

Maintaining the vernacular in Rimetea and Roșia Montană: Politics and meaning

Alexandra Florea & Mirjana Lozanovska
Deakin University, Melbourne,
Australia.

Abstract

This paper describes succinctly the analysis of two villages, part of a larger research conducted in the region of Transylvania in Romania. It focuses on the relationship between signage and vernacular architecture, arguing that the text and images displayed on the facades of buildings throughout the village are intimately connected to the vernacular and often emphasizes its social, cultural and political past and present. In Rimetea, the signage connects the village, part of Romania after WWI, with Hungary, to which was politically connected since medieval times. In Roșia Montană, the signage supports a proposed mining project by making use of the stories of vernacular architecture. Moreover, this paper brings forth the importance of conducting architectural fieldwork complemented by research on the history and culture of those particular place. Such a methodology was employed for this research, making possible an in-depth analysis of the rural environment in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: vernacular, signage, political, fieldwork, village.

Introduction

This paper describes an in-depth analysis of two of the five villages that were the subject of a PhD research. The research focused on the built environment of five villages in the Transylvanian area of Romania, Eastern Europe (Figure 1), investigating the infrastructure and the state of public buildings, individual houses and public space. Rimetea and Roșia Montană, both villages with a predominantly vernacular architecture, distinguished themselves from the other case studies due to a large number of printed messages and signage displayed on particular buildings. The connection between vernacular architecture and messages with a political, cultural or social character intended to bring change or express identity is the subject of this paper.



Fig. 1: Romania in Eastern Europe
Source: Alexandra Florea

Rimetea is a former mining village where one-third of the houses are available for tourist accommodation and even more for touristic activities. The village is in a beautiful setting, which creates an attractive destination for tourists looking for cultural and outdoor activities. The centre of the village has a strong mining character, resulted from the activities of the Szekelys, a Hungarian ethnic group which settled in Transylvania in the medieval era. Roşia is the oldest attested village in Romania, with documents describing mining activities from 131 AD. The settlement developed as an important centre for gold extraction until its peak in the nineteenth century, when it became a market town. The heritage of Roşia belongs to different ethnic groups (Romanians, Hungarians, Germans, Austrian and Italians).

Methodology:

The case studies were initially analysed from an urban and architectural point of view. It became evident that a rigorous literature review regarding vernacular architecture would be beneficial in understanding the built environment of the twenty-first century. An analysis of the existing built environment, a juxtaposition of different historical layers, required narratives or texts to complete the understanding of the village. Indeed, de Certeau (2011) underlines the limitations of maps and their representations of absent activities and suggests, for a comprehensive reading of a cultural environment, both the study of architectural documentation and narratives. This methodology has been labelled ‘archi-textual’ owing to the combined media used for expression: architectural and textual (Lozanovska 2004). The history of each village selected for analysis, as well as stories that inhabitants recalled during the interviews and other sources of information such as monographs and movies completed the architectural documentation.

The thesis built its argument on ground-truthed knowledge gained from intensive fieldwork in the villages in an attempt to bridge the body of rural knowledge found in the literature with the reality of the twenty-first century architecture of the Romanian village. The architectural fieldwork obtained information from the existing built environment and landscape through observation, data collection and data analysis. Moreover, the fieldwork comprised the collection of data on the history of the villages and interviews with locals, architects and mayors. The main body of fieldwork was conducted in November 2014, with a second visit in June 2017. The history of the village provided important contextual data, thus making a

significant contribution in understanding the twenty-first century village. It also revealed specific details about its culture and social movements which shaped the rural environment.

While preparing the analysis of the five villages, an interesting observation emerged: both Rimetea and Roşia, had significantly more signage than the other three villages, Certeze, Ciugud and Sancraiu-Almasului, where the existing built environment is not characterized as vernacular. What do these signage mean and how are they related to the built environment? Before responding to these questions we will describe the data.

Signage in Rimetea – a reflection of authentic identity and political meaning:

Rimetea is a village in the historical region of Transylvania, Romania. The settlement was first documented in the thirteenth century, when Szekelys, a group of ethnic Hungarians, migrated to the area and settled in the valleys near Rimetea (Edita 2012). At the time, Transylvania was under Hungarian domination and continued to be under its sphere of influence and authority until 1918. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the region was a popular place for research of folk [Hungarian] art and buildings (Macasai 1984). After World War I, Transylvania was adjoined to Romania, based on the ethnic background of the majority of people in the region. However, Transylvania continued to play an important role for the Hungarian intellectuals of the twentieth century, representing the territory in which the homeland was constructed (Kèurti 2001).

The continuous settlement in Rimetea created the legitimacy of an authentic identity, supported by the eighteenth and nineteenth century vernacular fabric which represents the peak of the Szekelys culture. The maintenance, rehabilitation and preservation works undertaken by the owners of the houses were supported by different actors, among which organisations from Romania and Hungary. Transylvania Trust is a charity formed in 1996 and since then surveyed the village and restored selected buildings. Through Transylvania Trust's investment, offering expertise in heritage conservation and facilitating funds from the City Council Budapest's Fifth District, Rimetea has reconstituted a strong "authentic" Hungarian cultural heritage. The Trust advocated the protection of Rimetea to the National Committee of Monuments and since 2004 the Trust is assessing building permits for new builds in Rimetea (Hughes 2008, p. 323). Recognition from the European Commission in heritage conservation in 1999 and global tourism further influenced the way in which the vernacular is represented.

Walking through the village, it is not only the built environment that tells the story of the past, but also signage with names written in a different language than Romanian, which is the official language of the country. There are two categories of signage: one which is written in Hungarian presenting its present and past to mainly Hungarian tourists and one which is emphasizing valuable vernacular buildings.

Messages written in Hungarian advertise that homemade spirits are sold on the premises (Figure 2). Emblems of Europa Nostra awards are also displayed on some of the facades (Figure 3). The award is a prize organised each year since 2002 in collaboration with the European Commission, promoting best practices related to heritage conservation.



Fig. 2: Left: Vernacular house in Rimetea. Right: The sign displayed on the timber gate reads ‘Selling spirits’

Source: Alexandra Florea

The traditional houses which received awards have a white façade with green timber framed windows and ornamental pillars and details. Since they have been recognized as valuable, non-traditional houses replicate some of the traits of the traditional houses: white paint, under eaves profiles and green paint for the timber framework, as shown in Figure 4.



Fig. 3: Left: Vernacular house in Rimetea. Right: The symbol of the Europa Nostra Award displayed on the main facade

Source: Alexandra Florea



Fig. 4: Left: Vernacular house in Rimetea. Right: Non-vernacular house in Rimetea (built in 1950)

Source: Alexandra Florea

Duna, a television that broadcasts for Hungarians outside Hungary's borders, has a presence in the main square and a bronzed colored plaque adorns a rehabilitated traditional building (Figure 5). The origin of the television owes to the desire to instil a sense of identity within the Hungarian communities outside of national boundaries. The village itself reflects this aim, since it became a symbol for authentic Hungarian identity.



Fig. 5: Left: Vernacular building in Rimetea. Right: The plaque with the symbol of Duna TV
Source: Alexandra Florea

The entire fabric of the village and the way different elements interact contribute to the image of an authentic identity and redefine political boundaries. Firstly, a significant number of vernacular buildings are maintained as close as possible to their original image. This is achieved through national and international support, in the form of small incentives for the owners who maintain their houses. The award also changed attitudes as some of the locals altered their non-vernacular houses or built new houses which mimic the vernacular ones. Another incentive is the tourism generated by the built and natural landscape, an industry that brings revenue to the village. The signage displayed in the village reinforces the idea of tradition (either tangible or intangible heritage) as well as the uniqueness of a culture which flourished in a rather remote geography.

Signage in Roșia Montană – a strategy to influence opinion:

Gold mining is intimately connected to Rosia Montana and it is the activity on which the settlement was formed and developed (Stroe et al). Historical evidence suggests continuous mining activities since the thirteenth century until late twentieth century, with different techniques of extraction and processing of the gold. During the nineteenth century, most of the mines were privately owned. In 1948 private property was abolished and the mines became owned by the state until the end of the 1990s when mining activities ceased due to inefficiency of extraction technologies and the state's incapacity to update those technologies. Since then, a new mining project has been proposed by Gabriel Resources, a Canadian mining company. The intent is to build a modern mine with four open pits and a factory for gold and silver that uses cyanide. The proposed open pits are located on the ancient mine galleries and the existing open pit started in 1970 at Cetate. The project plan outlines two years of construction, 16 years of operation and four to ten years of closure and rehabilitation (2008). In 2002, Roșia Montană Gold Corporation started acquiring properties in the area, and by 2008 had purchased 78% of the residential properties in the impact zone. Properties in the centre of the village are used to display development promises and to advertise their own messages.

The buildings of Rosia play a role in supporting or undermining the mining project. Canvas, panels, text and logos are attached to key buildings (or buildings in key locations) that can convey a message and are typically used to support the mining project rather than object to it. One of the buildings in the main square of the village, used as an information centre for the mining project, has a 1:1 scale canvas for the façade, depicting its rehabilitated image (Figure 6). Ironically, the message on the not yet rehabilitated building reads that the mining company invested 17 million dollars in Roşia Montană's patrimony.

An overwhelming number of the signs emphasize the mining past of the village and support the mining project as reflected by Figures 7 to 11. For example, the message in Figures 7 implies that the locals have an interest for the mining project to start as that means jobs for the struggling local population. New jobs in mining would allow them to secure a better future for their families. However, the jobs created by the new mining project would require miners with different expertise than those living in Rosia and surrounding villages and only limited jobs would become available to the local population. The second part of the message, "what about them?" refers to non-governmental organization, different professionals from academia, architecture and archeology and concerned Romanians who organized massive protests in Romania and around the world. These protests and petitions signed against the mining project, which culminated in 2013, postponed the mining project which has not yet begun in 2018. Thus, the message suggests the legitimization of locals to fight for the project.



Fig. 6: A message on the facade of the RMGC office building reads: 'RMGC invested 17 ilio dollars in Roşia Montană's patrimony'
Source: Alexandra Florea



Fig. 7: Referring to the people who are against the mining project, the message reads: ‘We fight for our jobs what about them?!?’
Source: Alexandra Florea



Fig. 8: The message reads: ‘Rehabilitation by Roșia Montană Town Hall partnered with Roșia Montană Gold Corporation’ (the rehabilitation process was not yet complete in 2017)
Source: Alexandra Florea



Fig. 9: The plates read: ‘Pro Roșia Montană. Devoted to the community’; ‘The Future of Mining Syndicate Roșia Montană’; ‘No. 323 house was built in 1867 and is remarkable due to the eclectic structure ornaments ... forms a unitary assembly with houses 554 and 555 ... proposed to function as guesthouses and restaurants. The funds that will come once the project starts will also allow the development of tourism at Roșia Montană.’
Source: Alexandra Florea



Fig. 10: The banner reads: 'Roşia Montană means mining/The Future of Mining Syndicate'.

Source: Alexandra Florea



Fig. 11: Information centre 'Pro Dreptatea' (Pro Justice).

Source: Alexandra Florea

The discourse of the mining company makes use of significant vernacular buildings as they are proofs of the past mining activities. The texts accompanying the buildings reflect the present with few prospects and allude to a prosperous future if the mining project starts.

Conclusions

It is no coincidence that signage displayed on the buildings' façade are present in predominantly vernacular environments. In Rimetea's case, the signage is an element of authenticity, which emerged in the last decades once tourism became a main activity in the village. It dissolves national boundaries and creates political connections, emphasizing the common past with Hungary. The signage associated with particular buildings has the power to change behaviour as owners of houses choose to mimic traits of vernacular buildings when building new or improving their existing non-vernacular houses.

In Roşia, the vernacular architecture is used as an argument for mining. To make this message clear to the audience, signage is present throughout the village. The mining company used signage as one of the tactics to convince locals and tourists of the necessity to mine. RMGC presents an idealised environment through signage, with maintained buildings and a thriving environment, all due to mining activities. Although non-governmental organisations are underlining the risk that such activities pose to the existing heritage of the area, the signage suggests a rather aggressive campaign to promote the mining project as the only pathway for the development of the area, supported by the local council.

This paper showed that signage can be used to emphasise the role of the vernacular in political, economic and identity discourses, which are often interlinked. However, the signage typically represents just one side of the story and does not depict the complex reality of a particular environment. In Rimetea's case, the signage helps to tell the story of the mining past, while non-traditional and contemporary buildings are excluded from the rural discourse. In Roşia, the mining company, which holds economic and political power, is represented throughout the village through signage. On the other hand, locals and organisations against the project which operate and contribute to the maintenance of vernacular buildings is not visible through texts, logos and canvas.

References:

- Certeau, Md. (2011). *The practice of everyday life* (S. Rendall, Trans.), Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Edita Proiectare Editare (2012), *General urban planning of the localities of Rimetea commune*, vol. 1, Cluj-Napoca
- Hughes, A. (2008), *Will there be conflict? Identity and values tensions in Transylvania's Saxon villages*. *Europolis, Journal of Political Science and Theory*. No. 4. 309-328
- Kèurti, L. (2001). *The remote borderland: Transylvania in the Hungarian imagination*, Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Lozanovska, M. (2004). *Emigration/immigration: maps, myths and origins*, in S Cairns (ed.), *Drifting: architecture and migrancy*, New York: Routledge, pp. 184-202.
- Macsai, J (1985). *Architecture as opposition*. *Journal of Architectural Education*. Vol. 38. No. 4. 8-14.
- Stroe, A et al (2009). *Rosia Montana. Inventarierea patrimoniului construit*. *Buletinul Comisiei Monumentelor Istorice*. No. 1-2. 66-112.
- (2008). *Strategic plan for socio-economic development of Roşia Montană*, Primăria comunei Roşia Montană, Roşia Montană.