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The Microcosm of Migration and Return: Identity, Space and Home in Romania

A selected literature review on housing and remittance houses of Roma and Romanian migrants

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Abstract

This HOMInG Working Paper presents the main directions of research in Romania as regards the migration of Romanian citizens and their remittance houses. It provides an overview on 'pride houses' and 'Gypsy palaces', two types of remittance buildings that gained attention in the public opinion. Both are attractions – 'touristic' and 'professional' ones. However, this bias towards the visible, exotic, or conspicuous might obscure some underlying processes of residential transformation due to migration and remittances. After (1) a short overview of the houses built by the ethnic Romanian returnees in particular areas of Romania, the Working paper presents (2) the literature on Gypsy palaces and their interpretation by the majority and their owners. It continues with (3) a brief overview of the literature of residential patterns of the Roma community and ends with (4) an outline of the broader effects of migration and return on the architecture and residential patterns of Roma settlements. Finally, a selected bibliography is presented along thematic lines, following the main sections of the text.

Keywords: Romania – Remittance houses – Roma – Residential patterns – Literature review

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Introduction

One of the most common and discussed effects of migration and remittances is the change in the housing landscapes in the communities of origin of migrants and their families. These changes are often more than individual level improvements in their housing situation, as they affect the built environment of entire localities. Remittance houses become the material expression of success (López 2015) and tools for enhancing kinship ties and displaying belonging. However, houses – and consequently homes – can also be regarded as imprints of society. Houses reflect the aspirations of their inhabitants, their plans for the future, as well as their ideas about the past. The ways to use the domestic space within a building and to position it in the public space mirror people's relationships with the environment. Examples of continuities and ruptures of the domestic space with the public arena offer a wealth of meaningful topics to address.

As we focus on migration and remittances, we can easily see that mobility also results in changing housing conditions. We can also reverse the question and ask: what can we learn about migration and the use of remittances, by observing the process of house building and its aftermath in the local ways of sociability?

Romania is considered a migrant sending country, therefore there is substantial research already on this topic. A review of the existing literature can guide us to identify some areas which were better described and others that are less comprehensively analyzed.

This HOMInG working paper aims at presenting selectively the main directions of research in Romania as regards the migration of Romanian citizens and their remittance houses (to be precise, their 'pride houses'). As remarkable, even more vigorous attention was paid to the "Gypsy palaces" scattered all over Romania in specific localities. The public reactions that these buildings have received are not independent from the residential patterns (de/segregation) of the Roma population within Romania. We will eventually see how migration and remittance expenses have influenced the restructuration of residential patterns in the case of the Romanian Roma population more generally.

There is a substantial body of literature on the migration of Romanian citizens and a growing subset of publications focusing on the effects of migration on the communities of origin. Generally speaking, the migration process is relatively well-documented in all of its complexity – regarding stocks, flows, demographic change, motivations, destination countries, economy, development, ethnicity, networks etc. (Sandu 2010, 2014; Șerban&Voicu 2010; Mara 2012; Stan&Erne 2014; Ciobanu 2015; Dospinescu&Russo 2018; Anghel, Toma&Fosztó 2019). There are analyses of discourses and policies (Elrick&Ciobanu 2009; Cingolani 2016), and community studies or ethnographic accounts (Anghel&Horváth 2009; Anghel 2013, 2016; Ciornei 2012; Moroșanu 2013; Moroșanu&Fox 2013; Marcu 2015; Oltean 2019). Migrants' motivations to return, and the difficulties they encounter in returning and spending or

investing remittances, have also begun to enter the attention of researchers (Vlase 2013; Sandu 2016; Anghel, Fauser&Boccagni 2019; Gherghina&Plopeanu 2020). The relevant topics cover different aspects of the migrants' lives and use of remittances regarding housing: life projects and aspirations, priorities in remittance spending, amount of money and constructions, return intentions.

For sure, the construction of new houses or the improvement of preexisting ones has been one of the most visible and tangible effects of the remittance-spending process at a community level. Yet, this has been only tangentially approached by a number of articles (Nagy 2009; Stan 2005; Pop 2006; Anghel 2009), and itssocial significance has received little focused and systematic attention.

Having said this, two more narrow and specific topics are a remarkable exception, as they received unequally more attention. These are, respectively, migrants' remittance houses in Maramureș, Bucovina and Crișana, and the so-called "Gypsy palaces". Maramureș, Bucovina and Crișana are the regions in Romania that were most affected by out-migration, but also by return, starting from the early '90s.[2] Here, returnees brought in architectural innovations, leaving behind the traditional construction styles of the region. The so-called "Gypsy palaces", in turn, are distinctive constructions with rich stylistic solutions that captured the imagination of both architects and photographers.

Given that in both cases the constructions are very distinctive in size and style, the heightened attention is rather understandable. Both 'pride houses' (otherwise named 'ghost houses') and 'Gypsy palaces' are attractions – both touristic and professional - since a common feature of this new migration-induced architecture is that in both instances houses employ conspicuous decorations. Compared to the old, well-known and locally established 'traditional' styles, the architectural elements of these new buildings seem innovative. However, this bias towards the visible, exotic, or conspicuous might obscure part of the local social significance of this new architecture. Therefore, a closer look on local practices and the narratives / voices of the migrants involved in these practices is still necessary.

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[2] eg. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FjvkZJ4Idkg (a TV report in Romanian language); https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/25087948.html (a newspaper article in Romanian language); http://www.mentor-construct.ro/blog/126/arhitectura-si-gospodaria-traditionala-din-tara-maramuresului (an architectural page in Romanian language)

Picture 1. Intercalation (Cluj area 2014) Foto: Stefánia Toma

Based on these premises, the structure of the paper is the following: (1) an overview of the houses built by the ethnic Romanian returnees in particular areas of Romania; (2) the literature on the Gypsy palaces and their interpretation by the majority and their owners; (3) a brief overview of the literature on residential patterns of the Roma community; (4) an outline of the broader effects of migration and return on the architecture and residential patterns of Roma settlements. Finally, the bibliography is structured thematically following the main sections of the text.

The "dream houses" of returnees

One of the recent interdisciplinary projects that gave an insight in the migrants' "dream houses" in the North-Western region of Romania is called *Brave New World – Romanian Migrants' Dream Houses* (Betea&Wild 2016). This is a thorough exploration of the new, decorated houses of Romanian returnees and their symbolism. It shows that the new house reflects the hard work and success of its owner. It is a long-lasting good that can be transferred to the younger generations through inheritance. All these points are articulated through a new aesthetic with the aim to clearly differentiate the owner from the rest of the local community. These houses are painted in vivid colors; they have several floors and are heavily decorated with granite and marble elements.

Pic. 2. Cover of the album Brave New World. Source of the photo: https://www.icr.ro/pagini/catalogul-expozitiei-brave-new-world-romanian-migrants-dream-houses-29385/en

Brave New World was the first large-scale collaborative project, after few smaller initiatives, like the 2010 visual project entitled *Pride and Concrete.*[3] The images it captured show that the buildings are not only expressions of a sort of competition between neighbors (Moisa 2010, 2016). Besides that, the builders aim at fitting intoWestern values and aesthetics (Mihăilescu 2014). In this way, the local competition uses, as reference points, elements taken from the broader world migrants have gained access to.

Pic. 3. Pride and Concrete. Photo source: screenshot of the project webpage taken on 10th May 2020.

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[3] http://prideandconcrete.com/multimedia.php (the film with English subtitles)

While these two projects were collaborative and interdisciplinary, involving artists and social scientists, the accent was, in both cases, on the visual elements of architecture. Still, there are individual ethnographic and/or sociological approaches that place the topic of newly built houses in the general framework of the effects of international migration.

*Pic. 4. A new construction in the central area of the village (Sălaj county 2007) Foto: Stefánia Toma*

The big new house built using remittances symbolizes the success of migration (Moisa 2009; Mihăilescu 2011). Several case studies focus on the practice and process of house-building through which both ownership and belonging to "home" are expressed. Moreover, the house enables continuity in the family or the kinship network, while improving the status of the kinship group even in the absence of the persons themselves (Nagy 2009; Larionescu 2012; Tue&Toderaș 2012, 2013). In some instances, the role of family networks is highlighted, along with the symbolic values that the houses have. For example, Nicolescu (2011) shows that being the owner of a house is a moral value among the Romanians, expressing the ability to well manage the material resources. Yet, other studies broaden the focus, analyzing this development at a meso-level. They reveal how far the housing business is influenced by increasing investments in constructions, and by the incorporation of the new houses in regional touristic circuits (Nagy 2009).

Both the visual and written materials document the exceptionality of such impressive buildings in rural areas, by contrasting the vivid colors of the houses with the otherwise demographically shrinking environment. The functionality of these buildings lies not so much in their pragmatic scope and liveability or their financial value on the market (which remains an open question so far), as in their symbolic value. This invests their owners with prestige and signals the "moral integrity" of the family.

The "Gypsy palaces"

Similar to the "pride houses" of Romanian migrants, "Gypsy palaces" have received heightened national and international attention in different media sources. This has been partly because of their rich architectural style (see for example the photo collections of Massimo Vicinanza, Sebastien Cuvelier and Carlo Gianferro[4]), and partly because of the exoticized image of their owners or inhabitants. Sometimes Roma themselves contribute to the burgeoning of this imaginary (Fosztó 2009), as we could see in the reportage of the National Geographic about the 'home of the Roma Kings'.[5]

Some of the literature approaches these buildings from an architectural point of view (Tomlinson 2007; Gräf 2008). These palace-like buildings are the expression of a peculiar style and architectural design that transform the homes of certain Roma communities, making them more distinctive than those of the neighboring majority.
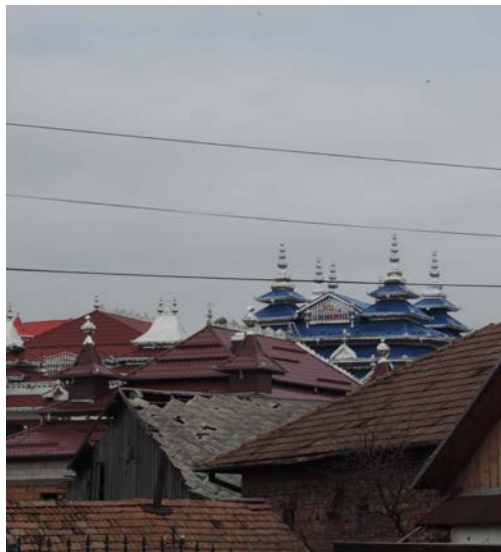
Pic. 5. Rooftops (Cluj area 2014) Foto: Stefánia Toma

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[4] These projects were published as follows: Kastellos. Architettura rom in Romania. (A photographic voyage through nomadic architecture). Photo: Massimo Vicinanza. 2010; Gypsy Queens. Photo: Sebastien Cuvelier. 2013 and Gianferro, C. (2009) Gypsy Interiors. Rome: Postcart Edizioni.

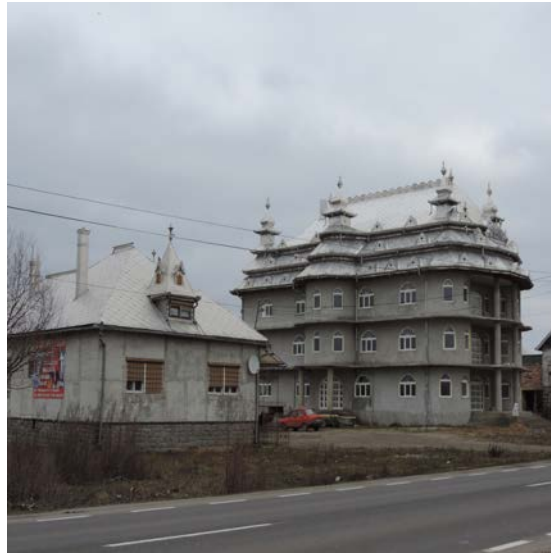[5] https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2012/09/wealthy-roma/

Pic. 6. Details (Cluj area 2014) Foto: Stefánia Toma

The walls and rooftops are heavily decorated and display rich ornaments; they have columns, turrets and domes. Impressive staircases connect the internal spaces. These 'palaces' tend to be clustered in certain regions and localities in Romania (Gräf 2008).

Pic. 7. An early construction in a remote rural area (Sălaj county 2003) Foto: Stefánia Toma

They are generally seen as markers of a strong ethnic identity. This means that these houses are not frozen material expression of specific identities, but rather the subject of continuous transformation.

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Pic. 8. Unfinished variations in styles (Cluj area 2014) Foto: Stefánia Toma

Their variation expresses the present diversity of the local Roma communities (Berescu 2002). They also represent a 'sedentarized nomadism', as Mariana Celac suggested, because they are a concrete means to articulate both mobility and settlement (Celac 2012). Furthermore, these houses are site of contestation where both belonging and aspirations are displayed. The majority population tends to contest the presence and opulent style of these buildings, rather than accept them (Preda, Vijulie&Lequex-Dinca 2018). Indeed, they function as "magnets for hate" (Nemeth&Gianferro 2009). Members of the majority society consider that the Roma entered, occupied or overrun a space that had not been assigned to them and should still be still restricted from them. It is almost outrageous, in this perspective, that Roma left their designated spaces – that is, at the outskirts of a locality. In this context, the 'Gypsy palaces' built in central areas of villages or towns systematically challenge the local power relations 'through their visual narratives' (Cojocaru 2017).

However, from the point of view of their owners these buildings are the link that strongly ties the migrant members of the family to their homeland and to the family members left-behind. They are also signs of a successful migration project, because they irrevocably show that the family was able to leave behind the segregated Roma neighborhood which most of the time is only characterized by poverty, vulnerability and stigma (Gamella, Beluschi-Fabeni, Gómez-Oehler & Muntean 2018; Toma, Tesăr & Fosztó 2018).

Pic. 9. Signs of success in migration (Cluj area 2014) Foto: Stefánia Toma

In order to better understand why the "Gypsy palaces" can stir such public hatred and outcries, curiosity and resentment among the majority population, it is important to know the larger socio-economic context and the existing residential patterns of the Roma population in Romania. Some of the most recent research projects will be presented in the next section.

Continuity and transformation of residential patterns of Roma communities

Although larger research projects have not directly addressed remittance houses, their main findings contribute to a better understanding of the housing and residential situation of Roma migrants and their families at home, in Romania. These results stem from different surveys at the national, regional or local level, which included questions related to the housing situation of the Roma families as well (in some cases, case studies were also included). Through these readings we gain insight in the housing situation, residential and segregation patterns in different regions of Romania. Some projects compared the situation of the Roma to the cohabiting majority population, or, in other cases, to the housing situation of Roma in neighboring or other European countries.

There is a historical continuity in the presence of segregated, marginalized and poor residential areas. These areas are usually situated at the edge of towns or villages. They are usually considered as Roma slums, ghettos or neighborhoods, even if the ethnic composition of the area is sometimes questioned.

Pic. 10. Housing and living conditions in rural Roma settlement – between private and public (Sălaj county 2007) Foto: Stefánia Toma

The appearance and continuous existence of segregated areas inhabited by the Roma raises many questions; therefore the literature is abundant and diverse. In short, the research literature can be clustered around four main interlinked questions:
i. where these segregated areas are located;
ii. what is the reason for the formation of segregated areas;
iii. what is the degree of exclusion associated with them;
iv. what processes can have transforming effects on these areas.

Pic. 11. Present and aspirations in a Roma neighbourhood (Sălaj county 2007) Foto: Stefánia Toma

The most recent mapping of Roma communities is the SocioRoMap project, but the two Atlases of the World Bank can be helpful as well.[6]
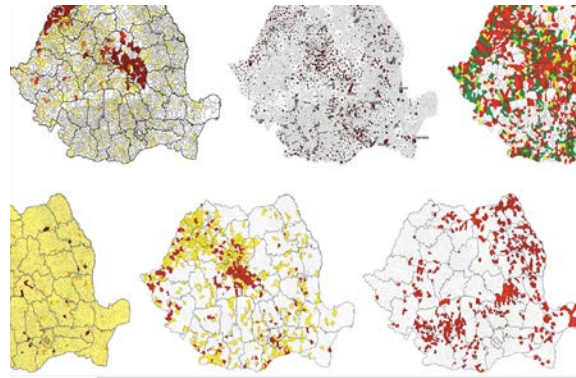
Pic. 12. Detail of the cover of the SocioRoMap report. It represents the visual representation of some of the results of the mapping. Source: www.ispmn.gov.ro

These projects identify marginalized Roma (or ethnically mixed) areas and describe them in terms of the main socio-economic variables. As regards the causes of development of such areas (sometimes labeled "ghettoes" or "slums"), there is a tendency to represent the Roma living in segregated areas as 'products' or victims of global forces (capitalism, neoliberal state policies, dynamic of the capital, etc.).

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[6] These two Atlases are the following: *The Atlas of rural marginalized areas and of local human development in Romania* (2016) (http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/847151467202306122/Atlas-marginalized-rural-areas-and-local-human-development-in-Romania) and *Elaboration of integration strategies for urban marginalized communities: The Atlas of urban marginalized communities in Romania* (2014). http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/668531468104952916/Elaboration-of-integration-strategies-for-urban-marginalized-communities-the-atlas-of-urban-marginalized-communities-in-Romania.
The report of SocioRoMap was published in Romanian language: *Raport de Cercetare SocioRoMap. O Cartografiere a comunităților de romi din Romania*, ed. Horváth, I., ISPMN, 2017

Pic. 13. Signs of transformation in a segregated rural Roma settlement (Brașov county 2015) Foto: Stefánia Toma

Nevertheless, research evidence shows that the process of exclusion is ultimately more complex, and varies across different regions. For example, the results of the large Eastern European poverty research "Poverty, Ethnicity, and Gender in Transitional Societies" show that the statistical effect of (caste-like) ethnicity in explaining the residence in poor, segregated areas is lower in the case of Roma in Romania if compared to Bulgaria, for example. Explaining these differences goes back to the transformation of larger and more traditional Roma communities due to the processes of state socialism (forced urbanization, internal mobility for work on state farms, and so on) (Szelényi 2002; Ladányi-Szelényi 2004).

The recent development of Roma international migration can be regarded as the most recent transformative process that challenges the residential landscape of the Roma population. The case studies of the MigRom project[7] focus on the agency of the Roma as they try to explain the changes that occur in Roma neighborhoods.

Pic. 14. Newly built brick house in the Roma settlement (Brașov county 2015) Foto: László Fosztó

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[7] See: http://migrom.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/

Depending on the local context, the residential segregation is maintained by returnees or, in other cases, families start to move out from the segregated areas, buying property in more central districts and becoming neighbors with members of the local majority population (Toma&Fosztó 2018a). These situations of 'new neighboring' create new patterns of ethnic relationships and may even generate social tensions. Understanding and explaining the "Gypsy palaces" is part of this process of desegregation, mobility and change in the ethnic landscape.

The effects of migration on the housing situation of the Roma in Romania

There are a number of studies that describe the way remittances are spent by Roma migrants in Romania, although their main research focus is often placed on a different social process, or a broader social phenomenon. These articles might contribute to formulate new and more informed research questions, developing new areas of research in Romania.

As a direct consequence of the participation of Roma in international migration, different forms of conspicuous consumption were observed in Roma communities, rather similar to those of mainstream Romanian migrants and returnees. These new forms include investment in goods at home, improvement or even construction of houses (Benarrosh-Orsoni 2015, 2019). Improving the home and house represents the material expression of the economic advancement of the household, or the family.

Pic. 15. Preparations for renovating an old home (Brașov county 2015) Foto: László Fosztó

Most of the time, these changes are interpreted as part of a process toward "civilization" (Tesăr 2016: 191; Racleș 2018). They also contribute to strengthening the symbolic position of the family in the local competition for resources (Szabó 2011: 331). Moreover, they can be converted in educational and social mobility (Piemontese et. al 2018). One can gain prestige by constructing or improving a

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house not only in their own ethnic community, but also in the eyes of outsiders. Members of the majority inhabitants of the localities have to acknowledge the masonry skills that the Roma men have acquired by working abroad (Toma, Tesăr&Fosztó 2018: 73-74; Anghel 2015).

In most cases, the improvement of the houses/homes is a longer process. It may require multiple rounds of journeys abroad for one or more household members. Along the process, a number of smaller improvements change the wellbeing of the family. At a later stage, the cumulative effect is the transformation of the local community.

Pic. 16. Newly opened shop at the Roma settlement (Braşov county 2015) Foto: László Fosztó

Moreover, some of the houses follow the architectural style of the local majority, or, on the contrary – as seen also in the cases of 'palaces' - they may take a divergent style, maintaining or heightening local social and cultural divisions (Fosztó&Toma 2020: 2). Working on these constructions (more exactly, the process of construction) contributes to maintaining social relationships between local ethnic groups (e.g. by hiring Romanian or Roma women as domestic workers). Others develop the informal job market by involving unskilled daily laborers in the construction, or even creating new occupational niches, like housekeeping (Toma,Tesăr&Fosztó 2018).

Some articles mention kinship as an important factor in constructing new houses in home communities (e.g. marriage). These houses are the proof of their preoccupation for the wellbeing of the forthcoming generation (Tesăr 2011: 308, 2016: 194). Depending on the type of construction and its position in the landscape of the local community, the distinguishing architecture (many details, colours and finishing) can increase the visibility of the local Roma community, especially in more traditional Roma communities (like the Ursari; see Toma, Tesăr&Fosztó 2018: 75).

As already mentioned at the end of the previous section, other studies have also approached changing patterns of residential segregation or de-segregation. Remittances are sometimes used to buy plots or buildings in more central, thus more prestigious locations (similar processes were observed in the case of ethnic

Romanian migrants as well). The effect of the residential repositioning is highly contextual and almost never unequivocal – it might depend on the actual social context. In some cases, the Roma are still stigmatized despite being the owners of large houses in the city center (Crețan&Powell 2018; Pontrandolfo 2018). Other studies showed that reduced physical distance (i.e. desegregation) does not necessarily reduce social distance between the Roma and the local majority (Toma&Fosztó 2018b: 72).

Most of these studies do not explicitly indicate that construction and homemaking practices contribute to the strengthening of ethnic identity. However, some articles argue more specifically that the Roma identity might have a 'materiality' of its own (Benarrosh-Orsoni 2019; Racleș 2017; Olivera 2012a, 2012b). This difference either signifies stronger belonging (the example of the "Gypsy palaces"), or contributes to social distancing and building kinship relations through rituals, like in the example of building bigger and nicer houses for the newlywed son; or investing in prestige goods like silver chalices or beakers (Beluschi-Fabeni 2018; Tesăr 2016; Berta 2019).

In lieu of a conclusion: new questions and research prospects

Overall, this corpus of literature is much more extended than what has been possible to present. The logic that guided the structure of this paper was that migration of the Romanian citizens has more or less visible effects in home communities and that is shown in the existing literature. One of the most visible effects lies in the big, colorful, decorated, newly built houses in different regions of Romania. The usual questions addressed in the reviewed literature are: who constructs these? Where? Why? How they construct them and when (i.e. the method and the time span) is less systematically addressed, but it might generate interesting questions for further research.

Instead, the why and where questions are appearing many times in the public narratives (mass media reportages [8]). This suggests that some of these constructions are contested both by the local population and the media. Why, we may wonder, is this the case? Why are 'Gypsy palaces' more contested than 'pride houses'? Why do they generate moral indignation (beneath the aesthetic differences)? What accounts for the differences in the discursive frames that define these houses built out of remittances? The reviewed literature offers some insights that help to understand these phenomena by placing them in a broader context.

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[8] For example, in Romanian press: https://presshub.ro/peste-200-de-palate-ale-romilor-din-timisoara-redeseneaza-orasul-i-1047/
https://adevarul.ro/locale/hunedoara/topul-celor-mai-bizare-palate-romilor-romania-cladirile-s-au-investit-milioane-euro-1_5b8d4be4df52022f75168c8c/index.html
And a more recent article in English: https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/8478723/luxury-town-romania-human-trafficking-uk/

The 'pride houses' of Romanian migrants have been visualized and analyzed from an aesthetic point of view (size, luxury, the quality of the materials) and from the point of view of the owners and the way they use them (or not), including the owners' relationship with the house (being there, using it, or not, inherited etc.). There is a remarkable convergence between self- and hetero-evaluation in this respect: being the owner of such houses represents the investment of great efforts and diligence and it is recognized as such by public discourses.

In contrast, the 'Gypsy palaces' – while being also evaluated from an aesthetical point of view – are mostly regarded by outsiders from a moral point of view: the 'aesthetics of ugliness' is concordant with the assumed immorality of its owners. These are the stigmatized 'Gypsies' who 'invaded' the Western world and then return with the money they illegally gained (as beggars) and invest in central places. This approach translates the marginal position of the Roma in the outer world into the language of moral discourse. No surprise, therefore, that the appearance of these buildings in a number of localities generated controversies.

Pic. 17. 'Palace' and renovated peasant house (Cluj area 2014) Foto: László Fosztó

The section that overviewed the research on the housing situation of the Romanian Roma communities more broadly helps to understand why the 'Gypsy palaces' were able to stir such interest, compared with the houses built by Romanian returnees. The owners of 'Gypsy palaces' are still being considered "outsiders", "strangers" who used to live in the segregated areas at the outskirts of the locality. While their 'palaces' are more present in the public space, and purposefully so, the 'proud houses' are only spaces of the domestic life.

These differences show us that it is worth trying to understand these houses and phenomena together, because there are associations – maybe not in their aspect – but in the way they are interpreted and understood by neighbors and visitors alike.

Appendix: a selected bibliography

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