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# CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY IN THE RUSSIAN WOODEN ARCHITECTURE IN 19TH-CENTURY ALASKA AND ITS INFLUENCE ON MODERN HERITAGE PRACTICES

## *SUSTENTABILIDADE CULTURAL NA ARQUITETURA RUSSA DE MADEIRA NO ALASCA DO SÉCULO XIX E SUA INFLUÊNCIA NAS PRÁTICAS MODERNAS DE PRESERVAÇÃO DO PATRIMÔNIO*

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**Irina Grin***
*National Research Moscow State University of Civil En-gineering
Moscow, Russia
Orcid: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-0708-8483
irina.y.grin@mymail.academy

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**Abstract**
This study examines the structural, planning, and cultural features of Russian wooden architecture preserved in nineteenth-century Novo-Arkhangelsk, now the city of Sitka. The research integrates archival materials, church records, and field meas-urements to clarify the architectural and engineering characteristics of major surviving buildings and to situate them within cur-rent discussions on heritage preservation and sustainable development. The findings show that these structures were created through a hybrid Russian-Finnish construction system that combined traditional log-building techniques with European meas-urement practices. The buildings display advanced engineering solutions for their time, including multi-layered thermal insula-tion, complex roof truss systems, and reinforced foundations adapted to Alaskan climatic conditions. Beyond their technical qualities, the buildings served as instruments of cultural presence and community formation and continue to function as markers of long-term cultural sustainability. Their preservation as national historic landmarks demonstrates how historic architecture contributes to sustainable development by supporting identity continuity, responsible land use, and climate-appropriate construc-tion principles. The architectural heritage of Russian America presents a distinctive example of how traditional building methods can support both cultural and environmental sustainability in northern regions.

**Keywords:** Russian America. Novo-Arkhangelsk. Sitka. Russian-American Company. Russian Building System in North America.

***Resumo***
*Este estudo examina as características estruturais, de planejamento e culturais da arquitetura russa em madeira preservada em Novo-Arkhangelsk, no século XIX, atual cidade de Sitka. A pesquisa integra materiais de arquivo, registros da igreja e medições de campo para esclarecer as características arquitetônicas e de engenharia dos principais edifícios remanescentes e situá-los dentro das discussões atuais sobre preservação do patrimônio e desenvolvimento sustentável. Os resultados mostram que essas estruturas foram criadas por meio de um sistema de construção híbrido russo-finlandês que combinava técnicas tradi-cionais de construção em toras com práticas europeias de medição. Os edifícios exibem soluções de engenharia avançadas para a época, incluindo isolamento térmico multicamadas, sistemas complexos de treliças de telhado e fundações reforçadas adaptadas às condições climáticas do Alasca. Além de suas qualidades técnicas, os edifícios serviram como instrumentos de presença cul-tural e formação de comunidade e continuam a funcionar como marcadores de sustentabilidade cultural a longo prazo. Sua preservação como marcos históricos nacionais demonstra como a arquitetura histórica contribui para o desenvolvimento susten-tável, apoiando a continuidade da identidade, o uso responsável da terra e princípios de construção adequados ao clima. O patri-mônio arquitetônico da América Russa apresenta um exemplo singular de como os métodos construtivos tradicionais podem contribuir para a sustentabilidade cultural e ambiental nas regiões setentrionais.*

***Palavras-chave:*** *América Russa. Novo-Arkhangelsk. Sitka. Companhia Russo-Americana. Sistema Construtivo Russo na América do Norte.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

On the territory of present-day Alaska, Russian presence left a lasting imprint through residential, public, and auxiliary buildings constructed by trade and industrial companies, as well as churches and structures of the Russian Orthodox mission. This presence spanned from the second half of the 18th century until 1867, when Russian America was transferred to the United States through a sale agreement. The exploration and consolidation of Alaska as Russian America were supported by the human and financial resources of the Russian-American Company, along with Orthodox missionaries officially sent to the region by the Russian diocese in 1794.

The buildings constructed in the early 19th century in Novo-Arkhangelsk (now Sitka) and preserved to this day possess distinctive architectural, structural, and engineering features that set them apart from standard North American designs. It is no coincidence that three buildings from the Russian period have been included in the National Historic Landmarks list. Novo-Arkhangelsk quickly grew from a fort and, by 1804, became the new headquarters of the Russian-American Company. Its rapid development led to its designation as the capital of Russian America in 1808 [1, pp. 57–69], prompting the construction of large-scale buildings. For instance, the Cathedral of St. Michael the Archangel—Alaska's largest Orthodox church, built by the Russian-American Company—has retained both its urban and civic significance [2, pp. 13–14].

The Russian-American Company was the first to begin developing Alaska, founding the earliest Russian settlements while expanding trade and resource extraction. In 1799, the company was granted exclusive rights to conduct trade and exploitation in Alaska by Emperor Paul I of Russia [3, pp. 114–121]. By the early 19th century, it had established robust administrative and financial infrastructure. Under the 1821 decree signed by Emperor Alexander I, the company was obligated to support the Russian Orthodox Church [4, pp. 6–12]. Fulfilling this decree guaranteed the company the necessary imperial backing to continue its commercial operations successfully.

The architectural legacy of Russian America in Novo-Arkhangelsk (Sitka) holds significance not only in terms of its structural and urban uniqueness but also within a broader historical-political context. In the first half of the 19th century, the Russian Empire actively used missionary activity as a key instrument of foreign policy, long before the concept of "soft power" was formally introduced. Orthodox missions dispatched to remote regions of the empire, including Alaska, played a dual role—spreading religion while strengthening Russia's cultural, linguistic, and administrative footprint. In the case of Russian America, missionary work was closely aligned with the interests of the Russian-American Company and often accompanied territorial colonization, framing Russia's expansion as both humanitarian and civilizational in nature.

The construction of churches, episcopal buildings, and schools under the patronage of religious missions became an integral part of Novo-Arkhangelsk's architectural landscape. These structures symbolized stability, order, and cultural identity, while also serving a diplomatic role—demonstrating to local communities and foreign observers the technological, aesthetic, and spiritual capacities of the Russian Empire. Furthermore, the clergy served as mediators between the Russian administration and Indigenous populations, fostering more peaceful integration of the region. Thus, analyzing the structural and planning features of Russian buildings from this period is inseparable from understanding the missionary movement as a component of Russia's cultural expansion and foreign influence strategy in the Pacific region. These buildings—products of both engineering ingenuity and ideological intent—bear witness to the intersection of religious, commercial, and diplomatic interests of the empire.

The surviving buildings constructed by the Russian-American Company in Alaska illustrate a high standard of craftsmanship and a keen adaptation to local climatic conditions. The use of Russian building systems reflects the national character of the architectural, structural, and engineering traditions embedded within these constructions.

## 2 METHODS

The study employs a comprehensive historical-architectural approach to investigate the structural and planning features of Russian buildings preserved in the city of Novo-Arkhangelsk (modern-day Sitka) from the period of Russian America. A broad

range of primary and secondary sources was analyzed, including archival drawings, measurement data, and historical documents from the US Library of Congress, the Department of Historic Preservation, and the National Register of Historic Places. Additionally, church records from the Orthodox Church in America were examined. The author conducted on-site architectural measurements of preserved structures, such as the Russian Bishop's House and the headquarters of the Russian-American Company, allowing for the comparison of dimensional modules and construction techniques with Russian and European standards of the 19th century.

Comparative analysis was a central methodological tool, applied to examine the differences in construction systems and measuring units (such as the Russian and European fathom/sazhen). The study also incorporated cartographic materials and early architectural surveys to clarify the chronology of buildings and identify the involvement of Finnish carpenters in the construction process. This allowed for the establishment of a connection between European construction norms and their adaptation in the harsh climatic and geographical conditions of Alaska. As a result, the methodology combines historical source analysis, structural measurement, and architectural typology to reveal the uniqueness and influence of Russian wooden architecture on the built environment of Russian America.

## 3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Builders and construction systems of Russian America in the 19th Century

Novo-Arkhangelsk became the main administrative center of Russian America in Alaska. The city's rapid development was facilitated by the presence of a convenient harbor and elevated terrain that allowed it to occupy strategic positions for defense and maritime control. A new site for the main church—the large Cathedral of St. Michael the Archangel—was selected on the upper elevations in the city center. As Novo-Arkhangelsk grew into the capital of Alaska, a more spacious cathedral was required to reflect its elevated status. A central plot was designated for this purpose. The architectural and structural features of the cathedral are discussed in a separate article by the author (I. Y. Grin. Historical and Architectural Significance of the Cathedral of St. Michael the Archangel in Sitka).

To this day, the cathedral remains the symbolic and urban-planning centerpiece of the city, completing Sitka's main street—formerly the heart of Novo-Arkhangelsk. All churches of this period were built of wood, and the Cathedral of St. Michael the Archangel stands out as an exception for its scale and compositional dominance. Around it were concentrated key civic buildings linking the city center with the seaport. In the first half of the 19th century, the tallest structure after the cathedral was the headquarters of the Russian-American Company. Second in size and public importance was the so-called Russian Bishop's House, also located nearby and built by the craftsmen of the Russian-American Company.

From 1840 to 1845, the company was headed by Adolph Karlovich Etolin. According to established protocol, the company's leader automatically held the title of Governor of Russian America, managing its primary resources. Etolin, born and raised in Swedish Finland, entered the service of the Russian Empire. Research suggests that Etolin invited experienced carpenters and builders from Finland, relying on their craftsmanship and reliability. His patronage enabled these Finnish artisans to receive the majority of construction contracts, including the most important projects, over a span of nearly twenty years [5, p. 5–6]. Several governors came and went during this time, but Finnish builders consistently maintained priority in construction.

The primary building material was wood—mostly spruce from the densely forested hills nearby. The basic structural and planning scheme was the log frame, traditional to Russian construction. However, since the "Russian orders" were carried out by Finnish builders, elements of both Russian and Finnish traditions merged in the structural system, roof forms, and external appearance of the buildings.

As a result, these buildings immediately stood out from typical North American architecture. Unsurprisingly, the high quality of construction, architectural detailing, and engineering ingenuity led to several of these structures being listed in the U.S. National Historic Landmarks registry.

The buildings of the Bishop's House and the Russian-American Company headquarters were divided lengthwise into equal bays (nine in the Bishop's House and six in the headquarters), each one sazhen in length, equivalent to 7 American feet as recorded in the official documentation. Measurements and calculations carried out by the author show that the "Russian sazhen" used in construction was 2.134 meters—consistent with the European definition of the Russian sazhen in the 19th century.

This "European sazhen," labeled as "Russian," appeared in the first half of the 19th century as part of the officially adopted metric system in Germany (Palatinate standard) and matched the standard used in France (see Official Units of Measurement in Europe, 1842) [6, pp. 137/131]. The European sazhen is shorter than the traditional Russian oblique sazhen, which is about 2.48 meters. Such discrepancies between the Russian and European sazhens suggest that the builders of the Bishop's House, company headquarters, and other buildings of this period were Finnish craftsmen who followed European measurement standards. Based on precise measurements and comparison of the two metric systems—Russian and European—the author argues that the term "European sazhen" should be used in official building records in Sitka, rather than the generalized "Russian sazhen." These features of the construction module clearly demonstrate that for nearly two decades, Finnish craftsmen in Alaska used a "Russian metric scheme" aligned with the European sazhen.

The following sections will provide a detailed examination of two key buildings from the Russian America period that have survived in Sitka: the Russian Bishop's House and the headquarters of the Russian-American Company.

### 3.2 The russian bishop's house as a multifunctional building of the 19th Century

Located next to the Cathedral of St. Michael the Archangel at the intersection of Lincoln and Monastery Streets is the so-called Russian Bishop's House. In the U.S. National Register of Historic Places, this building is also known as the Russian Episcopal House, the Russian Mission Orphanage, and the Bishop's House with the Church of the Annunciation, reflecting the multiple functions it served from the time of its construction. The building simultaneously housed the bishop's residence, the diocesan administrative offices on the first floor, and a school that initially functioned as a parish school for Russian and Native children; a seminary was later established there as well. The second floor contained the apartment of Bishop Innocent and the Annunciation Chapel.

The Russian Bishop's House served as a cultural, educational, and religious center not only during the active years of the Russian mission (1840s–1867), but also retained its importance well into the mid-20th century, even after Alaska was sold to the United States [7, pp. 11–23]. Although Russian America was ceded, the agreement allowed the Russian Orthodox Church to retain jurisdiction over its properties. Nonetheless, the

mission still needed to seek authorization and funding from the Holy Synod in St. Petersburg for essential matters, such as the major renovations carried out in 1887 by Peter Kalssen's team. In 1872, the bishop's residence moved to San Francisco, and the Bishop's House began to accommodate clergy serving in Sitka. However, in 1903, a new diocese was established specifically for the Aleutian Islands and Alaska, with its center in Sitka, prompting new changes in the building's function and layout [8, pp. 4–6].

After 1917, the Russian Orthodox Church in America could no longer be subordinate to the Holy Synod and began to operate as an independent public organization. The building was used for its own needs and rented out to various city services and organizations until the early 1960s. In 1962, the Bishop's House—then better known as the Russian Mission Orphanage—was designated a U.S. National Historic Landmark. A detailed assessment of the building's condition was conducted, and in 1967, it was added to the National Register of Historic Places. In 1972, the land parcel—owned by the Russian Orthodox Church for 130 years—was purchased with the approval of the U.S. Congress and transferred to the National Park Service, which assumed responsibility for restoring all 18th–19th century buildings related to Russian presence in the region. Restoration of the Russian Bishop's House included removing later additions and alterations, reinforcing the foundation, and replacing deteriorated structural elements [7, pp. 8–9].

Adjacent to the Bishop's House—still occupying its original historic parcel—are two auxiliary structures: a two-story frame school building (9.75 × 5.49 m or 32 × 18 ft) and a nearly square one-story service building (8.5 × 7.9 m or 28 × 26 ft). However, these were built in 1897 and are not part of the Russian America period. To this day, the Russian Bishop's House remains an important public building, currently housing city administrative offices and a small museum dedicated to Bishop Innocent (I. Veniaminov).

Constructed between 1841 and 1843 by the Russian-American Company, the Russian Bishop's House (or Russian Episcopal House) was built during the same period as the first chapel in Sitka, predating the completion of the Cathedral of St. Michael the Archangel [8]. The project was associated with the return of Father Innocent (I. Veniaminov) from St. Petersburg to Alaska in 1841, now elevated to bishop of Kamchatka, the Kuril Islands, and the Aleutians. Archival evidence suggests that Bishop Innocent designed the cathedral and possibly drew the plans for his own residence [7, p. 13; 9, p. 123]. On the second floor, adjacent to his private quarters, a chapel for solitary

prayer was built. Much of the liturgical furnishings in this Annunciation Chapel were brought from the chapel at Fort Ross following the 1842 sale of that territory in California by the Russian-American Company [7, pp. 3–4].

The Bishop's House is a two-story log structure with bay windows and a hipped roof. It measures 19.20 × 12.80 meters (63 × 42 feet). The complex hipped roof is made of boards and supported by a truss system with tie beams functioning as structural elements. The foundation is composed of crushed stone, carefully arranged from larger to smaller stones to level the construction site, which slopes sharply toward the sea.

The building is divided lengthwise into nine equal bays, each measuring one sazhen, equivalent to 7 American feet or 2.134 meters, according to the European interpretation of the Russian sazhen used in the 19th century (see above). Each bay on the main (north) facade corresponds to a window, and originally, there were seven windows per floor. On the second floor of the south side, there were six windows. Two-story galleries (4.27 m or 14 ft wide) were attached on the east and west sides, clad in vertical boards and battens. These galleries had their own gable roofs, lower than the main roof. They housed staircases, toilets, and utility rooms, and also functioned as vestibules that prevented cold air from entering the heated interiors.

The south facade, initially composed of exposed logs, was later clad with boards by Russian settlers to retain heat—this was done prior to 1867. The main north facade retained its original log walls until 1897. Later, under American administration, all facades were clad in wooden boards with battens.

The Russian Bishop's House was entered into the U.S. National Register not only as a historical artifact but also as a model of a new level of wooden construction, showcasing superior craftsmanship and planning and construction systems previously unseen in North America.

### 3.3 The russian-american company headquarters as an example of russian architecture in Sitka

To the right of the Cathedral of St. Michael the Archangel stands a massive two-story log building with a steep gabled roof and attic, originally constructed as the headquarters of the Russian-American Trading and Industrial Company. It is the only surviving building from this once-prominent commercial organization, which for many

years contributed substantial revenues to the Russian Empire through its profitable enterprises. It is no coincidence that this building, located on the city's main street, functioned as a crucial link connecting the port docks and the cathedral into a single, vital urban system.

Today, the building is privately owned and serves a commercial purpose. However, in 1961, it was granted protected status as the Tilson Building and added to the U.S. National Register of Historic Places [10]. The exact date of construction remains debated: some researchers suggest 1835, but based on various maps and drawings from 1835 to 1867, held in the archives of the U.S. Department of the Interior and the National Park Service [11], it is more accurate to state that the building was constructed no earlier than 1846, possibly in the 1850s. The Tilson Building is officially listed as a typical example of Russian settler architecture in Novo-Arkhangelsk (Sitka). However, direct measurements and comparisons of Russian and European sazhen units suggest that, like the Cathedral of St. Michael and the Bishop's House, the building was constructed by Finnish craftsmen invited by Adolph Karlovich Etolin, despite the change in governorship during its construction [12, pp. 5–6].

The building is large and two-storied, resting on a substantial stone foundation with a partial basement and keel-shaped vaults, topped with a tall hipped roof. This traditional Russian feature—the hipped roof—visually distinguished the building from the surrounding cityscape. Beyond its height and unusual form, American researchers were particularly struck by the original Russian wooden truss system: the roof of the headquarters employed a log-joining technique resembling a truss, which had not been previously used in North America.

In some texts, it is mentioned that the roof was covered with tiles. However, it was most likely wooden shingles, as clay was scarce in the region. For this reason, bricks and other clay-based materials had to be transported from afar—such as from Fort Ross in California. Materials and photographs from 1870 support the conclusion that by the time the Russians departed Alaska, the building's roof was indeed covered with shingles.

After 1867, following the departure of most of the Russian population due to the sale of Alaska, the building's exterior was clad in overlapping wooden siding, giving it a distinctly American appearance. However, some scholars suggest that this process may have begun gradually even during the final years of the Russian-American Company's presence. This hypothesis is supported by P. C. Cloyd and E. S. Donald, who reference

photographs and drawings of other buildings constructed by the Russian-American Company [13, pp. 20–21].

The company headquarters was originally conceived as a large structure, with sufficient space to accommodate both office areas and housing for several company employees. In general, the Russian-American Company built its facilities using a commune-like layout—combining office spaces, living quarters, a communal kitchen, a bakery, a laundry, and storage units. This compact configuration was a practical response to the harsh living conditions in these newly settled lands. The massive log walls were finely hewn and squared, with logs shaped to be convex on top and concave on the bottom for a snug fit. Some logs were marked with Arabic and Roman numerals to ensure precise assembly in the intended sequence. The corners were joined using the traditional "dovetail" technique. The floor's foundation consisted of halved logs topped with floorboards laid crosswise and joined using grooved connections [13]. Ceiling insulation followed traditional Russian building methods: a canvas was stretched above the beams and then covered with a thick layer of sand.

The interior logs were even more finely finished to prepare the walls for painting or wallpapering [14, p. 179]. The façade reflects the building's structural logic: the layout is clearly divided into four bays of one sazhen each, corresponding to the European version of the Russian sazhen used during that period. Each bay measures 28 feet (8.5 meters), equaling four European sazhens. The main entrance is marked by a one-story gallery with a porch and railings, attached to the right side of the building.

Notes from a traveler in 1865 provide a detailed description of the Russian-American Company building shortly before Alaska's transfer to the United States. W. H. Dall noted that the thick log walls painted light ochre and the red-tiled roof stood out in both color and form against the backdrop of forested hills, forming a sharp contrast with the typical American urban environment: "…It seemed to belong to a world of its own" [15].

Photographs from 1887 show that the gallery had been extended to the height of the second-floor roof, and an annex was added, expanding the building by two additional bays—or two more sazhens—creating a unified structure with two more windows on the second floor. The steep gabled roof was also updated to include four attic dormers [16, p. 7]. Drawings from the 1870s and photos from the 1880s confirm that the building retained its original double-leaf windows, with cornices appearing over the windows and doors

only in the 1880s, after Alaska ceased to be Russian territory. Later, in the 20th century, the windows were replaced with American-style ones featuring a single horizontal divider, though the original muntin pattern in the attic windows was preserved.

The 1966 fire, which destroyed the Cathedral of St. Michael the Archangel and most of the surrounding wooden buildings, miraculously spared the Russian-American Company headquarters. It is possible that a change in wind direction from the sea diverted the fire away from the structure. Unfortunately, this building remains the only surviving original structure of the Russian-American Company in Sitka. Now privately owned and officially listed as the Tilson Building in the U.S. National Register of Historic Places, the headquarters has been preserved not only for its historical value but also for maintaining its foundation, structural elements, original dimensions, and iconic high hipped roof for nearly 180 years—still standing out prominently amid Sitka's now much-expanded cityscape.

## 4 CONCLUSION

Buildings constructed during the development of Alaska and the existence of Russian America—and preserved to this day in the city of Sitka (originally called Novo-Arkhangelsk)—were built by the Russian-American Trading and Construction Company. Among these are the company's own headquarters as well as structures commissioned by the Russian Orthodox Mission, such as the Cathedral of St. Michael the Archangel and the Bishop's House. These buildings remain significant milestones in the formation of the city's urban layout and continue to shape the unique character of its main street. They have retained their historical and social significance as large public and multifunctional structures.

The historical and architectural importance of these buildings is rooted in their unique construction features based on traditional Russian log-building techniques, their high-quality craftsmanship, and distinctive carpentry and joinery methods that contrast with those used in typical American construction of the period. These buildings are one-of-a-kind, each with its own architectural, planning, and structural characteristics that clearly set them apart from projects built to 19th-century North American standards.

The study of the buildings' structural elements revealed discrepancies between the Russian sazhen and its European variation. The repeated use of a particular sazhen size

in buildings constructed by the Russian-American Company suggests that the Bishop's House and company headquarters were most likely built by Finnish carpenters and joiners who adhered to European standards of the Russian sazhen.

The Russian-American Trading and Industrial Company was responsible for constructing the most important buildings in Alaska's capital at the time. These structures featured a unique thermal insulation system that included a triple sand layer between the foundation and floorboards, as well as above the ceilings of both floors. They also had high door thresholds and enclosed entryways (vestibules), functioning as airlocks—features that American researchers refer to as galleries.

In a traditional Russian home, it was customary to include large stone or brick stoves, which were integrated into the building's modular system based on the sazhen. The sazhen-based layout divided the building into sections in a way that helped retain and distribute heat efficiently throughout the rooms. These techniques reduced heat loss and were typical of traditional Russian houses designed for long, cold winters.

The Russian buildings constructed in Alaska demonstrated original and effective structural and engineering systems that were traditional in Russian wooden architecture but had not been applied on the North American continent before the mid-19th century.

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## Authors' Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

**Data availability**

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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