

## Field Report

# The “Palaces” of the Romanian Rroma: A Claim to Citizenship

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The eclectic language of “Gypsy palace” settlements in Romania has to date been largely defined through an essentialist understanding of the Rroma’s oppositional relationship with the cultural norms of the majority. This report proposes an alternative reading of the mansions built by the formerly nomadic Rroma, one that accounts for a more reciprocal relationship between hetero-representation and auto-representation. It argues that the conspicuous consumption associated with the “palaces” should first be attributed to social rituals taking place within the Rroma clans, and second to a desire by owner/builders to broadcast respectability to the outside world. In examining Rroma built space, this report emphasizes and qualifies the discursive implications of auto-representation through the account of owner/builders, and of hetero-representation through the lens of the architecture profession and the Romanian mass media.

Gypsies (“Roma” in Romani, “Rromi” in Romanian), constitute one of Romania’s major ethnic groups. According to the 2002 national census, they represent 2.5 percent of the country’s total population, although unofficial sources claim they may number as many as two million, or approximately 8 percent.<sup>2</sup> The Rroma are also Romania’s most socially and economically disadvantaged minority, and most continue to live in slums to which the authorities in post-Communist Romania remain indifferent. However, a minority of well-to-do Rroma have garnered considerable attention in recent years by building settlements of so-called “palaces.” These peri-urban communities have triggered an indignant, derisive backlash in the national media. The production of such housing does mark a turning point in the history of the Rroma. But I propose to examine it here against a

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larger discourse of European integration and multiculturalism that situates Romania in the intellectual struggle of “self” and “other.”

The interrogation of built space can inform and problematize ethnographic research on Rroma identity construction. However, rather than solely analyzing the palaces as a reaction to structural economic constraints or to the norms of Romanian culture, this report will also highlight Rroma social rituals as a source of spatial practices, using accounts of owner/builders. It builds on Cerasela Voiculescu’s study of social associations within Rroma communities, and attempts to employ this analytical framework to inform a reading of Rroma dwellings and, most importantly, Rroma patterns of consumption.<sup>3</sup> It accepts that the economy of the Rroma communities is essentially informal, and that consumption, production and commerce are founded on a set of extralegal norms that define hierarchies and regulate social relations. Consumption in this case not only signals status within the community, but establishes social capital in the context of a quasi-feudal and nuclear community.

This report also refers to existing analytical frameworks within the study of vernacular environments. It will use these to interrogate the morphology and architectural symbolism of Rroma communities in two villages illustrative of the palace phenomenon. During fieldwork in June of 2007 I photographed and conducted interviews in the Rroma communities of Sintesti, ten kilometers south of Bucharest, and Buzescu, in southwest Romania, which is thought to be the origin of the palace phenomenon (FIG. 1).

The connection between the case studies is twofold: first, Buzescu precedes and influenced what was built in Sintesti; second, both communities are populated by members of the same Rroma clan, the Caldarari, who have been engaged in metal trading since the end of the Communist



FIGURE 1. Regional map of southeast Romania indicating the location of the villages of Sintesti and Buzescu.

era. The two case studies do not offer the basis for totalizing conclusions about the character of Rroma built space, but they do offer evidence of a common morphology shared by Rroma communities in different regions.

Despite being persecuted during World War II and forcefully assimilated under the subsequent Communist regimes of Eastern Europe, the Rroma are the largest transnational minority in Europe today, estimated at ten million members.<sup>4</sup> Often seen by outsiders as a homogenous group, they are actually a very heterogeneous population. Will Guy wrote that the Rroma are a “truly European people.” But he then went on to ask: “Can a people be truly European if Europeans don’t recognize them as such?”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the process by which the Rroma have been represented has for centuries been mostly determined by non-Rroma (or *gadje*, as they are disparagingly referred to in Romani). In speaking of the Rroma built artifacts, I will thus try to qualify the discursive implications of auto-representation (where the Rroma represent themselves), and hetero-representation (representation by others).

The so-called “Rroma palaces” that have been so maligned in Romanian mass media are testimony to the divisiveness of these competing views of the Rroma. I will attempt to describe them both through accounts by their owner/builders, and through the lens of architectural professionals and the media. Although I employ the term “palace” here, it should be understood that this carries pejorative connotations as it is used in present-day Romania.

#### THE ROMANIAN RROMA — A BRIEF HISTORY

“A traditional approach to the written history of Romania, would typically include no mention of the Rroma,” Viorel Achim has written.<sup>6</sup> In his recent and complete study of the social and political history of the Rroma in Romania, he has dated the arrival of the westbound nomads in the Romanian Principalates to around the second half of the fourteenth century. After being subjected to four centuries of slavery, the Enlightenment brought the emancipation of the Rroma starting in the mid-nineteenth century. But legal emancipation was not accompanied by economic freedom. Furthermore, the gap that separates the Rroma from the majority population today has been reinforced by continuing periods of violence and oppression, and by the fact that no serious measures have ever been taken to integrate the Rroma into mainstream Romanian culture.

The end of official enslavement prompted another westward migration — often referred to as the “second migration,” during which many Rroma moved on to other European countries.<sup>7</sup> However, after the unification of Romania in 1918, the remaining Rroma began to mobilize, form organizations, and engage in political activities. This was a significant step toward their participation in public life

and auto-representation. However, the anti-Rroma politics of World War II subsequently brought the deportation and murder of thousands of Rroma in a holocaust that is only now gaining official recognition.<sup>8</sup>

After the war, the Communist Party attempted to erase ethnic differences according to the egalitarian rhetoric of the new socialist state — although the differences always remained in the minds of the majority Romanian population. Thus, under the postwar government, the last Rroma nomads were forcefully settled, rarely in places of their choice. And since the Communist Party regarded the informal economy of the Rroma as “social parasitism,” most Rroma were forced to abandon their traditional trades and seek unskilled laboring jobs.

The Communist Party attempted to erase Rroma identity through erasing memory. Marxist-Leninist policies considered the Rroma mostly a social problem, with no regard for ethnic specificity. Conversely, since the fall of the Communist government, new multiculturalist policies have been instituted that regard the Rroma question as mostly one of ethnicity. These policies promoting difference and ethno-cultural neutrality may be more conducive to Rroma auto-representation, but they have also required less funding than a more substantial policy of social support.

In 1991 the Romanian government recognized the Rroma for the first time as a national minority. This offered the Rroma the first opportunity to express themselves publicly and organize politically.<sup>9</sup> The self-proclaimed Emperor of the world's Rroma, Iulian Radulescu, announced in 1997 the creation of the first Rroma state. As Iulian I, he proclaimed an impoverished district of Târgu Jiu in southwest Romania to be “Cem Romengo,” or “State of the Romanies.” In asking Romanian authorities to officially recognize the right of ownership to this land, Radulescu argued “This state has a symbolic value and does not affect the sovereignty and unity of Romania. It does not have armed forces and does not have borders.”<sup>10</sup>

#### “THEY ARE NOT OURS!” — PATTERNS OF EXCLUSION AFTER COMMUNISM

The Romanian Rroma are mostly mentioned in the European press today for their tireless attempts to migrate to the countries of Western Europe. Since the collapse of the Communist regime, reactions to this migration have generated a range of debate on both the Western and Eastern European sides, multiculturalist discourse converging uneasily with widespread xenophobia. In the eyes of contemporary Europe, the Rroma are crossing borders they should not be allowed to. But where the West sees unskilled Rroma migrants with anxiety and urges countries like Romania to keep its Rroma at home through policies of integration, Romania is more concerned with the image backlash that results when Rroma reach Western metropolises and

engage in informal activities. Not only have impoverished Rroma migrated to a West that is unreachable for most Romanians, but they have provoked a clash with modernity that sits uneasily both within the Western metropolis and with Romania's progressive aspirations. Not allowed in and not allowed out, the Gypsies are trapped at the fringes of modern society.

Recently, the socioeconomic condition of the Rroma has become an important issue in negotiations over Romania's inclusion in the European Union. Political debate has focused on E.U. requirements for democratic and economic reform, and the most intense controversy has focused on Romania's policy toward ethnic minorities, particularly the Rroma. The patterns of exclusion and discrimination are indisputable, naturalized within Romanian society. However, the fact that they have been strictly ascribed by Western critics to structural racism, and that therefore various remedies must be prescribed by the E.U., has also shown how images of Romania respond to European stereotypes of the Balkans.

The fact that overt xenophobia has triumphed in the current climate of ethno-racial tension in Romania may also be partly attributed to a battle for representation of “self” and “other.” Because Romania (as well as neighboring Balkan countries) has a problematic image within the hegemonic discourse of Western liberalism, it must define its own “others” to affirm its identity and legitimacy. Thus, as Maria Todorova has argued, the European Union enlargement process has provoked an indefinite set of criteria that align with an Orientalist discursive framework in which Balkanism is an inherently regressive and politically incorrect mode of thinking that belongs in the “East.”<sup>11</sup>

Throughout Eastern Europe, the poverty of Rroma has also taken on a new dimension since the fall of Communism. Structural forces have been seen as the main reason the Rroma have been transformed from a lower class during socialism to an underclass today. But the sociologists János Ladányi and Iván Szelényi have argued that Gypsies in Eastern Europe experience two dimensions of exclusion: economic and social.<sup>12</sup> Economic exclusion is dominant today, describing a division between classes. But social exclusion may be an equally powerful, if more subtle force.

According to Ladányi and Szelényi, if socially based cleavages become extreme, socially excluded groups may be transformed into castes.<sup>13</sup> Caste formation normally also requires divisions marked by ethnicity, since such boundaries are sanctioned more rigidly than boundaries between classes. However, in these cases, “Caste boundaries are drawn with reference to purity and impurity in an almost religious way.”<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the undercaste can be understood as composed of social “untouchables,” meaning that physical contact or intermarriage between them and members of mainstream society is unacceptable.

There is little doubt that comparisons to other pariah castes may inform present-day understanding of the social

condition of the Rroma. This is particularly true since a large number of Rroma engage in economic activities deemed inappropriate, dirty or illegal.

#### RROMA ARCHITECTURE: AN ALTERNATIVE AESTHETIC

Nezar AlSayyad has written of the concept of “hybridity” and how it can be used to understand identity in nonessentialist ways. Referencing Pnina Werbner, he has written that the “constructedness” of identity is more relevant than its “rootedness.”<sup>15</sup> In this regard, what is particularly striking about the Rroma palaces is the display of imagery associated both with the Romanian and European ruling majority and with the Orient.

The diversity and multiplicity of the Rroma identity when manifested in architecture also consistently repeats a distinct lexicon, no matter where in the country it is located. From the village of Buzescu in southeastern Romania to the urban palaces of Sibiu in Transylvania all such structures exhibit the same caricatured opulence and dissonant mixture of architectural styles (FIGS. 2, 3). Towers resembling Japanese pagodas mix with Classical Greek columns, Neoclassical and Viennese Baroque elements, colonial verandahs, marbled pediments, details from Alpine chalets, and glazed facades echoing post-Communist bank architecture (FIG. 4). Unrestrained by cultural norms, the Rroma assimilate a seemingly unlimited repertoire of identifiable references into a cacophonous but studied monumentality (FIG. 5A, B).

In most instances construction is performed without permits or skilled oversight. The finishes fall apart easily and decorative tin roof elements are often blown off in stronger winds. The ornate columns that support multiple stories and large slabs of concrete often appear too fragile to withstand an earthquake. With no architect or other building professional involved, the design of a typical structure may involve little more than the head of a household voicing his wishes to local, usually Romanian workers, or tracing the outline of rooms on the ground.

Reaction in the media to this uninhibited and eclectic architectural language has been unanimously negative. The structures have even been denounced as a sort of contamination of Romanian culture. Such media derision has been fueled by the new affluence within the Rroma community and its expression through informally built and highly visible signifiers.

Most architecture professionals have tended to echo this view. One of the few who has not is the architect and architecture critic Mariana Celac. Together with the artist Iosif Kiraly and the architect Marius Marcu Lepadat, she has applied an anthropological lens to the phenomenon as it emerged in the southeast region of Romania in the early 1990s and then spread to the rest of Romania and across Eastern European borders. Celac described her views in an article in a French architectural journal in 2001, and with Kiraly and Lepadat she subsequently organized an exhibition entitled “Tinseltown” in 2003 in Bucharest that caused significant controversy and critical interest.<sup>16</sup>



**FIGURE 2 (LEFT).** *The Imperial Palace of the Rroma from Around the World, built in the City of Sibiu, in Transylvania, by Iulian, the self-proclaimed Emperor of all Rroma. The Romanian national flag is inset in each of the lucarne decorating the roof.*

**FIGURE 3 (RIGHT).** *Back yard of a Rroma “palace” outside of Bucharest, on the road to Sintesti.*



FIGURE 4. The glazed facade of a "palace" in Buzescu echoing the language of office towers in Bucharest.

#### LEARNING FROM BUZESCU

While the city of Alexandria in Teleorman County — the "deep south" of Romania — makes no claims to urban identity, with its landscape of drab socialist apartment blocks, ten kilometers down a country road, the village of Buzescu is building for utmost visibility. Approached from Alexandria, Buzescu seems no different than any other agrarian settlement in the southeast: cornfields, modest masonry peasant homes, and a police station and post office each hardly larger than a small cottage. However, as soon as one turns the corner at the village church, an entirely different landscape emerges. For almost a kilometer, lined up along the main road as if part of a stage set, are dozens of towered mansions with glistening Japanese pagoda-like roofs, colossal colonnades and cupolas, elaborate ironwork, corbels, capitals, and patterned facades. Articulating a surreal and sublime urbanism, they create a spectacle of verticality, monumentality, symmetry, and heroic scale in comparison with the houses of their not-so-affluent neighbors.

The setting of Buzescu's "palatial" main street is eminently urban, evident not only in the public-private gradient, but in the way the buildings occupy the land. Closely spaced with a solid wall typically running along the depth of the lot, the homes abut the road, sometimes encroaching on the sidewalk (FIGS. 6, 7). All the attributes of a rich, vibrant, dense urbanism are present here. Yet, although these structures reproduce a great variety of historical styles, their origins elude any familiar reference, modern or historic. It matters little what the context is. The owners/creators/builders — all



FIGURE 5A,B. The palaces of two brothers, Gruia (left) and Nita (right), flanking the road that leads to the village of Sintesti, at Gara Progresul, outside of Bucharest.



FIGURE 6. (TOP) *The view east on Buzescu's main street.*

FIGURE 7. (ABOVE) *The view west on Buzescu's main street.*



converging into one — inhabit the ever expanding “palaces,” united in their determination to outdo and outbuild each other. Perhaps this is because for the first time the Roma can afford to build and for the first time collectively express themselves through building. When asked why he built a house with ten towers, the head of a family usually responds that he wanted to have the largest and most ornamented house. A similar rationale is typically given for the elaborate rooftop metal decorations that list the names of family members and highlight status and symbols of affluence (FIG. 8).<sup>17</sup>

The setting in Buzescu is typical of many other Roma settlements in the country today. Scattered at the outskirts of cities or clustered along the main streets of small country towns, the towered Roma mansions have become a widespread phenomenon, albeit one that still connotes marginality. With almost no regional variation, such structures can be found everywhere well-to-do Roma clans live. Moreover, as Celac noted, the phenomenon has spread to Roma communities throughout Eastern Europe — into Slovakia, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Bulgaria.<sup>18</sup>



**FIGURE 8.** Metalwork bearing the name of the owner on the roof of Banu' Mondialu's house in Buzescu. Traditionally a clan of metal craftsmen, the Caldarari display their craft in elaborate rooftop decorations.

Buzescu is today known as the epicenter of the Roma palace phenomenon. The owners of the mansions come from the Caldarari, a Roma clan that before World War II lived mostly a nomadic life, where the tent was the primary form of shelter. Under the Communist government, when most Roma were forcefully relocated to existing housing as

part of a systematization program, they were among the last clans to be settled.<sup>19</sup> As a group, therefore, they had no tradition of building or engaging in homeownership prior the fall of the Communist government. But in the legislative vacuum that followed the 1989 revolution, the Caldarari Roma in Buzescu, traditionally a clan of metal craftsmen, prospered trading nonferrous metals. The construction of their mansions over the last eighteen years has occurred in a similar void of building or zoning legislation.

After almost twenty years, Buzescu is still a laboratory. As if making up for lost opportunities, the Roma are tireless builders, and Buzescu's main street is a scene of nearly perpetual construction. During my fieldwork one constant reminder of this centrifugal force of renewal and expansion were piles of sand and construction materials in front of one out of every two or three homes. The homes were inhabited, but they were undergoing seemingly continuous expansion, addition and refinishing. Pagoda-style roofs were being replaced by cupolas, which were making way for Swiss-chalet roofs; loggias were becoming colossal colonial porches. Seen in this light, one might say that the Roma are not just producing architecture; they are producing a culture of perpetual construction. Indeed, Celac wrote of a "static nomadism," arguing that such building could be regarded as a symbolic extension of their former lives.<sup>20</sup>

The village of Buzescu is in fact a "strip," a voyeuristic corridor highlighting the "see and be seen" of Roma's new-found dwelling practices. A totally collective, but at the same time individual act, this neovernacular is reproducing an international catalog of cultures and aesthetic norms (FIG. 9).



**FIGURE 9.** The entry to the Village of Buzescu. A typical example of a "palace" with a rhetorical facade, where architectural systems surrender to the overall form.

Imagination and everyday desires are unleashed with what appear to the outside observer to be no social and cultural inhibitions. Symbols of a public, urban life that the Rroma never had but perhaps encountered in their travels, these structures must be seen to perform as signifiers before they function as dwellings. The palaces must be read first as rhetorical statements rather than systems of space and program. Furthermore, in Buzescu's pragmatic universe, location means everything. Only those families who can truly afford it get to build on the main street. Meanwhile, an impoverished local population continues to live behind this strip in modest rural homes.

#### OUT WITH THE OLD: CRISIS IN RROMA ARCHITECTURE

During my visit in 2007, I encountered a relatively new addition to the landscape in Buzescu. At the fork in the main road stood an imposing Neoclassical edifice. Together with the village church, it formed a sort of gateway to the main street, its decorative austerity and grand colonnade providing a powerful contrast to the stylistic cacophonies down the road.

Heroic in scale, this Palladian-revival villa was a quintessential “duck.”<sup>21</sup> It may also have provided an uncanny sense of déjà vu to some, given that it was in fact a replica of the courthouse in Caracal, a municipality in the neighboring county of Olt (FIG. 10A, B). The building's owner and the head of the household was a Gypsy music impresario alleged to have run into trouble with the law. After his experiences with the criminal justice system (including the court of Caracal), he built a replica of its courthouse as his private residence.<sup>22</sup> Above the colonnade, instead of the word

“Judecatorie” (Courthouse) displayed on the original structure, he ordered written his own name and the date: “Dan Finutu — 2003.”<sup>23</sup> Although it is not clear whether Dan Finutu's confrontation with the law ended in acquittal or conviction, the rhetorical object resulting from this encounter has provided a provocative break with the language and symbolism of the older Rroma palaces in Buzescu.

A bigger surprise, however, is revealed as one walks down the village main street. Rearticulated, exaggerated, or sometimes reduced to parodic miniature, Dan Finutu's colonnade has appeared on the facades of a number of newly renovated palaces (FIG. 11). And as if the spectacle of perpetual change were being played out in real time, rather than scraping away their old facades, some of these villas have applied the colonnade as a simple mask over other designs that have fallen out of fashion. As an instantaneous upgrade, the portico has been juxtaposed over “outdated” loggias, blocking existing windows, and in apparent disregard for pagoda-style dormers still visible in the back (FIG. 12). “We are changing it because it's out of fashion,” stated the owner of one home under reconstruction.

In the relational link between the Caracal Courthouse, Dan Finutu, and the new portico facades, the iconography of the “original” has been reduced to a rhetorical gesture. Flattened into an applied ornament, the colonnade has become the new reigning icon of Buzescu's “architecture without architects.” It is also a symbol of the astonishing reversibility and mutation possible within Rroma architecture, the outer sign of an always mobile community, defined by an equal mix of sameness and difference.

As the Rroma palaces across the country became a recognizable typology, they had also become more formulaic. But Dan Finutu has imagined a new face of the Rroma palace,



FIGURE 10A, B. The house built in Buzescu in 2003 by Dan Finutu (left), after being tried at the Caracal Courthouse. Its original referent, the Courthouse Building, City of Caracal (right).





FIGURE 11. An example of a newly renovated palace with a colonnade in Buzescu.



FIGURE 12. Residence under construction in Buzescu. The colonnade is applied on top of the old facade, blocking existing windows, leaving decorative dormers still visible in the back.

while perhaps unwittingly causing an aesthetic and ideological crisis. Each homeowner is now faced with a dilemma: continue to build bigger versions of the “traditional” Rroma palace, or follow Dan Finutu’s new language. This evolution of palace imagery has disrupted Rroma building and place-

making as a social practice. Dan Finutu’s gesture, which gained him instant notoriety, has also exponentially expanded the possibilities of palace architecture as a symbol of status and upward mobility.

## SINTESTI

The village of Sintesti is located in the county of Ilfov, ten kilometers south of Bucharest. Part of the larger commune of Vidra, Sintesti has a population approaching 2,500. Home to another prosperous Caldarari Roma community, the village is mostly known for having the largest number of firms trading nonferrous metals.<sup>24</sup> Sintesti has a troubled relationship with the local and national authorities. It is not unusual for the Romanian media to cover police raids there, during which large quantities of metal may be confiscated and their owners fined or arrested. The palaces provide a theatrical backdrop for this sensationalist narrative, as criminal allegations are complemented by images of the “palaces of the Roma millionaires” with their illegal connections to local electric lines (FIG. 13).

Lenuta, who brought me to Sintesti, explained that she used to work as a cook in the home of one of the well-to-do families there. In fact, she told me, “the people who clean their homes, cook for them, or the workers who build their homes are all Romanian.” This is another prominent aspect of media accounts: outrage over an unprecedented class conflict — Romanians working for the Roma.



**FIGURE 13.** Metal-trading Roma of Sintesti often trade merchandise from their homes. Here, a large quantity of aluminum tubing is stored in the front yard of one of the mansions.

Sintesti is a largely linear settlement, strung out along a main road. Just as in Buzescu, this main street is where most of the Caldarari have built their homes — particularly where it crosses the highway to Bucharest. As in Buzescu, the Roma in Sintesti do not form the majority of the population, and the remainder of the townspeople live further down the main street, where the real estate is less valuable.

The lots along the main road are all similar in size and proportion. However, unlike Buzescu’s mansions, those in Sintesti are set ten to fifteen meters back from the street. Nevertheless, their front facades are just as important as in Buzescu, and their rear facades, which overlook cornfields, are either unfinished or treated without detail. Despite the different configuration of houses on village lots and a generally lower density, the experiential quality of Sintesti’s main street is very similar to that of Buzescu. And there is greater stylistic uniformity, since a Dan Finutu-inspired Neoclassical makeover has not yet been made manifest here.

When I asked Ionut, an eighteen-year-old businessman and head of household, how he intended to complete the unfinished facade of his “palace,” he promptly corrected me: “We do not build palaces. We build homes!”

I was then repeatedly asked if I was a journalist. “We don’t allow them here anymore. Every time they come, they publish lies about us the in newspapers,” I was told.

I was eventually allowed to take photographs inside. While the house was under construction, Ionut, his wife, and one-year-old son lived upstairs. “I have all the marble for the floors already bought,” he told me, pointing to stacks of tiles against the wall. “From Paris. That’s also where I got the idea for the plan of the house” (FIG. 14A, B).

The similarity of architectural language in Sintesti is striking; there is also a less noticeable drive to build ever bigger homes. The result is an eminently cohesive urban form — even though there are no spatial constraints, or anything resembling “design guidelines.”

Likewise, the interiors of the houses follow a common, rigorous symmetry. The public side consists of a grand entry with two or three stories of galleries and a monumental staircase, typically marble (FIG. 15). Multiple rooms open onto the galleries, but have no access between them.

From the two houses I visited in Sintesti, I determined that the typical mansion contains between seven and twelve rooms. Most are unfurnished and uninhabited, but their number is considered more a matter of prestige. The rooms do fill up during family events such as weddings and funerals. As mentioned by one Sintesti resident, “It is a great embarrassment to have wedding guests and no place for all of them to sleep.”



FIGURE 14A (TOP), B (ABOVE). *Sintesti*. The home of eighteen-year-old Ionut and his wife.



FIGURE 15. Multiple rooms open into the galleries surrounding a monumental stair in one of the mansions of *Sintesti*.

#### A CONTEXT FOR DISCUSSION

In contrast to other forms of vernacular dwellings and settlements in rural Romania, the Roma palace phenomenon remains largely unstudied. In fact, rather than being regarded as the embodiment of a living culture, the houses have been dismissed as kitsch. The right wing and the media have even argued that the palaces represent a Trojan horse, the harbinger of a coming “Gypsyfication” of Romanian culture. A similar form of cultural backlash has been directed at the equally eclectic *manele* music that originated in post-Communist Roma slums. However, unlike the palaces, *manele* has enjoyed tremendous popularity and become an immensely profitable industry.

Indignation against the palaces within the Romanian architecture profession has been situated strictly within an exclusionary modernist trope of aesthetic purity. The theoretical and cultural lag caused by decades of Communist rule and cultural isolation has created the grounds for this intellectual struggle. Forty-five years of socialist-realism arrested Romania’s cultural development and delayed its encounter with postmodernism.<sup>25</sup> Today, this has created great difficulties when it comes to making sense of a phenomenon that does not have familiar references — certainly not when measured against a normative “West.”

Within this cultural milieu, Mariana Celac's taxonomy of Rroma palaces in Buzescu represented a coming of age of sorts — which is perhaps the reason it was so compelling to intellectual elites. The public is arguably still not ready to bridge the gap; however, Celac, Kiraly and Berescu created a healthy controversy and a belated *Learning from Las Vegas* moment with their “Tinseltown” exhibition in Bucharest. Yet, unlike Venturi, Izenour and Scott-Brown's stance, “Tinseltown” did not make a moral plea to rediscover the forgotten architecture of the common man. Rather, it simply proposed a deconstruction of the language of the palace, and of its subjectivities. The thesis involved an orderly resolution of discordant signifiers, trying to make sense of “design” moves that appear to surrender to the imperatives of global consumption, yet are still locally based and ethnically charged.

By examining the palaces through a single Rroma culture of former nomadism, however, “Tinseltown” unintentionally reproduced an Orientalist/exoticist discourse. Through systematic logic, it framed the extrovert consumption reflected in the “palace” architecture back toward an essentialized portrait of the Rroma as a marginal population. It thus used an overly simple approach to the Rroma's complex construction of “self.” It thus indirectly linked the conspicuous consumption of the Rroma to a need to signal their legitimacy to the non-Rroma outside world or to broadcast opulence to the Rroma community.<sup>26</sup>

This hypothesis may be called into question by ethnographic studies such as that of Cerasela Voiculescu in Sângeorgiu de Mures.<sup>27</sup> Voiculescu's far more nuanced understanding of Rroma community culture and social associations may inform a reading of their dwellings — and more importantly, their patterns of consumption.

According to Voiculescu, the economy of the Rroma is essentially informal. Within this world, consumption, production and commerce are founded on a set of extralegal norms that define hierarchies and regulate social relations. Consumption, then, not only signals status within the community but, in the context of a quasi-feudal and nuclear community, establishes social capital. Moreover, it provides an economic strategy and a way to establish trust, because most Rroma rely on each other for financial help. Weddings, funerals, and particularly the size and appearance of homes are thus defined by a set of norms and conventions, respect for which consolidates social capital, and disrespect for which may lead to a loss of prestige.<sup>28</sup>

The conspicuous consumption of the Rroma palaces may thus be attributed to social rituals, rather than to mimicry or to a desire to broadcast respectability. By contrast, Celac has proposed that the construction of identity is the primary determinant of the palace phenomenon, adding that the Rroma are attempting to express through architecture a status they have been historically denied. However, the names and symbols inscribed on the roofs of the palaces, besides being an indication of idiosyncratic social process and community network-

ing, demonstrate that the palace is primarily an expression of status within the community. For an outsider, these nicknames and symbols would have little significance.

It can also be argued that a form of transgression can be read into the Rroma architecture. The villas are almost always built without permits, and any request for compliance from the authorities is typically met with categorical refusal. The language of the palaces also appropriates and rearticulates the symbols of authority with deliberate irony and subversive intent, as the case of Dan Finutu demonstrates.

According to Celac, Rroma have a very strong sense of identity, that is always expressed through the same means. “I realized that the Rroma have chosen architecture to express their identity because it was precisely what was missing from their nomadic past.”<sup>29</sup>

It should also be noted that the Communist regime forcefully ended nomadism by settling the Rroma primarily in leftover spaces within the urban fabric, particularly in dwellings that were not compatible with their way of life (i.e., modernist flats). Thus, the similarity in manifestations of Rroma identity formation today could be attributed to a common reaction against such systemic forces imposed on them in the past. As I argued above, referring to Ladányi and Szélényi, a similar view can be applied to the analysis of Rroma social status throughout Eastern Europe.

This still does not explain how Rroma palaces elude most conceptions of vernacular while at the same time owing very little to the historical styles they reproduce. The houses are both traditional and postmodern. They are neither high design, nor truly vernacular; neither rural dwellings, nor spontaneous settlements. How can one interrogate this condition using existing scholarship?

According to Amos Rapoport, vernacular built environments can be conceptualized in terms of environmental quality, social settings, and the cultural landscapes in which they exist.<sup>30</sup> Built environments should thus be seen as more than artifacts. He situated traditional design along four variables: space, time, meaning and communication.

In an effort to derive a set of operational attributes that would classify groups as more or less traditional, this methodology establishes a subtle gradient that avoids classification based on ideal types. This emphasis on processes and product characteristics can serve as a starting point when examining the intersection of Rroma architecture and the study of traditional environments.

Referencing Paul Oliver, Nezar AlSayyad has also argued that “there is no such thing as ‘traditional building; there are only buildings that embody traditions.”<sup>31</sup> He went on to argue that viewing a building as such, “rather than it being the means by which the building came to be allows us to see the continuities between form, content and process.”<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, it is clear that a solely spatial perspective cannot suffice to navigate the concept of tradition with respect to Rroma architecture. The process of transmitting recogniz-

able architectural traits from generation to generation is what establishes a chain of tradition. But the Rroma culture of perpetual building and the rapid changes their structures undergo problematize the idea of transmission and raise questions about the nature of what is being transmitted.

Celac's concept of nomadism "in place," attributed to the Rroma of Buzescu, likewise complicates and expands the practice of transmission.<sup>33</sup> Although an essentialist view, it identifies a continuum — the practice of nomadism reappearing in the form of the constant renewal of the Rroma house.

A third possible frame with which to view the Rroma mansions is Yi-Fu Tuan's notion that the analysis of tradition can be coupled with the idea of "constraint-vs.-choice."<sup>34</sup> He took as axiomatic the fact that choice is limited in "nonliterate and folk societies." At the same time, he established that the exercise of choice allows for creativity, while constraint hinders it. Thus, he considered choice — a prerogative of modernity — to be at odds with the idea of tradition.

Could Tuan's conception of choice be applied to the complex equation of the Rroma settlement? Could the Rroma palace be regarded as a traditional artifact, even though it is undoubtedly an exercise of choice? Constrained neither economically nor by social or legal norms, the Rroma palace is the epitome of free will.

Existing analytical frameworks in the study of vernacular environments, such as these, may facilitate understanding of the Rroma vernacular and help interrogate its morphology and symbolism. However, the introduction of the term "vernacular" may be problematic, because some of the essential qualities of the palaces do not appear to qualify as such, particularly if read against Rapoport's polythetic framework of product and process characteristics.<sup>35</sup>

The palaces are clearly identifiable as a type. However, they are "academically" rather than "traditionally" inspired, to use Rapoport's words.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, the morphological characteristics of the Rroma settlements are in continuous transformation — as a physical environment as well as a language. This aspect problematizes their analysis as traditional environments, because the process of transmission does not involve an artifact as much as a practice.

Can we speak of a Rroma architectural style? No matter how diversified, the elements are typically composed according to a common syntax: eclectic language, strong symmetry, theatrical monumentality. However, the Rroma architecture does not seem to be derived from a borrowed aesthetic. Rather, it may be considered a neovernacular style. One important reason for this distinction is that visual practices in the Rroma communities must be understood in context of global and capitalist modernity, not just the Rroma's nomadic past. How else can one understand the range of forms out of which it is produced?

The peri-urban Rroma palace is a manifestation of a social imaginary, an "identity artifact" that functions as a material object and a sign — an embodied practice that shapes the identity of the individual, as well as the group. The palaces are deeply meaningful, a full expression of the aspirations of the Rroma. Yet the people who create them rely on prestigious models and signifiers drawn from what they see as "essential" in various types of formal architecture around the world.

To date, the study of folk housing in rural Romania has not been matched by a similar interest in the emerging architecture of the Rroma. I contend that the vibrant presence of this new Rroma architecture is a manifestation of a vernacular practice that engages a global language, and one of the most valuable forms of vernacular architecture in Romania today.

## REFERENCE NOTES

1. For the distinction between the two languages, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romani\\_language](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romani_language), and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romanian\\_language](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romanian_language).

2. The discrepancy may be caused by the fact that many Rroma did not declare their ethnicity in the census or do not have identity cards or birth certificates.

3. C. Voiculescu, "Constructii Identitare la Rromii din Sângeorgiu de Mures" ["Identity Construction in the Rroma Community of Sângeorgiu de Mures], *Sociologie Româneasca*, 1–2 (2002), pp.100–125.

4. For a description of the Rroma population in Europe, see R. Rose, "Europe's Largest Minority: Roma and Sinti Demand Equal Rights," in *United Nations Chronicle*, Online Edition (2006), <http://www.un.org/>

[pubs/chronicle/2006/webArticles/120106\\_rose.htm](http://pubs/chronicle/2006/webArticles/120106_rose.htm). For a brief historical account of the Rroma community in Europe in the aftermath of the Holocaust, see "The Roma: Europe's Largest Minority," in the *Encyclopædia Britannica Online* (2007), <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-250269>.

5. For a detailed discussion of the political and economic status of Rroma communities in the European Union, see W. Guy, ed., *Between Past and Future: The Rroma of Central and Eastern Europe* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2001).

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16. M. Celac, “Roumanie: les hautes toitures du Baragan,” [“Romania: The Pitched Roofs of Baragan,” *L'architecture d'aujourd'hui*, No. 335 (July/August 2001).
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. See Guy, ed., *Between Past and Future*; and D. Grigore, “Rromii, locuire si locuri de munca,” in the weekly political journal *Revista 22*, ANUL XV (853), July 14–20, 2006.
20. Celac, “Roumanie: les hautes toitures du Baragan.”
21. R. Venturi, S. Izenour, and D. Scott-Brown, *Learning from Las Vegas: Revised Edition: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977).
22. The story of Dan Finutu has been repeatedly featured in the Romanian popular press. Publications such as *Ziua* and *Maxim* have referred to his encounter with the legal system, but have not elaborated on the nature of his legal difficulties.
23. An English translation of the Romanian name is Dan “Fine-Guy.”
24. One example, in Romanian, of such an expose can be found at <http://www.infonews.ro/article45049.html>.
25. For an extensive discussion of the architecture profession in Romania during the Communist regime, see T. Sandqvist and A.M. Zahariade, *Dacia 1300: My Generation* (Bucharest: Simetria, 2003).
26. Celac, “Roumanie: les hautes toitures du Baragan.”
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28. Ibid.
29. *Ziua*, 3102 (August 25, 2004), interview with Mariana Celac (in Romanian) by Bandusa Aramanca, <http://www.ziua.ro/display.php?data=2004-08-25&id=155650>. Translation by author.
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34. Y.F. Tuan, “Traditional: What Does It Mean?” in AlSayyad and Bourdier, eds., *Dwellings, Settlements, and Tradition*.
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All photos and diagrams are by the author.