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One Bucharest neighborhood, a home ethnology perspective¹

Ioana Popescu

The collective mind of my generation has been marked by the slogan imposed through schooling and, later, through media propaganda: *sedentariness and continuity of inhabiting the same territory* are the main historical values of the Romanian people. Apparently they were due exclusively to rural steadiness.

Rural sedentariness continues to be considered to this day the essence of Romanians' cultural survival; by comparison, urban mobility is usually invested with ambiguous and even contradictory meanings. Manifest in diverse forms, from rhythmic or seasonal swinging between *home at the parents'* and *home at work*, to professional migration, or even emigration, the movement the city presupposes continues to be interpreted as instability, as "loss" of roots – and thus of identity – in favor of a not necessarily beneficiary cosmopolitanism. Briefly put, most of the times, the mobility of urban residence continues to be negatively connoted, despite evidence that we owe urban mobility the necessary aliterity for cultural survival and modernity.

I tend to believe though that the notion of *urban sedentariness* must not surprise one and that it defines a large portion of urban dwellers. In a large and approximate perspective, the concept refers to individuals born and raised "in the city" (an urban dwelling, wherever it is, even if during the life course the individual moves from

one city to another). There is however a native city sedentariness, that may encompass several generations; why not, a Bucharest sedentariness, or even more, a possible Bucharest *neighborhood sedentariness*. In all these cases, an important element in establishing sedentariness should be the exclusion of chance in keeping one's home as a *sine qua non* condition of cultural comfort and sociability.

I am sure there are a multitude of specialized definitions for the concept of neighborhood. For architects and urbanists, for historians and cartographers, for sociologists and specialists of all kinds, the term certainly has different but unanimously accepted contents inside each discipline. In this situation, I have chosen to refer to my own neighborhood as the space of direct communication that residing in proximity entails; I rely on memory and testimonies collected through lived experience. Thus for me, the neighborhood is less about territory and more about the social it implies. The neighborhood is not only a space, but a place, or more precisely – a constellation of places with public and/or private functions.

In the urban world, unlike the rural, man ceases to be simultaneously constructor and user of its own habitat. (S)he is in the situation of having to adapt to homes that were thought of, built and even inhabited initially by others. In this

contexts, (s)he is left to projecting on these spaces one's own habits and aspirations which, in their turn, can create new functions. Thus, in time, structures of living are coagulated from common functioning rules that define the neighborhood community. Once established as such, the social group constructs an identity to regulate the relations with *the others*. By necessity, the perception of a territory and its limits is also constructed, even if variable and vulnerable, together with a feeling of belonging – *us, we, of ours* –, which excludes the other. For these processes to fulfill, for a group of individuals living in a common urban territory to become a neighborhood, some elements of cohabitation are necessary, among which I propose as crucial the relations of vicinity, direct communication, solidarity, proximity, places of common use, language and common leisure, coherence in the perception of local landscape.

Inside the neighborhood, **vicinities** can be constructed on kinship (in the good and useful rural tradition), on professional categories, or in the absence of these – on affinities. The situation does not seem much different from rural vicinities. The city though entails specific proportions, nuances and accents. In the case of my enlarged family, for example, the tendency of living in the same neighborhood has always existed. Ever since my childhood, I was the beneficiary of a multiple *at home*: at my parents', but also at my grandmother's and my cousins', one street away. On that street, my family had marked by residence both ends; first my grandmother and her younger brother constructed a villa (which then, in the 30s, was at the limit of inhabited Bucharest). It was a modern construction with Bauhaus aspirations, with ground floor and two more floors, a roof-terrace, round corner and porthole windows for the bathrooms; the matte glass door at the entrance was protected with wrought iron and the initial of our family name. Unfortunately, not much later, with the establishment of the Communist regime, the house was nationalized and grandmother and

her four children moved at the other end of the street, where they rented an apartment at the ground floor of a more modest villa, still with modernist ambitions. They had a four-room apartment where, at some point, eleven people, from three generations, lived together. During the winter, the family grew with two more elder aunts who lived “in the shanty”, at the edge of the city in an unwholesome and unheated room. It was the same with the loft where I lived with my parents; my paternal grandmother, forcefully moved to Bran, joined us for the winter. Home was also the garage of the building, where a shoemaker's workshop was installed; the shoemaker kept his door open all day long and would let us children spend the whole day there, watching him fix the little nails on the boots or sew on the machine the faces of the soles. It is enough to remember him and the air is filled with the smell of dyed skin and shoemakers' clay. It is in that workshop that my cousins and I took refuge when the dog Dax jumped the high cement fence and tried to bite us. Our house was fence to fence with the house of Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej's sister. It was one of the exceptions that confirmed the rule of neighborhood community. Their house and courtyard were hidden behind a high and grey fence, and the only sign of life was the ferocious and almost permanent barking of their watch dog, Dax, a huge German shepherd, as we could see on the occasion of this adventure. The dog managed to put me down and bite me – I was five years old – and it was the only chance to hear a public anti-communist discourse from my mother: she boldly passed the militiaman in front of “their” house and loudly expressed her hopes on the future of the Bolsheviks in Romania. And she threatened with going to court... Unexpectedly, Dax was moved the next day to the frontier guards.

Home is also a certain way of arranging the space of the house, a particular syntax of pieces and functions that each member of the family, if forced to move (in another neighborhood, in the province or abroad) would reproduce with a lex-

icon of barely few objects and inherited behaviors. These are “skills” that we all acquired in our extended family through education and practice. Using the spaces inside and around the houses in a certain manner that I consider defining for our family’s conviviality, was highly similar in the homes of our neighbors who also lived in family residences. These forms of vicinity sometimes created, especially among children, relations of *symbolic kinship*. I cannot forget to mention, even briefly, the peasant rites of symbolic brotherhood, cousinhood or wedding, which – where still practiced – seem to have remained a game, if we don’t consider the marriage interdictions that they (still) presuppose for those reaching adulthood.

Each of us had one’s own room, a little room (*odaia*) – usually a former storage-room or a servant’s room, where we were masters. In my case, the sisters game played for almost two years with our neighbors’ little girl remains crucial – she is still my oldest friend – we used to dress alike, comb our hair alike, eat, study and play together, switching homes. We weren’t by far a singular case in the neighborhood.

As for vicinities built on professional criteria, I have to think of the beginnings of Drumul Taberei neighborhood. Initially, large groups of specialists in humanities were given homes there. They practiced a special kind of sociability, of *home leisure*, with meetings for classical music auditions or visits for watching lanternslides of the rare visits abroad of those lucky ones.

Vicinities structured on affinities were born – in my neighborhood at least – of the attempt to annul the painful effects of Bolshevik nationalization. In the beginning, some of the neighbors offered to host close relatives who had remained homeless. With time, they managed to rent rooms in the basement or in the attic of the building and they became *sedentary*. I remark that sedentariness in my 1950s neighborhood paradoxically presupposes a suitcase always ready for a (very) possible forced removal. Ours

was big, made of brown cardboard and it stayed waiting underneath my parents’ bed full and well closed until quite late.

In my childhood, the neighborhood vicinities meant secret paths, hidden tunnels linking together the attics and basements of twin houses. I am now thinking that these hidden urban tracks functioned as the rural stile across the fence; they meant small but permanent gestures of helping each other, with occasional food borrowing or exchanges of recipes. I know for sure my mother’s Transylvanian cuisine conquered my father’s „bistro menu“ (read southern), but even more important it seems that close neighbors started cooking caraway soup and dried plums or quince stew under her influence; coffee visits also with invitations made directly though the window. I remember there was definitely little talk on the telephone. The causes are certainly multiple, but it seems important that there were, in compensation, still numerous means of direct communication; finally, among the gestures of good living together there was also the recommendation of services from one neighbor to the other. A type of domestic service, long gone from Bucharest life, was the home tailor. In our neighborhood, she was Tinus. There was a sewing machine in every apartment, and if it was missing, it could be borrowed for a few days of tailoring. Tinus was not creative, she had no ideas but she could tailor, sew and finish the dress. The fashion magazines were rare but they could also be borrowed among neighbors on these occasions. This is why, many times, the girls from the neighborhood were dressed in the same clothes, made from the same cheap materials, discovered in the same store suggested from neighbor to neighbor. The children took French classes with the same *madame*, friend of a street neighbor, and the girls played piano with the same teacher, on the same small piano – the only one in the neighborhood – in the house of one of my mother’s friends. The rare house pets were also taken care of by all the neighborhood’s chil-

dren. A special case was that of the dog Una, stepped over by a car and buried by us children on the Cerchez field (on which the Television tower was later on built; few people know this building rests on the graveyard of the neighborhood's pets). Periodically, we would gather to perform doggy remembrances, occasion on which we also reactivated feelings of group belonging and even imaginary kinship.

Urban residence imposes a system of relations inside which communication is a mediated one, and interpersonal knowledge does not necessarily entail presence *in flesh and blood*. In the old village, communication was exclusively direct – *mouth to ear, eye to eye, given by hand* – and individual joys and sorrows were lived and solved in the presence of the entire social group. However neighborhood sedentariness also produces forms of **direct knowledge** measured in visual recognition and greetings, exchange of information about interior design and gardening, house modernization, comments on the latest news or public scandals; it is symptomatic that this verbal communication is installed without the need to know the name or civil /professional identity of *the other*, the neighbor; knowing *by sight* is enough inside the neighborhood due to the frequency and rhythmic daily meetings. Seeing /knowing the other again and again, in the same place and moment produces trust.

This form of communication, in between curiosity and discretion, can install real **solidarity**, materialized in exchange or recommendation of services, in using personal relations for solving common difficulties, or even common involvement in conflicts generated by the relations of the neighborhood with institutions or representatives of the system. But none of these acts of spontaneous solidarity presuppose intimacy of living in the urban dwelling. The city stresses individual living, protection of private life and private property through diminishing transparency, through closing, establishing limits and mediated communication – telephone, written correspondence, electronic correspondence.

However, even if sustained encounters and intimate knowledge of the neighbor are not compatible with urban living, in the conditions of neighborhood residence, **proximity** exists. It is felt as a strange reduction and abolishing distances; inside the neighborhood the access seems easier, the stores are closer, the means of transportation – more accessible. I remember the first time I realized the actual distance between the approximate limits of my neighborhood, where everything seemed *at arm's length*, I was in the second grade when our teacher sent us to measure – with a 100 meters string with knots every ten meters – the distance between school and home. Most of us measured between 7 and 10 strings! Our neighborhood became a territory with the school as its center and a radius of approximately one kilometer. Until then it was *from me to you, up on her fence, from home to school, from here to Church, at the Sweets-shop, or here on the waste ground (maidan)*.

My childhood's neighborhood was defined not only visually, but also from the point of view of vicinity relations, by courtyards, fences and gardens. Low cement or brick fences with a low wrought iron gate surrounded the courtyards; there were variants of fences with cement pedestal and iron or plank fence upon it. The iron works of the neighborhood were probably no different from the iron works of many Bucharest houses, however on the few streets of my neighborhood this fencing system is still kept. Passers-by can easily look over the fence or through the wrought iron gate. In my childhood, a small tour of the neighborhood would tell us precisely who is out to play, who is still doing homework, where are the others gathered. Sometimes, even without ever entering certain courtyards, we knew precisely where to go for raspberries or other unripe fruit. Today, among us, old neighborhood residents, newcomers have arrived with huge villas, surrounded by high, compact concrete fences, with compact metal gates, underneath which plastic grass doormats

are visible, as if to mark private property even on the sidewalk, in case paving with multicolored pieces was not marking enough. The houses were oriented with their side to the road, which somehow protected the entrance. Courtyards were spread around the building, or at least on three sides. Next to the fences, the gardens offered to the view more or less the same flowers, *M rit -m mam* (*Marry me, mama*), *phlox* red and white, *irises*, *Italian Honeysuckle* or *Japanese wisteria*. Today, among us, old neighborhood residents, newcomers have arrived with huge villas, surrounded by high, compact concrete fences, with compact metal gates, underneath which plastic grass doormats are visible, as if to mark private property even on the sidewalk, in case paving with multicolored pieces was not marking enough. On the sides and behind the houses, tall herbs - so tall that on Easter, children would find it difficult to retrieve their presents from the tall grass - were growing, with burdock and fruit trees - cherry trees, sour-cherry trees and plum trees. As fruits would ripen simultaneously all across the neighborhood, in certain periods most kitchens were busy with the jams and marmalades for the winter. Due to these courtyards the neighborhood had a specific smell - a mixture of flowers and, periodically, burnt leaves - and also a specific sound. In many courtyards, hens were raised for eggs and chickens. Every household took care of three or four domestic birds; some neighbors even had a cock, which gave them a certain power position in the neighborhood, as every spring the cock was borrowed to the others for a week. Thus, beside the sound of crickets in the summer nights, the sound landscape of the neighborhood was also underlined by chickens' clucking. In the 50s, the neighborhood also resounded the meowing of stray cats, which in certain periods of the year were so loud that residents were throwing cold water on them.

I was arguing that, in my opinion, the landmark of a neighborhood is not its territory but the social group and its behaviors. Any commu-

nity though, once the feeling of belonging becomes conscious, starts establishing **markers** and **limits**, identification and exclusion. In my childhood's neighborhood, the main marker of belonging was the high school² - *you attend Caragiale high school, you are caragialist, you are one of us*; for the teenagers we were, the fact that some youngsters were our neighbors did not legitimize their belonging *to the neighborhood* if they attended other nearby schools. The limits were always approximate and random, established by the relations between the inhabitants. The borders of the neighborhood were rather products of a subjective perspective (individual or collective), constructed most of the times through exclusion. Those of us, who left the neighborhood in certain contexts, have degraded to the status of simple visitors, even if they wanted it or not. Otherwise, in one of the personality bursts of young age, I considered that the emblematic act of my liberation should be abandoning the neighborhood. I decided to acquire a studio in block of flats in a totally different (new) neighborhood. For various reasons, I did not and my staying home certainly contributed to facing the fact that I am dependent on my family, friends and neighborhood. On the other hand, those relatives who were forced to move into one of Bucharest's newly built neighborhoods, very soon decided to leave the country for good and fled to the West. Leaving the neighborhood predisposed one or one's family towards even more radical changes.

Belonging to the neighborhood was marked not only through residence but also through **jargon** and **neighborhood leisure**. These indigenous cultural products (language³, jokes⁴, nicknames, toponyms⁵, games, parties⁶, collective TV-watching and, later on, video screenings) functioned only among *us*. The others, the outsiders could hardly incorporate our cryptic communication style.

The neighborhood, unfolding on the horizontal, with low buildings, no more than three, maximum four levels, offered a paradoxical ad-

vantage, that of living on the vertical. The more or less secret pathways between neighboring buildings were doubled by frequent circulation between floors; especially for us, children, among basements and attics, with storage rooms, canned food for winter, trunks with old clothes, hats and feathers, old furniture, secrets, mysteries and memory. Such places generated the legends of the group, with fabulous dark beings and adventures, histories transmitted and enriched from one day to the other. This folkloric repertoire was yet another cohesion element for the neighborhood's children.

Common memory is also based on some symbolic elements. The symbolic central **places** in my childhood's neighborhood were the church and the waste ground (*maidan*). Between the ceremonial and the everyday, between the religious and the magical, we were unknowingly exercising our group identity and the safety granted by the certainty of belonging. The relation with the neighborhood church was from its beginning group-based: the confessions of children were organized so we could answer out loud, in a common voice to the questions of the priest, no matter our individual small problems. Accordingly, we also received Holy Communion collectively. Then, almost every Saturday we would gather conspiratorially in front of the church where alms were distributed, even if we knew we would be scolded at home for this. On Easter night, under the sign of the ritual, vicinity was strongly activated, but not neighborhood community. Among us, *caragialistii* (those who attended Caragiale high school) there was a group who would try to boycott the Easter ceremony each year. They were immediately chased away by all participants, yet it did not stop us from continuing, the very next day, spending our time together. In a way, it was precisely this secret that strengthened our relationship. The waste ground, a particularly green area, with wild apricot trees and wax cherry trees, was a socializing, learning⁷, identity and ritual area⁸. Far from being a *non-place* of my childhood's neighbor-

hood, the waste ground was a place for games and symbolic practice.

The school was the center of a constellation of places in which, alternatively, acts of acceptance and refusal of schooling were deployed. The school building was the place for competition and group alliances: the contests and school plays, theatre or poetry, the class reunions, the sport competitions or just competitive games during the breaks, they all took place there. All these contributed to producing group relations and hierarchies. These relations were best tested in moments of collective class skipping: the She-Wolf square⁹, or the cake shops in the corner – the “Cof” – were public spaces of loyalty, confidentiality and solidarity testing. If one was discovered skipping class in one of these places, s(he) was immediately saved by the false yet loyal counter-testimony of the whole group.

To conclude, the neighborhood seems to be ultimately a question of **perception**. The *autochthonous* perception is to this day that of a “garden-neighborhood”, a place that kept a human dimension in its relation to nature and where elements of community residence can still be experienced. For *the others*, my neighborhood is a place for the nouveau riche with undeserved privileges and spectacular, secret private lives. These two perceptions meet in the common conscience of a luxury neighborhood, inhabited by *locals*, but also by abusive characters, in the sense of an authoritarian individualism. For instance, in order to gain status and visibility, the new comers decorate for Christmas the facades of their houses with geometric multicolored lights, blinking day and night, totally disregarding their neighbors' insomnia.

The strongest argument for a multiple perception of the neighborhood has recently been offered to me in the first issue of the first local magazine, nicely entitled *B NEASA free neighbourhood guide* (original title in English); I saw it hanging on all the fences in my neighborhood with its glossy cover of Catalin Botezatu among

fretwork decorations. I browse the titles: Catalin Botezatu on nowadays society, “a bed with dirty sheets”; whole pages of commercials for (other) newly inaugurated pubs and luxurious cafes; horoscope, *Truth and myth* column, advice for

teeth whitening, for “sex and communication”; real estate and expensive cars announcements; finally, on biometric passports. And all these just for my neighborhood...



Note

¹ By contamination with *home video* – audio-video documentation of one’s own memory or family present, accomplished with minimal means and technical expertise. The enterprise becomes valuable through the inner knowledge of the represented stories. In this sense, I am one of the neighborhood’s residents; I am also an ethnologist, which gives me the advantage of a double perspective. My life story can offer material for a case study together with the advantage of self-analysis and self-reflection.

² By that time, the high school had changed name from Titu Maiorescu to Ion Luca Caragiale.

³ For children, a special kind of *bird language*.

⁴ The jokes’ repertoire was so well known by the group that only the final punch line would actually be mentioned.

⁵ At the She-Wolf, at the Cake, at Andruta – these are denominations that survived the disappearance of the original place.

⁶ Parties were held in the neighborhood, among neighbors (family and friends), not only on anniversaries but also at the great feasts (Christmas, New Year’s Eve or Easter).

⁷ That is were we learned – one from another – nature painting, first notions of gardening, or first ballet figure.

⁸ On the waste ground we exercised ritual gestures that we had randomly witnessed or of which we heard about.

⁹ This is the Romulus and Remus Capitoline Wolf statue moved in 1990 to Romana Square.