

MARTOR



Title: “«Home» in Rovinari”

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How to cite this article: Nagy, Raluca and Ana Vinea. 2010. “«Home» in Rovinari”. *Martor* 15: 61-65.

Published by: *Editura MARTOR* (MARTOR Publishing House), *Muzeul Țăranului Român* (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant)

URL: <http://martor.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/archive/martor-15-2010/>

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“Home” in Rovinari

Raluca Nagy, Ana Vinea

Introduction

This paper was written between 2002 and 2003 as the result of a first anthropological field-work¹ by the authors in Rovinari, a Romanian mining town.

“Systematisation” is considered to be one of the particularities of the last communist decade, together with the industrialisation and urbanisation process. These lead to a systematic regrouping and large scale re-distribution of the population, as well as to the proliferation of ‘the block of flats’ – the only type of building and inhabitation mode accepted, following the political will to increasingly homogenize the population.

Built almost overnight, on barren land, as accommodation for the necessary work force brought by the increasing development of the regional mine, the “industrial town” of Rovinari can be considered a “dorm” or “work colony”. Without denying it this characteristic, we tried to analyse the way in which people who arrived in this town from all over Romania and for different reasons, have managed to feel “at home” in the apartments assigned to them.

In order to understand the importance of the house, we should first answer the question “How did these people get to Rovinari in the first place?”. Some of them were transferred from their old work places, some came on their own via word-to-mouth or newspaper information regarding Rovinari. After the discussions we man-

aged to have with some of them, three main motivations “dragged” them to Rovinari: house, food and salary. Significant in a context of subsistence economy, food and a salary helped a lot in making the house a home. Nevertheless, the comfort offered by the new town was strictly material.

The subjective investment in the place one is living in, the feeling of being at home, cannot be understood without knowing the actual living conditions. Rovinari is a town consisting exclusively of blocks of flats, divided into groups, each group assigned a letter when it was built. In general, there appears little difference in the quality of the blocks of flats, the only ones that stand out and being more appreciated are the ones from groups L and M. These two groups are built with brick, and so appear warmer.

Nevertheless there are distinctions when it comes to various areas of the town, appreciated more or less because of the proximity to the market, the park or the mine.

Trying to see how home was built in Rovinari we asked ourselves a series of questions. How can one build a home in a block of flats having lived previously in a village in a house with annexes and its own land? What does this moving imply for managing privacy? What constraints could appear and how are they solved? What is the role of the house in building the emotional/symbolic bond?

From a different angle, how can one build a home in an apartment block in a town built overnight where one does not know anyone else and is totally cut off from one's social network? We could think that many of these apply to all types of moving from one place to another or to living in a block of flats, but in the case of Rovinari the sterile gathering of random people creates imbalances unknown in a regular town and makes the process of building a home even more difficult. Moreover, there was movement of people, i.e. arrivals and departures, during the first two years of Rovinari existence: in 1982 out of roughly 4000 inhabitants, only 1000 were stable. This mobility created a situation characterised by damage and restructuring of families and social relationships. In this context, investing in a home, even subjectively or only materially, becomes pointless.

It is interesting to see *how* "home" takes shape in such an alienated context. Would people invest more in social relationships or in objects and space? Or is material culture reduced, on the contrary, to a subsistence status and home becomes a continuous projection outside itself? Is moving away transforming the house into a hotel-room or, on the contrary, into an isolated mini-universe, making everything outside the doors of the apartment meaningless?

We will try to find some answers to all these questions, some partial, some temporary, since this research is to be continued. Before we do that, we should try and see how "home" has been treated in anthropological literature.

Short theory about home

To Bollnow, for example, living is an equivalent of being at home, expressing a feeling of protection and security. Moreover, home is producing sense by a certain symbolic order of the interior of a house and living in it. Bollnow argues that living involves utility reasons (such as sleep or security) with meaning (and more profound) reasons.

Barbara Allen considers the house as a private space, as a home, enriched with a mediation

function between the individual/the family and society, within a larger "me versus the rest of the world" construction.

In a recent article in *Dilema*, Vintilă Mihăilescu shows that the place decided via the living process can be placed in a symbolic geography that we can call territory. In the centre of this territory there is a place called home, with the difference between home as where you are from, where you were born and home as where you live. During our interviews this difference was underlined as "the village is the place where you are born and the town the place where you live".

The house is hence supposed to offer a certain personal and group identity, security, comfort, production and consumption. On the other hand this house is invested in a subjective and symbolic manner, which turns it into a home. We were trying to gather this emotional investment in the living place, assuming it not totally cut off from material culture and everyday practices of social relationships.

Home in Rovinari

We will try to answer the question in the introduction by organising and classifying the ways in which people from Rovinari manage their private space. There is one thing that comes out clearly from our research: context can lead to a change in perception of space and home, but what does not change is the continuous search for an ideal home.

For many people who came to Rovinari, their "settlement" in a block of flats did not represent a decay in their lifestyle, a loss of their previous household with all that comes with it (security, property, stability, etc.), on the contrary, living in an apartment was a dream that came true: a desired social status, a comfort dreamt of, an "evolution". People who moved to Rovinari took the apartment as a chance given to them and even though most came from villages, few were disappointed of not living in a house.

We distinguished between various types of "home" that we grouped in three categories that

we named: “refused home”, “dreamt home” and “mixed home”. This division came from the need to order the information and it does not create groups with fixed boundaries – exceptions and subcategories overlap and mix.

The grouping by ways of building a home follows attitudes similar to the article “Lumea Rovinarilor. O perspectivă antropologică asupra formării comunității urbane”, by Vintilă Mihăilescu, Viorica Nicolau and co. Therefore, the “professional” type who is fulfilled, happy with his life and what he has achieved would be the equivalent of a “dreamt home”. The traveller who left his village in order to look for better alternatives, but feels unfulfilled and forever linked to his village where he wants to return when old would fit the “refused home” category. The “mixed home” is represented by a mixture of the previous two.

Dreamt home

No matter how they settled or how much they invested in the house in Rovinari, there is one thing everyone we talked to remembered: “The apartments were impeccable”. While in most towns and cities around Romania people hoped to get an apartment but were confronted with endless waiting lists, in Rovinari everyone had a house the moment they were hired.

As stated before, most of the people arrived from villages (83% according to the census from 1982), decided to build a life in the new town, benefiting from hot water and other blessings of civilisation, never feeling “deported” as they were perceived from the outside.

“Dreamt home” is maybe the most and better defined category of the three proposed in this paper and represents the true Rovinăreni, a category that we think exists: those who came to build a home in Rovinari and managed. Most of these “dreamt home” dwellers have weak links to the places they came from. However, the diminishing of these links and building a home cannot be placed in a cause-effect relationship. Many of them moved because they couldn’t find work or

because they wanted bigger salaries, others because they were “forcibly” transferred from their previous job. However, some left because of family conflicts: Rovinari was their escape.

Visits to the village of origin and financial help lasted in the early years, diminishing gradually, and in some cases coming to a complete stop in any links. The moment of arrival is also very significant in some of these cases, such as Mrs. B. She brought all of her furniture with her, all the way from Moldova, renting a whole special carriage for this task.

The Rovinăreni who found their dreamt home invested a lot in their apartments, bought furniture, started to transform the rooms, etc. V., originally from Roșiori says they did something in their apartment every year: “Now if I got a house for free I wouldn’t move just because I worked too much on this one and I wouldn’t like to go somewhere else and start over again or just live in a place where I hadn’t done anything with my own hands”.

An important feature for the “dreamt home” constitutes the relationship with the other people within the new space. Feeling at home means being involved in a community. The T2 block of flats is a special case of community since most of its inhabitants come from the same area (around the town of Roșiori). Re-creating the universe from their town of origin has been an easier task than starting from scratch. The generational element is also important when it comes to a dreamt home. Those who were born in Rovinari, or came when they were very young, are true Rovinăreni who grew up in the town and do not really think of leaving it. For them the village world is almost unknown and working in the allotment gardens at the periphery of the town more a hobby than a subsistence practice.

Refused homer

Rovinari is a refused home for those who weren’t keen on moving, weren’t trying and haven’t succeeded in adapting to living in a block of flats, in a town strange from their own.

They consider the move, together with their whole life, a failure.

Some of them have frozen in a state of improvised and provisional living, still feeling as if temporarily removed from their home and continuously waiting to go back, even though the terms of this return remain idealised and very improbable. For many of them the shock of the town built overnight was very strong, some of them have never recovered. For C. from Tîrnăveni: "(...) the morning when I arrived at the Rovinari train station I was shocked. (...) For one year I was so lost, as much a fighter as I was, that I was going crazy, I started forgetting what my name was (...) I was coming from a small civilised town, where I used to live among people. I wouldn't leave Rovinari now because I have nowhere to go to, but if I could go back in time, I wouldn't do the same. I miss my home, and have never adapted to being here."

There is a certain internal mobility in Rovinari since most people have changed their apartment at least once. In the beginning, we linked this phenomenon to the provisional status they had upon arrival, the contracts being signed for periods from six months to two years, so no one could think of settling in the beginning. But in most cases the changes were made simply for comfort reasons. Once settled, few moved again.

When thinking of this refused home we should also have in mind the way in which social relationships can be built when there is a lack of cultural institutions. Some have never been able to feel at home because they were completely incompatible not only with their neighbours or the physical shape of the town (so muddy for years and years than one could only wear wellies) but also with the lack of a cultural life. The relationship between home and the exterior becomes in this case more important than the subjective feeling of safety, as Allen argues.

We could include in this refused home a certain resort perception in the sense that there is a natural impossibility to transform the temporary into permanent: "I just cannot and don't know how to do it, I wish I could feel at home here but

it's just too strange, it's like a holiday, and one can't always be on a holiday..." says Mrs. M., who moved from Galați. The town and the block of flats with their increased comfort compared to the village houses (less work around the household, better hygiene conditions, etc.) become a type of relaxation space, thus more similar to a hotel in a resort only suitable for the retired or a visiting family.

Mixed home

Settling in an apartment in town, making it a home with "accessories" that belong to the traditional household (such as the allotments at the periphery of the town) while keeping the relationship with the place of origin and going back there once retired is a form of what we called mixed home. V. from Gorj who came to Rovinari in '82 spent all her summer holidays building a house in her parents' village, which is the only place she ever called home.

This mixed home is very similar to the mixed diffuse household as defined by Mihăilescu, which appeared as a consequence of urbanisation and industrialisation. The diffuse household is a functional unit, a network of people who perform individual and divergent activities but have convergent roles for the whole group, a private way of putting together needs and subsistence strategies. Kinship is the main background of the diffuse household but things can expand beyond kinship. This diffuse household was built as an agro-industrial and rural-urban network, with informal exchanges between the two spaces.

The allotments in Rovinari, following this diffuse household model, could be the subject of a separate paper; found in all possible shapes, places and combinations (attached to the block of flats, further away, at the periphery of the town or along the Jiu river), these allotments work as a prolongation of the inhabited space. Nowadays the plots along Jiu do not exist anymore because those lands have been gradually included in the restitution process to return them to their owners before the communist era.

But the ones that are at the periphery, along the railway or close to the block are still functioning, the most spectacular are between a set of blocks and the mine. As opposed to garages which were distributed officially, these allotment gardens have no owner, no rent, nor conflict.

For many from the mixed home category, Rovinari could have been a dreamt home if they had come from further afield. Their proximity to their original villages lead to a more frequent visits as well as to an investment in the village house; even the allotment gardens were redundant in this case since they could work their land in the village. Investing in the village house and spending all weekends and holidays there for various agricultural tasks could be considered a combination of mixed and refused home.

Conclusions

In this paper we've tried to suggest that some people managed to build a home even in such a surrogate place as Rovinari. Moved from rural to urban spaces because of political circumstances and rapid industrialization; alienated from previous social structures and practices, some of the people living in Rovinari managed to create a home. Our perspective is fragmented, since we focus in this paper on the household and on how people invested subjectively in this so often mentioned “home”. Material culture or the relationship between family and household are issues that should be further detailed.



Notes

The material we used for this research consists of two periods of fieldwork during the summer of 2002 (approximately three weeks in total): participatory and non-participatory observation, surveys, *recit de vie*, interviews, informal conversations, photos and studying the flats (room distribution, furniture, use of space, transformations in the apartment, etc.). We also had access to official data from the townhall.

¹ We would like to thank Vintilă Mihăilescu, the coordinator of the Master Degree “Anthropology and Community Development” from Școala Națională de Studii Politice și Administrative (SNSPA), Liviu Chelcea, who reviewed this paper back in 2003 and our MA colleagues, especially Bogdan Iancu and Gabriel Dragomir.

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