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# Solid Houses and Distant Homes. The Morality of Domestic Space in Southeast Romania

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper I will explore the intimate relationship between domestic space and morality in a village situated in southeast Romania.\* Following local responses to the main question – what is that makes a house a home? – I will explore the house as the foremost setting for deeper social relations, not only between its inhabitants and other, more distant relations, but also between these domestic groups and the village itself. I suggest this dual relationship articulates a certain morality that is socially imposed on the lived domestic space. I will then argue it is the practice and the diverse generational reproduction of this morality that provides both the ideal of home and the actual realisation of the household. Finally, using classical theories in material culture, I will trace the way households objectify various modern and often conflicting understandings of *homes*.

## KEYWORDS

domesticity, morality, house, Romania, materiality.

In the Romanian language *casă* can mean both house and home. At the same time, the term can refer to the building itself or the household in general. In the village where I conducted my fieldwork, in the south-eastern part of Bărăgan,<sup>1</sup> houses were considered to be by far the most important possessions people had. There is a relatively broad literature on Romanian houses in rural space (see, for example, Paul Stahl 2004, 2005, Mihăilescu 2002, 2009) that draws mainly on the centrality of the domestic space in the social and cultural lives of rural communities. While acknowledging such claims, my paper will focus on the equally intimate processes that happen to the house in order for it to become a *home*. Therefore, instead of looking bluntly to the ‘home’ and its strong system of social significance, I will explore the idea of the home within the dynamics of its realisation, whether this implies ideas of achievement or betrayal. I will suggest first that the social transformation of a house into a home takes place exactly because people accept and follow a normative and, therefore, often intensely disputed morality that governs the social life of the village. I will then argue that it is by means of specific everyday practices including domestication and consumption that the domestic group manifests its own

autonomy or, on the contrary, its submission to the rather restrictive morality of the community it is part of. I will show how such practices are generational<sup>2</sup> and moral and serve to govern the ever changing attempts to objectify people’s shared ideas through their houses. In conclusion, I will argue that because of this unyielding cultural alterity, the Romanian *home* is, in Annette Weiner’s terms, an inalienable possession that accounts for a specific indisputable ideal of domestic life. Meanwhile, the *house* represents the essentially disputable social path towards achieving this ideal, a more conventional succession of accomplishments and failures.

I will cite two main ethnographic examples to show how the entire idea of the home is related to people’s enduring practices towards their own house. In the first example I discuss a family that started to build their house almost twenty years ago, and even though they have lived there ever since, and despite their constant efforts, they were never actually convinced their house was a home. Although they would actually call it was a home, their idea of a home always reflected a distant and ever-changing ideal of what would successfully represent them.

The second example is that of an old couple living in a contrastingly static house. In

1) I conducted fieldwork in Mostiștei Valley (*Valea Mostiștei*) in the county of Călărași.

2) Not to be confused with the difference Henri Stahl identifies between what he names the historical ‘generational’ and ‘non-generational’ character of Romanian villages. He discusses this difference in terms of lineage, descent, common ancestry, and, especially, common patrimonial rights on the entire village territory that correspond to a specific family genealogy, see for example Henri Stahl (1980, especially pp. 35–93).

the glaring absence of their children, who left for Bucharest many years ago and have no intention of returning to the village, this old couple faces a situation in which their house simply cannot be transformed into a different kind of home. Their domestic lives reflect a permanent and often frustrating attempt to perpetuate an ideal that has long since ceased to represent them. In consequence, even if strikingly different than the first case, this example represents another type of major social distance between house and home.

Drawing on other substantive examples from the village, I will suggest that, given the increasing difficulty in attaining an acceptable relationship of equality between the house and the home, people instead find moral values through which to relate to their domestic space as well as to the social order of the village. I will then show to what extent this morality is generational, with each generation attempting to impose its own idea of a *home*. I will explore the way generational production and reproduction of domestic relations and practices, shared and contested within the household, simultaneously provide houses with enduring strength and comfort and homes with social inalienability. I then suggest that such resilient values objectify the very ambiguity and desirability of the home. I therefore argue for a more dynamic and often unexpected idea of the home as an ideal, in contrast to the much more established idea of the home as a kind of static, self-reliant, objective, and often romanticised entity.

## The materiality of the house

I will begin by describing the basic unit that allows for the house to exist in the first place, that is, the particular lot of land where a house can be built. This is called a *loc de casă* (literally 'house lot'). House lots are usually inherited, split, reunited, and traded by individuals or families. House lots have a particular foundational role for the whole idea of domesticity. For example, people relate house lots to

families (rarely to individuals) rather than with a particular house or structure. As an agricultural plot, a house lot always belongs to somebody or, in certain circumstances, is a place where somebody does something: cultivates, grows, or simply waits for better times to use it. At the same time, this concept is also connected to the important local attitudes towards land and ownership. While house lots are situated at the core of the family in general and at key points in kin relationships in particular, they are also blatantly visible from outside these relationships. The domestic group's dual relationship towards the interior and the exterior provides house lots with various social significations that are either simply accepted and therefore defended or, on the contrary, hotly contested.

In the region in question the majority of houses were traditionally made of *chirpici*,<sup>3</sup> a special mixture of special soil, clay, straw, and cow or horse manure. The type of household and related practices meant these materials were widely available and extremely cheap. Historically, serfs and poor and middle-class free peasants<sup>4</sup> went on building *chirpici* houses until well after the end of Second World War. It was the privilege of lords, big farmers, and some of the very few wealthy peasants to use other materials for their houses.<sup>5</sup> The simplicity of the structure allowed for a *chirpici* house to be built in just a few months, usually during summer.<sup>6</sup> The materials required, such as wattle and twigs, were easily collected in the fields or wastelands surrounding the village. While men were in charge of the house's wooden structure, ceilings and rooftops, and the layering of wattle meshwork, the women would make the *chirpici* material itself and attach it to the different structures until it took on the shape of both the house's interior and exterior. *Chirpici* was not only extremely easy to use; it also gave the house a very flexible character. For more pretentious houses, bricks of *chirpici* would be used, but this was more expensive and usually involved more time, work, and expertise.

I will start with the idea – much discussed in the Romanian literature – that the village

3) *Chirpici* is the Romanian word for the traditional construction material made out of a mixture of clay, straws and manure.

This mixture, widely used in the southern parts of Romania, from the west of Bărăgan to the lowlands of Moldavia and Dobrogea, as well as in the Balkans in general, can either be shaped into bricks and dried in the sun, or used as a filling or levelling material to cover the structure of the house or its walls.

4) For a good and detailed historical description of these categories, see, for example, Henri Stahl (1980).

5) This category of people was estimated by some old villagers at less than 15% of the total village population.

6) Traditionally, a house made of *chirpici* had no foundations. The house's resistance structure was thus made of the most expensive materials available, wooden beams and timber, and the structure of the walls and ceilings was made of an elaborate meshwork of knitted wattle and twigs.

or community exercises a potent social normativity in almost every aspect of rural life, in order to show how domesticity fundamentally turns this exterior normativity into more intimate moral virtues expressed, for example, through the mastery of ownership, competence, and care. By looking at both everyday and particular practices of redecoration or renovation, I will argue that the social force of these three notions derives not only from their 'domestic' employment, but also because they are recognised and valued as such within the community. For example, it is *normal* to look after your garden in certain ways and to wash clothes, but is *moral* to care about your garden in special ways and to wash clothes dedicatedly.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, the relative fragility and numerous deficiencies of the materials that contribute to the creation of a household are strengthened by sustained everyday practices. For example, the interior of a traditional *chirpici* house would be renovated and whitewashed as often as the family felt the need,<sup>8</sup> while during the spring the exterior would be repaired to a certain degree and possibly whitewashed too. It was recently pointed out how daily routines, as well as a change in daily routines, not only represent special practices or appropriation processes, but also, more intimately, social qualities and characteristics of time, space, and even moral values (Shove, 2007). I suggest here that it is by the constant practice of domestically accepted (daily or seasonal) routines that the wife actually becomes a *good* wife and the house becomes a *home*.

In the village a traditional house is composed of two rooms separated by one large hall which, especially during warmer seasons, serves as a third room. The hall's two end walls each contain a door that communicates with the exterior of the house. The first of these is the central door of the house that opens onto a long, straight veranda running the full length of the front of the house. It is built facing the front garden and thus also the village road (*uliță*). The second, much smaller door, leads to a fairly long but low corridor or shelter in which there is normally



a small winter kitchen. This particular corridor is used as shelter for almost anything valuable or perishable in the house, from smoked or salted meat and pickles to heavy construction materials. In turn this rear corridor itself opens, through an even smaller door, onto the backyard of the house. It is important to add that, while this back corridor and its small door are heavily used during the day, years can pass without the main door being opened, except for specific functional reasons such as cleaning the house, carrying in large objects or on important occasions, such as marriage ceremonies or welcoming important guests into the house. While the structure and function of such a traditional house does not usually change over time, it is its decoration and the continuous adjustments made over the generations that express the constant effort to turn it into a *home*. In the next part of this paper I will show how the materiality of the house and its everyday domestic practices provide it with enduring strength, comfort, and a certain social recognition, the main qualities of the local understanding of *home*.



### The sociality of the house

For a young couple, together with marriage obtaining a house lot represents the reaching of a social apex: on the one hand it

A 'traditional' *chirpici* house whose structure and appearance have changed slightly since being built

7) See, for example, Mihăilescu's discussion of care (*îngrijire*) as the foremost expression of domestic Romanianess (Mihăilescu 2011).

8) Typically every three to five years, or sometimes even more often.

9) Marriage should be understood here as the moment that unambiguously marks the union of the young couple in front of others, such as a civil or religious ceremony.

Wealthy or traditional couples sometimes hold the two ceremonies at the same time, followed by a marriage feast. However, for financial and official reasons, most people prefer to separate the two events at their convenience. So the word 'marriage' is mainly used to express a matter of fact rather than a more established event.

10) This is normally achieved through succession or buying.

11) These social changes were originally the result of the massive rate of employment in agriculture and industry, which became increasingly specialised and therefore better remunerated. This abundance of personal capital persisted to a certain extent until the collapse of communism.

12) Traditionally, of the two rooms of the house, usually only that situated in the most protected part (south or southeast) had a stove. This is also the room where the family usually spends cold winters and engages in indoor activities during the cold seasons. When spring comes, the family spreads out into the rest of ▶

provides definite evidence of their social independence as a young family, while on the other hand it is a clear marker of their integration into the community. Homes are less about relations and more about domesticity. A house stands for the stability of the marriage and the predictability of its inhabitants' lives. It is something that conforms to the general expectations of the village and is thus accepted. Acquiring a house lot or starting to build a makeshift house are part of the long process of becoming a family that is accepted and recognised as such. This process may start with the moment the bride-to-be moves into the house of her future parents-in-law and begins being initiated into the domestic routines. While she follows a long process of learning and practicing the house rules under the direct command of a woman of the house, usually her future mother-in-law, her future husband embarks on a similar but more visible process of becoming an adult: he is expected to secure or change his job, to pay off any debts, especially official ones, to become more active in terms of domestic work and to start saving money for his wedding. Finally, sometime after the marriage,<sup>9</sup> the young couple may find a way to obtain a house or house lot for themselves.<sup>10</sup> Usually, the succession of the parental house and wealth respects the customs described in the many monographic works on domestic space in southern Romania. What is important here is that the young family's practice of buying a house lot or old house, or, alternatively, building a new house from the scratch – something which became popular in the 1970s, when people began to dispose of the unprecedented amounts of capital gained through the major changes that occurred in rural life at the time<sup>11</sup> – has only rarely been reproduced over the last twenty years, mainly because of the disappearance of such financial and economic resources. Regardless of the house's setting, the social integration of the new adult family continued to be denoted through popular expressions such as *a se așeza la casa lor* (literally 'to settle down in their home'), or *a fi în rând cu lumea* (literally 'to be in line with the people/the others'). This expresses a certain normativity and social expectation within the

community that starts to take the place of the similar values of their families.

But what does modernising a house imply? Generally, during and after communism, the first act of modernisation was to conceal the very material (*chirpici*) it was originally built of. As a result concrete and other plastering materials came to reinforce or simply decorate these houses. These works were not normally aimed at the structure of a house, but at its exterior. People would say their houses not only became more comfortable, but they also started to look better. When I was conducting my fieldwork, the next step in modernising a house was to replace its simple and small windows with impervious PVC windows of the same size. After this people would normally start to think about changing the roof. The cheapest solution, and by far the most utilised, was to replace the traditional tiled roofs with very simple metallic ones. This new material required no specialised labour and the installation and subsequent maintenance could usually be carried out within the family. These basic operations were then followed by interior improvements: building or repairing the stove,<sup>12</sup> painting the walls, or levelling the walls or ceilings. Over time, the increased flexibility and availability of construction materials ushered in radical change, not only in the way people viewed their houses – as increasingly comfortable and respectable – but also in terms of their domestic practices. For example, modern houses place an unprecedented burden on the men as opposed to the women. While traditionally women had been far more involved in both the building<sup>13</sup> and maintenance of their houses, after modernisation, much of these tasks were transferred to the men.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, together with the growth in various forms of local and national government and regulation, house lots became increasingly difficult to come by. Additionally, men were in charge of all the formal and informal ventures deriving from these issues. This involved the supplementary and novel mastery of new relevant languages, strategies and alliances. I suggest that the social transformations that came together with the successive waves of renovation and

increased access to new technology account for the corresponding ideals of *home*. As we know, modernity never expresses itself simply in material or practical terms; it is also expressed through a continual increase in self-consciousness. I therefore argue that while the ideas and ideals of a *home* were constantly changing, the houses were simply following their own course.<sup>15</sup>

In 1992, Andrei and Elena were in their late twenties when they decided they wanted to build their own house. Immediately after the collapse of communism, they applied to the people's council of the village for a house lot. Public land in a new area of the village was being allotted and distributed to people intending to build new houses. After massive disputes regarding the exact positioning of each lot and the various distribution criteria, they finally received a lot of two thousand square metres.<sup>16</sup> As they were working under financial constraints, they immediately started to build a *chirpici* house. And already having two daughters at the time, they set out to build a large house that could accommodate a big family. So, in contrast to the traditional two-room houses in the area, they began to work on a four-room structure with a vast corridor in the middle that could accommodate large dinners or family reunions. They began work in April after the land had dried out (*pământul s-a zvântat*). Andrei had a good job as a driver at the mechanical works in the nearest town. His flexible schedule allowed him to participate in much of the building work on the house. His wife worked full time on the house while also caring for their children. Having decided to build their own house as a result of various disagreements with Andrei's family, with whom the couple was living before, the young family rarely received any help from their relatives. When working on the most important tasks, their new neighbours would help with the materials, advice and even labour. Sometimes they would reproach Andrei's family for not helping as much as they should, and as a result some relatives would show up for a few days only, then simply vanish again.

After Easter of the same year there was an unusually long period of seasonal rain that

came close to ruining much of what they had achieved during the previous three months' work. The walls of the house were only partially finished and the roof was yet to be installed. Andrei recalls this perfectly because he had no way of covering the house, not even temporarily or partially. During the pouring rain he had to dig large ditches inside each of the rooms of the house in order to prevent water from accumulating and destroying the freshly built walls and the structure of the entire building. This game of continuous rain and digging went on for two weeks, with everybody hoping the former would finally stop so as to be able to put an end to the latter.

In September, Andrei and Elena finally finished work on the house they began building in spring. It was a moment of great satisfaction for them to enter winter in their own house. They built an earthenware stove in one room and spent the winter there together with their two small children. After this immense effort, much of the remaining building work was never carried out. In terms of the structure of the house itself, in the eighteen years since building it, Andrei and Elena have since managed to plaster the living room, whitewash the walls on a regular basis, and introduce two metallic and mobile stoves welded by Andrei himself. Otherwise, they only decorated the house and bought the furniture they needed to live comfortably. By the time their two sons were born they had invested only relatively little in the house, but nevertheless the entire family made a sustained effort to make it ever more comfortable, especially through an abundance of domestic consumer goods. What is interesting here is the enormous contrast between the initial huge effort put into the construction of the house and the subsequent apparent apathy and indifference towards its completion. Even if the couple had always planned, not necessarily to modernise the house, but at least to realise their original intentions, they never actually pursued these ambitions.<sup>17</sup>

Looking at the wooden furniture inside houses in urban north-east Romania, Adam Drazin (2001) shows how emotional and comfortable domestic interiors may sometimes contradict or even negate the exterior

12) ► the house, the rear shelters or the summer kitchen.

13) Beside their usual domestic chores, women were also in charge of not only the building process itself, including the preparation and constant moulding of the *chirpici* material, but also of cooking, washing and keeping an eye on their small children.

14) I lack the space to discuss this further here, but for a good account of these social changes caused by new housing conditions and the available technologies, see Shove (2003).

15) For a detailed description of this progress in both ideal and material forms, see for example (Buchli, 1999) for the early years of the socialist period in Soviet space or (Alexander, Buchli and Humphrey, 2006) for a similar transformation in the post-socialist era.

16) This is the average surface area of a house lot. Old fragmented house lots could be as small as a few hundred square metres, while those bought by wealthy people, including those with summer houses, could be at least twice as large.

17) In 2008 Andrei took out a large loan from two local banks to precisely this end. He managed to make ►



The house built by Andrei and Elena when I conducted my fieldwork. The initial *chirpici* walls are entirely covered by concrete

17) ▶ minor improvements to the house, including building a room for a future indoor bathroom. However, he used most of the money in many different ways with the result that the works were never even close to completion. Worse still, during the recent financial crisis he was to lose his job while still having to repay his loan to the banks. As a result, while Andrei and his family continue to dream of the improvements they would like to make to their house, in reality they are fully aware that achieving these goals is still a long way off.

of a house, the uneasiness of post-socialist social life, or the state itself. However, the omnipresent domestic care and insistence on related practices are not oriented towards the exterior, but, on the contrary, they make a powerful claim to desired domestic unity, intimate freedom, and self-introspection (2001: 197). Similarly, in Bărăgan, where the houses were seen from the outside as challenging or even contradicting a certain type of normative scheme or social ideal, for the people actually living in them, the houses had nothing wrong with them at all. This was because their construction and many subsequent adjustments always followed a domestic moral logic, rather than blunt social values.

I think the underlying issue is that it is less a matter of a project to build a house and then live in it, and more that the very construction of the house is itself a life-long project and therefore continuously changing. Even if Andrei and Elena call the place they live in home, they in fact believe their 'real' home is the one they have always dreamt of. At the same time, they are very aware that, like themselves, much of the rest of the village sees their house as a clearly unfinished project for a *home*. On the other hand, they feel it would be futile to build a house for what they think they will need in future, so instead they preferred to concentrate on a wiser project of building a house for what they actually needed at the time. For example, the apparently unfinished nature of their house allowed them to adapt it regularly to

the increasing and varying needs of their four children.

In other words, while the *house* is not an aspiration, but rather a reflection of who one actually is, the *home* stands more for an ideal rather than a particular material realisation. Most Romanian literature on houses shows how, traditionally, these two concepts tend to converge. The rapidity of this convergence and then the subsequent stability over time and down the generations has led to the intimate conviction that a house was also the home of those living it. In building their house more slowly and in successive stages, Andrei and Elena were not attempting to reject tradition or customary forms, but rather to follow an everyday pursuit of rendering these issues more meaningful for themselves.

I lack the space here to argue that this attitude reflects a certain personal understanding and the advent of modernity. However, at least for Andrei and Elena, an important turning point came during communism, when at a very young age they both refused to follow the paths their families expected them to follow, instead embracing radically different lifestyles and prospects. By refusing to work in agriculture, Andrei was guaranteed always to work outside the village. He and his wife became increasingly independent from their families, something characterised in a number of decisive moments, such as when they decided to sell their cow, destroy the outdoor baking oven and not to seek the unreliable help of their families. Coming back to the house, the couple also expressed its modernity by their very refusal to finish building a 'normal' house. By comparison, their unfinished and ever changing house responded better to the important changes happening within their own family, its variable needs, and the equally changeable society around them. Throughout this process, the constant revisions to their initial plans reflected different ways of living in the house. They understood how the house was useful to the extent to which it best responded to them. In other words, the house reflected their own morality, rather than a morality imposed on them from outside their family.

If, for different reasons, this ambition could not be met, the house could be refurbished, restructured, enhanced or partitioned anew. Therefore, where local houses traditionally obliged people to live or act in certain normative ways (for example, the uses of rooms and outbuildings were fixed and could not easily be changed, or the proper maintenance of the house required certain daily or seasonal practices), modern houses are the expression of the instability and impulses of the people living within them. I suggest the main reason for this fundamental change is a cultural shift in the idea of the *home*. The increasing impossibility to achieve a *home* is characterised by the permanent adjustment and reinterpretation of this term visible through the constant refurbishments and modifications made to the house. Therefore, one current and coherent idea of *home* is inevitably an ideal one.

The second ethnographic example shows that neglecting the obvious dynamics implied by the term *home* results in an increasing inadequacy between the unexpected course of life and the frustrating immobility of the home as a distinctive life-long project. Whereas judging the *home* as an always distant ideal asserts the unsolicited consolidation of the provisory, the occasional, or the erratic as being among the most acceptable responses to uncertainty.

George and his wife Lucia are in their mid-seventies. They live alone in the house they built when they were young. They have two daughters, who, after obtaining university degrees, continued to live and work in Bucharest. Their house can be described as a traditional house, as is the type of life they themselves lead. The house has remained virtually unchanged since their children were teenagers, almost thirty years ago. Their practices also did not change much over the years. The last major change was in the early 1990s, when they stopped working for the local state agricultural association.<sup>18</sup> At this point they began working intensively on their newly recuperated agricultural land. Since the end of communism, during which he worked as a tractor driver, George became

recognised as one of the most diligent workers in the village. Now his land is always in good condition and his crops bountiful. Soon after he began working for himself, George managed to buy his own tractor and all the tools he needs to work the land.<sup>19</sup> Because of their constant hard work, the family considers itself to be fairly independent from the rest of the village.

This old couple has a strong feeling of *home* and *homeness*. They have a wealthy household in the traditional sense and invest great pride in preserving this way of living. The house is about fifty years old, but solid and clean. They raise far more poultry than they have need of and work their immense courtyard, garden and vineyard manually. They have relatively small pensions, but as many of the products they consume come from their own production they consider themselves fortunate to receive this extra money. There are few goods they need to buy and are thus able to avoid any pointless waste of money. It appears that the durability and persistence of their work as well as of their house represents a comprehensive response to what they consider the ephemerality, futility, and even the immorality of mass consumption products. It is in the decency of their work and of their old house that this couple has found an acceptable way to deal with the indecency of consumption. They feel their domestic universe is enough for them.

At the same time, it is this domestic universe that represents the ideal of the home that impedes them from working less or relaxing any of their daily routines or ambitions. Unlike in the first example, where the unattained ideal of the home granted the people living in it more freedom to challenge, change, or to contest the different guises of their house, here the actual presence of this ideal has imposed serious burdens on the old couple. Their drive to continue working hard and properly as good *gospodari* reflects a social and cultural desire to maintain their house (*gospodărie*) as a *home*. In the glaring absence of their children, who left for Bucharest many years ago and have no intention of returning to the village, the old couple is

18) *Cooperativa Agricolă de Producție (CAP)*.

19) With the exception of harvesting, for which he uses the services of one of the few agricultural associations in the village.



faced with a situation in which their house simply cannot be transformed into another kind of home. Therefore, ironically the opposite of what ageing people usually do, they work hard in order to continue feeling at home in their own household. Customarily, as children grow old and create their own families, the houses of their parents or other older relatives, as well as their daily involvement in domestic routines, undergo dramatic change.<sup>20</sup> In this case, however, their once ideal home continues to force them to see it and render it as a home. Here the difficulty rests in the old couple's obstinately insisting on maintaining their old and unusual ideal of a *home*. The problem is that the house seems not to appreciate these efforts sufficiently and insists, for its part, on decaying.

As I have shown, the materiality of their houses obliges people to adopt specific routines of care and maintenance. Criticising the overemphasis on residency (mainly property and inheritance), Wilk and Netting (1984) distinguish between the households' morphology and its activity. They argue that in contemporary societies 'the process of modernisation' is not a transition from one type or form of household to another, but it is more basically a change in the spheres of activity that underlie household form (1984: 20–1). They argue the material flows of labour, goods, and cash in household production, distribution, and transmission are negotiated anew with each generation through approved options of co-residence but also with respect to different cultural options of co-residence and patterns of authority, duty, and affection. As is obvious from the two examples above, genealogy is central to the perpetuation or, on the contrary, the contestation of the idea of home. As a house or land is essentially transmitted from generation to generation, each generation in turn imposes its own idea of *home*. Therefore, the younger generations will actually live in the house, while the co-residential older generations begin to develop a radically different relationship towards their new dwellings. Not only are these new dwellings always much smaller, of secondary importance, or often improvised, more impor-

tantly they can never become *homes*. The real *homes*, either aimed for or actually attained, exist in a close mutual relationship with the households that, together with the domestic practices, are always transmitted, one way or another, down the generations. Access to, and practice within, the household is what determines the aspiration for or the existence of a *home*. In this sense, it is important to note Miller's distinction between 'households' that mediate with the concept of family and the 'house societies' that mediate between the concept of lineage and the longevity of the site of residence (2001: 12).

In order to understand this relationship better, I will now briefly discuss an extreme example of estrangement and decay of a house. Marius is in his early forties and has just lost his relatively good job. His wife left him more than one year ago, taking their young son with her. His ageing mother and his sister are the only persons who actually help him with domestic work. Since his wife left, Marius sold much of his poultry and stopped cultivating or caring for anything in his garden. Without any basic means of subsistence, he began doing odd jobs in the village. He enjoyed drinking and discussing with his friends at one of the local bars, so his daily expenditure rose considerably. Over a period of just five months, he found the money he needed to fund this activity first by selling his television set, then the refrigerator, and eventually even the front door of the house. The money he earned in this way helped him each time to continue his daily routine for a few weeks at a time. At the time I was finishing my fieldwork, he had no intention to replace the goods he had sold or to sell any more, but it seemed each time the opportunity arose he was always willing to trade or estrange different parts of his house. In this case, the decay of the house represents not only an irreplaceable loss of domesticity, but also an enduring effort to preserve his personal and much cherished social life. To have no money to live his everyday life meant abandoning important parts of his lifestyle. He loses his television, but the money obtained afforded him access to the more social

20) The households become centred around the new house (*casa nouă*), built or maintained by the younger generations.

activity available at the local bar. Therefore, rather than restricting himself, he chose to restrict his house, which anyway reminded him of an unpleasant and distant home. As with the renovation of a house, he explained to me, 'I can do it [buy it back] if I want.' However, refusing to actually 'do it' was born of a sense of the absolute futility of the home. The house itself was replaced by an unusually distributed and more convenient domesticity.

The loss of the usually inalienable home gave way to the equally unusual possibility of alienating the house. Therefore, Marius' home, like the one built by Andrei and Elena, stands for an idea of inalienability that, in the terms of Annette Weiner, can be understood as a continuous search for persistence and inherent predictability in an ever changing, and thus unpredictable, social world (1992: 8). The household that irremediably loses the imperative quality of persistence also loses its potential quality as a *home*, as an 'inalienable possession'. No longer insistently cared for by the united family, the house can only change radically, be partitioned, estranged, or simply decay.

As we have seen, in deciding whether or not to care for their houses, as fundamentally more visible and disputed entities, people are essentially translating the social normativity of the village, or the larger impositions and contradictions of modernity, into domestic goods, materials, and recognisable practices. Drawing on Maurice Bloch's (1973) position on the morality of long-term relationships, I argue that this process is both generational and moral. Building on a fairly established tradition in anthropology that began with Malinowski and Mauss regarding the relationship between either immediate or delayed reciprocity and morality, as well as on Fortes' insistence on the morality of essentially kinship systems,<sup>21</sup> Bloch basically argues that 'the crucial effect of morality is a long term reciprocity' (1973: 76). Therefore, the long term effect is achieved because it is not reciprocity that is the motive but morality (1973: 76). Bloch understands morality as being non-specific and long-term, giving kinship great potential to adapt to long-term social change.

Taking this argument further, I suggest that a sustained set of domestic relations and practices grants each generation with either the prospect or the actual attainment of a *home*. This continuously changing morality of the domestic space provides the *home* (either as an idea or an actual accomplishment) with its enduring strength and inalienability.

The *home*, therefore, is not what the house *is* but what it *should be*. The social recognition of a *home* thus rests in the ability of its inhabitants to deal with such issues as care, conformity, and material integrity in a socially accepted way. For example, once young people feel at *home* in their households, the entire village knows it, and often even earlier. It is in this moral setting that people incessantly attempt to domesticate the different conflicting qualities of the household I have described so far. The very ownership of this mastery is what transforms people from house inhabitants to *home* dwellers. This process not only creates social relationships but is also central to a broad range of essential social and economic issues, such as the rights of residency, ownership, inheritance, development or access to different forms of capital. From a broader perspective, it is this transmitted mastery, and hence the transmission of always different ideas of *homes*, that actually allows for what appears to be the impressive continuity of the 'traditional' household.



### The morality of homes

In this paper I have shown the way current houses in southeast Romania always attempt to become *homes*. The idea of a home is shaped by the everyday practices reproduced within the domestic group and normalised by the community or the society in general. I went on to suggest that this dual relationship articulated a certain morality of the lived domestic space. It is this morality that reconciles the individual with his or her ever distanced idea of home. At the same time, this process not only brings strength, continuity,



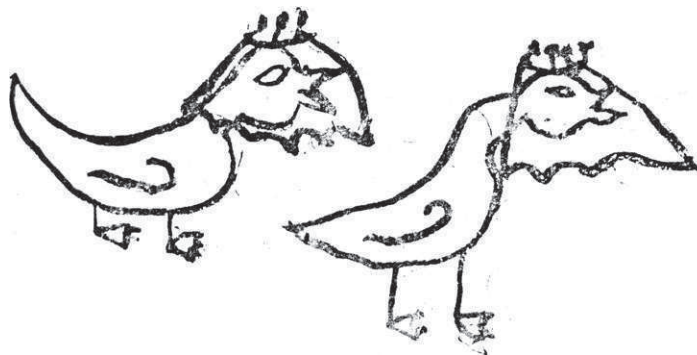
21) Fortes even stresses 'sharing' without 'reckoning' as the essence of kinship morality (Fortes, 1969: 238 [in Bloch, 1973: 76]).

and social recognition to the house; it also makes the often frustrating distance between the house and the home socially acceptable. While the current house continues to fail to become the new ideal *home*, its inhabitants and their ambitions in turn become increasingly trapped within this distance. This process is primarily determined not by the changes that happen within the domestic group in terms of customs, affection or tastes, or by its larger social and economic considerations, but instead by the dialectical process between its desire and the results of that desire. On most occasions this impervious cultural distance confers a certain social vitality to the actual material forms. Then, a rare sense that the house is actually a *home* affords it a frustrating rigidity and a restricted social meaning that soon proves impossible to sustain. On the other hand, a permanent quest for the idealised *home* gives the people living in the house a certain social confidence and flexibility. It is the everyday practice of this dialectics that informs us about people and their social relations.

I also showed how the normative order imposed by the larger social and cultural setting can be contested in different ways, something which has important normative implications in its own right but usually only up to a moment of self-realisation when the social construction of the new idea of *home* begins. This moment usually corresponds to differ-

ent, more active engagements with the house and the people living in it. In this case, new responsibilities and commitments express the new morality of the domestic space or, in other words, the new actualisation of the idea of home. Whether a house is recognised as being settled (*așezată*) and predictable or not (by means of public displays and scrutiny of the social normative), the domestic social relations existing in this house represent far more dynamic attempts and creative freedoms meant to objectify the ever changing ideals of *home*. It is through this process – involving caring, conflicting notions of innovation and conformity, and a permanent change in domesticity – that the house increasingly becomes a *home* for its inhabitants.

From a broader perspective, the dual process for the house to acquire both social consciousness and self-consciousness determines the probability of it becoming a *home*. In this understanding, the house tends to represent the modern objectification of the customary ambition to actually attain a *home*. Therefore, living in a house represents a permanent attempt to translate the inalienable into something substantial and accessible. For this reason, consumption of expensive materials and minor or structural changes to daily domestic practices should be understood as either social hesitation or a radical new awareness of the notion of *home*.



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