

## CONCEPT TRANSFER: VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE INTO NEW INTERIOR DESIGN

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### **Abstract:**

*The purpose of this study is to embrace regionalism and specific Romanian wood construction methods and create a vital connection between vernacular concepts and new interior design. The methods used in the research are based on field trips, visiting Romanian villages, connecting with the community and determining the degree of presence of traditional wood structures and housing, the transition of vernacular construction typologies in the contemporary context. A social research will complete the architectural, aesthetic and functional aspect of the analysis which offers a more profound approach in the process of identification of traditional characteristics of Romanian architecture and wood construction methods. The most difficult part of this project consists mainly of raising the awareness of local authorities, of the community and of architects concerning local identity, traditions, vernacular construction as a viable way of seeing contemporary design. The aim of the project is to create furniture with value and meaning which increases with time and through the use of local communities. This type of interior design achieves meaning as a part of the variety of cultures of the local Romanian communities and as a symbolic reflection of the context.*

**Key words:** romanian vernacular; rural context; local identity; wood; Titești; Boișoara; Bratovești.

## INTRODUCTION

The main subject of this research consists of rediscovering a series of traditional romanian regional values lost in the rapid process of urbanisation, and redefining the concept of local identity by the improvement of specific romanian vernacular characteristics concerning architecture and the way of life of village communities. The new design process has to be aware of the efficiency of vernacular architecture, being able to take in consideration the possibility of concept transfer between contemporary and vernacular planning and buiding methods. In the present, vernacular or traditional buiding methods are under a constant transition and adaptation phase, the legislative system being more strict concerning the quality of materials, stability and safety of building structures. Although contemporary architectural requirements are very strict, vernacular concepts can still be easily integrated in the design process without altering the demands of modern living. When the number of local craftsmen is being under threat, the need of the client is becoming more complex, the architect ends up being a mere instrument in the local authorities hands. G.M. Cantacuzino expresses the need of a neo-vernacular current: „Traditional architecture can be seen as the beginning of something, not only as a continous process... Tradition is a profound restlessness. Tradition is sense” (Cantacuzino 1977).

In the conditions of rapid urbanisation which is not taking in consideration the traditional rural structure, a series of threats appeared concerning the preservation and protection of local identity and cultural value: the dissapearing of traditional households, the growing density of the built environment, degradation of landscape, loss of traditional techiques and building materials (due to european standards or globalisation), abnegation of local traditions and cultural activities.

These transformations in the field of traditional architecture led to a series of reactions and research projects initiated by specialists, the main subject being the determination of the *degree of presence of local traditional architecture or building methods in the rural context of Romania*. The goal of this study is to offer a series of possible answers or directions of further investigation. The approach of the analysis can be separated on several levels (architectural, social, cultural) and consists of four stages: **1.** The identification of traditonal elements in local romanian architecture; **2.** The aesthetics and architectural vocabulary of contemporary households; **3.** Traditional and modern architecture in the vision of local communities; **4.** The existence of impediments in the implementation process of vernacular-inspired architectural rules.

## OBJECTIVES AND METHOD

The phases mentioned above meant observing a series of particular aspects refering to the presence of the hipped roof in the local architectural landscape (four slopes usually), the usage of wood as a basic building material and traditional tecniques in log conctruction (specific conctruction details, beam joints, wooden pillars), the presence of the porch, the general composition and proportion concerning the facade of the building.

As a result of the field trip investigation in three villages situated in Vâlcea county Romania, it was possible to conclude that the local household's primary building material is wood, it is developed on a single level with a rectangular planimetric display, with a high hipped roof with four slopes covered by wooden tiles. The house consists of two rooms (a guest room and main room for daily activities), a small entrance hall (called „tinda”) and a porch as shown in figure 1.

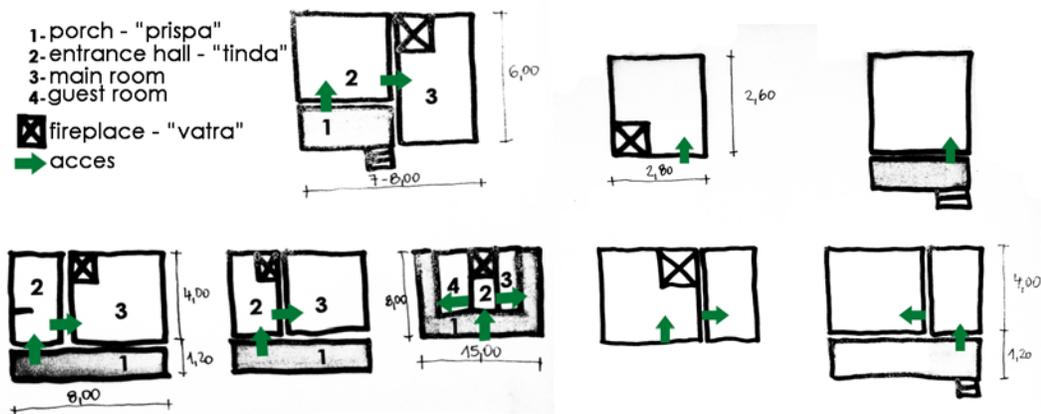


Fig. 1  
The functional and spatial evolution of village housing.

Wood as a primary building material is a clear reflection of the local communities way of living. Even though the communication of traditional building methods from one generation to the other has had a fragmented evolution, it has managed to adapt itself to the contemporary context due to the collective interest of local communities and their way of understanding life, living and the importance of traditional wood constructions.

The chaotic urban development was the result of a series of changes in the structure and life of local communities: migration of the local village population; transition and deformation of specific values; the loss of the role of the traditional household in the rural context as the key element in the village landscape. So, the need of identifying and proposing methods of improvement of local cultural and architectural potential has become a necessity. This subject has been in the center of the specialists interest in the last 5-10 years: a growing concern towards the environmental impact, sustainability, experiments with new prototypes and ways of living adjusted to the more complex and diverse needs of modern society. The term *vernacular architecture* "entered the Romanian specialized literature quite recently. It can be said that to a great extent, this subject was included into what is now called *folk architecture*. Influences from the urban to the rural environment are still current nowadays. But now, they are negative. The influences are manifest, first and foremost, at mentalities level. Rural population is looked down upon by citizens, and as a consequence, it fails its own heritage" (Pop 2009).

The originality of traditional Romanian architecture had been exploited in the 19<sup>th</sup> century on a monumental scale and will continue to inspire romanian architects like Ion Mincu in the creation of a neo-Romanian architectural current which had a profoundly reinterpreted vernacular architectural vocabulary. He believed that he had found the „*roots of a windfall*” (Curinschi 1981).

Even though the research of vernacular architecture has existed throughout several decades, there hasn't been identified an organised attempt of systematisation of the results concerning this theme, the interpretation and concept transfer of Romanian vernacular architectural elements being present in the last 300 years on a national level with the aim of representing the spirituality of the Romanian population.

**Fig. 2**  
***Time-line of the main research objectives.***

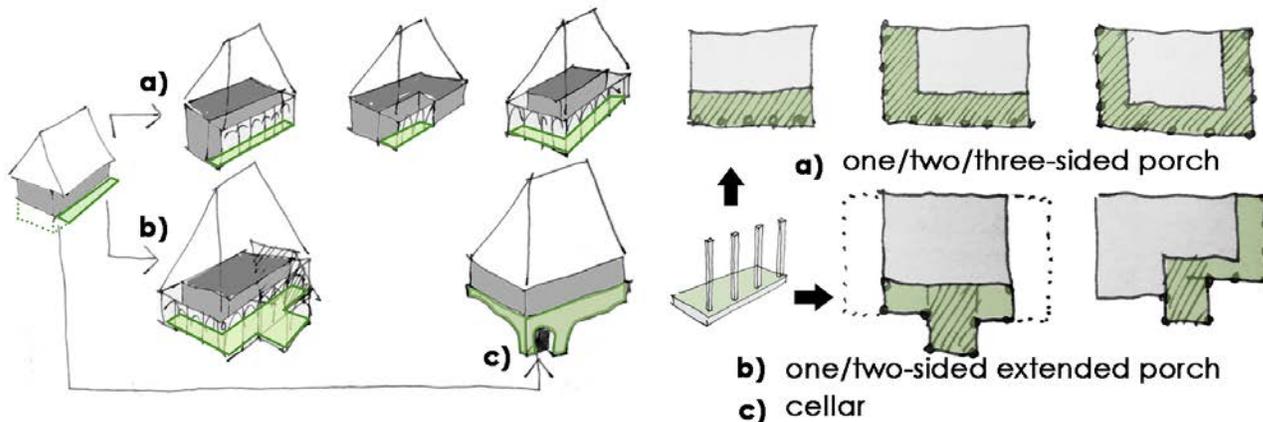
The main objective of this research project consists of the definition of a series of improvement methods concerning the Romanian local vernacular characteristics and the integration of these elements into the contemporary design process increasing the awareness of local communities and authorities. This process of „concept transfer” would mean the implementation of improvement methods referring to local vernacular architectural and cultural values shown in figure 2. The determination of the objectives is preceded by a research

on a social level, connecting with the communities of the three villages *Titesti, Boisoara, Bratovesti*. "Today, rural architecture is undergoing a phase of acute change and loss of traditional values, through its physical disappearance, a natural and acceptable phenomenon up to a point, but also through its damage by the uncontrolled introduction of elements from other cultures" (Pătrașcu 2008). A series of dramatic changes had occurred concerning space perception and the way the user interacts with furniture which had become more flexible, modular, multi-purpose, recyclable. The need of specific local values reappears in a globalised world and interest for traditional wood design increases: *specific vs. uniform* (the furniture is a direct reflection of a communities cultural identity).

**Method: Participants, Measures, Statistical Plans, Case study**

In order to verify the feasibility of the theoretical undertaking described earlier, a series of field trips were made in several villages in Vâlcea county, Romania. The main objective was to determine the degree of presence of wooden traditional built environment and the level of preservation of these constructions. The debate of the research project mainly focused on two basic plans: the *social aspect* (connecting with the people of the village community, creating social impact) and the *architectural aspect* (construction methods, building materials and techniques) which had as main subject the following: *the presence of wood as primary building material, the general architectural shape and its subcomponents (roof, walls, entrance, porch)*. This analysis was then further completed with interviews and discussions with the village inhabitants the social aspect of the research being fundamental in the formulation of the final conclusion.

The first aspect of the analysis consisted of determining the *attitude of locals towards wood as a construction material* and if they were willing to use this type of material in the construction of a new household. The experience gained during the interviews and observation was positive, the locals being very open to traditional techniques and aware of the definitive role of wood in the preservation of local identity, but not so eager using it when it comes to the building process. The majority of the locals were very firm in their options mainly consisting of other building materials like concrete or brick which have no compatibility with the traditional methods and local architectural expression. These new materials gain terrain in the options of villagers, their main motivation being that they are cheaper than wood and easier to work with on the construction site.

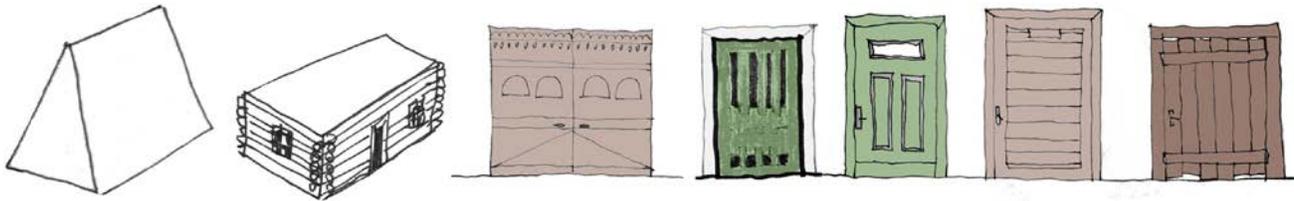


**Fig. 3**  
**Connection of village households with the natural context and local porch typologies**  
**(after arch. Laura Zaharia, 2009).**

The second aspect of the analysis refers to the general shape of the constructions. Contemporary interventions usually ignore the vernacular functional and spatial layout or the proportion of the façade. In the same time they also tend to lack the porch from the front façade of the house resulting in a major impact upon the way of life of the inhabitants and their connection with the rest of the community (the porch being a place to meet and spend time with neighbors and friends) and an altered connection with the natural context. The porch has a definitive role on a functional level: the main activities of the villagers take place in the "prispa" (as it is called in Romanian): work, preparing food in the summer time, storage for wood in winter months, or just a shaded place to rest on a hot summer day with a length between 80-90-120cm. Its existence is a clear response to the climate of Vâlcea County. The role of the porch can be extended to a social, aesthetic and symbolic layer also and in figure 3 above you can observe the evolution and the adaptation process of it in order to satisfy the

inhabitant's needs. Unfortunately in the present the porch is being replaced by the balcony which has a different proportion (150-200cm) and visual aspect.

One of the most important compositional and functional elements of any vernacular household is the *roof*. It has usually four very steep slopes: on the longitudinal direction of the house having a  $60^{\circ}$  angle, and on the transversal direction a  $70^{\circ}$  angle. The main structure of the roof consists of round wooden logs, and the structural elements (wooden pillars) are replaced by a series of angle braces and horizontal beams connecting the wooden eaves which support the layer of clapboard. Contemporary interventions tend to change the angle of the slope or the general chromatic of the roof, replacing the traditional wooden clapboard with ceramic or aluminum tiles the aesthetic integration in the landscape becoming impossible. The transformations due to the lack of interest and awareness of the community of the local building methods, traditions and cultural values have a strong impact not only on a level concerning the general exterior aesthetic of the house (roof, walls) but on a smaller scale also as the *carpentry*. The walls are made of wooden logs with dimensions between 12-15cm in length and 20-30cm in height and the carpentry is mainly of wood painted in green or blue. In the present, the texture of the façade offered by the layers of the wooden logs is interrupted by a wood boarding which covers it up and has a dramatic visual impact. The main motive of this type of contemporary intervention can be summed up by the indifferent and permissive attitude of local authorities concerning the preservation of traditional architectural aesthetics and local landscape. The solution wouldn't necessarily consist of excluding modern materials from the new design process but finding a way of integrating them without breaking the specific local harmony of the space.



**Fig. 4**  
**Local vernacular architectural elements: hipped roof, wooden log wall structure and doors.**

“Fences and gates were essential elements in the architecture of the homesteads: they delimited the family space and related it to the world of the village; provided social and cultural indicators expressed by dimensions, form and decoration” (Bonenberg 2009).

## CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Results

The results obtained from the research process in Vâlcea County (villages Titești, Bratovești, Boișoara) were transferred in a more compact format in order to reflect visually the multitude of spatial and aesthetic organization typologies of traditional wooden housing in a Romanian rural context. The four axes of the graphic represent four of the main characteristics that define specific traditional architectural design: *\*the degree of utilization of wood as a primary building material (%)*; *\*the degree of presence of vernacular furniture in the interior space of the house (%)*; *\*the existence of the porch (three possibilities: continuous porch, partial porch, absence of the porch)*; *\*the hipped roof (different degrees, the ideal array being situated between  $50^{\circ}$ - $70^{\circ}$ )*.

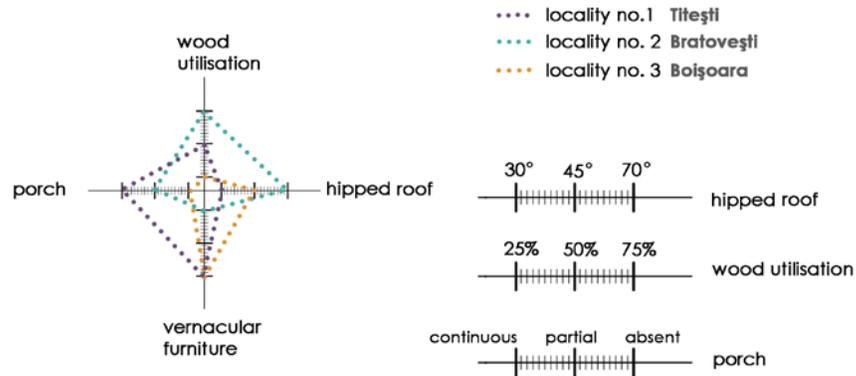


Fig. 5

Statistical graphic containing local architectural characteristics.

In each of the three villages analysed it was possible to identify a series of parameters available for 80% of the built environment. The general characteristics according to figure 5 and 6 in the case of *locality no. 1 Titești* are: a high degree of utilisation of wood as a primary material in the construction process, the existence of the porch; *locality no. 2 Bratovești*: steep slopes with angles between 50-70°, 50% of the investigated village houses contained vernacular wood furniture; *locality no. 3 Boișoara*: the presence of wood furniture in 75% of the analysed interior space.

Fig. 6

Statistical graphic containing traditional architectural characteristics of the three villages.

As shown in figure 6, every studied house has its equivalent in a statistical graphic which contains in a visual and expressive manner the four main particular elements that were the objective of the research process: wood utilization, presence of vernacular furniture, presence of the porch, hipped roof. By overlapping the individual graphic of each vernacular house, we were able to draw the general conclusions that stood as a starting point in the elaboration of the more specific and detailed topics of the table shown in figure 7.

The general research directions described above are followed by a series of specific rules with a more precise objective and research topics: preservation of the traditional architectural heritage, general layout of the households (height of the construction, distance between different households), integration in the specific local landscape (interpretation of vernacular concepts concerning the interior space of the new construction), hipped roof with four slopes ( $60-70^{\circ}$ ), the porch, utilisation of local materials, construction details (base course – stone or masonry; wall structure – wooden log; carpentry – wood; fence – wood or paling (height of 1-1,5m).

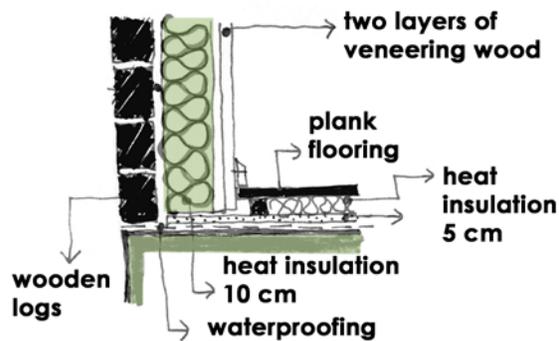
The figure below contains the basic requirements concerning the integration in the local traditional architectural landscape of new interventions. The degree of success will be reflected by the number of points obtained from a maximum of 100 points (the minimum accepted score is 85 points).

**Fig. 7**

***Control table of the level of integration of contemporary housing in the vernacular rural context  
(after the Institute of Romanian architects, Maramureş county, 2009).***

The following architectural details can offer a guide for the architects and the locals in order to obtain a specific design that would harmoniously integrate into the local landscape.

### Wooden log wall structure



### Brick masonry wall structure

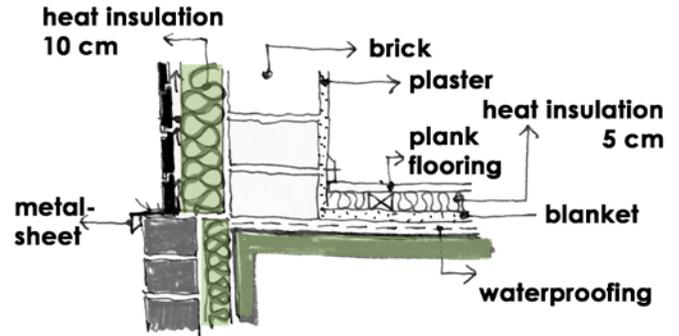


Fig. 8

*Guide for specific local architectural details concerning new interventions in a rural context (after the Institute of Romanian architects, Maramureş county, 2009).*

The overlapping of an architectural analysis with a statistical research method can offer clear and precise conclusions concerning the metamorphosis of the contemporary design process in the Romanian rural context. This systematic reflection of data can avail an effortless interpretation and a multitude of possibilities for future investigations. In the same time it can be a starting point for specialists, the rural communities and the local authorities in seeing vernacular architecture, traditional building methods, and wood construction as a feasible approach in contemporary design.

### Conclusions

The research embraces *regionalism* and *specific Romanian wood construction methods* and defines a clear connection between vernacular concepts and new interior design process (Fig. 9) concerning Romanian villages, connecting with the community and determining the degree of presence of traditional wood structures and housing, the *transition of vernacular construction typologies in the contemporary context*. The social layer of the study has completed the architectural, aesthetic and functional aspect of the analysis with the purpose of offering a more profound approach in the process of identification of *traditional characteristics of Romanian architecture and wood construction methods* and a guide for integrating them in the present design process. The most complex and challenging part of the project was of raising the awareness of local authorities, the community and of specialists concerning vernacular construction as a viable way of seeing contemporary design. This type of design process achieves meaning as a part of the variety of cultures of the local Romanian communities and as a symbolic reflection of the context.

Fig. 9

*The process of concept transfer between the vernacular and new design process.*

The differences between the “vernacular” and “modern” design processes are very clear: in the case of vernacular, the production would be singular, crafted and local, whereas the contemporary modern production would be characterized by a serial, industrial, dislocated approach. In order to achieve the wanted result, we need to utilize and rely on the advantages of modern production, but should not forget that the design should reflect the profoundness of a local vernacular concept.

The conclusions obtained as a direct result of the research project concerning the transformation of traditional architecture in the present, the degree of its preservation in the Romanian rural context, the vision of communities towards the new design process, had offered several new directions of research but in the same time had managed to provide concluding answers to certain questions. Even though the implementation process of a transfer between vernacular concepts and new design process seems difficult and complex, the open-minded attitude of the local communities made it clear that this process is needed and feasible. “The villager has a special sense of space and creates it as a pure reflection of its material and spiritual need. He adapts his house to the local materials and climate. The architectural mission of the villagers had been resolved” (Cantacuzino 1977).

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