

Brave New World

**Romanian Migrants'
Dream Houses**



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Romanian Migrants' Dream Houses

Edited by Raluca Betea and Beate Wild

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Dreams Realised

The Exhibition Project

Brave New World – Romanian Migrants’ Dream Houses

Beate Wild

Sometimes, a project does not go according to plan: the initial concepts are somewhat static, oriented to the past – a pile of historical black-and-white photographs depicting the Oaş region up in the furthest reaches of northwestern Romania. The significance of the photographs cannot be denied. But what exhibition value do these photographs have today, in times of rapid political, economic and social change? What could make them interesting and attractive for visitors outside Romania at the beginning of the 21st century?

Inevitably, the focus turns to the current situation in this rural region of northern Romania. Its appearance, like that of neighbouring Maramureş and Bukovina, has in parts rapidly changed over the last 20 years. The internal migration that marked this region already before the political turn in 1989 gave way in the 1990s to an external migration to France, Italy, Spain, Great Britain and other countries. It was as though an entire region just picked up and decided to move elsewhere, looking for work. Back in their homeland, however, it seems people have reacted against their own movement – that constant commuting between worlds – with something static, something permanent and reliable. Something that waits for them 11 months out of the year and bravely stands in for them during the long absence. And something that makes their dreams and longing visible from far away. Romanians call the imposing constructions *case făloase* (proud houses), and they stand for many things: for the hard work, success and social advancement of their owners, who left their villages due to work shortages in order to support their families from abroad. At the same time, they also stand for the modern Western lifestyle and a new aesthetic.

This is in no way a phenomenon limited to the infrastructurally-poor regions of northern Romania. Such houses can be found in other parts of Romania, as well as in Greece, Turkey, Serbia, Croatia, Poland and elsewhere. Yet, the houses all look different in their various manifestations depending on the prevailing political and economic factors, and especially on the timing of the labour migration. Thus, the generation of the so-called *Gastarbeiter* ('guest workers') who came in the 1960s to Germany and its neighbours adopted different fashions and ideals from their respective host societies. In contrast, Romanians saw themselves confronted in the 1990s with a Western world of consumption which the Ceauşescu regime had deprived them of until 1989. It is only understandable that they, like others from the ex-communist states, felt an especially profound need for Western products as late-comers to the game.

One other aspect of Romanian history in particular can be explained here: Ceauşescu's communist politics, which predominantly promoted industrialisation and urbanisation in addition to collectivised agriculture, drove many people out of rural regions and into cities. They were never really integrated there, however; social recognition never came. In the 1990s, they moved back to the countryside, although the infrastructure there had not sustainably improved after the fall of communism. For many, the only way out of the job shortage was to their western neighbours. In this context, it is not surprising that they would demonstrate their success abroad predominantly through urban status symbols on display in their home villages. With the many opulent new constructions, a few villages have now taken on the dimensions of small cities. A new type of settlement has evolved: the 'village town' or 'rural town', yet without the requisite urban infrastructure. After all, the communal design of public space beyond one's own plot of land seems comparatively uninteresting.

In the end, what matters is only the architectural realisation of one's own dream, either with or without an architect. Such 'anonymous architecture' (buildings without an architect) contains disproportionately more possibilities for unique design. Throughout the construction period, changes can always be worked in following the current fashions, finances, and neighbouring houses.

It is no coincidence that the exhibition title *Brave New World* plays off the novel of the same name by Aldous Huxley (1932). It does indeed suggest an attractive new world that – on closer examination – quickly reveals its shadow side and contradictions as well. After all, the price for this bright new world made in the Western image is high. By far, not all Romanian migrants have been able to fulfil the dream of their own home. For many, their wages earned abroad only cover their families' living expenses. And for a number of home owners, the dream of a home has since become a nightmare, as the completion date fades farther and farther into the future. After all, the global economic crisis directly effects the labour market in the minimum-wage sector. Many people have lost their jobs, moved to other countries, or returned to Romania, struggling to survive there with a poorly paid job. The number of house skeletons in the middle of the northern Romanian landscape has increased dramatically in recent years. It begs the question: is this a sign of a failed migration?

Is their home society even willing and able to profit from the newly gained skills of its returnees? What basic federal regulations are needed to guarantee them a reliable livelihood? How can the local and regional infrastructure be upgraded sustainably to ensure jobs and a comprehensive social supply network on site? How can Western companies get involved in long-term investments? And how can successful migrants invest sensibly in their home economy to make a permanent return to Romania more attractive and prevent the exodus of the next generations?

Most likely, a wider perspective is needed to instil in them a general appreciation of the natural and cultural landscape of their homeland, particularly in the younger generations. This will lead to new concepts of settlement that curb the housing sprawl and simultaneously allow for the emergence of an appropriate tourist infrastructure. An ecological appreciation of the landscape also includes the sustainable use of agricultural land, albeit probably nowhere along the lines of large Western agricultural giants. The same holds for forestry.

The above contexts make it clear that all these questions cannot be solved only at the national level. Indeed, the economies of the Western host countries are closely linked to it. It is not only that the change in Western societies is directly reflected in the labour market, which is increasingly filled by migrants from Eastern Europe. As well, within this bitterly disputed job market, clear hierarchies have formed in the meantime through wage dumping.

The *Brave New World* exhibition is far from offering answers and solutions. On the contrary: it poses these global questions and opens up an interdisciplinary dialogue from multiple perspectives. With its upcoming tour through the Western European host countries and the Eastern European home countries, *Brave New World* calls international attention to these contexts. The core exhibit presented here, which illuminates the various aspects of migration and the construction boom in the example of northern Romania, can be expanded at any time with information, images and objects from local cooperative partners and communities. Indeed, the examples presented here are only transferable to a limited extent to other migrant groups. The many translocal realities are simply too different.

After all, the exhibition only reproduces snapshots of a rapidly changing process. The examples undergo continuous change: fashions evolve quickly and are replaced by counter-fashions. There just has not been enough time to observe the Romanian examples and draw conclusions for the mid and long term. Much is left to speculation:

Will the migrants return permanently at least by retirement age, or will they continue to commute between two worlds?

When will the dream houses be inhabited permanently and by whom? What will become of the uncompleted houses?

What will the second or third generation of labour migrants do with the inherited houses? Will they perceive them as a burden and eventually feel compelled to sell?

How will these processes effect the rural communities socially, economically and ecologically over the long term?

These are questions that will hopefully find many different answers during the *Tour d'Europe* and open up some new perspectives.



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