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ON VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE IN FINLAND

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*Planering av Svidja slott uppmätt år 1928*

I VÄNNGEN

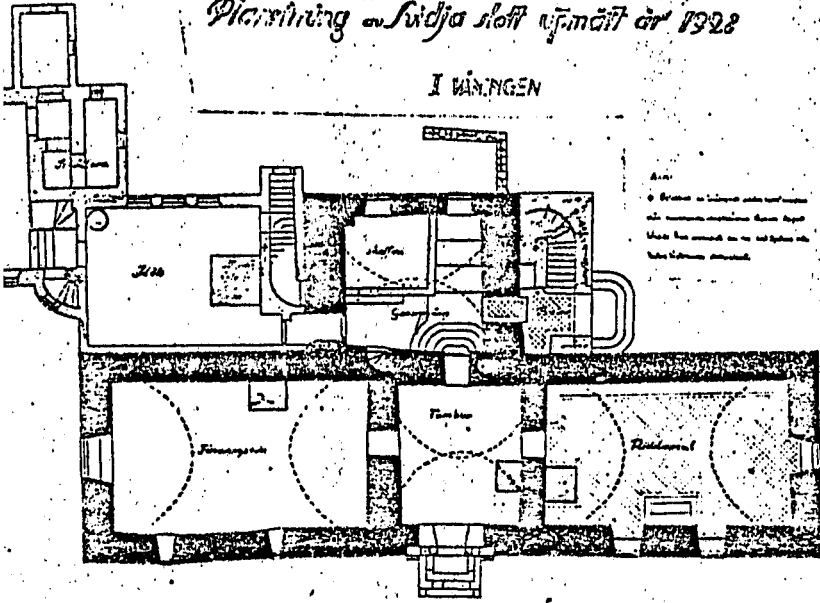


Fig.1. Plan of the castle of Svidja, 1540's. Two living rooms and a porch between them, the room above is a tower.

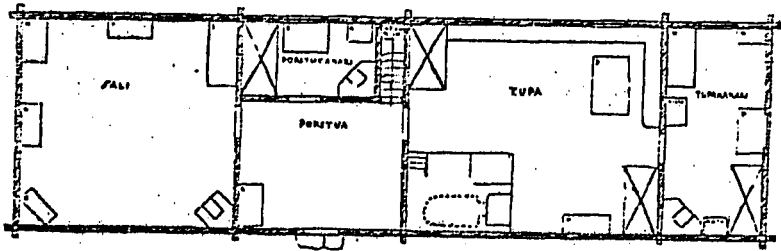


Fig.2. Most typical plan of a farm house, Anttila in Mynämäki, 19th century. The same system of two main rooms, one for normal living and the other for festivities.

## ON VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE IN FINLAND

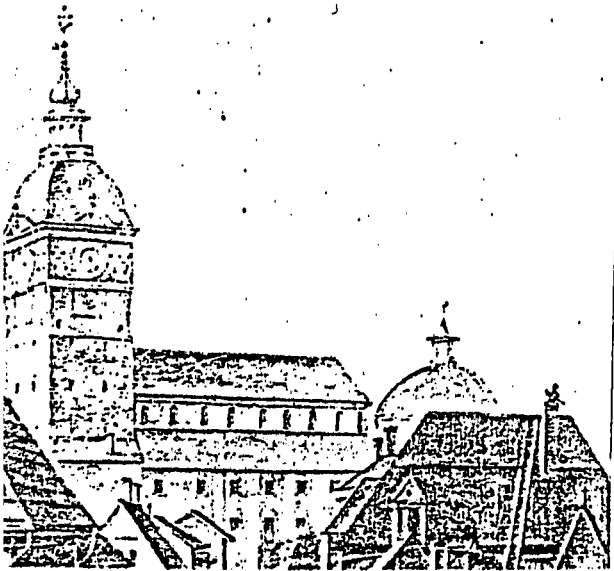
Panu Kaila, architect  
National Board of Historical Monuments

The term "vernacular architecture" appears in Finnish in a form which could be translated exactly "folk architecture"; more often a form "folk building" is used. When trying to outline the part of architecture that falls into the frames of that term in Finland, I first go through different types of buildings so to find what is and what is not "vernacular" in Finnish architecture.

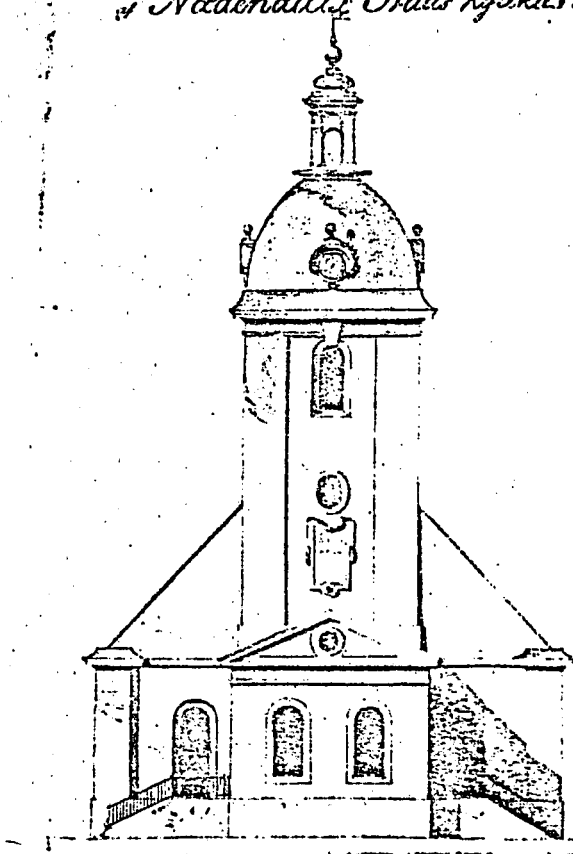
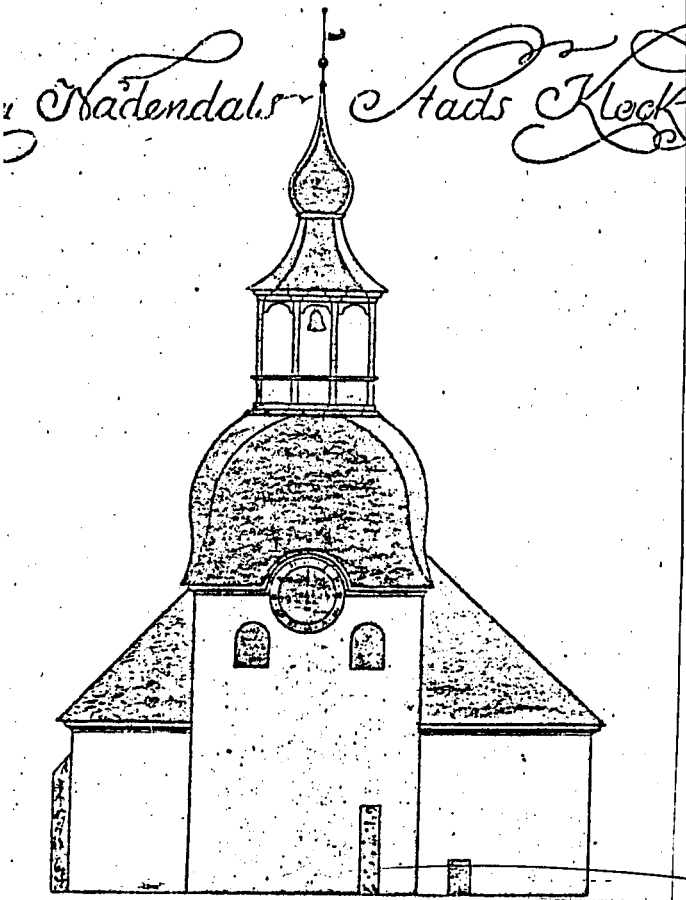
### Castles and fortresses

The oldest hill fortresses of iron age with low earthen and stone walls and wooden balustrades were built by local people for their own refuge, and not by the state or any military personnel. During the Swedish rule, from 12th century on, castles and fortresses were built by the state (feudalism with family castles did not exist in Finland) with up to date forms and building technics far different from that used by local people. Master builders were foreign, from Sweden and Germany. It is likely that many new ideas were thus imported, from timber joints to house plans. For instance the typical house plan with two main rooms and a porch between them which became utmost common up to the beginning of our century was probably introduced in Finland by the castles. Likewise the soldiers building up the sea fortress Sveaborg outside Helsinki in 18th century spread the skill of cutting stones all around Finland, and consequently the farm houses had soon basements of cut stones instead of rough split ones.

Fig.3. The spire of Turku Cathedral, designed by architect Schröder 1757.



*Dessin ou Tornbyggnad i Åbo. Gafveln. i Naändals Stads Klockstapel.*



*Adlercrantz*

Fig.4. The spire for Naantali church near Turku. Plan of master-carpenter Piimänen, 1780's. The influence of older Turku spire is evident.

Fig.5. The spire for Naantali church, the final version by architect Adlercrantz, 1780's. The old-fashioned baroque of folk-master Piimänen is transformed into modern classicism.

## Churches

The Finnish tribes had no buildings for worship during the pageantry. The Swedish rulers came together with the Roman church, three main invasions in 12th and 13th centuries are called crusades. Most of the earliest medieval churches were built of wood but nothing of them is left. That which was said above about the castles introducing new building technics is still more obvious here - though craftsmen builders were foreign, most of the work was carried out by local people. Soon even the Building Act obliged people to build their church as well as their parsonage.

We have now about 70 medieval churches left, built of grey stone (with two exceptions of brick).

These are not considered as vernacular architecture.

The habit of building churches of stone ended together with the time of Roman church. The Reformation meant less churches and cheaper materials - wood.

Oldest existing wooden churches derive from 17th century, and there are lots of them from 18th and 19th centuries. As to the notion vernacular, these wooden churches form an interesting group. The building work was carried out by contract, the contractor being a skilled master-carpenter who was working with his own team of carpenters and helped by local people. These carpenters did also designs of churches, at first they built even without any drawings. (Since 1776 all drawings ought to be sent to the capital, Stockholm, for inspection; but this bureaucracy took so long that in many cases the church was finished before the drawings came back with a note that they were not accepted...)

When the design of a church is done by a master-carpenter the church is sometimes called vernacular, more often a "folk-master's church" or "folk-builder's church. When the drawings came from an architect, the church is not vernacular. This definition is sometimes complicated: when a master-carpenter attended some lectures in Stockholm art school he is now classified as an architect. The carpenters also made their own designs copying or modelling after the churches of the architects.

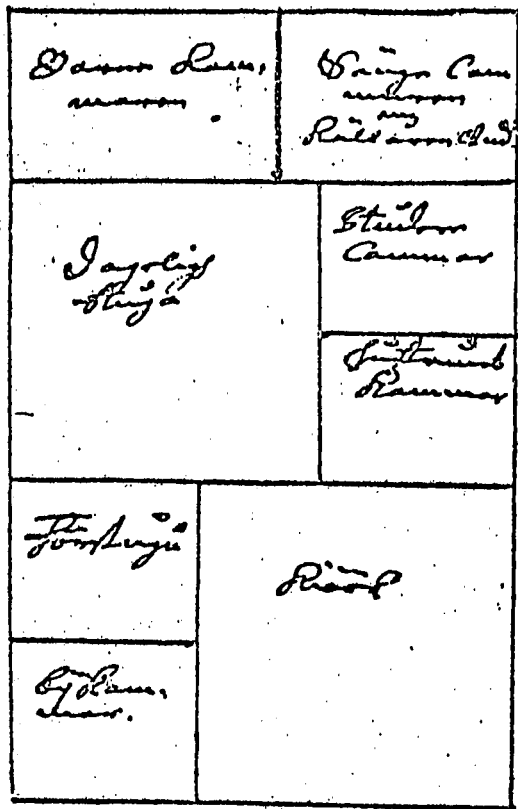


Fig.6. Plan of Mustasaari parsonage, 1667. An uncommon plan that comes from Swedish baroque architecture. Planned by the governor Gabriel Graan.

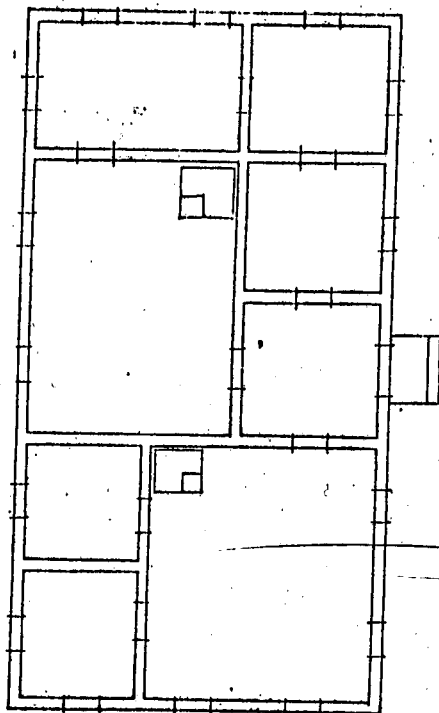


Fig.7. Plan of Puusaari farm house in Veteli near Mustasaari, 1835. The type is used only in a very limited area and it is evidently made on the model of the former.

This division into vernacular and non-vernacular churches in Finland arose in the beginning of this century, when it was important to find out a national Finnish culture, Finnish folk art, something Finnish in the architecture, too. Because the architects were foreign and the master-carpenters Finns, here the notion vernacular means the same as Finnish.

The later church architecture, from mid 19th century on was always designed by architects and it is thus not vernacular.

#### Manors and parsonages

The houses of nobility and clergy are not considered vernacular.

The oldest manors, built of stone, exist from 17th century, and there are many wooden manors from 18th and 19th centuries. The planner was earlier in many cases the owner himself, later an architect, and builders were mostly local.

The law obliged local people to build a house for their pastor ever since the Roman church entered Finland in 12th century. At first only the amount of rooms was given, then in 1730 also the size and form of the plan. It is probable that in the early times a parsonage looked much like any bigger farmstead, but when the plan type was given, it introduced a new system with central hall that was never adopted by the farmers. It is evident that parsonages had a great influence on building tradition especially in the countryside - ~~they were scattered all over the country~~, they were inspected by delegates of the local public meeting (where the decisions of building and reparation was made), and as offices they were open to the public. We can find several technical innovations going step by step with an interval of some decades from churches to manors and town houses, then to parsonages and at last to farm buildings. So spread for instance the use of glass windows, chimneys, weatherboarding, roof trusses, red paint.



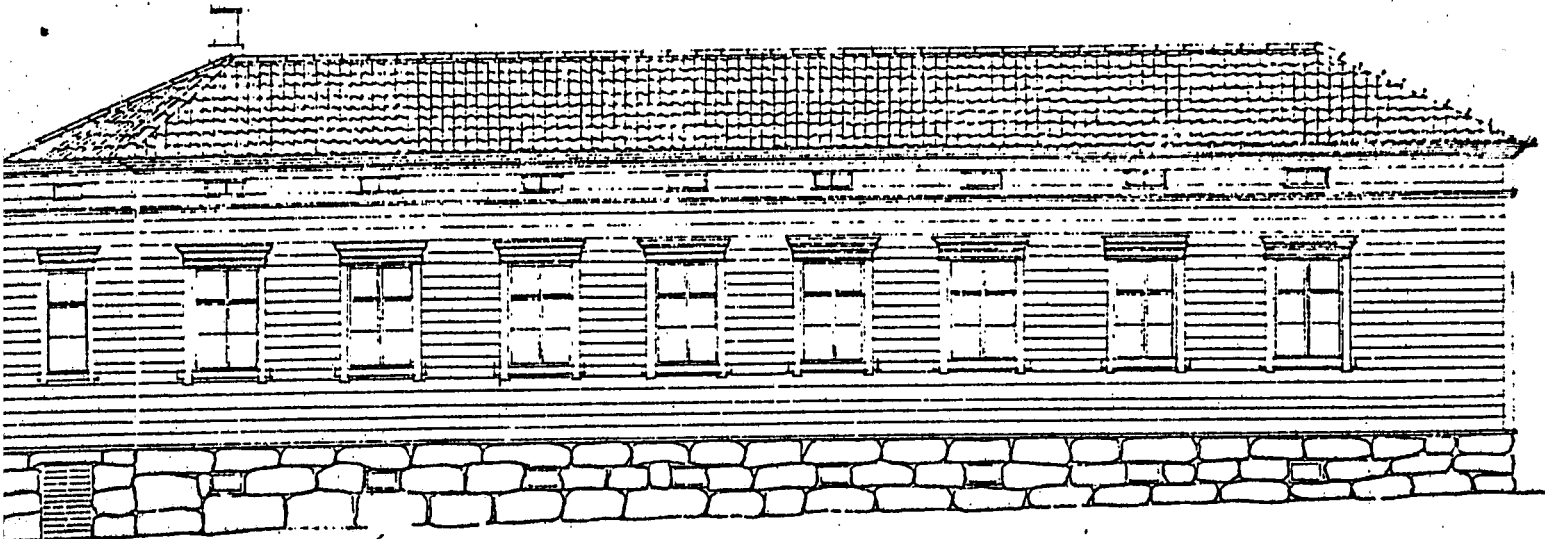


Fig.8. Elevation of a typical wooden town house in Raahе, 1850-70.

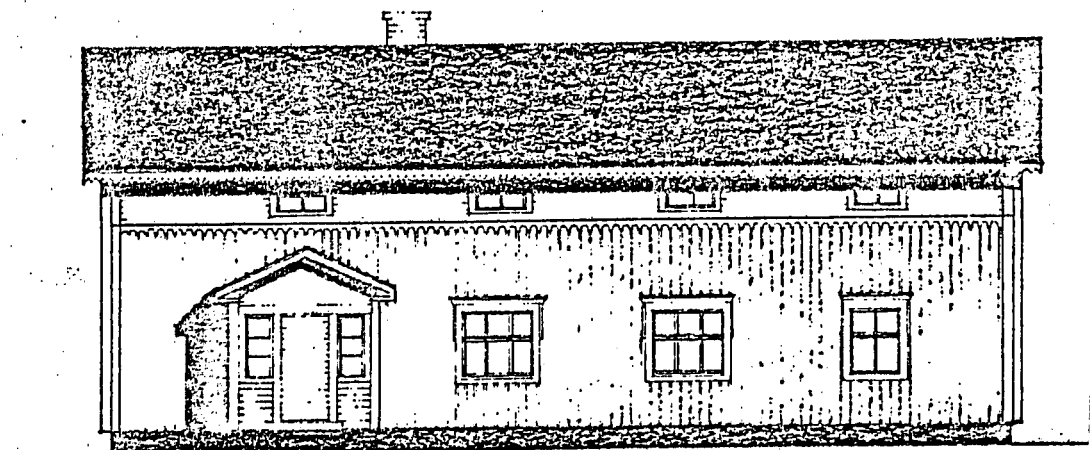


Fig.9. Elevation of a typical farm house in Evijärvi, 1870's.

### Houses in towns

Up to the 19th century the towns in Finland were small and great majority of population was living in the countryside. The old towns, inhabited by merchants, artisans and sailors, received much influence from abroad. Houses were relatively rich and the small building sites lead to build in two stories. This in turn influenced the countryside - for instance the very popular but unnecessary habit to build two-storied houses in Ostrobothnia 1750-1850 was the direct influence of the local sea port town Vaasa.

We have very little left of any older towns in Finland: because the houses were placed densely and built of wood every town used to burn down at least once in a century. Only some town houses derive from 18th century, and all the bigger areas of 19th century were largely demolished in 1950's and 1960's.

The houses in towns are not usually considered as vernacular. Only during recent years there has been an effort to find appreciation to the 19th century wooden town houses by calling them vernacular. Most of them were designed by building contractors and have timber structure, old-fashioned plan type and up to date facades.

There are some old houses of brick in towns, too, designed and built by master-masons. These are never considered vernacular - it seems here that only a timber house can be vernacular in Finland.

Big houses, blocks of flats, were designed by architects from the beginning (1870's) and are not vernacular.

### Houses in the countryside

The notion vernacular architecture means most clearly all older buildings of farmers and other folk in the countryside. The notion is applied to as long as the plan type is "traditional" and the building material is timber - this means until about 1920's.

It is generally supposed that this traditional Finnish architecture was more or less independent, designed and developed by local people, and that all the houses were built by farmers and settlers themselves.

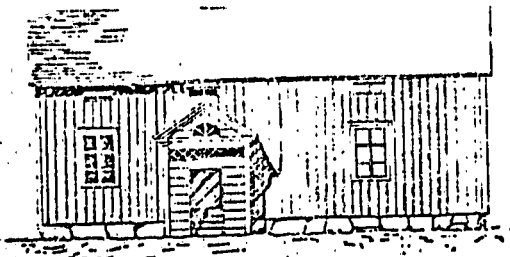


Fig.10. Small house from Western Finland, Lohtaja. Especially small houses of poor people were the same whether in town or in the countryside. 19th century.

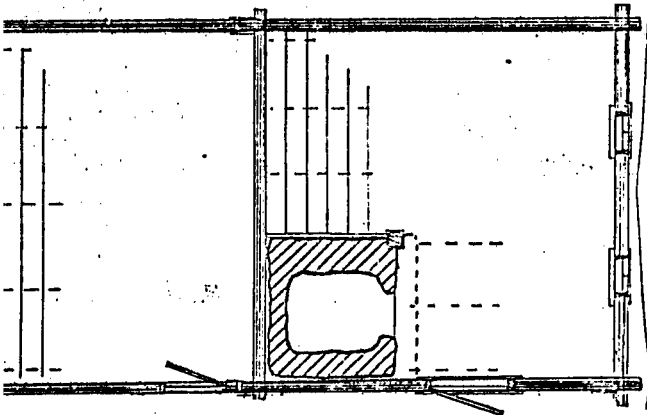
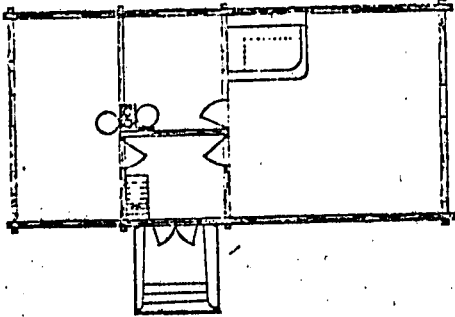


Fig.11. Plan of a small settlers house from Eastern Finland, 1790's. Vernacular architecture.

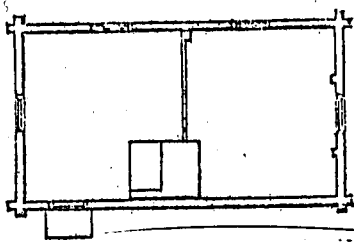
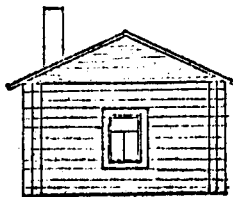
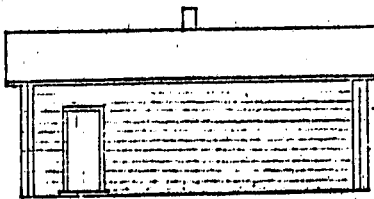


Fig.12. Plan and elevations of a small house of an industrial worker from Lappeenranta, Eastern Finland, 1880's. Non-vernacular architecture.



In fact the development of forms and materials took place in leading countries of culture and on higher social level and was only adopted here. Also the work itself was in biggest farms carried out by professional master-carpenters, the same who built even the churches. On the other hand it is true that no architects were used, nor any drawings, a local or regional slowly moving building tradition was formed and local natural materials were mostly used.

#### Houses of workers

At the time of industrialization in Finland, in the latter half of 19th century, sawmills and paper factories were founded in the countryside where both wood and water power was available. Freely growing workmens villages were soon formed near by the factories - small huts built by own hands in the form of poor crofts of the countryside but often using the waste material of the industry. These areas got later (in 1930's) a town plan and developed to more regular suburban settlements.

It is interesting to see that these houses are not called vernacular, although they were both self-planned and self-built by the workers, and though they followed closely the type of crofts and small farm houses. It seems that the notion vernacular is limited only to peasant architecture.

#### Industry

No factories nor any buildings for industrial production are called vernacular (not even humble log cabins of timbermen camps).

#### Public buildings

Public buildings like schools, houses for administration &c are not called vernacular, whether in towns or in the countryside.

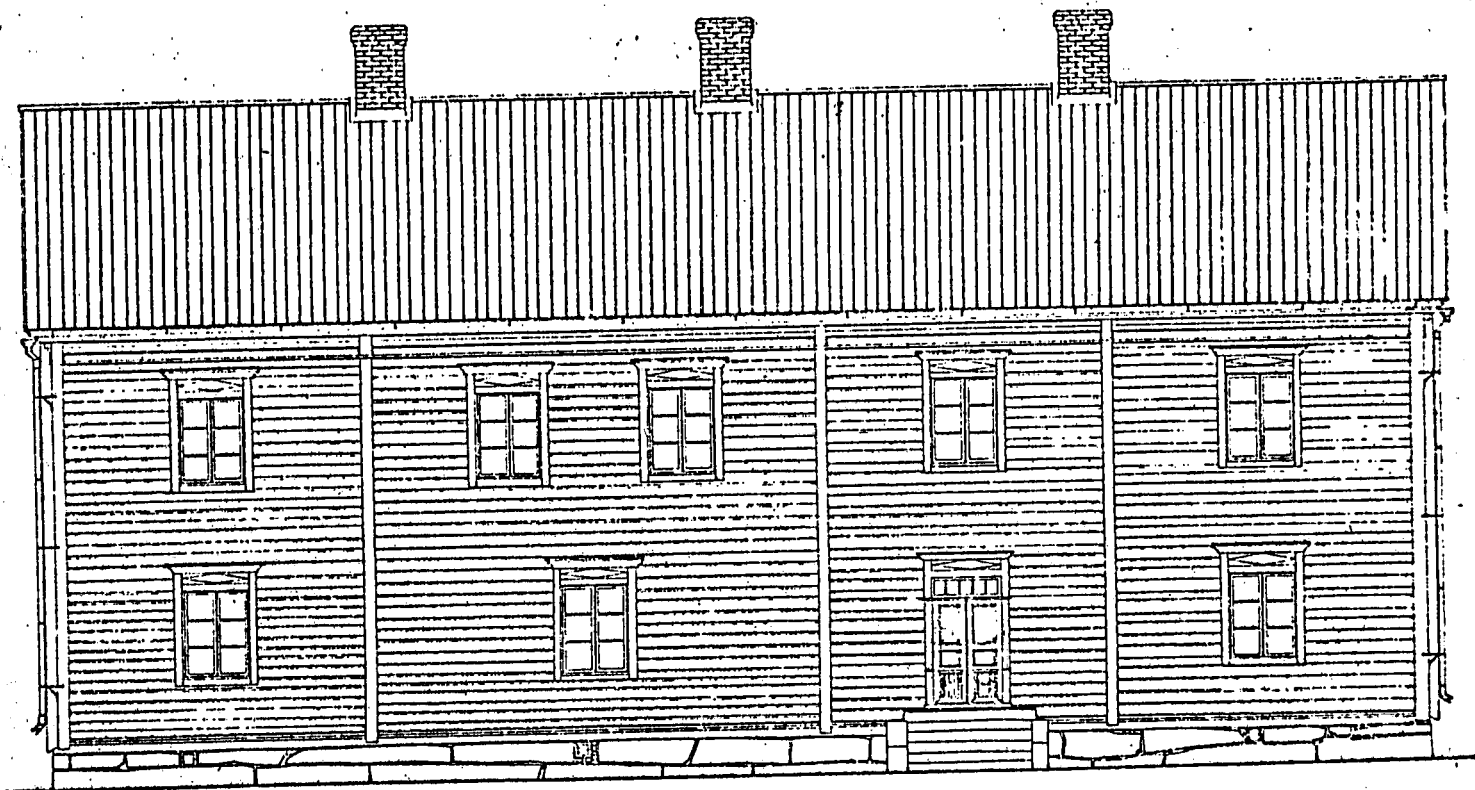


Fig.13. One of the most prominent vernacular houses in Finland, Yli-Laurgsela, 1848. The living area (for one family) was 380 m<sup>2</sup>, and the height of the building 9 metres. This was only the main building, the farm had more than 20 other buildings. The builder was a professional master-carpenter. The house is now owned by the state and houses a centre for restoration and a museum.

### Summary

The general use of the notion vernacular architecture has in Finland a rather limited area: it means the buildings of peasant agricultural society, the buildings of a farmstead. In largest extent the term includes also wooden churches planned and built by master-carpenters with peasant background. The vernacular building material is timber. Most of the houses derive from 19th century, a few from 18th century (only some storey-houses are older than that) and the last ones from about 1920's.

This old definition seems today unfit. It is a term used in ethnology, a science that started studying primitive tribes and cultures. The division of for instance 19th century architecture into vernacular and non-vernacular is artificial. Yet in the Finnish National Board of Antiquities and Historical Monuments the Department of Ethnology took care of peasant houses and the Department of Historical Architecture cared only for mansions, parsonages and other houses of higher classes, also all architecture in towns. Nowadays all the restoration belongs to the Dept. of Historical Architecture, but the study is done in both departments.

To make a new exact definition, even limited in Finland, seems difficult. The notion vernacular architecture should mean something local or regional, but not the same as national architecture. It should be a common way of building in any society, not only the agricultural. Maybe it would be possible to define the core of the notion, but ~~surely it would~~ be too difficult to define exact limits of it.

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