

# The Building Tradition in Russian Karelia and in the East of Northern Norway

Randi Berit Sjølie<sup>1</sup>

## Commercial contact and related building tradition across the border in the north

The old building tradition in Northern Norway, in the eastern part of the county of Finnmark, is closely related to the building tradition in Russian Karelia and to the villages around the White Sea. This applies both to village organisation and to the design of the individual houses. It is customary to argue that the reason for this conformity in building practice in the two neighbouring countries is the intensive trade relations between the two regions in the past. The so-called Pomor trade lasted from the 1700s until 1920, when the border was closed. Norway and Russia have a common borderline in the north, and the tradition here has been open borders.

The northern part of Norway was supplied with building materials, flour and other household necessities, while the Rus-

sians received fish in return. Many houses in the eastern part of the county of Finnmark are made of “Russian logs” and the roofs are thatched with Russian birch bark. This trade was extremely important for our ancestors in Northern Norway. This part of our country naturally has only small forest resources, while the Russian side in the White Sea and Karelia have huge areas covered with conifers. Major waterways from the south to the north in Russia also made it easier to supply Norway with goods one could not obtain otherwise. In the spring, when the ice in the White Sea and the rivers broke, the Russian merchants set out in their boats for the Norwegian coast. Some Norwegian merchants sent their sons to Arkhangelsk to learn business acumen and create contacts. Russian fishermen were also authorised by the Norwegian authorities to engage in fishing in some places on the coast of Northern Norway.

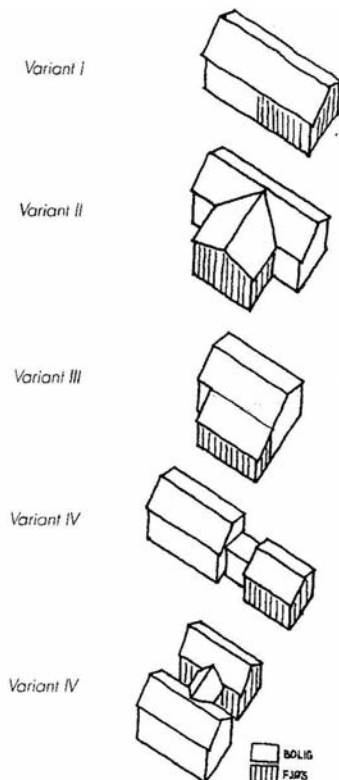
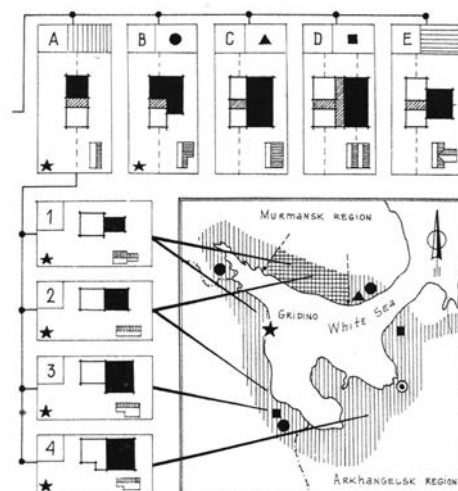


Fig. 1 Multifunction houses in Varanger, Norway (Bratrein 1980)

Fig. 2 Multifunction houses in the White Sea, Russia (Medvedjev, P. 1992)



## Village patterns

The settlements were built in the form of villages. The villages consisted of family houses with barns, quays with boathouses and saunas, and common buildings like schools, church with churchyard, shops. There are two main types of village patterns in these areas: properties with their corresponding houses arranged in a row along the river, the seaside or the road; and the other with individual properties placed together in unorganised groups.

## Multifunction houses

The old buildings are mostly small houses with one storey and built of logs.

This special type of individual houses is called multifunction houses, where the living space and the area for the livestock are in one building. This has given rise to the question why these buildings were designed like that. The harsh climate of the north has been cited as an important reason. People did not have to go outside to get to their livestock. When the border between Norway and Russia became more open again in the 1980s, we could visit colleagues and many villages in Russia and thus study the architecture there. We discovered that most of the villages in the northeast of Russia were based on the multifunction house architecture. Our Russian colleagues said their ancestors got their inspiration for this building type from further down south.

The multifunction house is known elsewhere in Europe, but in Norway this design has only been in use in the northeast of the country, close to the Russian border. The details of the design of the houses are different in Finnmark and in Karelia. Most striking perhaps is that the houses in Karelia are larger and more robust and are built of round timber. Details in the front design, the timber joint and the stove model are also different.

### *Norwegian multifunction houses*

Norwegian scientists have done research on this topic and have found that the design of these old houses can be divided into four different models, I, II, III and IV. These models are connected to how the houses are oriented in the village and how they are assembled (Fig. 1). Model II is the most common in Norway. The living quarters of the houses are built according to the style or the financial resources of the builder, with two, three or four rooms (Fig. 2).

### *Russian multifunction houses*

The most common way for these houses is model I. The drawings by the Russian researchers show how this model was varied in many different models. The living space of these houses has more rooms than those on the Norwegian side, perhaps four or five. The outside is designed to show the size of the interior. The design of the fireplaces is different; they consist of large stone volumes with more openings in the same furnace.



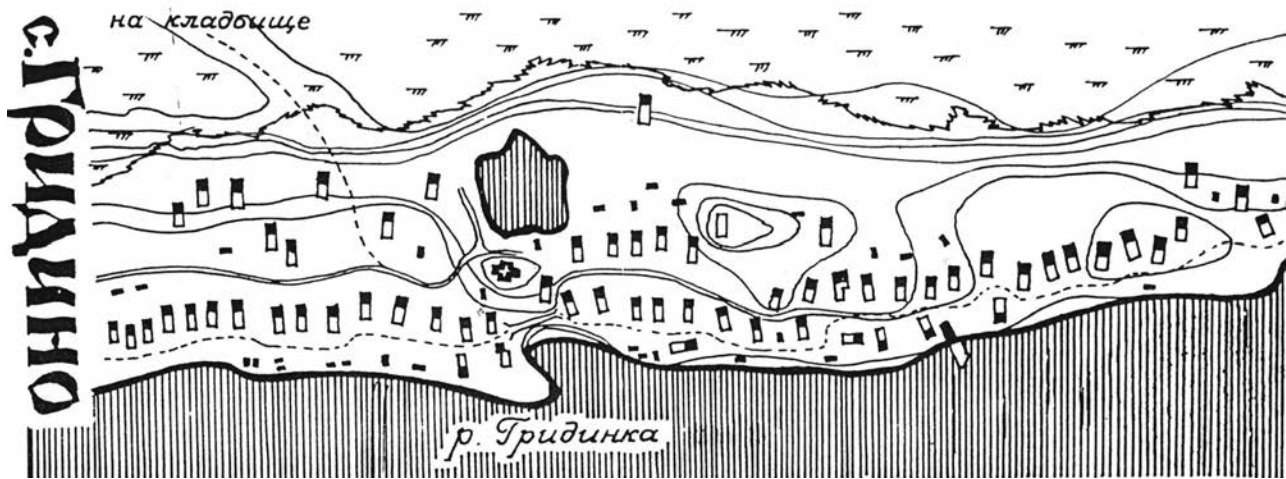
*Fig. 3 Multifunction house in Varanger, Norway (Sjølie 2005), torn down in 2005 without permission*

*Fig. 4 Multifunction house in Varanger, built 1950 (Sjølie 1995); permission to demolish given in 2014, but the house is still standing.*

*Fig. 5 Multifunction house in Njutcha, White Sea, Russia (Sjølie 2014)*

## The building legacy is threatened

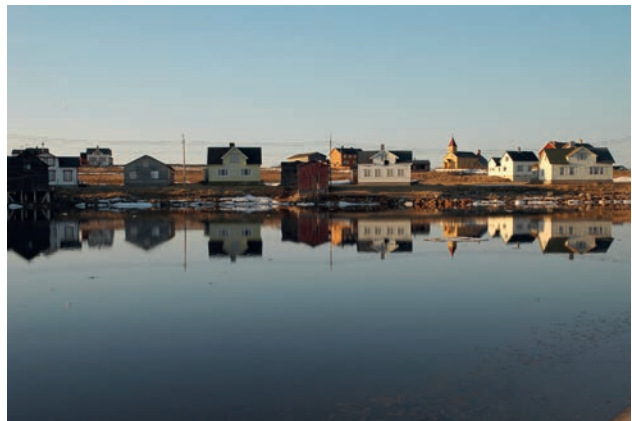
Both on the Norwegian and the Russian sides, we are facing major challenges in taking care of these historic building traditions. Due to the end of small-scale agriculture and the centralisation of the population on both sides of the border there is no need any longer for these multifunction houses.



On the Norwegian side, the barn part of most of these houses is converted into bathrooms or is torn down, or houses and whole villages are abandoned. Mass registration of the building heritage on the Norwegian side in the 1970s led to research on this heritage. The Museum of Varanger has now started preparing an exhibition on these houses.

The multifunction houses in the Karelian villages are still largely intact and inhabited all year or only in the summer, but owners usually have too little funds to take care of the houses. Russian researchers have done a huge job on this building heritage, but results are not available to us because of the language. It appears to us Norwegian researchers when we visit the Russian side that skilled craftsmen and building material suppliers are rare resources. It seems that the utilisation of the great forest resources in Karelia has stalled and that the economy is in a deadlock. The communities there face a major challenge in protecting the buildings and providing better housing standards for the villagers as well. Through a joint project between the EU, Finland and Russia the Karelian village of Paanajärvi received funds and the Europa Nostra Award in 2005. Other villages would like to take part in this contact and fundraising across the borders. Perhaps Norwegian partners could join in and help?

A joint research project in the 1990s between colleagues from Norway, Russia and Finland focused on the common architectural heritage in these northern areas, but the material has unfortunately not yet been published.



*Fig. 6 Village of Gridino in the White Sea, Russia, 1992*

*Fig. 7 Multifunction houses in Gridino, White Sea, Russia (Sjølie 2014)*

*Fig. 8 Village of Skallelv in Varanger, Norway (Sjølie 2006)*

## References

Unpublished articles in the project *Wooden Houses in the Northern Hemisphere*, (Nordkalotten)

Bratrein, H. D.: *Varangerhuset. En foreløpig presentasjon av en nordnorsk hustype med konsentrerte gårdsfunksjoner* (Norveg 1989)

Own travels and studies in the area

<sup>1</sup> Retired senior advisor of the Sami Parliament of Norway.