Gypsy Palaces: A New Visibility for the Roma in Romania?

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Over the last 25 years, a new type of dwelling has spread in some Romanian cities and peri-urban belts; the so-called Roma or Gypsy Palaces. Roma/Gypsies have been considered for centuries as a foreign, vagrant and poor outcast ethnic group that should be educated and eventually assimilated. After 1989 they became a 'discriminated minority' deserving of pity and help. The numerous imposing and flashy buildings owned by nouveaux-riches Gypsies, although often unfinished and empty, challenge the main stereotypes afflicting Roma people, those of poverty and vagrancy. These palaces are still considered as typical productions of an exotic 'Roma ethnic culture'. Such a culture is in fact being constructed by activists and various political institutions in the name of a political Roma ethnic minority. Rejecting such an outdated culturalist/ethnicist and essentialist approach, I see the 'palaces' as the mere and common expression of recently acquired wealth and of the desire to belong to the new rich cosmopolitan élite. Hence in my view, Roma palaces are foremost a symbolic way of affirming one's new social status. They are not particularly Roma.
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When Romania joined the EU in 2007, 19 non-Romanian minorities – that is, 10% of the population, regrouped in a *Council of National Minorities* – enjoyed a very liberal status, allowing them to create their own political parties, to appoint deputies and to develop cultural activities with the financial support of the Government. A special unit had already been established in 1997 at a governmental level to facilitate the development of these minorities: the *Department for Interethnic Relations*. Education played an important role, mainly for the conservation and the development of the vernacular languages. The differences among the so-called ethnic minorities and the titular Nation (the ethnic Romanians) were, as a side effect, reinforced due to the application of this kind of political model of multiculturalism. Competition among the minorities themselves was also stimulated. As positive as this discrimination can be, it remains discrimination. At the level of stereotypes and common attitudes, such a policy has not brought about a greater sense of equality. Many surveys conducted after the fall of the Ceausescu regime on intercultural relations in Romania, including a research project I directed during a period of three years with colleagues in that country (Poledna, Ruegg and Rus eds 2006), have confirmed the permanence of ethnic stereotypes. Hungarians for example are still considered as hard workers; Roma are instead seen as lazy and dependent of Government subsidies, not fit for sophisticated jobs, to name but a few.

In addition, the vast movement of temporary economic emigration of Romanian citizen from Romania to the Latin Western European countries has provoked another chasm. Following some widely echoed acquisitive crimes perpetrated by Romanian Roma in Italy, ethnic Romanians challenged the new name given to Gypsies: Roma. Indeed, in Western

Europe, all Romanian citizens were taken for Roma. It is a matter of fact that the reputation of Romanians in general has suffered a lot from these events. It is not infrequent, even amongst an educated population in Western European countries, to find this sort of confusion; Eastern Europe and Romania in particular hitting only the front page for scandals of pollution, corruption or other kinds of crime and catastrophe.

Another side effect of the multicultural model, as we shall see, is the ethnicization of research itself. As a consequence, research focused on particular minorities as if they were not a part of the national community and had no common history and memory, particularly a long common socialist, and fascist interwar past, affecting them all, not to mention their shared Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman history. Hence many anthropologists, either locals or outsiders, taking the ethnic groups for granted and homogeneous, produced very good pieces of ethnography indeed, stressing ethnicity and what is supposed to characterise each minority, according to the old traditional culturalist model. In addition, sociological *intercultural research* has too often been limited to superficial reciprocal analysis of representations, conducted with written questionnaires or calibrated interviews. Research on Roma 'identity strategies' are mostly linked with how they declare themselves in the census, or with which religious affiliation they choose, but rarely rests on their habitat.

In Eastern Europe, Roma are a popular example of an exoticizing process. In the specialised literature, they are described as eternal victims of the bad 'Romanians' who first 'enslaved' them (Pons 1995) and later ill-treated them (Fonseca 1995). One should recall that Vlachs (= ethnic Romanians) were equally 'enslaved' by their landlords, Romanian or Greek Boyars and monasteries, and that there was no Romanian Nation, in the modern sense of Nation-State, before the middle of the 19th Century. Furthermore, Romania, with its present borders, including Transylvania, was created in several steps following the Traité of Trianon (1920).

This is why a purely ethnic approach is not appropriate to tackle issues such as Roma/Gypsies and their housing, be it a tent or a palace. My intention here is to analyse the flourishing of Roma/Gypsy palaces in Romania as a socio-economic phenomenon, rich with symbols that of course have to be interpreted but most importantly must be linked with the striving for a new social status (Bourdieu 2001: 281-323) rather than with the demonstration of typical ethnic traits. Despite the visibility of these palaces and their glamour, they are diverse in styles and uses, reflecting diverse groups of Roma following different models and different strategies in different cities of Romania. Moreover and most significantly,

Roma/Gypsies are not the only ones to show off through the possession of individual monumental buildings. Instead of taking these 'objects' as expression of Gypsiness, as it is done by many ethnographers, architects and the media, I argue that they must be placed in the context of a larger claim for social recognition, by an élite which follows the old pattern of new rich behaviour. This process can be observed elsewhere, in the United States as well as in many newly rich countries, as for example Kazakhstan: the bigger the house one can afford the more esteemed one will be. The use of eclectic architectural elements as well as the references to world known historical monuments of architecture can be observed everywhere in every revival monument. Nobility needs a remote origin to be recognized. 'New rich behaviour' knows neither border nor time limit. It is on this common knowledge about newly wealthy communities or families and my personal observations that I build my interpretation. In this article, I have no pretension to propose more than a re-interpretation of the symbolism of Gypsy Palaces, in a non-ethnic perspective. At this stage of my on-going research I am not in a position to develop the comparison with new rich dwellings outside of Romania.

If informality is part of the stereotype afflicting Roma/Gypsies, housing is not the most studied topic concerning them. The main reason is that in the social imagination of researchers and journalists they are still nomads living in 'informal shelters', tents or carriages; if sedentarized, they live in 'miserable huts' which do not even deserve the name of houses (Ruegg 1991). It is not surprising either that the surveys and research about Roma/Gypsies, particularly in Eastern Europe, are mostly devoted to topics related to their poverty of which housing is only one aspect. Poverty goes well along with the 'informal economy' they traditionally practise. Their poverty is attributed either to an adverse past (Ruegg 2009a and 2009b), made of exclusion and serfdom, or to present discrimination. These long-lasting stereotypes about Roma/Gypsies, which help to create their ethnic identity, make it difficult to speak about rich Roma, as it is about those who quietly joined the average middle class, sometimes called the invisible Roma (Ruegg and Boscoboinik 2009). These Roma are either ridiculed for escaping their 'true identity', i.e. ethnic poverty, or rejected by their communities as traitors to their ethnic group.

Moreover, it is no longer politically correct to declare that Roma/Gypsies are responsible for their situation of poverty and discrimination, as it was the case for centuries, when assimilation was the principal policy chosen to eradicate poverty and difference. This policy was still applied in the 1970s in Switzerland towards the Yenish, a rather sedentarized group of Gypsies, whose children were placed in foster families or institutions in view of

eliminating what was considered to be an inappropriate socio-ethnic legacy. But the new fashion for multiculturalism imposed mainly by the European institutions and moneys on the freed Eastern Europe States has provoked a radical turn in policies addressing Roma/Gypsies. In post-socialist States, minorities are now benefiting of a special status and sometimes even political representation in Parliament, as it is the case in Romania, which enhanced the construction of ethnic communities. On the one hand these minorities distinguish themselves ethnically from the titular Nation; on the other hand they are supposed to become homogeneous social groups, as if ethnicity was a strong enough factor to abolish the internal differences. In the case of the Roma, such differences concern mainly language, religious affiliations, type of labour and traditional occupation assigning the sub-groups names, wealth and the level of education.

Before delving into my topic – rich Roma houses as a challenge to informality – I would like to discuss deeper the matter of the construction of the Roma community itself around poverty and discrimination. This construction ignores, as aforementioned, other groups who are either integrated and invisible or, on the contrary, very visible because of their ostentatious wealth.

The construction of a 'Roma community' around poverty, discrimination and solidarity

Poverty and discrimination are the classical western socio-economic notions used to describe different groups of Roma. Chosen indicators are generally limited to income, unemployment rates, housing, hygiene, health and education, to name a few, a highly ethnocentric perspective to which a humanitarian concern for 'these poor and discriminated people' is added to engage morally into action.

Contemporary anthropologists can easily recognise here the same *miserabilism* or *bonism* that invaded anthropology when it had to come back home after decolonisation. Poor people were and still are our new savages. This is particularly true in urban anthropology because of the old North-American sociological heritage of the School of Chicago that almost exclusively paid attention to the marginals in the cities and to those citizens who embody the hobo-like individual – replaced in France by the SDF or more generally in Europe today, by the Roma.

On the positive side of the Roma stereotype, however, several social scientists[1] have pointed out solidarity as being one of the defining characteristics of Roma communities.

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[1]See among others Michael Stewart (1997).

Anthropologists here will again remember that the same had been said earlier about a variety of small, exotic, segmentary *traditional ethnic* communities or minorities, as if their very size would naturally engender solidarity and harmony among them. This stereotype applies particularly to Indian tribes of the Amazons who were seen as the perfect model of non-authoritarian societies in the 1970s[2]. According to this social representation, such ethnic groups informally celebrate trust and solidarity which are mainly built upon kinship and alliances. Of course this adds to the claimed homogeneity of such groups. Yet, the problem lies in the fact that if there happens to be 'solidarity' among a particular community, and this term should still be looked at in a closer way, the construction of a global *Roma community*, based on such western-humanitarian values, is utterly misleading, primarily because there is no such thing as one Roma community. As documented already in the 19th century Ottoman Empire (Paspátis 1870), a strong rivalry separated nomad Gypsies from established Gypsies, the latter being blamed by the former to have mixed with the local (Bulgarian) population. Similarly, *Travellers* (Sinti, Yenish, etc.) in different European countries do not admit to having any link with the mainly Eastern and Central European *Roma.* In Switzerland, for example, local *Gypsies,* the Yenish, refuse to have anything in common with other Gypsies/Roma and particularly with Eastern European groups. They regard them as dirty and uncivilised as they often leave rubbish and disorder on their camping sites once they have left, which in Switzerland is considered as one of the main offence against Swiss traditions (these having been well incorporated by the Yenish). Recent events in Western Switzerland, amply related in the press, would confirm this.

Despite numerous initiatives launched by Roma and non-Roma activists over the last twenty years, aimed at uniting all Roma in a common ethnic/cultural community through the creation of a common language and a new common culture (Liégeois 2007), there is only a *community of fate* and not (yet) of *destiny*. In other words, the Roma common identity is a negative one. Since they are and have always been segregated in diverse ways, under different political regimes (Barany 2002), they are publicly recognised as a globally *discriminated minority.* This ascribed identity – used in turn by the Roma to gain public international attention – does not help to understand the social variety and stratification among diverse Roma/Gypsy groups.

As applied to the Roma, informality is in fact primarily linked with their legendary *mobility.* Mobility, associated with nomadic and/or a traveller's lifestyle still represents the

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[2]See the essays by Pierre Clastres (1977) or Robert Jaulin (1971), and others in France. However, there are many counterexamples and among them the famous Iks studied by Colin Turnbull (1972).

main ingredient for the construction of the image of the Roma, and even serves as a derivative for their ethnic definition, at least in Britain (Liégeois 2007). Despite the politically neutral connotation of the term 'travellers', or 'gens du voyage' in French, mobility has strong negative social implications as it is intricately connoted with instability (which contains the notion of unpredictability, a notion that in turn contradicts the very aim of applied political or managerial sciences). The concept of informality applies to social identities and how they can be essentialized when applied to the Roma.

Following classical theories of social representations (Jodelet 1989), informality can be seen as a major characteristic of the Roma/Gypsies. As Norbert Elias had observed for the court society (Elias 1969), social status depends mainly on public opinion or social representations of the majority. In the case of the Roma, informality applies to their identity and status, helping the construction of stereotypes and prejudices linked traditionally with informality. The fact that Roma/Gypsies mainly rely on informal networks and informal economic activities is also common knowledge. *Informality* is a part of their assigned and assumed identity and also contributes to forming the stereotype which has stuck for years; in the negative light of vagrancy and laziness or, positively, as the expression of their freedom and detachment from or even despise for 'bourgeois' values (Ruegg 2004).

Poverty as the expression of informality and the incapacity to manage one's life has attracted much more attention from the scholars and activists than the informal networks linked with corruption and trafficking. However, as far as housing is concerned, the wild urbanisation or acquisition of properties by the new rich – Roma or not – has not hit the front page. For the Roma, informality is primarily a survival strategy in asymmetrical social relationships, particularly in economically difficult times. I also believe that *Roma informality*, as their major survival strategy, will not be recognised as positive as long as their social status remains as it is now, i.e. that of outcasts. But what about the rich Roma and their visibility? Do they correspond to the stereotype of informality or do they challenge it, as they challenge the stereotype of poverty?

Roma palaces as the sign of an unacceptable Roma establishment
I would argue that the visibility of new rich Roma in solid and ostentatious buildings, in Romania as in other Balkan countries, challenges the representation of their supposed informality and marginality. It also breaks down the stereotype according to which Roma can only perform survival economic activities and live in poverty. In addition, for the external (moral) observer, successful informality is immediately linked with illegality, which allows

public opinion to reject this 'exception', rich Roma and their palaces, into the criminal basket of outlaws.

Roma and informal housing

As far as Roma housing is concerned, the image of their nomadic habitat, a wagon or tent, reflects the same stereotype of informality. But even the habitat of sedentary Roma, the majority in Eastern Europe, is considered as 'informal housing' made of poor materials and located in peripheral *mahala* (quarters/sectors). However, since 1989, wealthy Roma in different regions of Romania have designed and constructed a new type of habitat, the so-called 'Gypsy palaces'.

These huge flashy, exotic buildings contradict the current stereotypes and renew tensions between the non-Roma and the Roma, particularly when they appear in the city centre. My aim is to analyse now how such wealthy Roma and their palaces challenge social representations of informality and marginality (poverty) attached to their (constructed) ethnic identity.

Wealthy Roma, owners of Palaces: who are they?

No more than any other group do all Roma belong to the same economic strata. Despite the poverty stereotype discussed earlier, Roma, as each ethnic group or minority in Romania, do have élites of different sorts. Some of them are integrated into the business and the political community. As it has been observed among the Roma, certain 'families'[3] tend to monopolise some type of trade or occupation or even social behaviour. According to a research we have coordinated in Moldavia[4], the new, innovative, intellectual and entrepreneurial Roma élites are almost exclusively recruited among the *Ursari* (originally bear showers). Others are more visible and constitute what the late Prof. Adrian Neculau (2009) called 'cardboard élites' using a metaphor underlining the artificiality or the bluffing aspect of their status.

In Western Romania, in the city of Timisoara, the owners of already famous palaces are all *Matase* which means silk workers. In Bucharest, *Caldarari* (cauldron or pot makers) are the owners of the palaces (Delepine 2007). Not all of them are rich or really newly rich; some gathered their fortune during the Communist times, notably by collecting gold and making other shady informal dealings.[5] Although it was common for them to have

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[3]I prefer to speak of families rather than clans, since these groups are not organised as traditional clans in the ethnographic sense but rather as extended families.

[4]See Neculau, 2009.

'extravagant' economic behaviours, spending fortunes in the blink of an eye – a kind of *potlatch* – these were punctual and could be attributed to their famous prodigality.

However, through the building of striking palaces, this new élite of Roma has attracted public attention mainly at home and also on the web. Like tribal societies, Roma are frequently used and misused by the media to show some extravagant or exotic features. After early marriage among traditional Roma/Gypsies (blacksmiths are among the most traditional groups, preserving their visible exotic identity and customs), luxurious housing has become the new exotic characteristic for Roma/Gypsies. But only a few socio-anthropological studies have been devoted to this topic.[6]

Why palaces?

As previously mentioned, Roma/Gypsies had no 'real' or at least fixed homes. Like other nomads of the Balkans, they practised a bi-seasonal type of dwelling: in the summer they would use removable (black) tents or their carriages/wagons. The wagon still figures as the 'traditional' shelter of Gypsies, although it has been totally abandoned in South-Eastern Europe for more than half a century. Actually, this mode of seasonal housing is or was very common in all pastoral societies particularly among Indians and Inuit or other groups of Eskimos (Mauss 1904[1960]). Temporary shepherd huts, made of straw, are equally observed by travellers and in use to this days in the entire Balkan regions.

What is important to recall from these descriptions is the negative image of improper, dirty, sometimes even underground holes, where people lived 'like animals in promiscuity'. This is at least what one can read in the accounts of travellers in the 18th Century. Like the nomad stereotype, the miserable housing of Roma/Gypsies is still alive.

In the winter, however, they used to stay in 'holes' or so-called *bordei* – semi-buried houses. The latter have no ethnic characteristics and were inhabited by Romanians, Serbians and Bulgarians as well as by Gypsies in the plains along the Danube. Described several times by travellers and ethnographers (see, e.g., Stahl 1972) because of the strange impression they leave, their chimneys rising directly out of the ground, they are sometimes seen more positively. However many travellers note that when occupied by Gypsies these holes are in rather poor conditions:

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[5]It is worth noting that a similar older new rich élite established in a *mahala* in Soroca, in nearby Moldova, started constructing palaces long ago.

[6] Neculau's interviews in Boscoboinik & Ruegg (2009: 84) offer good ethnographic examples.

> *Gypsies live even under the ground in pits above which they build a thatched roof. Their kitchens are located in front of the pit, in the open air* (Taube 1777: I, 52; my translation)

The level of the house above earth depends on the type of soil they are buried in. According to some theories, the level would raise with time and a higher standard of life. *Bordei* would be the ancestor of earthen houses, made with diverse techniques of constructions[7] even out of uncooked bricks.

Today in in the Balkans and more precisely in Romania, Roma/Gypsies are known to live in the *mahala* or peripheral parts of cities and towns, or even of villages. There are cases when they live in slums, but this has happened only after the fall of the Communist regimes. This means that they tend to live in communities, but not necessarily in one single Roma community. Many different scenarios are possible. In Transylvania, I have witnessed (Munti Apuseni) small communities living not far from each other, but having nothing in common besides the belonging to the Roma/Gypsy ethnic minority. The first was composed of well-off *fierari* (iron workers), working hard on different types of wrought iron, keys, horseshoes and mending diverse items. A few kilometres away I met a 'very poor' community of Roma, living in traditional local wooden houses which were falling apart (had they recuperated them from Romanians?) and begging each visitor. They were not inclined towards doing anything to repair a leaking roof or a falling window but would instead set plastic foil above their beds. Elsewhere, they lived as a community again, in simple wooden or mud house they built themselves and practised one of their traditional occupations: collecting iron, glass, selling clothes, etc. Some Roma/Gypsy communities in Romania are actually called brick-maker (caramidari) and exert this profession, making either uncooked or cooked bricks.

It is not possible to find a house that would be exclusively associated with the Roma/Gypsies. There is no typical Roma/Gypsy architecture, since they dwell in whatever type of house is available to them or, recently, if rich enough, ask architects to draw up the plans for their new palaces. Perhaps, then, the reason why they choose to build these so-called palaces today is to break completely from the constructed expectations of what *type* of housing a Gypsy would choose to live in or have built, considering their historic dwellings. As we shall see, it is also an attempt to join, symbolically, a cosmopolitan élite.

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[7] It can be a mix of clay and straw/manure simply piled up in layer or cased or even clay on wickerwork.

Gypsy housing in Communist times

The policy of the Communist regime towards Gypsies was to integrate them in the mainstream working class society, which was carried out in two ways. Sedentarization was a first objective, taken from older traditions going back to the *Aufklaerung* (Ruegg 1991). It is an obvious measure that has been used by all colonial and neo-colonial powers, in Africa as well as in Latin America, to civilise and modernise the 'savages'. This process includes also a *normalization* of the house that consists mainly in imposing the use of solid materials: bricks for the walls instead of mud, concrete for the floors instead of earth and corrugated iron for the roof instead of straw or shingle. Under a regime that was keen to civilise Gypsies and include them in the labour force, one of the solutions was the constructions of the so-called blocs of three or more storeys, in which any workers would be housed, independently of their 'nationalities' or ethnic belonging. The history of soviet type architecture, from the time of Lenin to Brejnev has been largely described and can still be seen in the main cities of Eastern Europe as well as in the countryside where factories were newly established.

In Romania, 'normalisation' of the housing was a part of Ceausescu's plan to eradicate the rural type of dwellings in order to transform (modernise) the design of habitat with the view of achieving the industrial revolution. However, the planned destruction of hundreds of villages never came through. What can be generally said about this period is that the forced assimilation policy helped to integrate Roma people into the general Romanian working class. As other citizens, they joined the newly created urban spaces and lived in the worker's blocs. Having said that, let us try to identify new trends in Roma housing since the opening of the borders in 1989.

Using other people's houses: informal settlements

This trend actually pre-dates the opening of the borders in Romania. The massive emigration of Germans from Transylvania started under the Ceausescu regime as early as the 1960s. The German government was actually 'buying' Germans to be 'repatriated'. These Germans, settled during much earlier colonisation initiative from the Middle Ages to the 18th Century, lived mainly in towns and cities of Transylvania and the Banat. They left behind them empty semi-urban houses. Some were sold, others simply occupied by the Roma/Gypsies. Today one can still see Roma settlements in the fortified medieval villages of Transylvania, constructed by the Saxons in the 13th Century.

Modernised and Renovated Houses of Converts to Neo-Protestant Churches

Among diverse social changes that have occurred in South-Eastern Europe and particularly among Roma/Gypsies after 1989, conversion to neo-Protestantism plays a crucial role. These conversions have been covered by many researches, showing how converts would split from their previous community and create new ones based upon their new identity (Gog 2009).

One could be tempted to attribute new resources and renovated houses to the flow of foreign money channelled through the diverse churches these newly converted Roma families belong to. The reality is more complex. Some financial help may have originated from the US or from more global/international projects of help and development, but it is impossible to generalise. During our research in Romania we witnessed several cases of renovations of older Roma/Gypsy houses through their adherence to neo-Protestant churches. It corresponds not only to the access to financial resources, but also to the adoption of a new style of life, based upon classical Protestant (capitalist) values. This could count for a first exit from informality and poverty, particularly for pastors and leaders of the communities.

Urban housing

Here again it is impossible to draw a single line of housing policies and practices for and by Roma/Gypsy people. However, we can confirm that, in general, special parts of the city were traditionally inhabited by Gypsies in the margins of urban centres (Delepine 2007) and that, as elsewhere in the urbanisation process, they were pushed further out during the more recent urban developments and gentrifications. The very name of 'gypsy neighbourhood' does not mean that the majority of the population is actually Roma, nor that the houses were different from other houses in the city. It may simply have a depreciative connotation which refers to the poor conditions of older buildings. It is remarkable that in one particular city, Constanta, Muslim and Christian Roma do not occupy the same neighbourhood.
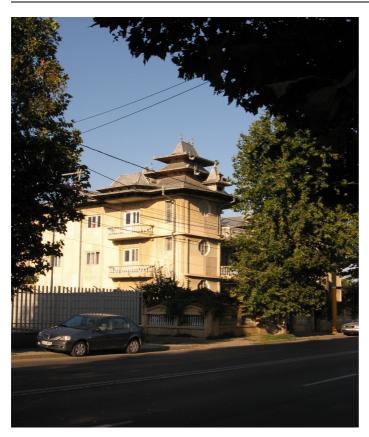
Image 1: Christian Roma Family Palace (Constanta) Photocredit F. Ruegg

Palaces

Since the fall of the former regime, Gypsy palaces have been built in every region of Romania. According to one of the few rigorous, though strictly architectural/ethnographical, studies of the palaces (Gräf 2002), all of them were only built after 1989 in Romania. However, we have been able to visit a Gypsy *mahala* in the city of Soroca in the North of the Republic of Moldova, where similar palaces have been built before this date. These palaces show globally the same features as the Romanian ones. They reproduce some famous historical monuments or imitate Western and Eastern styles, from French mansard roofs to Soviet triumphal youth palaces.

In Romania there is a tendency to build *à la française* in the West, near Timisoara for example, or to use a more Rococo style partly imitated from the bourgeois urban national Romanian style. Gräf also distinguishes the western palaces in Banat following western models (neoclassicism) that are both local imitations and more recent ones in Transylvania, following local models of architecture, particularly Baroque and Rococo churches built under the Austrians in the 18th and 19th Centuries. In Southern Moldavia they follow the Neo-Romanesque Romanian style from the beginning of the 20th century. Hence, Neo-classical

Gypsy/Roma palaces imitate Romanian bourgeois houses from the turn of the 20th century like they were built in Bucharest or in other big cities of the country.

Image 2: Roma Palace *à la française* near Caransebes. Phototocredit F. Ruegg

However, according to Delepine, a French geographer who was able to interview the architect who drew the palaces of Timisoara, the latter copied the Royal Palace of Budapest, the Madeleine Church in Paris as well as Viennese and Bucharest models (Delepine 2007: 113).

One can identify other architectural styles:

• An 'oriental' style particularly characterised by the bulbous church-like roof with also neo-oriental furniture and decoration as observed in Soroca;

Image 3: Roma Palace in Soroca (R. Moldova). Photocredit F. Ruegg

•The Caransebes tin roofed (concrete and marble) houses which can be said Oriental too, or Rococo;
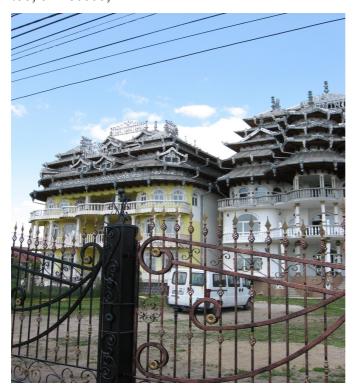

Image 4: Roma Palace in Caransebes (Western Romania). Photocredit F. Ruegg

•The new store house (in Constanta) belonging to 'Turkish' or Muslim Roma with a shop at the bottom;

Image 5: Urban Muslim Roma Palace in Constanta (Eastern Romania). Photocredit F. Ruegg

The symbolism and ornamentation of the houses are extremely varied and do not necessarily correspond to any particular architectural style. They tend to symbolise wealth and power in the form of the material used, white marble and the animals which are represented – lions, and eagles. Similarly, the emblems can be seen as astral (stars) or as a car brand (Mercedes), depending on the number of branches they show. The two can actually be mixed. A common feature of the palaces is the fact that they are unfinished and often uninhabited. The fact that they are empty emphasises on the one hand their symbolic value as pure representations of wealth, but can also be seen as the sign of an unsustainable wealth cut short.

Are these characteristics enough to give the palaces an ethnic identity? This is what Gräf tends to take for granted. Despite his very serious attempt to approach this new phenomenon, I do not share this view and consider it an old fashioned and narrow minded ethnical approach. His ethnographic bias, studying only the architecture of the new rich Roma, brings him to assume that Gypsies have built a typical kind of architecture that relates to, or even worse, that partakes in their ethnicity or culture. This resembles too much the national approach of rural architecture that has dominated the ethnographic scene for a century (Ruegg 2011). In addition, Gräf bases his analysis on another old fashioned ethnographic-folkloristic dichotomy, where culture is divided in two parts, the material and the non-material culture, and tends once more to essentialise Gypsies as a particular ethnic group. The fact that Roma are still often living in a separate district of the town is not enough an argument to establish an ethnic style of housing. Similarly, the fact that a majority of the palaces owners are *caldarari* and so tend to isolate themselves from the rest of the community does not give license to ethnicise the house style.

On the contrary, it is possible on the one hand to identify different styles corresponding to different models taken by the owners of the palaces. On the other hand, it is necessary to compare these 'Roma' palaces with other new flashy buildings in Romania and elsewhere. Since our research is still on-going it is not yet possible to demonstrate systematically that there are many other architectural expressions of wealth which are as kitsch or pretentious as the Roma palaces. A good example however is this neo-classic mini-palace built by a medical doctor which I found in Cluj. Through the chosen building materials (marble) and its neo-classic quasi temple design, as well as by its iron gates, it expresses also the willingness to be separated from the neighbouring profane world and to show off in the darkness!

Image 6: Romanian Palace in Cluj. Photocredit F. Ruegg

This is to me a strong argument in favour of interpreting palaces as a quest for a better social status, a process that can be observed among all new money eéltes and that has nothing to do with a Gypsy culture whatsoever.

Roma Palaces: A Sense of Misplacement?

Until recently, Roma/Gypsies were more or less invisible in the architectural urban landscape. As I stated before, having no specific architecture, they tended to disappear in the periphery of the cities or towns and villages, at least from the public conscience. They were visible only as social actors passing through the city, as craftsmen, salesmen, beggars or musicians. They would never dwell in the centre of cities and even less so in their historical sectors. This was but a tacit law, enforced by the tradition and the fact that Gypsies would not have the means to do so, nor would the authorities of the city, even in the Communist time, let them squat these urban areas reserved for the élites. The construction of palaces and the acquisition of important urban villas by Roma have to be linked with the advent of a free-market economy and the lucrative deals that were done then by the former élite members of the Romanian society who knew the rules and the ways.

As in other parts of Romania, the Roma of the Timisoara area are also building palaces on the outskirts of the city, in so-called Gypsy districts or along the main road at the exit of the towns. This is the case of the Palaces we have observed in Constanta (fig. 1) Caransebes (fig. 2) or Soroca (fig. 3). This practice may be more or less tolerated or seen as normal for a *Bulibashi* or a Gypsy King as it is the case in Buzescu, a village in the South known as the 'Home of the Roma Kings' and already reported on by the National Geographic

Magazine in 2012[8]. But the dwelling of Roma in the centre of the city of Timisoara and their acquisition of historical buildings has (and still does to this day) provoked many demonstrations of anger among the urban population of Timisoara.

It is their presence in an 'inappropriate place' in the traditionally bourgeois parts of the city that has created a row. According to the theory of symbolism expressed in *Purity and Danger* by Mary Douglas (1966), one will remember that it is not the essence of the object that makes it clean (= acceptable) or dirty (= unacceptable) but the shared values on what is acceptable and the sacredness of this consensus. Hence these palaces seem 'misplaced' (*déplacés)* in the moral sense of 'inappropriate and sacrilegious'. In Timisoara they add to the already shocking visibility (a Roma should be invisible and vagrant) of their central place. The centre is still supposed to be reserved for well-established 'indigenous' or majority élites, or possibly to international companies. Since Roma have no urban history, their presence in historical parts and buildings creates in itself a scandal.

It is their *new* and *arrogant* – at least this is how it is perceived by the local population – architectural presence that seems to create a major problem. As it is for the resurgence of (Roma) beggars in post-modern Western societies, it is the challenge that their presence represents to our social representations and values that creates the obstacle. In addition, a *normal* Roma is supposed to be poor and to deserve at best our pity; a rich Roma is thus an abnormality that does not fit into the social landscape. Houses, even if unfinished and empty are more visible and stable than cars; no longer can the Roma identity be properly covered by informality or poverty alone. Around the globe new rich are showing (off) their wealth, particularly through their most visible acquisitions: cars, women and houses. Why should the Roma be an exception?

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[8] See the reportage by Tom O'Neill in the issue of September 2012.

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