

## TRACES OF THE PAST AS STARTING POINTS FOR INNOVATION

**Calma Andreea** - "Ion Mincu" University of Architecture and Urban Planning, Academiei Str. 18-20, Bucharest, Romania

*andreeaioana.calma@gmail.com*

**Abstract.** We identify in Romania an urgent need to recover the materials, the techniques of working and processing of finishes, objects, buildings and to collect the few remaining authentic elements of the world of the city, the village or the way of life of the mature generations, referring here to the way of socializing, to their belonging to a community/group, to the way of working more manual/physical. We try to unravel the process of craftsmanship and appreciate the work of rare crafts in our world. All these searches make us associate this period with the 60s, after the thaw, after socialist realism is no longer imposed, but the openness to what was happening in the West is still too weak. The need for modernization makes artists and architects realize that the old will gradually disappear, so they start to collect old objects and exhibit them in their workshops, at which time they reflect on what they have collected and better understand the continuity of tradition and the need to innovate through a thorough knowledge of the details of an object. Today, to further enhance what was said at the beginning, there is The Ambulance for Monuments project in different regions and other non-profit organizations that fight for the preservation of old traditions, without freezing them in time, helping them to survive through innovativeness, through understanding the principles and applying them in a contemporary manner and through demand, creating the need, which is essential for the survival of any craft. We will talk about the socio-economic impact that emergency interventions on monuments have, but also about how an ongoing site such as the restoration of the Petre P. Carp's Manor House, the main part of the Crafting the Iron at the Manor! project (Batem fierul la conac!), can evolve.

**Introduction.** The subject of the article has been on my mind since I was a student, 12 years ago, when I was trying to construct an ethical way of relating to context, to the past, and to be able to carry forward what the new site of any intervention offered me. In this way, I became passionate about the concept of critical regionalism, a concept that has been theorized most by Kenneth Frampton, although he is not the author of the association between the two terms, he took the phrase (new term) from Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre and gave it his own interpretation.

Studying the concept of critical regionalism as defined by Kenneth Frampton, we can ask ourselves about its relevance today and about how a nuance of critical regionality could be born in recent architecture in Romania, and if this would happen, what would be the reason. A possible answer about the reason for the formation of a critical regionality would be the need to save and secure historical and cultural assets and to coagulate a community around them. The primary need involves both

professionals and locals. It should be stated from the beginning that there are not all types of professionals with whom it would be possible to restore a historical monument, for this reason training/educating some of them is an objective that can be quite difficult to achieve when the work of such craftsmen is seasonal, very expensive and not attractive for young people in the old-fashioned form of working only in a workshop.

The new community would ideally be made up of people who have been close to the architectural monument and have witnessed it in its moments of functionality and its phases of deterioration, as well as people from outside the local community who become part of the community through a desire for good, through their enthusiasm to bring the architectural monument to the present and the future, to work and learn a craft involving hands and the arts, and trying to open up to the contemporary world in which the objects created by craftsmen become consumer goods or in which tourism is an important part of a region's economy.

**The paradox of critical regionalism.** Without attempting to define the concept of critical regionalism, we can say that it is becoming a peripheral architectural practice, kept on the margins because of the brake lever which it acts in the face of the rapid advance of universal technology which standardizes architectural space and transforms it into a constructed space with few qualities. In the applied framework of the concept advanced technology is used to collect data, process it and make the work of architects, engineers and archaeologists easier, so it does not resist progress, but it resists an easy way to solve, in our case, a restoration.

We are at this point of addressing the question why do we use the concept of critical regionalism in the same sentence with the words as restoration, craftsmanship, tradition? A short answer would be Kenneth Frampton's [1] repeated introduction of Paul Ricoeur's quote: "There is the paradox: how to become modern and to return to resources; how to revive an old, dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization." [2]

It is essential to understand the paradox proposed by the theory of critical regionalism and to see how it is applied today, through what kind of projects.

**Romania and summer schools.** In a Romania where things have deteriorated and encouraging craftsmen to preserve their craft was not an administrative, political or educational desire, in the first years after 2000 the lack of these crafts was felt in the heritage and architecture sector, so architecture schools were planned for the summer period in which amateurs or professionals could train in working with traditional techniques and materials in the first phase and then in working with experimental techniques. These schools were set up by individual individuals, with their own funds and the contribution of participating volunteers, not run by a cultural/educational administration. Currently, there are 37 schools of architecture and crafts on the Romanian territory (according to the Summer Schools Map platform - <https://hartamesterilorconstructii.ro/#scoli-de-vara>).

Alexandra Mihailciuc and Șerban Sturdza, the founders and coordinators of the Crafting the Iron at the Manor! (Batem fierul la conac!), talk about the network formed by these summer schools, which are like active points, nodes that have developed spontaneously, out of need and/or the joy of

sharing their craft with others, but which are located in places that are more or less advantageous in terms of Romania's infrastructure. [3] There are a few aspects to point out within the network, aspects that are taken into account by all or at least most of the active nodes:

- (a) the setting up of these summer schools is not by chance, but is part of a degree of rurality found in a place, that traditional rurality [3] that you feel in the way of living, in the care of the inhabitants for the details, for the hospitality with which they welcome a guest in their community, for the way they have known how to decorate their houses, take care of their household and the fields around the rural settlement;
- (b) trying to enter into a sustainable cycle and to generate an advanced rurality (an adaptation of living spaces for greater comfort, but without losing the qualities of living in a small community);
- (c) attracting young people with specific professions or city dwellers to capitalize on living in the village;
- (d) the formation of local production hubs - producer and outlet;
- (e) targeting the needs of people with limited access to education and information in order to lessen the firm boundary between those with jobs in the cities and the lack of opportunity in the village, which has resulted in massive depopulation and a very ageing present population;
- (f) working to be able to absorb cutting-edge technologies.

For this article, two examples of summer schools were chosen (Crafting the Iron at the Manor! - Batem fierul la conac! and The Ambulance for Monuments project - Ambulanța pentru Monumente), which have two different types of activity profile, first of all, the range of action, given that one school is static - located in Țibănești village - Crafting the Iron at the Manor! (Batem fierul la conac! - and a mobile one - covering a large part of the country, about 60% [4] - The Ambulance for Monuments. Secondly, the mode of action - one passes from one year to the next in a new stage of restoration of the architectural monument and within it so far it has been possible to experience pottery workshops, stove and oven building workshops, craft charters, exchange of experience in the blacksmithing workshops run by French companions of the program Les Compagnons du Devoir, workshops for children, carpentry workshops, encouragement of local products and community involvement in their production, workshops in traditional plastering with clay and dung, metal-plastering workshops, technical painting in secco, fresco workshops, and workshops in wood-polishing [5]. So the first advances in experimenting with techniques and working out details, while the second acts punctually enough to make a monument safe enough to avoid the unfortunate event of its collapse.

**Profile of the Țibănești summer school.** Crafting the Iron at the Manor! - Batem fierul la conac! project as launched in 2007 by Maria Association in Tibanesti village, Iasi county. It is a project with a specific place, which has turned into an alternative school with many opportunities to learn and practice crafts. It started here with the restoration of Petre P. Carp's manor, which is slowly being done through workshops open every summer.

This project with its workshops is aimed at both amateurs and professionals. They use the blacksmith's workshop space for small objects (object design) as well as for architectural pieces (metalwork and wrought iron furniture, restoration, interior and exhibition design). (Figure 2; Figure 3; Figure 4) In addition, it is open to corporate events and team building.

Moreover, the project Crafting the Iron at the Manor! - Batem fierul la conac! deepens the craftsmanship, tells the story of the art and the community in which these activities are carried out through architectural publications and cultural periodicals, and seeks answers for contemporary residential architecture and develops an architectural research center. It answers several needs and this helps the project to be always active. [6]

In an interview with the architect Șerban Sturdza, the founder of Prodid office, he confessed to me that his main purpose is not to restore the building, but to activate the community, which is why he brought a press to make brick from earth, both for restoration, but also for the villagers to make this material themselves to use in their own households. The community is also involved in the restoration process when exhibitions or cultural events (such as concerts, Sonoro Festival) are organized. These sorts of actions open the monuments to a much wider range of public.

**Profile of The Ambulance for Monuments project.** The Ambulance for Monuments project was founded in 2016 by the Vaida couple, architects Veronica and Eugen, and is part of the Monumentum Association. An interesting thing would be to tell about the intervention kit they have prepared for each rescue action (making cultural heritage safe in collapse and pre-collapse phases) and how there are actually several ambulance cars that are equipped with the necessary materials and tools [7]. This project was a winner in 2020 in the category Education, Training and Awareness in the awards given by the pan-European organization Europa Nostra (founded in 1963 in Paris).

The Europa Nostra Awards bring to light favourable cases in the practice of restoration in Romania where not only the architectural object needs restoration, but moreover the community that can maintain it needs to be (re) shaped and (re)thought to the current needs and flexible, easily adaptable to a survival in a changing world.

This type of project needs trained volunteers who are trained in summer schools like Țibănești. So the type of local school is deepening some techniques, some crafts to help the larger, mobile type project. At the same time, the Monument Ambulance has clear stages it has to go through in order to be able to act. Historic objects and sites need to be studied and documented, involving architects, engineers, archaeologists, historians, chemists, biologists, geographers, and these documents need to be approved. Then it is necessary to be able to cover the cost of materials, have accommodation and meals provided. A big help can come from local and county authorities, for approval of the necessary documentation and funding, and from benevolent locals, for accommodation and meals.

There is also no shortage of technology on the documentation side, with drones and geo-radar being used to identify things on the archaeology side and 3D scans being done. (Figure 1)

In brief, this type of intervention is dynamic in space, with many places of intervention, but is limited in time. This type of intervention produces a network to which circuits are activated and in favorable cases the monument comes to new life by activating the community to maintain and enhance it.

Emergency intervention on monuments makes the younger generation more aware of the value of the building, more involved, eager to put a material into practice and to get to know its properties by actually working with their hands, with the tactile, weight, rigid or plastic geometry of the material, thus perpetuating a craft and innovating based on a good understanding of the working technique and socio-economic basics to maintain the art of craftsmanship. [8]

**Innovative ways.** We have identified three main ways to use a material to be innovative, but there are definitely more because these approaches can hybridize:

-Firstly, adding an ancient element (a familiar, local material or a traditional technique or both) in a contemporary context. So taking it out of a known context, where the viewer is able to assimilate it easily because it is familiar. For example, the wattle (braided sticks fence) is placed as part of a contemporary landscape, used indoors or used as a balcony in an urban context. (Figure 2; Figure 3)

-Secondly, the manner/technique of implementing a material. (Figure 3)

-Thirdly, the way of taking the specific form of one material and assigning it to another material (brick vault - concrete vault, sculptural details in wood - volumetric details in concrete, weaving a shingle roof - roof of recycled glass cut into rectangles like a shingle; Zenithal skylight) (Figure 5)

**Conclusion.** To sum up, knowing yesterday's village, its values, the quality of life in a community and learning the crafts ensures a better way of thinking about tomorrow's village, but also about contemporary architecture, whether in the village or in the city, by the fact that we have acquired a type of knowledge that helps us to generate a change in the space we live in. To be innovative does not mean to break with tradition, but to know how to bring it into the present in relation to current needs. [9]

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## References.

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architect and project's co-founder. 16 November 2024, 10:00. <https://fb.watch/w36AlpLhfK/>.

5. Cultural newspaper from Tibanesti (*Ziar cultural de Țibănești*) 2018 July; p. 6-7 in pdf. at <https://batemfierullaconac.ro/ziare-culturale/>.

6. Cultural newspaper from Tibanesti (*Ziar cultural de Țibănești*) 2018 December, p. 8 in pdf. at <https://batemfierullaconac.ro/ziare-culturale/>.

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## Figures.

Figure 1 – A part of volunteers for The Ambulance for Monument project. Source image: facebook page of the project - [https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=869895311943773&set=pb.100067699361083\\_-2207520000&type=3](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=869895311943773&set=pb.100067699361083_-2207520000&type=3).

Figure 2 – The braided sticks fence in rural context, Sinca Veche monastery landscape designed by Serban Sturdza. Source image: <https://www.stiridecluj.ro/travel/locul-misterios-din-ardeal-unde-se-afila-templul-dorintelor-se-spune-ca-aco-lo-toate-dorintele-se-indeplinesc-foto>.

Figure 3 – The metal structure of staircase and the braided sticks parapet in urban context, Cotroceni, Bucharest. Designed by architect Serban Sturdza and realised in the Tibanesti workshop. Source image: <https://batemfierullaconac.ro/portfolio/feronerie-si-artizanat/>.

Figure 4 – The metal structure of staircase and the intermediate platform. Frog Bistro designed by Ioana and Dan Cioclu and Serban Sturdza. Photo credit Vlad Albu. Source image: <https://www.f-r-o-g.com/bistro-vasile-lascar-24>.

Figure 5 – The newest intervention at The School of Bunesti. A roof of recycled glass cut into rectangles like shingles. Source image: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1021376350030142&set=a.465035205664262>.

