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Rosia Montana, Romania:
An Analysis of its Heritage Conservation from an Architectural and Planning Perspective

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Abstract

Rosia Montana is a village located in the Apuseni Mountains, in the historical region of Transylvania in Romania. Its unique built environment has resulted from a series of contextual factors: the existence and exploitation of gold mines, the political and economic system that allowed private and state exploitation in different historical periods, the steep terrain and the spectacular landscape. From an architectural and planning point of view, the village is a traditional mining village frozen in time at the starting point of the urbanisation process.

After state mining had been interrupted at the end of the 1990s, a new mining project that requires the use of cyanide has been proposed. The heritage buildings, concentrated within and around the centre of the village, were used in the discourse of both those supporting the project and those who opposed it. On one hand, the heritage was employed to strengthen the discourse on development by selecting individual valuable buildings to be saved and renovated. On the other hand, the heritage was part of a discourse where the whole existing built fabric is valuable and needs to be protected. These two attitudes are complicated by political tactics meant to curtail small interventions into the existing fabric in order to discourage an alternative development of the area.

Through an analysis of visual material collected during fieldwork and of documents, maps and media publications, this paper navigates the complexities around heritage buildings and planning regulations that are supposed to protect valuable built environment while at the same time allow for development. In this case, tensions between heritage conservation and mining development supported by planning regulations become apparent.

This paper analyses the role of heritage buildings and demonstrates how they can be used with the intention to manipulate public opinion. Due to rapid and ample public protests against a proposed mining project which threatened buildings, churches, Roman mining galleries and four surrounding mountains, the mining company created a discourse focused on development, but tightly connected with tradition. Those opposing the project had the heritage buildings and the value of the cultural landscape at its core. Thus, it became a dichotomy and tradition was employed as the continuity of the process by one party and as the continuity of the product by the other. This became apparent over two fieldwork trips in Roșia Montana, Romania in 2014 and 2017. As one walked through the village, signage, plaques, banners, full-sized canvas over facades and other written messages were visible on the buildings' facades. The presence of the mining company is overwhelming and this study is focusing on their messages and the meaning of the signage. The strong connection of the village with mining over millennia and the often used word of tradition made an analysis of tradition necessary. The employed methodology made use of visual material collected during fieldwork, theoretical concepts of tradition as well as official documents, maps, news from the media and legislation to understand the history of the village, its current situation and the role of the built environment.

Photographs were taken during the first and second field trips, which captured the state of the built environment, but also the discourse of the two main parties, those opposing and those supporting the proposed mining project. Maps and planning documents were sourced from the council and other organisations, while sketches and observations completed the fieldwork. These bring up an inherent conflict within the idea of heritage, requiring a theoretical framework able to entangle the discourse on heritage, tradition and continuity.

Part of the theoretical concepts emphasised by this case study is in relation to 'invented tradition', a concept that entered the academic discourse in the past few decades.[1] Hobsbawm and Ranger argue that continuity is the element defining authentic tradition. The moment a tradition has to be revived, it becomes an invented tradition. Anderson also uses the term 'invented tradition' as that which allows for social dynamics, as parts of tradition that are not suitable anymore will be replaced and modelled for current needs. Upton argues that "in many cases, it is frustrating and possibly counterproductive even to try to make the distinction" between the two types of tradition.[2] Although this

may be true, not having a clear distinction can create confusion and be used as a means of manipulation. The case study of Rosia Montana attempts to ascertain the conflict within heritage (that is if the continuity of the mining activity prevails, the heritage which this activity created over millennia will be destroyed), then discuss invented tradition and continuity as problematic.

Cultural heritage also needs to be defined in order to articulate the interests and approaches of different invested parties in what the outcome will be: preservation of the built heritage or the continuity of the mining tradition. Cultural heritage represents either monuments, groups of buildings or sites "of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science."[3] In addition to this global perspective, countries often attempt to protect their cultural heritage with national legislation. For example, Romanian law regulates the preservation of cultural heritage, which is categorised in a manner similar to that described by UNESCO.[4] The List for Historical Monuments is the official document that registers archaeological, architectural and public monuments, and memorial and funeral monuments. It is managed by the Cultural and National Identity Minister. The monuments cover different historical periods, from prehistory to the twentieth century and have either global or national significance.

The next section of the paper will detail the history of the village which became essential to understand when analysing present debates in relation to the mining project. Then, the cultural significance of the village is demonstrated through its presence in literature and the film industry. The mining project will detail what it means for the area and how it developed so far, bringing to surface the dichotomy between continuity as a process and as a product explained in the following sections. We will then look in more detail at the mining company's discourse before drawing conclusions.

The History of the Mining Village, Rosia Montana

The first known document to attest the settlement at Roșia dates from 131 BC and it is a 'wax-tablet' (*tăbliță cerată*) discovered in the galleries of the mine. The tablet was used for writing down transactions between the individuals of the mining community, such as contracts of purchase and sale, mine rental and receipts for loans repaid. Wax-tablets were found in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries inside the ancient mines and range in date from 131 to 167 BC. This evidence makes Roșia the oldest attested settlement in Romania.

Archaeological evidence indicates that the settlement is approximately 4500 years old, and mining activities have likely been undertaken throughout its history.[5] During Roman occupation (106-175 AD), the settlement was called Alburnus Maior and was built as a colony close to the mines. In medieval times the valley was called Verespatak in Hungarian, or Valea Roșie in Romanian, and there were two settlements from antiquity until the nineteenth century when the semi-urban centre of Roșia started to take shape.

Roșia Montană is one of the sixteen villages that make up the commune with the same name in Alba County, central-west Romania. It is situated on the north-west side of the Carpathian Meridionali in the Apuseni Mountains, 10 km from the town of Abrud and 15 km from Câmpeni.[6]

From an administrative point of view, Roșia Montană is a village and the commune's main locality. From an architectural and planning point of view, it is a "traditional mining village frozen in time at the starting point of the urbanisation process."[7] There is a large square at the centre of the village, which once hosted a weekly market (Figure 1). Public facilities such as the casino open into the square. The buildings are influenced by urban architectural styles such as baroque and eclectic. A numerous population strengthened the urban character of Roșia in the nineteenth century. But early in the twentieth century the population started to decline, and by 2002 it had reached 1,450 inhabitants, approximately one-third of the population registered in 1880.
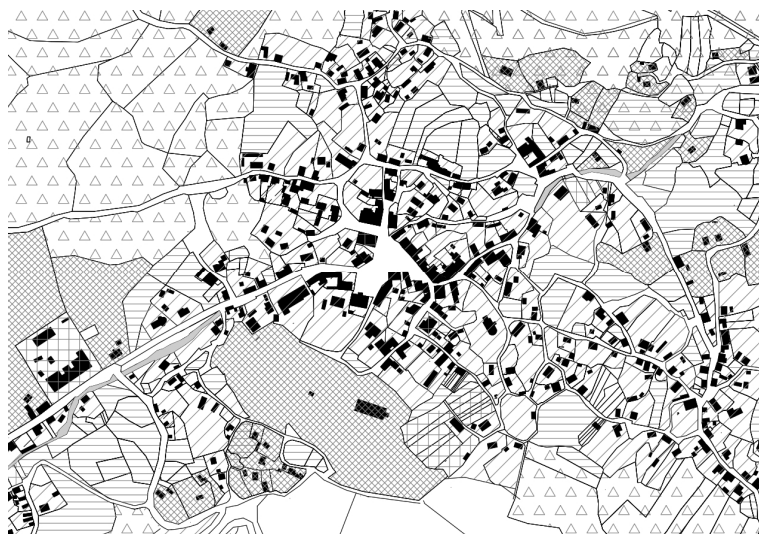

Figure 1. The built fabric of the village in proximity to the main
square, continuous frontages flanking the main square
(Drawing by Alexandra Florea).

Previous ethnic studies of the area focused on the methods of gold extraction and processing, with little reference to the built environment.[8] Indeed, mining has played an important role in shaping the village, for example, the houses are positioned according to the entrance in the mine where the family worked and the source of water.[9] Changes in extraction techniques have affected the built and natural environment of Roșia over time. For example, at the end of the eighteenth century, artificial lakes (*tăuri*) were created to ensure ore exploitation in cases of draught, some of which are still visible today.

Until 1948, the mines were managed privately by the inhabitants, usually organised in *cuxe*, a type of economic association between the owners of the mines.[10] When there was much work to be done, miners were employed by the owners and usually paid in produce: grain or gold. However, between the world wars, the situation in Roșia was no different from other villages in the mountains, characterised by poverty, lack of maintenance to the existent buildings and a lack of public buildings (i.e. cultural centres, libraries, communal baths).[11]

The urban influences such as continuous street frontage and the architectural elements of the buildings are attributed to the so-called freeholders (mine owners) mentioned above. These freeholders worked the mines until they were confiscated by the state during communism. The economic and social changes brought about by nationalisation contributed to outmigration to construction sites or coal mines and eight years later, in 1956, the population in Roșia dropped by 345 inhabitants.[12] During the 1970s, the open cast mining conducted by the state interrupted private exploitation, rendering the previous installations obsolete. Therefore, the former mechanism that used water to separate the gold from the rest of the minerals was destroyed, and the only one left in the village is a reconstruction.

Cultural and Architectural Value

Roșia Montană was the site for acclaimed films: *Stone Wedding*, directed by Mircea Veroiu and Dan Pita in 1973, and *Flames on Treasures*, directed by Nicolae Mărgineanu in 1987. The films were adaptations of stories written by Ion Agârbiceanu in the first half of the twentieth century and present psychological analysis of the human spirit. They are based on Agârbiceanu's period as a priest in the nearby village of Bucium, where he served for four years and witnessed the challenges experienced by the miners.[13] His depictions contrast with the typical idealised rural life.

These films, besides their importance for the cinematic industry, are considered testimonies of the valuable culture and architecture of the area. They also inspired contemporary documentaries of Roșia. The aim of these documentaries (*Roșia Montană: Town on the Brink*, *New El Dorado*, *Gold Futures*) and the campaign raised by Maia Morgenstern, an internationally acclaimed Romanian actress, was to draw awareness to the consequences of the mining project. Conversely, Roșia Montană Gold Corporation (RMGC) financed the *Mine Your Own Business* documentary to support the views of the mining industry. The site of Rosia has been put forward for UNESCO's consideration as a protected site and after several attempts, it was accepted as a World Heritage site in July 2021.[14]

The Mining Project

Mining activities had been interrupted at the end of the 1990s in Roșia due to inefficiency of extraction technologies and the state's incapacity to update those technologies. Since then, a new mining project has been proposed. The intent is to build a modern mine with four open pits and a factory for gold and silver. The proposed open pits are located on the ancient mine galleries and the existing open pit started in 1970 at Cetate. They are scheduled to be exploited in two phases, each phase with two pits (Cetatea, Cârnic and Orlea, Jig), so at no given time will the four pits be exploited together. The project plan outlines two years of construction, sixteen years of operation and four to ten years of closure and rehabilitation.[15]

The advantages of the mining project promoted by RMGC include: creation of jobs (1200 during construction and 650 during exploitation); 2 billion US dollars to the Romanian state; collection and management of acid water waste and pollution from previous extraction processes; restoration and conservation of existing historical and archaeological sites; and assurance that the areas affected by the project will be rehabilitated. A recurrent theme in the discourse of the pro-mining group is the current pollution in the hydrographic system of Roșia, environmental issues that will apparently be addressed by the company in their effort to reduce pollution in the area. The impact of using cyanide for the extraction of gold is predicted to comply with the limits imposed by the International Code of Cyanide Management. Conversely, there is some information that the documents regarding the stability of the soil beneath the proposed lake (in the territory of the nearby village of Corna) are false, and therefore risk cyanide spills into the waterways. A report by Robert Moran requested by Alburnus Maior, the

non-governmental organisation formed to protect the village, underlines data that were not available to the public, raising suspicions about the mining company, for example, regarding the pollution of the rivers.

In 2002, RMGC started acquiring properties in the area, and by 2008 had purchased 78% of the residential properties in the impact zone. It is argued that this occurred through negotiation with land owners on free market principles.[16] Inside the historical centre of the village Roșia Montană, most of the properties are owned by RMGC. It is unusual for properties in rural areas to be owned by companies, especially in such high percentages, and this has caused disruption within the community. Company ownership means that the buildings are not inhabited or used, which in the context of community life equals abandonment. The only exceptions are some properties in the main square that are used as offices by the mining company. These central properties can be used to display development promises and media advertising their own message.

To maintain existing ties within the community, the company proposed two places for relocation: a new village nearby, and a new neighbourhood on the outskirts of Alba Iulia, Alba County. The new village, Recea, will comprise in addition to the residential part, a centre with facilities such as a hall, school, police and churches. Further, RMGC has stated that they will facilitate the construction of infrastructure required for tourism, funds that are hard to obtain in remote areas. In fact, the area was categorised as mono-industrial in GUP documents, posing greater difficulties in developing formal tourist accommodation and leaving no alternatives for locals to develop businesses outside mining.[17] However, in peak season, many locals host tourists, offering accommodation, meals and local products. In 2011, during the musical festival FânFest in Roșia, all available accommodation in informal facilities (such as individual houses) was booked out. In 2015, news media advertised that the GUP document was annulled due to conflicts of interest.[18]

In spite of any proposed benefits, the arguments opposing the mining project are convincing:

> … the relocation of 910 households, displacement of about 2000 persons from 740 houses and 138 flats, demolition of four mountains, a lake of cyanide and toxic waste covering over 1800 hectares of land, demolished houses and buildings (many of them being of cultural patrimony such as the

famous Roman Galleries) and, last but not least, the exhumation of ancestors through the destruction of nine cemeteries and eight churches.[19]

Arhitectură. Restaurare. Arheologie (ARA) is an important organisation that investigated and published architectural studies, as well as restored buildings in the village. They emphasise the built and natural environment as a cultural landscape and thus the need to protect the village. The present study reveals several ways in which the different players employ tradition and the built environment to argue their cause in the case of the Roșia Montană mining proposal, analysing the role architecture has in a contemporary context. It is a paradox that the same concept can be used by opposing sides, therefore the relationship between authority, power and tradition must be deconstructed for a deeper understanding of the built environment in Roșia. Key buildings (such as the museum in the main square) have been restored or hung with real-size façades printed on canvas. Conversely, NGOs have actively restored houses, proposing their inclusion as UNESCO heritage sites, which would see the demise of mining claims.

Tradition can be distinguished as a process and as an object, the difference underlined by Rapoport in 1969.[20] Processes of tradition are understood to be transmission of culture from generation to generation, whereas objects are the products of this process. The continuity of the process (that is, of mining tradition, as claimed by the mining company) and the continuity of the objects and the built environment (as claimed by the preservationists) cannot be reconciled in this particular case.

The Continuity of Tradition as a Process – Mining

As detailed previously, the history of Roșia is intertwined with gold extraction. Although the landscape includes forests and agriculture, for example, from the total area of the commune (4161 ha), only 225 ha (or 5.4% of the total area) are used for agriculture. It has been argued that the integrity of the settlement as a whole is of great significance due to the particularities of the village resulting from working with the site and adapting the built and natural environment to centuries of mining activities.[21] Underground mines from as far back as the Roman occupation are open to the public as a museum.[22]

The impacts of mining on the surrounding natural landscape are clearly visible. Cârnic and Văidoaia peaks still bear traces of the traditional techniques of exploitation, with entrances to the mine and little or no vegetation. Cetate is a volcanic dacite massif

located south of the village, where spectacular Roman (and probably pre-Roman) open cast mining was visible until the 1970s.[23] Other human interventions in the landscape include seven artificial lakes constructed for mining activities: Tăul Mare, Țarina, Brazi, Anghel, Corna, Tapului and Găuri. They present examples of industrial technology characteristic of the eighteenth century and nineteenth centuries.[24] Piatra Corbului (Raven's Rock) and Piatra Despicată (Split Rock) are natural reserves acknowledged to have patrimony values of national interest.[25]

The Continuity of Tradition as a Product – Built Environment

Roșia's unique built environment has resulted from a series of contextual factors: the existence and exploitation of gold mines, the political and economic system that allowed private and state exploitation in different historical periods, the steep terrain and the spectacular landscape. For example, human negotiation of the difficult and steep natural environment has created terraces for buildings, constructions adapted to the slope and dry-stone walls used as fences or to retain terraces.

The built environment has many layers comprising the houses of the miners, the houses of the owners of the mines and other business people, in addition to blocks of apartments from the communist era. A variety of facilities have been developed in different historical periods to service the number of inhabitants and their activities. For example, the casino, currently closed, also had a summer garden, which now functions as a park for children. There was still a pharmacy and shops on the ground floor of the buildings around the main square in the twentieth century. Currently, there are only two grocery shops in proximity to the square.

The current state of the built environment varies according to its status. The mining company renovated or reinforced the structure of some buildings labelled as historical monuments to prevent collapse and demolished others that did not have heritage classification. Conversely, some historical monuments and traditional houses have been left in disrepair.[26] Some of the buildings have been rehabilitated and reconverted by the ARA association, for example, the former parish house, where various community events were hosted. The association held summer workshops with architecture students who helped at restoring different buildings with traditional technologies. Music festivals were also organised to attract tourists in the area. The focus of different NGOs and associations is to create viable economic opportunities for locals and help maintain valuable buildings in the village. They hoped for the entire site of Roșia to be included

in the UNESCO list of heritage buildings, as a unique landscape produced by the tradition of mining.

The built or cultural landscape of Roșia is currently being put in jeopardy by the mining project, which would require buildings, natural monuments and cemeteries to be relocated. In the case of relocation, these objects become museum pieces, as they are extracted from the culture that produced them. Further, pressure to start the mining project has led to rapid depopulation including the outmigration of doctors and other professionals.

The Discourse of the Mining Company
The mining company has rehabilitated some buildings and structures around the village of Roșia and demolished others, but they have also promised more investment into the existing heritage once the project commences. Part of the rehabilitated buildings are not being used, but they become part of the discourse advocating for the commencement of the project through plaques that show a before and after photo (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Examples of buildings restored by RMGC
(Photographs by Alexandra Florea).

Partial intervention of derelict structures and plaques with short descriptions of promised rehabilitation works and the symbol of the mining company are also used to garner support for the mining project. In one example (Figure 3), part of the message reads: "Between 1940 and 1980, the house suffered interventions at the facade level, leading to a loss of the original style. Currently, RMGC assures maintenance work and emergency interventions for this building, the rehabilitation following once the mining project starts." Traditionally the house would have been painted with a mixture of lime,

technique which is important to maintain the integrity of the structure. Several years later, it received a full-size printed canvas on the façade facing the road.

Figure 3. House no. 301. The roof is covered for protection and timber posts support the exterior wall. The finish that has degraded over time is visible around the windows and the base. Top image: 2014, Bottom image: 2017 (Photographs by Alexandra Florea).

Other selected buildings around the village received full-size printed canvas, presenting the future image of the building (Figure 4). Their role is to create the vision of what the village could look like once the mining project starts. The selection of buildings is based on its own historical significance and visibility within the village and thus they are typically on the main road. Other messages supporting the commencement of the mining project (such as written texts on key buildings or structures) endorse the legitimacy of mining activities in the area.

Figure 4. Top image: The message reads: "Rehabilitation by Roșia Montană Town Hall partnered with Roșia Montană Gold Corporation" (tense of the message suggests the rehabilitation has been completed, however in 2017 there was still a canvas to the main façade). Bottom image: "Rosia Montana exists because of MINING! Help us keep a valuable tradition of Apuseni mountains, MINING!"
(Photographs by Alexandra Florea).

RMGC appealed to the potential value people see in the continuity of tradition as a process to support the new project. In doing so, it appropriated the existing built environment charged with tradition. Is this a process through which tradition is invented?

A different stance on invented tradition is that one must not be deceived by the importance of the past in understanding the present.[27] Although there have been cases in which tradition was invented purely for ideological causes, invented tradition does not reflect people's creativity in responding to the environment, but it depends on the

reasons behind the created tradition. When the reasons are dubious, the result is an invented tradition, as it does not correspond to reality, but manipulates the masses for private interests, what Khan describes as the "setting up of rituals and modes of behaviour in pursuance of arbitrary social, political or economic agendas," or manufactured tradition.[28]

There are subtler visual connections with the proposed mining project through plaques with the RMGC symbol. These plaques explain succinctly the historical significance of the building and then briefly mention that it will benefit when the mining project starts as it will be rehabilitated. Several examples are presented below, where the derelict state of the existing buildings is noticeable (Figure 5). Whether this strategy was put in place from the start or it evolved along the process, the mining company's discourse has made use of the heritage. After RMGC bought hundreds of properties and the project faced opposition and delays, the purchased abandoned houses became a tool to convince an audience that is sensitive to heritage that mining is a way to save these unique buildings.

Figure 5. Examples of derelict buildings that have been
labelled as proposed for restoration once the mining project
starts (Photographs by Alexandra Florea).

Conclusions

The village of Roșia Montană has experienced a struggle between its history or tradition of mining and the present-day requirements and growth of the mining industry. Conflictingly, the mining company argues for further development in Roșia emphasising the continuity of the mining tradition, while being engaged in projects that protect existing heritage. However, huge excavations will also destroy many historic buildings located between the four mountains comprising the open pit. Each building is individually valuable, but the value lies in the village as a whole, with the underground mines and surrounding landscape.

What is the discourse of the individual or group holding the power in order to facilitate change in society and how are such discourses constructed that "represent true or false pictures of reality"?[29]

The discourse of the two sides (those supporting the mining project and those against) seems paradoxical at first glance, as they use the same concept: tradition. The company's argument rests on the fact that Roșia Montană's existence relied on mining and it should continue, in a proper manner, with technological efficiency. The other side argues that cyanide technology should be banned and tradition be kept by protecting the natural landscape and the architecture as a cultural landscape. Furthermore, they support the idea of tradition as the background for development, especially for cultural tourism, an industry that continues to grow in the twenty-first century.

In this particular case, having the heritage erased is not a desirable outcome. And although one might argue that through prioritising the integrity of the heritage over continuing a millennia old activity, the village is subject to invented tradition. It is in fact the mining company engaging in construing invented tradition. One way it does that is through its tactic of renovating key buildings to create the illusion of protecting the heritage, and thus aiming to manipulate the masses for an economic agenda. The mining company did not deploy a well thought plan sensitive to the specific area, working with the local community to achieve common goals, which is necessary to successfully develop a project that will erase a significant part of history.

Roșia Montană rejects the theory of well-defined terminology and brings to surface the complexities around tradition and modernity in the context of the built environment, which only emphasise the importance in interpreting concepts within the specific details of a project. Both views are politicised which makes a dialogue between the parties difficult.

The mining company employed the heritage in order to emphasise the importance of continuing the mining tradition, although if commenced, the proposed project brings destruction to the heritage and most likely provides little benefit to the local people. Their discourse represented a false picture of reality and the protests around the country and overseas in 2013 against the project are evidence of the misleading discourse of the company.

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