DISPLAYING/DISPLACING THE RURAL:
THE “VILLAGE MUSEUM” IN BUCHAREST, ROMANIA, 1936-65

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Executive Summary

In this paper, I investigate the prominent, and at times paradoxical, political, aesthetic, and discursive roles that the open-air ‘Village Museum’ in Bucharest played during the first two decades of the communist regime in Romania, as well as the continuities and ruptures with the practices of collecting and display that characterized the museum at its origins in the 1930s. My recent work in the Romanian archives has led me to reflect on several aspects of the museum’s history: first, its transition from an institution with an explicit nationalist (and royalist) agenda, to a communist one engaged in the cultural and social production of a new man; second, the important convergence between the museum’s development after 1948 and the concurrent collectivization campaigns; and, finally, a more speculative reflection on the role a museum of folk architecture could have played at a time of intense promotion of mass housing as the principal, modern, and socialist mode of dwelling.
Introduction

More than 300,000 people visited the Village Museum in Bucharest in 2010, making it one of the capital’s – and the country’s – topmost attractions, for tourists and locals alike. With its picturesque park-like site and open-air collection of old, quaint peasant houses, wood churches and windmills, the museum offers the visitors an irresistible utopia of tranquility and simple beauty, a sense of a long-gone harmony with nature, an elegiac moment at a stone’s throw from the hustle and bustle of contemporary Bucharest. But the soft haze of an indeterminate past – perhaps the most seductive aspect of the exhibition, nowadays – has not always constituted the museum’s purpose, as the collection’s relation to time and space has always been highly contested, and controlled to different effects by successive political regimes.

In this paper, I investigate the prominent, and at times paradoxical, political, aesthetic, and discursive roles that the open-air ‘Village Museum’ in Bucharest played during the first two decades of the communist regime in Romania, as well as the continuities and ruptures with the practices of collecting and display that characterized the museum at its origins in the 1930s. My recent work in the Romanian archives has led me to reflect on several aspects of the museum’s history: first, its transition from an institution with an explicit nationalist (and royalist) agenda, to a communist one engaged in the cultural and social production of a new man; second, the important convergence between the museum’s development after 1948 and the concurrent collectivization campaigns; and, finally, a more speculative reflection on the role a museum of folk architecture could have played at a time of intense promotion of mass housing as the principal, modern, and socialist mode of dwelling.

The Interwar Context

The origins of the VM in the 1930s are intertwined with the general wave of interest in a Romanian vernacular that marked the interwar decades. Many different interests converged in the new attention to folk forms; the newly-unified country had seen its territory and its population double in 1919, and the government eagerly endorsed peasant art of the newly-acquired regions as demonstrations of shared Romanian character. A wave of agrarian reforms provided the impetus for the scientific study and development of the countryside, and the Ministry for Agriculture sponsored research into rural dwelling patterns aimed at the design of model farms and colonies.2

Concurrently with administrators and scholars concerned with the typologies and ideal forms of the peasant house, several Romanian architects (such as Florea Stânculescu and Henriette Delavrancea-Gibory, to name two among many) called for integrating rural or vernacular forms in the formulation of a modern architecture. Romania’s royal family was, from the beginning, directly involved in the search for, and promotion of a certain folk aesthetic, from the barely disguised colonialism of Queen Maria’s vernacularist productions (romanticized photographic portraits in folk costumes, peasant garden pavilions, etc.) to the well-funded and scientific research campaigns commissioned throughout the 1930s by King Carol II’s Royal Cultural Foundation (Fundația Culturală Regală), which actively promoted an image of Romania’s ruler as the “Peasants’ King.” But well beyond the legitimization attempts of an increasingly autocratic monarchy, it is the drive to modernize and improve what was seen as the lamentable state of the Romanian peasantry that informed the Romanian state’s multifarious and

systematic investment in the countryside.

The Romanian state’s attempts, in the 1920s and 1930s, to reform the countryside, or, at least, to understand it and get a hold on it, is part of the movement to rationalize agriculture that was underway in other large agricultural countries (the example of Stalinist forced collectivization of 1928 comes immediately to mind, but also model farms in the U.S.). However, the Romanian attitude towards the countryside (at least in those manifestations that led to the formation of the Village Museum), while it shared in the common belief in technological and scientific progress, was also strongly tainted by a romantic view of the village as the repository of immutable traditions and authentic characteristics constitutive of the Romanian national ‘soul.’ Laments about the rural world in the 1930s concerned its technological backwardness or the persistency of feudal social and economic structures, but were equally concerned with its ‘contamination’ by foreign elements brought on by industrialization or by increased contacts with the city.

For instance, the introduction of new building practices or the disappearance of others was seen by contemporary architects, sociologists or ethnographers not always as a sign of progress, but instead as a loss. Speaking about the porch (prispă) as one of the most fundamental and generalized traits of Romanian peasant houses, the architect Florea Stănculescu writes in 1922:

“A house without a porch is a house without a soul. Only the parvenus of the countryside, wanting to show a distinct taste, build their houses without a porch, following an urban type (tipul orășenesc de mahala), with lots of plaster flourishes; by doing this, they leave behind the register of the rural dwelling, and show that the house, like its owner, are without soul.”

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The design and construction of model villages in the late 1920s and 1930s was an important part in the state’s efforts to restructure and rationalize the countryside in the wake of the land redistributions related to agrarian reforms. (Between 1921 and 1928, the Rural Engineering Corps of the Ministry of Agriculture and Landholdings designed and built 150 new villages, and the Cadastral Directorate subdivided and prepared the land for 334 more.5)

Many of the projects, however, were, in equal measure, attempts to preserve the authentic character of the rural, which the villager, left to his own devices, was seen as threatening to disrupt or alter. A detailed retrospective account of the construction process of the model village of Dioști, in the southern Romanian province of Romanați (today, Dolj) between 1938 and 1939, illustrates what seems to have been a common, paternalistic attitude towards the peasantry as needing guidance and careful teaching.

The account’s author is Gheorghe Focșa, who had started his career as ethnographer in 1930, taking part in the rural research and documentation campaigns commissioned by the Royal Cultural Foundation and directed by Romania’s leading sociologist Dimitrie Gusti. Those “monographic campaigns,” as they were called, were based on a method of direct observation and scientific recording of all aspects of village life, from physical environment to magical beliefs. Brigades of scholars and university students were sent for months to live in the company of villagers, at once to collect information about their mode of life, and to influence it, by introducing what were seen as basic elements of modernity: literacy, vaccination, hygienic guidelines, and moral norms (un-wed couples, for instance, were persuaded to marry).6

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6 According to Gusti, the youth brigades were doing “work of social pedagogy in the villages, work to educate and influence the mentality and the soul of the villager.” In return, the young urban dwellers would establish lasting bonds between town and country. Finally, Gusti saw these campaigns as ways to alert and educate the government authorities to the ways and needs of the village. Gustav Gusti, “Învățăminte si perspective din a III-a campanie de lucru a echipelor studentesti” in A III-a expozitie a echipelor regale studentesti. Catalog. Fundata culturală regală “Prinçipele Carol”, 1937, p. 8.
The construction of the model village of Dioști (in lieu of an old settlement that had been razed by a fire the previous year) was another, much advertised, project of the Royal Cultural Foundation. Focșa, who had, by 1938, almost a decade of first-hand observations of village life behind him, seems to have supervised the reconstruction of the village, or at least to have had a central role in its planning and conception. His retrospective account of the reconstruction allows us to retrace some of the principles and assumptions that characterized rural interventions at the time. Perhaps more importantly, he personifies the continuity between pre-communist and communist practices: Focșa was to become the Village Museum’s first director in 1948, overseeing the museum’s transformation, growth and rise to national and international prominence throughout the 1960s.

Writing about Dioști in 1941, Focșa stated that village life had been undergoing rapid and profound transformations, not all of them positive. He is representative of most of the work produced under the auspices of the Royal Cultural Foundation, in that he approaches the village as an entity that, having existed in a certain fixity for millennia, sees its stability fundamentally threatened by modernity. The work of reconstruction constitutes a response to this disruption, and is fueled by a sense of urgency to protect old customs, beliefs and modes of life against disappearance, or to carefully guide their transformation.7

Another important conviction underpinning the notion of a model village, and which turns out to be equally central to the displays of folk architecture in the Village Museum, is that the utilitarian art of the village (houses, tools, clothing, etc.) constituted the material manifestation of the spiritual and psychic orders of the peasant world. In this view, a humble villager’s house, for instance, offered a kind of master key to the universe of the rural. Because a

direct, organic and intuitive connection existed between, for instance, architectural forms and spiritual life, the ideal model village, by restoring archetypal forms, could hope to remedy the loss or weakening of tradition.

“As a material embodiment meant to facilitate spiritual growth, the model village will be that social unit endowed with all the institutions, organizations, buildings and technical installations which – both in the individual and collective life – stimulate and deepen spiritual pursuits, protect and complete the health of the body, develop physical strength and vital human energy, and assist and perfect the labor of human hands by multiplying its fruit.”

First Exhibition, 1936

It is within this double matrix of empirical observation and active intervention, which culminates in the model village, that the formation of the Village Museum is best understood. The first open-air exhibition of rural households or homesteads, some of them original, some of them replicas, opened in 1936 in a park slightly north of the city’s center, and which remains the site of the Village Museum today. Twenty-nine houses were exhibited, 14 of which were original, “dismounted on site and reconstituted piece by piece in the museum.” The exhibition, under the aegis of the Royal Cultural Foundation and the direct patronage of the king, was organized by Dimitrie Gusti, director of the foundation, and a towering figure of the emerging discipline of sociology in Romania – and whose name the museum bears today, recognizing him as the founding figure.

The display of typical rural dwellings was one outcome of the same intense field campaigns that had led to the model village of Dioști. However, unlike the Royal Cultural

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Foundation’s “cultural actions” in the countryside, the task of the exhibitions in Bucharest took direct aim at an urban audience, thus showing that there was an equal concern with the reverse flow of information and influence, from rural to urban. In the late 1930s, the incipient Village Museum, as part of a larger network of actions and pressures upon the rural, constituted the other, highly visible half of a circuit of intense traffic meant to link city and village.

The historian James C. Scott has written eloquently on the ways the modern state, in the process to civilize the rural, requires the village, its forms, products, and inhabitants to become “more readily identifiable and accessible to the center.”¹¹ It is this quest for a new, easy legibility of the countryside that the first exhibition effectively fulfilled. According to Gusti, the museum was “a permanent, live and intuitive lesson, meant to attract the attention of the public and to offer a series of thoughts, of problems and of explanations about our social life.”¹² At its origin, the museum may have worked, in a narrow sense, as a picturesque propaganda for the King’s patronage of good works in the countryside. In a larger cultural sense, however, the Village Museum became an instant success because it responded perfectly to the larger cultural desire to have the village well in sight.

The peasant house was the most visible (and, according to Gusti, intuitively legible) mark of the peasant life. It is no surprise then that the gathering of empirical evidence about the countryside quickly concentrated on it, with Gusti, early on, directing the Royal Foundation brigades to count, document, photograph, observe, measure, and so forth, the peasant dwelling. If the Village Museum is to be understood as the culmination of this process of representing in legible, simple ways the incommensurable complexity of rural life, then the houses it displayed functioned as powerful synecdoches of the peasant social, economic, and symbolic world.

¹² Dimitrie Gusti, in Sociologia Românească I, no 6, June 1936.
In preparation of the first exhibition in 1936, Gusti devises explicit – if highly ambiguous – criteria for the selection of buildings to be brought to Bucharest for display. They can be summarized as follows:

- The house should be rural, that is, without having been subjected to the influence of urban trends.
- The house should bear the characteristics of the region. (This is an interestingly circular requirement, since the definition of regional characteristics was being formulated through these exhibitions. Subsequently, regional character will come to be defined on the basis of the houses selected for the Village Museum exhibits.)
- The houses should be beautiful, “perfect models of beauty.” The set of instructions warned both against exhibiting houses that are too modest (that speak of poverty and misery) or too opulent.
- The house does not need to be old. The museum was not concerned with age value, and Gusti instructs to look for houses “as they are today.”
- Each house was expected to be occupied for the two months of the exhibition by a village couple. The imported villagers were to receive a salary in addition to being allowed to sell the visitors the objects of their craft. The villagers were expected to be “handsome, healthy, and inclined to talk.” They were to be dressed in authentic and beautiful costume, and they themselves had to be “absolutely authentic.”

In its original form, the museum was conceived like a colonial exhibition, a lived-in installation, in which peasant families (called gospodari, householders) were brought along with the artifacts to inhabit the dwellings, use the tools, work the land and tend animals, all this on a monthly salary. Women, in particular, were expected to go on with their craft in front of the visitors, for the education of the latter into the traditions of the village (a cafeteria was proposed in 1938 to discharge the women of the need for cooking, thus allowing them more time for their weaving, embroidering, etc.)

Although not always the legal owners of the buildings, the peasants were nonetheless expected, in the museum’s original version, to identify with their lodgings, and overall put up an appearance of a genuine household. In addition, many of the objects on display (tools and

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perhaps even constructions) had been borrowed rather than purchased by the museum, thus retaining intact the relation of ownership, and the personal identity of the artifacts. Thus, the focus of the original museum had been not only on the objects themselves, but also, and perhaps more importantly, on the customs and habits of their users – architecture was but a background to human life. Indeed, from 1936 to 1949, when Focșa, as newly-appointed director, obtains from the communist government the removal of the last hired inhabitants, the houses in the collection were lived-in, some intermittently, some continuously. By 1950, the museum was empty of its “villagers.”

1948 Onwards

After subsisting precariously and without a clear institutional framework during a turbulent decade, the Village Museum receives its first permanent mandate in 1948. Under the new communist state, the Village Museum enters the administrative responsibility of the Ministry of the Arts, and is thus recruited, with seemingly little alterations, (and with Gheorghe Focșa as its first full-time director) to become part of the new network of museums that would contribute to the construction of a new, communist society. It is useful to compare the 1936 Gusti document with Focșa’s own vision for the museum, which he formulated in 1950, in a memorandum addressed to the Ministry of the Arts. Focșa revised and expanded on this original document on several occasions, without however altering its core propositions.

14 In 1938, the museum’s administrator complains about the many letters he receives from villagers asking for restitution of objects they had lent the museum. See the report on the state of the museum, October 24, 1936, re-transcribed in Gheorghe Focșa, “Etape successive in elaborarea tematicii Muzeului Satului, Anuar Muzeul Satului 1970, p. 7.

15 ANIC, Ministerul Artelor 144/1950, page 74 onwards.

16 In 1970, Focșa writes perhaps his most systematic text on the museum’s history. In it, he claims to have written what amounts to the original manifesto of the Village Museum in 1938. This claim has not been verified by the archives.
Writing in 1950, Focșa is addressing the newly formed communist government and the Council of Ministers and clearly struggles to show adherence to the political doctrine of the day. His postwar writings are duly purged of the references to spirituality and the importance of religion in defining rural life that had pervaded his writings about Dioști. But perhaps the most important shift is the appearance of the notion of history – granted, a rather stilted understanding of history, mechanically divided into Marx’s stages of development (primitive, feudal, capitalist), but history nonetheless. Gone is the timelessness of the rural, and instead there is now a clear effort to link the artifacts to specific historic formations. Houses are now representative not only of a region, but, more specifically, of a historical period, a social class, or an economic structure. Such is, for instance, the one-room house from the village of Răpciuni, which, according to Focșa, illustrates the living conditions of serfs in 19th century Moldova.

By contrast, the 1930s writings by Gusti were explicit about the fact that the museum documented existing practices and customs: “We are putting together not a museum of antiquities but a sociological museum of the village of today.”17 If old material was sometimes preferred, it was because the more recent constructions had been “contaminated’, hybridized, by “exterior influences.” By contrast, the 1950s seem to have had a less easy relationship to the “village of today,” and particularly vexing, seemed to have been the moment when the past met the present. Although the proposal to integrate the houses of workers, and a few years later, the houses of collectivized peasants, is a recurrent theme of Foca’s writings, the transition from historical material to contemporaneous practice remains unsolved, and no artifact enters the collection as a reflection of present times.

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This anxiety about the relationship with the present is best seen, I believe, in the decision to empty the museum of its “villagers.” Focșa presents a series of convincing arguments, mostly on grounds of conservation, in favor of evacuating the houses, and the communist government, although particularly sensitive to the expulsion of peasants, heeds to his arguments. 18 If, on the one hand, the houses are now required to illustrate specific socio-political and historical circumstances, they are, on the other hand, fully depersonalized.

The shift affects, perhaps most importantly, the historical time in which the buildings subsist. When inhabited, they existed in the present, re-actualized daily through their ongoing use for everyday functions (shelter, sleeping, working, and so on) were therefore read as picturesque, but nonetheless plausible forms of dwelling, to which the public’s visits must have been felt, on both sides, as intrusions into the private sphere. By contrast, after 1948, the deserted buildings recede into the depths of the past. They showcase not only their peasant motifs, but also their obsolescence and, by implication, assert the transformation of modes of living. Cramped, with low ceilings and small windows, they invalidate such spaces as uninhabitable, and only good for the museum.

It is also after 1948 that the museum sheds all reference to the original owners (or builders or users) of the tools, the buildings and their furnishings. This is visible in the way designations change: from being called the house of a specific family or owner the buildings now are referred to by the name of the original village or region. (For instance, the house of Antonie Mogoș is now referred to, in the documents, as Ceauru, Gorj.) As such, the buildings and their fittings were now understood as strictly for display, removed from active use, and, by the same token, from all intimate relationship with a user. Thus de-possessed of human agency,

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18 Focșa’s pleas with various branches of the government to remove the inhabitants after 1948 is well documented in ANIC, Ministerul Artelor 144/1950.
the museum implicitly proposed the architecture on view as the natural result of geographical and historical circumstances, and larger social forces, very much like the landscape itself.

That these pieces of architecture were predominantly seen as abstract artifacts is well illustrated in the case of the displaced wood church of Răpciuni (district of Neamț, in the region of Moldova), which enters the collection in 1958. As a result of the construction of a large dam on the river Bicaz and the formation of an artificial lake, the church, along with the entire village, had to be displaced. As news of its transfer into the Village Museum reached the villagers, 261 villagers (the quasi-entirety of the village) sign an impassioned plea to allow the church to move with the villagers to a new site, and circulate it to various government agencies in the capital, such as the Direction of Historical Monuments.

In their petition, the villagers insist that the church is central to their world, and that the building, in order to maintain its historic value, ought to be allowed to remain the site of the villagers’ piety and rituals. “Taken away from here (Răpciuni) and brought to Bucharest, the church will lose much of its value.” Ultimately, the church, dating from 1773 and which, by 1958, subsisted in disrepair, is removed and placed on the museum’s site. Twenty years after Gusti’s instructions, the users had become unnecessary to the full understanding of the building, and perhaps even interfering with it.

The process of de-personalizing the artifacts illustrated by the expulsions and the controversy around the Răpciuni church do not mean, however, that the museum’s presence and importance in the cultural landscape of the capital was diminished; on the contrary, under communism, the Village Museum gains new authority and legitimacy. Indeed, the period between 1948 and the mid-1960s can be seen as a golden age in the museum’s history.

19 Archiva INMI, Fond Directia Monumentelor Istorice, Dosar 7534 - Biserica Răpciuni. Letter, dated April 20, 1958, to the President of the Romanian Academy, Directia Historical Monuments, Bucharest.
It is during those years that the museum acquired most of its artifacts, dramatically amplified its collection, and entirely revised its scope. By the end of the 1960s, the museum had expanded to 20 hectares, and contained more than 300 buildings – not only houses (although those are in majority), but also churches, stables, mills, and various structures linked to village trades and crafts.\textsuperscript{20} Each building was (and still is) authentically furnished and decorated, fitted with a descriptive plaque and floor plan, and, as one American visitor in the 70s put it, could be explained by a friendly guide.\textsuperscript{21} Between 1949 and 1966, 249 rural constructions were removed from their original rural location, transported to Bucharest and painstakingly reassembled on the museum’s open-air site.

The overall erasure of traces of active usage may also seem to signal the severing of the circuit of exchange and intervention that had linked so tightly the pre-communist Village Museum to the rural world. On the contrary, the communist state’s interest and involvement in the countryside had hardly ceased by 1948, and instead had radically intensified and concentrated around the issue of collectivization. By 1948, the “village of today,” caught in the full turmoil of collectivization, was no longer a nostalgic, remote notion, but one of tremendous economic and political actuality.

In this last part, I argue that after 1948, the museum’s relationship to folk architecture was highly colored by the collectivization campaigns of the first decade and a half of communist rule; and that the display of rural houses, while no longer appearing to address the contemporary village, addressed another, equally pressing aspect of contemporary life: the transformation of urban dwelling patterns and the promotion of mass apartment housing. In other words, I suggest that the museum functioned as an important mediator between two key policies of the communist

\textsuperscript{21} Jan Harold Brunvand.
state: in the countryside, the collectivization of rural property; in the city, the promotion of apartment dwelling as the chief mode of inhabitation for the population.

In the same way in which the Village Museum of 1936 could not be separated from the model villages erected at the time, the museographic practices that turned the rural architecture into an object of display in the 1950s and 1960s cannot be separated from the vast mass housing projects that had started to shape profoundly the urban experience of Bucharest at the same time. Therefore, despite the apparent formal contrast, these two realms (of the urban and modern, and the craft-based vernacular) are tightly intertwined, and form a single cultural project – the folk museum thus revealing itself once more as part of a modernization project.

**Ethnography and Collectivization**

Despite its city-based identity, the newly installed communist regime was deeply engaged, from 1948 to 1962 (when collectivization was deemed complete), with surveying, documenting, studying, and, more importantly, transforming the rural world by re-defining social and economic relations in the villages through the process of collectivization.\(^\text{22}\) That is, at the same time that the regime supported the preservation of folk art within the context of the museum, it also carried out a campaign against the social, material and economic traditional structures of the world in which that same art had originated.

The call to collectivize triggered an extensive effort, from the part of a ruling political class that was mostly urban, of getting to know the particularities of the rural households their rulings were about to transform. To exert intense pressure on the peasants to renounce private

\(^{22}\) Collectivization was, in the words of an ethnographer writing in 1966: “The agricultural production cooperative as a socialist unit represents a new form of organization of the village economy and concerns production as well as the organization of labor; along with it private property over land, and over the main working tools, disappears.” Dinuta, *Anuar Muzeul Satului*, 1966: 77.
property and to participate in collective ownership of land as well as of the means of production, political authorities sent activists to countless villages. There, the political activists would carry out research and verify the structure of ownership in peasant households, eventually expropriating those that were found to be in a position of exploitation, labeled as *chiaburi*. 23 This period of “intrusion and intimacy” (in the words of Katherine Verdery) between the party and the village, and the violence that accompanied it, is thoroughly analyzed in the a large collaborative project led by Dorin Dobrincu and Constantin Iordachi. Their work explicitly documents the ways in which the party entered deeply into the villagers’ lives, as its delegates traveled to rural communities and held discussions, even visiting the houses of villagers under discussion.

It is therefore not hard to see why ethnography and collectivization developed, so to speak, hand in hand, during the 1950s and 60s. This is not to say that ethnographers collaborated to, or even endorsed, the process of forced collectivization, but that they shared with the political authorities a similar impulse to, and perhaps method of, getting to know the rural. A minor, but telling example of this is the case of Paul Petrescu (1921-2009).

Before becoming a full-time researcher on the Village Museum team, and accompanying Focșa on many early documentation and acquisition campaigns, Petrescu had served on the staff of the Central Institute of Statistics (Institutul Central de Statistică, Comisia de Stat a Planificării). There he had been part of the technical team in charge of the agricultural census before 1950. 24 Thus the act of collecting information about forms of land ownership could double into a gathering of ethnographic data, and I wish to suggest that it is not mere coincidence

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that the decades that saw the large-scale enforcement of collectivization were also those during which the collections of many ethnographic institutions around the country were developed or greatly expanded.25 (The period’s enthusiasm for all things folkloric is noticed in many foreign publications. An American ethnographer writes in the early 1970s: “Romania has one of the best organized and supported folk research programs in Eastern Europe, which sustains a network of institutes, archives, museums, publications, and research activities.”)26

The case of the windmill and cherhana27 from Jurilovca, a village from the Black Sea region of Dobrogea, illustrates well the existence of direct overlaps between the two processes of agricultural collectivization and museum collection. Both buildings were brought into the Village Museum at the end of 1949 or early 1950, as attested by the archives.28 The case of Jurilovca as early example of collectivization is thoroughly documented by Constantin Iordachi, who cites the cherhanas and windmills as among the earliest examples of private property to be seized and turned into state-run enterprises in which fishermen operated as employees on a regular state salary – a transformation that occurs at exactly the same time as one of these cherhana finds its way on the lawn of the Bucharest museum.29

25 On the relationship between collectivization and the Village Museum, see Gh. Dinuta, “Din experienta Muzeului Satului in cercetarea etnografica a nouului” (From the Village Museum’s experience with the ethnographic research of the new.) Anuar Muzeul Satului 1966: 75-88.


27 Building for collecting, distributing and preparing fish.

28 ANIC, Ministerul Artelor 144/1950, pages 20, 21.


It is perhaps worth mentioning that Jurilovca is also less than 40 km North from Black Sea town of Mamaia, which the Communist state will develop into one of the first workers’ resorts at the end of the 1950s.
The striking proximity between the museographers’ ethnographic inquiries and the party cadres’ political activism is not the only aspect that interests us here; the displacement of houses that underlay the museum’s existence also transfigured the status of folk architecture. Because of the historicity and distance all museums cast upon their objects, forcing the familiar to became foreign, the rural reality the Village Museum put on display was subtly becoming distant, and alien.

The history of the Village Museum is a good terrain to observe the process through which architecture, transitioning from a utilitarian structure into an ethnographic artifact, comes to be constituted and perceived in a museum, a process I would like to relate to what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimlett called ‘the poetics of detachment.’ The Village Museum, although at first hand meant to bring the rural to the city, is a particularly powerful example of the opposite effect: a remove – temporal, spatial, functional, and ultimately epistemological – that the museum introduces between its viewers and its artifacts.

Conclusion

Audiences come to ethnographic museums to experience wonder and surprise in front of the unfamiliar, the exotic, the incomprehensible; but in the context of postwar Bucharest, where, by 1968, 59% of the population had recently migrated from the countryside, it is possible to suggest that it was the rural dwellings that constituted the familiar, and the apartment blocs, the realm of the novel and the strange. As a consequence, the display of folk architecture can be seen as a device of de-familiarization, able to actively undo relations of close, personal

association. On the museum’s lawn, in the shadow of the new mass housing districts, the recently-urbanized viewers experienced not only the rural buildings, but also the radical gulf that had opened between a former way of life and their new existence in white, luminous, serially-stacked apartments. The historicity and distance that the museum unavoidably cast upon all its objects effectively transformed the public perception of the rural, from intimate memory to object of wonder or critical attention.

The museum also performed for its viewers the visual expression of the new legal and economic separation between land and individual ownership. The physical displacement and display of houses enacted, celebrated, and monumentalized the political effort of breaking the bond between land and household. The migration of folk architecture into the city thus mirrored the urban migration of people themselves during the decades in which many of the inhabitants of the village ceased to be farmers and became city dwellers and industry workers.

The museum participated fully in this process of urbanization, by transforming those who were once the users or inhabitants of its vernacular buildings into viewers or visitors, spectators of their own past and customs. Although the buildings in the museum were often displayed and photographed with a peasant figure firmly planted in front of them, where they really belonged was within the realm of moving crowds and rapid urban transit. Despite their folk aura, they suggest not the lasting and purposeful presence of the peasant, but the dynamic, randomly fleeting, unknown figures of modernity.

The success and prominence of the Village Museum in the communist years should be read in relation to the modernist architecture of the mass housing districts. The current consensus about the architecture of communist regimes in the decades after WWII revolves around mass housing, urban life, relentless industrialization and standardization of the building
process, and rapid transformation – an architectural culture, in other words, in apparent antagonism with the celebration of craft and centuries-old customs that characterized an institution like the Village Museum.

The museum, however, shows that it continued and intensified the extensive collecting and meticulous, lifelike reconstructions of the pre-communist years, and that the general fascination with the traditional village persisted and developed neither despite, nor against, the communist state. For that state was simultaneously commissioning new and vast modernist mass housing districts. I argue for reading this vast museum operation and its particular display strategies not as an exceptional occurrence within the architectural culture of communism, but representative of it.

I have here chronicled the many ways in which the documentation and display of folk architecture constituted an important element of a communist architectural culture commonly understood as aggressively opposed to it, and have listed some of the reasons why the vernacular, as presented and framed by the Village Museum in Bucharest, constituted a convenient tool for the communist state’s own architectural ambitions. The Village Museum provided a terrain in which the communist regime’s attack on private ownership perfectly overlapped with an attack on notions of authorship, thus pointing at the implicit political and ideological connection between the two notions. Finally, this case study shows that the museum’s role went far beyond its commonly understood role of reflecting the past, and instead acted as a powerful agent of transformation.