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# The Golden Age of *Termopane*\*. The Social Life of Post-Socialist Windows

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## ABSTRACT

The emergence of double-glazed windows in Romania had the coordinates of a troubling event not only for the local window market but also for the domestic environment, turning from a mundane accessory into an item of consumption whose nature tends to be fetishised. This article discusses an ethnographic material about the transformations triggered by the emergence of the *termopane* in the local material culture and its social significances, configuration of the market and of the local *termopane* consumption.

## KEYWORDS

Termopan, double-glazed window, material culture, domestic modernity, consumption

“Household objects are interpreted as material elements imbricated in the presentation of a socially plausible and internally consistent aesthetic self.

—Woodward: 2001, 115

## A window turned into termopan

At the end of August 2008, on an ordinary afternoon, the handle of one of the windows in my living room broke due to the faulty manner in which I used it every day. At first, it seemed to be an ordinary domestic accident, easy to fix with the tool kit I had just bought from Ikea. Later on, however, it turned into a problem almost impossible to solve. I spent the following days visiting all specialised shops in my neighbourhood, trying to find what initially had appeared to be a simple window handle. On this occasion, I realised there were quite

a few shops of this sort in a relatively small area. I visited no less than nine shops and the shop assistants' eagerness to help was put on hold every time by their impossibility to find a handle similar to what I had brought as a sample, or by the fact that they could only sell a window with its own handle. When hearing my almost desperate question (I was living in the apartment of a friend of mine and I didn't want to trouble her by destroying the living room window) the shop assistants either shrugged their shoulders or advised me to go to a specialised warehouse located in a distant district, the address of which they could not specify. I eventually managed to find this address after spending a few minutes surfing the internet. Nevertheless, the right handle could not be found in the generous portfolio of the warehouse: it was the handle of a window installed four years before, that is from the pioneering days of the *termopane* and so it was “already pretty old”, as the warehouse sales-assistant put it.

The solution came from an informal market in a neighbouring district, around Bucur Obor market, where I was sent by friends who had gone through the same unfortunate expe-

\*) Romanian for double-glazed window.



just needs a simple repair cannot easily find the perishable components of the window.

During the last decade and especially the last few years, Romania has been frenetically experiencing a reconfiguration of urban and rural landscapes. The most visible element of these “rejuvenations” seems to be, as in most ex-socialist eastern countries, the domestic environment (Humphrey 2002, Fehervary 2002, Drazin 2009, Mihăilescu 2009): “From the ‘impressive houses’ in almost all villages to gated communities in most big cities and from *termopane* to rustic pavilions, Romanians appeal to diverse urban scenographies and props to show off and compete for social recognition” (Mihăilescu 2011). If, for the rural environment, the *rustic* seems to be the most recent “statement of taste and distinction” (idem) for the urban landscape, the *termopan* (the insulated glazing and especially its PVC variant) replacing the classic wooden-framed windows may be considered a similar statement. Once the latter disappeared, a series of other artefacts leave the domestic scenography: window curtains – replaced with vertical blinds (“just like at the office”, as an acquaintance of mine inspiredly indexed them) – or the old and massive chandeliers, frequently replaced with spotlights that turn homes into a sort of exhibition halls with picture rails.

rience and where one could find second-hand components for *termopan* windows. I am telling this story because it seems relevant to the transformations that the ruptures caused by the new technologies produce not only in the window industry but also in the domestic environment of households. Obviously, not only the window industry goes through this situation; therefore, I find the description of this reality relevant for actual larger-scale phenomena. A “traditional” window (two sheets of glass fixed into a wooden frame) could have been repaired in a few minutes at one of the few handcrafted-glass centres in my neighbourhood. As *termopan* windows are produced only on automatic technological lines/flows, the result of which is a product almost impossible to destroy, producers or distributors do not consider incidents like the one that happened to me; so, a customer who

The domestic sphere of material culture (Miller) integrates this domestic artefact with such rapidity, outrunning all the countries neighbouring Romania if we were to consider the figures regarding consumption and also if we look at the façades of apartment blocks; this has already lead to the occurrence of at least two lexical derivatives regarding specific materiality: “double-glazification” and “double-glazity”<sup>1</sup>. Ioana Tudora (2009) shows that recent preferences of Bucharest inhabitants are driven either by “a minimal functionalism”, or by “the tradition of stodgy eclectism”: “balancing between a desire for modernity and western chic and a manner of decoration that had become traditional during the communism, with massive complicated furniture, imitating the luxury of old bourgeois homes”.

1) *Termopanizare* and *termopanitate*, respectively.

In most cases when somebody buys a flat, the first step of its renovation<sup>2</sup> begins (and sometimes ends as well) with the *termopan* window, then a similar step is taken for closing the balcony, a common practice in socialist Romania (Poenaru 2008). One may observe the importance of this accessory for the local domestic environment in real estate transactions, where the presence of *termopan* windows becomes the owner's instrument to maintain a price as high as possible.

The window, which has been an important but common accessory of local households for decades, turned into an *article of consumption* overnight and became building *material*<sup>3</sup> in the building industry. This change produced other transformations, too: within the community of glass cutters that I studied (during my PhD research), the *termopan* is invoked as the object that dramatically changed its relation with the repair industry; it became the option for successful small-size businesses during the middle of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century just like commercial tourism used to be in the former Republic of Yugoslavia, Hungary or Turkey towards the mid 90s; it became the geometrical place of modernisation (through the idea of comfort and not only) and of the props that confer social recognition (Mihăilescu 2011). Since the *termopan*, almost like the *rustic*, is “a distinctive bricolage between the market and subjectivity” (idem), I will try further on to answer the questions regarding the significance of the transformations incorporated by this object: within the material culture of the local domestic environment, within the market – both in the productive sector and the perception of consumers. In addition, I will analyse the manner in which this object communicates with the recent or more distant past of the spaces it covers.

This article is structured as follows: first, I will speak about the literature concerning the transformations of the specific domestic material culture in former socialist countries; I will then describe the dynamics that have shaped the productive sector of thermal insulated windows (called *termopan* in everyday language) and related products based on arti-

cles from economical and general press – the evolution of the Romanian *termopan* window *market* in a nutshell. Further on, with the help of ethnographic vignettes and the results of a study dedicated to specific consumption, I will illustrate the configuration of the *termopan* window as a contradictive cultural object, as it embodies a desirable modernity in terms of comfort, but also the way in which it becomes a *contaminated* object, polluting entire contexts through its simple presence. In the end, I will describe my personal experience transformed, through the ethnographic dimension of its course, into a complementary step of my research: the sale/purchase and installing of *termopan* windows in the flat I live in to complete, at least partially, an analysis in front of “closed doors” (Miller 2001).



### “Architecture without architects”<sup>4</sup>, material culture and social recognition in Eastern Europe

One of the first important studies on changes in post-socialist domestic environment is the one dedicated by Humphrey (2002) to the mansions built by a special social category, the “New Russians”. Not only do they develop a new form of real estate property, but also an architectural style that is completely new in the ex-Soviet space: their unfinished red brick facades confer on them a different aspect comparing to the blocks of flats and run-down cottages from the Soviet era. Humphrey suggests that, in the case of “New Russian” one may speak about a bidimensional identity: the “New Russian” mansions underlie two images about the self, one of a high bourgeoisie in an imagined “historical” empire and one of modern and efficient Europeans, part of a globalised perspective regarding modern business elites” (2002: 175). The landscapes of the new residential complexes described by Humphrey have been reproduced in more or less similar forms in most former socialist European countries:

2) Immediate renovation is a matter of course when speaking about a flat situated in a “socialist” building.

3) Anyone visiting Bucharest may notice the prevalence of kiosks or booths made of PVC.

4) The phrase belongs to Bernard Rudofsky and has been used in an article by Adam Drazin (2005).

We must say that one may successfully integrate a Jacuzzi into a design plan as “Napoleon III”, next to drapes, golden-framed mirrors and so on. Or it may simply be a Jacuzzi in an apparently ordinary bathroom [...]. Or the Jacuzzi may be broken or out-of-order, which is a sign of the owner’s crisis. What is important is that people know any of these possibilities has potential for the other two. The mansions are the architectural materialisation of the cultural identity of the “New Russian” exactly because they have this oscillatory range of possibilities (...). (2002:176)

The “materiality of these mansions” becomes the territory of some acts of “ostentatious negligence” or even acts of sabotage: the builders, coming from rural areas most of the times, poor and hired with short-term labour contracts, do not show any sympathy for the *nouveau riches*. Therefore, the Jacuzzi and other few decoration elements turn into a territory that perfectly expresses this antipathy – it is either out-of-order or dented, or it leaks water in the bathroom because the installations are badly structured. Instead of inducing the owners a sensation of prosperity, the Jacuzzi and the inner staircase eventually look like a pile of scrap metal.

In an analysis that this time starts from a phenomenon communicating with the socialist past, speaking about the “normal” – “abnormal” dichotomy, Fehervary (2002) indicates that the surprising transformations occurred in the 90s in the public sphere in Hungary have been outrun by the ones occurring in the domestic sphere. The most visible and most important changes, with reference to material and emotional investments, were the increasingly spacious living rooms, high-tech kitchens, more bathrooms and recreational spaces. The author was particularly interested in the spaces obtained through the demolition of certain parts of the walls and especially the “American-style” kitchens opening to the living room and not closed, as they used to be during socialism. Her attention was also drawn to the new floors of the corridors as well:

Inside these new idealised interior spaces, the new “American” kitchens and luxurious bathrooms may be seen as cultivated heterotopias, spaces of the particular potential to condense the “modern” with its concentrations of advanced domestic technology and hygienic standards in order to differentiate from socialist modernity. (Fehervary 2002: 384)

“The post-socialist boom of commercial spaces – post-modern offices, bank offices, luxury hotels, medical clinics and shopping malls – adds to the striking new neighbourhoods emerging in the outskirts with red brick houses painted in shiny sorbet colours, decorated with red terracotta roofs.” (idem 376).

Fehervary indicates that the increasing presence of these new post-socialist spaces sharply contrasts with and transforms the significance of old spaces around them, “creating discrepancies between temporal and spatial experiences”. On the other hand, some of them are nothing but fulfilments of locative phantasms from the socialist era, when western merchandise became dislocated metonymies of another world, while the antagonism between the state socialist system and the capitalist system these products incorporated was increasing:

The concept of open “American kitchen” became popular in the 80s (though it had been initially forbidden on account that the smell in the kitchen would spread around the house). After 1989, even the persons in privatised prefabricated apartments, started to knock down the walls of the kitchen in order to “open” it towards the living room. It created the illusion of a larger space and allowed the mother/wife to watch TV or to involve in family activities while cooking. Such a kitchen, with tile flooring, new lightning system and appliances is the actual standard for a “normal” kitchen – the equivalent of western material standards.



Unlike the Hungarian kitchen that starts to open its walls towards the living room, Vintilă Mihăilescu (2009) indicates that the kitchen in the Romanian socialist blocks of flats had become a place of refuge, due to the general lack of heating. Therefore, the inhabitants of these buildings began to redesign the kitchen in order to provide for reunions with family or friends.

Kitchen furniture was very sought after, especially [...] the corner bench, placed on two sides of the table – a modern version of the benches in peasant houses. The set showed more comfort and intimacy. This “revised and corrected” space, small and multifunctional at the same time, was the space of family sociability, the space where you could have a drink with your friends, etc.

After 2000, Adam Drazin investigates the “knowledge about and practices of wood” in the apartments in Suceava, starting from the obvious wide spread of this material in the spaces carefully cared for by the inhabitants, trying to highlight the primary qualities of domesticity and “care”. Just like Fehervary (2002), the author suggests a historical perspective on understanding this prevalence:

The floor is made of wood in living rooms, bedrooms and hallways. The wooden floor covers the concrete widely used in building blocks of flats. The style of wood flooring has changed in time, from beech boards in the 1960’s laid in a straight edge pattern to zigzag designs appeared later on. During the 80’s, a time of severe rationing and shortages, the new residents were offered opulent oak boards, but they often discov-



ered they had a type of linoleum imitating wood in their apartments. (idem: 178)

Starting from the “modernist fantasy” (Rowlands 1994) – incorporating an idea about Western culture in one’s home, through a mix of local and adopted styles”, Drazin shows that the furniture layout creates the possibility of expressing modernity “and, however, the wood itself contrasts with the modernity in the concrete-dominated public space” (2001: 179). Concrete is specific to a historical time when the carefree socialist state started to destroy domesticity (Mihăilescu 1995; Verdery 1996 apud. Drazin 2001).

Another study of the same author and conducted in Suceava again (Drazin 2009) focuses on the “progressive and gradual re-interpreting of the past”, starting from the cleaning/“care” styles, which can offer pertinent images of the process of recent rejection of certain items, such as carpets and rugs. The “new aesthetics” denies the idea of work by removing the items subjected to it, and this has significant implications over gender and inter-generation relations (idem: 67). Drazin indicates that, on the long term, cleaning may be considered as an area relevant to discussing the “nature of transition”, as long as the “materiality of the home” becomes the territory of a specific process of “item order”, which “orders people” in its turn.

In a recent article – a result of a research conducted in two Romanian villages, trying to capture the late changes in the geography and morphology of rural households, Vintilă Mihăilescu discusses the apparent prevalence of a building style, noticeable in representative spaces of the house and not only: the *rustic*. The author, just like the other foregoing researchers, places its object of study in a larger historical equation: it starts with the “traditional household” described by Romanian sociologists at the beginning of the last century, it goes through the “diffuse household” of the Romanian village that intersects socialist modernity, thus proving an “adaptive plasticity as a social unit”, and reaches recent phenomena such as the “impressive houses” discussed

by Cristina Coroş (2000) and Daniela Moisa (2010). “Impressive houses” “replace old buildings and their purpose is to put social success on display” (Mihăilescu 2010: 11).

The author indicates that, even if the *rustic* may induce the idea that it is part of the same family of impressive houses, its emergence is subsequent to this phenomenon and it is less than an architectonic style and more of a “statement of taste and distinction” (idem: 15). The *rustic* appears here as a style with a *combinatory* pattern. It is a place of personal interpretations that, after all, originate in the search for authenticity, perceived by sliding from inhabiting spaces seen as “a competitive bricolage with a mainly *exterior* meaning (and therefore they are often not inhabited/empty)” to rustic houses. Rustic houses mark the transition to “self-fulfilment” and obtain an implicit meaning similar to aesthetic (the proof is the stated pleasure of taking care of the garden and the explicit concern for “something beautiful””) (idem: 17).

### When the *termopan* window faces the market

It is impossible and eventually futile to search for the first *termopane* window in post-socialist Romania (the *Business Standard* magazine dates it back to 1994<sup>5</sup>). It is more productive to find the moment it started to become a more than visible presence in the local urban. Most of my interlocutors approximate this moment as the end of the 90’s. In the summer of 2001, *Capital* magazine describes the rising success of *termopan* windows as follows:

The Romanian market grows year-on-year by 35–40%, too. But this market is a lot smaller than Western markets; Romania is actually in its infancy when it comes to using aluminium and PVC-framed thermal insulated windows, which started back in 1993–1994. Experts estimate today’s market at 1.2 million sq m/year,

5) “We invest in thermopane windows as much as we spend on beer”, *Bussines Standard* June 22nd 2007: [www.hotnews.ro/stiri-arhiva-1059357-investim-termopan-cat-cheltuim-bere.htm](http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-arhiva-1059357-investim-termopan-cat-cheltuim-bere.htm)

while in Germany, for example, it is 20 times bigger i.e. 20 million sq m/year.<sup>6</sup>

The article, suggestively entitled “Double-glazed windows want to break classic wooden-framed windows” launched a prophecy and brought to light the fact that wooden-framed windows were still predominant in Romania (95%), compared to Germany, where 50% of window frames were made of PVC. The author of the article asserted, quoting industry specialists, that a 23–30% increase in *termopane* window usage in new buildings was highly probable during the following 2–3 years. This is exactly what happened.

The *termopane* window market reached EUR 800 million in 2007, an instantaneous growth with a rate of 30% from the previous year. The biggest market players had turnovers of around EUR 30 million, but their market share was 5%, as the number of small enterprises had meanwhile reached 4,500. Most economic analysts and managers in the field agree on the fact that 2007–2008 was the peak year of development for thermal insulated panes, as for most sectors in the building industry. In 2008, the double-glazed window market reached EUR 1 billion. In Bucharest, the presence of small players was so diffuse, that at least 3–4 *termopan* shops could be found in every important intersection. Small players were pejoratively called “garage producers” by large manufacturers and were not expecting such good times in the future, as specific European norms were about to come into force.

This industry has also been encouraged in the last few years (starting with 2005) by the authorities, who wanted to help apartment owners to reduce heat losses caused by previous precarious building<sup>7</sup>. At the start-up of the National Thermal Rehabilitation Programme, authorities reimbursed 80% of the amount invested by the owners in *termopan* windows for their apartments. In the end, since not very many individuals were willing to invest money in such a project, probably because they feared the reimbursement would be strenuous and would take long, local authorities hit the gas and started reimbursing 100% of the expenses

made for thermal rehabilitations of the buildings, especially in election years. This is the case of the district I live in. The rehabilitation fever is continuously going up as a large number of companies bring fabulous revenues to the local budget. So the Mayor’s Office continues the “thermal rehabilitation of old apartment buildings” (please read: “of *all* apartment buildings in the district”; new apartment buildings in my district are few and have been in use for only 2–3 years). Therefore, in the last few years, the urban landscape of Bucharest resembles that of a city after an earthquake or a bombardment: hundreds of construction sites cover the districts, and old windows are taken down and left leaning against the fences around the buildings for a while.

Together with the old wooden-framed windows, other elements belonging to a less and less desirable past leave the households: pieces of furniture, wooden entrance doors replaced with massive metal doors, inside doors covered in leather (products of a flourishing informal economy, as this kind of doors were not for sale during socialism), which used to provide for heat and sound insulation, etc. When the scaffolds are taken down, buildings completely covered in *termopanes* and painted in flashy or sorbet colours (Fehervary 2002) replace them, leaving the impression they were expressly revamped to contrast with the grey buildings in the neighbourhood. The *termopan* becomes, in this case, an agent carrying a non-negligible capital for elections<sup>8</sup> (maybe it is not an accident that the only district in Bucharest where the Mayor did not keep his position after the last elections was the district with the smallest investments in rehabilitations).



### Evaluating the consumers’ perceptions. A market study

This section presents the results of a study coordinated by the sociologist Gabriel Jderu upon the request of one of the major *termopane* window producers. Used as an instru-

6) *Capital*, June 28th 2001

7) At the same time, the Government has stimulated the car market by several “Junk Car” programmes: owners brought their junk cars (most of them old Dacias) to scrapyards and they received a voucher to cover part of the cost of a new car in return. In reality, this programme stimulated the emergence of an informal voucher market, and not the purchases of new cars.

8) In Bucharest, district mayors who brought this joy to their citizens took the opportunity to display their names on the great rehabilitated works.





ment to improve the marketing strategies of the producer, the study has not been made public. That is why I received the approval to use a few of the research results, but not other details. I hereby thank Gabriel Jderu for providing this data and for the suggestions he made for their usage. Conducted in 2008, this study was structured as a set of interviews with “influencers” (metalworkers, architects and builders) on the one hand and interviews with owners of apartments of various sizes on the other hand, and the discussions aimed at the decision-making mechanisms employed when buying a window.

**G.J.: Does the country of origin matter, where they are produced?**

– Yes

**G.J.: In what way?**

– Mercedes is a better car.

**G.J.: So should I understand that the German ones...?**

– Yes. German or Italian metalwork. As for the French or English window, I do not know, people write it down, I don’t know how French or English that window is.

**G.J.: Where are the bad ones produced?**

– In hundreds of small workshops. They rent a space, buy lathes, machines and start making and assembling PVC profiles. They buy the glass from wherever and make the window.

*(A dialogue of Gabriel Jderu with a metalworker)*

Based on the pattern resulted from the study, he identified a few categories of consumers function of the prevalence of the factors determining their consumption be-

haviours. The first category is that of the customers who believe German double-glazed windows are of the highest quality. When they cannot afford a premium brand, they still choose German double-glazed to be sure they buy top quality products:

Consumers are aware of the fact that what is expensive is also top quality. But this cognitive heuristics is replaced by another one, which comes in handy: “what is German is top quality”, thus avoiding the negative tension given by the present financial constraints. In this category, we should probably add the largest part of end-users. This heuristics is offered by the positive stereotypes that Romanians show towards German products and, one may say, towards imported products, in general. (G. J., comment about the market study 2008)

Consumers considering there is a direct link between the brand fame and the quality of the window are part of a different category. They usually hire the services of a specialist in advance to double the chances of a long-term purchase. The last category is represented by those who make their choice function of the material the window is made of, which determines its resistance in time.

Regarding the influencing factors involved in the decisional process of purchasing the window, these are determined by a series of perceptions and influences:

- a. The perception according to which the *termopan* window is a direct part of what is – subjectively – defined as the comfort of a home.
- b. The indirect social pressure: most families install this type of windows as a symbol of their social condition; installing thermal insulated windows turned into a “fashion”.
- c. The perception regarding the price of thermal insulating window: consumers consider this kind of “solutions” have now

become accessible and address “ordinary people” or families with average incomes.

- d. The “proximity influence” – performed through direct social pressure: consumers are exposed to influencing actors (other than their spouse), such as relatives, friends, neighbours, office colleagues, etc.

Another interesting result of this research refers to the gender terms of the decision to purchase and install windows: this is made at the initiative of women, who are more preoccupied with domestic comfort. Nevertheless, I tend to believe this does not come as a surprise because women are, more traditionally, interested in “home comfort” in Romania (Drazin 2009).

The final option is putting this date in an equation: the lowest price window, fulfilling most of the previously set requirements (especially the German origin of the profile). The German origin of the window came to be perceived in such a diffuse manner as a discriminating factor that it cause German “second-hand *termopane*” to emerge on the Romanian market; the public does not hold back from purchasing those, against any strategic rumour one tends to word when one thinks the frames of a window must adapt to the frame set by the builder and not vice versa.

My interlocutor, the entrepreneur Petre Brad, evaluated the importance of an optimum installation of the window, another detail contributing to the window quality, as follows: “The installation accounts for 50–60% of the window quality because, if you do it wrongly, even if the window is top quality, you will have problems. It’s like installing a Mercedes to work as a window in a run-down cottage!” This type of plastic comparison – a top quality object placed in a wrong context – that the players in this industry present, makes us think the public enters the excessively consumerist logic, exclusively discriminating between different options based on brand fame. Hence, the conclusion that the window becomes an object of consumption just like any other.



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## Is this still a window? How to sell a *termopan*

Last spring I was involved in the *termopan* market research, looking for the most suitable windows to replace the old wooden-framed ones in the apartment I had just moved in. After the first few experiences, I decided upon the sketch of the windows and balcony door, printed in dozens of copies to serve as a model for requesting a price offer, could become a good research instrument.

Then I spent weeks combining the immediate utility of this approach with the academic one: I visited 20 shops and negotiated price offers, had either friendly or routine and boring technical conversations. Part of my friends' and *termopan* experts' suggestions (taken from specialised internet forums) regarding the desirable standards of *termopan* turned into a similar number of anguished topics, but also into fertile conversation topics with sale representatives.

After collecting all field experiences, I realised each discussion (sometimes featuring the same characters) is a unique event as the sale of *termopane* windows rather seems to be a haggling, where factors have rhetorical capacity, gender, the signs of belonging to a presumed social class.

The performance dimension of *termopane* window sale I will further discuss is of capital importance in the relation established between the actors confronted with a product catalogue. Most offices I visited had a shop window with direct access from the street, where the sections of the windows are exposed (the mystery of this object must be revealed, right?). The shopping windows had stickers with logos of the companies (usually German ones) producing double-glazed window profiles. The carriage-layout office allow the buyers to visit the range of available products so that these could be seen, touched, used.

The vocabulary used by sale representa-

tives – young people, of maximum 35 years of age – is most of the times highly technical. This makes it impossible to be deciphered and it places the customer in the position of a completely infantilised actor, who waits to be revealed the mysteries of the components, which turn the window into something magical: it will be soundproof, prevent the sun from turning the flat into an oven during summer and thus will provide for lower maintenance expenses.<sup>9</sup> All these will happen if and only if... from now on the window becomes a multiple-variable equation which the sale representatives solve right under the customer's eyes. This type of situation may be assessed by non-standardised goods (Crăciun 2009), which "leads to an informational asymmetry between the seller, who gets something certain and of certain value in return, money, and the buyer, who gets something uncertain and of an uncertain value". When the customer does not understand something, which is very likely to happen and – from the sales representatives' perspective – something to be desired, he is shown the range of products and then is let to play with the window components just like a car buyer is allowed to test-drive a car. Then they have the recommendations and discussion about the price.

For a highly skilled sales representative, the price of a window has the characteristics of a chemical formula: if, upon the first price proposal, the customer's expectations are being contradicted, the sales representative looks for a solution: THE SOLUTION. That is, a window with characteristics close to the ones desired by the customer but at a lower price or by keeping the price but adding certain accessories to the purchased package. In two shops I was even offered the opportunity to purchase the windows in instalments at a very low interest rate.

Technological innovation plays a major role in the double-glazed window sale dramaturgy. Beside the little tricks that make minuscule details reach the dimensions of little miracles (for example, the way the window turns several axis), the customer may test how different types of glass filter strong light

9) The same rhetoric is employed by the authorities, who started the national thermal rehabilitation program a few years ago.



if he is to be persuaded to buy a more expensive top quality window<sup>10</sup>. Obviously, as the customer cannot empirically test the scientific validity of the “experiment”, the only thing left for him to do is to be amazed of what lies in front of his eyes. A very important detail: none of the sales representatives asked me for any technical information about the type of wall where the window was to be installed and they did not recommend any “special care” for it after installation. Moreover, when I asked about potential problems – mould, fungi, etc. – that double-glazed windows might cause, things I had read about on internet forums and in magazines, none of the sales representatives gave me a relevant answer. *Termopan* cannot fail!

### • • • • • **A hole in the wall? The social life of the *termopane***

Once people realised the importance of energetic efficiency, windows started to play an increasingly important role in the building industry. Windows were not regarded as products that simply cover a hole in the wall, but as elements influencing both the aspect of the entire building and its energetic efficiency. Widely known as “*termopane*”, windows are no longer a sign of wealth, but one of smart investment. ([www.aplast.ro](http://www.aplast.ro))

After 2005, double-glazed windows had become such a valued social status indicator, that it entered pop culture by means of a music hit of those times: “*Termopane, termopane!*” of artist Florin Chilian<sup>11</sup>. For that matter, the song was imposed on me by the Realitatea TV producers – against my humble protests – as a soundtrack for a documentary about glass cutters/glazers TV<sup>12</sup>. The *termopan* had become a recurrent discussion topic in the means of transport. It is now the time to narrate about an observation made by a friend of mine during a research in Valea Jiului in 2005. Returning to that area

after many years, she noted the large number of *termopane* windows installed in run down apartment buildings. Her surprise received a very simple answer from a Mayor’s office clerk: most of the miners left unemployed after massive layoffs in the mid 90’s had gone to Italy to find a job. They sent money to their families and a significant part of it was invested in the household, mainly in *termopane* windows, not only for their technical qualities but because they could be interpreted by the neighbours as a proof of their hard work and wealth: “so people see they made a living and do not waste their time there!” At that time, double-glazed windows, like any new technology, were costly and not everybody could afford it. Thus, the *termopan* became an element implicitly associated with social recognition.

While carefully observing the social and cultural trajectory of this object, I realised that, in most cases, when somebody purchased an apartment, he began (and sometimes ended as well) with *termopan* windows, then a similar step was taken for closing the balcony. Closing the balcony and turning it into a thermal shield against the elements was common practice during socialism. In his paper discussing these practices, Florin Poenaru discussed with some apartment owners and they exposed their reasons as follows:

Elena, a lawyer, remembers that, in winter, the entire balcony was covered in snow and sometimes the snow got into the room, due to the bad finishing of the windows. Before deciding upon closing the balcony, Elena and her husband used to sleep in the same room with their son, as it was very cold [...]. Mr. Ungureanu gives extensive explanations for the precarious living conditions in these apartment buildings. They confirm the problems people had to deal with: “These apartment buildings (in the neighbourhood I studied) were built facing the North-East. However, everybody in this city knows this is the wind direction here. They were wrong ever since the beginning”. (Poenaru 2008: 26–27)

10) I think that, in this way, sales representatives make use of one of the main preoccupations Bucharest people have each summer: their fear of heat, manifested as cohorts of customers in shops selling air conditioners.

11) Și-o mașină mai de neam  
Și-o să ai în loc de geamuri  
La ferestre, la ferestre... termopan!  
(s.m.)  
Fă-te (fă-te!) avocat,  
Sânde!e!  
Termopane, termopane,  
Termopane, termopane, tata...Fă-te (fă-te!) deputat!  
Termopane, termopane, fă-te șef de stat!  
Termopane, termopane, of-of (Fă-te!) Fă-te șef de stat!

12) The *thermopane* also marked the recent history of Romanian politics. Two years after losing the 2004 presidential elections, the former PM, Adrian Năstase was involved in a corruption scandal. He was accused of receiving as bribe *thermopane* windows for his mansion in downtown Bucharest from a businessperson.

Poenaru (idem.) leaves the interpretation of closing the balcony aside, explained as a necessity, indicating that a closed balcony signified belonging to a stringer or weaker informal network, function of the type of materials used for this intervention. In this way, the balcony became one of the situations in which people “could evaluate their symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1984)” (idem). In the case of the *termopane* window, the sign of distinction was provided for a while by the brand printed on the plastic wrap stuck to the window and which apartment owners kept for a long time. Nevertheless, when the branded plastic wrap is taken off, the materiality of the *termopan* is hard to assess in terms of a distinctive quality. The *termopan* window finishings usually take over this dimension, being able to make the difference between different *aspirational situations*.



### Bad *termopan* and the food-for-thought *termopan*

Here is another story I find interesting for the transformations entailed by the appearance of the *termopane* window in households, but especially for the emergence of certain negative perceptions of cultural content (there are also negative perceptions regarding the potentially polluting factor of *termopanes* in domestic spaces) due to the presence of this object. I was told this story by a friend of mine, whose brother built a “traditional” bed and breakfast in the mountains a few years ago. Out of ecologic enthusiasm, he used building materials for the structure similar to those used by the villagers in that area. All the windows of the building had classical double wooden frames. The bed and breakfast was a real success during the first two years; the tourists appreciated the “specific” atmosphere completed by the traditional Romanian cuisine, etc. Two years later, when he visited his brother, my friend noticed that those beautiful wooden-framed windows had been replaced with *termopan* windows, plated with a layer imitating wood texture. The young entrepreneur told him he was fed up

taking out the paper balls that tourists used to seal the windows with during extremely cold windy winter days, trying to make them preserve the heat coming from the minuscule heaters. Later on, loyal/regular tourists returned to spend their holidays at the same bed and breakfast. My friend’s brother was questioned by many of them about the recent intervention meant to increase their comfort: “Had we wanted *termopane*, we could have stayed at home. We have them at home, too!”

This story illustrates a more and more common perception expressed in the daily discourses of a certain public that we might characterise as snobbish, irritated by the infinite numbers/layers of *termopan* used not only in households, but also in the architecture of facades and all sorts of kiosks in Bucharest and throughout the country. Even when masked by a layer imitating wood texture, the *termopane* does not seem to integrate in a desirable rural tourism aesthetics; thus, it becomes an *infected* object, which pollutes the landscape.

A few scandals have been recently covered by the Romanian media, which acted appalled at the fact that several patrimony monuments have been accessorised with *termopan* windows. Media discourses place these “*termopane*” on the position of objects that attack the live substance of the national culture:

Transforming one of the oldest stone-carved churches, built in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in a *termopan* and polyurethane foam kitsch is the latest example of carelessness and ignorance. In 2010, the priest decided to replace the old windows with *termopane*. The parish priest claims he did so in order to prevent the church from degradation. The church carved in a stony mountain in Aluniş was built back in 1274. It is one of the most valuable historical monuments in Romania and the only church of this kind in which services are still held. Its face turned ugly over night by *termopane* windows, much to the horror of the tourists and local people who come to pray in this house of worship. (Micu 2010)<sup>13</sup>

13) [www.jurnalul.ro/stiri/observator/biserica-din-secolul-al-xiii-lea-renovata-cu-termopan-559696.html](http://www.jurnalul.ro/stiri/observator/biserica-din-secolul-al-xiii-lea-renovata-cu-termopan-559696.html)

„Unde ești tu, Țepeș Doamne? (Where are you, Lord Vlad the Impaler?) – this is the question asked by many appalled historic restoration experts with reference to the termopane recently installed in the throne hall of the Citadel of the famous ruler.” (news caption in a PRO TV news programme from January 29<sup>th</sup> 2011)<sup>14</sup>

“Run-down Târgoviște Citadel with termopane. The restoration cost EUR 3.5 million.” (news caption in an Antena 3 news programme from January 29<sup>th</sup> 2011)<sup>15</sup>

The last two news captions previously mentioned are a signal of the fact that, after this kind of restoration, using *termopan* windows, the patrimony building started to degrade physically. This kind of problems are frequently signalled by an important number of apartment owners, who accessorised their homes, balconies and bathrooms with *termopan* windows. These problems usually occur due to excessive humidity and/or fungi on the walls.

During my research, I saw several places affected by these post-*termopan* “diseases” and I listened to many similar stories. According to specialised magazines, but without getting into technical details, most of these problems are due to the fact that windows are inadequately placed in the specific ecologic context.

The errors are the result of embracing this object with such enthusiasm, that it eludes circumstances. Here is an analysis with anthropological potential (as well) of this phenomenon, carried out by an engineer two years ago, in a specialised magazine:

Closing the balconies became a habit when we talk about the renovation of apartments. Problems such as condensation, leakages and aesthetical issues that occur later on are due to the wood/glasswork as a product and to the clumsiness of those doing it. Unfortunately, people ignore the fact that balconies were not conceived to be included in the thermal insulation of the building. In case of individual apartments in multiple-floor buildings, the need for airing spaces

14) [stirileprotv.ro/stiri/social/cetatea-de-scaun-a-lui-tepes-proaspat-renovata-peretiiplini-de-igrasie.html](http://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/social/cetatea-de-scaun-a-lui-tepes-proaspat-renovata-peretiiplini-de-igrasie.html)

15) [www.antena3.ro/life-show/cultura/cetatea-targoviste-in-paragina-darcu-termopane-restaurarea-a-costat-3-5-milioane-euro-117693.html](http://www.antena3.ro/life-show/cultura/cetatea-targoviste-in-paragina-darcu-termopane-restaurarea-a-costat-3-5-milioane-euro-117693.html)



got solved through balconies. The balcony is a space, part of the apartment, where one can satisfy his needs to communicate with the exterior directly. Meanwhile, the role of the balcony in the apartment tends to change. The lack of storage spaces, the relatively reduced dimensions of rooms, the lack of laundry drying rooms lead to the owners' attempt to increase their useful volume by closing the balconies. Thus, they minimise the initial role of balconies, that of open rooms exposed to the exterior. The issues occurred when closing the balconies are due to the fact that architects did not project including the balconies in the entire building enveloping (s.m)". (Dragoş Sima, "Închiderea balcoanelor, o operațiune nu lipsita de

probleme" – GFF magazine (GFF is an acronym for "Geamuri Ferestre Fațade" – Glasses, Windows, Facades), unspecified date)

We should remark that, even if closing the balcony is not recommended, as it has not been included in the building enveloping, only few apartment owners think about it, and those selling this type of interventions are even fewer. Moreover, as a historical payback for the fantasy years of closing the balconies during socialism, no balcony stays open due to the national and local thermal rehabilitation programmes. As I have previously shown, the colours of these thermal envelopes tend to make for the payback for the classic grey of the Romanian socialist buildings.



## Conclusions

David Kideckel (2010) noted that, in post-socialist Romania, as "work and production were less and less used as identity sources, they latter started being built around consumption practices". These practices are characteristic of the "new lifestyles influenced by consumption" and they had direct and "significant effects over homes and inhabiting styles" through "refreshing them with a series of modern functionalities". One of these functionalities – and there are quite a few! – based on which the home became the "domain of spontaneous expressivity of an authentic *self/ego*" (Crăciun 2009) is, for sure, the *termopan* window. In this chapter, I have made arguments based on ethnographic examples, a market study but also bibliographical references regarding the fact that this fetish-like object of the relatively recent local domestic material culture marks the transition from an ordinary accessory to an object of consumption. This is charged with a number of different social and cultural significances, function of the way in which "this similar material world" is differently understood and "appropriated with the purpose of building the self" (Crăciun 2010).

The local dimensions specific to this phe-

nomenon – let us call it "thermopanisation" – can be better understood if one does not regard it as a *rupture*: even if it has the nature of a technological innovation, it was adopted in specific ways that communicate with the inhabiting styles of the socialist times through a sort of historical payback it seems to produce. The origins of the bulimic *termopan* consumption in Romania are compared with other eastern countries (figures fully confirm this presumption), where this object was adopted with a temperate enthusiasm exactly in the precarious inhabiting style it seemed to eliminate. In addition, socialist inhabiting styles do not appear to be signalled as such a big phenomenon as was the case of Romania.

In this new world the classic wooden-framed windows that Romanians adjusted with duct tape or sealed with paper balls and cloths "do not find their place anymore" (Drazin 2009) because *termopan* windows are the new instruments of "adding meaning to the world" (idem), and these "fetishised objects are not only accessories, neither are they simple cultural signs among other signs" (Baudrillard 96: 52). If the domesticity in Suceava during the first decade of this century was made of wood (Drazin 2001), we may say, on the same note, that the domestic modernity of 2010 is made of *termopan*.

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