



**NEW SETTLEMENTS ON VIRGIN LANDS – MODERN AGRICULTURAL
LANDSCAPES IN ESTONIA OF THE 1930S**

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On 10 November, 1919 the Constituent Assembly of the young Republic of Estonia adopted the Land Act that commenced the agrarian reform. The main objectives of the Land Act were: a) to abolish the existing remnants of feudalism by parceling out the manorial estates and thus neutralizing the Baltic-German nobility; b) to satisfy the need for land of a great part of population on the basis of ownership so that people could support their families; c) to increase the output of agriculture as the production of small holdings per superficial unit surpassed that of the large manorial estates.¹

As a result of the Estonian agrarian reform, 96.6% of the lands owned by the Baltic-German landlords were nationalized. From the expropriated lands, 1.25 million hectares of forests and other lands not used in agriculture were allotted for the state forest fund. The manorial fields, meadows and pastures were divided into small holdings.

The founding of farms in Estonia in the 1920s–1930s has been called the **campaign of forced farm making**.² 27,770 new dwellings or 19.5%³ of the dwellings in use at that time were built in the country in 1929–1939.

As the area of free agricultural land diminished when more and more lands of former manors were divided into small holdings and additional allotments, difficulties sprang up in connection with founding new small holdings (farms) and the continuation of settling. Transferring settling to newly reclaimed lands, the so-called **virgin lands**, required extensive land improvement and other work to be carried out by the state. For the organizing of settling, the Settling Committee was formed at the Ministry of Agriculture. Its tasks were a) to acquire habitable lands, carry out preliminary planning and land reclamation, build access routes and dwellings, and then sell the lands; b) to allocate loans for buying the land, land improvement and building as well as for starting a farm.⁴

¹ See: Land Act. Article 21. Riigi Teataja No 79/80, Tallinn 1919.

² Rauba, Monika 2002. Ülevaade Eesti majanduspoliitikast 20. sajandil. – Eesti Rahva Muuseumi Aastaraamat XLVI, p. 12.

³ Altogether 1039 manorial estates covering 2.34 million hectares.

⁴ See: Riigi Teataja, No 57, Tallinn 1929.



According to the data of 1929, there were about 1,000, hectares of marshes and bogs in Estonia at that time. About 250,000 hectares of marshes were to be cultivated and settled. The Settling Committee adopted the resolution that the work connected with settling – construction and cultivation – would take place in two ways (using Germany as an example⁵): 1) on cultivated lands and in individual farmsteads on new land it would be carried out by the settler himself; 2) in larger settlements on virgin land it would be the concern of the state to erect farm buildings and also cultivate three hectares of land on each holding so that the settler would be guaranteed lodging and food. Schools and communal grain driers would also be built in larger settlements by the state.⁶

In the 1920s planning of farm buildings by professional architects became widespread in Estonia. So far, only a few richer farm owners could afford ordering such projects. The trendsetter for farm architecture in Estonia was the Building Board of Smallholders, State Tenants and Farmers' Agricultural Society, whose work has usually been studied on the basis of collections *Maaehituse (Rural Buildings)* I and II that were published by the Agricultural Society in 1928 and 1930 and give a good overview of what was planned in the 1920s.

⁵ Mattausch, Roswitha 1981. *Siedlungsbau und Stadtneugründungen im deutschen Faschismus*. Frankfurt am Main: Haag + Herchen Verlag, pp. 7–34.

⁶ Tammet, Tiina 2003. *Eesti pargi- ja aiaarhitektuur 1920.–30. aastatel*. Eesti Kunstiakadeemia toimetised. No 11. Tallinn, p. 130.

Striving towards ancient forms could be recognized, whereas replacing historicism with the Estonian style added clear political background.

In addition to restoring the bond with tradition, the values of modernism in the design of farm buildings were equally important. This was largely caused by the economic situation. At the end of the 1920s, cheaper clay buildings and fireproof cement stone structures were promoted. Due to the increasing shortage of wood as construction material and rapid rise of timber prices the building had to be based on new principles. Several hollow wall construction systems that enabled to erect cheaper houses were developed to make use of fireproof building materials.

The settlers' first task was to set up buildings on their plots. The greatest problems were involved with building the dwelling house. In the 1920s and 1930s the state used indirect coercive measures, like the obligation to submit a building plan when applying for the loan. Usually the settler was not able to draw up a plan himself and so he appealed to the Building Board of the Agricultural Society, where the architects outlined plans for the buildings. Thus, first of all the architects had to observe the building regulations in drawing up new standard designs for farm buildings and meeting the orders of smallholders.

The house type that combines living rooms under one roof with workspace and production rooms, mostly a cattle-shed, was primarily propagated. The cheapness of constructing only a single building and the ease of tending animals there was stressed. When drawing up new standard designs for farmhouses, the architects were inspired by the division of space in the Estonian ancient farmhouse – the barn dwelling (*rehemaja*) – where the living rooms were built under the same roof with the grain-drying room (kiln room) and the threshing-floor. Such three-part division could also be noted by the model farmhouses where the living rooms were located at one end and the cattle-shed in the other end of the house, being separated either by a shed or a barn. Usually a barn, a pantry and an entrance hall separated the living rooms from the cattle-shed. The manure storage at the end of the house made it possible to build a dry cattle-shed. Almost all standard designs recommended the settlers to build rooms also in the attic. Unfortunately in most cases the economic situation of the settlers did not enable to complete them, or sometimes there was no intention of ever building the rooms on the upper floor.

By 1930 it was clear that the settling of marshlands was inevitable. The founding of marsh settlements began and lasted for 12 years. Many new settlements (more than one hundred) were founded with state money (+ cheap long-term loans); the best-known among them being Pikavere, Lepplaane, Pillapalu, Peressaare and Mustamäe.

First such settlement was Pikavere-Suursoo in Harjumaa (Northern Estonia), where the survey and drainage were started in 1930. Pikavere was established at the time when there was no agricultural crisis and nobody could foresee such a thing. The idea of settling the marsh of Suursoo was raised in order to gain experience of settling the marshlands. It was planned to establish 50 farms there. The houses were planned so that it would later be possible to rebuild the primary small cattle-sheds into those of a standard-size farm. Most buildings held only two rooms and a kitchen, and a cattle-shed for eight cows.



Farmstead in Pikavere-Suursoo. 1931

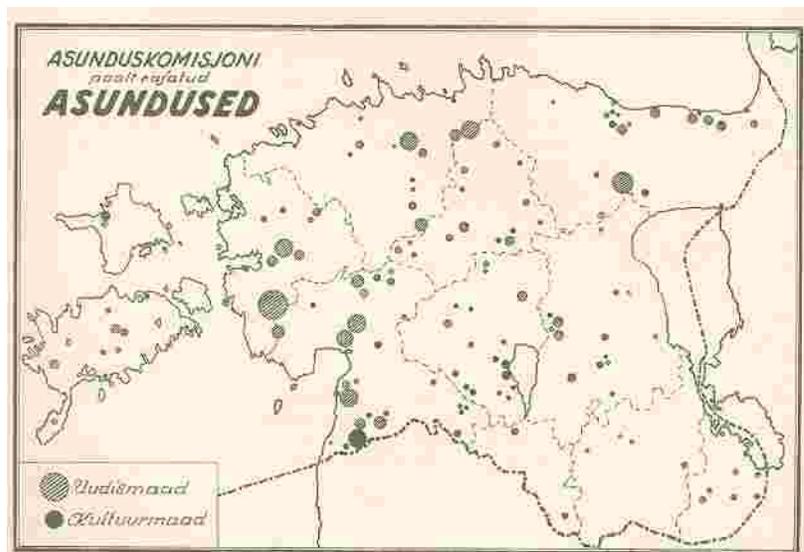


At the same time, at the beginning of the 1930s, construction was started in at least fifteen settlements but all of them were considerably smaller than Pikavere-Suursoo.

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

In 1933 the economic crisis reached its peak in Estonia and the number of unemployed persons reached a record level. One searched for the ways to get out of the deadlock. It was decided to promote settling as this was the best way of fighting unemployment. 1934 is considered the year of breakthrough because then the government of Estonia declared settling the most important means of fighting the economic crisis and unemployment, and promised in the next five years to spend up to 2 million *kroons* on it each year on the condition that at least 800 new homesteads were founded annually. Unfortunately the promise of financing was not kept.

By 1934, 470 new holdings had been established in twenty settlements. In the new settlements mainly small holdings were founded, keeping in mind the possibilities and requirements of the neighbourhood. Almost all settlers undertook extensive building for the first time in their lives, therefore the plans and standard designs were often underestimated, timber was preferred as building material, etc.



Map from 1934. Black dots – settlements on early cultivated landscapes; dots with bend sinisters – settlements on virgin lands.

In case of houses constructed by the Settlement Committee, the regulations followed the principle that the cattle-shed together with the living room should be built first; new living rooms could be added to the house later when the circumstances improved. The state built houses on about $\frac{1}{4}$ of the plots on virgin lands.

The main purposes of the large-scale construction organized directly by the state were the choice and promotion of the most practical types of rural buildings in the country, promotion of fireproof building materials, and maybe the most important aim – speeding up and facilitating the settling process, especially in difficult settlement conditions. Thus, the construction work lasted for 5–6 years when carried out by the settlers themselves, but only 2–3 years when carried out by the state.

By 1934, forty one standard designs had been drawn up for the buildings of small holdings. Eighteen designs were used when the construction was carried out on the initiative of the state. Eleven of them were meant for agricultural farms and seven for fishermen's and craftsmen's homesteads. They were developed from three or four original designs; each new version tried to eliminate the shortcomings of the previous design. In practice the most widespread designs were the ones where all the rooms were combined under the same roof as this house type met the requirements of a small holding the best. One tried to find a design that could be built in stages, in accordance with the development of the farm.

At the beginning of 1935, three new designs for standard-size farmhouses with all the rooms under the same roof that could be built in stages were drafted, as the building plans used so far turned out to be unsuitable for the small holdings on virgin lands. Another important issue was the choice of building materials. In spite of active promotion of cement stone it was not very popular among those who built with the help of loans.

On the one hand, establishing settlements on virgin lands relieved the lack of land in case of the sons from big farm families who had inherited the experience of agricultural work from their homes. Here one can observe their mobility within the boundaries of a single commune or neighbouring communes. Re-settling from a more distant area (horizontal mobility) occurred quite seldom.

On the other hand, settlement activity enabled at least two thousand new landholders to rise on the social ladder – an unemployed worker or a farmhand could become a farmer (vertical mobility).

In the situation of increasing unemployment, a novel solution of carrying out settlement work as community placement was suggested in Lepplaane, Pärnumaa. In 1932 it was decided to resettle part of the unemployed from the town of Pärnu to a new settlement in Lepplaane, Pärnu region. This turned out to be a serious attempt to send the unemployed to the countryside. Fifty seven new plots were planned in the new settlement.

By the beginning of the 1930s, 21.58% of the territory of Pärnumaa County had been registered as unusable land. It consisted mostly of marshes, bogs and wooded meadowlands. Therefore the density of population was extremely low, only 18 persons per square kilometre. The Settlement Board estimated that about 2,700–3,000 new settlement farms could be founded in Pärnumaa.



Plan of Lepplaane settlement drawn by Erika Nõva.

In 1935 the government started active operations in planning further development trends of economy, in order to achieve maximum employment rate by creating new jobs. Estonia had taken the course to increase the government's role in organizing the economic life. The

government of Estonia declared settlement activity the most important means in fighting against the economic crisis and unemployment.

In 1935 the founding of Pillapalu settlement was started in Harjumaa, Northern Estonia. Fifty four small holdings were planned to be established there. The buildings followed the same principle as in other new settlements, but the houses considerably differed from the ones in Lepplaane. At the same time architect Erika Nõva,⁷ who had drawn up the plans and building designs for Lepplaane and Pillapalu, started to draft Mustamäe settlement. Mustamäe differs from all other settlements described in this paper, as due to its location near the capital of Estonia, Tallinn, it mostly consisted of homesteads allocated to state officials. Thus, they were not traditional farm buildings but town households where it was possible to keep livestock and a garden if one wished so.

The unemployment turned out to be a big problem in Virumaa, Northern Estonia, where industrial regions like the town of Narva, oil shale industries in Kohtla and Püssi as well as the factories in Kunda and Aseri cut down their production as the economic crisis deepened. In Virumaa County the settling took place in two ways: by creating homesteads on virgin lands and by acquiring land for residence, especially in mining regions.



New farmstead in Peressaare, 1937.

⁷ Nõva, Erika 2006. *Minu töö ja elu*. – Arhitektuuri muuseum. Tallinn

The eastern part of Virumaa held large state reserve lands and the population density was extremely low. There was 115,777 hectares (18.15%) of unusable land.⁸

In 1933 it was decided to found the settlement of Peressaare with the total area of 1,700 hectares on the territory of Tudulinna rural municipality. In all, it was planned to establish 130 farms in the settlement. About one hundred of them were founded. It was the biggest settlement founded in this period.

In establishing the settlement, i.e. in draining the marshes and uprooting the forest, and to some extent also in building the houses, the prisoners' labour was used by the example of Germany. Already in the first years a schoolhouse was built in Peressaare; it was the most modern rural school in the area at the time. The architectural appearance of the white two-storey stone building was shaped by the high traditionalist tiled roof and big windows providing good light for the classrooms. The upper storey was made more impressive by round windows characteristic of functionalist architecture.

As part of Peressaare, a small settlement was established by the Adomäe railway station. The area between two railway stations was planned for the farms of handicraftsmen, the medical assistant and the police constable. This was the only settlement the plans of which also included a cemetery from the beginning. The latter was never used as the settlers there were quite young and the village started to die out after the World War II.



Farmstead in Peressaare (arch. E. Nõva, 1936). Footo: 04.

⁸ See: Virumaa tervishoiuline kirjeldus. Tartu, 1931, p. 18.

In 1934–1938 the whole Virumaa County was seized by very active settlement activity. New settlements were founded one after another. Most of the new settlements in Virumaa were founded in industrial regions so that the new settlers would be close to the market.

In the last years of the pre-war Republic of Estonia the cultivation of newly reclaimed lands intensified. The country had recovered from the hardships of the economic crisis; the awards paid for land improvement on virgin lands also contributed to the development of settlement.

Until the 1920s the Estonian villages followed the building traditions handed over from one generation to another. In spite of their numerous drawbacks the standard designs drafted at the Settlement Board brought along several positive innovations to the Estonian rural architecture, both in construction technology and in the division of space. In a relatively short period the fireproof materials were introduced to the building practice, which drastically changed the appearance of the Estonian village. Very big changes took place in the interior finishing. Interior walls were now whitewashed and covered with lime paints which, in turn, helped to introduce new contemporary hygiene standards.

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

The state was responsible for all the planning and land improvement activities, construction of road network, drawing up of designs for buildings and lot plans. Re-settlers were supported by granting long-term loans, the poorest even had their houses built for them. The founding of settlements caused extensive internal migration; traditional types of buildings and the logic of settlement peculiar to specific regions disappeared.

Many standard designs were produced in one decade; some of them cannot be distinguished at a first glance. Nowadays the pinkish-yellowish houses with elongated proportions and cracks in walls caused by construction faults make a depressing impression because most of them have lost their original function – to be a home for a large family with many children.

Nearly one hundred such settlements were established in a decade. The smallest of them had seven and the largest about one hundred farms. Thousands of hectares of land that had been unused so far were cultivated in the attempt of creating a functional village landscape with

perfect infrastructure. This process came to an end when the World War II broke out. The post-war collectivization brought most of the new settlements to the extinction.

