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LOST IN SPACE

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A HOUSE IS NOT JUST A HOUSE

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It is not an easy task to talk about something you are keen about, and yet to be impartial. But it is an experience worth trying. Therefore, I will write, and do my best to cling to facts as much as possible.

Once upon a time, in Bucharest, there was a district. A most wonderful one, as well as one of the eldest, which had been preserved. It was quite representative, in my opinion, for the city. Its name was Dealul Spirii.

More than three quarters of it were pulled down in the 1980s.

I will not deal here with the causes and effects of this almost apocalyptic process, which was basically rooted in a mad lack of responsibility, and resulted in a long-term tragedy, as far as Romanian civilization was concerned. Fortunately, some specialists have already referred to some of these aspects (see Leahu 1993, 1995; Boldur-Lățescu 1992, 1994; Anania *et alii* 1995), and presumably still others will continue to do so.

But I *will* attempt to describe this area, in the first part of the present essay, and to focus on one house thereof, afterwards.

Some two centuries ago, roughly until the mid-19th century [...], both the aristocracy and the petty bourgeoisie built fairly beautiful houses for their families. The aristocrats built aristocratic houses, while the merchants built bourgeois houses; all these dwellings were characterized

3. *Public Place – Private Spaces / Loc public – Spații private*

by remarkable civility. The thesis put forth by certain snobs [...] that Bucharest is only a huge village, which has grown up at random, on a ground lacking both in tradition and in style, only proves the aforesaid snobs' callousness and lack of culture. Bucharest is [or rather was, my specification, M.N.] a city which was built in a rational way (though, obviously, not according to plans) around various monumental centres (usually churches). (Paleologu 1999: 8)

Anyway, in Dealul Spirii district, straight lines and angles were an abstract notion, much rather than a constant value. They were not found at crossroads. Streets were almost never parallel to, or perpendicular on one another. They were sinuous and sloping. As a rule, the sidewalks were wide enough; for about a century, they had been laid with asphalt. Also by the end of the 19th century, water-piping was installed, electricity was introduced (cf. Bulei 1990; Georgescu *et alii* 1996; Giurescu 1979; Țără 1997). All the streets in this zone were paved. When the streets were so devious, houses could be hardly said to make a frontage. After all, why should they? Some specialists have even gone as far as saying that many wind draughts could be avoided in this way.

There were houses of all sorts and kinds in Dealul Spirii. And so must have been the people who had once made their dwellings there. To my mind, this seems to be the most important feature in the district. I think that the streets and houses in Dealul Spirii were the token of a lifestyle. They were the actual manifestation of the dominant mentalities of Bucharest middle class around 1900. The mentalities characteristic of those townspeople living in Cazarmii Street, or Sapienței Street, or Uranus Street, or Antim Street. Any average Romanian reader is quite well acquainted with the

names of these streets from a fairly wide range of fictional works, from the comedies and sketches of I. L. Caragiale (1852-1912) to the works of G. Călinescu (1899-1965). When talking about the streets and houses in Dealul Spirii, stress ought should be laid on their *diversity*.

There were one-story or two-story houses. Sometimes, even three-story houses, but not too often. In the former half of the 20th century, basically in the inter-war period, even a few blocks-of-flats were built there. A four-, or five-story block-of-flats every ten or twenty houses. Churches were just as frequent, only more “discreet”. An inventory of these churches would be out of place in these pages. Anyway, most of them were demolished in the 1980s. A few have been “saved”. Saved, but “maimed”, nevertheless. Were it only because their peaceful and serene atmosphere (which had been a well-acknowledged fact for centuries) was chased for ever by the presence of the ugly blocks-of-flats built in haste in the late 1980s, in order to hide churches from sight. But it can be even worse. The precincts of monasteries or cloisters (like Antim, or Schitul Maicilor, or Mihai-Vodă) were destroyed, at least in part. Only one church (St. Spiridon’s), which had been completely pulled down, was rebuilt during the last decade. Strangely enough, the copy is more beautiful than the original was, *illo tempore*. I wish this event to have been a signal, not a symbol.

But let us forget about the present. Anyway, in Dealul Spirii district, it is hideous and tragic. And let us come back to what it was. To see *why* it was like that, while constantly keeping in mind that it could have stayed like that and progressed. Only it did not, and progress was arrested.

Dealul Spirii district was quite old. Its foundations had been laid about 1700. Its heterogeneous character stands

additional proof to this effect. Although most houses had been successively rebuilt and modernized meanwhile, some of them (or their “ancestors”) belonged to the 18th century (cf. Hagi-Mosco 1995; Leahu 1995; Giurescu 1979). They belonged to that particular century of the Enlightenment, as it is called elsewhere; in this country, the 18th century is known as the epoch of the Phanariotes’ reign. A couple of big, aristocratic, houses were standing side by side with solid, petty bourgeois houses, and with small, tiny houses, which must have belonged to employees (see Leahu 1995, and *București sans frontières* 1996).

Moreover, this district stood in-between the ruins of the old Princely Court, dating from the mid-16th century, and the Metropolitan Church, built in the mid-17th. It was also bordered by Mihai-Vodă Monastery (end of 17th century), as well as by the southern end of Calea Victoriei, initially traced about 1700, and still considered as the main axis of Bucharest.

But it is something quite different, which I deem to have been overwhelmingly important there. Something I have seen nowhere else, save, perhaps, here and there, by Diham or Sfântul Mina, i.e., in some other fragments of old Bucharest. Fragments, which, so far, have been lucky enough to be preserved. This quite unique characteristic I have just alluded to is the way in which the houses in Dealul Spirii district were able to *live together*, in a fairly companionable, live-and-live way. For it is a fact that no one who has ever lived in any of these houses, just as no one who has ever traveled there – irrespective of their, possibly high, artistic taste – claimed to have been disturbed by the houses’ multifarious proportions and welfare. For a well-sized house, which put forth a wealthy appearance, with two entrances, a garden, and sometimes (though not too often) a garage, was usually followed by a

small, and almost humble, house. Nobody has ever been disturbed by the fact that houses had been built according to so many, and so sundry, styles. This heteroclitous architecture *could* become a style. And it did.

Dealul Spirii district was just as decent, sound, and honourable, as the well-known aristocratic and upper middle class ones, more recently built around Grădina Icoanei (end of the 19th century), Parcul Filipescu (after World War I), or round the Lakes (just before World War II). The three latter residential districts, beautiful though they are, do not differ so much from the residential district round Dupont Circle in Washington, D.C. or, say, from the aristocratic suburbs in the North of London.

But the style in Dealul Spirii was quite different, and fairly genuine. And it *was* a style, not just a “picturesque Balkan agglomeration”, as a few snobs used to say.

In effect, I would like to talk about a specific house. In my eyes, this house was an emblem.

The address was 31, Bateriilor Street. Actually, the house stood at the crossroads between Bateriilor and Logofățul Nestor Street.

Unfortunately, I have no photograph.

But it ought to be made clear from the very start that none of my family had ever owned it, or contributed, in any way, to building it. Nonetheless, for seven years (1959-1966), my parents and I lived there in rather promiscuous terms. Town Hall authorities had attributed us two rooms, out of the six the house consisted in (cf. *infra*), and we shared the lobby, the kitchen, and the toilet with an old lady.

I have never known who the last owners of the house were, neither do I know under what circumstances they had been deprived of it.

3. Public Place – Private Spaces / Loc public – Spații private

I do not think that this house was particularly beautiful. It was only functional and unobtrusive. It was also quite smart and almost aristocratically discreet. If it still existed, I suppose I'd try to buy it. Or, as I am quite aware that it is really priceless, I would just be happy to know it is there. But it is no longer there.

The house was built at the beginning of the 20th century; from the very start, it had had electricity and running water. Later on, methane gas was heating the old terracota stoves.

The people who built it knew quite well what they were doing. Every detail had been thoroughly thought of. Everything had been taken into consideration. Very few things were amiss, and there was no excess.

It was a two-story house. At the ground floor, there was an entrance from the street, besides the main entrance, which was, naturally, from the (small) courtyard. The former entrance led only to the ground floor. The latter one led also to the upper floor. In the courtyard, there were also two side entrances. The one leading to the ground floor was just besides the kitchen. The backstairs, which led to the bathroom at the upper floor, were made of wood; all the steps had metal edges. The bannisters were also made of wood. Under the backstairs, there was the cellar. Quite a large one, with well-built vaults, and paved with cement.

The side entrance at the ground floor was just below the side entrance on top of the backstairs. I suppose the caterers were meant to come this way into the kitchen. And I am pretty sure that one or another member of the family used to go out this way, whenever they wanted to give visitors a slip. In the courtyard, there was also the pantry, and a rest room (basically for the kitchen staff, I guess).

I suppose the house must have been originally meant for a two-children family, or for a young couple still living with (one of) their parents.

Now let us imagine getting into the house. Let us start by visiting the ground floor. (Anyway, unless you are a member of the family, you can hardly be admitted at the upper floor, since the bedrooms and the bathroom are located there.)

Two steps, leading to the threshold. A double metal door, with big frosted windowpanes, with a wrought-iron lattice outside. If you had left a windowpane half-open, and you had forgotten your key, you could squeeze your arm through the lattice, and unlock the door from the inside. In the former half of the 20th century, streets in Bucharest were secure.

A tiny vestibule. Another step. Then the actual vestibule. Half of it was paved with parquet, like all the rooms. The next half (the one along the dining-room) was paved with cement, like the kitchen. But let's not anticipate. We are still in the vestibule. On the right, the maid's room. Or perhaps an office (one cannot be sure, as long as no family chronicle has come up). And, of course, the main lobby, where the big wooden staircase was, which led to the upper floor. Then, still on the right side, next to the kitchen door, there was the side door getting to the courtyard.

On the left side, the sitting room came first. It was not exactly round, but originally it must have been meant to be. It consisted of five walls. It had two huge windows, each of which gave into a different street.

In effect, all the rooms in this house were really huge and tall, and so were the doors and windows. (For instance, whenever my father, who is 1,80 m tall, wanted to change a bulb of the hanging ceiling lamp, he had to climb on a stool put on the dining-room table.) I have often wondered why

the rooms were so big. The only possible answer I could find is that people were quite aware, in those times, that they ought to breathe.

A double door led from the sitting room to the dining room. Another, much smaller, door led from the dining room to the latter part of the vestibule. At the back, there was the kitchen. A big one, heated by a cylindrical iron stove, and (as already pointed out) with cement on the floor. The door leading from the vestibule into the kitchen had two transparent windowpanes. (Whoever owned this house could by no means suffer from claustrophobia, and the kitchen maid, if there was one, had to be supervised, even though fleetingly.) But there was only *cold* running-water in the kitchen. No water-boiling device. (I think that this was the only flaw in the almost perfect design of the house.)

If you were in the vestibule, and did not choose to go to any of the rooms, and neither to the kitchen, you could turn right and go out to the courtyard and to the outbuildings there (see above).

And so, we have made a complete tour of the ground floor.

As already specified, both the main staircase and the side one, were in the courtyard. The door to the main staircase was, in its turn, a double iron door, with two frosted windowpanes, and preceded by two steps. It gave access to a square lobby, which communicated, through a small door, with the vestibule at the ground floor. In the midst of it, there was a dark wooden staircase, with wooden bannisters.

It is an aristocrat, who is also an art historian and a philosopher of culture, who explains why staircases, in general, were made of wood, and not of marble:

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“As a rule, aristocratic houses were big, beautiful houses, usually consisting of a Hochparter and an upper floor. They had a round sitting room, paved by marquetry, while the rest of the house usually had parquet or even stained wood. Never were these houses anything but humane and courtois; never were they meanly arrogant and overwhelmingly imposing. Special stress ought to be laid on their wooden staircases. Rare essences of wood, definitely, but always wood. Marble is usually a material flattering the upstarts’ vanity.” (Paleologu 1999: 8)

I am pretty sure that the house in 31, Bateriilor Street had not belonged to an aristocratic family. Therefore, it is very much to its owners’ credit that they did not seem to have any upstarts’ complexes.

Now let us get back into the house.

On top of the main staircase there was a door, leading to another vestibule (rather a lobby), placed exactly above the ground floor vestibule. The bathroom was above the kitchen. This time, there was an old-fashioned boiler, heated with methane gas.

At the upper floor, once again, there were three rooms. Two bedrooms and a living room, I think. A very small balcony, from the living room, above the crossroads. There was only room enough for two stools. Their possible occupants could have a good view over the neighbourhood, viz. Bateriilor Street, Logofătul Nestor Street, and even the bell tower of Antim Monastery, not far away.

I have never been up to the attics. I don’t even know how you could get there.

All I know is that that I have often thought about this house, ever since we left it, and even more so ever since it was demolished. I suppose the souvenirs about this house and about

this district are the last I will ever forget. I am pretty sure that my strong attachment to this house (31, Bateriilor Street) could by no means be accounted for by events in my personal biography, by family or friendship ties. It is only accounted for by the very fact that both this house and this area once existed. This essay does not refer, even obliquely, to my own childhood. It refers to the maturity of this nation.

REZUMAT

În Dealul Spirii, unghiurile drepte erau mai curând un concept abstract. În configurația străzilor, în orice caz. Trotuarele, destul de largi, erau, desigur, de un secol asfaltate, iar străzile – în pantă, sinuoase, aproape niciodată paralele sau perpendiculare – aveau, de regulă, pavaj din piatră cubică. Când nu era pavaj, era asfalt. Pe străzi atât de des șerpuitoare, era greu ca, fie și în stadiul de proiect, casele să fi fost aliniate. Nu doar că nu erau, dar nici nu cred că-și va fi pus problema asta cineva. De ce să și-o fi pus?

Iar casele din Dealul Spirii erau fel de fel. Și tot așa trebuie să fi fost și oamenii care le-au locuit cândva. Pentru că *asta* mi se pare mie important, până la urmă. Eu cred că străzile și casele din Dealul Spirii erau expresia materială a unui stil și mod de viață. A mentalității care-l caracteriza pe cetățeanul mediu al Bucureștiului de la 1900. Cel din strada Sapienței, sau Cazărmii sau Antim. (Nu mai fac conexiunea cu literatura; e prea evidentă, tot așa cum e și motivația autorilor de a-și fi plasat tocmai acolo personajele.)

Casele aveau câte un cat sau două. Uneori chiar trei, dar rar. Câte un bloc de început sau de mijloc de secol XX (interbelic, totuși) cu trei, sau maximum patru etaje, apărea

precum măgarul între oi, cam la zece-douăzeci de case odată. Și bisericile – mai discrete însă ca prezență – aveau o frecvență asemănătoare. Câteva au fost salvate, chipurile. Mutilate însă – de n-ar fi decât fiindcă ambientul lor de pace și senin a fost gonit pe veci de blocurile ce, forțat, le înconjoară. Alteori, mai rău, ca la Antim sau Schitul Maicilor, deși a rămas biserica, zidul de incintă (sau o bună parte a lui) a fost distrus. Doar o singură biserică, rasă de pe lume, a fost refăcută. Mi-aș dori să fie un semnal, nu un simbol.

Să lăsăm însă prezentul – care, în Dealul Spirii, e hidos și tragic – și să revenim la ce a fost și, mai ales, *de ce* a fost așa. Și la ceea ce încă ar mai fi putut să fie. Aș vrea, de fapt, să vă vorbesc despre o casă. Pentru mine, o emblemă. Nici eu, nici familia mea nu am *clădit* vreodată acolo, în sensul propriu al cuvântului. Vreme de șapte ani (1959-1966), am fost chiriași, în semi-promiscuitate cu alte familii de chiriași. N-am știut niciodată cine a fost ultimul proprietar și în ce condiții s-a trezit lipsit de casa din Bateriilor, 31, colț cu Logofătul Nestor.

Fusese construită pe la începutul secolului și se încălzea, de pe atunci, cu gaz metan. Nu cred că era, în mod special, frumoasă. Era numai funcțională, fără ostentație, și elegantă, cu o discreție aproape aristocratică. Dacă ar mai exista, m-aș strădui s-o cumpăr. Sau, poate, pentru că știu bine că nu are preț, m-aș mulțumi numai să știu că e acolo. Nu mai e. Știu doar că e casa visurilor mele, chiar dacă, pentru a încerca să o descriu, am făcut eforturi s-o “golesc” de promiscuitatea împărțirilor și “adaptărilor” ad-hoc de după naționalizare. De casa din Bateriilor, 31 nu mă leagă propria biografie, nici familia, nici prietenii. Mă leagă doar faptul că această casă și această zonă au existat. Nu am scris aici despre copilăria mea pierdută, ci despre maturitatea unei nații.

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