

TINSELTOWN
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For some ten years I've been observing developments in the districts / neighbourhoods / settlements of houses with turrets, overhanging roofs and inscriptions on cornicing featuring lions, deer and sun motifs. Initially few in number, turrets can now be seen everywhere, in compact groups and all sizes, landscapes, both rich and poor, and all situations, *Tinseltowns*, I hastily called them the first time I encountered this apparently new genus in the middle of the sleepy Teleorman plain, and this is how they continue to be known by people around me as well as enthusiasts, neutrals and fierce critics. *Towns* because of their well-aligned facades, like in middle-class housing districts; *tinsel* because of their gleaming sheet metal roofs.

A decade is a short time in building terms. A building aspires to stability and longevity. Not so in *tinseltowns*. These change so much and so fast that finding your orientation using physical reference points memorised even only a couple of months ago is no easy matter. From one gate to the next, every entrance is a building site full of heaps of sand, wooden scaffolding, spades, wheelbarrows and bucket-wielding women, the ever-present "unskilled" local workforce. The stucco facades, with their contrasting polygon forms of white and dark grey, have given way to the "alpine" chalet with two very steep sloping roofs and a mini-balcony in a triangular tympanum. After the alpine chalet, the next fashion was for roofs with fake green tiles like a McDonald's restaurant. These were followed by copies of new bank buildings with shiny tiling, domes and curved curtain walls. More recently, marble has taken the place of plasterwork and now covers the *kastells*, inside and out, from the ground to the roof.

The latest photographs, taken in Buzescu this spring by Iosif Kiraly, showed narrower pavements, an increase in the density of houses, and cornice lines two and three levels above the ground floor. The compositional vernacular had also been extended to include classical references. Over high chrome railings you see pediments raised on two cylindrical pillars the full height of the house, window architraves, front steps with landing, festive entrances with porches, loggias and arcades: axiality, symmetry, the solid materials of high architecture are replacing the fragile scenography of *tinseltown*. The villa/house/*kastell* retains and displays the stages of its development. The first investment (a single room built two generations ago) is now embedded in the multi-level structure of reinforced concrete of the latest reconstruction. In twenty years, the generic cell with its primary wall has become a three-storey property. All the classic dramas of the never-ending building site - roofs swept away by the wind, cracks in the floor and collapsing balconies, fractures in dangerously-thin pillars - are all plain to see. With phenomenal agility and using only the tools to hand, the components of the houses, from their structure to their finishing, from their form to their decoration, from their function to their colour schemes, mimic prestige and combine according to its inflexible syntax. The syntax remains, the rest changes.

From the look of things, we appear to be dealing with an offshoot, a subspecies, a new variety. But a subspecies of what? What hierarchically superior taxonomic grouping are we dealing with here? This is not folklore. Folklore presupposes refinement through repetition, slowness, long periods of time, an instinct wary of adventure. The folkloric scenario feeds on the rhythms of the rural world and the fixed points of nature. This is not the case with the *kastells*, which are based on an urban

concept of density and events, power and hierarchy. But the *kastell* also sets its sights on "high" style. Are we thus dealing with "high style" architecture without the architects, to borrow Rudofski's phrase? Not quite, for architects were and will from now on be increasingly associated with *kastell* building sites. The surprising part is that the presence of a qualified architect and properly drawn up plans does not divert the general appearances of these houses from the intentions of the sub-species. Internal genes beat formal design. With or without an architect, the *kastell* is still a *kastell* when viewed a distance. Neither folklore nor structured urbanity, neither rural idyll nor neo-pseudo-vernacular, neither architecture as practiced by an architect nor ad hoc construction, neither experimentation without an architect nor an avant-garde experiment.

I have been intentionally avoiding here the word architecture. I don't believe architecture, as it is defined today, can be a hierarchically superior species of which the buildings described here form a sub-species. For the time being, clear and well-founded studies are few and far between due to the difficulty and uncertainties of conducting research, their emotional-cultural reception and the self-censorship of the critical endeavour for reasons of political correctness. Until we achieve a different state of mind, we will be dealing mainly with ingrained stereotypes divided "equitably" between superficial journalism, a limited array of architectural literature, studies of Roma culture and partisan public positions of equal inconclusiveness.

At any rate, when it comes to a *kastell*, or an entire district of *kastells*, there are more questions in circulation than theories or conjectures. Their penetrating spirit, dynamism, cumulative expressivity, the numerous challenges they pose, the attraction for distinctive features of various sources, the vitality and the large sums invested together with a social success that exceeds ethnic boundaries, the territorial dispersion and critical mass achieved - all these together have removed the *kastell* from under the sign of the picturesque. *Kastells* are supported by a substratum that can be compared, metaphorically speaking, with that which facilitated the journey of Jazz from the margins to a sub-species of high music with equal rights: hunger for identity, irreverence for what went before and authority, but an active mimetic spirit, freedom to take control over anything that can be used to realise your own design, the capacity to resonate with a growing audience, but also exclusion, sarcasm and negative publicity - as a vulgar, aesthetically crude, anti-cultural phenomenon. All with the advantages of uproar as a vehicle of fame.

Does there really exist in the internal destiny of the *kastells* the energy to push this now doubtful subspecies towards high style architecture, as happened with Jazz? We'll see what happens. In any case, the original *tinseltown* is being eclipsed. But the *kastells* are growing in size, spreading and multiplying; they are changing their "styles", have fans and detractors at home and abroad, and give birth to cultural polemics and administrative conflict. They engender many emotions, with the single exception of indifference.

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