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Proposal for the theme **Fundamentals** – Venice Biennale 2014

The House of the Soul

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*„We may argue the following, without overly betraying symbolic thinking: the passage from one world to another was ‘spiritual’, without the experience being an ordeal lacking in physical manifestations. [...] What in today’s society has become a metaphor was in traditional society a real experience, albeit one difficult to communicate, an experience necessary in order to make explicit the paradoxical nature of extension. (Radu Drăgan – *Inverted Worlds*)*

A number of preliminary clarifications. *The House of the Soul* is the idea for an exhibition. We owe the idea in large part to the “Regions of Romania — The Buzău Region. Cultural and Natural Heritage as a Basis for Sustainable Development” project, initiated by the University of Bucharest — Geomedia Centre and financed by the Administration of the National Cultural Fund in 2007. During fieldwork carried out in the summer of that year, we were able to do preliminary research on the subject of the *alms cottage* custom, one of a series of burial and commemoration practices from the north of Buzău county. In 2013 the curatorial idea took shape as a response to the proposal that the Venice Biennale of Architecture made to the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant (MȚR) to put forward an exhibition that would enter into dialogue with the theme for 2014, *Fundamentals*, in a space made available to the MȚR. For various reasons, the exhibition did not come to fruition, remaining at the proposal stage. In the meantime, the project was resumed in a somewhat more complex form and with more substantial funding—“Applied Research for Sustainable Development and Economic Growth following the Principles of Geo-Conservation; Supporting the Buzău Region UNESCO Geo-park initiative”, set underway by the Romanian Academy’s Sabba S. Ștefănescu Institute of Geodynamics and financed by the European Economic Area Financial Mechanism (EEA Grants) and the Romanian Ministry of Education — which made it possible to revisit the locations where we had discovered the alms cottage tradition, mentioned cursorily in the *Festivals and Customs* volumes published by the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore. The title we have chosen for the exhibition we present below — *The House of the Soul* — was inspired by Radu Drăgan’s book *Inverted Worlds*.

Contexts and structures. In the traditional world the system of dwelling struck a balance between the criterion of utility and that of rules relating to protection from all kinds of danger. The starting point was a mono-cellular space that had to be big enough to contain the bare essentials for dwelling. (Wooden) structures were shelters that guaranteed continuity: houses — families, churches — communities. Both the one and the other could be moved under extreme circumstances: portability was taken into account during the design phase. In any event, churches also adopted the symbolic model of the ship, which through the rituals enacted in them transported the community safely to the next world. There was potential for mobility both within the material world and between this world and the next. Sacred architecture found its fulfilment in the practice of ritual, abidance by the canons, and affirmation of dogmas.

The opposite model can also be found in the potential imaginary modes present in the world of the village: ritual can generate a built space, whose purpose is likewise to enable crossing between worlds. But here we are no longer dealing with an institutional type of organisation and administration. We have entered the realm of folk beliefs, a blend of theology and magic. This system of rules is more readily subject to modification than in the institutional case of the church. The main tools of actualisation are

piety and charity on the part of the believers. One such example is the “alms house” we found in Bisoca, in northern Buzău County, near the old monastery of Poiana Mărului.

Description. In brief, the custom of the “alms house” is as follows: at a set period of time after the funeral — forty days, termed the *Panagia* in the ecclesiastical space and in the traditional village, but also other intervals of up to one year, in special circumstances — the family of the deceased donates as alms to a poorer family a wooden structure that has all the trappings of a temporary dwelling / shelter, furnished and equipped with the bare essentials for survival or a simple life (bed, chair, table, bucket, crockery, cutlery; to these may also be added various other items: an icon, stove, cooker, cupboard, shelves, clothes rack, calendar, paintings etc.). The rationale behind this arrangement comes from the mode in which peasants from this region (and also other regions) picture the next world. According to this conception, the next world mirrors the world in which we live our earthly lives. In the next world, you will still be able to meet your friends and neighbours. Consequently, a projection of the real village is a world that enables a form of dwelling which preserves all the characteristics of the material world. But in order for the deceased to possess all the household items he needs in the next world, his family must perform the ritual of *pomană* (commemorative almsgiving). Practised in all the Romanian traditional spaces, *pomană* enables communication between this world and the next. In the particular form encountered in Bisoca, *pomană* transcends a merely alimentary order. The physiological and sensorial possibilities of the human body as it is imagined post mortem are thereby enlarged: from the interior (alimentation) to the exterior (habitation). In addition, whereas alimentary alms are believed to reach the deceased by means of the consumption and use of the offering by the living (once only, in the case of food, and on various occasions in the case of crockery and utensils), use of the alms house is continuous: quasi-permanent habitation of the new space by a new body, which in their writings some theologians and monks call the *spiritualised body*. This ritual can also be found in Moldavia — Galați, Bacău and Neamț counties — where the house is simulated through the use of rush matting rather than blankets or prefabricated wooden elements. Also relevant is the name of the practice: *Grijă* (Care) or *Grijanie* (Caringness), because it includes a psychological function, even if this is sooner a secondary element for the family of the deceased in relation to what makes the funerary practices as a whole viable, namely a particular mode of viewing life, death and the world.

How the ritual unfolds. The “alms house” is built in the yard of the deceased’s home. The person who will receive the house lies down on the bed inside and the priest blesses the *pomană*: “This house, with its bed and table, is given to X for the soul of Y!” The structure is then disassembled, and the parts are taken to the yard of the family that will receive the *pomană*, where they are re-assembled. More often than not, “alms houses” are used as summer kitchens or storage spaces. Improvements are made to some of them and they are then lived in. The materials used to build them are wood, but we have also come across examples in which prefabricated wood materials are employed. They are situated near the main house and the garden.

The “alms house” is an element of continuity (a bridge, threshold, passage) and articulation between this world and the next. But what enables the existence of this element connecting the two worlds is corporeality. The transfer of the house and its items from one family to another binds them through the custom of commemorating the dead both in the real community and, above all, in a future, imagined community, to which the villagers from Bisoca relate with remarkable urgency. We witnessed such a commemoration, carried out a few days before the *Panagia* (fortieth day). We were told that the deceased had to find his house as soon as he was subjected to the *provisory judgement* (according to Orthodox Christian doxology, the *individual judgement* of the soul takes place forty days after burial), whence the family’s concern that the ritual be fulfilled in time and in accordance with all the prescriptions of the community. The deceased’s body and the living body of him who receives the alms enter into a relationship of likeness and communication whereby the two worlds find points of convergence, with the *alms house* thereby becoming a sounding box. The minimal house (in this world)

and the garden (in the next world) create a utopic space. The house is conceived as a dwelling / shelter sufficient to allow survival in a world imagined as the Garden of Heaven.

Documentation. The bibliography we consulted widened the area encompassed by these spatial simulations of dwelling in the next world, which besides their symbolic nature also display a mode of relating to life and death. Similar but non-durable structures (found in Moldavia and Muntenia) were made from rush mats or blankets (carpets, rugs): four poles the height of a room were planted in the ground and then the walls and ceiling were hung using these fabrics, also making assembly and disassembly easier. These flimsier versions are more similar to a shelter / tent, which obviously facilitates mobility. The same as in the case of the alms house at Bisoca, the interior was equipped with all the things required for living / dwelling. Then the structure was disassembled. In fact, almost all the items that furnished an interior are also to be found as offerings for the soul of the deceased in other areas of the country. But given that every custom always has the potential to be brought up to date and adapted, innovations will also occur, reinvigorating an old belief with new forms and materials.

We have found an interesting detail, which might open up research into possible connections, in a story that J. L. Borges adapts from the spiritualist writings of Emanuel Swedenborg. The story, "A Dying Theologian", was inspired by *Vera Christiana Religio, Continens Universam Theologiam Novae Ecclesiae* (1771), rather than by *Arcana Cœlestia* (1749–1756), as Borges claims, and recounts the sensorial experiences of a theologian (Melancthon) after his death. Everything around him is identical to the world he has just left. Gradually the new world alters in significant ways, and finally it is perceived according to the standard representation of hell. The cause of this transformation is the absence of charity in the writings and above all the soul of the theologian.

I have not spoken with Melancthon so often or so near as with Luther... Because he could not approach me in the same way, inasmuch as he devoted his study so fully to justification by faith alone, and not to charity... I have heard that as soon as he entered the Spiritual World, a house was prepared for him like the house in which he had stayed in the world... In his chamber also all things were like: a like table, a like desk with compartments, and also a bookcase; and therefore, as soon as he came thither... he placed himself at the table, and continued to write; and this concerning justification by faith alone; and in like manner for some days; and nothing whatever about charity. When this was perceived by the Angels, he was asked through messengers why he did not write about charity also. He replied that in charity there is nothing of the Church; for if that were to be received as a kind of essential attribute of the Church, man would also ascribe to himself the merit of justification, and thence of salvation; and thus he would bereave faith of its spiritual essence.

The story is provocative precisely for the link between the two perfectly mirrored worlds and the act of Christian charity, whereby the real world seems to find its perfect continuation after death, exactly the same as in the model found in the village of Bisoca, where we find the ritual of gaining access.

Apart from the ethnographical information that localises the custom (also named *care*, *alms at the gate*, *the dead man's house*, and *the rush-mat house*), there is also a consistent description of the intermediate form, which is also practised with the alms you give during the recipient's life:

"I have made a house of rush mats, of four rush mats, I have put the bed inside the house, I have put rugs on the walls, we have placed a lamp to the east, by the lamp and the bed I have placed a table. On the table I have placed all kinds of dishes: a plate of kolivo, a plate of pilaff, whole roast chickens and loaves of bread. Take a bag, in the bag place a roast chicken, a loaf of bread and a knife, food as for a journey, that he may have it in the world beyond. I have planted a tree over there, to the east, as at a betrothal, a tree taken from the earth, roots and all. We have planted two trees, for the man and for myself, for we have each thought of it. I put my clothes in the tree. I put there stockings, footwear, blouse, slip, then a white skirt... At root of the tree place a live chicken. Make a ladder from candles and ring loaves, also place in the tree a towel for wiping the eyes. Put everything there. Then start to give them away: give away the clothes, give them to whom you like. First to strangers. Give not to a young boy, because you will say you have fathered him once more."

Similarities. We have observed that the logic behind the building and donation of such structures is the same as that behind the wayside crosses / shelters to be found at crossroads, which are points where a tension exists between this world and the next. Likewise, wayside crosses / shelters are also erected to commemorate the souls of the departed and often feature a well, which is also viewed as a means of communicating with the next world. We asked ourselves whether the “humbleness” of such structures might have a connexion with the tabernacles that St Peter the Apostle thought to erect on Mount Tabor, during the Transfiguration, for Jesus, Elias and Moses, who crossed between worlds and whom he wished to bring closer. It is a supposition whose validity remains to be examined.

The artistic concept of the project. We propose to construct an “alms house”, which will be accompanied by a book and a documentary film. The exterior space (the gallery) will become habitable, having been structured in accordance with the ritual. The structure will come into being *in situ* and will be invested with the alterity of a place possessing the symbolic power of ritual dwelling. Being a composite of building materials and specific items, the structure of the dwelling space, although fundamentally symbolic / religious in its functions, will, as a visual space, acquire the features of a post-modern cultural product.

Version 1. As a counterpoint (work-in-progress) to the alms house (dimensions: 2.5 / 2.5 / 2.2 metres), a craftsman will build a wayside cross (dimensions: 1.5 / 1.5 / 2 metres). The relationship between the two structures will create a more powerful and complex territory situated at the point where two worlds intersect and overlap: this world and the next, the HERE and the BEYOND.

Version 2. The current form of the alms house (dimensions: 2.5 / 2.5 / 2.2 metres) will be encapsulated in the previous form (consisting of traditional carpets that incorporate the vegetal elements of the garden through textile fibres, natural colours and decoration, reconstructing the symbolic context of the Garden of Heaven), expanded to dimensions of 6 / 6 / 4 m. The “house inside a house” formula (the perishable husk and the seed that actualises and gives re-birth) is one in which past and present, this world and the next coexist.

Items for the exhibition space. Old and contemporary realia, autobiographical items (photographs, furniture) and typical bought items (from wholesalers, markets) used in commemorative almsgiving, in order to achieve a true-to-life recreation of the ritual.

Materials. Wood, in the framework of the structure. Wool and blends of synthetic fibres for the fabrics and carpets. OSB panels and pine planks. Undulated or sheet metal panels for the roof.

Household items. Plates, cups, cutlery, kettle, mirror, clothes, hooks, bed, pillow, blanket, table, chairs, bucket, stove.

Sound installation. Audio montage in which we have included archive recordings of *bocete* (*bocet s.*, *bocete pl.* – improvised lament, usually versified and sung to a particular melody, part of the funeral ritual), as well as field recordings with those whom we interviewed on the subject.

Translated by Alistair Ian Blyth.

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ALMS HOUSE 1 /

details

01



02



03



a



b



c



d



e



f



At a set period of time after the funeral, the family of the deceased donates as alms to a poorer family a wooden structure that has all the trappings of a temporary dwelling/shelter, furnished and equipped with the bare essentials for survival or a simple life (bed, chair, table, bucket, crockery, cutlery; to these may also be added various other items: an icon, stove, cooker, cupboard, shelves, clothes rack, calendar, paintings, etc.). The rationale behind this arrangement comes from the mode in which peasants from this region (and also other regions) conceive of the next world.

ALMS HOUSE 2 /

contexts

01



02



03



a



b



c



d



e



f



g



More often than not, "alms houses" are used as summer kitchens or storage spaces. Improvements are made to some of them and they are then lived in. The materials used to build them are wood, but we have also come across examples in which prefabricated wood materials are employed. They are situated near the main house and the garden. The "alms house" is an element of continuity (a bridge, threshold, passage) and articulation between this world and the next. The minimal house (in this world) and the garden (in the next world) create a utopic space. The house is conceived as a dwelling/shelter sufficient to allow survival in a world imagined as the Garden of Heaven.



01



02



03



04



05



06



07



How the ritual unfolds

VERSION 1a /

wayside crosses
contexts

01



02



03



04



05



found at crossroads

06



07



wayside crosses/
shelters

08

wayside crosses are also erected to commemorate the souls of the departed and often feature a well, which is also viewed as a means of communicating with the next world

points where a tension exists between this world and the next



VERSION 1a /

details

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