

**ÎN GRĂMADA DESCHISĂ
A KITSCH-ULUI IMOBILIAR
ROMÂNESC
THE SPRAWLING MASS OF
ROMANIAN REAL ESTATE
KITSCH**

DR. ARH. DORIN ȘTEFAN

Since 1990 Romania has been haunted by a new and powerful energy generated by the desire for private homes (houses, mansions, etc.) And we began to rewrite history... In the beginning there was the wall. The architects came later. The city was already inhabited. We began to build on the outskirts. The order was clear. It should be big (bigger than the flat in the block). We spent long enough in little rooms in blocks of flats. The more educated said it was kitsch.

The beneficiaries didn't care. They didn't falter. They weren't intimidated. They ordered palaces. Standard palaces were built. A street of carbon copy palaces appeared. The carbon copy street. The "Iancu Nicolae" pseudo-Tuscan palace. Tuscany was the (un)fulfilled dream of the minority Romanians with money. Gypsy palaces have also joined the sprawling mass of post 1989 Romanian real estate kitsch. Unfortunately.

Unfortunately because today, after years of blame, gypsy palaces are starting to lose their roofs. They're being styled. Unfortunately, if the attempt to differentiate them from kitsch is made by styling, they will only become "kitsch style". Both realities (pseudo-Tuscan palaces and gypsy palaces) are the symbolic expression of a minority group's search for legitimacy. Gypsy palaces deserve to be understood beyond the more or less informed labelling practiced both by specialist critics and other residents (the majority receptors). For they are the expression of a minority culture. A minority ethnic group expresses itself freely in a mature majority culture. The minority group needed "something else" in order to become "visible". But we all inhabit the same space. The majority mature culture interposes the critical apparatus between public and product. Cultural differentiation should express itself freely. The essential difference between the kitsch of the Iancu Nicolae catalogue houses and the gypsy palaces is that the former represents a tautology, while the gypsy houses are a legitimate product, legitimised ethnically and through a unity of expression and sincerity of gesture. If, for lack of substance, the appearance of the pseudo-Tuscan palaces has begun to resemble kitsch, the gypsy palaces have found their identity as the unitary expression of an ethnic group. They stood up and became legitimate in Romanian culture. This gesture can also be interpreted socio-historically. Slaves until 150 years ago whether they liked it or not, gypsies found themselves in the streets as a result of their emancipation. They (again) became nomads. On the edge of settlements.

Ostracised until 1944, "hardened" by communism, "schooled" in the free market, after 1989 their accumulations of wealth, both small and large, allowed them to take revenge on history. They built themselves houses that imitated those in whose shadow their ancestors toiled: the boyar manor houses. Vengeance through outshining, exceeding. Made manifest on more than one level. Through an identityforming image. Of settlement. Of "situating" in something else. Gypsy palaces legitimise themselves through this "situating", while pseudo-Tuscan palaces are de-legitimised through "de-situating".

In fact there also exists an intermediary form between these two positions/categories. Intermediary but at the same time impossible. For nothing can be intermediary between two disjointed results. A hybrid is possible, but not of the pseudo-Tuscan Romanian palace and its gypsy counterpart. A hybrid only from the point of view of the gypsy palace. I'm referring to certain large "boyar" style houses which appeared in Timisoara in the early years of the 1990s. They were considerable

houses. A hybrid of a house "by an architect" and that which later became known as the gypsy palace. It lacked the element of spontaneity, the unforeseen, the unplanned-for, which appeared later, and at the same time also betrayed the work of a trained eye in the background.

Something between two "authenticatables". Discord and a lack of a spontaneity in the "design".

A hybrid of the written architectural canon and the unwritten canon of the meaning known only to the instigator. Gypsy palaces have a meaning of their own. They are made in the image of their creator. I don't know how these palaces, which I call authentic and which I like to get worked up about in determining their meaning, are built. If I find I have something, perhaps too much to say about them, that tells me there must be some point to them. I also like to think they are participatory achievements. In the world of plans "conducted" by architects there also exist participatory works. Interdisciplinary teams use brainstorming to invent participatory schemes. This is why I like to think this "design" is a spontaneous gesture even without having a formal design. The craftsman brings a little knowledge, the beneficiary makes his contribution and the material supplies the rest. Negotiation takes place on site. The palaces in Timisoara were infected palaces. They got off to a good start, and the building process followed a scheme, but at a certain moment something deviates from the plan. Does it self-deviate?

The difference between the two palaces was clearly also the consequence of a placement in a certain physical context. Those in Timisoara were situated in an existing context, the others contextualised on the fly. Both had a course to run, but from different starting positions. The first required permission from the city hall, followed planning rules and either fitted or didn't. They had low spontaneity. They respected an urban consensus about communal living but did not attain satisfaction/integration. The others applied a clan-like form of communal living, and although they had high spontaneity, they also achieved an enviable level of unity. Unity of style became an exclusive quality. Maybe the "authentic" gypsy palaces, those we have in fact attempted to "authenticate", should be declared completed projects. They have achieved that "something else". Maybe unwillingly. Now actively sought after, this "something else" may lose its identity. Or, if the project is unfinished, let it retain its course. How? Just as it did thus far. I'm afraid, however, that being aware of this "desire" will upset this. And in this category we already have the pseudo-Tuscan palace a la Iancu Nicolae.

Source: *Kastello. Palaces Of The Roma in Romania*; Published by Igloo Media, June 2008, www.igloo.ro