

PREFAȚĂ PREFACE



KASTELLO, PALATE ALE ROMILOR DIN ROMÂNIA *Castelul și maneaua*

KASTELLO. PALACES OF THE ROMA IN ROMANIA *The castle and the maneaua*

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I don't think there's anyone who can walk past the palaces built by rich Roma without stopping to stare. Nor do I think there's anyone left in Romania who hasn't heard of these gigantic houses, with their unmistakable stylistic features: roofs with turrets and overlapping corncicing, a vague mix of Chinese pagodas and the gingerbread palaces of Bollywood melodrama. Like many others, we were also not able to withstand the fascination these houses exert on anyone brought up with "normal" (visual) culture and traditional architecture. Whether this fascination is the result of a profound misunderstanding, the difficulty of describing this architectural phenomenon in terms of natural rules (or not so natural rules, but current practice in Romania) or personal pathology, I don't know and I'm not going to wrack my brains too much finding out, either. What's for sure is that in this area, we were able to find many interested and knowledgeable people willing to help us capture something of the essence of this bizarre world of Roma palaces. Our thanks go to each and every one of them.

Although unaware of all the difficulties we would encounter when we decided to start work on this book, our motivation seems to have been sufficiently strong to overcome all the inconveniences encountered en route. The result is not a scientific study dedicated to Roma architecture on Romanian soil, but rather a collection of images and articles which endeavour to articulate the uniqueness of a phenomenon of a remarkable vitality. This book doesn't claim to provide an exhaustive record - something which would anyway have been impossible, given the speed at which these houses are being built, are changing and transforming. But naturally, the subtlety of the title - "Palaces of...", and not "The Palaces..." - will escape no one... Paradoxically, and despite its vitality, there is as yet no other album in Romania which deals with this subject, despite the availability of studies, even serious ones, and interested parties, not to mention the rich visual material.

Is the reason for this absence the fact that this phenomenon is considered by majority culture activists as insufficiently serious to be dealt with in a serious book?

Is it because of the suspicious attitude of the owners of these houses, who imagine they will suffer prejudice if their own houses appear in some publication or other, despite their crushing physical presences? Are we dealing with Roma distrust of anything involving traditional methods of cultural dissemination? It's of little importance because this act of cultural injustice will from now on have been redressed.

What, then, is *Kastello. Palaces of the Roma in Romania*? Clearly, it's a book. An album which tries to capture the essential nature of the architecture practiced by the wellhealed Roma of Romania. The difficulty of classifying this architecture within existing, pre-established canons can be seen from the title, which resorts to an act of linguistic invention in order to officialise the genre. Clearly, *Kastello* is a deviation of "castel" (castle), which is insufficiently expressive for our needs and already guilty of other overt meanings. Just as *Kombinat* made reference to the phantasmagorical and bankrupt world of the socialist industrial complex, *Kastello*, in our opinion, encapsulates far better the unique character of these mansions/palaces/large houses. This is a new word, whose phonetic roots make explicit reference to noble houses, but whose sound expresses stylistic freedom, versatility, disrespect for the rules, kitsch. It is, if you prefer, a castle impregnated by *manele* music.

All the same, and despite what it might seem, the album *Kastello. Palaces of the Roma in Romania*, is not - or does not wish to be - the print equivalent of a *manele* compilation, albeit this comparison might seem legitimate and justifiable to a certain degree. The serious approach adopted by this volume, and the texts it contains, which have nothing whatsoever to do with the repertoire of singer-songwriters with the names of food stuffs, towns or miracles, provides a strong argument in favour of not treating this book like a treatise on *manele* told through images. If this is not the case, then we will surely be the last to complain.

This album is split into three chapters, each representing a different, vaguely defined geographic area documented through images: the west, southcentral and east of the country. These don't fit perfectly with traditional regional boundaries; however, the similarity and differences of their architecture somehow confirms the fact that the Roma have their own spiritual geography, one entirely different to ours. The texts between these chapters are the work of authors of diverse cultural backgrounds - architecture, sociology, psychology - and thus offer varied perspectives of the topic. They are not directly related to the images, but rather offer a more general point of view. This journey into the world of Roma palaces is thus highly subjective and not academically structured, and for this reason is perhaps particularly well suited to the task at hand. Lacking any political, ethnic, racist or, less still, legal agenda, *Kastello* aims merely to bring (back) to the majority culture a phenomenon generated by a marginal culture whose size and importance merit this treatment. Regardless of whether we like these houses or not...

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