MIGRATING MODERNIST INTERIORS

Reception and Adaptation of Finnish Prefabricated Wooden Houses in Silesia, Poland, in the Postwar decades

Mia Åkerfelt, Anna Wilczynska, Tzafrir Fainholtz and Martti Veldi

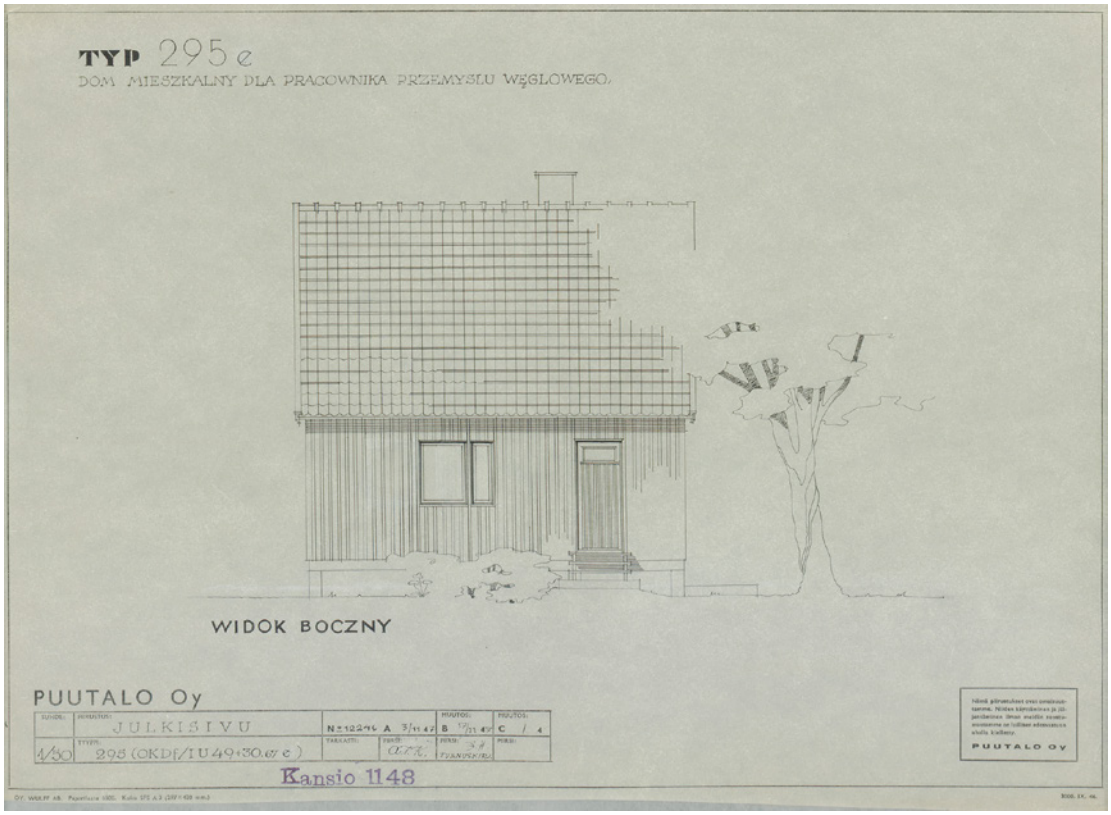
ABSTRACT: After World War II, Finland and Poland needed swift housing reconstruction. In Finland, the solution was prefabricated, wooden detached houses, which soon were exported globally. In 1947-48, Poland imported around 4,000 Finnish houses to the mining areas in Silesia. The architecture was based on domestic Finnish models developed from modernist housing ideals. The division of the interiors focused on rational usage of space, labor, and hygiene. Today, most of the buildings are preserved, and it is possible to track the adaptations of the architecture from foreign temporary structures to local homes and heritage to provide data for developing future reconstruction architecture.

This article analyzes how Finnish modernist ideals on home and housing were circulated internationally by exporting prefabricated wooden housing to reconstruction areas in Upper Silesia. The main questions relate to how the Finnish ideology on modernist housing and interior planning was adapted to the local culture of home and housing in Silesia and what can be learned from the reception and adaption of the interiors when designing housing for reconstruction after crises today. The article is based on archival material from Finland and Poland, such as architectural drawings, maps, and documentation on trade and export. The main methodologies are architectural and design analysis combined with historiographic reading of archival data and literature. The article shows how architecture with interiors planned for Finnish domestic use became integrated into the Silesian home culture, transforming temporary housing into permanent homes.

KEYWORDS: Prefabrication, reconstruction, temporary housing, modern interiors, Finland, Poland

INTRODUCTION: After World War II, Finland and Poland faced large-scale housing reconstruction. In Finland, the solution was type-planned and prefabricated, wooden detached houses, sheltering Karelian refugees and war veterans. The Finnish prefabricated housing industry started in the late 19th century and grew during the interwar decades (Keinänen, 2010; Smeds, 1996). Type-planned housing and prefabrication were developed in dialog with modernist ideas, as described by Leiviskä (2009) and Saarikangas (1993). World War II catalyzed the prefabrication industry, in which the *Puutalo oy* company[1] (hereafter: *Puutalo*) became a leading actor. After the two wars between Finland and the Soviet Union in 1939-1940 and 1941-1944, Finland paid substantial war reparations to the Soviet Union, mainly in products, and between 1944 and 1948, *Puutalo* contributed with prefabricated houses. Additionally, together with other companies, such as *Suomen puurakenteiden myyntiyhdistys* (The Finnish sales organization for wooden structures) and *Pelkkatalojen myyntiyhdistys* (The Pelkkatalo sales organization), they were engaged in substantial export (Puutalo Oy., 1951).

Poland became a part of the Soviet sphere of interest after World War II and faced an acute need for reconstruction of both housing and industry. In 1945, when the reconstruction of Poland's capital Warsaw began, Finnish houses were distributed by the Soviet Union as a gift. Large-scale import began in 1947 when Poland imported 4000 Finnish houses for the mining areas in Upper Silesia. The Soviet communist party considered the industry to be of utmost importance for the national economy and significant in constructing a communist identity. The government aimed to rebuild the area while strengthening Polish national identity in a region that historically belonged to different nations. The houses were planned in



01 The front elevation of the Puutalo type 295 which was sent to Katowice, Poland, in 1948. Drawing signed A.F.K and E.H, 17.11.1947. © Suomen Elinkeinoelämän Keskusarkisto ELKA, Scanned by ELKA 2024.

collaboration between *Puutalo* architects and Polish planners [FIGURE 01]. However, they differed clearly from what the local population was used to. As a result, they were adapted to local needs over time. Today, most of these houses are preserved as homes, having become an integrated part of the local urban landscape and an example of sustainable reconstruction architecture more than 70 years later.

This article analyzes how Finnish modernist ideals on home and housing were circulated internationally by exporting prefabricated wooden housing to reconstruction areas in Upper Silesia. The main questions are how the Finnish ideology on modernist housing and interior design was adapted to the local culture of home and housing in Silesia and what can be learned from the reception and adaptation of the interiors in reconstruction after crises today. The article is produced as part of the HoPE-project (*Housing, Prefabrication and Export: The Architecture of Reconstruction in Times of Crisis 2022-2026*) funded by the Finnish Kone Foundation and based at Åbo Akademi University. The project examines Finnish houses exported to Poland and Israel in the post-war decades. The primary data is archival material from Finland and Poland, such as architectural drawings, maps, and documentation on trade and export. Archives visited included in Finland: Central Archives for Finnish Business Records – ELKA, National Library of Finland digital archives and Finna.fi; and in Poland: Polish Press Agency – Polska Agencja Prasowa PAP; Baltic Digital Library - Bałtycka Biblioteka Cyfrowa; Silesian Digital Library - Śląska Biblioteka Cyfrowa; The Central Archives of Modern Records - Archiwum Akt Nowych, State Archives in Katowice. The methodologies used in the study are architectural and design analysis combined with historiographic reading of archival data and contemporary literature. The results are explored in terms of reconstruction, identity, and ideology in modernist housing ideals.

Previous research on Finnish houses in Poland was focused on the Jazdów neighborhood in Warsaw. Here, local projects examined the area from different perspectives: historical, environmental, architectural, social, and cultural (Koźluk et al., 2019). The same area is generally mentioned in Finnish literature on housing export (Vesikansa et al., 2021). The history of the Finnish houses in Silesia has mainly been examined within projects on architectural documentation of built environments (Chmielewska, 2009) or in research on local housing history (Nakonieczny, 2014). Both areas have been examined within the HoPE-project (Åkerfelt et al., 2023). This article uses data from a pilot study in Katowice, Poland, in June 2023, where the architecture, building types, and prevalence of changes to the buildings in two areas of Finnish houses were documented on-site.

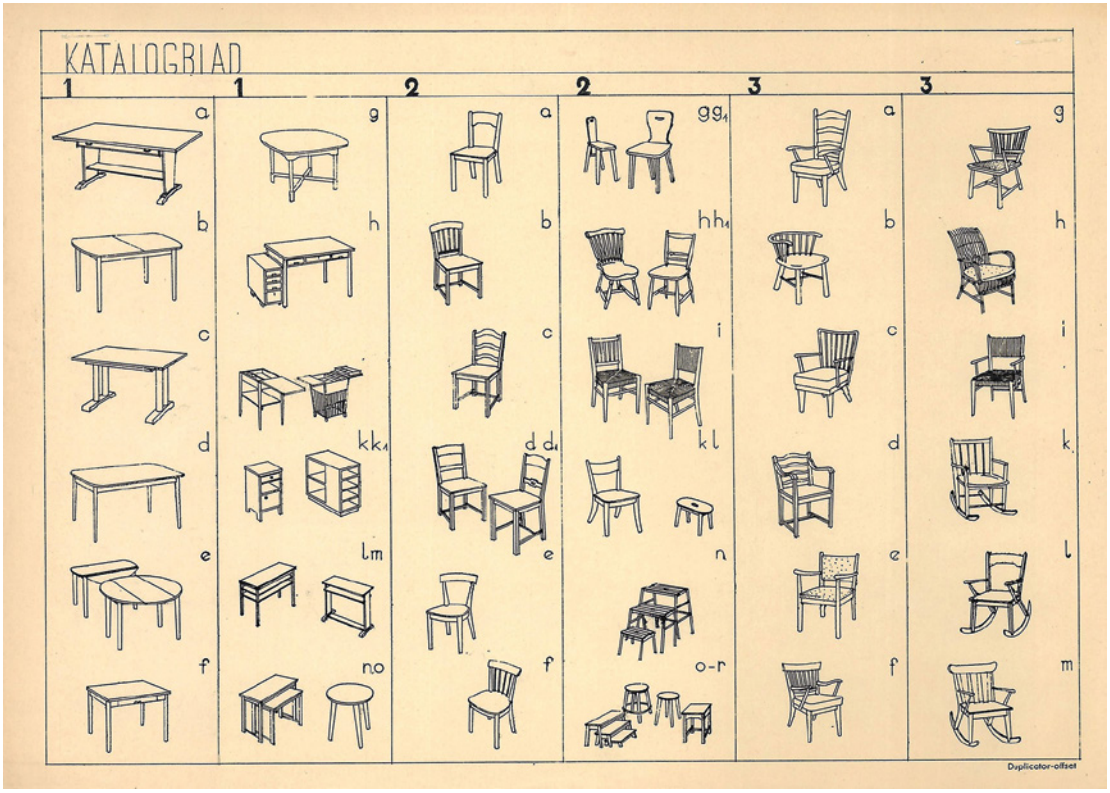
Within housing research, 'temporary housing` and the meaning of 'home' have gained interest due to mass migration, pandemics, climate change, and natural disasters (Félix et al., 2013; Stocker et al., 2021). Finding shelters is prioritized in the aftermath of a disaster (Félix et al., 2013). But when the reconstruction phase is prolonged (Johnson, 2007; Perrucci et al., 2016), it is crucial for health and well-being to create conditions that enable an experience of the lost home and daily routines since losing a home often equals losing privacy and dignity and can negatively affect both physical and mental health

(Barakat et al., 2003, Fussell & Lowe, 2014; Murakami et al., 2017). As Stocker et al. (2021) after Johnson (2010) suggested, temporary housing is the best solution to bridge the gap between crisis and reconstruction since it can provide an organized daily life as well as bring hope for the future. Research generally mentions two types of housing: ready-made and prefabricated (Perrucci et al., 2016). They are discussed both from the perspective of quality and social and environmental sustainability. The latter discussion focuses on practical problems with standardized designs, which do not sustain local climate conditions or fit the local cultural landscape or user's needs (Félix et al. 2013). Research shows that, in reality, temporary housing is often turned into permanent dwellings, causing challenges for the inhabitants due to impractical design. Therefore, inhabitants change their homes according to their needs and preferences, and adaptability becomes an important factor in designing qualitative reconstruction architecture (Wagemann, 2017). However, interiors and their functionality are rarely mentioned in the literature.

FINNISH MODERNIST HOUSING IDEOLOGY

In Finland, the interest in housing grew after the country gained independence in 1917. Due to the bourgeois governments' fear of socialism, one main idea was that workers should own a detached home instead of renting a room in a tenement since ownership was thought to make them less inclined towards socialism. As previously described by Åkerfelt (2019), type-planning and prefabrication became the solution for teaching the new homeowners how to build and furnish the small, modest houses that were to reflect their social status in society. Furthermore, Finland saw a housing crisis during the 1920s and 1930s, where both urban and rural housing was inadequate and often lacked modern comforts (Juntto, 1990; Saarikangas, 1993). The interwar housing reform movement based on functionalist ideals combined with national, romanticist aesthetics was generally advocated for by architects or associations as well as government bodies in the Nordic countries as a softer take on Modernism. In the Scandinavian modernist manifesto *acceptera*, some of the core values to be expressed in architecture were "work, rest and unity" (Asplund et al., 1931). The ideas on ideal interiors were circulated to the public through exhibitions and articles. The ultimate home for the working or middle classes was a simple wooden house with no unnecessary ornamentation, surrounded by a utility garden. The interiors were designed to solve problems through rational housekeeping and proper care of health and hygiene while strengthening the identity of both the nuclear family and the nation (Saarikangas, 1993).

The aspect of 'work' was represented by rational kitchens with standardized cabinetry, designed according to American, German, and Swedish ideas on domestic work hygiene. The simple, modernist furniture should be either homemade using standardized drawings or purchased from select retailers [FIGURE 02]. Textiles should be kept to a minimum for easy cleaning, made by the mother, or be inherited handicrafts. Plumbing and facilities for hygiene were important to upkeep the general health of



02 A page from a catalog published by Bostadsföreningen för Svenska Finland (The housing association for the Swedish-speaking regions in Finland) in the early 1940s, including type-designs for furniture for modern homes. © Museum of Finnish Architecture, collection Eva Kuhlefelt, scanned drawings, date unknown.

03 Re-created interior in the permanent exhibition U nos w domu na Nikiszu (Our home in Nikiszowiec) showing the traditional kitchen furnishings in a familok apartment. © Museum of Katowice History, 2023.

the population and make chores easier (Åkerfelt, 2019). The idea of physical rest was connected to bodily and sexual hygiene through separate bedrooms for parents and children of different sexes. Furthermore, no beds in the kitchen were an absolute requirement (Saarikangas 1993). Rest also included the idea of space for mental rest and reflection. The house should not be too small since the negative effects of cramped living were seen as harmful to the population's mental health (Wickström, 1940). Unity was promoted through the large kitchen, which had room for the family to gather for meals and chores. Here, the mother should teach the children about being proper members of the nation. Therefore, she should not be closed off in a separate kitchen but integrated into family life (Åkerfelt 2019). The garden was an extension of the home, a place for practicing healthy living and the cultivation of character through work and food production. These ideologies were the foundation for creating standardized housing in Finland in the post-war years, resulting in the type of housing called *rintamamiestalo* (war veterans' house), a one-and-a-half storied square modernist wooden detached house. This type later became the core of the large-scale prefabrication and export (Saarikangas, 1993).

THE SILESIAN MINERS' HOME IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

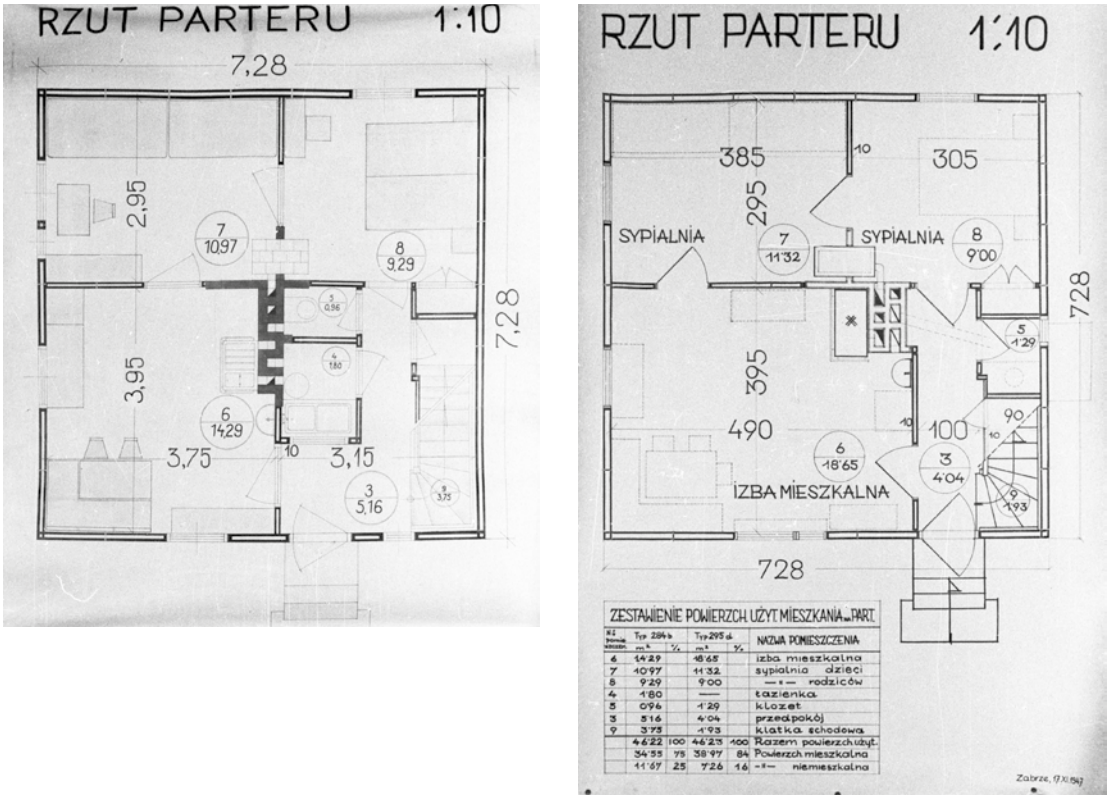
In the early 20th century, common miners housing in Silesia were *familoks*—multi-storied red-brick tenement buildings. The *familoks* formed closed blocks around a central garden in large housing areas with access to stores, churches, and schools. The apartments generally had one room and a small kitchen, which was the center of daily life. The room was used for sleeping and entertaining guests. The apartments were around 35 m^2, and especially in summer, the common spaces inside the perimeter of the housing blocks became a second living room (Piegza, 2021). The central pieces of furnishing were the *byfyj*, a large sideboard placed in the kitchen and a large table with chairs—all painted white [FIGURE 03].

After the third Silesian uprising in 1921, the six counties of Upper Silesia, which were joined with Poland as voivodeship with substantial autonomy, strove to create a unifying identity. Here, architecture played an important role. In the 1920s, the architectural characteristics mostly adhered to a mix of modernist forms with classicist details. Soon, this style became more inclined towards functionalism as a blank canvas for creating a new identity (Cymer, 2019). In the 1930s, Poland, like many other European countries, experienced a national housing crisis. Therefore, the government decided to establish the Association of Workers Settlements in 1934. A set of rules was established to make the housing areas comfortable. For instance, the dwelling could not be further than 3 km from the inhabitants' workplace. Furthermore, they should be planned according to modernist ideals–with sufficient light, air, and access to greenery (Jastrzębska, 2003). The discourse on interiors and housing had a strong nationalist connotation, aiming to create new homes reflecting the Polish identity, breaking with historicism and its associations with German rule, replacing it with Modernism in both architecture and interior design (Korduba, 2020, pp. 347-348). In Katowice, the *House Interior Design Exhibition* in 1928 promoted Polish tastes in furniture. Stylistically, this approach sought inspiration from folk crafts, producing furniture and textiles with traditional décor in local materials. However, towards the late 1930s, modernist German furniture became a source of inspiration for Polish architects and designers, focusing more on their transmitted modernity rather than nationality (Korduba, 2020, pp. 350-358).

TRANSFORMING MODERNIST IDEALS

After World War II, the Soviet Union (USSR) circulated Finnish prefabricated wooden houses obtained as war reparations; the first ones sent to Poland went to Warsaw in 1945. This housing type was seen as a cheap and functional solution to the overwhelming lack of housing, so in 1947-1948, around 4000 additional Finnish houses were imported in exchange for coal and placed in areas around Katowice in Upper Silesia, as well as a unit of 85 houses in Gdansk. These houses formed communities for mining workers and their families. The lightweight houses functioned well in the mining areas where the ground was unstable due to mining shafts, and the authorities requested houses that could be moved if needed.

The *Puutalo* types 284 and 295 were sent to Katowice in 1947 and 1948 [FIGURE 04]. Both were prefabricated wooden houses with one main floor and an attic; many also constructed with a basement. The exterior had a simplistic wainscoting and no ornamentation. The division of rooms followed the Finnish ideals: a mid-size kitchen, two rooms, and an entrance with an adjacent bathroom.



04 Floor plans of the main floor in housing types 284 (left) and 295 (right). The drawings often had suggestions for how to place the furniture efficiently. © Polish press archives, picture archives, pictures pap_19480201_00Q and pap_19480201_000, unknown, 1948.

The attic had two bedrooms and two storage rooms. According to a report on the Activities of the Polish Coal Industry, these types should be comfortable for a family of 4-6 people (Sprawozdanie z działalności Polskiego Przemysłu Węglowego, 1947). Type 284 could be provided with running water, an indoor bathroom, and a toilet. However, plumbing was not always possible. If not, a shed in the garden was planned with an outdoor toilet and space for keeping animals and tools. For the shipments in 1948, type 295 was developed to include an indoor dry toilet (Centralny Urząd Planowania, 1948).

When the housing areas were completed, the inhabitants saw the architecture as something unconventional, especially since it was made of wood [FIGURE 05]. Since the 19th century, stone houses were most common in Silesia, and wooden houses were generally associated with poverty. To mitigate these opinions, the authorities advocated for the quality of the houses. The *Biuro Budowlane Przemysłu Węglowego (BBPW)* (Construction Office of the Coal Industry) report from 1947 stressed that the public should regularly be informed about how the construction of the housing areas was proceeding (Centralny Urząd Planowania, 1948, p. 27). In early documents, skepticism of wooden houses was raised, referring to the Polish saying "Domy drewniane – pluskwy murowane" ("One can be sure there are bugs in a wooden house"). This needed to be contradicted, which is why the document's author stated that the reason for bug-infested wooden houses could be found in sloppy housewives managing them [sic!], not in the construction material itself. In addition, the reader was also reminded that bugs were a common problem in urban housing (Centralny Zarząd Przemysłu Węglowego Katowice, 1947).

05 The uniformity of the housing areas was striking in their modernity. © Unknown. Polish press archives, picture archives, picture pap_19480201_002.1948.

06 At first, the houses included pre-installed kitchen cabinets. Here, a woman shows how she uses the cabinet instead of the byfyj. © Polish press archives, picture archives, picture pap_19480201_010, unknown, 1948.

07 The kitchen on the left in one of the exhibition houses in Katowice, 1948, shows two chairs almost identical to the Finnish Asko company's chair nr 42. The bedroom on the right shows a sumptuous divan-type bed and decorative but light wooden furniture. The wall tapestries connect to local crafts while bringing warmth to the interior. © Polish press archives, picture archives, picture pap_19480201_01L, 1948 andpap_19480201_01C, unknown, 1948.

Besides the skepticism towards wood, another problem was that the interiors did not accommodate furnishings that the workers owned. The kitchen had pre-installed cabinetry and no room for the traditional large sideboard: *byfyj* [FIGURE 03, FIGURE 06]. However, the authorities saw this as a positive matter. In their directions for furnishing the houses, they stated that there was no place for "large cupboards or wardrobes, round tables, or excessively large beds" which were the typical furniture of a Silesian miner family (Centralny Zarząd Przemysłu Węglowego Katowice, 1947). To solve the problem, the BBPW decided to pay for furnishings imported from Finland. However, they quickly realized that this was too expensive. Together with the *Towarzystwo Reformy Mieszkaniowej* (Housing Reformation Association), the authorities created an exposition of six fully furnished houses in the Bogucice neighborhood in Katowice to show how to furnish the homes with Polish furniture, following the spirit of the Finnish design (Centralny Urząd Planowania, 1948). The ideas for furnishings could also be seen in some of the drawings, but it is not known if it was the Finnish or Polish architects who developed the details [FIGURE 04].

The exhibition was documented in photographs, showing the intended standard of living. The photographs show sparsely decorated but quite comfortable interiors with light wooden furniture and select textiles. The kitchen had wall-mounted cabinetry, which was promoted in Finnish interior design education. The table was small, and the chairs were almost identical to one of the Finnish bestseller chairs of *Asko* company at the time [FIGURE 07]. In 1948, the Ministry of Reconstruction ordered a set of bare minimum furniture for all 1000 housing units already constructed. The pieces were delivered by *Centrala Zaopatrzenia Przemysłu Węglowego* (Supply unit of the coal industry). For the living room, every unit received one extendable table, chest benches, and two Thonet-type chairs. For the parents' bedroom, they received two 80 cm x 192 cm metal beds and, for the other room, one bed of the same type and two chairs (Centralny Zarząd Przemysłu Węglowego Katowice, 1948). Shortly after, the need to cut costs led to replacing the orders to Puutalo oy for the kitchen cabinetry with Polish versions. In 1948, the kitchen furnishings were discontinued altogether.

When the workers moved in, it was seen as an important political event, and local news covered the inauguration ceremonies and wrote positive reports of life in the Finnish houses (Dziennik Bałtycki, 1948). Since the funding for furniture ended, the inhabitants had to furnish the houses themselves. The houses gradually adapted to the local needs and culture through additions or changes.

08 Houses in Katowice that feature some of the most common changes, such as stone cladding and built-in porches. © Tzafrir Fainholtz, 2023.

According to a pilot study in the HoPE-project, conducted on-site in Silesia in June 2023, the most common exterior change was adding stone cladding to the outer walls to make the house look like it was made from stone. Another common change was adding a built-in porch since both types, 284 and 295, had a small entry with insufficient room for storing heavily dusty work gear. In the interiors, the main changes were related to plumbing when indoor bathrooms were installed. Today, most of the houses in the Katowice area are still in use in their primary function—as homes. Popular commentary on the houses on social media, as well as free-form interviews with residents, show that the houses became popular dwellings and have become sought-after objects on the housing market. The general opinion is that they are comfortably designed, warm, and easy to adapt when needed [FIGURE 08].

CONCLUSIONS

The history of the Finnish houses holds a wide range of useful information for planning sustainable reconstruction architecture today. Planning and involvement from national and local governments contributed to coordinating the (re)construction of the area. The organizations had a clear idea of what they wanted to achieve on a practical note, following modern ideas on functional workers' housing. The urban planning aimed at supporting these ideas through facilitating infrastructure and implementing ideas on workers' residential areas prevalent from the prewar decades; however, it was not always successful due to funding issues or planning decisions. Building types 284 and 295 were planned during several meetings between Finnish and Polish architects to make them work for both the producer and the local culture. It can be argued that the houses were not fully adapted to the local needs, not from neglect but from ideological reasons. There was a clear understanding from the officials' side that this was not what the local population was used to. Therefore, they needed to educate the miners on how to use the houses through exhibitions and propaganda in local media.

Ideologically, the Polish government intended to use the modern and progressive houses to underline the political significance of the mining industry while simultaneously cutting ties to the German heritage of the area. By giving the miners access to modern housing, they were thought to quickly earn back the value of their investment. The houses were seen as the ideal prerequisites for efficient work in an industry that Poland depended on for the nation's reconstruction. The interiors of the houses, as well as their exteriors, gardens, and neighborhoods, were designed to keep the miners healthy and loyal to their workplaces. By planning houses in which the 'bourgeois' furniture based on late-19th-century German ideals could not fit, the inhabitants were forced to change their dwelling culture towards the ideals of work, rest, and unity as embodied by the Finnish houses. The *byfyj* and the decorative furniture, which were the pride of the Silesian housewife, had to be replaced by standardized kitchen cabinets and light wooden furniture. These furnishings were branded 'Finnish' to connotate something qualitative and more neutral than German Modernism. It was neglected, however, that Finnish Modernism was to some extent built on circulating German ideas similar to those promoted by the Bauhaus Movement or in the large housing exhibitions during the interwar decades. This was most likely a calculated risk taken by the government, which had to curb the public's skepticism by venturing into a large-scale and costly project to provide suitable furniture for the inhabitants. This shows that both the local ideas of changing the housing ideology and the design of the type of buildings sent to reconstruction areas should be critically

considered. As pointed out by Fussell & Lowe (2014) and Murakami et al. (2017): If the housing does not function for the inhabitants over a long-term perspective, it can lead to health issues and the abandonment of the buildings, which does not contribute to sustainability.

After the centralized funding ended, the adaptability of the houses became an important asset despite not being initially discussed during the planning process. This observation follows the conclusions by Wagemann (2017) and can be understood as a central trait when planning contemporary crisis housing. The initial idea was to produce lightweight and movable houses. Since the floor plans were already divided in preparation for modern sanitary facilities, the inhabitants could easily modernize them when funding permitted. They could then be furnished according to contemporary ideals, and when the families grew, another room could be added. The basic structure was also easy to replicate, and since the need for houses was larger than the budget for importing them, Polish factories started to produce houses of a 'Finnish type' similar to the original houses and placed them next to the original settlements. The replicability of the housing is also an aspect to consider in today's crisis housing. If the types are flexible and easily replicable, local production can continue according to the same standards after the initial reconstruction phase. The same goes for furnishings, which in Silesia were based on the Finnish drawings but produced by local industries. However, the ideological wish to shape the Silesians' dwelling habits led to problems when the new housing could not fit people's existing furniture. This aspect of planning for the existing local dwelling traditions would also be relevant to incorporate further in today's crisis housing. In the end, the possibility for the inhabitants to start with a basic shelter, which allows for additions, modernization, and the chance to make the foreign structure into a home, was, in the Silesian case, a central aspect that contributed to the houses becoming a valued part of the local culture.

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ENDNOTES

1 The Finnish companies often had versions of their names in several languages, such as Finnish and Swedish for the domestic market, as well as English or other local languages for international trade. However, the records from Poland and Israel show that the international name versions were hardly ever used in communication with customers abroad. For traceability of the research data, we use the Finnish name as the companies themselves did. Where no original English translations were available, the names have been translated by the authors.