

MICI ORAȘE / MARI SATE DIN SUD-VESTUL ROMÂNIEI

Monografii urbanistice

Teodor Octavian Gheorghiu



S I M E T R I A

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Small Towns / Large Villages in Southwestern Romania.

Urban Monographs

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Despite recent breakthroughs, with several books and relevant articles being published during the last few years, the field of urban history in Romania is still left with many "blank spots", waiting to be comprehensively looked into. One of the reasons for this current state of affairs is the relative scarcity of fundamental research: we still know very little as to the history of human settlements in our country, as not many scholars have, until now, published meaningful papers on their evolution and morphology.

The situation is somewhat better in the case of larger cities (Bucharest, in particular) and, paradoxically maybe, in the case of rural space. The former have the advantage of the wider availability of primary sources, as well as of a larger public and academic interest. The latter has enjoyed a long tradition of extensive study, with some remarkable results, starting with the interwar period, especially in the field of sociology and human geography, grounded on comprehensive fieldwork.¹ The smaller towns were almost always neglected, as they were seldom spectacular cases, and as studying them was generally more difficult and less rewarding.

Teodor Octavian Gheorghiu overcomes these limitations, taking advantage of his almost ideal professional status: being at the same time an accomplished professor, having taught urban history for decades at the Timișoara School of Architecture, and a practicing urban historian, preoccupied with the operational side of his research, Professor Gheorghiu can benefit from both these experiences. On the one hand, he is familiar with the academic and scientific requirements of urban history studies and, on the other hand, has an intimate knowledge of the object of his investigation, based on field experience and on practice in architecture and planning.

The case studies reunited in this volume tackle the evolution and current problems of five smaller towns in the Banat province (a region lying in Southwestern Romania, at the Serbian border²), namely Ciacova, Pecica, Nădlac, Ineu, and Glogovăț-Vladmirescu. As the author himself acknowledges, the basic research has been undertaken during the elaboration of these municipalities' masterplans, following a legal obligation that, unfortunately, is often treated formally and superficially.³ Nevertheless, the printing of this book should also encourage similar endeavors by other researchers, whose studies, which sometimes are the first to probe the history of a given settlement, never become public.

1 Notably in the works of sociologists D. Gusti, H.H. Stahl and their associates, and of geographers V. Mihăilescu or I. Conea. Some architects have also shown interest in understanding the evolution of rural habitat (A. Pănoiu, for instance, or T.O. Gheorghiu himself).

2 The historic province of Banat, formerly a part of Austria-Hungary, was divided in 1919 between Romania and the newly formed Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.

3 Romanian legislation stipulates that every municipality having any form of built or archaeological heritage on its territory (which would basically include almost every city or commune in the country) should base its masterplan on a historical study which would establish protected areas and regulate local conservation and development taking into account the specificity of these settlements' evolution.

From the very beginning, Professor Gheorghiu lays out the mission this volume assumes, which is twofold: first, it obviously aims at shedding light on some currently neglected parts of Romanian urban history, which is a normal, academic objective; second, and equally important, it tries to bring in the public eye the current reality of these small towns and of their future development, thus expanding the analysis into the realm of the intricate relation between tradition and modernity.

The book has a very clear structure. The five case studies are framed by two chapters, acting respectively as a general introduction and a theoretical conclusion. The former is setting the stage for the case studies, laying out the environmental conditions of the region and exposing a brief history of human settlements in the Banat area, from Antiquity throughout the Middle Ages and up until the contemporary period. Gheorghiu also proposes a general morphological classification of the Banat settlements, based on their urban fabric. We are left with the image of a multicultural region, which has been, for much of its history, a marginal one, away from the respective “centers”, be it in the framework of the Roman, Ottoman or Habsburg Empires or of the Romanian nation-state, and where various ethnic groups have each created their own urbanity.

The five case studies all pursue a similar general structure, which makes them easy to be followed in a comparative manner. They each start by exposing the sources used during research, succeeded by a general chronology of events having an urban relevance, organized according to the type of information. The morphological characteristics of the settlement (street pattern, land use, property division, building typology) are also discussed at this stage. A synthetic approach ensues, putting into perspective local urban evolution and architectural history, formulating various hypotheses and testing their validity. Finally, operational conclusions are formulated: a zoning system based on historic coherence, several adjustments as to the legal protection status of local heritage and specific principles and measures to be included in the masterplan. This structure, which has both scientific and operational qualities, expanding on the mandatory legal provisions of the study, can be seen as an original theoretical and methodological contribution by the author.

The final chapter of the book draws upon the conclusions of all the case studies, laying out a general diagnostic of their current situation and identifying the main challenges they are facing for the near future. It is here that the author's own position becomes clear: he advocates an operational understanding of *tradition*, seen as a contemporary, lively process, which should provide arguments and resources both for conservation and development. This position could be seen as related to the discourse of the interwar Romanian architects assembled around the

Simetria magazine,⁴ who imagined and theorized a “tradition-informed-modernity”, with an essential connection to a specific place. Gheorghiu argues that, in the Banat region, the fusion between ancient tradition and early modernity started in the 18th century, with the massive colonization actions of the Habsburg Empire; the “unwritten law” of the land, regulating every aspect of daily life, was superimposed by the “written law” of Central European civilization. The result, Gheorghiu believes, was a mix between the two, which have co-existed ever since and given birth to a new type of tradition, leaving its imprint on the shape and evolution of human settlements up until the 20th century.

This specific tradition has been abandoned during the communist period, and never revisited afterwards. The contemporary result, the author states, is a type of urban and architectural modernity completely devoid of any link with place or history, whose produce is not sustainable and lacks cultural and functional qualities. Gheorghiu identifies the marks of this process in each and every one of the towns he investigates. He proposes a taxonomy of the phenomenon and points out some of its current causes, be they demographic, economic, social, cultural or technical. Finally, he advocates possible operational solutions and principles of development, which should be implemented through planning documents and projects: limiting territorial growth and protecting agricultural use, prioritizing conversion over greenfield operations, balancing conservation and development necessities, using traditional techniques and building materials, perpetuating specific land-use typologies, etc.

This most recent book by Professor Gheorghiu can be read in several keys, and it is equally relevant in all of them. It is, of course, as its title announces, a collection of urban “micro-monographs”, each of them perfectly sound as a scientific or academic research; it is a methodological guide and a best practice model for similar studies, validated by the stature of their author, one of the foremost Romanian specialists in urban history; it is an operational document, attempting to inform and guide the planning process for these towns; and, last but not least, it is a warning signal, meant to raise awareness to the potentially irreparable damage that is currently being done to these “small towns / large villages”. In the end, it is a plea not for blind and indiscriminate conservation, but for a kind of development which is both responsible and sustainable, seeing history and heritage not as ballast, but as resource and as guide for further evolution.

Teodor Octavian Gheorghiu puts it clearly and explains it convincingly and without exaltation, which makes his warning even more daunting.

4 Yearly publication edited between 1939 and 1947 by a group of architects and artists including G.M. Cantacuzino, O. Doicescu, P.Em. Miculescu, H. Georgescu, M. Constantinescu, and others.