

Penedo: A Finnish Utopian Colony In Brazil 80 years

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Introduction

Penedo is a Finnish colony, created in 1929 in the Rio de Janeiro State, Brazil. A group of young vegetarians, led by Toivo Uuskallio,¹ bought a farm and created a community where freedom, life close to nature in the tropics and equality between people were the main ideals. He had a “call” to create a new society in the South, and was followed by a group organized within naturalistic movements. That was the result of some existing movements in Finland, of natural treatments for health, vegetarianism and some Pentecostal religious thoughts, and also Uuskallio’s own ideals.² The end of the 19th and beginning of 20th Century was a period of great migration from Finland, especially to the United States and Canada but there were some different experiences that Peltoniemi³ called the foundation of Finnish Utopian Colonies, with examples as Sointula in Canada, founded at 1900, Colonia Finlandesa in Argentina, created at 1906 and Penedo in Brazil, founded in 1929.⁴

Penedo was a vegetarian colony, where the pioneers strived to equal work division and wanted to build a new society, living a natural life in harmony with religious principles. Respect for nature and freedom were the commandments of the project, which would regulate the colony’s life for a while. The installation of the settlement followed Uuskallio’s Housing Project,⁵ which was the basis for a communal life, organizing space and people’s lives.

Architect and Urbanist, born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1964. Completed his Architecture formation at Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro/UFRJ (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro), in 1987. Also studied History of Art and Architecture at Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro. He wrote his dissertation about the Finnish utopian colony of Penedo.

The construction of houses and opening of roads were part of the project, and it also regulated the part of the farm that would be occupied, the forest that should be maintained, including a deep concern with the river and its pollution. After the initial subsistence horticultural activities, the settlement functioned during the period between 1929–1942 as a utopian colony, when finally it suffered economical difficulties and problems to implant a harmonious community.⁶ Penedo continued to exist after that, but as a touristic village, in a traditional way. It was particularly important for this study the memories of some pioneers,⁷ books of the founders and Uuskallio’s Housing Project. The written plan, a text with 20 items describing what should be done, was the best way to understand the place, comparing it to maps and photos. To study Finnish migration to Penedo, it is important to understand how Finland was at that moment, and its migration history. Reading some Finnish authors like Teuvo Peltoniemi,⁸ Olavi Koivukangas⁹ and Eevaleena Melkas¹⁰ it was possible to understand that Penedo was not alone as a utopian experiment among Finnish migration. It was also important to know what Koivukangas¹¹ says about that Finnish experiences in Latin America "*The peculiar background of each colonial*



Fazenda Penedo (1929). Author’s collection.



Location of Penedo in the map of Brazil and the State of Rio de Janeiro. In Sousa, H.; Fagerlande, A.; Honkalla, J., 2002.

enterprise makes the Finnish emigration to Latin America unique and interesting. Every enterprise had its own uniting idealistic goals, which placed these colonies apart from the general and spontaneous mass emigration to North America."

Penedo's initial history was studied not as a simple project that was applied to one place, but the relation people had with that place, their personal history, and how that new space changed their lives, during those years.

The ideological grounds for the creation of Penedo

Finland was a land of emigrants, and since the 18th century many Finnish went to the United States among Swedish emigrants, as Finland was part of the Swed-

ish Kingdom.¹² This process continued during Russian period, in the 19th century. There was economic and political motivation to emigrate, and the United States and Canada offered many job opportunities, as mining activities, factories, railroad construction and land for agriculture.¹³

United States began to restrict Finnish immigration after 1923, and Canada continued to admit immigrants,¹⁴ and other places such as Australia, Cuba, Paraguay, Dominican Republic, Argentina and Brazil also received Finnish immigrants. Many of those migrants wanted to transform the world, and founded what Peltoniemi called the Finnish Utopian Colonies.¹⁵

During the 1920's a "tropical fever" occurred in Finland. It was related to a search for tropical places and the application of vegetarian and naturalistic ideals.¹⁶ Penedo in Brazil, Villa Alborado founded in Paraguay in 1920 and Viljavakka, created in the Dominican Republic in 1929, were some examples.¹⁷

The ideas for the foundation of Penedo were the result of an existing movement in Finland, based on natural health treatments, vegetarianism, some Pentecostal religious movements and Toivo Uuskallio's own ideals.¹⁸

There was a group interested in naturalistic ideals, founded on some sanatoriums where those methods were applied, and newspapers and reviews publicizing those ideas. The naturalist movement was connected to the Finnish Vegetarian Society (Suomen Vegetarien Yhdistys), intended to establish a sanatorium in Penedo, using its methods of natural health, sauna and a radical vegetarian alimentation.¹⁹



Finnish Vegetarian Society Meeting, (SVY), Kirvu (1925). Author's collection.

Uuskallio and his followers were radically against any cultural situation, and wanted to transform society, returning to a natural world. He also had ideas about how God had created men to live in warmer places, not in cold places like Finland. This thought made Uuskallio and his group go to the tropics, the best choice to build a new society, far from wars, with an appropriate alimentation, where men and God would be together, and closer to nature. A big country as Brazil was then chosen as a good place for this new society.

The choice of Brazil and Fazenda Penedo

During 1927 the initial pioneer group of five Finns arrived in Rio de Janeiro, and after more than one year they found Fazenda Penedo, an ancient coffee plantation. The presence of mountains, forests and rivers, and the impressive view of the mountain chain behind the farm were important. Those natural conditions and the easy accessibility by railway were behind Uuskallio's choice.

The purchase of the farm was done with contribution from a movement called "Friends of Penedo" that organized all proceedings in Finland to help the project. Pastor H.D. Pennanen was the representative of the group, and after visiting Penedo, he wrote a book "Suomalainen maanviljelystila Brasiliassa"²⁰ as part of advertising campaign to divulge the enterprise. Analyzing a formulary at its end we can understand how people were chosen to go to Brazil, know their financial, spiritual, educational, familiar and ideological situation. That was important because the major



Group planting tomatoes (193-). Author's collection.

support to the project was the group of "Friends of Penedo", with small help from Finnish or Brazilian governments.

The communal life

The communal experience at Penedo began when the first group arrived. They all stayed in the ancient farm main house, the only construction with conditions to house all those people. In the first year, 1929, at least 100 people came to Penedo and many of them soon returned to Finland. The residence was the center of the community, a place where they could sleep, eat together in a big room, and cook in a communal kitchen.²¹ Life there was described as completely free, with no social differences, and everything was equally discussed, work being divided the same way. Nobody could be obliged to do anything, but should work for the community welfare. Side by side with many Finnish traditions, the utopian ideals were part of Penedo daily life.

Everything had to be done from the beginning in Fazenda Penedo. The main activities in the first year were opening roads, beginning the agricultural activities and building new houses. Initially agriculture was destined to subsistence, trying to produce bananas, strawberries and other fruits and vegetables, and after some years orange trees became the main product in Penedo. Its production supported the colony until the war years, when many changes in Brazilian economy ended the business, causing a great problem for the local economy.²²

The Housing Project

The planning of the colony was based on Uuskallio's 1929 Housing Project.²³ This written project would be followed as an initial regulation. Reading its items is possible to understand how the colony should be developed, and the urban occupation intentions. It proposed the division of the farm in 250 lots, each one with 14 hectares, being 2 hectares of flat land and 12 covered by forest, with indicated roads and infrastructure to be built and collectively maintained.²⁴ Uuskallio thought that was the ideal size for each lot, because by his calculus, this piece of land could produce sufficient food to feed one family.²⁵

Nature was a major priority to Uuskallio, according not only to his vegetarian aims, but also to his worry about the pollution of the rivers and the preservation of the forest. Another important item related to the urban process was his intention to construct a straight road directly from the old house of the farm, its most important center, towards the Railway Station, close to Paraíba River, the main access to the property. That new straight road was a mark in Penedo's life, even without being completed and still is the main road of the town, the Avenida das Mangueiras.

According to the Housing Project, from 1929 till 1942, four houses were constructed.²⁶ The idea was to build houses for all Finnish immigrants in Penedo, but the process started with stone foundations for six houses, and only four were completed, after some years. They were built also as an image of the colony itself, showing how Penedo was intended to be in the future, according to Uuskallio's plans.

Those houses were planned to be similar, like model houses, a way to show how men in the new society would be equal to one another. Even the occupation of the houses was completely unusual. Many times their first owners traveled, and other people were allowed to live in the new building. This is different from traditional occupation, where one property is individual, and in this case, it was quite collective.

In an urban way, the houses weren't close to each other. As a vegetarian community, the original project was to live and work in the same lot, so houses should necessarily be far from each other.²⁷ There should be place for agriculture between the houses, and also all houses should have access to the river, essential for Finns.

Building four residences was not enough to house all the people that still lived in the communitarian residence. Some people decided to build their own houses, but there was no money to build brick houses for eve-



Lehtola House (1929). Author's collection.



Suni House (1930). Author's collection.



Uuskallio House (ancient Nurmi House), (194?). Author's collection.



Casa Branca (195?). Author's collection.



Tuulentupa (1936). Asikainen's first house. Author's collection.



Saarela House (ca. 1937). Author's collection.

rybody, so many houses were built in a simpler method, using materials like wood or bamboo, according to some ancient local traditions. That was how Penedo grew, following an informal disposition of many pioneers, and no longer obeying Uuskallio's project.²⁸ Even with many houses being constructed, the center of the colony still was the old main house, where all kind of social meetings took place. There the colony choir rehearsed, there many religious happenings took place and there people had their meals in the dining room, cooked in the communal kitchen.

The patio in front of the old house was the place where many other communal events took place, as photographs show, of the wedding parties, departure

parties, gymnastics, and there was the first dancing balls, with traditional Finnish music, that was later transferred to the inner room.²⁹ Some of Penedo's traditions, as the balls that still occur at the Club, began at that place, with the old pioneers, even Carnival balls, with great success with the first tourist that were staying in Penedo since the decade of 1930, beginning its new business.

The end of the utopian dream

When Uuskallio bought the farm, he did not divide the lots, legally, and he said his intention was to pay



First colony's wedding party, October, 26th, 1929. Author's collection.



Gymnastic group in front of the farm house, 1931. Author's collection.

fewer taxes, but his idea was that land was not to be a property of man, but God's gift, and men should use it properly.

After some years of communal life, in 1935 many investors were not satisfied with the colony situation. Some got money from Uuskallio to buy properties near Penedo, and others went to Rio and São Paulo. A group called Kaleva was organized and obtained their lots with the interference of the Finnish Legation in Rio de Janeiro. That was the beginning of the utopian experiment's end, because land was divided, making it possible to sell lots, and the collective farm's idea would finish soon, even though many activities continued to be collective, as the group of chicken producers that later became the origin of the local association, Clube Finlândia, founded in 1943.³⁰

In 1942 the colony's economical situation was difficult, and with no help from Finnish friends, because of the war, Uuskallio had to sell the property to a Swiss group, Plamed, that bought part of the farm to produce medicinal plants. They employed a group of Finnish workers, so even those who had to leave their land and houses could get money to rebuild their houses on other lots. Many residences were transformed to small inns, and touristical activity could be increased, giving birth to Penedo's new main activity, tourism. That old utopian colony then become an attraction, with Finnish dances in Clube Finlândia, offering their traditional food, handicraft, and nature, especially the mountains and rivers.³¹

Conclusion

Penedo was the result of a project formulated in a moment of great changes in urbanism, when new models were developed, but this Finnish Colony seemed to go in a different direction, being a space that privileged not industry or cars, but simplicity and natural life. Freedom was the most important point in Penedo, not only of religion, but also in daily life. Being a vegetarian community reflected not only ideals of changing, from an old Europe to a New World in tropics, but also a millenarian trial to go back to human origins, reaching God through natural life,

There was in Uuskallio's Project an intention to maintain the natural environment, preserving the rivers, forests and those so-called naturalistic activities.

Uuskallio was also worried about urban density, against big cities and everything relating to "civilized" places.

At the beginning, the settlement followed Uuskallio and his project in detail concerning social life and how people's behavior should be. Uuskallio probably tried to organize the urban site, to form a community where people were equal and organized. Still nature was stronger and in some places the river could not be transposed, and the straight line had to turn into a curve, especially where there was a valley, and the road would follow the river.

That the Housing Project had the residences within its most important plans. How and where they should be built, following a predetermined model, is another testimony of how people should be treated equally in the colony. As a vegetarian enterprise, people would not have cattle or other animals, so there should not be fences between houses and plantations. That was another symbolic idea to reinforce the sense of communion, without fences dividing people and their lives.

Another influence on the landscape of the vegetarian choice was the growing of many trees, especially fruit trees, which transformed the farm, from a desert land to a green area, full of trees, with the return of birds and other animals. That was fundamental to transform the old colony into a new touristic area, where people could stay in small inns, hosted by Finnish old pioneers, and enjoying many attractions as Finnish balls and handicraft. Nowadays, when Penedo is commemorating its 80th anniversary, it is a tourist village, and its main attractions are its natural landscape and the Finnish colony, represented by the Finnish folk dances at Clube Finlândia, the Finnish Museum and a Santa Claus House, built in a commercial center called *Pequena Finlândia* (Small Finland), that looks like a traditional ancient Finnish village. The old colony preserves its Finnish culture, and the commemoration, called Festival Finlândia, will be in March of 2009, with dances, expositions and other events. It will be an occasion to show how traditional and modern Penedo can live together.

The utopian main idea was to be no place and also the best place, and Penedo was another example of how Utopia should stay in our minds, when thinking about urbanism. Utopian ideals should be an alternative way for cities; in a world where people don't care about each other's welfare anymore.

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Endnotes

- 1 Uuskallio's occupation in Finnish is called puutarha arkkitehti.
- 2 Melkas, 1999, p. 60.
- 3 Peltoniemi, Teuvo. *Kohti parempaa maailmaa*. Translated by Fagerlande, Alva (s.n.). Original edition: Helsinki, Finland: Otava, 1986.
- 4 Koivukangas, Olavi. *Finns abroad: a short history of Finnish emigration*. 2004 (Available in: www.migrationinstitute.fi/db/articles/art.php?article=4. Access in May, 05th, 2006).
- 5 This Project, in Finnish called Fazenda Penedon Asuttamissuunnitelma, was published in Melkas, 1999, p. 289. The original is on Turun yliopiston yleisen historian siirtolaishistorian tutkimusarkistossa, Turku. Alva Fagerlande had an original copy, a little different, without some items.
- 6 Fagerlande, Alva. *Fazenda Penedo: Uma colônia finlandesa no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: s.n., 1998a).
- 7 Valtonen, Niilo. *Sonho do Paraíso: Acontecimentos dos finlandeses no Brasil* (Penedo, Brazil: Editora Gráfica do Patronato, 1998); Ampula, Eila. *Memórias* (Fortaleza, Brazil: s.n., 1997); Fagerlund, Ethel Bertell. *Diary originally in Swedish, translated by Fagerlande, Alva*. In Fagerlande, Alva. *Aventura de Penedo: A Família Bertell* (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: s.n., 1996).
- 8 Peltoniemi, 1986, p. 1-20.
- 9 Koivukangas, 2004; *Finland: a land of emigrants*. 2005 (Available in: <http://virtual.finland.fi/netcomm/news/showarticle.asp?intNWSAID=33022>. Access in May, 10th, 2006).
- 10 Melkas, 1999, p. 9-175.
- 11 Koivukangas, 2004, p. 1.

- 12 Koivukangas, Olavi. Finland: a land of emigrants. 2005. (Available in: <http://virtual.finland.fi/net-comm/news/showarticle.asp?intNWSAID=33022>. Access in May, 10th, 2006, p.1).
- 13 Koivukangas, 2005, p. 2.
- 14 Engelberg, 1942, p.2.
- 15 Peltoniemi, Teuvo. Kohti parempaa maailmaa: towards a better world. Exhibition of Finnish Utopian Emigration (Helsinki, Finland: T.A. Sahalan Kirjapaino Oy, 1987. p.8).
- 16 Peltoniemi, 1987, p.2.
- 17 Melkas, 1999, p.285.
- 18 Melkas, 1999, p.60.
- 19 That radical vegetarian alimentation excluded not only animal products like meat, but also milk, eggs, fish, alcohol and even coffee and tea were forbidden.
- 20 Pennanen, Harri David. Fazenda Penedo: Suomalainen maanviljelijästä Brasiliassa. (Fazenda Penedo, um Empreendimento Finlandês no Brasil. Translated by Fagerlande, Alva – (s.n.). Original Edition (Tampere, Finland: Työkaasan Kirjapaino, 1929).
- 21 Valtonen, 1998, p. 32.
- 22 Fagerlande, Alva, 1998.
- 23 Melkas, 1999, p. 289.
- 24 Fagerlande, 1998.
- 25 Melkas, 1999, p. 84.
- 26 Those houses were Suni's, Lehtola's, Nurmi's and the white house.
- 27 Fagerlande, Sergio Moraes Rego. A utopia e a formação urbana de Penedo: A criação, em 1929, e o desenvolvimento de uma colônia utópica finlandesa no estado do Rio de Janeiro. Dissertation of Master's Degree, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Urbanismo Prourb – FAU UFRJ, s.n., 2007, p.154.
- 28 Valtonen, 1998, p. 73.
- 29 Fagerlande, 1998.
- 30 Fagerlande, 1996.
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