GÂNDURI DESPRE „PALATELE ŢIGĂNEŞTI”

Despre ce vorbim şi cum vorbim.

REFLECTIONS ON “GYPSY PALACES”

On what we say and how we say it.

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Contemporary language designates at least two forms of reality by the term "gypsy palace". One contains houses, generally gigantic, belonging to the "moguls" of Roma origin, which the public despise for their ugliness and see as the cause of the dissatisfactory state of the city. Our petty-but-well-internalised-racism is blind to the fact that these are in no way inferior to the majority of houses built by the moguls of "indigenous origin" and no less detrimental to the city at that. The same conspicuous display of illiteracy, the same display of primitive wealth, the same design (to my mind a hybrid of "Ceau¿escuist architecture" with the cheap "trademarks" of consumer society), that is to say, the same immorality: both are the product of first-generation nouveau-riche arrogance, of a lack of social graces and appreciation for the value of public space; a product of a self-idolatrous individualism which broadcasts its representative identity to the detriment of the city. From this perspective, these "gypsy palaces" neither add nor take away from the wave of poor quality architecture invading our cities - often at the instigation and as the result of the illegal manoeuvres of beneficiaries with expectations loftier than those of Roma origin.

The second reality is that in which communities, groups of Roma origin, formed according to different criteria (kin, trade relations, etc.), once they reach a certain level of well-being, settle in one place and together build an "ideal environment". This is the case of many new settlements, of which the best known is the extension of Buzescu. This village became known through an exhibition held in 2001 by Mariana Celac and Iosif Kiraly, an exhibition which at the time unsettled many and provoked many paradoxical reactions, ranging from curiosity (sometimes honest, at other times motivated by snobbery) to blind and aggressive opposition. This second reality, which again our petty-but-traditional-racism unfairly ignores and places in the same category as the first, has not been sufficiently researched and understood in spite of the special attention it merits. Why so?

Instead of providing arguments, I will tell a story. In 2001, I took a group of 3rd year students to the Mariana Celac exhibition. I was shocked: firstly, at what was on display; then at the reaction of the students. The exhibition documented the incredible expression of a lively contemporary vernacular with a stylistic unity (vocabulary, typologies, expressions, materials, etc.) the strictest planning regulations would find hard to match. According to its own rules - clearly commonly accepted by the members of the group, the creators of this ideal environment - a formal exuberance that is hard to describe existed through a free and joyful mixture of random designs and naive understandings with clear expressive choices. It was like a collection of fairytales: streets of silver "castles" tantalisingly fashioned with the sophisticated finesse of old jewellery. From somewhere behind its shining appearance, and also in spite of it, there shone a kind of drama: you felt a stab of fear, the sadness of the inevitably transitory. Technically speaking, things were pretty clear: the design had obviously been taken from the architecture of German Romanticism, the ornamental profusion of fine details had come from the East (I was to find out later that they had previously worked in Germany and Iran), the art of sheet metal working was clearly their speciality, and the large number of pillars covering different surfaces were of a extremely undersized fragility and waiting to

be destroyed by the next high winds... But this was not the problem. Of course, this architecture did not easily fit with the customs/expectations of architecture students of the day, and neither did its exuberance, coherence or emotional significance appear to strike a sensitive cord with them: the most favourable reaction was laughter; others almost choked with indignation; not one of them initially displayed even the slightest hint of understanding. We then sat down on the floor (we were the only visitors) and started to talk. We were there almost three hours and it turned into one of the most pleasurable seminars in my experience. And we all left deep in thought. Some of the students told me they later went to see the extension of Buzescu. I went myself some two years later. What I had seen at the exhibition and had assumed then was now confirmed: the coherence, design, exuberance, fragility - most of all the fragility.

As a phenomenon this is rare. Contemporary vernacular architecture is normally represented by slums, illegal barriadas and a wide range of "soft architecture", all on the extremes of squalor. So this is a community, belonging to an ethnic group discriminated against par excellence and victims of an historical tragedy, which, once it had achieved a prosperous economic situation (by working as sheet metal workers abroad), wanted to settle in one place and build a place that was representative of its identity. Not as an expression of individual positions, but as a way of representing the group, with all its ethnic pride and its identity - an identity, however, that is hard to define so long it is not based on an established culture and recognised as such, and all the more so as this implies a radical change in the way of life and values which support the group; an identity hard to express in built forms while it has no architectural tradition to draw upon. We're dealing here with an identity-forming building process whose constituent mechanisms are different from the "national" phenomenon that was characteristic of the 19th century; this is a spontaneous building process, part of no political programme, deinstitutionalised, occurring only of its own will and means.

But isn't this also what the residents of the new "gated communities" want, to build a group identity? Here's the difference: the community in Buzescu is not "gated"; on the contrary, it is the extension of an existing village on either side of a public road accessible by all. The houses there don't even try to isolate themselves from the rest of the world and nor do they hide from the road and public space. As in a mediaeval town, the individuality of each house reflects a collective formal unity (of public space and the settlement) in which individual interpretations of the "model" have an equal say. They are situated in the extended part of an existing village of which they form a part (the most interesting one, as it happens); they do not express the contemptuous isolation from the city of "gated communities", which acts as an expression of financial status, but rather a desire to participate, with their new prosperity and newly-built identity, in Romanian society (finally with equal rights!)

In terms of architecture this is a rare phenomenon and clearly requires further study. As human experience, however, it should not be viewed with the scientific eye of the entomologist; it should be treated with understanding. Why, then, with the exception of a few nit-picking architects, does the world so readily accept the pathetic phenomenon of "gated communities" - even envying them and aspiring to live in them - while at the same time being so unforgiving of "gypsy palace" settlements? Perhaps this book, which will surely meet with great success, will lead to a more sympathetic approach. Unfortunately, its attraction will owe much to the "exoticism" of the subject - though even this can provide a way of bringing us closer to the "other".

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