each type of settlement drawing on its own specific set of standard projects and recommendations.[18] The planning and development projects for logging settlements were developed by design institutes of the Ministry of Timber Industry, such as the GIPROLESPROM Institute. With some exceptions, the projects offered construction plans of standard houses built from prefabricated components. The appearance of houses and their internal structure were always standard. Any significant variations were not allowed, both in the construction of houses and the overall settlement layout. The designs were mandatory even when it was carried out by the so-called self-managed construction method (*khozyaystvennyy metod*), in which enterprise workers themselves built their future homes in accordance with standard blueprints during working hours, using materials allocated by the enterprise. My interlocutors, Konstantin and

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Ksenia, recall that when they decided to make a minor changes to the floor plan, they encountered sharp resistance from the management of the timber production enterprise and were compelled to adhere to the standard design that had been assigned to them.[19]

Below I will discuss several editions of recommendations and standard designs for the construction of workers' settlements in the logging industry, issued between 1945 and 1970, to see how the architectural vision and lifestyle models offered to timber workers changed significantly.

The earliest post-war planning and development projects for logging settlements, drawn up by L.A. Federmeer, date back to 1945. The most important feature of these projects is the architect's emphasis on the location of homestead plots, as well as additional plots for agricultural needs and outbuildings. In fact, subsidiary farming and livestock breeding were an essential and integral part of the lives of logging settlement residents during the 1940s, and the architect took this crucial need into account. Although priority was given to the homestead principle of spatial planning, that is, scattered houses surrounded by plots of land, if such a settlement layout were impossible, '*the size of home plots should be assigned to the maximum possible for each particular case and not far from the settlement to provide additional areas for potato fields and other crops. The soil of this additional area should be suitable for agricultural exploitation*'.[20] The necessity of outbuildings on plots was also addressed: '*barns for fuel and premises for* livestock *should be either attached to the house or at a distance not closer than 15 meters on the border of two homesteads, so that they form one structure. Yard latrine, garbage pit, manure storage (compost) shall be located behind the house at least 15 meters away from it next to outbuildings, and they should also be located next to similar devices of neighboring homesteads*'.[21]

During the 1950s, the way architects and planners perceived the everyday loggers' routines noticeably shifted. For instance, N.V. Kolchenko, in his 1958 project for the layout of logging settlements, still paid attention to the agricultural activities of the inhabitants but did not provide detailed descriptions of outbuildings for livestock. Unlike the 1940s, this type of activity was no longer considered essential. Although the homestead type of development was still a priority and dominant, most of the land was to be located outside the settlement: '*In the settlements of logging enterprises, homesteads are provided for the workers and their families. The homestead-base character of the territory use enables the most complete isolation of a dwelling house or an apartment and allows each family to have the necessary conveniences - a separate apartment; a small land plot at the house for vegetable gardens and green plantings, up to 0.03-0.07 ha in size; and service buildings (a barn, a cellar, a latrine). Garden plots of 0.5-0.75 ha per family are allotted outside the settlement territory*'.[22] Despite the differences, these projects favoured a particular hybrid character of workers' settlements, where modern industrial objects coexisted alongside vegetable gardens and grazing livestock and where residents combined the identities and practices of workers and peasants.

The first half of the 1960s saw significant changes both in the daily lives of workers and in the way architects and planners interpreted them. By this time, the major redevelopment of the forest industry had been completed. The industry's growth was now driven not by an increase in the number of workers but by the mechanization of processes and improvements in logistics. As a result, the industry no longer needed to rapidly construct numerous new settlements, whereas the bulk of the housing in the settlements created in 1940s–1950s had been built. This allowed the enterprises to invest significantly more in the quality of life in the workers' settlements and the centralized supply. As a result, by the early 1960s, the standard plans of logging settlements and construction norms had practically ceased to mention homesteads. Workers' auxiliary agricultural activities were no longer a factor shaping the overall vision and planning decisions, and the architects replaced the hybrid peasant-worker layouts with a concept of the forest settlements as small but entirely urban entities amid forests. '*Among the main requirements of rational design of settlements, especially of permanent type at integrated enterprises, is the need to increase the density (compactness) of development and ensure economic provision of residential complexes with engineering communications*'.[23] The new economic and infrastructural considerations replaced the

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earlier rationale for promoting the hybrid semi-rural lifestyle, motivating planners to redesign housing from single-story homestead buildings to more compact, non-homestead two- and three-story structures. This, in turn, allowed for a decrease in the average area of settlements, consequently reducing costs and optimizing their infrastructural improvements, including sewage and central heating. Typical projects of the mid-1960s and 1970s have little in common with the daily agricultural routines of the settlement's inhabitants. On the contrary, the pronounced urban component in 1960s planning became strongly intensified. The new projects proposed a mass multi-apartment development that involved small separate bedrooms, small living rooms, and small kitchens, yet lacked storerooms and sheds. Small functional apartments of this kind were not intended to store winter supplies or farm implements or livestock. If they were preserved, individual subsidiary plots had to be moved outside the settlement territory.

In addition to multi-apartment buildings, the layouts of loggers' settlements also depict the anticipated lifestyle of their inhabitants. These are modernist images in which one- and two-story houses with spacious terraces occupy straight and wide streets. The stylish curtains hang inside rooms and on the terraces. Flowers bloom in the flowerbeds. Cars are parked in front of the houses, and the inhabitants, wearing elegant dresses and heeled shoes, walk along clean streets with small bags in hand. The designs for the club and the service centre resemble a futuristic urban environment, featuring wide sidewalks, streetlights, cars, and beautifully dressed residents. In contrast to the 1940–1950s plans, there are no vegetable beds, fruit bushes, trees, or gardens. The interiors of the houses shown in the collections of standard projects also reproduced the most progressive patterns of their time, including angular furniture on thin legs, and other characteristic interior elements of the 1960s–70s.[24]

Thus, the new designs that formed the basis of housing construction in loggers' settlements from the early 1970s onwards were directed towards the fully urban daily life to which the architects believed settlement dwellers would inevitably come, following the 'village-to-city' transformation approach. The most striking example of this architectural stratagem was the settlement of Pyaozersky in the Louhsky district of Karelia, built in 1971–1973 as part of a Soviet-Finnish construction partnership by the Finnish company Perusyhtymä.[25] Not only the houses' designs but also the prefabricated facade elements for the apartment buildings complete with factory-preinstalled windows came from Finland.[26] Finnish constructors erected forty 5–9 story multi-apartment buildings, a school, a kindergarten, a store, and a hospital, using designs that differed from those typical for the USSR at that time. This led to the appearance of buildings and layouts in Pyaozersky that were atypical of other Soviet settlements. Following the architectural approach prevalent in post-WWII Finland, the settlement had an irregular layout that took into account the terrain and also preserved forest areas within the blocks of houses.[27] Moreover, the Leningrad Furniture Factory designed and produced specially designed furniture, and each apartment in Pyaozersky was provided to residents fully furnished. Residents recall many small details that clearly distinguished Pyaozersky from other workers' settlements they were used to: automatic light switches in the entrances, convenient multi-lock keys that opened several doors at once, washing machines, bathrooms with hot water, laundry services, and drying rooms for workers' uniforms.[28]

In this modern urban environment, there was no space for vegetable gardens and homesteads, let alone cows and barns. However, in all settlements, even in the highly urbanized Pyaozersky, the residents insisted on being allowed to create conditions for subsidiary agriculture and animal husbandry. To understand their rationale, we will look at the larger narratives and discourses within which mass housing construction unfolded in rural areas of the USSR.

Modern housing for rural areas

New approaches to the construction of logging settlements, including the creation of apartment buildings from prefabricated components and new urbanized layouts, were part of a larger process

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of mass housing construction that swept across the USSR from the late 1950s onwards. Although researchers have traditionally paid more attention to how mass housing construction changed the character of Soviet cities, dozens of new architectural and planning designs were being developed for mass model housing construction in rural and semi-rural settlements in the USSR during that period. A large-scale mass construction programme aimed at modernizing rural areas began almost simultaneously with the mass construction in Soviet cities. In his speeches from 1957 to 1959, Khrushchev repeatedly emphasized the need for a large-scale reconstruction of rural areas, outlining a vision of well-equipped villages with modern infrastructure that would gradually close the gap between rural and urban living conditions. By 1958–1959, the Party formalized this agenda, calling for the development of regional and settlement-level planning schemes to guide both agricultural and residential construction.[29] One of the first outcomes of this campaign was the development of a more formal approach to rural construction and planning. In 1960, the Research Institute of Rural Buildings and Constructions of the Academy of Construction and Architecture of the USSR and the Department of Agricultural Construction of Gosstroy (State Construction Agency) published regulatory documents on the design of rural settlements.[30] That same year, an All-Union Conference on Urban Planning was held, which included, among others, a Section on the Planning and Development of Rural Settlements. Special brochures were prepared for the section's work – comprehensive analytical reports describing actual practices, trends, and the most important tasks of rural construction in all Soviet republics. The brochures devoted considerable attention to the typology of rural construction, regional climatic and natural conditions, the necessity and challenges of providing rural settlements with electricity, running water supply and sewerage systems, as well as the transition to apartment-style housing.[31] As L. Mazur notes, these initiatives intended to bring previously chaotic, unplanned rural building under strict state control and systematically direct capital investment.[32]

Although the most well-known initiatives in this regard were the resettlement of unviable villages and the construction of consolidated collective farms, state farms, and agricultural towns, in practice, all types of rural settlements underwent restructuring.[33] Model projects for new settlements and residential buildings were developed for both agricultural (collective and state farms) and industrial settlements in rural areas – consolidated collective farms, former residents of 'unviable' villages, reindeer herding camps, fishing bases, small settlements near local hydroelectric power plants, oil extraction workers, loggers, railway maintenance stations, peat bog settlements, and other semi-rural and rural settlements. Given this diversity of rural settlements, the variability of model construction plans for various types of rural environments was much greater than for Soviet cities. Special model designs were developed by the Central Scientific Research and Engineering-Experimental Institute for the Design of Residential, Civil, and Rural Buildings and Structures (TsNIIEP Grazhanselstroy), as well as by architectural and engineering institutes in all the republics, and took into account the regional climatic (extremely high or low temperatures, strong winds, heavy snow cover, or arid terrain), geological (primarily requirements for seismic resistance and construction in permafrost conditions) characteristics of the regions, the cultural and family traditions of the peoples and their demographic dynamics (family structure and number of children), the availability of local building materials and the location of factories producing building components, and the type of employment among rural residents. At the same time, the projects included various types of houses ranging from single-story single-family homes to five-story apartment buildings.[34] The inhabitants of collective farm villages most often reproduced traditional styles single-family houses, while the enterprises built all types of standard designs in workers' settlements.[35]

It was a nationwide project of building urbanized housing and urban spaces for rural areas. While in cities, private apartments were replacing communal apartments, in newly created rural areas the apartment-type houses were replacing the homestead layouts. As a result, rural and semi-rural settlements, included in the renovation programme, were becoming more modern, well-developed, standardized, and compact. The layout of settlements and the type of housing changed:

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strict streets of multi-apartment buildings with amenities replaced irregular clusters of wooden houses – a marked departure from the dispersed traditional dwellings that had previously defined the countryside.

Mass housing construction in the countryside looked as revolutionary as the new neighbourhoods of mass housing blocks that sprang up everywhere on the outskirts of large Soviet cities. But was this project revolutionary in its core? As Harris notes, the transition to a new model of mass-type urban construction in the Khrushchev period was not a rejection of the earlier pre-war vision of a communist way of life. He notes that '*the consensus on making the separate apartment a mass phenomenon in Soviet life began to take shape under Stalin before the war. Stalin's and Khrushchev's regimes contributed different elements to this consensus, which reflected the cultural values and social priorities of each*'.[36] The Stalinist regime marginalized radical architectural theories on collectivist living. Instead, it promoted single-family apartments as a symbol of cultured living, but access was limited to elites while most citizens lived in communal spaces. Khrushchev expanded on this by making separate apartments widely available through a mass housing campaign that prioritized families across social classes. Similarly, the urbanization of the design of rural settlements was not a fundamentally new turn in the state's ideological vision of these spaces. It was a continuation of a long and critical debate about the place of the village as traditional rural habitat in the Soviet social, ideological, and material landscape.

While the perception of the city as a more progressive form of settlement, symbolizing the future and contrasting with the backward, tradition-bound village, is not unique to the Soviet context, it holds particular significance within the Soviet vision of social and economic development towards building a new world. Extending the seminal ideas of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, Soviet urbanization drew its theoretical basis from a particular conception of the relationship between the city — identified with the advanced proletariat — and the countryside — associated with what the Soviet ideological tradition called the backward peasantry. Both embodied a '*cultural gap*' that needed to be bridged. At the same time, the proposed model for overcoming this confrontation had the linear character of a stage transition from village to city, within which '*the village grows into a city, and the small city into a big city*'.[37] This transformation itself, as Soviet theorists of urbanization pointed out, was made possible by the fact that the city as the '*highest form of human settlement*' '*inevitably leads the village forward, the village inevitably follows the city*'.[38] Thus, Soviet theorists saw the city as the engine of socialism, equating urban culture with socialist culture. This was the essence of Soviet urbanization. The development of the village along this path was seen through the gradual penetration of the city, understood as a specific materiality and particular practices, into the village environment, bringing the rural environment closer to the urban environment in terms of quality of life and planning solutions. For a long time, this was an enduring practical and ideological mandate. In his report to the December 1958 Plenum of the CPSU, Nikita Khrushchev asserted that the Party's most important task in the restructuring of the countryside was to ensure that 'living conditions in the countryside, thanks to the development of culture, would differ little from those of a socialist city'.[39] Almost 20 years later, at the 25th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in March 1976, Leonid Brezhnev, the next Soviet leader, reiterated that the party's core goal was 'to continue moving toward the convergence of material and cultural living conditions in cities and rural areas'.[40] The embodiment of this process, as Elessna Bogdanova notes, was the emergence of modern multi-story housing in the countryside: '*Urban housing was a way to 'transform' villagers into townspeople*'.[41]

Despite the fact that the Soviet urban planning and social discourse perceived workers' settlements as a transitional stage between village and city, most of them never made it all the way along this imaginary road of transformation, remaining forever 'cities in perspective', that is, '*existing as 'transitional' to cities and appearing as only a stage of the urbanization process*'.[42] Nevertheless, it is essential to note that the construction of workers' settlements and the remodelling of lifestyle patterns and social interaction through the gradual creation of urban (or at

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least semi-urban) infrastructure were an important tool for industrial development of the northern territories and their inclusion in the Soviet project.[43] As Ekaterina Kalemeneva notes, '*urbanization was the process through which the vast region of the Far North materially and symbolically became a full-fledged part of the Soviet Union*'.[44] Undoubtedly, the construction of the small but fully urbanized settlement of Pyaozersky serves as a notable example of this kind of symbolic and material inclusion of the region into Soviet modernity.

Summing up, the relationship between the 'backward' village and the 'progressive' city was seen as a relationship between the past and the future, in which, as Zakirova puts it, '*the imperfect culture of the present was rooted in the past - in the countryside*'.[45] However, while each city inevitably represented the space of the future, the other, smaller types of settlements were not equal to each other but were positioned on some scale of progress, historical development, and social time. Interestingly, this dynamic of movement from rural to urbanized forms of life can be observed not only when comparing different settlements but also within each of them, as the design institutes responsible for the actual projects of future settlements occasionally updated the norms of settlement construction. As a consequence, the appearance of settlements underwent gradual but significant changes, as new layouts became more urban. In general, it was a systematic movement from the planning and development of the homestead type, with houses surrounded by auxiliary plots and buildings, to one- or multi-story apartment-type houses without any outbuildings. This was the planned transition '*from the village to the city*', as the residents' everyday life transformed through changes of the actual settlement's layout. At the same time, since the old buildings usually remained intact through each successive revision of settlement design standards, the new trends formed different layers that are still visible in current settlement layouts.

The layered transition from a rural to urban type can be clearly traced in workers' settlement. Most often, these were two- or three-story standard houses made of prefabricated panels, consisting of one-, two-, and three-room apartments of an urban type. If earlier projects with one-story wooden buildings often proposed to build houses with so-called 'simplified amenities', that is, with public baths, wells and outdoor latrines near the house, since the late 1960s all housing projects for rural areas of the USSR offered fully equipped housing with sewerage, bathrooms, flush toilets, and hot water.[46] At the same time, while the rural area land-use plans and settlement projects developed since the 1960s have always emphasized the necessity of constructing utility networks, quite often the infrastructure was not ready in time, leaving habitants with no hot water supply or sewerage for many years. However, such defects remained compliant with construction regulations, which mandated that new housing – even in areas lacking water or sewage infrastructure – be designed for future network connectivity.[47] In any case, it was obvious to everyone – architects, residents, and administration – that every family should live in an apartment with heating, toilets, and hot water, even if it sometimes took a little longer.[48] The rural model projects thus presupposed a lifestyle parity between future inhabitants and urban dwellers.

As a rule, settlement residents supported and welcomed the construction of comfortable urban-type housing with warm apartments, hot water, heating, sewerage, and bathrooms. However, the impossibility of producing food themselves – growing potatoes or keeping cows – met with strong resistance.

Agricultural benefits and resettlement policies

In *Potato Ontology* Nancy Ries underscores the existential significance of private subsidiary farming, particularly potato cultivation, for the inhabitants of the post-Soviet space.[49] The crucial role of private farming was especially evident during my fieldwork in the logging settlements of Karelia. Despite the harsh circumpolar climate, poor soil quality, and various restrictions imposed by the authorities, residents of these northern settlements continued to cultivate vegetables and

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raise livestock. This often required commuting long distances to their plots on weekends or dedicating entire vacation periods to haymaking. Ries attributes this persistence to the fact that multiple generations of Soviet citizens had endured severe famines orchestrated by the state extractivist policies, fostering a deep-seated distrust of the state. This explanation is certainly valid, and many individuals in Karelia have had similar experiences. As migrant workers from different regions, many of my interlocutors recounted personal or familial memories of famine, particularly in Ukraine and Belarus in 1947, as well as during the Second World War. Some also referred to the state induced devastating famines of the 1930s.[50] Additionally, food supplies in Karelia during the first post-war decade remained insufficient, making private farming essential for survival. However, the steady resistance to urbanization efforts among residents of forest settlements cannot be attributed solely to the historical experience of famine and distrust of the state. A more complex set of factors must be considered – namely, the resettlement policies of the late Stalinist period. These policies, which included numerous agricultural incentives, played a crucial role in attracting a significant number of future loggers to Karelia. Although comprehensive aggregated data on agricultural benefits as a tool for controlled labour migration are lacking, scattered research suggests that organized resettlement was most widespread in the early post-war years, beginning in 1946. This policy had three main objectives: colonizing newly annexed territories (e.g., Sakhalin and Kaliningrad), repopulating areas emptied by deportations (e.g., Crimea), and attracting workers to new industrial regions like northwestern Karelia.[51]

Most of the new workers attracted to industry through agricultural incentives were peasants seeking to evade the restrictions imposed by Stalin's agricultural policy. The forced collectivization campaign implemented in the USSR from the late 1920s onwards, along with subsequent dekulakization and passportization, significantly curtailed peasants' rights as a social class, effectively depriving them of freedom of movement, criminalizing private agricultural activity, denying them access to monetary wages, as their labour was compensated not in cash but in kind, and obliging them to sell their produce to the state at sharply reduced prices.[52] The privileges granted to these new workers enabled them to circumvent strict ideological constraints while legally maintaining a degree of autonomy as individual agricultural producers. At the same time, a significant share of the recruited workers came from Western Ukraine, Western Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, territories annexed by the USSR between 1939 and 1945.[53] In these regions, compulsory collectivization did not commence until the late 1940s, and recruitment into the timber and other industries provided residents with an opportunity to avoid the severe restrictions associated with the transition to collective-farm status (*kolkhozniki*). The main benefits granted to the resettlers were (1) exemption from the payment of tax arrears for previous years, (2) exemption from or a significant reduction of obligatory deliveries of agricultural products to the state and agricultural tax in the future, (3) allocation of land plots for vegetable gardening, grazing, and hay mowing, which greatly exceeded those allocated to collective and state farmers and other categories of the population (0.5–0.75-hectares plots for horticulture and hayfields of 1 to 2 hectares per family), (4) permission to own more livestock than other groups of population, (5) assistance in the transportation of livestock and subsidies for its purchase at the new place of residence, and (6) grants and subsidized loans for the construction of houses in the new location.[54] These benefits proved to be a favourable alternative to collective farms (kolkhozes) for those peasants who were proactive and sought to own a strong, independent agricultural household. In other words, this system of privileges enabled those peasants who, under different circumstances, might have been prosecuted and even executed as *kulaks* – 'counterrevolutionaries', 'exploiters', or individual producers – to legally run more or less individual farms, provided they agreed to work for an enterprise (factory, timber production enterprise, or even in a kolkhoz in newly colonized regions) and to relocate to remote and largely underdeveloped territories. Moreover, after a certain period of work in a new place, migrants could obtain a passport and thus freedom of further relocation, which remained unavailable to collective farmers until the mid-1970s. Undoubtedly, this was a good opportunity for many peasants, and the state gained motivated labour migrants,

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who willingly moved their entire families to remote regions of the USSR, expecting to live in the new place for at least 5 years. On the other hand, this method of attracting workers was also beneficial to the newly established enterprises that would employ the migrants, as the persistent problem of Soviet planning was the inability to simultaneously develop several components of large infrastructure projects.[55] In other words, it had always been a challenge for the Soviet state to simultaneously create infrastructure for production and for the welfare and supply of workers. By recruiting proactive peasants as workers, this problem was partially alleviated because the migrants were largely prepared to provide their own food. Such labour migration based on agricultural benefits should not only have brought motivated workers to the new places but also encouraged them to create self-sustaining settlements by combining private agriculture and industrial employment. Hence, we observe that traditional peasant manual production, focused on providing for one's family – otherwise repressed and marginalized – became a form of social capital in the context of labour migration, actively encouraged and supported by the state. Individuals motivated towards private food production were precisely the kind the state sought to contract, offering them resettlement in new regions along with a wide range of benefits and subsidies and allowing them to become members of enclosed consumer communities.

For my interlocutors, residents of logging settlements who came to Karelia through state recruitment programmes, maintaining their private auxiliary plots was an essential and important value. These were people who had made the difficult decision to move to the remote, desolate northern regions on the condition that they retain their right to relatively free farming. The agricultural incentives were part of the social contract they entered into with the state through their employment agreements with the logging enterprises.

Resisting urban-type modernity

The construction of urban spaces in rural areas in the late Soviet Union was a broad, unifying endeavour, a form of social engineering aimed at creating and reinforcing urban lifestyles by means of architecture and design. However, the residents of rural and semi-rural settlements were highly dissatisfied with the fully urbanized lifestyles imposed on them through new architectural, planning, and design solutions. Although these solutions were intended to contribute to the well-being of dwellers, to give them the benefits of modern urban life, they had yet another purpose – to transform the values of these settlements. In fact, architecture and design were a means of forging a new social contract with the residents of semi-rural industrial settlements, one that significantly limited their opportunities and rights to private agriculture in exchange for access to heating, water, and sewage in their new apartments. Equally important, this new contract offered residents the option to become urban citizens in their daily practices, such as buying food in stores and using the time freed from agricultural activities for the Soviet-style cultural leisure. However, this new contract was far from being supported by the settlement residents. The disappearance of agricultural spaces from workers' settlements and the replacement of homesteads with apartment buildings did not actually lead to dumping of agricultural activities, as the new approaches to settlement planning provoked hidden resistance from the residents.[56] Unable to influence the changes in centrally administered settlements, residents exerted constant pressure on local authorities to obtain new plots to replace those lost, as well as the right to build barns and storage facilities.

Although the settlement of Pyaozersky was exceptional among Soviet workers' settlements and far exceeded others in terms of living standards, the confrontation described here was not unique. Similar cases can be found in other logging settlements. Thus, in 1967, residents of the settlement of Muezersky (also comprising apartment buildings) asked the settlement council to allocate a place for building barns to keep cows. However, in this case, the council decided that agricultural activities were only possible outside the settlement and ultimately denied the residents the right to

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build barns.[57] Since there are now entire barn districts in the settlement, however, it is clear that this decision was later reversed.

One of the most common solutions to the problem was to allocate plots for agricultural work outside the settlement, often at a considerable distance, as was the case in Pyaozersky. If a person wanted to maintain their agricultural activity, it had to be relocated to a separate place in both space and time: one could visit the plot on the weekend but could not work every day in the vegetable garden near one's home in one's spare time. This significantly altered the dynamics of the residents' interaction with nature and their everyday routines. Speaking about similar processes in Estonian collective farms, Mart Kalm notes that although such plots allowed residents to retain some connection to country living, 'it seemed absurd to have to bring the greens for the soup from a considerable distance away'.[58] In the case of livestock, their location outside the settlements was even more problematic, as it made it very difficult to care for them. At the same time, the distance of 10 km or more, as was the case in Pyaozersky, seemed particularly absurd given that the settlements were located in an extremely sparsely populated area. The introduction of urban housing in rural areas was also viewed critically in other countries under state socialism. As Roman Doušek notes, although the rural population of Czechoslovakia welcomed modern urban living standards for the countryside, life in a flat proved problematic for them as it was not conducive to the practice of food self-sufficiency. 'In response, the people ... engaged in what we might call "guerilla gardening" today, building rockeries, vegetable beds, sheds, rabbit hutches, and chicken coops in the public space around these new buildings'. Some residents even left their new apartments once they realized they did not like living there.[59]

In Soviet workers' settlements, where residents were primarily employed in logging or other industrial enterprises, hidden resistance typically manifested as petitions to local authorities for the allocation of new plots. In contrast, in agricultural settlements, new approaches to settlement planning – intended to retain the population of depopulated regions by improving living conditions – ultimately led to increased outward-migration, as residents who opposed the new policy simply left. Judith Pallot notes that in the process of resettling so-called 'unviable villages', the policy of concentration in rural areas aimed to reorganize villages along more urban lines, replacing traditional cottages with five-story apartment blocks and relocating kolkhoz workers' private plots to the village outskirts. For many kolkhozniks, the prospect of losing their private plots was a decisive factor in leaving the countryside, as the inability to maintain these plots reduced the appeal of remaining in villages compared with moving to urban areas.[60]

Conclusion

The persistence of architects and enterprises in enforcing urban-style layouts, coupled with the hidden resistance of residents, resulted in a hybrid character of settlements. Rather than being dismantled, these semi-rural designs and practices were reproduced on a new and more modern scale. Despite continuing to function as nature-dependent communities, residents increasingly adopted mobility patterns characteristic of urban dwellers, regularly travelling outside their settlements to visit their plots and livestock. This dynamic created a striking contrast between modern material infrastructure and the persistence of manual agricultural production, accompanied by makeshift structures such as barns, sheds, and outbuildings.

This mixed character of workers' settlements did not merely illustrate yet another absurd dimension of Soviet everyday life. It was, above all, a testament to the complex relationship between this segment of the rural non-agricultural population and the state. As we have seen, the residents of workers' settlements were far from passive subjects to be reshaped by ideological projects and state imperatives. They possessed a strong agency of their own, one they had first exercised as peasants who made the difficult decision to relocate to newly established industrial settlements in exchange for important agricultural privileges.

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It was precisely this cohort's capacity to act as independent agents under difficult social, environmental, and everyday conditions, and their willingness to move to remote northern regions with harsh climates and sustain themselves through farming, that made the project of building industrial settlements in rural areas viable in the first place. Over time, however, their agency came into conflict with the urban developmental trajectory imposed on the rural landscape by Soviet ideology. The state's persistent drive to create urban-type planned communities paradoxically reinforced these subjects' autonomy, giving rise to years of quiet resistance against the constraints of an imposed environment.

Unlike the rural agricultural population, which researchers note was often willing, even eager, to leave villages for cities under the pressure of late Soviet modernization projects, the residents of workers' settlements related to the question of maintaining subsidiary farming in an entirely different way. For them, it was not a remnant of a life to be left behind, but a condition of a new social contract, one in which they were industrial workers living a modern way of life, yet unwilling to fully surrender their identity as individual agricultural producers, and with it, their agency.

At odds with original intentions, the quick onset of Perestroika and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union fundamentally reconfigured livelihood strategies in these settlements over a compressed time frame – literally in just a few years. Physical survival became dependent on household subsistence farming, with residents relying on livestock such as cows and pigs.[61] With the decline of state-managed enterprises, the modern infrastructure of urban-style buildings became increasingly unsuitable. By the 1990s, the most favourable living conditions were found not in multi-story apartment buildings with modern amenities but in more traditional, single-story wooden houses with stove heating, without running water and sewage. Even today, three decades later, as infrastructure has been largely restored, individual housing remains more desirable, despite requiring greater personal involvement in maintaining life-sustaining systems.

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Notes

[1] The settlement of Pyaozersky was founded in 1973 as part of the new integrated Pyaozersky timber production enterprise, the most modern and probably the last major timber production enterprises of Karelia in the Soviet era. For more information on Pyaozersky, compare A. Kramskikh, *Pyaozerskii lespromkhoz—30 let puti, 1973–2003* (Petrozavodsk, 2003); A. F. Titov (ed.), *Karelia: entsiklopediya, vol. 2* (Petrozavodsk, 2009), p. 457; I. Fedschik, *Pyaozerskoe uskorenie: Ob opyte raboty Pyaozerskogo lespromkhoza* (Petrozavodsk, 1981).

[2] Interview with Evgenia, Rugozero settlement, Karelia, July 2018. All the names of interviewees in the text are fictional.

[3] Interview with Vera, Kalevala settlement, Karelia, June 2019.

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[6] Harris, *Communism on Tomorrow Street.*

[7] Ibid.

[8] V. Abashev, M. Alekseevskii, M. Akhmetova et al., 'Issledovaniia goroda', *Antropologicheskii Forum,* **12** (2010), 9–213.

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[13] Golubev, *The Things of Life*, p. 6.

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