Floor Area. Customizing the Socialist Standard of Good Life in a Soviet Summer Cottage

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Introduction

Standardization of housing was a universal tool of twentieth-century social modernization, not least in the Socialist bloc where it provided the dominant economic model for housing construction during the Cold War era. While twentieth-century modernists were keen to express the formal qualities of architecture,[1] they showed a relative inability to establish a vocabulary defining the social qualities of modern architecture. Nonetheless, terms such as "floor area" and "*mikrorayon*" became the key concepts in Soviet housing programs, designating a utopia of social equality to be materialized by means of central planning, standardization, and industrialization of construction. Adapted from the pan-European idea of minimum dwelling, the fundamental architectural measure for addressing housing needs in the Soviet Union determined that just nine square meters of livable "floor area" (жилая площадь in Russian) were required for a satisfying and healthy life.[2]

The term "floor area"[3] acquired wide usage following the formal decree of Nikita Khrushchev's 1957 initiative to resolve the housing question in Soviet Union by constructing mass-produced prefabricated buildings that would provide every family with a separate flat. Khrushchev's housing program became the principal measure for achieving communism by 1980, a goal that had been set by the third program of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1961. Although the official rhetoric granted the term "nuclear family" a firm place in the housing program, other terms such as "home" and even "flat" were deemed unduly burdened with connotations of Western "private life," and so the term "floor area" was appropriated from technical jargon to replace them. Similarly, architectural concerns were pushed to the background to be replaced by a new vocabulary derived from civil and mechanical engineering, including terms such as "montage" instead of "building," while dwellings were now described as constructed with "assembly line methods" and from materials that "came out of the autoclave."[4] By the end of the 1960s, the floor area concept had lost its reformist spirit as the variety of dwelling types, floor plans and designs initially drawn up in the experimental departments of construction research institutes were cast aside to be superseded by production lines geared to

1 Adrian Forty, *Words and Buildings. A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture* (New York and London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 103.

2 Triin Ojari is one of the first authors to discuss the emergence of the term "floor area" in the Soviet housing discourse after the Second World War and how it helped to mediate the citizens' everyday space in the service of political and social goals. See Triin Ojari, "Elamispind. Modernistlik elamuehitusideoloogia ja Mustamäe," *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi/Studies on Art and Architecture* 13, no. 2 (2004): 43.

3 For conceptual consistency, the article applies a general term "floor area" throughout the text although it can indicate both the livable floor area and usable floor area. The reason for choosing a more general term is due to the inconsistent ways of estimating building norms in different building typologies in the Soviet Union. For example, flat sizes were calculated on the basis of living space per person while the limitation for summer cottages was defined by usable floor area.

4 Ojari, "Elamispind," 43.

produce only a limited series of standardized sections. Consequently, "floor area" came to stand for the total unification of housing areas across a vast Soviet territory that stretched from the Baltic coast in the west to the Bering Strait in the east.

The transformative and creative potential of the floor area (i.e. social equality without a necessarily uniform architectural look) was lost due to the domination of production and distribution systems over design principles. However, that potential re-emerged in the Soviet Union in a rather different context of practice: the individual small-scale construction of personal summer houses. The growth of the second home as a leisure destination was a by-product of large-scale housing estates: from the 1960s to the 1980s hundreds of thousands of small summer houses were built by the residents of the mass-produced flats that dotted the areas around the larger Soviet cities. Although not mass-produced, these summer houses were mostly built in the cooperative gardening areas outside the city limits that served both as sites of subsistence farming and as places for family holidays or weekend getaways. They form a remarkable mass-phenomenon of Soviet urban history.[5]

The Soviet summer house, and especially the Russian *dacha*, has been studied in detail within cultural history and material culture studies as a practice that reflects the changing relationship between the state and the individual under late Socialism.[6] Yet, the architectural operations and the conditions of production of this ambivalent phenomenon, located between the emerging consumer culture and self-provisioning economic system, have received little attention.[7] The self-built summer cottages that started out as the small "cousins" of the small Khrushchev-era flats in exurban regions were equally subjected to strict limitations of floor area. Despite the norms regarding the size of the buildings, the Soviet summer houses became a trigger for architects' imaginations as the small-scale individual construction was not subordinated to the strict centrally imposed rules of cost-effectiveness or inflexible production methods. While staying within the prescribed limitation, the summer houses contested the notion of floor area with various architectural means and as such transformed the everyday environment and the experiences of the people living in standardized flats in the city.

The main argument of this article concerns the Estonian summer houses[8] built during the late-Soviet period, which formed a distinctively coherent architectural practice in the all-Union context.[9] Rather than representing the pastoral longing to turn back to traditional village

5 For more detailed discussion and statistics on collective gardening in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe after the Second World War, see Alexander V. Rusanov, "Dacha Dwellers and Gardeners: Garden Plots and Second Homes in Europe and Russia," *Population and Economics* 3, no. 1 (December 2019): 107-124, https://doi.org/10.3897/popecon.3.e34783.

6 See for example, Paulina Bren, "Weekend Getaways: the Chata, the Tramp and the Politics of Private Life in post-1968 Czechoslovakia," in *Socialist Spaces. Sites of Everyday Life in Eastern Bloc,* eds. David Crowley, Susan E. Reid (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2002), 123–140; Karin Taylor, "My Own Vikendica: Holiday Cottages as Idyll and Investment," in *Yugoslavia's Sunny Side: A History of Tourism in Socialism (1950s–1980s),* eds. Hannes Grandits, Karin Taylor (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010), 171-210; Melissa L. Caldwell, *Dacha Idylls: Living Organically in Russia's Countryside* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Alexandra Kasatkina, "Dacha Life and 'Political Warfare': The Problems of Self-Organisation in Contemporary Russian Garden Cooperatives," *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*, no. 9 (2013): pp. 98-123, https://doi.org/https://anthropologie.kunstkamera.ru/files/pdf/eng009/kasatkina1.pdf.

7 For one of the few recent accounts see Triin Ojari, "Under the Watchword of Holidays. Development of Summer Cottage Architecture During the Soviet Period," in *Leisure Spaces. Holidays and Architecture in 20th Century Estonia,* eds. Epp Lankots and Triin Ojari (Tallinn: Estonian Museum of Architecture, 2020), 74–119.

8 Although the Russian *dacha* is often taken to stand for the Soviet summer house in general, it is mostly tied to the history of holidaying in Russia. Summer house or summer cottage is a more neutral term to use in Estonian context as the modernist summer cottages are architecturally quite different from the *dachas* built in Soviet Russia, which have elements derived from *izbas* (a traditional peasants' house in Russia).

9 There was certainly a similar wave of building second homes in the large majority of socialist countries like in GDR, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia etc. However, the article examines the Estonian summer houses specifically in the context of Soviet Union as the regulations and norms as well as practices of appropriation could vary considerably within the bloc – stretching from the highly regulated collective practice in the Soviet Union to almost market regulation in Yugoslavia.



Fig. 1: Local standard series 1-317 in Tallinn, Estonia. Built in 1955–1966. Architects Mart Port, Roman Urb, Reginald Liiberg and Ülo Ellandi, civil engineer Olav Sammal.

life, as was largely the case with the Russian *dacha,* the summer houses in Soviet Estonia are characterized by the uncompromised modernist (or late-modernist) aesthetic and professional architectural solutions that epitomized the preferences and lifestyles of modern urbanites. The typical Estonian summer house with a terrace, outdoor fireplace, and Finnish sauna, was a consistent customization of the Soviet standard of the good life as embodied by the small, functional, and apparently identical apartment buildings built in almost every larger settlement across the Soviet Union. Rather than highlighting the national peculiarities of Estonian summer houses or cultural differences within the wider Soviet state, this article considers these peculiarities as "systemic" and indicative of the shifting boundaries of Socialist life under Communist rule. It argues that these modernist summer cottages were a peculiar kind of appropriation of the two pillars of the Soviet housing question — the minimal living space and single-family occupancy — whereby the austere and utopian dimensions of proletarian living were replaced with aspirations of middle-class privacy and ascending material self-affirmation.

A Minimal Flat for the Soviet Family

"A flat for every family" was the guiding slogan of the housing program initiated by Khrushchev. Khrushchev had already addressed the topic in his 1954 speech to builders when he declared that previously architects had been forced to create living conditions that were too high and within reach of only a small segment of the society and had thus limited opportunities for the majority of the population to enjoy a healthy lifestyle. The program was launched in 1956 with an all-Union architectural competition for standard designs of small flats. The awarded housing series No. 1, designed by the Soviet Building and Architecture Academy and Gorstroiprojekt, became the basis for local adaptations. In Estonia, the 1956 housing series No. 1-317 designed in Estonprojekt by Mart Port, Roman Urb, Reginald Liiberg, Ülo Ellandi and the engineer Olav Sammal (Fig. 1) — later commonly referred to as *khruschchevka* in Estonia — followed the novel solution proposed in the competition entries. One particular element of that solution that helped to radically optimize the layout of the tiny flats was the minimal provision of auxiliary rooms and the access to the

kitchen from the living room.[10] Optimal configuration of small flats was based on the abstract notion of floor area calculated on the basis of an average family of three or four members. Soviet building codes determined both the lowest and the highest acceptable dimensions and square footages for flats. Although the amount of space suggested by the Soviet building code was already rather modest — nine square meters of floor area per person — the standard series kept the flats sizes to the lower rather than the upper limit.[11] In comparison, whereas the *Existenzminimum* signified a flat of approximately 50-60 sqm for three to four people in Germany and New Belgrade, in former Yugoslavia,[12] the Soviet version settled on a standard 36-40 sqm two-room flat for a family of three. Organizing everyday life on the basis of floor area limitations made the tiny flats operate as effective living cells — an arena for transitory activities and changing functions. The importance of the central living room was inherited from the function of the dining room in the bourgeoisie apartment. Reduced to a size of 18-19 sqm it redefined the space as a kind of communication center connecting family members as well as the various functions in the flat. Further, the new easily adjustable and removable lightweight furniture that had been actively propagated in art and design and home decoration journals in the early 1960s served the same purpose: to reorganize the functions of the flat whenever necessary.[13]

The nine square-meter living space per person as a normative measure for healthy life certainly has an earlier history than the experiments done within Soviet state research institutions in the late 1950s and early 1960s.[14] In 1919, the People's Commissariat of Health of Soviet Russia established a minimum norm of 8.25 sqm of living space per person with a minimum ceiling height of no less than 2.50 meters. The limitation was determined by the combination of health and sanitation norms as well as moral behavior imposed by the state, and it was expected that if everyone occupied the same amount of space they would be more likely to share the collectivist values of equality, economy and mutual responsibility.[15] The norm of floor area was retained as a measure for housing needs throughout the entire course of Soviet history and was only changed twice: first in 1929, when it was increased to 9 sqm and then again over 50 years later when in 1983 it was further increased to 12 sqm.[16]

The other ancestral lineage of the idea of minimum dwelling derives from radical attempts to break away from the traditional habitation models centered around the nuclear family, which were primarily connected to the experiments in communal housing by the Russian avant-garde in the 1920s (for example, Moisei Ginzburg and other architects from OSA - Association for Contemporary Architects; and Karel Teige's critical reaction to the CIAM's dwelling for minimum subsistence, which according to him, preserved the idea of family dwelling and thus left the traditional patriarchal family structure unchallenged).[17] However,

10 Ojari, "Elamispind," 49.

11 Kateryna Malaia, A Unit of Homemaking: The Prefabricated Panel and Domestic Architecture in the Late Soviet Union. *Architectural Histories* 8, no. 1 (2020): 12. DOI: http://doi.org/10.5334/ah.453.

12 Anica Dragutinovic, Uta Pottgiesser and Michel Melenhorst, "The Minimum Dwelling: New Belgrade Flat and Reflections on the Minimum Today," in *100 YEARS BAUHAUS: What interest do we take in Modern Movement today?* eds. Michel Melenhorst, Uta Pottgiesser, Teresa Kellner, Franz Jaschke (Hochschule OWL, Docomomo Deutschland, 2019), 352-365.

13 Ojari, "Elamispind," 50.

14 While tracking the history of the minimum dwelling unit, Steven E. Harris goes back to the 19th century French prison where the cell sizes were calculated on the estimations of sufficient air-flow in a room to keep the prisoner in good health, he connects the history of the Soviet endeavors to resolve the housing questions by minimizing the living space primarily back to the 19th century reformers in France, Germany and England attempting to enlarge the state's share in constructing proper living conditions for the working class. As such, the application of the idea of minimum dwelling was part of the larger pan-European movement that saw the housing question as a central one to carrying out social reform. See Steven E. Harris, *Communism on Tomorrow Street: Mass Housing and Everyday Life after Stalin* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2013), 31.

15 Ibid., 54.

16 Ibid., 48.

17 Tracing the ideas of the house/apartment not as a private household but as universal space, Pier Vittorio Aureli et al. have listed medieval monastic cells and American boarding houses, residential hotels and

the ideas of collective living where personal space was reduced to small individual sleeping cells had a rather short life in Soviet housing discourse (although more radical proposals from OSA like Nikolai Kuzmin's "socialist hostel" also foresaw collective dormitories separately for men and women as well as children)[18]. Despite predictions in the 1920s that the family would "wither away" under Socialism, Stalin put it firmly back at the center of Soviet life already in the 1930s, following which there was a clear and definite shift away from collectivist living towards single-family occupancy.[19] The residential building with individual apartments became the central focus for new housing in the 1930s with local housing decrees in Moscow and Leningrad and by all-Union decree in 1939.[20] The insufficient volume of housing construction had managed to provide individual family flats only to the Stalinist elite while the rest of the population was still housed in flats shared by several families.

The return to the nuclear family as the main economic unit of society was also one reason why Khrushchev's housing campaign eventually eliminated architectural concerns from the equation of housing distribution. According to Harris, as cost-effectiveness became the dominant principle in resolving the housing question, architects' dreams of working out novel, alternative design solutions specifically for single-family flats were sunk. Instead, they were forced to keep auxiliary rooms small in order to ensure that the cost of production remained low.[21] Architects proposed "rational apartment plans" and "flexible series"[22] to distribute the same amount of space among living and auxiliary units according to a family's needs, but these experiments seldom found their way into production. With total control over distribution, the Soviet state used minimum norms as maximum reductions in ways that restricted what architects could design rather than liberating them to create new ways of life from ideas alone.[23]

The well-known outcome of this equation is the promise of happiness transmuted into a life in large housing estates consisting of the same limited series of mass-produced standard designs. By the 1970s, the floor-area principle combined with prefabricated large panel construction no longer had the experimentalist appeal of earlier decades. With the coming of a new generation of large panel housing, the range of architectural diversity in mass-housing became limited to the combination of building sections according to site-specific needs known as a "block-section method."[24] Beyond that, the architectural appropriations of the floor-area principle remained in place for the inhabitants inside their flats — private kingdoms where the rules of cost-effectiveness gave way to other, more personal practices of homemaking.[25]

19th century home clubs as forerunners of the collective habitation model rejecting normative domestic arrangements. Pier Vittorio Aureli, Martino Tattara, and Marson Korbi, "Loveless: A Short History of Minimum Dwelling," in *Home Futures: Living in Yesterday's Tomorrow*, ed. Eszter Steierhoffer and Justin McGuirk (London, United Kingdom: Design Museum Publishing, 2018), 245-255.

18 Moisei Ginzburg, *Dwelling. Five Years Work on the Problem of the Habitation* (London: Fontanka Publications, 2017), 138.

19 Lynne Attwood, *Gender and Housing in Soviet Russia. Private Life in a Public Space* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 156-157. Harris similarly sees the return of the single-family flat during Stalin's regime further secured by Khrushchev's campaign and the Western European bourgeoisie family apartment that the *Existenzminimum* had just reduced not radically rethought as being part of another pan-European standard of urban everyday life repacked by the soviets to build up their version of modern society. See Harris, *Communism on Tomorrow Street,* 107.

20 Harris, *Communism on Tomorrow Street,* 320.

21 Ibid., 103.

22 The flexible series were on the architects' desks in many socialist countries. In Estonia the new experimental series was completed in 1960 and the main rationale behind it was the possibility to resize the apartments to bigger norms in the future. See Allan Murdmaa, "RPI "Estonprojekti" neljakorruseline eksperimentaalne paneelelamu kohalikest materjalidest," *Elamuehituse küsimusi Eesti NSV-s* 1960: 111-118. For flexible type plans in Romania see Dana Vais, "Type Projects as Tools: Housing Type Design in Communist Romania," *Architectural Histories* 8, no. 1(2020): 10. DOI: http://doi.org/10.5334/ah.321.

23 Harris, *Communism on Tomorrow Street*, 105-107.

24 Malaia, "A Unit of Homemaking."

25 Susan E. Reid, "The Meaning of Home: 'The Only Bit of the World You Can Have to Yourself'," in *Borders of Socialism: Private Spheres of Soviet Russia*, ed. Lewis Siegelbaum (New York: Palgrave Macmillan,

Architectural Appropriations of the Minimum

As with the domesticated version of the Socialist way of life in a small flat, the regime also tolerated the strengthening of family-centered ways of holidaying and the trend towards privacy in leisure spaces: while organization of the leisure time of Soviet citizens came about in an institutional framework, the purposefulness of free time retained the rhetoric of reconstituting one's productivity for the benefit of the collective. Holidays were often organized in purpose-built sites and buildings like sanatoriums and company holiday homes, the use of which was made possible by employment relations and organized through trade unions. Even if tied to institutional relations, the leisure spaces as well as ways of holidaying in those spaces went through considerable transformation from the 1960s onwards. With Khrushchev's reforms, dissatisfaction with the model that prioritized the value of the individual worker for society, while families were considered relatively unimportant, became more and more evident. The reason for this was the broader change in the role of the family and private life, which was also implicated most strongly by the housing program but also in the shift from production-based planning to a demand-driven economic model. The results of numerous consumer surveys regarding holidays from the 1960s onwards showed that a considerable proportion of the inhabitants preferred to spend their holidays with their family. To meet the rising demands of millions of holidaymakers for family-vacation the state developed two fairly successful measures: enabling Soviet enterprises to build holiday homes for their employees and their families; and encouraging the formation of gardening cooperatives and the construction of personal summer houses in peripheral urban areas.

Although the history of summer houses stretches beyond the Soviet years, originating from the aristocratic lifestyle in Russia and interwar holiday culture in Estonia, the renewed approach towards mass development of small summer houses first began under the coordination of the state in the second half of the 1950s alongside Khrushchev's housing program. These summer cottages were initially intended for industrial production and sold to the population by the state. The first years were an experimental phase also in terms of testing the construction materials best suited for production. In 1956 rather peculiar distribution of amounts and material typologies were worked out at all-Union level, for example: 1,300 summer houses constructed of reinforced concrete panels were meant to be built near Moscow over a two-year span, 800 from concrete blocks in Leningrad, 300 from aerated concrete in Tallinn, and 300 brick summer houses in Riga and Vilnius.[26] In Estonia, lightweight summer houses of prefabricated wooden details with a usable area of 17 to 23 sqm were also produced alongside structures of large blocks. These were designed in the state design institute Estgiprogorstroi and were sold to customers by the Tallinn City Government's construction office.[27] However, the large-scale production of summer houses was dropped after a few years as the system was geared toward lending all of its constructive industry to serving the housing sector and was not sufficiently flexible to include other building types. Thus, the construction of summer houses became left entirely to individuals.

From the early 1960s onwards, the planning of gardening areas was propelled by a new decree that allowed the establishment of settlements only on a cooperative basis and prohibited individual construction outside the cooperative. Formed often by colleagues working for the same employer, the cooperatives were responsible for ordering the plan for the settlement wherein housing principles were also decided, such as whether to use only standardized designs (and which ones to use) or to allow the possibility for using one-off designs. The land was allocated to the cooperatives by the state and was usually located in places that were not suitable for large-scale agriculture because it was either not very fertile

2006),145-170.

26 Ojari, "Under the Watchword of Holidays," 80.

27 Ibid.

or was in a naturally beautiful area by the sea and intended for recreational use. This mixed type of ownership and management pattern made the gardening and summer house areas a peculiar type of ambiguous semi-public socialist space combining cooperative ownership with private holidaying in an institutional framework.

As a rule, the built environment of the Soviet Union was formalized under an all-encompassing framework of cost-effectiveness: the SNIP all-Union building norms and regulations. Although not categorized under SNIP,[28] the summer houses were nevertheless subjected to strict floor area norms validated by local decrees and varying to some extent across the different Soviet republics. There were also other restrictions, such as the seasonal use of houses from May to October, and thus the houses could not be insulated as this could lead to all-year-round usage and the growth in ownership of fully functional second family-dwellings in addition to the family flat in the city. Likewise, the construction and completion of the buildings were occasionally monitored by inspectors who checked the financial documents proving the purchase of construction materials in order to hinder the development of an informal commercial economy.

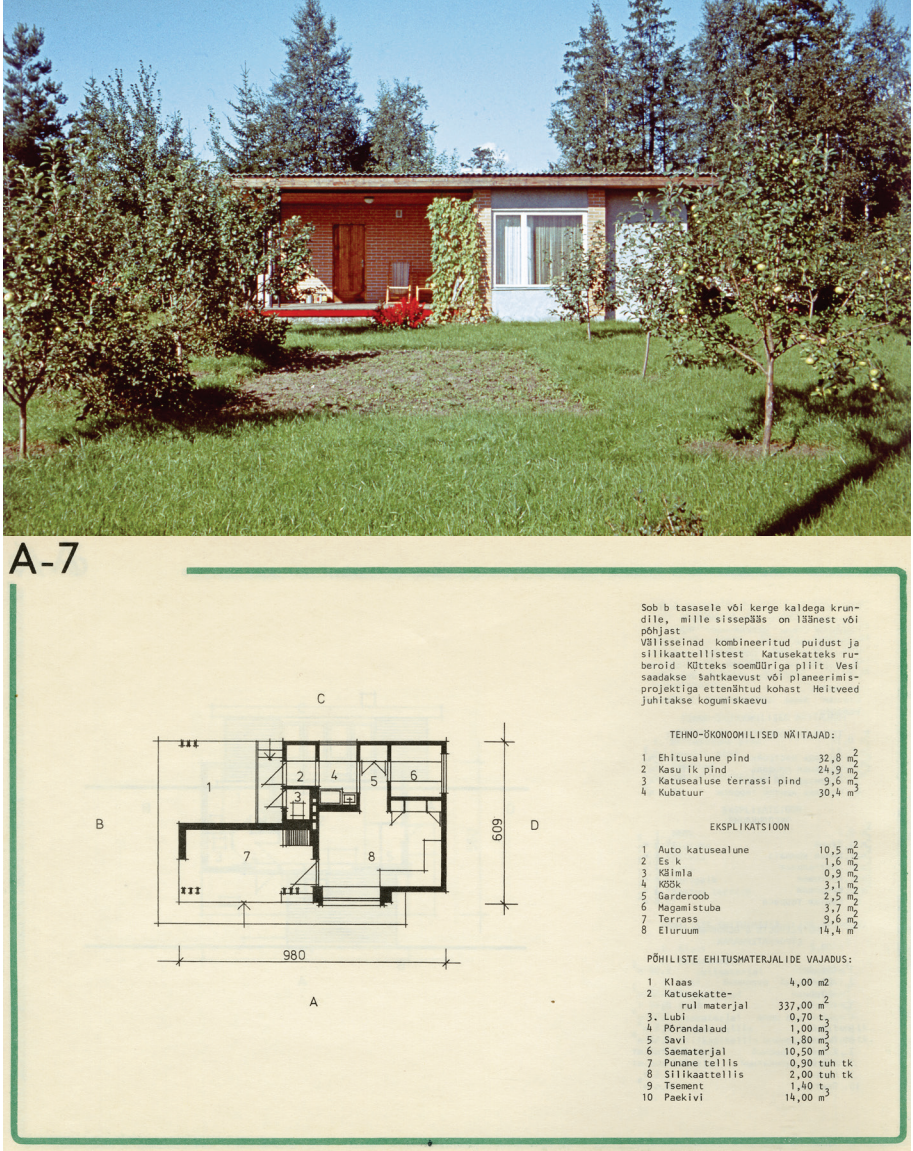
Although holidaying in a personal summer house can be seen as being legitimized by physical labor in a gardening cooperative, Estonia developed a parallel system of cooperative holidaying. In addition to gardening cooperatives where small houses of 25 sqm floor area could be built, the decree of the Estonian Council of Ministers also allowed the formation of cooperatives to build cottages solely for leisure and where the cultivation of garden produce was forbidden. These cooperatives were planned and built on beautiful coastal locations among sand-dunes and pine forest without regard to the additional physical labor required in order to conceal the somewhat bourgeois culture of holidaying in a weekend house. As a rule, these coastal cottages featured mostly one-off designs by individual contractors with a floor area limitation of 40 sqm. While there was considerably greater share of gardening cooperatives and the summer house or holidaying cooperatives are sometimes regarded as characterizing mostly the holiday practices of high rank party officials and professional elites, there were certainly possibilities for less privileged citizens to acquire a plot in a holiday cooperative without any obligation to garden.

Both types of cooperatives in Estonia form unified modernist settlements with varying typologies and combinations of standard and one-off designs. Although there were no strict rules requiring the use of typical designs, there were four architectural competitions organized by the state from the mid 1960s to the 1980s to generate new standard solutions and these were included in catalogues from which the cooperative members could choose. Both the individual and standard designs of the 1960s and early 1970s were dominated by a strong modernist aesthetic founded on simplicity, functionality and austerity and which melded into a severe-looking architecture: low sloping or flat roofs with a robust cornice, asymmetrical building volumes with geometric façades, spacious windows, elements such an outdoor fireplace, terrace or area sheltered by an overhanging roof.[29] The limited floor area demanded the optimal arrangement of different functions of the space. The interiors of the summer cottages in gardening cooperatives that remained below 25 sqm were often arranged according to the principle of a unified space divided into different zones. While the daytime area or living room extended to a terrace encompassed most of the floor area of the tiny cottages, the kitchen and bedroom were arranged in alcoves or sometimes in a separate room with a minimum size of about 3-4 sqm. This extreme precision that resembled the mobile habitations such as the ship or train cabins that Moisei Ginzburg had admired 40 years earlier when describing a minimal living cell with nothing more than a bed, a cupboard, and a narrow passageway[30] was the main quality of the most widely used standard design in

28 In the Russian Federation, the summer houses received the SNIP categorization only in 1997 after the fall of the Soviet state. https://vz.ru/question/2020/6/3/1042956.html (accessed 2 July, 2021).

29 Ojari, "Under the Watchword of Holidays," 94.

30 Ginzburg, *Dwelling*, 30.



Figs. 2, 3: The most widely built standard project no. A-7 for summer house in a gardening cooperative with a floor area of 25 sqm. Architect Reginal Liiberg, 1966.

Estonia, No. A7, designed by Reginald Liiberg in 1966. (Fig. 2 and 3) The arrangement of furniture in a minimum space also determined the particular minimalist design of the façades that was also discussed in different instructive literature for self-builders.[31] The most typical façade comprised a large windowpane in the living area combined with narrow window strips under the roof cornice in the sleeping and kitchen areas so that furniture could be placed along the walls without blocking the windows and the light. (Fig. 4)

While the tiny building and compressed living space made the life in a summer house controlled by codes and regulations a truly embodied experience of the abstract ideal, the cottages simultaneously and consistently contested this standard via various architectural means. The subsidiary functions like the terrace were not counted within living space, which invited architects to experiment with designs that integrated the secondary functions as part of the architectural solution in such a way that the actual living space would be perceived

31 Ants Raid, “Aken suvilas,” *Kunst ja Kodu* 1 (1972): 16-19.



Fig. 4: Summer cottage in Lohusalu, Estonia. Architect Udo Ivask, 1964.

differently and more spacious. Being different from the mass-produced prefabricated housing while also conditioned by the floor area limitation, this architecture enabled strategies for creating more enjoyable, livable, and leisurely spaces within restrictive norms. The roof profile became the most distinctive architectural feature of summer cottages. In the designs of the latter half of the 1970s, the low sloping roof or flat box roof of the 1960s was replaced with roofs with the most disparate shape, and bold use was made of large window surfaces and the forms in various complex shapes. (Fig. 5 and 6). Expressive roof shapes were endorsed also in official literature and handbooks for summer cottage builders—flat, gabled, or custom-shaped roofs like the upturned cornices could also provide additional square meters under the roof not counted within the usable square footage. (Fig. 7) Lightweight A-frame structures became perhaps one of the most iconic forms of summer cottage architecture in Soviet Estonia as the sloping walls enabled different spatial experiences from the square-cornered city apartment, similar to the way the popular mid-century weekend cabin was marketed in the US in the 1950s.[32] (Fig. 8) The A-frame was also particularly easy for the self-builder to construct and its triangular form was sufficiently flexible to allow a second floor to be built under the gable that was not included within the livable floor area but could be used as a sleeping area.

Designing Privacy and Leisurely Lifestyle

Before the mass-housing campaign there was no possibility of being alone at home due to the overcrowded apartments being shared by several families, so private space was nothing more than the public space of the household.[33] The move to individual family accommodation encouraged not only a sense of private life but also of private ownership and for this reason the small single-family flat has been a focus of studies exploring the changing relationship of the public and private domains in the Soviet domestic space.

While several studies have analyzed the flat in a *khrushchevka* as a primary site of domesticating public discourse in the Soviet Union (embodied by norms based on an average family and patterns of distributing flats) where a sense of private life could be enhanced by decorating and adjusting the apartment to the needs and tastes of its family members,[34]

32 Chad Randl, *A-frame* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), 9-10.

33 Attwood, *Gender and Housing in Soviet Russia,* 9.

34 See particularly studies by Susan E. Reid, for example Susan E. Reid, „Cold War in the Kitchen: Gender and the De-Stalinization of Consumer Taste in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev," *Slavic Review* 61, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 211-252; Susan E. Reid, "Makeshift Modernity. DIY, Craft and the Virtuous Homemaker



Fig. 5: A summer cottage by architect Heino Parmas designed for himself with a boat shed on the ground floor. Design from 1976.

Fig. 6: Summer cottage in Kihnu island, Estonia. Architect Vilen Künnapu, 1971.



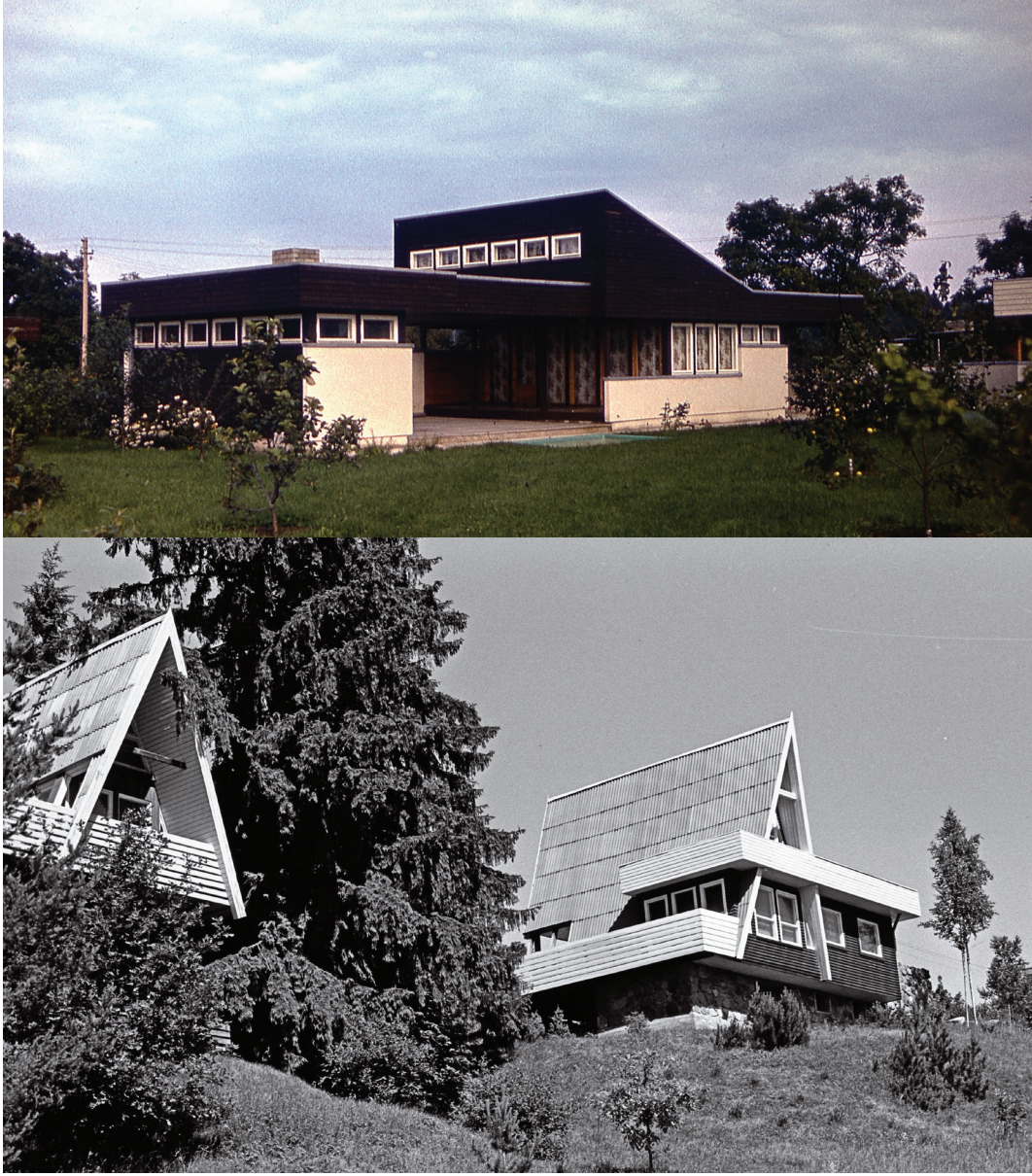


Fig. 7: Summer cottage in gardening cooperative with a raised attic and sleeping area under the roof. Architect Lembit Aljaste, 1973.

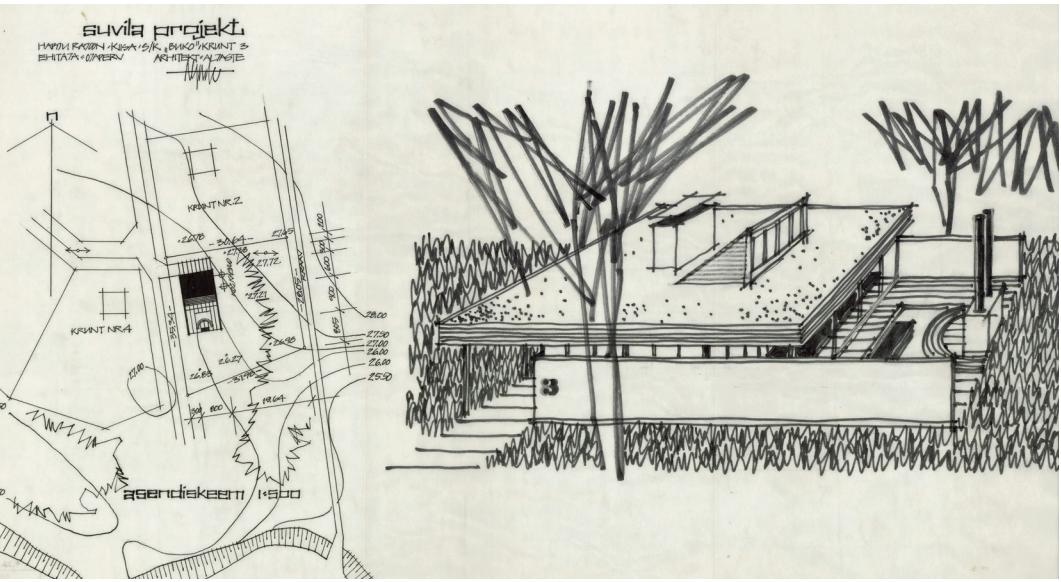
Fig. 8: A-frame cottage in Pirnaku cooperative near Elva, Estonia. Architect Jaan Pärnik, 1976.

this phenomenon is all the more apparent in the self-built summer cottages. Although privacy remained primarily an elusive concept under circumstances where personal choices were difficult to picture as something under individual control,[35] the summer cottage is a significant analytical context of the Soviet everyday wherein specific socialist spatial and material practices such as home decoration or summer house construction operated.

The summer cottages overtly evoked allusions to bourgeois or middle-class lifestyle with their terraces, indoor and outdoor fireplaces etc. For example, Lembit Aljaste's design for a

in New Soviet Housing of the 1960s," *International Journal of History, Culture and Modernity* 2, no. 2 (November 2014): 87-124.

35 Reid, "The Meaning of Home," 157-158.



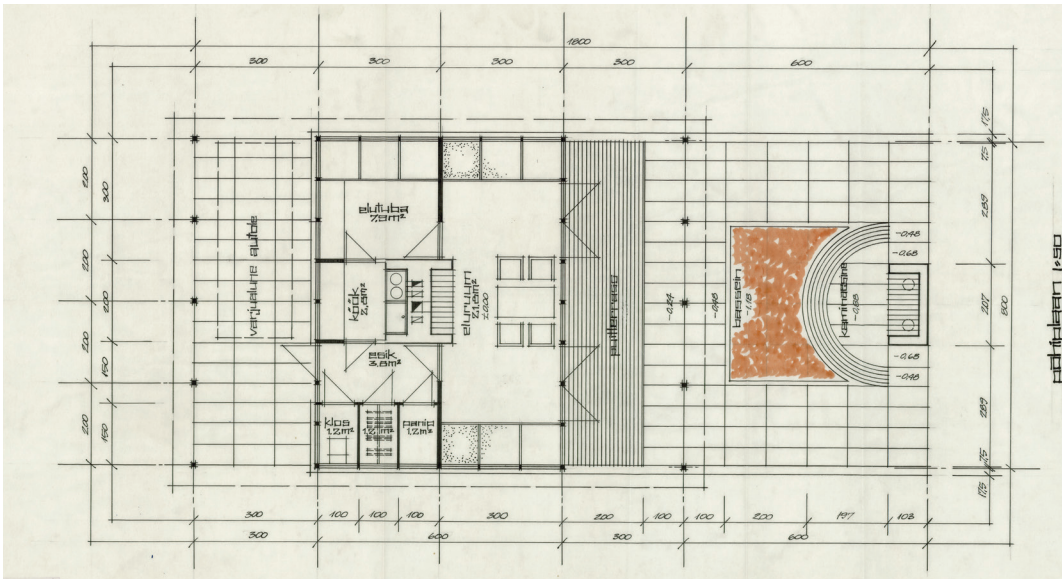
Figs. 9, 10: Design for a summer house in Kiisa. Architect Lembit Aljaste, 1968.

40 sqm summer house in Kiisa is built on the idea of an extended living room: the skylight and glazed outer wall of the living room that opens to the terrace creates a seamless transition to the courtyard framed by brick walls concealing the private area with a small pool and an outdoor fireplace. (Fig. 9 and 10) Representations of the "good life" were, however, present already in the very first summer houses propagated by the state to the buyers before the obligatory formation of cooperatives. There were often images published in the press as well on the design illustrations drawn by architects where the house often included a car parked under the shelter beside the house. Considering this was a time when car ownership was rare among the Soviet population these representations were directly associated with a former bourgeoisie life that involved travelling to a weekend-house in a family car.

The good and healthy socialist life as defined by the floor area limitation not only reflects a shift towards a family-centered understanding of the socialist collective (as in the case of the mass-built single-family flat) but it also incorporated the more sensual aspects of architecture, such as the textures and patterns of natural materials, orientation to the movement of sunlight throughout the day, views into and out of rooms that also ensure maximum privacy, and simultaneously also contact with nature. The taste, cultivation and instruction of summer house builders was also a hot topic in the main home decoration magazine of the time, "Kunst ja Kodu" (Art and Home). The magazine propagated simple interiors, harmonious colors, geometric textile patterns and building materials suitable for natural surroundings.[36] Instructive articles and books, many of which had several reprints and sold tens of thousands of copies in Estonia, not only provide practical knowledge to self-builders but also cultivated an understanding of how holidays in a summer cottage should be about enjoying the aesthetic quality of surrounding spaces and untouched nature.[37] In his book published in Moscow for the Soviet audience, Voldemar Herkel, an architect of many summer houses in Estonia and in Russia in the 1960s, instructs readers about the skills

36 Udo Ivask, "Sisustus," *Kunst ja Kodu* 1 (1972): 26.

37 Arvo Veski, *Suvemajade ehitamine* (Tallinn: Valgus, 1971); Вольдемар Херкель, Ваша дача (Москва: Знание, 1972); Владимир Полянский, Дача и приусадебное хозяйство: проектирование, строительство, благоустройство (Воронеж: Издательство Воронежского университета,1991).



enabling leisurely pastimes, such as how to place a fireplace in the living area so that in sitting by it an individual could take in both the beautiful views opening through the large window to the garden as well as enjoying the flickering flames of the fire.[38] As such, the summer house customized the Soviet standard of good life prescribed by the nine square meter living space limitation, both on the level of creating possibilities for creative architectural thinking and for the individual users of the spaces.

The summer house also functioned as a peculiar kind of gravity point for family life. To some extent it also achieved the democratization of family life that the early revolutionary designs for communal housing had strived for and that the flat in a *khrushchevka* and in later generations of mass-produced houses had failed to achieve: in a well-equipped city home the traditional men's jobs like chopping wood or fetching water were unnecessary, leaving an imbalance whereby men entertained guests while the women were still occupied with traditional tasks like cooking and decorating the apartment.[39] In the summer house, all the family members were engaged in various activities around the house and garden, from construction, to managing the house and maintaining the garden, to simply enjoying a family holiday in a summer house, and without any obligation to grow vegetables and flowers.

Realizing that the summer houses may lead to a retreat into greater privacy, the official ideological rhetoric emphasized instead that the present situation in leisure organization was a transitional phase toward collectively organized holidays. It was often declared that the society was not yet ready for radical collectivization and therefore parts of family-centered models of habitation needed to be preserved temporarily — such as single-family flats and self-built houses.[40] Similarly, leisure time and holidaying were justified on the basis that there was still insufficient material base, but that this would be solved in the future to enable the population to spend most of their free time and holidays collectively.[41]

38 Херкель, Ваша дача, 9.

39 Attwood, *Gender and Housing in Soviet Russia*, 166.

40 Ginzburg, *Dwelling,* 82.

41 Estonian National Archives ERA.T-14.4-6.615: ENSV puhketsoonide generaalplaan (Tallinn. Eesti Maaehitusprojekt, 1975), 15.



Fig. 11: The interior of the summer cottage in Muriste, Estonia. Architect Kalju Valdre, 1970s.

Conclusion

The shifting context of the term "floor area" and minimum dwelling — from reductive to the creative architectural operations — that shaped the domestic habitats of the Soviet masses also elucidates the changes that occurred in ideological positions after Khruschev's fall. As Anna Alekseyeva has written, the developed socialism that replaced Khrushchev's austere consumerism of the early 1960s (which had set the ground for the emergence of second homes) refocused the state's involvement in the domestic environment away from the functional processes of the living cell toward "a way of life." The living cell was infiltrated with ideas like individuality (such as the family holiday as a measure of personal freedom), agency and choice.[42] The role of the experts and the state in determining the norms and standards diminished and, in discussions of residential and family life, opinions about how the state should mediate between the needs and preferences of socialist citizens became more significant.[43] Although legitimized by the rhetoric of simplicity and austerity and the reconstituting effect of physical labor in fresh air, life in a summer cottage was not at all about self-denying asceticism and instead was rather presented as pleasurable. Cottage life as it was materialized in its architectural setting, with fireplaces, saunas, and terraces, involved enjoyable bodily experiences that have the power to make the simple and primitive a sensuously rich experience.[44] (Fig. 11)

42 Anna Alekseyeva, *Everyday Soviet Utopias. The Planning, Design and the Aesthetics of Developed Socialism* (London: Routledge, 2020), 112.

43 Ibid., 9.

44 Karoliina Periäinen, "The Summer Cottage. A Dream in a Finnish Forest," *in Multiple Dwelling and Tourism. Negotiating Place, Home and Identity,* eds. Norman McIntyre, Daniel R. Williams and Kevin E. McHugh (Wallingfrod, Cambridge: CABI, 2006), 105.

The architecture of the Estonian summer cottages was in many ways triggered by the imposition of "floor area" limitations and the inability of the state to fully tune small-size construction to mass-production. On the other hand, this peculiarity was also legitimized by the official call for "difference" — the principal category in Soviet leisure that served the need to distance oneself mentally and physically from the everyday urban routines in order to reconstitute one's health and work productivity for the benefit of the state.

The shifting context of the term "floor area" shows how it was stripped of its initial utopian dimension of operating as a measure for proletarian living in the early history of the Soviet state and in the Khrushchev's late 1950s. Despite the strict rules established, not only the unique designs but also the architectural solutions offered by standard designs were often the result of creative adaptations. The summer cottage with a terrace, outdoor fireplace and a sauna became a location where the new leisurely lifestyle became rooted: it reappropriated the reductionist aesthetic of the initial floor area principle in order to accommodate the aspirations of middle-class life with its connotations of idleness and aspiring material self-affirmation.

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Fig. 4: Epp Lankots.

Fig. 8: Film Archive of National Archives of Estonia.