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Elena Bogan, Mihaela Iamandei

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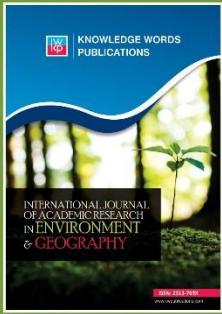
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Considerations Regarding Vernacular Architecture from The Mehedinti Plateau

Elena Bogan, Mihaela Iamandei

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Geography, Romania

Email: elena.bogan@yahoo.com, iamandeimihaela17@yahoo.com

Abstract

The architecture of the Mehedinți Plateau is the expression of the material and spiritual values of the inhabitants, with an enormous cultural potential, including numerous constructions that transmit the memory of places and people starting from the 18th century. It is about buildings and various constructions of domestic or public utility, all of these representing the traditional Mehedinți county, the ancient savoir-faire by using the materials at hands: limestone, used especially for the foundations, and wood, common materials for this area. This paper refers to the vernacular architecture, without including churches and monasteries. In the meaning of this research, only the crucifixes are part of the religious vernacular landscape analyzed here, together with other constructions with nonreligious functions. So this paper refers to the main constructions without architect, of popular origin, concentrated in ancient villages from the Mehedinți Plateau, which is the smallest geographical unit of Romania: 1. houses and household annexes, 2. various utilitarian-economic constructions -vehicle and traditional tools for transport, agriculture and handicrafts and 3. Constructions with symbolic functions, representing the local culture subscribed to the regional and national one. It is about an authentic ancient ecofriendly housing and lifestyle that must be cultural preserved and economic capitalized.

Keywords: Vernacular Architecture, Mehedinti Plateau, Limestone, Wood Culture, Handicrafts, Romanian Villages, Romanian Traditions, Romanian Culture, Eco-Friendly Housing, Cultural Potential.

Introduction

This paper aims to make known and to promote the vernacular architectural elements that preserve the memory of places and people, their habits and customs, and generally express the cultural identity of the villages of the Mehedinti Plateau, the smallest geographical unit of Romania (about 800 square kilometers surface apud Bălțeanu 2006) that is located in the southwest of the country. Also the work emphasizes the need to revive crafts and traditions; capitalizing on this cultural heritage in the economic purpose for the development of this area

and to increase the standard of living of the inhabitants that is depending on how fruitful is the economy.

Several considerations about international definitions of vernacular architecture

In this approach, we have taken into account the internationally accepted definitions of vernacular architecture according to which this type of architecture includes dwellings and other constructions built by the owner or community using traditional techniques, to meet specific needs and taking into account available resources (Encyclopedia of the vernacular architecture of the world, 1997). They are also a response to the symbolic needs of those communities, attesting to their cultural identity.

Vernacular constructions are linked to the conditions of a spatial and temporal context, of the environment and relief, to the values and the local economy and the lifestyle. Except the religious buildings, i.e. churches and monasteries, or other types of buildings in the same region, the architectural elements analyzed in this paper were built without architects or construction specialists and also without elaborate, calculated models.

In the architecture, vernacular constructions are defined as those popular constructions that are made by people called craftsmen, whose main activity is not in constructions and which are based on an empirical knowledge of materials, gained over time, through repeated trials and failures and whose knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation (Arhimedia.ro, 2020).

The "vernacular" term was first used in an architectural context in 1964, at the Architecture without Architects exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York by Bernard Rudofsky. He presented a book regarding the vernacular architecture, including black and white pictures from around the world. Then this concept was introduced in the literature of the architecture and also the features of the vernacular in architecture were drawn for the eyes of the wider public: anonymous, spontaneous, indigenous, rural or urban.

Brunskill (1985) defined the vernacular architecture as a construction designed by an amateur without any training in design, guided by a series of conventions built in his locality, giving very little attention to fashionable elements in architecture at that time. The function of the construction was the dominant factor, the aesthetic considerations being minimal. Local materials were also commonly used, other imported materials being sometimes exceptionally adopted.

Francois Varin (www.icomos.org, 2020) noted that this type of architecture differs from one era to another and defined it as a popularly inspired architecture that has developed and develops its own characteristics in a certain area and that uses local materials, traditional ways of work and forms. In his opinion, the essential variables in defining this architecture are: function (must respond to a need) conception (way of working, methods, materials used) nature (the result of a process, the product of the image of an object), belonging, context and conservation conditions). This author shows that vernacular architecture can be found in both rural and urban space, can include both individual and residential constructions (houses complexes), can be urban or rural landscapes.

Methodology

This work is the result of consulting an extensive Romanian and international bibliography, of several geographical and ethnographic researches in the villages of the

Mehedinți Plateau. The analysis of the information on the vernacular architecture in this geographical unit took place during the last 3 years, being based on personal photos and observations, as well as on documents, interviews with local residents and administrative authorities. Also, the specialized literature on architecture in Mehedinți County was one of the important sources for achievement of the general architectural landscape of the rural area in the Mehedinți Plateau. The data have been processed by systematization (hierarchy, classification), except for the exact numerical inventory, which is not the subject of this paper. The data have been processed in Excel for comparisons and other necessary observations, presented here.

The Vernacular Architecture in the Mehedinți Plateau Villages

Taking into account these few international definitions that synthesize the characteristics of vernacular architecture, we tried to identify in the rural area of the Mehedinți Plateau those elements that capitalize on knowledge and traditions in their architecture "without an architect". This work is not an inventory of vernacular constructions and only wants to show the importance of some traditional architectural features specific to this area in the economic and social development of the inhabitants. The specificity of these places is very much reflected in the customs and traditions passed down from generation to generation, but also in the ancient forms of living related to various utilitarian constructions (see Figure no. 1).

Mehedinți Plateau, included in the Mehedinți County, is known as one of the area with the smallest number of households in a village because here the scattered settlements predominate, on a hilly, heavily forested land. The average altitude of the villages does not exceed 900 m (see Figure no. 2).





Figure 1. Two representatives types of peasant houses from 19th century preserved at Golesti museum complex of traditional rural buildings

Source: Personal archive

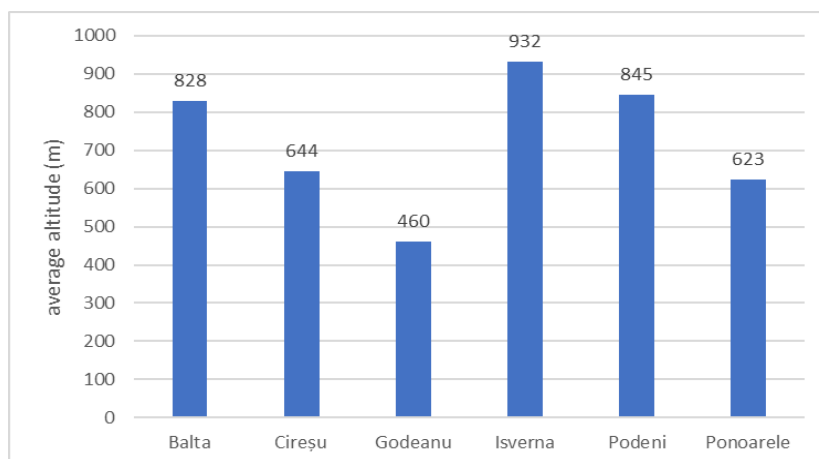


Figure 2. Average altitude of the homes in the main villages from the Mehedinți Plateau

Source: Personal processing of data about Stroe R., Peptenatu D., 2011

The villages from the Mehedinți Plateau are villages with tourist values that can be grouped based on their specificity in several major types defined by Simon T. *et al*, 2009: 1. Villages with cultural-historical objectives; 2. Landscape and climatic villages; 3. Tourist villages for sports activities; 4. Fishing and hunting villages; 5. Agro-pastoral villages; 6. Tourist villages for vineyards and fruit trees; 7. Ethnographic tourist villages for craft and handicrafts; 8. Ethnographic tourist villages with special folklore manifestations; 9. Ethnographic tourist villages for traditional architecture. To these, we added a special category; 10. Villages with objectives of speleological interest. But for the purposes of this paper, here are included those of the „Tourist villages for traditional architecture” category.

The habitat of a tourist village for traditional architecture from Mehedinți Plateau consists of the built environment and natural conditions, the two being closely linked. The relationship is

a determining one, of mutual conditioning. Dwellings and outbuildings, as well as utilitarian architectural elements (bridges, water mills etc.) are influenced by the sloping relief and the specific climate of the hills. At the same time, the natural landscape has changed over time according to human housing and economic needs. On the other hand, housing is an indicator of quality of life (Nicola & Danciu, 2008). They provide housing at different standards. At home, the existence of individuals takes place, consensus is created, values are transmitted, so it is not just a shelter, a depersonalized space. Housing also expresses social relations, the degree of cohesion of groups (Idem).

As part of the Romanian traditional architectural landscape, the vernacular landscape of the Mehedinți Plateau reflects both general features of vernacular architecture and elements specific to Oltenia and Banat historical and economic regions: *a)* Archaic construction techniques; *b)* Evidence of the existence of local crafts; *c)* Valorization of traditions in crafts; *d)* A place-specific civilization of wood and stone; *e)* The functional and aesthetic elements of a typical household; *f)* Lifestyles; *g)* Basic occupations; *h)* Family size and village size; *i)* The state of the local economy; *j)* A certain symbolism (local beliefs and practices, a popular language); *k)* The aesthetic sense of the locals; *l)* Similarities and influences; *m)* Determining / influencing environmental factors; *n)* Minimum interventions in the environment; *o)* Degree of conservation / state of construction; *p)* Models of good practices and typologies in the vernacular field; *q)* The local architectural specifics.

Characteristics of The Vernacular Constructions From the Mehedinți Plateau

The vernacular constructions from the Mehedinți Plateau belong to a patrimony that is largely not yet capitalized. They are not integrated into a unitary conception, they are not uniform, being scattered in the villages in the hilly area. The main elements of indigenous architecture are integrated into the landscapes, being adapted to the environment. Local materials were used to build them, limestone and wood being predominant. Also there are local practices to ecofriendly building, using ancient methods based on clay soil combined with organic materials according to traditional recipes.

In the Table no. 1, there are the main elements of vernacular architecture identified in the Mehedinți Plateau: *a)* constructions intended for housing and annexes intended mainly for animal breeding; *b)* utilitarian-economic constructions, used intensively in the past centuries, but today they are in danger of extinction, including water mills, ox carts, rudimentary washing devices on the rivers (locally named: "vâltori"- whirlpools), as well as *c)* constructions with symbolic functions, related to the beliefs and superstitions of the locals.

Table 1. The main elements of the vernacular architecture from the Mehedinți Plateau

Crt. No	Residential buildings and outbuildings (annexes)	Utilitarian-economic constructions	Constructions with symbolic functions
1.	Typical peasant houses with outbuildings (haylofts, various outbuildings for animals in the yard)	Cellars	Wooden gates with roofs
2.	Mansions	Water mills	Rock fences
3.	Cula type houses (fortified houses local named "cule")	Lime kilns	Wooden trinities
4.	Inns	Wooden bridges over the rivers	Street fountains with wooden wheel
5.		Traditional wooden hydraulic installations-Rudimentary washing devices on the rivers, local named "vâltori"(whirlpools)	
6.		Haystacks	
7.		Mountain shelters for animals, local named "Sălașe"	
8.		Ox carts	
9.		Home Looms	

Source: Personal Processing

Typical peasant houses in Mehedinți Plateau

The first official statistics on the number and type of dwellings in Mehedinți County date back to the early 1800s. A statistic made by the authorities in 1859 shows that this county was on the first place in the number of wooden houses - almost 13,000, but with the fewest houses in masonry (Pănoiu A., 1983). The wooden houses were built directly in the forest, especially oak, and were transported and installed in the villages by the owners. Such a house costs between 7 and 10 yellows (Austrian gold coins). Very few of these houses have been preserved, some being real traditional architectural jewels being now preserved in the national museums of Romanian villages (see Figure no. 1).

In the field, some houses that are 200 years old have survived, in the hilly areas of the Mehedinți Plateau. They are built of massive oak beams on solid stone foundations extracted from the predominantly calcareous area. The Mehedinți traditional ancient house consisted of two areas: one for preparing food, with a fireplace in the middle of the room, and one for resting, with wooden beds.

The central position of the hearth, with the high chimney, placed in front of the house, as well as the position of the central or lateral entrances, the types of joints of the materials, the way of covering the roofs of the houses, the combination of different sizes, along with the façade of the house, they belong to the architectural peculiarities of the area, being original vernacular elements, specific to the local craftsmen.

In the traditional Romanian architecture one talks about the "peasant baroque style of Mehedinți" (Idem), which is found in the artistic realization of the porches, in the geometric decoration of the curved columns, of the polylobed arches, both of the wooden houses and of the cula or mansion houses. Also specific are the limestone cellars integrated into the houses or built at different distances from them. The fences in the area are also made of locally extracted rock, with traditional wooden gates with roofs, sometimes carved (See Figures no. 3, 4, 5).



Figure 3 (left), 4 (right). Typical peasant houses in Mehedinți Plateau – Jupânești village
Source: Personal archive



Figure 5. Wooden gates with roofs, Gornovița village, 2020
Source: Personal archive

The choice of a building material for the house and the fence depended in this area adjacent to the Mehedinți Mountains both needing defense against environmental conditions and military defense. Most of the houses are located on a slope, on the old roads built by the Romans and, later, by the Austrian armies, along the rivers with variable flows. The construction of the houses rudimentarily follows the principles of the walls of some fortresses, with fences measuring over 2 m high and thick, as well as water ditches in front of or around them.

Cula-type houses are the most obvious examples of fortified houses, specially built for defense in case of war. They have at least one floor, cellars, thick walls, rock fences. However, they do not lack total or partial porches, emblems for the vernacular architecture of the area. The model of a tall, multi-storey house, with the function of improving the view of the horizon, was also taken from the region, from older type houses existing in the 18th century, built entirely of wood. However, their main function became that of military defense, for this purpose the walls were reinforced with stone and reaching thicknesses of over half a meter (Figure no. 6).



Figure 6. Cula type houses, Isverna, 2020

Source: Personal archive

The mansions are the expression of the luxurious lifestyle of the boyars from the XVIIth-XVIIIth centuries. There are high houses with masonry, but which differ from the cula-type houses through elevation and the central position as compared to the houses of the servants, in areas with vineyards and agricultural areas. Dozens of mansions belonged until the second half of the eighteenth century to boyars who owned huge properties in the area, with forests, farmland, vineyards and peasants working for them in order to survive. Regarding the architecture of the mansions from the Mehedinți Plateau, George Erdeli (1992) observes that almost all of them reproduce in fact, in a slightly simplified form, the usual plan of the village house, consisting of two main rooms: clay oven cooking chamber and the rest room. Also, at the entrance, outside, with specific partial porch or continuous porch. Some of these mansions are the houses that were not moved to the hearth as ordered by the authorities in the systematization plan of the mid-nineteenth century. In fact, their construction is common to the ancient construction principle of the Southern Carpathians, according to which the entire construction is placed on a foundation of river stones or broken limestone. Most mansions can be seen towards the N of the Mehedinți Plateau, in the Balta, Jupânești, Podeni, Obârșia Cloșani, Mălărișca, Sfodea villages. Nowadays,

mansions as well as inns, once key elements in the economic infrastructure and social life, have disappeared from the landscape or are in an advanced state of ruin (See Figure no. 7).



Figure 7. Mansion type house in Mehedinți Plateau

Source: Personal archive

Lime kilns. As we previously underlined, limestone has been used extensively in constructions in the past, just like wood. The processing of locally extracted rocks was also done with the help of kilns used to obtain lime, locally called “vărării” (see Figure no. 8). Some of these huge ovens are still preserved today in some localities in the Mehedinți Plateau.



Figure 8. Lime kiln in ruins

Source: Personal archive (2018)

Also, from the economic view point, an important role was played by water mills, made of wood, on the Danube and on inland rivers. Currently, they are no longer functional or have even disappeared from the landscape (see Figure no. 9).



Figure 9. Water mill in ruins covered by vegetation on the Topolnița River
Source: Personal archive

As picturesque elements of vernacular architecture are still in use carts with horses and carts with oxen. Also, numerous massive wooden bridges, made entirely by hand, can be crossed over the main rivers, with variable flows, from the calcareous area of the Mehedinți Plateau.



Figures 10 (left), 11 (right). Carts with horses and carts with oxen
Source: Personal archive

Rudimentary washing devices on the rivers, local named “vâltori” (whirlpools) represents another element of vernacular architecture from the Mehedinți Plateau, built on rocks, along rivers, at the base of waterfalls. They were used by the peasants to wash woolen carpets and thick clothes, which were woven with the help of looms that were present in almost every house.

The street fountains, with a limestone well and wooden wheel and buckets, but also crosses reminiscent of heroes and faith, can still be seen today at the crossroads in the villages of the Mehedinți Plateau (see Figure 12).



Figure 12. Rural street fountains, Isverna, 2019

Source: Personal archive

Mehedinți County, which includes the Mehedinți Plateau, has been, in the last 30 years, one of the counties in Romania with the highest number of unemployed and one of the highest unemployment rates, despite the economic potential of the area. In all years, women have been the ones who have raised the unemployment rate the most, thus being one of the main disadvantaged categories (Figure 13). Another aspect revealed by official statistics is that the majority of the employed population was represented by workers.

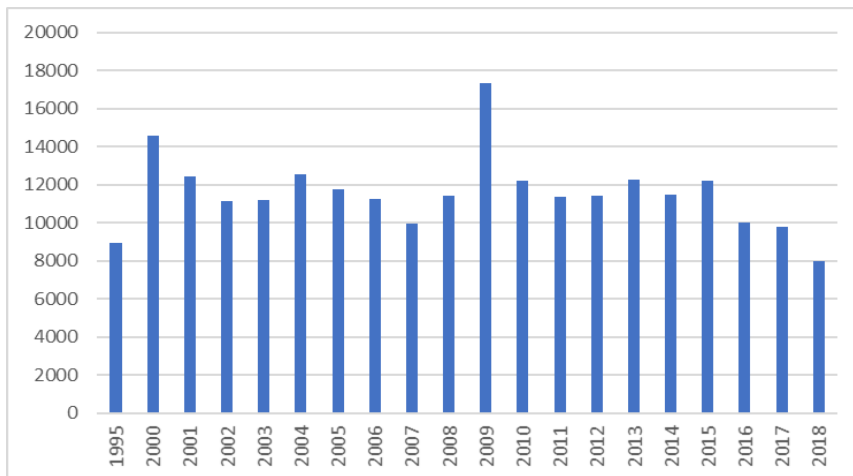


Figure 13. The number of unemployed in the Mehedinți County between 1995-2018

Source: Personal Processing after National Institute of Statistic Data

Another problem, closely related to the first, is the depopulation of villages. The lack of investments and concern for local employment has led to the wider phenomenon of migration of the active population to areas in Romania or other European countries. Thus, whole villages lost the young people looking for a better life. An exact estimate of their number is impossible, but what is certain is that hundreds of young people went mainly to Spain and Italy to work, and

most did not return to the country, starting their families in the host countries. As a result, many traditions and crafts from the Mehedinți Plateau stagnated or, most of the time, were lost, there being no interest in their perpetuation.

Conclusions

The Mehedinți Plateau, as well as the entire Mehedinți County, has numerous testimonies of a local know-how, which in the last 30 years has not been capitalized. These are architectural and cultural-economic elements related to traditions and crafts that are in danger of being completely lost. Taking into account the need to preserve the cultural identity of the area, but also its economic and social development, some measures are needed:

- ❑ Systematized inventory of vernacular architecture in the Mehedinți Plateau;
- ❑ Measures for the adequate conservation and legal protection of some buildings and vernacular assets;
- ❑ To create local schools for crafts, traditional constructions and intelligent land use based on the elements of vernacular architecture, which are testimonies of ways of life;
- ❑ Creating new jobs and involving locals, both young and old, in local projects to revive traditions, handicrafts and to create new elements of local and national cultural heritage;
- ❑ Creating and capitalizing on local brands;
- ❑ Protecting new productions of local, national, international cultural interest;
- ❑ Adequate, coordinated capitalization, in tourism, of the old elements of vernacular architecture bundled with local traditional crafts and products.

All the proposed measures aim to increase the attractiveness of the rural area of the Mehedinți Plateau and encourage tourism here, which would contribute to the economic and social development of both Mehedinți County and the historical regions of Oltenia and Banat, which this geographical unit is included.

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