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## **FINAL REPORT** **for Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives, Budapest, Hungary**

Title: Soviet Mobile Architecture: Enabling Colonial Resettlement, Displacement and Extractivism in Western Siberia, 1960-1993

### *Project Overview*

In the late Soviet period, construction, architectural and urban planning expertise was mobilised in the state-sponsored project of transforming Western Siberia into the country's largest extractivist region. Upon the "discovery" of vast oil reserves in 1960, expedited construction of provisional buildings and "rotational" settlements ensured rapid accommodation of geologists, construction workers, and industry personnel. Despite harsh weather conditions and limited transport infrastructure, barracks, decommissioned wagons and mobile living units facilitated labour migration from across the USSR to achieve state goals. Meanwhile, the region's indigenous minorities – Khanty, Mansi, Selkup, Nenets and others – faced continued marginalisation and spatial containment due to the legacy of state violence, collectivisation, paternalistic policies, and exacerbated ecological challenges. The proposed research project asks: how architectural expertise and knowledge participated in and informed the territorialisation of Western Siberia as a landscape for resource extraction? What techniques of mobile and portable architecture were brought forward to facilitate mass migration and "acclimatisation" of oil industry workers and the displacement/sedentarisation of indigenous communities? How were epistemic binaries, such as "indigenous/modern", "nomadic/mobile" and "vernacular/industrial", produced and maintained amidst this process?

Guided by these questions, during March–April 2024, I conducted research at the Open Society Archives in Budapest within the framework of Visegrad research scholarship. During the fellowship, I went through archival sources from the Records of the Open Media Research Institute and Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute, which allowed me to reconstruct contemporaneous media coverage of Soviet extractivist state policies, the mass resettlement of oil industry workers to Western Siberia, and the changing livelihoods of Khanty, Mansi, Nenets and other indigenous groups, many of whom were displaced due to those policies. Press surveys, reports and documentary films about the indigenous communities and intellectuals from these collections helped me reconstruct various discourses around rotational settlements, domesticity of fly-in/fly-out workers and indigenous portable architecture, that emerged during the *Perestroika* era and continued through the 1990s. Furthermore, I retraced the historical media coverage and reports of living conditions of fly-in/fly-out workers of Western Siberian oil towns, such as Surgut and Nizhnevartovsk. These sources provided essential information for better contextualisation of historical conditions, to which the design and research institutes, construction organisations and industrial enterprises have responded. This

preparatory stage allowed to complete an important part of the historical contextualising work, test research hypotheses, and identify archival and library collections for future analysis.

### *I Subject files*

The first category of files I analysed were subject files, primarily consisting of newspaper clippings, press surveys, and internal reports from the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) arranged following the specific themes of Soviet/Russian economic and cultural governance. These files are evidently the result of RFE's extensive press monitoring of the Soviet press and Russian press in the immediate post-Soviet period.

The first broad thematic section related to the “national question” of indigenous ethnic minorities – Khanty, Mansi, Nenets, and Selkup – sourced from various Soviet and later Russian central newspapers (e.g., *Ogoniok*, *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*) and regional newspapers (e.g., *Novosti Udry*). The articles reviewed a range of topics, including Soviet cultural, educational, language, and civilisational policies. They highlighted the challenges faced by the indigenous communities, such as inequality, high suicide rates, life expectancy disparities between indigenous people and new settlers in Western Siberia, ecological damage, and disputes over land ownership and use. The clippings also described the material culture of indigenous settlements and the changes these settlements endured due to the erection of oil extraction facilities. Additionally, the files provided accounts of the displacement of indigenous groups from their patrimonial territories during the construction of towns such as Kogalym, Langepas, and Surgut. They also highlighted the unfulfilled promises of lightweight mobile homes for indigenous groups involved in reindeer herding. Other press clippings critically evaluated referendums among indigenous groups on “granting” approvals for extractive activities.

A significant portion of the subject files addressed problems of labour recruitment and mobilisation to the Soviet Northern territories, particularly the North of the Tyumen region. These documents signified a transition from rigid Stalin-era methods of labour mobilisation, which widely instrumentalised forced labour, to new governance techniques, such as utilising financial and other incentives to attract workers. Newspaper clippings and reports reviewed the Soviet government's attempts to create “stable” cadres for the Northern territories using these new methods. They also explored the causal connection between the labour shortage in the Tyumen oil region and the lack of adequate housing and social infrastructure.

Therefore, the “housing question” became another central theme in the subject files analysis. Accordingly, I have focused on analysing the newspaper clippings evaluating living conditions in the rotational (fly-in/fly-out) settlements and regional urban centres in Western Siberia. The files contained critical articles on the living conditions of oil and gas industry workers, particularly those residing in slum-like settlements around urban centres such as Surgut. Articles also critiqued the delays in housing and social infrastructure provisions, describing temporary accommodations constructed by citizens in lieu of their housing allocations. The articles also highlighted social and ecological issues associated with rotational and temporary oil and gas settlements: oil spills, health problems among fly-in/fly-out workers and indigenous populations due to a lack of healthcare facilities, and high crime rates.

The subject files provided a comprehensive overview of existing discourses and contemporaneous critical voices reviewing the social, economic, and environmental challenges faced by indigenous communities and new settlers in Western Siberia. The detailed press

clippings and reports helped me understand the contemporary media context and existing discourses discussing Soviet and Russian policies and their impacts on local populations.

## *II The Russian regional files*

The second category of files I examined were the Russian regional files, which consisted of the newspaper clippings and internal RFE/RL reports organized in accordance with the geographical metadata. I focused on the files related to the West Siberian Region, specifically the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug (KhMAO), the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug (YaNAO), and the Taymyr (Dolgano-Nenets) Autonomous District. These files mainly originated in the last years of the Soviet Union's existence and the immediate post-Soviet period (1989-1995), showcasing the intense competition for political power, land and control over the oil production.

Of particular significance in my research were the discussions surrounding the "Law on Subsoil" (1992), a pivotal topic in the early 1990s that directly impacted indigenous rights. The press also extensively covered local elections, indigenous people's political representation, and patrimonial territories' status. A noteworthy event documented was the international conference on "Oil and Indigenous Peoples", held in 1994. The archives also reflect the reception of the UN project for the "Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples" and the workshop on the possible establishment of the UN "Permanent Forum for Indigenous Peoples" in 1995. The files contain articles on indigenous mobilization and their resistance to extensive and poorly regulated oil and gas extraction. For instance, news articles reviewed the 1st Congress of the Representatives of Indigenous Peoples (1989) and press clippings featuring positions of indigenous intelligentsia, such as those of the Khanty writer Yeremey Aipin. These sources offer a perspective on existing critiques of centrally devised development plans that aimed to reorganize indigenous ways of life in line with norms of late Soviet and Russian modernity.

## *III OSA Library*

The OSA library collection gave me access to two relevant Soviet periodicals: the professional architectural journal *Arkhitektura SSSR* (Architecture of the USSR) and the popular science journal *Tekhnika Molodezhi* (Technology for the Youth). I analysed all issues of the *Arkhitektura SSSR* between 1960 and 1989; for *Tekhnika Molodezhi*, I analysed all available issues between 1960 and 1975.

*Tekhnika Molodezhi* was published by the Central Committee of the All-Union Leninist Communist Youth League and addressed young Soviet technical intelligentsia, many of whom were potential new settlers in Western Siberia and the Soviet North. I used this publication to reconstruct the visions and ideologies for developing the Northern built environments. The journal depicted futuristic, comfortable and self-sufficient cities extending into Northern forests and rivers. The narrative of "mastering" or "conquest" of a "hostile" nature was prevalent in the discussion of such projects. Many publications promoted an idea of an equilibrium: an idyllic vision of industrial development and continuous indigenous coexistence, where allegedly conflict-free industrial extractivist and "traditional" herding and hunting activities could co-exist in "balance". Despite the techno-utopian imagery in *Tekhnika Molodezhi*, the reality of extractive activities and paternalistic state policies, as we have seen from the Subject and Russian regional files, had catastrophic effects on some indigenous groups. Indigenous communities experienced

social, cultural and economic marginalization as they struggled to maintain connection to their patrimonial settlements amidst industrial encroachment.

*Arkhitektura SSSR* was a professional journal published by the Union of Architects of the USSR and the State Committee for Architecture and Urban Planning under the USSR State Construction Committee. This journal was a professional publication for specialists in construction, structural engineering, architecture and urban planning. I have analysed the journal's issues to identify existing proposals (both realised and unrealised) for constructing and equipping the rotational oil and gas settlements, as well as various professional opinions on the modes of mobility existing at the time. The journal featured proposals for climate-controlled environments, including rotational settlements with courtyards, gardens, and enclosed passages. Other designs included transportable autonomous buildings powered by solar energy. Prefabricated buildings made of lightweight materials such as aluminium, wood, or plastic were common in architectural proposals. For instance, Krasnoyarsk Promstroyniproekt developed "block packages" made from timber — lightweight, cheap, easily assembled by non-specialists, and "adaptable" to extremely low temperatures with tailored insulation techniques. These could be transported by truck, aeroplane, train, or helicopter, addressing the region's logistical challenges. The Solginsky house-building plant in the Arkhangelsk region was also a significant supplier of wooden panel houses to Western Siberia and the Baikal-Amur Mainline. Another interesting, less popular, mobile building type was pneumatic structures, promoted by Moscow-based architect and sculptor Vyacheslav Koleychuk. These self-expanding structures could be transported flat and erected in hours, though there is no evidence of their realisation nor their widespread use in Western Siberia.

While researching the journals, I found several (largely unrealised) projects of mobile building units designed for indigenous mobile pastoralists incorporated into the Soviet economy as "professional reindeer herders." Once a "lifestyle" or cultural practice informed by indigenous knowledge, following collectivisation, their activity was redefined as a type of waged labour as they were arranged in herding brigades or collectives. Architects employed various strategies to accommodate indigenous communities' mobility: replacement of traditional building materials with modern ones, such as the Nganasan sledge tent formerly covered with animal skins was presented in the plastic version; modernisation of conventional building typologies, such as Khanty seasonal houses re-designed in a "modern" silhouette; vernacularisation of otherwise modernist building typologies with "traditional" ornaments or tent-looking volumes; introduction of entirely new elements to herders' material reality.

These sources were further contextualized by other archival collections I previously analyzed, revealing architectural involvement's aspirational nature. It became evident that most of the widespread mobile or temporary building typologies were provided by industrial enterprises rather than professional architectural design institutes. Therefore, this highlights a significant area for further research into the intersection of industrial influence and architectural practices in designing for labour mobility in Western Siberia.

#### *IV OSA Film Library*

During the time of my fellowship, I had a chance to work with the OSA film library. Below are summaries of some of the documentary and ethnographic films that were relevant to the present

research. These films were crucial in illustrating the stark differences in how settlers and indigenous peoples navigated the challenges posed by Soviet extractivism. They provided a nuanced understanding of the socio-political landscape and the varying resistance strategies of indigenous activists, reflecting their struggle for recognition, rights, and environmental justice in the face of continuous industrial encroachment in the immediate post-Soviet period.

The documentaries predominantly explore the adverse effects of industrial activities on indigenous communities. “Oil Field” (2012) by Ivan Golovnev captures the traditional lifestyle of the Khanty and Nenets people in the Beloyarsky District, highlighting the disruption caused by the oil industry. The film follows Vasily and Svetlana Pyak, reindeer herders whose lives and livelihoods are imperilled by encroaching oil operations. It illustrates a decline in their reindeer population and compromises with the oil industry the family chooses to allow to maintain their settlement. Similarly, “Lost Land” (1998) by Manfred van Eyk documents the environmental degradation and cultural erosion faced by the Khanty people in Ugut, Western Siberia, as their traditional subsistence practices are jeopardized by oil pollution and habitat destruction.

Several films highlight the socio-political struggles and activism of indigenous leaders. “Voices” (1996) by Valentin Kuik chronicles Khanty writer Yeremey Aipin’s efforts to represent his people in the Russian State Duma. Despite his moderate approach of advocating for fair resource redistribution and land rights without openly opposing oil extraction, Aipin’s political journey is fraught with obstacles, including his disqualification from the 1995 elections. In contrast, “Vella” (2005) by Vladimir Gerchikov portrays Yury Vella, a Nenets activist, who adopts a confrontational stance against the oil industry. He openly opposed the Lukoil by slashing the tyres of one of the snowmobiles belonging to the oil company. Vella’s commitment to protecting indigenous lands from oil pollution and his advocacy for land rights were central themes in his poetry and activism. Vella’s resistance highlighted the severe environmental and cultural impacts of oil extraction on indigenous communities but also testified to the possibility of indigenous criticism that briefly existed in the late 1980s and the 1990s.

Another theme foregrounded in the ethnographic films is the resilience and preservation of cultural identity amidst external pressures. “Old Man Peter” (2008) by Ivan Golovnev depicts the solitary life of Petr Ivanovich Sengepov in a reindeer nomad camp. The film showcases his use of the Khanty language, performance of rituals, participation in the political process (voting), and the impact of historical trauma, as his father, a shaman, was executed during the suppression of the Kazym rebellion in the 1930s.

### *Conclusion*

I concluded my stay at the OSA Archives with the presentation titled “Provisional Architectures of Soviet Extractivism,” held on April 30, 2024. This presentation encapsulated my research findings and insights from the archival materials and films I analysed at the OSA. I want to thank the OSA team and my fellow researchers for this incredible opportunity and their invaluable support throughout my residency. Their contributions have been instrumental in the development of this research project.

### *List of sources*

Call Number	Name	Timeframe	Contents
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HU OSA 300-85-12:202/23	National Question: Khanty-mansi [Khants and Mansis]	1988-1991	Newspaper clippings, news surveys
HU OSA 205-4-203:30/3	68 West-Siberian Region: Khanty-Mansiisk Autonomous District (Khanty-Mansiisk)	1995-1996	Articles, reports
HU OSA 205-4-201:221/7	Regions: Khanty-Mansi Okrug	1993-1995	Articles, open letters
HU OSA 300-80-1:869/6	Russia: geopolitical structure: Khanty-Mansi national district	1974-1993	Newspaper clippings, press conference reports
HU OSA 300-85-12:197/2	National Question: Small Peoples: Of the North	1931-1993	Newspaper clippings, news surveys
HU OSA 300-81-9:396/7	Problemy malochislennykh narodov Severa Rossiiskoi Federatsii	1993	A television program about the “small peoples” of the North of the Russian Federation
HU OSA 300-85-44:34/13	[Ecology: North]	1992	Unpublished samizdat on ecological problems in the Soviet North
HU OSA 300-85-12:65/5	Groups: Environmental: the North	1989	Newspaper clippings
HU OSA 205-4-201:231/7	Regions: Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug	1992-1995	Newspaper clippings
HU OSA HU OSA 205-4-203:32/2	74: East-Siberian Region: Taimyr (Dolgano-Nenets) Autonomous District (Dudinka)	1995-1997	Newspaper clippings
HU OSA HU OSA 205-4-203:32/1	73: East-Siberian Region: Krasnoiarsk Krai [1996 - 1997]	1996-1997	Newspaper clippings
HU OSA 300-5-170:62/4	Labor Mobility	1977-1987	TBA
HU OSA 300-80-1:1041/2; HU OSA 300-80-1:1041/3	Labor: recruitment and mobilisation	1962-1973 1974-1987	TBA
HU OSA 300-8-3-7632	Labour Mobility in the Soviet Union	1969	RFE/RL internal report
HU OSA 300-8-3-6584	The Question of mobile Labor Force	1961	RFE/RL internal report
HU OSA 297-0-1-67077	Prime Cost of Tyumen Oil Disclosed	1970	RFE/RL internal report
HU OSA 300-2-8:45/2	International technology transfer for oil and gas extraction in Western Siberia; international gas and oil export agreements	1976-1978	Newspaper clippings

HU OSA 300-80-1/268	Housing question in the Soviet Union. Discussions of “rotational” settlements and Northern construction	1964-72	Newspaper clippings; RFE/RL internal report
HU OSA 424-0-1-021 (Soviet Propaganda Films Collection)	Samyi severnyi gorod	1984	A propaganda film featuring operations of extractive industries and everyday life in Noril'sk
HU OSA 424-0-1-073 (Soviet Propaganda Films Collection)	Chelovek - khoziain severa	1960	A propaganda film on everyday life of Evenk and Nenets people amidst Sovietisation; scientific ‘exploration’ of the North of Siberia
HU OSA 300-81-9:381/6	Life in Taiga	Ca. 1992-1994	Russian TV programme dedicated to problems experienced by the “peoples of the North”
HU OSA 300-81-9:396/7	The Problems of Smaller Peoples of the North of the Russian Federation	Ca. 1992-1994	Russian TV programme about “smaller peoples of the North of the Russian Federation”
HU OSA 300-81-9:400/6	Far From Moscow	Ca. 1992-1994	A documentary film about problems in the Soviet Far North
HU OSA 300-81-9:537/15	Raduzhnyi's Flowers, or The Formula of Happiness	Ca. 1992-1994	A Russian TV program about the history of oil production in the town of Raduzhnyi in Western Siberia
HU OSA 424-0-1-100 (Soviet Propaganda Films Collection)	Zapadnaia Sibir' - Zapadnaia Evropa	1983	A propaganda film featuring housing conditions of Urengoy-Pomary-Uzhgorod pipeline construction workers
FL Record 2527 (OSA Film Library)	Voices	1995	A documentary film on Khanty people and Khanty activist Yeremey Aipin
FL Record 2579 (OSA Film Library)	Lost Land	1998	A documentary film on Khanty people and crude oil industry in Western Siberia
FL Record 2241 (OSA Film Library)	Wella	2005	A documentary film featuring activist Yuri Wella and challenges of Forest Nenets in Western Siberia
FL Record 1225 (OSA Film Library)	Yaptik-Hasse	2006	A documentary film on nomadic Nenets

FL Record 1760 (OSA Film Library)	Old Man Peter	2008	An ethnographic film about the last surviving shaman of the Kazym river
FL Record 3193 (OSA Film Library)	Oil field	2012	An ethnographic film about the everyday life of Khanty and Nenets indigenous couple in the context of oil extraction
7/44/1/5 (OSA Archivum Library)	Arkhitektura SSSR : teoreticheskii, nauchno-prakticheskii zhurnal	1953-1986	Professional architectural journal issues
HU OSA 300 - RFE/RL collection	Problemy Severa / Akademiia nauk SSSR, Komissiiia po problemam Severa Soveta po izucheniiu proizvoditel'nykh sil	1965	A professional journal of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR dedicated to the development of the Soviet North
338.2/7/2820947 CAM (OSA Archivum Library)	Trends in Soviet Oil and gas industry	1976	A report on Soviet petroleum industry and trade