

MINOR SPACE AS CULTURAL HERITAGE. THE CASE OF WAGON HOUSE

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Abstract. When discussing heritage in architecture, we often focus on buildings or areas with overtly valuable characteristics, such as historical age, urban context, cultural significance, or intrinsic aesthetic value. However, there exists a less apparent heritage, often overlooked because it lies concealed within the depths of urban plots. In the context of dwelling, the architectural heritage of cities includes diverse modes of living that have evolved, persisted, and transformed alongside the buildings that house them. For the historical fabric of Bucharest, one of the most significant typologies is the wagon house, a model that emerged during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. While the construction period represents a fixed moment in time, the associated ways of living evolve gradually, reflecting the latent imprints of the city from different historical periods. The prominent spaces within these houses, those visible from the street, are complemented by a network of minor, hidden spaces that are essential for their functional and formal coherence. This study examines the vulnerability of wagon houses and especially of minor spaces within them through selected case studies, analysing patterns of urban densification that have impacted them. By revisiting these examples, the paper proposes an alternative approach to urban densification, emphasising the significance of minor spaces as cultural heritage in sustaining the character and of historical urban fabric.

Introduction. The study highlights contemporary intervention methods on the minor spaces within dwellings, adopting a critical stance towards the usual practices of dissociating parts of a construction. It advocates for a conscious and integrative approach to minor spaces as cultural heritage of the city in the process of densification.

Minor spaces emerged with the need for the hierarchical organisation of rooms within dwellings, in the local context, with the architectural compositional principles specific to the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the living protocol of privileged classes. These spaces, often overlooked in architectural history, exhibit boundary-negotiating characteristics, versatility, and a formal dilution capacity that endures over time.

The concept of minor space has been addressed only tangentially in the scholarly literature, often associated with service or auxiliary spaces. Within descriptions of Bucharest's urban dwelling architecture, it is rarely mentioned, typically only on functional reasons. Moreover, plans of houses where such spaces are most prominent, such as basements, are often omitted from specialized publications.

Minor spaces, as a term developed specifically for this doctoral research,

refer to secondary or service spaces within dwellings. These spaces often serve marginalized groups, such as domestic staff or, in the case of underprivileged households, the women of the family. However, this study explores minor spaces as a valuable resource for addressing contemporary urban development challenges, particularly within the wagon house typology. This typology itself emerged as a result of urban expansion, city growth, and the subdivision of large estates.

The current investigation explores the methods of transformation and resilience of minor spaces through case studies that exemplify trends in the city's evolution. To this end, the study analyzes both the initial and modified states of wagon houses. The research employs visual documentation, including architectural drawings, on-site photographs, and historical and contemporary plans of the context. Through these materials, the study observes the changes undergone by minor spaces and the wagon house typology, tracing their transformation and, in some cases, their disappearance from the urban fabric.

This study does not aim to provide an exhaustive account of the phenomenon of minor space transformation within the city. Instead, it is based on a selection of phenomena observed through case studies and acknowledges that these are not the only ways minor spaces may be altered. The conclusions drawn are a set of observations based on these specific examples and do not claim general applicability.

The need to adapt minor spaces is evident in the context of the contemporary city. Amidst the current housing crisis and growing real estate pressures, the city has begun to incorporate minor spaces organically, transforming them into living spaces with intrinsic property value. In the case of small and medium-sized urban dwellings—ranging from rudimentary wagon house typologies to more refined variants—housing pressure often leads to extreme outcomes, such as the fragmentation of the house into distinct segments. This results in the elimination of minor spaces in favour of new construction.

This inversion of spatial hierarchy allows new structures to gain height and economic value, while the primary building faces the risk of becoming a “museum piece.” This study examines the resilience of minor spaces as cultural heritage within the context of Bucharest. By highlighting current practices and their implications, it aims to promote a more thoughtful and conscious approach to the preservation and adaptation of these spaces.

Wagon House. Cultural Relevance and Specificity of Minor Spaces.

The wagon house emerged as a result of urbanization and densification processes, representing a fundamental typological model that served as the basis for later housing typologies. Its narrow façade conceals an unexpected depth along the plot, with a sequential arrangement of rooms positioned in close proximity to either mirrored wagon houses or blind walls. The spaces created by this elongated and narrow configuration fostered a distinctive mode of living, sometimes peculiar but undeniably fascinating within the city's fabric. The specific plot shapes associated with this typology remain preserved in the urban fabric but are now occupied by alternative forms of wagon houses, such as multi-level apartment buildings. Despite their vertical expansion, these new structures continue to maintain

these new structures continue to maintain the same intimate spatial proximity, with only a shift in scale.

In late 19th-century Bucharest, French influence and the Parisian urban model were prominently reflected in both administrative policies, such as urban building regulations, and in societal lifestyles. Architecturally, the Beaux-Arts ideology heavily influenced private commissions, shaping both the aesthetic and spatial organization of homes. While Theodor Rădulescu [1] associated this type of dwelling with the marginal population, a reinterpretation of the rural peasant house adapted to an urban setting, this characterization does not entirely fit the wagon house. The basic form consisted of a minimum of three rooms: an entryway and two salons. The house exhibited a clear symmetry along a perpendicular axis centered on the entrance, even though the progression through the rooms followed a linear path.

The organization of domestic space as a cohesive architectural project brought about a clear separation of functions and spatial hierarchies, aligning with evolving family roles and rituals [2]. This reorganization also facilitated the proliferation of minor spaces, which were increasingly specialized to meet new needs. Initially, kitchens and cellars were appended to the three-room configuration, followed by corridors or verandas to improve circulation, alongside latrines and additional secondary rooms. This core layout was sometimes replicated, with supplementary, rudimentary annexes, such as sheds, added to the property.

The house layouts adhered closely to the plot boundaries, with minor spaces complementing the main spaces and often intricately woven into the overall design. These spaces catered to both new aspirations and the constraints of irregular plots characteristic of Bucharest's spontaneous urban development. The city itself was "minor" in comparison to its Western models, rooted in a Balkan-Byzantine cultural framework that resisted full assimilation of imported models. Instead, it distorted or imitated them without access to their original sources, which in itself introduced an element of modification.

The Beaux-Arts model was adapted to the local context, resulting in wagon houses that progressively adopted more complex and refined forms. However, by the early 20th century, Bucharest's building regulations began to discourage this typology, citing it as economically inefficient and unsanitary [3]. In some extreme cases, wagon houses were demolished, either due to public health concerns or to facilitate higher-density construction [4].

Cases of Densification in Wagon Houses: The Vulnerability of Minor Spaces. The following analysis explores several typical scenarios concerning the alteration of the spatial configuration of wagon houses. Through representative case studies from Bucharest, we will examine the modification and disappearance of minor spaces, as well as the complete replacement of wagon houses in some instances.

The first significant phase of lot densification associated with wagon houses occurred during the interwar period. During this time, the push for modernization, driven by new regulations and rising living standards, reshaped the urban fabric. The rear sections, or "tails" of wagon houses were often replaced by modernist buildings, effectively increasing the density of

the lots.

The removal of the minor space "tails" remains a contemporary practice that, especially in protected areas, often accompanies the replacement of buildings with larger structures, while imitating the decorative elements of the original façade. Unlike the replacement with an entirely new typology, as seen in the previous case, this approach replicates not necessarily the characteristics of the secondary body, but rather those of the main volume facing the street. This process leads to a superficial homogenization, but in reality, it creates an inverse hierarchy, as the new volume gains height, overshadowing the original structure.

In both of the cases mentioned above, despite the replacement of the minor space, the plot and the general layout of the buildings on the land maintain their original arrangement. The replacement of minor spaces with new constructions fundamentally alters the lot's length, occupying its full width while preserving the appearance of a wagon house at the front, but compromising its specific depth. This situation is particularly unusual within the urban fabric, as it obstructs the characteristic depth of visual penetration that is a defining feature of the wagon house. The new constructions effectively divide the lot into two distinct courtyards: one in the front and one in the back, thus masking the unique features of the original plot.

The romanticization of the past, coupled with the demand for densification, has given rise to a new phenomenon: the treatment of a building as merely a façade. This practice involves preserving only the minimal outward appearance of the house, a process akin to museification. Not only is the "tail" of the minor spaces erased, but the very essence of the original structure is compromised, with the street-facing room and its façade being retained as a mere shell. In the rear, a completely new building is imposed, permanently altering and distorting the original spatial hierarchy, resulting in a disconnected and disjointed architectural narrative.

A typical scenario in the 1990s and 2000s involved merely mimicking the façade of the wagon house, while a new building was constructed solely facing the street. If this small structure retains any memory of the old fabric, it is unclear whether this is intentional or a result of mandatory urban planning regulations. At the rear, however, a completely new design, characterized by a different scale and aesthetic, occupies the full length of the plot in a striking manner. This case can be described as the "elephant in the urban fabric," being highly unusual, not only because of the enormous scale difference but also due to its completely alien configuration in the Bucharest landscape. The new construction, with its rounded shape, appears to expand, seemingly covering the entire width and length of the plot, further distorting the spatial continuity.

The most extreme case is that of the complete disappearance of the original structure, which is becoming increasingly common. The total elimination of any distinction between the façade and the rear of the plot simplifies the complexity of the urban fabric through a uniform, entirely undifferentiated construction act. In this final case, the length of the plot becomes indistinguishable from the uniformity and height of the façade. This lack of nuance, almost modernist in nature, results in a sterile urban

environment, where the courtyard serves only as a sanitary space or a vehicle circulation area, stripping the plot of its original identity and character. This extreme homogenization of the urban tissue reduces the diversity of architectural types and weakens the connection to the historical fabric of the city.

Conclusion. Minor spaces, understood either as a sum of service rooms, secondary to the core part of a dwelling, or as a distinct part in the form of an annex, secondary body, or dependencies, are, as the cases highlighted reveal, certainly the most vulnerable in the face of densification. Moreover, the wagon house, by its very length characterized by the arrangement of minor spaces in depth and even the repetition of the formula, is itself minor in relation to the “valuable” fabric of the city, becoming vulnerable and in danger of disappearing.

At the urban context level, the intrinsic value of the minor spaces as cultural heritage of the city is at risk of being forgotten, erased, bringing buildings back to a form of restoration approached by Eugène Viollet-le-Duc to its originally imagined, ideal form, where the construction gains autonomy outside of its absolutely necessary, utilitarian spaces. The malleable character of these constructions allows fine negotiation of boundaries and the occupation of land, sometimes to the point of excess, allowing, encouraged by the building regulations of the period, either extremely small ventilation courtyards (in the case of medium and large-scale buildings) or a surprisingly narrow courtyard that forms between two lots (in the case of wagon houses).

The current tendency to replace these buildings with new constructions with more stories primarily leads to hyperdensification of the plot and raises the issue of natural lighting, where it was already problematic. Current regulations allow the retention of the current land occupation percentage, only on the condition that the existing boundaries (even the minor space) are preserved. Under the pressure of the street and the related regulations, buildings maintain their street-facing representative body, undergoing either minor or considerable modifications, leaving freedom for the “back” which takes on a new form, following the same footprints. This aspect is also influenced by some historical studies, which allow extensive modifications to minor spaces, considered “worthless.”

An integrative approach to this aspect is to treat the building as a single body, one that cannot be fragmented, and which was formed in this way precisely for this reason. The small, fragmented spaces work together with the main space of the house in the scenario of its use as a whole, and amputating them harms the very way the house functions. Far from offering an intervention solution in these cases, we rather advocate for an understanding of the building and its service apparatus as a whole, which, precisely because of its human scale, can easily be adapted to the new housing standards of the time.

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archival plans, which have been instrumental in the study of wagon house typology.

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Figures.

FIGURE 1 – The interwar densification. Case study on Dacia Boulevard, no. 129, Bucharest (A. Localisation of the plot, B. Street façade, C Visual captures oriented toward the plot’s rear boundary, D. Plot plan showing the initial condition, E. Overlay of the plot plan in its current condition with the initial one, F. Volumetric representation of the current condition).

FIGURE 2 – Extinction of the ‘Tail’ and Pastiche. Case study on Plantelor Street, no. 21, Bucharest, idem.

FIGURE 3 – Dissimulation of the Plot. Case study on Silvestru Street, no. 53, 57, Bucharest, idem.

FIGURE 4 – Is a Façade a Building? Case study on Rosetti Street, no. 4, Bucharest, idem.

FIGURE 5 – The Elephant in the Urban Tissue. Case study on Domnița Ruxandra Street, no. 12, Bucharest, idem.

FIGURE 6 – Disappearance and Extrusion. Case study on Popa Petre Street, no. 5, Bucharest, idem.

1.



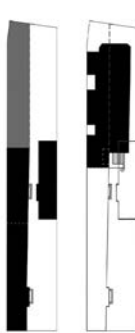
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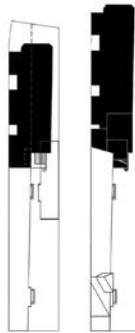
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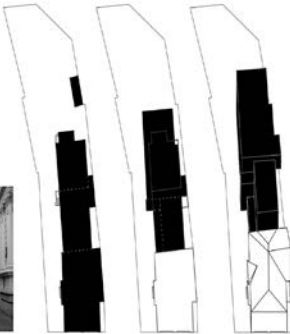
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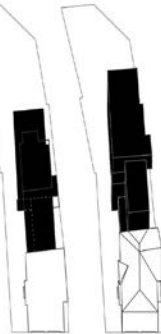
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