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*Zigeunerpaläste. Die Architektur der Roma in Rumänien*  
(review)

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**Zigeunerpaläste. Die Architektur der Roma in Rumänien.** Rudolf R. Graef. 2007 Cluj Napoca: Interferențe. Rumänische Akademie. Zentrum für Siebenbürgische Studien. 153 pp. ISBN 978-3-7784-21-6

Reviewed by Elisabeth Tauber and Gertrud Tauber

First of all, what makes this little book so readable? It's a sentence in the third part which draws our attention to the work's main thesis: "The dissociation of material support from social content demonstrates a grandiose ability to affirm and understand the social, the resource-less community (city, monuments or other time-resistant artefacts)." (p. 127, all quotes translated from German).

The author quotes none of the well-known ethnographic studies on Romanies from all over Europe, but his observation from an architectural point of view consolidates what ethnographers have been writing now for the last forty years. At the same time, he writes that "the Gypsy palaces (*Zigeunerpaläste*) have to be seen as cultural products with all implicit and explicit rights." (p. 17) Rumanian society is not yet sure about this (see p. 9), and therefore this work can also be seen as a plea for the recognition of the cultural inheritance of the Rumanian Romanies. But his analysis leads him to more than this affirmation: it directs him also to the important realisation that Roma material culture is incredibly agile, transposable, flexible, and continuously re-created (p. 126). The author demonstrates this by confronting Gypsy palaces with the European monument. The structural substance of the European monument is untouchable, for it is part of the preserving and celebrating nature of the monument, while the Gypsy palace implies continuous change. An allowance or even an obligation to change is inscribed in its material form (p. 126).

The author writes that his contact with the Roma during the collection of material (800 photographs, a video and a field report) over two years was a challenge to his own cultural certainty and showed him the relativity of so-called scientific objectivity (p. 11). Graef describes a core element of the experience of ethnographic fieldwork—but he is a young architect.

His published thesis, "Zigeunerpaläste: Die Architektur der Roma in Rumänien" [Gypsy Palaces: Roma architecture in Rumania] is divided into three main parts. The first (pp. 15–47) provides an insight into the historical background and current situation of Rumanian Roma, in particular Kalderash Roma. The second part (pp. 51–81) develops the author's notes collected dur-

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ing his fieldtrip through Rumanian cities and villages where examples of the architectural phenomenon of these so-called Gypsy palaces are to be found. The author leads the reader through the regional similarities and dissimilarities of newly built Gypsy palaces. He draws attention to the architectural paradigms of the palaces which can be traced to the neoclassic and baroque styles and the Austro-Hungarian and Rumanian architectural traditions of the early 20th century. Some completely new elements have been added to these architectural languages, as “generally speaking empty, homogenous surfaces are not acceptable. Ornamentation has a high significance, since it is an effective way of fighting against the empty wall.” (p. 93) Roma refer to these architectural languages because of their representative character. This suggests that the central issue of Gypsy palaces is possibly representation. But here the author throws down a challenging question, at least for the ethnographer: how should we interpret the practice of burying gold coins—the main part of the dowry and of affinal negotiations—in the palaces’ foundations?

The third part (pp. 97–107) is dedicated to socio-cultural analyses of this phenomenon, based mainly on the theory of culture as a semiotic text and Bourdieu’s concept of *Habitus*. Graef subdivides the text into “architecture as text” and “architecture and identity”. Here the author gives a summary of what the Gypsy palaces tell the careful observer. Confronting Bourdieu’s analysis of the Kabyl house with the Gypsy palace, Graef suggests that the Gypsy palace does not hide or protect the interior, as we know from the Kabyl house. For Graef the Gypsy palace is a public building, not in the sense that it is open to everybody, but in contrast to the European model of the nuclear family’s private house; “private” in the Roma context is an “unacceptable concept for the self-identification of the individual” (p. 125). Following this logic, the most luxurious rooms remain closed for the routine of daily life. Nonetheless the Gypsy palace is in Bourdieu’s sense the expression of how the builder views the world, and himself or herself in it. Graef sees the Gypsy palaces as moments of public discourse whose protagonists are the different Roma families/clans who are actually building their own social prestige in the community (p. 125).

The author seeks an interdisciplinary approach which is challenged by the subject of the study itself—Gypsy palaces and their principles of construction which cannot be understood without an ethnographic and anthropological background. While on the analysis of the Gypsy palace, Rudolf Graef virtuously follows Roma architectural expression and interprets it in an adequate manner (it is not a “coffee-table book”, as Nemeth 2008 reviews the picture book, *Gypsy architecture: Houses of the Roma in Eastern Europe*), but his ethnographic summary of the underlying symbolic structure of Gypsy palaces is somehow sedate. An example is Graef’s reference to Roland Posner’s definition of culture: “Summarizing, one can say that culture in an anthropological

and archaeological sense is nothing but a society which owns a certain mentality on which it has developed a civilisation.” (2003: 48) (p. 98) Graef refers to this definition dealing rather summarily with concepts like culture, society, mentality and civilisation. He subdivides social, material and mental culture categorically as a way of explaining the rapid adoption of new codes in the architectural languages of the Gypsy palaces (p. 98). We think ethnographically proven concepts like “bricolage” and “hybrid” could be more helpful in explaining this grandiose cultural ability to dialogue with and express the world Romanies live in.

In conclusion, there remain some unanswered questions, such as “Why have the Gypsy palaces become so prominent while no architect has ever reflected on the architectural language of the Kalderash tents or the Roma caravans?,” and “Are tents and caravans not to be considered as architectural expressions of a lifestyle and, if so, who defines that?” Further, tents and caravans shape(d) everyday life and public spaces all over Europe without, however, being noticed as a cultural contribution to cities and places. Will the Romanies’ cultural–architectural legacy across Europe in the end get recognition only by the time it becomes understandable within the mainstream cultural concepts as in this case of the built house?

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**The Roma: A minority in Europe. Historical, political and social perspectives.** Roni Stauber and Raphael Vago (eds.). Budapest, New York: Central European University Press, 2007. 185 pp. ISBN 978-63-7326-86-8.

Reviewed by Claude Cahn

The book under review is a collection of essays arising from a conference held in Israel in 2002, although a number of the articles included make reference to events after 2004 and so have evidently been subsequently revised. The

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