

# On Change and Adaptation: Rural Inhabitation during the Romanian Post-Socialist Transition

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This article examines the Romanian rural environment after twenty years of never-ending transition toward the promised land of capitalism. Since the end of the dictatorial regime that lasted nearly half a century, changes in rural building have challenged the condition of Romania's traditions. New social phenomena like migration and tourism now overlap a confused, ambiguous search for greater comfort and the desire for social exposure. The article suggests that the apparently malformed visions of the new vernacular are just one of many intermediate phases that a tradition goes through in times of transition. Adapting and improvising have always best defined the spontaneous Romanian rural spirit.

Without being seized by a fascination (or obsession) with “ends,” as discussed by Nezar AlSayyad in his essay “The End of Tradition, or the Tradition of Endings?” it is important to acknowledge that Romanian rural society is presently in an extremely delicate situation.<sup>1</sup> In a relatively short span of time, the post-socialist transition has brought a brutal series of alterations to a way of life that the former totalitarian regime would have preferred to have abolished.<sup>2</sup> This social and moral transfiguration — a “disfigurement” in many meanings of the term — has obviously involved the building process. Indeed, this process is nothing but the reflection of a rural way of life that is still deprived of socioeconomic catalysts, or that has, at best, been recatalyzed. The consequence is that much new vernacular building in rural areas seems disoriented, ambiguous, and even grotesque, a degradation of what has previously been considered “authentic” in the “traditional” environment.<sup>3</sup> This article argues that, although the vernacular may not “look” like it used to, what matters is its potential for reinventing itself and its capacity for inheriting and spreading a certain meaning of and connection to place.

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Being indissolubly linked to inhabitation and to new constraints or freedoms, the new vernacular reflects the reality of a present way of life that is undoubtedly different from the former one. In this manner, it participates in the active redefinition of modernity. As Bernd Hüppauf has noticed, the triumph of modernity does not necessarily mean the end of the vernacular:

*... the assumption that the triumph of the modern invariably spells the death of the vernacular, although widespread, is difficult to sustain. Rediscovered and raised to the level of the theoretical reflection, it [the vernacular] is gaining a surprising significance and the potential to contribute to the ongoing reconstitution of images of modernity and modernism.<sup>4</sup>*

The study of tradition and vernacular architecture in Romania is a relatively undeveloped field with little recent fieldwork. Especially considering the uncertain future of many valuable vernacular ensembles and buildings, any work in this field is useful and opportune — whether it engages the traditional environment from a historical, sociological, geographical or architectural perspective. In this article, however, I suggest that another perspective is also necessary. In addition to historical studies that sound a legitimate alarm over the deterioration of old vernacular buildings, it is absolutely necessary to become immersed in close analysis of the omnipresent phenomenon of change. Incisive and lucid studies like Marcel Vellinga's "Engaging the Future" and Dell Upton's "Tradition of Change" have called for approaches "that explicitly focus on the dynamic nature of vernacular traditions," and that examine "points of contact and transformation — in the market, at the edge, in the new and the decaying."<sup>5</sup> It is in this spirit that I venture a reading of a possible new trajectory for tradition in rural Romania. Moreover, I suggest that the study of vernacular architecture is not only more interesting, but all the more necessary, when a particular tradition is invaded by confusion. It is especially at such times that a critical look can reveal the ongoing reformulation of tradition, and as Vellinga pointed out, "pave the way for a more action-oriented approach that perceives the vernacular as a source of architectural knowledge."<sup>6</sup>

In a recent study, T.O. Gheorghiu argued that all that had been won in "the sphere of the collective mentality" has been lost in contemporary Romanian rural communities, which are now characterized by general confusion and "a strange way of relating to modernity."<sup>7</sup> Gheorghiu's conclusion is that the present situation is so serious that "it does not allow the liberalisation of the constructive process and it imposes other ways of preserving tradition, aiming at people's prosperity, inclusively." As long as tradition is no longer a feature of these communities, Gheorghiu believes, it should be looked for somewhere else: in "the old urbanistic and architectural organizations," where tradition can be

"detected and protected from the exterior, in parallel with the local behavioural reformation." Only after restoring this link, "the bridge," can the constructive process "become free again."<sup>8</sup>

Unlike most European countries, Romania still has, especially in its rural areas, a great number of extremely valuable old buildings. This genuine heritage — physically degraded, perishable, and exposed — includes rural habitations, houses and annexes that still define the built landscape of many regions in the country. This is a heritage with an inestimable historic, ethnographic and documentary value, which can deteriorate or be lost to redevelopment seemingly overnight. No doubt, this heritage must be reconsidered, reassessed and protected. And much can be learned in this respect from the Western world's mistakes — which Romanians seem keen on copying, even when they know they are wrong.<sup>9</sup> But this article does not refer to that kind of endangered heritage, which can be saved only by museification. It considers another aspect (the most important, in my opinion) of rural inhabitation and contemporary vernacular architecture. This is a groping for new forms of expression in a moment without any criteria — the articulation of new sounds in a language which is learned on the run. The article thus detaches itself from discourses like that of Gheorghiu (which possibly remain valid in connection with those traditional buildings that should be preserved in their original form, as monuments). It rather questions present contrasts — the lack of continuity with the past and an apparent fall into an abyss of ugliness — where aesthetic analysis is less significant. To do so involves estimating the validity of old models of inhabitation in a topsy-turvy world, and observing the reactions of a modern vernacular which is using new forms of expression. More than preservation, therefore, this article is interested in adaptation, search, experiment and collage.

Many observations and conclusions on these topics are undoubtedly valid across rural and urban contexts, because they are the reflection of a social reality that leaves its mark on all types of buildings. But this study deals only with the process of rural inhabitation and vernacular architecture because of the important role rurality has played in Romanian culture and in the meaning of Romanian "traditional space."<sup>10</sup> However, this study does not intend to follow the evolution in time of a certain type of house or the transformation of a specific geographical area. Instead, it tries to explain the nature, symptoms, and general manifestations of the transformation of inhabitation and rural vernacular architecture during the post-socialist transition by correlating socioeconomic data (statistics, prognoses) with field research and case studies.

Such a pluridisciplinary approach is absolutely necessary because the evolution of local economic processes and the appearance of social phenomena such as migration and tourism (which were not widely present in rural areas before the 1990s) has upset the pre-capitalist order of traditional

space and drastically altered the forms of vernacular architecture. The consequences of these new social phenomena are visible almost everywhere, and have caused many conflicts. Their manifestations have ranged from depopulation to an aggressive and unsustainable development, from an inappropriate spatial configuration to poor physical condition (lack of equipment, energy inefficiency, etc.). Indeed, many rural dwellings are presently incompatible with minimal requirements for comfort at the beginning of the twenty-first century — even in a relatively underdeveloped environment such as rural Romania.

Finally, by no means can the notions of modern and vernacular be appreciated in a country of the former Communist bloc without understanding the connection between their recent evolution and the intentions and programs of their former totalitarian regimes.<sup>11</sup> That is why, to correctly situate the discussion of post-socialist transition in Romania, I shall first describe inhabitation and rural vernacular architecture in the socioeconomic and cultural context preceding the wave of change which shook up Europe in 1989.

#### TOWARD THE ERADICATION OF RURALITY: SYSTEMATIZATION AND COLLECTIVIZATION DURING THE GOLDEN EPOCH

Until very recently, Romanian society was predominantly rural. Indeed, the country's urban population did not exceed its rural population until 1981.<sup>12</sup> Because of the extremely slow transition of its population from a rural to an urban condition, the Romanian case can be considered an exception among the countries of the former Eastern Europe.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the sudden impact of a brutal Communist regime on Romania's rural communities (and upon its peasantry — a recently established social class at the time the Communists took over) was profound.

Historically, aspects of a capitalist economy had begun to appear in Romania in the nineteenth century. But the process of separation from the previous feudal economic order was long and difficult. A legal framework for the liberation and emancipation of the peasants first appeared in the southern provinces of Romania in 1864. But because it was not accompanied by a social framework, the "becoming" of this social class lasted for many decades, until 1946, when the last effort at agrarian reform took place.<sup>14</sup> The problem was that each time agrarian reforms occurred, they were only partial, and did not create radical change in rural social structure. Thus, powerful landowners were able to retain large properties even after the 1923 agrarian reform. And because peasants received only small plots of land, they were frequently pauperized, and in many cases had no choice but to sell their land.<sup>15</sup>

In the countries of the former Communist bloc, World War II was followed by agricultural collectivization, the conse-

quence of a political ideology which sought to create a "new society" by destroying economic, social and cultural connections considered too traditionalist. And in Romania the assault upon rural life was made worse after 1974 by the association of collectivization with the Ceausescu regime's sinister project of systematization.<sup>16</sup> Both aimed to dislocate peasants, psychologically and physically, from their customs and their villages. Their reach was comprehensive. Gheorghiu has even described how pejorative connotations were introduced to dictionary definitions of "tradition" and "traditionalism" for purely political-doctrinarian reasons.<sup>17</sup> Collectivization interrupted private land relations, instituting agricultural associations as the primary form of farm production. As a result, by 1989, the Romanian socialist state had come to own 90.7 percent of the country's arable land.<sup>18</sup>

Communist management aimed at transforming Romania into an urbanized and highly industrialized society. In this system, the village was to become an annex for the town (a potential source of workers and raw materials). And — in addition to being forced off the land by collectivization, systematization and industrialization — many peasants left their villages because the rural education system was neglected and the role of the Church was undermined.<sup>19</sup>

The Communist regime succeeded in bringing deep changes and discontinuities to Romanian society, both in urban and rural areas. Its tactics were varied: intense urbanization; annexation of villages to towns, or their compulsory transformation into "towns"; annulment of property rights and collectivization; forced changes to local economies and administrations; demolition of private houses and the construction of blocks of flats (followed by the forced relocation of the population to the flats); and industrialization and the concentration of the workforce near industrial sites. All these actions had a huge impact on the rural environment and its inhabitants. In an unnatural, forced way, they changed rural ways of life and rural customs, and led to economic stagnation in most rural zones, where people built few new buildings (FIG. 1).

The Communist regime also brought deep alterations of social structure and individual motivation, unsettling almost any system of values based on common sense. In many cases, changes at the individual level — as in each person's ways of living, thinking, and relating to others — had an even more negative effect on the traditional environment than larger-scale economic or social change.

Nevertheless, as Violette Rey noticed, "during the whole 20th century Romania has lived under the sign of repeated transitions."<sup>20</sup> The most recent appeared following the fall of the Communist dictatorship. The arrival of this new period of change in the 1990s, she added, was initially referred to as the post-socialist transition, "with its simplistic connotation of 'return' to a 'normal' model of evolution."<sup>21</sup> Yet, as it has turned out, in the entire region isolated behind the Iron Curtain until 1989, "the post-socialist transition has been the



**FIGURE 1.** Block of Communist-era flats in the village of Berzasca, Caras-Severin, 2008.

synonym of a systemic break, a break which decomposed the bases of the previous system, and which had to allow the initiation of a new construction, by the appearance of new types of behaviour.”<sup>22</sup>

As a result, today’s Romania is no longer involved in the great project of totalitarian modernization. Nevertheless, mutations go on, as the country is confronted with the open patterns of development dictated by a growing market and an open relationship to Western cultures and societies.

#### HERITAGE AND CULTURAL VALUE VS. COMFORT AND NEED

The end of socialism exposed Romania to a process of having to “learn” democracy. In the 1990s the country went through various political changes, experiencing profound transformations as a result of major legal decisions, radical economic reforms, and new social phenomena.<sup>23</sup>

As part of this process, it was inevitable that the process of inhabitation would be directly and severely affected. The unsettling of the rules of everyday life, the gradual passage to a market economy, the liberalization of the workforce, and the implicit increase in personal mobility have all modified the requirements for habitations. Traditional rural houses are now seen as too old, too small, or too uncomfortable for a new society of consumption.

As the size of new houses has increased fabulously — not only because this was necessary, but because of a need for representation and social exposure (I shall return to this later) — so has the necessity of adapting the house to new local occupations and to allow an increased degree of comfort. But where new wealth now makes the restoration or extension of existing buildings, or the erection of new ones, affordable, an “outsider” will usually immediately notice a

lack of awareness of the value of local cultural heritage in the production of details, structures and building ensembles (FIG. 2). Therefore, recent construction has for the most part been regarded as uninspired or destructive.

For example, Gheorghiu identified the following characteristics of the “destructive interventions upon traditional inhabitation: the demolition of the old house and the building of a new one, the demolition of the annexes, ‘the modernisation’ of some parts of the building, the installation of inappropriate equipment” or, in many cases, the combination of these operations.<sup>24</sup> The consequence is that

*... the new houses are much more fragile in front of water, wind, cold or heat, implicitly they (uselessly) consume more energy, they have oversized spaces, which are overwhelmingly useless, they are inappropriately oriented (to the sun and to the vicinity) and they do not offer an intimate and protected family environment. If we add ugliness and stridency, we have a complete picture of “the quality” of the new rural architecture.*<sup>25</sup>

Such remarks need more explanation. Obviously, work on existing buildings is completed without specialized technical experience in the modification of traditional structures. But there are several reasons for this. Sometimes old, “traditional” technologies are obsolete, or the materials necessary for those technologies are difficult to find. Alternatively, if both technology and material are available, the cost of using them exceeds the cost of more commonplace, modern solutions, which are now widely available, and which most people can afford. For example, some village mayors have protested the recently approved urban and architectural regulations for the Danube Delta Biosphere Reservation area.<sup>26</sup> The regulations seek to protect the specificity of the delta region as a place through such measures as a requirement that houses be roofed only with reed thatch or ceramic tiles.<sup>27</sup> But the mayors claim it will be impossible for them to



**FIGURE 2.** Erecting a new house in a village from Oltenia, 2007.



**FIGURE 3.** The use of reed thatch vs. corrugated metal sheets as a roofing material in the village of Murighiol, Tulcea, 2006.

impose such a measure as long as corrugated metal sheets are cheaper. Although these reactions often hide other interests, it is true that in the Danube delta (the reed land) reed is no longer a cheap material.<sup>28</sup> Harvesting it is extremely hard work, and before 1989 it was done, on an industrial scale, by political prisoners in the work camps on the Chilia arm. Now, because of reed harvesting and processing technology, it costs, indeed, more than corrugated metal (FIG. 3).

Therefore, the appropriate technical solutions, which are “correct” if one’s goal is only the preservation of traditional buildings, are no longer “vernacular,” except in the remotest areas. In the other areas, they have become the preoccupation of specialists. Although it is not at all *natural* at first sight, the association between new technologies and old houses is, however, the spontaneous and pragmatic manifestation of need.

I do not mean to suggest here that the present evolution is the only normal and possible one. For example, the solution (which is recurrent in most of Romania) of covering walls with expanded polystyrene, to improve thermal performance, is hard to accept — especially when existing walls have frameworks and decorations specific to the architecture of the area (FIG. 4). The replacement of the wood shingles covering and protecting the walls of the houses in Bucovina’s forested mountain area by a product with a similar form, but made of PVC, is also not easy to accept. But capitalism and the consumption market play their part here as well: the renewal of old walls using wood shingles requires attentive manual work and considerable time, making it expensive. Moreover, people know that wood degrades in time and needs to be taken care of, while they believe that plastic will not (although there is not enough information about the resistance of plastic in the long term).

As time passes, original building technologies, which had been developed locally, are being replaced by imported systems. But, being the most accessible solution in the absence



**FIGURE 4.** Polystyrene insulation used to blanket the walls of a beautifully decorated old house in a village from Sibiu, 2007.

of some effective local alternative, these imported technologies are implicitly those which should *normally* be used by people. It may be true, as Gheorghiu has claimed, that “during the last ten years, carelessness and the infernal bombardment of advertising begin to be the causes which, in traditional environments which used to be solid, have been facilitating the penetration of globalized ideas and concepts, into the habitation field inclusively, extremely rapidly and aggressively.”<sup>29</sup> But the only real way to recalibrate building practices and reduce these discrepancies and disfunctionalities will be to allow the assimilation of these technologies within traditional environments. Only in time will one see if they will succeed, through adaptation, experiment and practice, in using them in an intelligent manner proper to local needs.

Even Gheorghiu has pointed out that “the way of life of traditional societies is almost exclusively based upon decisions taking into account practical use.”<sup>30</sup> This situation has not changed — peasants will not adopt a technical solution out of pure passion, and the attachment to the house in its present condition (if such an attachment exists) often disappears when generations change, in the face of practical arguments.

#### MIGRATION AND TOURISM

Since the early 1990s, two important phenomena, migration and tourism, have become more and more present in rural Romania. While tourism existed before 1989, it was only domestic, reduced, and usually concentrated in certain regions. Migration is a completely new phenomenon. Labor, leisure, ethnic or other types of migration have caused the almost complete emptying of some villages, the development of others, and (especially) the replacement of many cultural and social reference marks within rural communities with imported ones.

The effect upon Romanian villages of both phenomena intensified suddenly after the 2007 accession of Romania to the E.U. The strongest impact and the most immediate consequence of accession to the E.U. involved the new freedom of Romanians to move through Europe in search of economic opportunity. Thus, the village-town flow within Romania has since 2007 been partially replaced by the chance to look further afield for economic opportunity. Romanians now have the chance to leave areas which had been dominated by only one pole (the closest town, the county capital, etc.) in their search for a better life. The opportunity of a job (most of the time, an illegal one) in the much-dreamed-of and promising countries of Western Europe has thus caused a significant migration abroad.

These processes and their consequences upon rural habitation are connected with the rising importance of what Manuel Castells called “the space of flows,” as opposed to “the space of places.” AlSayyad has referred to this discussion in the context of changes which took place in the last decades of the twentieth century, “which dramatically altered the global order.”<sup>31</sup> He argued that, as a result, it was important to adopt a new way of understanding the role of traditional settlements in the reconstruction of history, and of populations and identities. And he suggested that, although identity cannot exist without a place (while a global culture can exist only without a place), the impact of the new “space of flows” upon the form of settlements would make cultural experience less connected to place and more based on information.<sup>32</sup>

Vintila Mihailescu noticed the evolution of an apparently strange phenomenon after the fall of the totalitarian regime: “. . . instead of diminishing, in order to get closer to European dimensions to a certain extent, the rural world expanded after 1990. The villages have not grown older, but, on the contrary, they have received young people; however, they have been losing more and more women, because they go to work abroad.”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, many people came back or moved to the countryside in the 1990s, trying to practice agriculture.<sup>34</sup>

This means that in many cases, those who are building in rural areas today are either townspeople, former peasants who had moved (or been moved) to a town, or (a new case nowadays) people who left the village and then came back with money made in Europe. The result is that these new buildings are not necessarily “local production.” In other words, the new “space of flows” has extended the range of influences on the rural building process. Architectural models from the town, or from abroad (seen in other contexts, on TV, or in magazines), have been imported in an aleatory way, without discernment. For example, the built environment of Maramures County in northern Romania, renowned for its old timber vernacular architecture, is changing because of the influence of workers returning from countries like Italy and Spain. Their new houses are huge, to show their prosperity and success, and include large windows, indoor garages, and even exterior elevators. Undoubtedly, under the

influence of a culture of consumption and media, such buildings alter the coherence of the built, autochthonous environment, which has been unchanged for decades. But, leaving aside the extremes, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, do they freshen it at the same time?

Another visible consequence of migration, this time in economically inactive areas, are abandoned or seriously degraded houses. In many cases, the degradation is irreversible, and in most cases, the oldest houses (probably the most valuable) are the first to be abandoned (FIG. 5). Such abandonment can, however, eventually lead to the sale of rural properties to townspeople or foreigners as second homes. Unfortunately, for the time being, this is only happening in places where people have affective or family relations. No general policy has yet been formulated to promote the resale of traditional habitations instead of building new neighborhoods on the peripheries of existing towns.<sup>35</sup>

At the opposite pole, the areas which are most exposed to transformation are, predictably, those with touristic potential. The Prahova Valley and the Black Sea shore are two such areas that have been changed by a construction boom, driven by a “second-home” phenomenon and the development of tourist infrastructure. In such areas, the absence of private initiatives until 1989 and the sudden unchaining of their development potential during the years that followed have led to sudden and uncontrolled change.

The Limanu commune, at the south end of the seashore, close to the Romanian-Bulgarian border, is a particularly good example of the outcome of these new forces. Limanu is formed of four villages, two of which face the seashore, and two the interior. As attested by documents from the era of Ottoman domination, the commune has long been heterogeneous in terms of the status, size and nature of its villages. But it is also mixed from the point of view of the ethnicity of its population and the way each village has developed in recent years.<sup>36</sup> Of the four, Hagieni is almost “frozen” in a preindustrial era, with its houses made of stone



FIGURE 5. Abandoned house in Dambovicioara, Prahova, 2007.

and clay and with sandy, earthen streets. Limanu, being the administrative center of the commune, has experienced the most constant, normal pattern of development. The other two villages, 2 Mai and Vama Veche, on the seashore, however, are growing rapidly and changing with each passing year.

Although a handful of tourists did visit the area before the 1990s, Limanu was by and large isolated and almost unknown. Its discovery involved the appearance of so-called “weekend” tourism in the context of the transition to a market economy and an outburst (impossible before 1989) of touristic demand. Since then, the growing number of visitors and their effect on the urban and architectural development of the place has created a mental distinction between *before* and *now*, both on the part of the old tourists and the local people.<sup>37</sup> Tourism is now the main income source (instead of fishing or agriculture). And where people coming here once used to have minimal demands, they have now started “to ask for better conditions.”<sup>38</sup> Therefore, money earned during the summer has been used in the offseason to make improvements to houses so they will be more attractive to visitors. The money is first used to build a bathroom inside the house (until now, the toilet and the shower were outside, in the yard). An electric boiler is then installed; and gradually, the house is extended so that it can accommodate more lodgers (FIG. 6).

At the same time these changes have occurred at the level of individual houses, changes have also occurred at the village level. 2 Mai has been extended to include new neighborhoods with bigger houses planned from the very beginning so that they can accommodate tourists. And Vama Veche is growing mainly as a result of new tourist infrastructure, paid for by outside investors. As a result, the houses of the local people are now being dwarfed by new development.



**FIGURE 6.** In the case of small, existing houses, where there was not enough space inside for a bathroom, it was built separately, in the courtyard. Here an old structure encloses toilets and a shower at Vasile Egor's house, 2 Mai, 2006.



**FIGURE 7.** Example of house where the original veranda has been closed, while a bower has been improvised in front of the house. Vasile Egor's house, 2 Mai, 2006.

In such contexts, analysis of changes to vernacular design should be more concerned with how household spaces are being changed than how building materials are changing. For example, new construction has almost completely eliminated the verandah, a space of passage between interior and exterior that was once a characteristic of residential design across southern Europe. In 2 Mai, these porches have been closed to better protect against winter cold and to increase the comfort of tourists (most rooms are accessed through this space) (FIG. 7).

It is curious that in this case, however, the duality between *before* and *now* manifests itself differently between groups. In particular, older tourists have viewed such transformations negatively, feeling that the houses are no longer as they used to know and like them. Thus, the process has also inverted itself: the verandah of some houses has been reopened, while in other houses the functions of the porch have been transferred to small pavilions or bowers built in the courtyard.<sup>39</sup> By extrapolating, the problem of the “loss of tradition” appears also to involve sentimental attachment. Generally, if people like a place, they like to find it as they remember it when they come back. If the place changes, they do not recognize it, and the emotion vanishes. Hence, they are disappointed, and they are left with the sensation that the place has lost its authenticity.

In the case of 2 Mai, the destructive pragmatism of villagers when it comes to building or restoring vernacular houses may thus be combated by the effect of tourism. Or, more accurately, it is redirected because the locals come to understand that building/restoring in a “traditional” manner is preferred by visitors, and it will thus bring more guests (FIG. 8). In time, by meeting more and more people, villagers come to understand the difference between building approaches, and come to appreciate the local specificity and

**FIGURE 8.** Agritourism: an example of a touristic pension where the typical open verandahs have been closed with glass (in front of the wooden structure), all around the house. Dragoslavele village, Dambovită, 2007.



be proud of it.<sup>40</sup> This is, or can be, one positive outcome of the recent phenomenon of agritourism, which is becoming more and more widespread in rural areas. Its spread has been assisted by a recent infusion of European funds, aimed at reviving local economies and encouraging the sustainable development of rural areas.

Emphasizing site-specific characteristics through agritourism can, indeed, be a valid solution to the rehabilitation of many Romanian villages. But it must be initiated by the inhabitants, complementary to agricultural, zootechnical and handcraft activities, and in conformity with the traditional values of the region. Otherwise, as Ozkan has shown, the interruption of the old life and production cycles “are irreversible processes which could deeply harm the respective community if the flow of tourists decreases.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, the village needs a deep and genuine resuscitation of its traditional mechanisms so that it can provide quality agritouristic activities, which can in turn inject vitality into the rural economy — a complementary outcome.

#### ADAPTATION AS AN ARCHITECTURAL MANIFESTATION

Many studies have previously advocated a view of tradition and vernacular building as dynamic and creative processes, open to change and evolution. For example, Vellinga argued that tradition can be understood only as “a continuous creative process through which people, as active agents, negotiate, interpret and adapt knowledge and experiences gained in the past within the context of the challenges, wishes and requirements of the present.”<sup>42</sup> And Abu-Lughod

has described the impossibility that any existing architecture could have been formed without contact, diffusion, migration, reproduction, imitation, synergy, hybridization, etc.<sup>43</sup> In a world where “cultural and demographic migrations are the rule rather than the exception,” she saw influence, encounter, combination or adaptation as the only genuine possibilities of architectural manifestation — a process which she defined, following John Turner, as “traditioning.”<sup>44</sup> Consequently, the attempt to evaluate change instantly in the context of tradition is extremely difficult if we want to avoid subjectivity. Instead, such evaluation requires time, because *adaptation* best defines the way a tradition is given form and is able to endure.

At this point a distinction needs to be made. Although adaptation is a real form of vernacular manifestation and a vital process allowing a tradition to evolve, it is presumptuous to assert that the present “revolution” in the Romanian rural built environment is the proper, normal or only acceptable way to pass through these fuzzy times (which will supposedly end in the promised land of capitalism). The current transformations are by no means coherent or logical, and often lead to useless, aggressive exaggerations.

Vellinga has called for incorporating into academic discourse the interconnections between vernacular traditions and those that may be described as modern, popular or informal — as well as those that have resulted from their creative mixture.<sup>45</sup> This raises an important question: in the context of the post-socialist transition in Romania, is any kind of association/mixture, regardless of its intent or extent, *creative*? Of course not. The building onto and adaptation of existing structures — like the “modernized Minangkabau house,” the “Cotswolds barn that is now used as luxury weekend retreat,”



or the “urban Mongolian yurt provided with a concrete base and electric lights” mentioned by Vellinga — are one thing. So is the transformation of open verandahs into courtyard pavilions, as in the case of houses in 2 Mai. These are vernacular manifestations of modern times. But eradicating whole rural structures and entirely replacing them with new ones (this occurred systematically under the Communist regime, and has occurred unsystematically, and is still occurring, today) is another thing.<sup>46</sup> In this case, the connection of the new structures with the place is hard to detect even according to the most optimistic view. Nevertheless, the way in which the local community will handle these new structures in time, assimilating or rejecting them, might still be *creative*.

Following Dell Upton’s argument, we should not deny what may be the basic characteristic of the vernacular: change.<sup>47</sup> It is obvious that Romania’s old, “traditional” rural built forms do not correspond to present social norms. Therefore, they should not, and could not, be imposed as the “correct” ones. Probably, there could not be a better field of research in which to examine Upton’s call to study points of contact and transformation than the rural built landscape of Romania today: indeed, it is defined by nothing else but ambiguity, contrast, and apparent disorientation. Still, this is a landscape where, I dare say, one can also spot traces of continuity.

What is *local specificity*, and since when is it really *local*? Dobrogea, for example, with its picturesque houses, is in reality an ethnic and cultural conglomerate. The vernacular, the architecture that is specific to it as a place, is actually a mixture of types of houses and influences from various places. The reason is that the area is a place where Turks, Tartars, Bulgarians, Romanians, Greeks, Germans, Lippovans, Russians, Italians, and Macedo-Romanians have all historically lived together. Obviously, “the diverse spatial typologies have overcome mutual influences, leading to the migration of some typical architectural elements among them.”<sup>48</sup> Moreover, present-day tourism marketing is trying to transform it from a “Romanian Land” into a “multiethnic space,” or even a “California of the Balkans.”<sup>49</sup>

If the scale is reduced, we could also wonder about the appearance between World Wars I and II of small modernist villas which mixed with the Ukrainian habitations in Sfântu Gheorghe, an isolated settlement at the end of the Danube delta, during a period when all buildings there were made of adobe and reed thatch. Today, it is precisely this very lively mixture which represents the specificity of the village.

The same thing happened later, during the Communist regime, but, because the circulation of people and information was severely restricted, it happened in a different manner. For example, in Ciocanesti village, in Suceava, the exterior of most houses is painted with folk motifs. But the tradition of painted houses (which was identified as a strong local specificity at the end of the 1980s) started, in fact, in 1950, when Leontina Taran, a local woman, began it.<sup>50</sup> The idea spread in the village because of the mimesis that func-

tions so well in rural Romania. Then, after the place became famous in the 1990s for its tradition, the Local Council decreed in 2000 that all houses must be painted. In this case, the success of tourism led to the instauration of a (relatively new) form of tradition as a legal rule.

In the collective mentality, the *specificity of the place* is connected to the “power of custom.” The absence of change for a long time thus induces to the general mentality an image of things “like they should be,” “like they have always been,” or “since old people’s time.” Furthermore, the combination during the socialist period of total closure to the outside and centralized control of urban and rural development favored the emergence of perceptions like these when a systemic transformation followed during the post-socialist transition.

For example, when giving examples of “contemporary aberrations” in the modernization of a traditional house, Gheorghiu presented, under the category “Gypsy palace,” the image of a house with typical details of Gypsy-style architecture (sharp roof, shingles, and shiny metal panels). But I cannot refrain from noticing an extremely interesting detail.<sup>51</sup> Although the intervention is visibly radical, the house preserves both the alignment to the street of its first floor and, most of all, the exterior passage under this level, from the gate to the back yard — a space which is characteristic only of the Transylvanian region.

Referring to the bigger and bigger houses appearing in the Romanian rural landscape, Rey noticed that “the increasing medium surface of the new buildings is due both to a positive dynamism of economic growth, with positive effects upon the living standard, and to the touristic demand.”<sup>52</sup> However, “in the countryside, people often continue to live in a common room, while the number of rooms ostentatively proves social wealth and the familial capital” (FIG. 9).<sup>53</sup> It is possible that these houses will not survive in their present



FIGURE 9. A new and an old house within the same family compound. Draganesti village, Prahova, 2005.

form. Socioeconomic factors, such as a significant decrease in the birth rate, growing population mobility (especially among young people), the difficulty of maintaining such a big house, or even the experience of moments of economic crisis (like the present) associated with increasing unemployment might force the next generation to readapt this habitation for practical and effective use, or lead to a moderation of the constructive impetus in the case of future houses.

On the other hand, these “oversized and overwhelmingly useless spaces,” as Gheorghiu called them, might have a different significance.<sup>54</sup> Starting from the well-known notion of the “fine” or “good” room, which exists in the houses of all Romanian villages, Mihailescu found that “peasant beauty” might be connected with the “space of the exposure, a self-exposure in front of a public and the recognition, by this public, of the status of this self, a confirmation of dignity and of self-esteem.”<sup>55</sup> Thus, Mihailescu continued, there is a

*... surprising continuity where all of us see, most of the time, a misleading and even alarming break. From this point of view, the difference between the traditional peasant’s “fine room” and the imposing houses which have appeared in the countryside lately is no longer one of essence: all of them want to show their position “authentically,” to expose their fulfillment in order to place themselves with dignity in front of the world. But “the world” has changed.*

If, before, “being up to the world’s standards” meant the world of the village, “now ‘the world’ has grown larger and everyone looks for their own reference marks in order to be up to *that* specific world and *those* specific standards which they take into account electively in order to measure the fulfillment of their position.” Thus, Mihailescu concluded, “being modern” means merely “being up to the world’s standards.”<sup>56</sup>

Sometimes, adaptation also shapes a new vernacular by redrawing or interpreting traditional forms and elements with the help of new, “nontraditional” materials. The new houses in the submontane villages of the Arges Valley — for example, Corbsori — now use a mixture of red brick and white cement blocks, alternating the layers to obtain an image similar to that of older buildings, which used brick and stone or brick and white plaster (FIG. 10). People also claim that brick is too expensive to use for the whole house. Details which used to be carved in timber are also now imitated by shapes poured in concrete (FIGS. 11, 12).

In the touristic village of 2 Mai, one can find new fences built up from plastic beer cases (with the top layer used as a container for planting flowers) or from surf boards (FIGS. 13, 14). Strange, contrasting juxtapositions can be found even in the remotest and poorest areas — a mixture of adobe, thatched roof, and thermal insulating windows in the village of Topalu; or an old, clay house with both a clay oven and a TV satellite dish in a southern Dobrogea village (FIGS. 15, 16).



**FIGURE 10.**  
*Alternate layers of red brick and white cement blocks used in a new house, Corbsori village, Arges, 2007.*



**FIGURE 11 (ABOVE).**  
*The use of concrete to resemble the typical details of a timber structure, Corbsori village, Arges, 2007.*

**FIGURE 12. (RIGHT).**  
*Mixed use of timber and concrete, Corbsori village, Arges, 2007.*





**FIGURE 13.** *The creative use of beer cases to construct a fence (notice that the top row of cases have been used for plants). Village of 2 Mai, Constanta, 2004.*



**FIGURE 14.** *The use of surf boards to build a fence, 2 Mai, Constanta, 2004.*

The examples go on. They all might be considered simply isolated, incidental situations; but they might also be considered an appearance of tradition, as Duanfang Lu saw it — not so much “handed down” in a fast-changing society, as

constantly constructed and deconstructed in daily reproduction, a *latent* potential which “tends to reappear in new guises and generate new contradictions in other contexts.”<sup>57</sup>



**FIGURE 15.** A new, unfinished house using adobe and thatch, but also thermal-insulating double-pane windows and doors. Topalu, Constanta, 2005



**FIGURE 16.** An old, clay house, with a TV satellite antenna, Dobrogea, 2003.

## IN-BETWEEN

Today Romania is still far from being a developed society, which “was expected as a natural becoming after the socialist parenthesis.”<sup>58</sup> That is why, Rey claimed, “even the term ‘transition,’ initially understood as a more or less fast return to a democratic society, to a market economy, can be questioned.”<sup>59</sup>

True, Romania is not a pure European democratic country yet, but neither is it a Third World country. Its rural space is not typically Western (and probably never will be). But, at the same time, it is no longer the unaltered “traditional environment” it was considered until not long ago. It is exactly this “in-between” that I find most attractive and challenging — a country with a strong rural and traditional background, experiencing today a social metamorphosis that provides an opportunity to study change as a process in itself.

The “good, old Romanian village” is no longer what it used to be, because its social and economic situation is different. Of course, its built landscape has followed this change and has not stay untouched. This leads to several questions. To what extent are traditional mentalities behind these new built forms, which seem to lack local specificity, as Mihailescu observed? Can the new buildings be seen as attempts to adapt traditional ways of building to new requirements, constraints and possibilities? How much are these buildings a taking over of foreign models, and to what extent do they represent the formation of new models?

Change is inherent, and the major problem is not change itself, but its speed. In the Romanian countryside its present speed has created a temporary incapacity for cultural adaptation, as there is no time for assuming and assimilating change.

This is why a static, romantic perception of the vernacular could only prevent the development and the survival of traditions. As Vellinga has pointed out, it would only reconfirm “persistent stereotypes that represent vernacular architecture as picturesque and charming, yet out of date and irrelevant.”<sup>60</sup>

However, this landscape of mixture — a strange, unclear space in continuous turmoil — also needs practical initiatives, research, and concrete proposals. In this regard, designers at Planwerk, a Romanian urbanism and architecture office, have done something very important in their work on the commune of Limanu. Their research there is aimed at “translating the essential elements of the orientation of the buildings, of the succession of spaces which put rhythm into the use of the place, of traditional dimensions related to human dimensions, into norms and proposals for the development of new buildings.”<sup>61</sup> Their emphasis is not on forms, details, materials, and the taking over of traditional architecture elements in the typology of present houses. As they say: “[It] does not mean the formal repetition of some obsolete expression forms, but the taking over of spatial diversity still present in the old typologies of dividing the plot.” The essential aspects, the ones carrying identity, are “the orientation of the house on the plot, the marking of the passages between outside and inside, the spatial articulation of the dimensions and of the relationships between the dimensions of architectural elements.”<sup>62</sup>

Such an approach by architecture and urbanism practitioners is the most appropriate way to contribute effectively to the recovery of that spontaneous and fresh spirit which has always kept Romanian rural settings vital, and which is today in the temporary condition of “in-between.”

## REFERENCE NOTES

1. N. AlSayyad, "The End of Tradition, or the Tradition of Endings?" in N. AlSayyad, ed., *The End of Tradition?* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp.1–28.
2. I refer to the so-called systematization, the name of the program initiated by Nicolae Ceausescu in 1974, which aimed to urbanize, reorganize and uniformitize urban and rural places, which was transformed into a law in 1974. For a concise presentation of systematization, see M. Berindei, "Distrușterea satelor romanesti in arhivele Comitetului Central" ("The Destruction of Romanian Villages in the Archives of the Central Committee"), in *Revista Grupului Pentru Dialog Social*, 22 (June 30, 2009).
3. Similar situations are visible especially in rural spaces affected by touristic development. See, for example, the case of the Limanu commune, Constanta. Not only tourists, but also some of the village inhabitants have had reactions similar to this by Fedea, a Lippovan: "This is a disaster. Some people from the outside have come here and they destroyed all specific things, all tradition. If you look at those villas, only two or three are from Dobrogea, the others have one room and another one on top of it, without any architecture. They have destroyed things, they have spent money foolishly. I do not mean that they should not build, but they should build with taste, in the style of Dobrogea. Shouldn't they?" Cited in M. Tirca, "Povesti de la 2 Mai: O istorie orala a zonei" ("Stories from 2 Mai: An Oral History of the Area"), in V. Mihailescu, ed., *Intre stil si brand: Turismul alternativ la 2 Mai-Vama Veche (Between Style and Brand: Alternative Tourism in 2 Mai-Vama Veche)* (Bucuresti: Paideia, 2005), p.34.
4. B. Hüppauf, "Spaces of the Vernacular: Ernst Bloch's Philosophy of Hope and the German Hometown," in M. Umbaugh and B. Hüppauf, eds., *Vernacular Modernism: Heimat, Globalization and the Built Environment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p.87.
5. M. Vellinga, "Engaging the Future: Vernacular Architecture Studies in the Twenty-First Century," in L. Asquith and M. Vellinga, eds., *Vernacular Architecture in the Twenty-First Century: Theory, Education and Practice* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2006), p.83; and D. Upton, "The Tradition of Change," *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, Vol.5 No.1 (Spring 1993), p.14.
6. Vellinga, "Engaging the Future."
7. T.O. Gheorghiu, *Locuirea traditionala rurala din zona Banat-Crisana: Elemente de istorie si morfologie; protectie si integrare (Rural Traditional Inhabitation in the Banat-Crisana area: Elements of History and Morphology; Protection and Integration)* (Timisoara: Eurobit, 2008), pp.9–12, 360–68. This recently published book is extremely valuable, offering a wide-ranging, profound study of vernacular architecture in Romania. Yet, although the study's motto is "through the spirit of tradition, in full modernity," there are few allusions to the importance of present changes in vernacular architecture. And the allusions to these changes refer only to their harmful dimension (which is real, but by no means the only one).
8. Ibid.
9. Similar problems connected with the lack of durability for most contemporary buildings are presented in Architect's Council of Europe, ed., *Europe and Architecture Tomorrow*, 1995, pp.27–29 (quoted in Gheorghiu, *Locuirea traditionala rurala din zona Banat-Crisana*, p.359).
10. At the end of the nineteenth century and during the first half of the twentieth century many important cultural figures referred to the Romania's rural space and its peasants as the main source of Romanian culture (which was forming and asserting itself during those years). Speeches given on the occasion of their admission to the Romanian Academy by L. Blaga, "Elogiul satului romanesc" ("The Eulogy of the Romanian Village") (1937), and L. Rebreanu, "Lauda taranului roman" ("The Praise of the Romanian Peasant") (1939), continue to be reference marks in the discussion about Romanian rural space. See E. Simion, "Satul romanesc nu mai poate exista in afara istoriei" ("The Romanian Village Can No Longer Exist Outside History"), a speech given in the Romanian Academy, in C. Hera, *Lumea rurala: astazi si maine (Rural World: Today and Tomorrow)* (Bucuresti: Editura Academiei Romane, 2006).
11. See also the discussion on the politicization of architecture in the spaces influenced by the Soviet Union after World War II in J. Czaplicka, "The Vernacular in Place and Time: Relocating History in Post-Soviet Cities," in Umbaugh and Hüppauf, eds., *Vernacular Modernism*, p.173.
12. V. Enikö, "De/re-taranizare in Romania dupa 1989" ("De/re-peasantization in Romania after 1989"), in *Sociologie Romaneasca*, No.III (1999), p.85.
13. Ibid., p.80.
14. S. Costea, M. Larionescu, F. Tanasescu, *Agricultura romaneasca (Romanian Agriculture)*, p.49, quoted in Enikö, "De/re-taranizare in Romania dupa 1989," p.81.
15. Enikö, "De/re-taranizare in Romania dupa 1989," p.81.
16. See note no.2.
17. Gheorghiu, *Locuirea traditionala rurala din zona Banat-Crisana*, p.6.
18. Enikö, "De/re-taranizare in Romania dupa 1989," p.82.
19. Ibid., p.83.
20. V. Rey, O. Groza, I. Ianos, and M. Patroescu, *Atlasul Romaniei (The Atlas of Romania)* (Bucharest: Enciclopedia Rao, 2006), p.11.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., p.12.
23. A phenomenon which should be noticed here is the absence of a coherent agricultural policy. As a result, decollectivization led only to a kind of subsistence agriculture. Moreover, it involved the parallel destruction of the productive infrastructure of the former cooperatives. See Rey et al., *Atlasul Romaniei*, p.58; and Enikö, "De/re-taranizare in Romania dupa 1989," p.83.
24. Gheorghiu, *Locuirea traditionala rurala din zona Banat-Crisana*, p.360.
25. Ibid.
26. "Regulamentul de urbanism pentru Delta Dunarii, contestat de autoritatile locale" ("Urbanism Regulation for the Danube Delta, Contested by Local Authorities"), news published in *Obiectiv*, a

daily paper, Tulcea, June 23, 2009.

27. The regulation can be read at [http://www.mie.ro/\\_documente/transparenta/consultari\\_publice/consultare46/regulamentul.pdf](http://www.mie.ro/_documente/transparenta/consultari_publice/consultare46/regulamentul.pdf).
28. Among other things, the regulation specifies a maximum height for the ground floors and first floors of all new buildings, as well a maximum of twenty rooms for touristic pensions, which contravenes the huge real estate interest in the area.
29. Gheorghiu, *Locuirea traditionala rurala din zona Banat-Crisana*, p.12.
30. *Ibid.*, p.8.
31. M. Castells, "The World has Changed: Can Planning Change?" *Landscape and Urban Planning*, Vol.22 (Amsterdam: Elsevier Publishers, 1992), as cited in N. AlSayyad, "From Vernacularism to Globalism: the Temporal Reality of Traditional Settlements," *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, Vol.7 No.1 (Spring 1995), p.22.
32. AlSayyad, "From Vernacularism to Globalism," p.23.
33. V. Mihailescu, "Lectiile unui atlas" ("The Lessons of an Atlas"), *Dilema*, No.157 (February 9, 2007).
34. In fact, the conclusion reached by both Mihailescu and Enikö is that Romania did not have, and still does not have, a coherent and consistent agricultural policy. Because of the absence of a well-oriented political interest and of an agricultural policy which could revive agriculture, in a country which seems to stand out in Europe because of its increased agricultural rural character, there are almost no measures for stimulating local development and somehow motivating the population.
35. This is, for example, the case of the villages of the Transylvanian Saxons. The population of most of them left in the 1980s or immediately after the change of the political regime, between 1990 and 1992. But some houses have now been repurchased by those who left, or by their relatives, as second homes. See, for example, the case of Viscri village.
36. For more information on the formation and the evolution of the four villages, see

- Consiliul Judetean Constanta, *Carta verde a judetului Constanta* (Constanta: Ex Ponto, 2000), p.196.
37. Tirca, "Povesti de la 2 Mai," pp.21,31.
  38. *Ibid.*, p.31
  39. *Ibid.*, p.33
  40. *Ibid.*
  41. S. Özkan, "Cycles of Sustenance in Traditional Architecture," *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, Vol.7 No.1 (Spring 1995), pp.41–46.
  42. Vellinga, "Engaging the Future," p.89.
  43. J. Abu-Lughod, "Creating One's Future from One's Past: Nondefensively," *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, Vol.7 No.1 (Spring 1995), pp.7–11.
  44. *Ibid.*, p.8; and J. Abu-Lughod, "Disappearing Dichotomies: First World — Third World; Traditional — Modern," *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, Vol.3 No.2 (Spring 1992), pp.7–12.
  45. Vellinga, "Engaging the Future," p.88.
  46. After 1989, corruption and the lack of political will, characteristic of all the administrative structures, have allowed ample developments and interventions without proper legal basis. Areas with economic potential are thus being transformed into real estate paradises through urbanistic projects that radically impair established rules. This is, for example, the case of the Limanu commune, where a general urbanism plan produced by Planwerk in 2005 (see also notes 48, 61 and 62) has yet to be approved, because the village mayor's office has been trying to approve other documents with completely different provisions, which would transform the two villages into a resort.
  47. Upton, "The Tradition of Change," pp.9–15.
  48. For more data related to the history of Dobrogea and to the ethnic groups populating it, see, for example, A. Chiritoiu and R. Ionescu-Tugui, "Introducere: Regimuri etnice in Dobrogea" ("Introduction: Ethnic Regimes in Dobrogea"), in B. Iancu, ed., *Dobrogea: Identitati si crize (Dobrogea: Identities and Crises)* (Bucuresti: Paideia, 2009); and A. Radulescu and I. Bitoleanu, *Istoria romanilor dintre Dunare si Mare — Dobrogea (The History of Romanians between*

- the Danube and the Sea — Dobrogea)* (Bucuresti: Editura Stiintifica si Enciclopedica, 1979). For an analysis of some inhabitation typologies in Dobrogea, see "Comuna Limanu: Analiza tipologica si morfologica" ("The Limanu Commune: A Typological and Morphological Analysis"), a study conducted by Planwerk within PUG Limanu.
49. V. Mihailescu, foreword, in Iancu, ed., *Dobrogea*, p.8; and M. Stroe, "Concluzii — Dobrogea, identitati si crize: de la mozaic etnic la pamant romanesc, tur-retur" ("Dobrogea — Identities and Crises: From an Ethnic Mosaic to a Romanian Land, a Two-Way Trip"), in Iancu, ed., *Dobrogea*, pp.151–63.
  50. A series of interviews on this theme with the village mayor and Leontina Taran have been published in newspapers. See, for example, D. Gheorghe, "Casele nepictate, interzise de lege" ("Unpainted Houses, Forbidden by Law"), *Romania Libera*, October 7, 2008; and C. Scortariu, "Minunile de la Ciocanesti" ("The Marvels of Ciocanesti"), *Evenimentul zilei*, June 6, 2008.
  51. Gheorghiu, *Locuirea traditionala rurala din zona Banat-Crisana*, pp.363–64.
  52. Rey et al., *Atlasul Romaniei*, p.123
  53. *Ibid.*
  54. Gheorghiu, *Locuirea traditionala rurala din zona Banat-Crisana*, pp.360.
  55. V. Mihailescu, "Ceva Frumos" ("Something Beautiful"), in *Dilema Veche*, Anul VI, nr.289 (August 27, 2009).
  56. *Ibid.*
  57. D. Lu, "The Latency of Tradition: On the Vicissitudes of Walls in Contemporary China," in N. AlSayyad, ed., *The End of Tradition?* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.211.
  58. Rey et al., *Atlasul Romaniei*, p.131.
  59. *Ibid.*
  60. Vellinga, "Engaging the Future," p.83.
  61. For more on Planwerk, visit <http://www.planwerkcluj.org/>. See also note 48.
  62. Planwerk, "Comuna Limanu," p.38.

All photos are by the author.