

DESPRE PALATE ON PALACES

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If we compare images of a journey through the *țigării* ("gypsy areas") of the regions of Romania, we first see an amazing diversity of forms, colours and building techniques. We can split these into two large categories, one for the regions to the north and west of the Carpathians, another for those to the east and south. In the centre of Romania, in Transylvania, we find a gentle mixture, which we will not treat separately. The differences between the two categories relate to form, spatial composition, facades, colour schemes, concepts and the grouping in space of the "palaces". Similarities exist in the way a "palace" is used, the role it plays within the group, the way day-to-day activities are performed (or not) inside it.

The internal space is arranged differently for a nomadic population compared with a sedentary one. For the nomad, the borders of his property mean nothing, for his life, the existence of his family, does not depend on them. A sedentary lifestyle, however, begins precisely with the drawing of borders. Where these two mentalities have met, over the years different ways of managing the spatial dimension of this contact have always been found. These were established amicably at a community (village-camp) level, as long as there existed a state of reciprocal economic dependence between both parties, or arose as the consequence of a national ideology or policy (e.g. sedentarisation on the outskirts of villages in Habsburg Transylvania or deportation to Transdnistria). Thus, a form of social relationship has always been expressed in a spatial context reflecting real life situations, trends and ideologies.

Those Roma who were the most prolific builders in Moldavia and Wallachia belonged to the Kalderash. This group was not sedentarised until late on and did not undergo a process of assimilation like Roma in the territories under the Habsburg Empire. They are faced with a marginal social status while physically inhabiting an area peripheral to the "heart of the village". The villages of Ciurea, Ivelți and Iești are all cases in point. Interestingly, even when, after 1989, they were able to perform alternative forms of economic activity, the Kalderash continued living on the periphery in these areas, unlike the "silk gypsies" from Timișoara and Reșița, for example, who migrated towards the centres of towns that provided economic opportunities.

Physical segregation on ethnic grounds is still more acute in rural areas, especially for the more closely-knit communities, such as those of the Kalderash. The *țigărie*, as even the Roma themselves call the district in which they live, overlaps with the identical term *țigărie*, which is used to describe the social life of a group of Roma with its traditions and customs. In small and medium sized towns things were set in motion after 1989, with the Roma communities demonstrating a higher level of internal dynamics which saw well-to-do Roma showing a preference for the central areas of towns to the detriment of the old *țigărie*. Here, *țigărie*, as a physical space, is liberated from *țigărie* as a social space.

At first sight, we can identify three different building methods from a formal point of view. The differences lie in the different architectural models adopted depending on the „semi-nomadism" routes chosen in different regions. The "gypsy palaces" in Banat stand out for their resemblance with architectural styles of western inspiration (Neoclassicism, eclecticism), in Transylvania the style is more local while Moldavia and the south of the country feature many references to neo-Brâncovenesc designs of the early 20th century as well as local styles (the large houses built in the 1970s by the richest or most creative village members). The explanation for these differences is that many of the Roma from the west of the country moved to the West after 1990, returning home periodically, while those from the southern and eastern regions travelled mainly within the borders

of the country - especially the Kalderash, whose movements over the entire southern and eastern areas followed a fixed schedule.

Beyond these differences, which refer to the aesthetics of the "palaces", there are, however, also some striking similarities in the way they were used. In general, these buildings are not inhabited: day-to-day activities would take place around them or in separate, far more modest buildings. A permanent feature was a room used for storing the contents of a dowry, though sometimes even a whole house might be used to this end. In the entire southern and eastern region, there are no bathrooms in the "palaces", something justified culturally by the strict separation of "clean" and "dirty" (vujō/marime) elements. Some Roma in Banat see this practice as dated, as an "old-fashioned" custom. There are also similarities in terms of formal language. Nowhere will you see large surfaces that do not feature the richest geometrical ornamentation. The roof, regardless of whether it is of the so-called "pagoda" style (in the south and the east) or with a split structure (as in the west), always receives special attention along with the main facades. Other permanent features are monumental staircases and a generously-sized assembly space (parlour), often on more than one level and used for important family and, implicitly, community events.

However, all this information about the appearance and location of the "palaces" tells us nothing about their role and importance. Architectural descriptions do not help us understand the motivation behind the financial investment made by the families who are building and have built these houses. Any interpretation and deciphering of the "gypsy palace" would require the approach of cultural science, so as to enable us to understand how living, building, community and nomadism can coexist in a single cultural space, which, reflected in built space, have given birth to one of the more dynamic phenomena in Romania of the last 18 years. How this phenomenon will continue to develop remains to be seen and does not preclude a drastic drop in its intensity. To finish, it is worth mentioning that only a small number of Roma actually have the financial means to build such buildings. The majority are prisoners of an identity that moves between social marginalisation and an often fragmented ethnic identity in full transformation.

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