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Container in the North: The Use of Mobile Modules in Chukotka and Taimyr

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Abstract. People designed an iron container to rationalize cargo transportation on the sea. In the Northern regions, it has become a universal module for appropriation of space. When local people install it in a specific point, they use it as a stationary structure and a place for storing property, as well as for a temporary stay. Giving the examples of field research in Chukotka and Taimyr, the author examines the ways of using an iron container in the households of local people in situation of relative remoteness from the centers of resource distribution. Under the conditions of the Far North, it is gradually turning into a dominant module, replacing other buildings. Its special qualities, resistance to deformation, mobility, the ability to use it to perform a large number of everyday tasks – all this makes it a useful element of both local peoples' and newcomers households. Following John Urry's concept of offshoring, the author analyzes how the informal economy practices involve the inland communities, changing spatial practices and materiality in the Arctic. He argues that the appropriation of the northern territories by humans is a result of the creative use of modular systems, including both complexes of material objects used by nomads, and innovative mobile modules that allows use resources in the situation of harsh natural and climatic conditions more effectively.

Keywords: Arctic, Chukotka, Taimyr, infrastructure, mobility, built environment, storage space, iron container, containerization.

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Контейнер на Севере: использование мобильных модулей на Чукотке и Таймыре

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Аннотация: Металлический контейнер был изначально разработан для рационализации транспортировки грузов по морю. В Арктике его используют в качестве универсального модуля освоения пространства. Когда контейнер устанавливают в качестве стационарной постройки, он может стать местом для хранения имущества, а также помещением для временного пребывания. В статье на примере полевых исследований, проведенных на Чукотке и Таймыре, рассмотрены способы применения металлического контейнера местными жителями в относительной удаленности от центров распределения ресурсов. В условиях Крайнего Севера он постепенно превращается в доминирующий модуль, заменяющий и вытесняющий самодельные постройки. Особые свойства (устойчивость к деформациям, мобильность, возможность решения широкого спектра повседневных задач) делают его востребованным элементом хозяйственных практик местного и приезжего населения. Опираясь на концепцию офшоризации Дж. Урри, автор анализирует, каким образом неформальная экономика проникает вглубь континента, оказывая воздействие на стратегии использования пространства и материалов в Арктике. Автор делает вывод, что в освоении северных территорий человеком важную роль сыграло креативное применение модульных систем, включающих комплексы как материальных объектов быта кочевников, так и инновационных мобильных модулей, позволяющих более эффективно использовать ресурсы в суровых природно-климатических условиях.

Ключевые слова: Арктика, Чукотка, Таймыр, инфраструктура, мобильность, постройки, подсобные помещения, металлический контейнер, контейнеризация

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Introduction

In Arctic settlements, one cannot help noticing a large number of metal items – stacks of empty fuel drums, pipes, parts of metal structures and old pieces of equipment as well as metal containers. For an outside observer all these metal objects may seem abandoned and forgotten. Yet local people often put old structures and their parts to good use. Domestic life and daily routines of people in northern villages are based on modularity. When moving, Arctic nomads use portable modules that allow to effectively utilizing available resources (Golovnev, 2017: 10–11).

Quite often inhabitants of the Polar Regions use the typical strategies. When travelling by water transport, they fill available space with metal modules – containers. We may call this process the containerization of the Arctic. In some areas especially near seaports, one can see huge pile-ups of these key elements for maritime freight transportation. At present metal containers

are used in the Arctic as multifunctional modules for space organization. People employ containers everywhere, but in the Northern regions, they have become one of the most important elements that help to manage surrounding space.

Containers have a number of characteristics which can be taken in account for their wide spread and practical use in the Arctic region. The main reason is their hybrid nature – they combine qualities of both permanently located and movable constructions. When people install this mobile module in a certain place, they may use it as a permanently located structure, for example as a storage for things, equipment and food or even as a place of temporary residence.

The present article explains how local people use iron containers in the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug and the Taymyrskii Dolgano-Nenetskii Raion (District) of the Krasnoiarskii Krai (Region). The article discusses field research in these regions that the author had being conducting within last 6 years. The total length of fieldwork comprising a period of about 10 months.

Who uses containers in the Arctic and why?

In Khatanga at the Taymyr Peninsula and in the urban-type settlement of Egvekinot in Chukotka containers are a typical part of the landscape. Local residents are used to them and see nothing out of the ordinary. In many settlements containers can be found practically everywhere. Often they are set close to each other forming clusters near houses. In Egvekinot they are arranged in lines like garages with narrow lanes between them. People living nearby in standard five-storeyed buildings use these containers as storages. These modules allow people to expand their living space and keep various things, appliances and other equipment outside their houses and flats.

People often use containers in addition to the existing sheds and garages, built from available materials and remnants of old structures. Not only local people use them in Amguema, but also people from remote coastal Nutepel'men village who come to this place and to the raion center from time to time. Most people keep in their containers transport equipment. Containers belong the sphere of male activities and often become a place for fixing vehicles. The position of each container is usually defined by the customary law and is not officially registered in any legal documents. Local people know which module belongs to whom and associate a container and its position with its owner.

Containers, which people use in Taymyr and Chukotka, vary in size. The practical needs usually determine their choice. People who have lots of equipment need larger containers or greater number of them. Containers made in various periods can be found side by side in one settlement. For example, in Egvekinot people still use containers produced during the Soviet period – metal frames covered with wooden boards.

In winter, the residents of Northern villages who live in flats and cottages often use containers as refrigerators – to keep their things and food frozen (Davydova, 2019). When people do not have a possibility to accommodate things and products in their flats, containers allow expanding storage space. Moreover, they preserve things, vehicles and food better than ordinary self-built sheds do. Containers restrict access to the enclosed space inside and to the property being stored or transported. Many people use them to protect their things from theft. Containers usually have only one entrance, while people can combine them into structures that are more complex.

Communities in the Arctic follow the principle of minimalism when it comes to resources (Golovnev et al., 2018). Containers fully conform with this principle because they do not demand any additional materials or efforts and are reliable enough to endure long and active usage.

Containers are widely used by fishermen and hunters in Chukotka and Taimyr. People often employ such «hunting or fishing containers» as utility rooms or portable cabins and place them not far from the hunting or fishing territories. In this case containers can be arranged either in groups (for example, to store boats, motors and fishing gear by a river) or as

standalone storage spaces. In Khatanga containers play an important role in fishing trade and water travel – they are used to store boats, fishing gear, motors and fuel drums. When placed on the river bank, people employ containers as lockable storage rooms allowing to manage recourses rationally – keep equipment close to the place of fishing to avoid transporting it from home every time.

Iron container as a dream a symbol of freedom

For many residents of Khatanga and Egvekinot the use of containers is associated with endless freedom because containers may be located practically anywhere. They can be moved from place to place with the help of specialized vehicles – tractors, prime movers and bulldozers that belong to public utility companies or private owners.

Local people use container in the Arctic as a combination of a garage and a transportable module. In that respect it is different from a permanently located garage designed to remain in the same place for a long time. Compared to it, a container serves as a means of achieving a relative freedom. It is an object that can be bought, sold, exchanged or moved to another place. At the same time, it is very practical at protecting things stored inside. Containers may be used to store almost any kind of material objects – from equipment, fuel and tools to clothes and food. The climate of the Northern regions allows using containers as refrigerators most of the year. In Chukotka, people often store food, meat and hides in containers. When discussing everyday matters local people often mention containers as parts of their dreams and plans for the future; they associate containers with wealth and good standard of living. They are a part of everyday life and can be used in addition to already existing buildings and structures.

Dream is an important part, motivating local people to perform everyday tasks and to stay in the remote northern regions (Simonova, 2020). One of the residents of Amguema who specializes in traditional techniques and technologies said that she wanted to put a container near her *yaranga* on the riverbank to keep reindeer skins there. She uses *yaranga* as an additional space where she can process hides, cook traditional food and entertain guests and tourists. A number of other informants mentioned that they were planning to buy containers to store their things and equipment.

How do containers arrive to the Arctic settlements?

Metal containers are entirely connected with water transport. They can only arrive to the Taymyr Peninsula and Chukotka by water. Large clusters of containers can be found near northern seaports. Containers arrive to these locations by sea and then people transport them inland by cars and special heavy equipment. For example, people deliver containers to Amguema located on the 91st kilometer of the Iul'tinskaia highway in Chukotka by motor transport.

The number of containers constantly increases – new ones arrive and the old ones get redistributed. This process can be explained by the fact that people use containers as a macropackage to deliver and distribute goods and it is easier to sell or just leave them at the place of destination than to bring them back to the starting point. So a certain amount of containers remains in Arctic settlements due to the standard shipment process. They are in constant demand because these mobile modules allow saving time and efforts that would be necessary to find materials and build permanent storages.

A great number of containers that are currently in use in Chukotka became delivered to settlements of indigenous people upon the initiative of the administration along with constriction materials necessary to build cottages using a Canadian construction technology. Sometimes local people order and organize the transportation of containers. In this case, they themselves decide where they want to install the containers – usually new modules supplement the existing structures. Quite often, they install containers on plots, which are not officially registered on cadastral maps, thus violating the official rules.

Containers are a part of local informal economy. They can be let and rented or sold to new owners. Amguema dwellers sometimes

resell containers to their neighbors. Such transactions are not very frequent and people do not register them officially. In 2018 the price of a container was 10 to 80 thousand rubles depending on its capacity and condition.

Containers are elements of the movements of local people and in the practices of supply chain of local shops. Some people buy their containers «on the mainland», fill them with the necessary goods, send along a shipping route to the port of Egvekinot and then move to villages by land transport. Local residents can buy or rent containers when they go to Vladivostok on vacation – in this case they fill containers with the goods they have bought and ship them to Egvekinot via a transportation company. Generally, people buy used containers. Goods and containers are much cheaper in Vladivostok than in Chukotka; though delivery to a remote location increases their cost. Local people often buy modern equipment, four-wheelers, and snowmobiles but construction of garages demand a lot of efforts, so containers are in constant demand and can be resold.

Containers as permanent structures

In Nutepel'men the administration distribute containers among local people and install them as additional storage units for fuel and other things instead of sheds. Thus, they became a part of official centralized village development and the plots occupied by the containers were marked on official plans and cadastral maps. In this context containers acquired the status of permanent buildings. They were located next to newly built cottages to store coal that would be used for heating. It was practical to keep coal close to the house entrance so that people would not have to go too far to get fuel. Containers filled up with coal became immovable permanent structures.

From the administrative point of view, each structure should be registered and fixed at a certain place. Yet, as it was mentioned above, residents of Arctic villages and settlements often buy or rent additional containers and move them at their own discretion. In this case the use and location of containers is defined by the needs of their owners and often differ from the initial plans of the administration.

Transformation of metal constructions

Though metal containers are difficult to remodel, local people manage to change their structure by adding new elements and joining containers together. They have moved and rearranged some containers to meet their needs. When a container is located in a certain place it can be transformed into a storage or living quarters. By installing windows and a heater and insulating the container, the owner can turn it into a kind of a construction trailer that can be used as a temporary living place.

Because of the shortage of building materials in Arctic villages, people sometimes use containers instead of various permanent structures. In Nutepel'men some people, especially those who have several modules, turned their containers into bath houses. For that purpose, they make a cold-proof entrance – they usually install an additional wooden wall with a small door behind the metal door. They install an iron stove inside to heat water for bathing and washing clothes. Special holes are made in the container for a water outlet and a chimney pipe. If there are enough materials the insides of the container are covered with wooden boards. Though there is a public bath in Nutepel'men, in winter it is often closed because the water pump and pipes get frozen. During these periods, local people wash in private container-baths.

Containers can be easily combined with other modules to form larger structures which are sometimes connected with each other. Local people can join several containers to create additional facilities. For example, in Chukotka they often put two containers side by side leaving some space between them and cover them with a roof so that the space between the containers could be used as a garage. That way they create a structure with three inner spaces where they can effectively arrange fuel and equipment. They often join different storages into one complex structure.

The space in such structures may be expanded not only horizontally but also vertically. For example, a second story may be built over a container. Several containers may be turned into a kind of multi-storeyed building. The ground floor is typically used as a ga-

rage. In Anguema one can find several samples of such structures with a greenhouse on the ground floor. Thus, a container becomes an «unfinished project» (Ssorin-Chaikov, 2016) and can be transformed by its owners in accordance with their needs as well as combined with other objects.

When people have a lack of standard containers, they come up with substitute storage units. They can use and create structures that function just like containers. For example, in Syndassko in Taymyr, on a sandy beach of the Khatanga Gulf, one can see metal tanks and metal boxes that are mostly used to store fishing gear and boat motors. Such structures are often found next to standard metal containers. In the Nutepel'men at the northern coast of Chukotka, local people manage to find new applications for any abandoned structure or equipment. One of the storage spaces used by the villagers is a helicopter. It was left in the village in 2017 after a hard landing – because of strong winds the helicopter crashed and the airline decided not to restore it. Airline representatives dismantled main parts and devices and left the frame in Nutepel'men. Village residents quickly made the most of it. With a tractor they moved it and placed by one of the houses. So the helicopter frame was turned into a store room just like a container.

Container as an element of offshore economy

Metal containers were initially designed to facilitate transportation of goods. They became a key element of freight transport and are used as movable modules to transfer food and other goods (Birtchnell et al. 2015). In fact, their creation made a revolution in freight transport and turned ports into cargo sorting centers. Water transport can deliver the largest amount of containers at one go. Huge container ships deliver them by sea to different parts of the world. So containers have become indispensable part of global logistics.

In the Arctic people began to use containers as universal storage modules setting the stage for the distribution of containers in seaside settlements and later – for their transportation further inland. According to John Urry the process of containerization is a part of offshore economy (Urry, 2018). A container is a movable module that allows transferring goods within such system (Ibid.). Modern container ships can deliver enormous amounts of goods. People living in the northern settlements acquire some containers that are no longer used for sea transportation. It is no secret that the Arctic is a place for offloading past due goods (Davydova, Davydov, 2020: 68). In most arctic villages and settlements visited by the author of the present article food products in the shops were past their expiration date. In fact, the goods sold in the Arctic cannot be considered proper goods and should have been disposed of by the seller. Yet such past due goods form a large part of commodity turnover in the northern regions.

Containerization is a part of offshore economy connected first of all with maritime freight transport (Urry, 2018). Past due goods officially do not exist and should be disposed of, but recycling process implies additional expenses. When such goods arrive to the shops in the northern settlements, their price is several times higher than the price of the same goods in Sothern regions. Realization of goods past their expiration date in the Arctic is explained not only by the difficulties of shipment and great distances but also by the fact that local people consider such goods as part of normal everyday live and see nothing uncommon in them.

Something similar happens to containers that are no longer used for freight transportation. Quite often, it is more beneficial to sell or just leave them in the Arctic than bring them back. Essentially containers are the same «past due goods» like the food products in northern shops. By selling containers that has served their purpose shipping companies avoid recycling them. Containers used by local people in the Arctic are rather old – they have their own «cultural biography» (Kopytoff, 1986) and have travelled a lot around the world. These decommissioned containers may be regarded as a tangible embodiment of offshore economy.

The analysis of markings and inscriptions on containers, for example, in Nutepel'men, shows that most of them came from Southeast Asian countries. In fact, most containers in Chukotka and Taymyr have come from abroad. After serving their purpose in the sea, they are

left on the shore and gradually moved inland in accordance with informal economy mechanisms. Actually, the process of filling the space with new material objects is a result of global processes, of the offshorization described by Urry, with the only difference that it physically takes place onshore. In remote locations food products and containers get new lease of life and their expiration date is considerably postponed. This «remoteness» becomes a category within the representation necessary to justify high prices for food and other goods in the Arctic. Surprisingly the «remoteness» allows increasing the price of a container, which has already travelled a lot – the price grows contrary to all reason and in spite on the container's wear and tear. Thus global economic trends through transport infrastructure make impact on the general changes in materiality and on the strategies of space management in the Arctic.

Containers as a part of creative process

Appropriation of space in the Arctic is a creative process. The lack of infrastructure does not hinder local people – they still manage to create spaces necessary for storage and redistribution of recourses. One of the peculiar features of this process is its modularity – creation of similar storage units with the same available materials. As soon as metal containers were introduced in the Arctic, they spread quickly and widely.

Containers became an ordinary element of local people's life and a return point within their everyday movements. A remarkable characteristic of such modules is their portability. It is very important for dynamic use of resources. There is a well-pronounced correlation between the transportation of material objects and the movements of people (Urry, 2012:98). People move the modules to the places where they need those most of all. In this respect, containers perform a function similar to that of portable structures. Yet people transport mobile dwellings of nomadic peoples in Chukotka and Taymyr (such as *yaranga*, tent or *balok*) more often than sheds and storages.

One should not see a container (just as the landscape where it is located) as something immovable and frozen in time (Ingold, 1993; 2002). It has its own peculiar temporality due to the fact that it remains at one place for a long time and that large numbers of such modules can be accumulated in the places of their active use. Physical properties of this object combined with the creativity of local people make it useful within everyday practices. Each material object has a certain potential of temporality, i. e. a number of qualities that enable particular usage and movement of this object. For example, a *yaranga* consists of easily demountable modules and allows people to roam from place to place at a fast pace taking the modules and other things with them. Containers are more difficult to remodel or move compared to mobile dwellings. In this case we can speak about «affordances» (Gibson, 1979) provided to people by a material object, i. e. certain physical qualities that define its ability to be moved and modified. A nomad camp implies constant movement and change of things. Nomads are segmented into autonomous units – certain «mobile molecules» which can be combined and disported (Golovnev et al., 2020: 12). Therefore, container fits to practical logic of nomadic people, which imply a similar segmentation of the material objects. Containers provide an opportunity to create the particular points while on the move, which mark the places of the intensive use. For nomads such places often become points of constant return within their movements.

Conclusion

During the Soviet and early post-Soviet periods containers could be associated with departure from the Arctic regions. Possession of a container was an important part of the dream to move «to the mainland». People packed their things and sent them to southern regions. However, at present, there is a considerable imbalance in the number of containers going in either direction – much more containers arrive to the North than go back. Furthermore, local people usually use containers not to transport cargoes but to optimize the storage in remote places.

Containers as movable modules for transportation and substitutes for permanently located storages have become an indispensable

part of urbanized spaces. This article covers the ways of how local people use and modify a container in Arctic settlements. In the North containers gradually become the most spread module replacing self-made structures. Their specific properties – strain stability, portability, adaptability for various purposes, etc. – make these mobile modules an indispensable element of households for both local people and newcomers. They provide means to expand household outbuildings and thus become a universal tool of space appropriation. One can state, that containers are «sedentarised» in the Arctic and people mostly use them as permanent structures, which however they can move in case of need. They change the materiality and design of infrastructure and gradually replace self-made sheds built by local people from available materials. At the same time, the appearance of containers in the Arctic is the consequence of the region's inclusion into the global economy. Wide spread of containers can be explained by the fact that they help to save costs and efforts when creating new infrastructure elements in remote areas. Thus, the development of the Arctic is the result of creative use of modular systems including both material object complexes of nomads and innovative movable modules that enables local people utilize resources in harsh climate conditions more effectively.

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