

Brave New World

**Romanian Migrants'
Dream Houses**



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Romanian Migrants' Dream Houses

Edited by Raluca Betea and Beate Wild

Bucharest 2016

CIP Description of the National Library of Romania

Brave New World – Romanian Migrants' Dream Houses

ed.: Raluca Betea, Beate Wild. – Bucharest: Romanian Cultural Institute, 2016

Includes bibliographical references

ISBN 978-973-577-679-4

I. Betea, Raluca (ed.)

II. Wild, Beate (ed.)

314.7

Generously supported by



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Assembled Territories. Constructing Houses, Socialising Resources in Moisei, Maramureş¹

Iulia Hurducaş

Following the process of house-building in the commune of Moisei, Maramureş, I propose a territorial approach to the construction of houses. Adjusting the focus from the house as an object to the process of construction, I make use of a transversal territorial section in order to register all the things involved: humans, social relations (marriage, labour), relations that socialise materials (building permits, property titles, money) and the materials themselves (soil, trees, water). As materialities are socialised during construction, houses and territories become precariously assembled.

Form vs process

An architectural representation of a building usually comprises floor plans, sections, and façades. Taken together, they construct an architectural form, both as a mental representation and during the building process itself. Perspectival drawings and photographs re-construct the form as an image seen by a human eye. Recent architectural studies examining how an architectural form is constructed have focused either on the process of creation (Lotz 2008) or on the negotiation processes going on between architects, clients, and contractors (Yaneva 2011). The main question in such studies is how the architectural form is created as an interaction between humans and materials. This is a similar question to the one that I am proposing here, with the exception that such research takes as its subject of study Architectural forms and Architectural practice with a capital A, as in buildings designed by world-renowned architects, while I take as my subject of research ubiquitous architectural forms – houses – in which architects are surely involved along the bureaucratic lines of construction, but which are, to a certain extent, 'designed and built' by their owners. The difference between those Architects and those forms and these architects and these houses is one of focus. The focus in studying Architectural forms and Architectural practice is creation, and the scope of study is to show that the architect is not alone: he has a team, there are other people, and there are some artefacts – drawings, models, and other materialities – that are involved in the process of creation. Focusing on house-building, on the other hand, means focusing on construction, of which creation is a part, to be sure; however, the architect, his team, those other people, and those artefacts are all just one link in the process of constructing a building. Next to an architectural project, you need land, resources, building materials utilities in order to build. The question I propose is, then, how does form materialise in the process of construction?

The implications of this question are twofold. First, it assumes a meandering path, as it is not the finality of a form that is studied, but the process of making one. In the recent shift from form to process in architectural theory and practice, the abandonment of form as an object of

study and the focus on the social relations constructed during the design process has led to form being indeterminate (Petrescu 2005; Yaneva 2011). Studying house-building on the other hand, while focusing on the process, does have the house, a very material and determinate form, as the finality of it. Retaining form as the finality of the process obliges us to pay attention to the materials that are involved in the process of construction and that will make for the end form. It follows, then, that the process is not to be understood as a set of social relations established between humans, but as the socialising of materials, that rests on existing and newly established social relations. Second, within the process of construction, what needs to be registered are all the things involved: humans, the social relations between them (marriage, labour relations), the relations that socialise materials (building permits, property titles, money) and the materials themselves (soil, trees, water). In this sense, Bruno Latour's proposition to "redistribute essence" to the non-humans, and to raise them to the status of "actors endowed with the capacity to translate what they transport, to redefine it, redeploy it, and also to betray it" (Latour 1993, 81) transforms our relationship to time. As such, house-building can be approached transversally across history. In architectural theory, modern and traditional architecture are intertwined, though opposed. However, turning our attention not to the human definitions of modernity and tradition, but towards the process by which trees, soil, water, and other 'natures' are being translated into a built form, it follows that the built form does not pertain solely to a building culture – modern or traditional – but to a "nature-culture", in Latour's words. In other words, accounting for the materialities involved obliges us to follow the paths of association that transform natural 'resources' into a built form.

In architectural representation, the equivalent of a path of association would be a line. However, though everything is drawn with lines, there is one line that, when drawn on a plan, makes visible what otherwise is invisible to the observing eye – the section line. An architectural transversal section does two very important things. First, it functions as a video-recorder, as it shows in one image what otherwise would require walking through the whole building to see – the floors stacked onto one another which makes, for example, bathrooms in an apartment building stand on top of each other, and as such, makes visible the infrastructural networks of the building. Second, it cuts through all the building elements – floors, walls, roofs – revealing their otherwise invisible composition and making visible the structural joints, those points of articulation where the forces inherent and applied to the structural elements become equivalent. It is those points that, when built properly, make the building stand solid and resist strong winds or earthquakes. The stability of the architectural form resides within these structural joints.

If an architectural section cuts through a building, the line of construction we are interested in must make visible other materialities outside the confines of a building. It must record the process by which trees become the wooden beams in a building, and the connection between the infrastructure of a building and the infrastructure networks of a city. The materialities involved in the process of construction no longer refer to the assemblage of different elements at the building scale. They reference another scale: the territorial scale at which the infrastructural networks and the natural resources are managed. Representations of the territorial scale, on the other hand, do not account for such a construction line, similar to a transversal section through a building. Territories are represented as stable on maps, similar to the spaces represented in the blueprint of a building. However, while in blueprints and on maps, what is important is to delimit, enclose, and prescribe the movement between spaces. In sections, another layer of dynamics is added – the dynamic forces inherent within the elements of construction. While in blueprints the importance is thus on the relations between

spaces, the dynamic relations in the territorial section I am envisaging are of the kind that socialise materials; they are the techno-scientific and politico-economical assemblages that act at a territorial scale and socialise wood, and water, to name but two.

This essay thus interrogates both the materialisation of the architectural form and the stabilisation of the territorial form. The vehicle for these interrogations is the process of house-building in the commune of Moisei, Maramureş, in northern Romania. Moisei is part of 'historical Maramureş' – a territory stabilised as traditionally Romanian. However, many of the houses constructed in Moisei do not bend to the image of traditional wood architecture you would expect, though a few old houses – referred to as 'elderly houses' – still remain. What is specific to the process of house-building in Moisei, and Maramureş at large, is that most of the newer houses are being built partly by migrant workers in Western Europe who access financial resources at a global scale. However, in comparison to other regions throughout Romania where the housing boom is fuelled by migrant workers, Maramureş is a place where global resources are not only brought in, but also brought out, as the global timber economy draws part of its resources from the forested mountains. Oaş, on the other hand, where migrant workers build at an equally high pace, seems to have exhausted its other resources, migration being sort of an end-game at the territorial scale. Within the historical region, defined by three river valleys, Moisei is situated on the Vişeu river valley that borders the largest forested surface in Maramureş. The communes and municipalities in the Vişeu river valley have within their territorial boundaries 68,55% forest and 13,63% pastoral landscape.² Along the upper part of the valley, the built-up area along the upper part of the river forms a continuous stretch divided between the cities of Vişeu de Sus and Borşa, and the commune of Moisei. Research was conducted in Moisei on October 2014, when 8 interviews referring to the process of house-building within the wider family were conducted. Approaching house-building transversally across history, the interviewees referred both to the elderly houses which they inherited or dismantled, and the brick houses of the 80s and the newly built houses constructed through migration.

Materials

The 'elderly house' was built with locally sourced building materials. The foundation was made out of stone from the mountain. Everything else – walls, roof structure and cladding, windows, doors – was made out of timber from the nearby forest. "Building was done with stone and wood because there were no bricks" (Mr. T. in his 70s). Rendering was done with *pleavă și bălegar* – a mix made out of the remains of processed oats and manure. The construction that emerges out of stone and wood is mobile, as it can easily be disassembled and reassembled in another place. Only a few stand today. Some have been maintained, upgraded, and enlarged. Some have been moved uphill. After the village was set on fire in the Second World War, grandfather rebuilt his house up the hill because he thought the valley to be dangerous. Then, when the father built his house, he built it in the valley. Yet again, when his brother built his house in the valley, he disassembled the old wooden house and reassembled it uphill as a *saivan* – a summer shelter for when he was on the mountain with the sheep and cattle.

The brick house was built with building materials made locally accessible, and paid for with locally accrued finances. "The foundation was made out of pigs" (Mrs. U. in her 50s). The pigs were raised by the veterinarian and his wife in the stable of the veterinarian's mother, which was big enough to accommodate them and all the other animals. The cement for the foundation was bought with the money gained from selling the pigs. There were no porous bricks to

buy in Moisei at the end of the 80s, just ceramic bricks, so they were bought and transported from Deva, some hundreds of kilometres down south, with the help of his wife's cousin, who worked at the brick factory there. The structure of the roof was made out of 5 square metres of timber, from the nearby state-administered forest, paid for and registered on paper. The wooden doors and the windows have recently been replaced with new double-glazed ones made by her cousin, who is a carpenter, with wood sourced from his now privately owned forest. The brick house is not mobile in itself, but assembles very mobile resources.

The 'new' house is being built partly with materials locally accessible, and partly with materials sent directly, like the money paying for the whole house, from migrant workers in the European Union. Cement, concrete, bricks, porous or ceramic, and timber are locally accessible. Interior finishes, however, are expensive to buy locally, so oak floors are sent directly from Italy:

"He gets it from the factory where he usually gets it, but he took it at 10 euros per square metre, plus the transport. Here you don't find it under 25 euros. One bucket of glue here is 50 euros, he took it with 15, but normally there it is about 20 a bucket. And you do the math, up to 50, here. It's more than double. Just that it costs you the transport, but it's cheaper there than here" (Mr. S. in his 40s).

Infrastructure

The houses are built on land inherited from parents, while it is the joining together of a new family, or the future possibility of such joining, that sets in motion the mechanisms of property division. Groups of houses recreate the history of alliances, as "Mother-in-law planted them all [her children] in the yard" (Mrs. U. in her 50s). The veterinarian got a piece of his mother's yard, while his sister inherited their parents' 'elderly house', which she extended with a bathroom, a kitchen and an extra room. However, division of property ultimately comes to a halt as "The land doesn't grow. They [the forefathers] had something to split, but we will not have anything to split with our children" (Mr. S. in his 40s). The forefathers of today's villagers used to owe mountains. People reconstruct their forefathers' properties in their minds, and on paper, when attempting to reclaim property. Registration in official records makes such construction visible to outsiders³, and constitutes a solid piece of reference for making a property claim. While building and agricultural land have mostly been individually owned in the valley, despite the collectivisation of property in socialist Romania, it is forest land that has been reclaimed in the early 90s and early 2000s. The bureaucracy of constructing a house is nowadays legally tied to a series of papers: registering a plot of land, gaining a property title, and obtaining a building permit based on an authorised project. Registration is, however, tied to neighbourhood relations, for in order to register a plot of land, the owners of the adjacent plots must testify. The procedure is ultimately conditioned by the availability of money, as it costs to take the papers through the procedure set by law.

Construction is determined by the accessibility of land and the availability of water. The groups of houses spread across the mountain are gathered around the springs that run down to the Vişeu river valley. They are what in modern urban vocabulary would be called neighbourhoods, named after the springs running down the mountain. Most roads leading to the 'neighbourhoods' uphill have been asphalted. While the main road passing through the valley has been asphalted with money from the European Structural Funds, the roads uphill have been asphalted by accessing rural development funds, supporting the infrastructure for new farms up the mountain. The other roads, however, leading perhaps to just a few houses, are

set with broken stone, an operation that needs to be repeated each year with money from the local budget. All agricultural land is now accessible by asphalted or stone roads. As most parts of the commune are accessible by asphalted roads, it becomes easier to build uphill, as materials can easily be transported there. Cars can now access any house, at least with a 4x4 car. However, there is no specific milk collection truck, and people are expected to bring their milk to a collection point. The nearby forest is not completely accessible, as some roads are still dirt roads that can be accessed only by animals – horses and oxen. However, exploiting the forest continuously redesigns the roads' layout.

Work on the roads comes in parallel with extending the water distribution system. Water is captured from two of the many springs running down the mountain and is treated downstream from the commune on the Vişeu river. Investments are made by accessing the European Structural Funds. Like the asphalt, the water distribution system does not reach all the houses. As the water bed is high, in order to have water in the household – for animals and humans alike – people do what they did before the water network was introduced: they dig polders in their backyard uphill from the house to let water accumulate, and use the inclined slope to redirect it for daily needs. Collecting water this way requires rationing it to cover the needs of both animals and humans.

Labour

Sheep and cattle raising have always been the main agricultural activities in Maramureş (or so people claim during interviews), as the geology of the land makes it a scarce resource for intensive agricultural production. The ecology of sheep and cattle raising cuts through the entire mountain, assembling people, animals, buildings, wood, water, hay, and the land itself as it is socialised through property titles. The cattle spend the summer on the mountain, mostly with farmers leasing communal pastures. However, it takes “two cows to summer them, one you have to sell, to summer the others”. Some take the cattle with the elders, who spend the summer on a mountain pasture in one of the reassembled ‘elderly houses’. The pastures uphill from the village are tended with manure and cultivated for hay in order to feed the cattle spending the winter in the stables. Small sheds built with timber from the nearby forest are used to store the hay. Agrarian products function in an enclosed circle of equivalences. One makes just as much hay as one’s animals need. Surplus hay is either kept for the next year, or used to pay for the extra pair of hands needed. The milk from the summered cows is returned in cheese, while the part that is collected is processed in the house, by making butter and feeding the rest to the pigs. The land is worked along the network of social relations, and in relation to the seasonal conditions throughout the year. As it is divided among the children, the one who takes the land closest to the parents also takes up the task of tending to them when they grow old. Land that cannot be worked within the family is given to neighbours or people without land. Manure is spread out in the fields in the spring, mowing is done in late August, and the hay is brought downhill in late autumn. “You cannot go any time, you have to choose the time”. Mowing engages the whole extended family, with even the migrant workers coming in the August holidays to help with the task. If even more help is needed, extra hands are brought in either in return for payment, or to even a debt. If someone has horses or oxen and helps others bring in the hay in the autumn, the favour is returned in August for the mowing season.

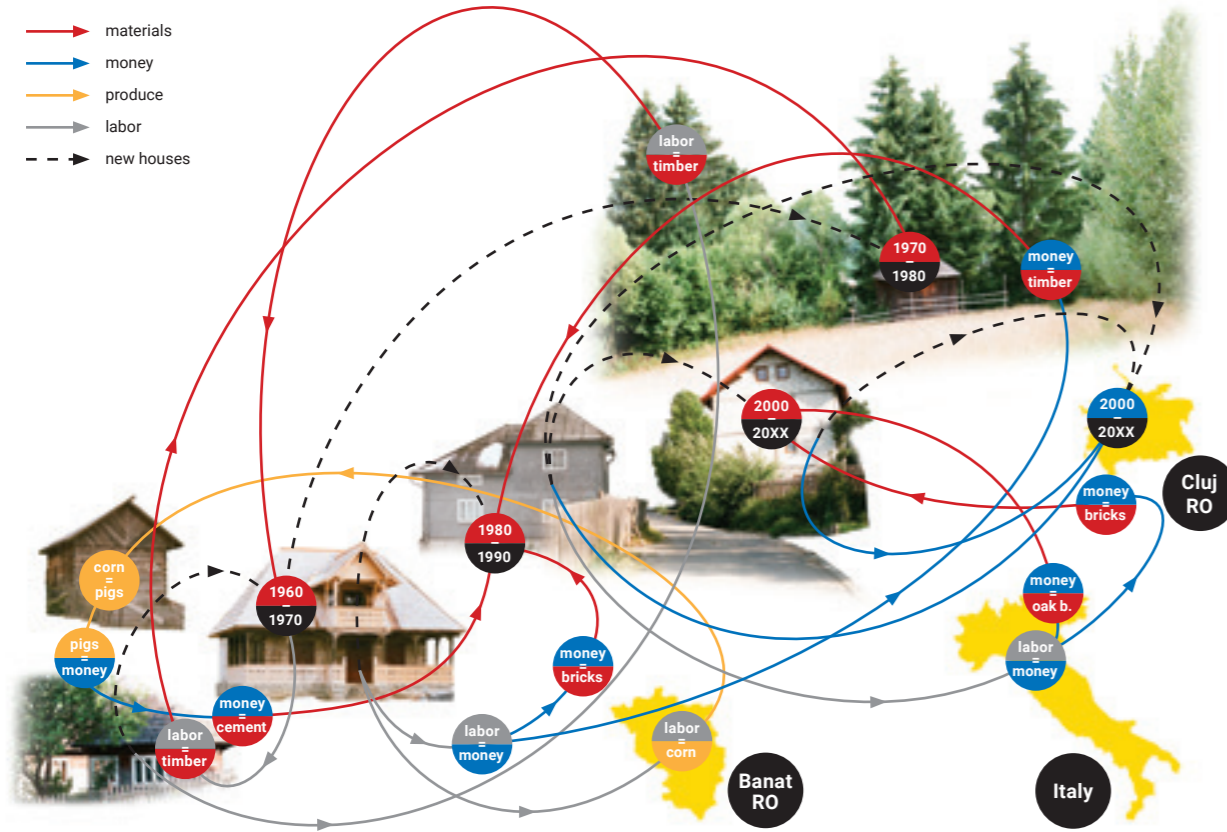
The relational economy of working the land is doubled in a financialised economy. On the one hand, agricultural practices are subsidised through state funding according to the number of

cattle or sheep and the surface of the pastoral land. On the other hand, paid labour is taken up by at least one member of the family. Seasonal agricultural labour is one form of labour that people use to augment their income. However, if during socialist times people would work in the prosperous Banat plains in western Romania and be paid in corn or wheat, nowadays the circuit of agricultural labour is on a European scale, as seasonal workers go to Italy, Austria, or Germany: “Now you go quicker to Italy, than you’d previously go to corn”. As the industrial economy has collapsed after the demise of socialism, local jobs are now only to be found in public administration, or in the service economy as a school teacher, veterinarian, or nurse. Not only seasonal migration, but also permanent migration is used to supplement a family’s income. In those cases where people reside permanently in other European countries, their home affairs are left in the care of family members or neighbours. It is in these cases that parents or siblings take up the task of supervising and organising the construction of a house or tending to the land, while it is the money sent in from abroad that provides the basis for such activities.

Work in the forest was organised during the Habsburg Monarchy through the *Zipser (țipteri)* – German colonists from Zips, nowadays Slovakian territory. From 1774 to 1790, some 300 families were settled at the confluence of the Vaser and Vişeu rivers to work in an ‘orderly’ fashion in the forest (Țelman 2008, 41). At the same time, in an attempt to guarantee the succession of the Habsburg Monarchy to the throne, Empress Maria Theresa initiated three territorial policies – the gathering of all treaties into an Imperial Archive, the charting of all imperial territories, and the administrative reform (Pauser 2004) that realised at the territorial and city scales what the Imperial Archive realised at the European scale: succession of property. State-making mechanisms, such as the property titles guaranteeing succession of property ownership, were set up to facilitate the fiscal management of territory, simultaneously with the development of scientific forestry practices (Scott 1999, 14). In order to facilitate planning, the ordering and charting of territory in the military maps known as the *Josephinische Landesaufnahme* (1763–1785) clearly separated cities and villages from the forest. Reclaiming forest property today takes people back to the imperial archives, while work in the forest is codified through legal procedures tying forest exploitation to professional forestry practices.

Assembled territories

The stability of territories is inscribed into their architectural representation. Architectural representations of form construct very stable objects. This is how, on the one hand, the ‘elderly houses’ are ‘stabilised’ in the form of ‘traditional architecture’ by means of blueprints, sections and facades of a house at a specific moment, while, on the other hand, Maramureş is seen as a stable territory of reference represented on maps. However, if, as I have done here, we focus not on form, but on process, and aim not to re-construct the house using all forms of architectural representation, but rather to follow the process of house construction using only the section, a territorial transversal section, then the stability of territories loses its ground. Focusing on the infrastructural networks and the points of articulation of resource flows that the section brings to the fore, we shift our view from objects, in this case, the houses and the territory, to a mode of construction transcending both of them. Thus, houses and territories come to be precariously assembled as material resources are socialised through the networks of social relations.



1. *Planting people*: Houses and territories are precariously assembled as material resources are socialised through the network of social relations.

Planting people (Fig. 1), for example, assembles people, trees, cement, animals, fodder, water, and land, as they are all socialised through family relations, the bureaucracy of registering property and obtaining a building permit, and the rhythms of migration and cattle raising. The mother-in-law planted all her children in the yard by partitioning her vegetable garden into equal parts so that each could build a house. In the yard, the houses had the accessibility of an existing road and water source. In addition, each got a part of her land uphill, so they could cultivate it. The houses were partly built through the effort of cultivating the land and growing animals. Thus, the cemented pigs became the foundation of a house. The pigs were raised in a stable next to the house, they were fed with water from the mountain accumulating in a polder in the backyard, and corn brought through seasonal migration from the plains of Banat before 1989. When the mother-in-law passed away, her youngest daughter inherited her elderly house, which she extended with a kitchen and a bathroom. While she works at the local hospital, her husband has a permanent job in Germany, which paid for the extension and maintenance of the house. However, planting the next generation will not be possible in the yard, and so the newest houses are being built not only in bigger yards, but also in other cities, as people send their children to university and buy property for them there.

In architectural thought, constructing territories has been conceived as the extension of urban into natural environments. The separation between city and territory then followed the separation between a first, 'pristine' nature, and a second, constructed one (ETH Studio Basel 2015). Researching the 'pristine' nature in the Amazonian rainforest, anthropologist Michael Heckenberger (2003) was able to present it not as 'pristine', but as a bio-social, cultivated nature. Using digital technologies to scan the age of the forest, as well as ethnographic and archeological data, he was able to trace the complex, cultivated landscape that was, and to some extent still is, the Amazonian rainforest, as it has been crossed by indigenous tribes through their

migration patterns (Heckenberger 2003). Researching the city-state of Singapore, architect Milica Topalovic (2014) was able to represent it as a bio-social hybrid in which the construction of the city is ecologically, economically and politically mediated by the flow of sand from neighbouring territories used to conquer territory from the sea (Topalovic and Yabuka 2014).

As a constructed territory, the Maramureş of today references the separation between the cities and villages and the forest that was established during the Habsburg Monarchy. On the one hand, timber entered the flow of global capital, and that was put into effect by the infrastructure of timber exploitation that constructs the forest as a cultivated nature. On the other hand, the socialisation of land through property titles constructs territory by building roads, collecting and distributing water, and building houses. Infrastructure, both the material infrastructure of roads and water, and the legal infrastructure of property titles and forestry practices, cuts across the divide between the forest and human settlements, as natural resources are socialised as building materials.

Footnotes

- 1 Acknowledgements: This essay was made possible through a Biohybrid Human Scholarship from the University of Sheffield. Many thanks to Norbert Petrovici for the fruitful conversations on the structure of this essay, to Nishat Awan for her comments on the concepts running through it, and to Andrei Herța who has allowed me to learn from his ethnographic craft during fieldwork in Moisei.
- 2 Corine Land Cover 2012.
- 3 For a discussion on legibility, see Scott (1999).

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ISBN 978-973-577-679-4