

WEST UNIVERSITY OF TIMIȘOARA
Faculty of Letters, History and Theology
Doctoral School of Humanities

**The earth in the diffuse building traditions of Banat.
Stories, habits and inherited know-how**

PHD THESIS SUMMARY

Coordinator: Prof. Dr. Otilia Hedeșan

Candidate: Alina Cristina Negru

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This work is the result of the doctoral research on the inherited know-how of the inhabitants of the Banat villages, passed on and incorporated through everyday practices of maintenance of the earthen heritage in the historical region of Banat. The purpose of the thesis is to illustrate the diversity of building traditions in this cross-border region and to document the role of professional and domestic knowledge in the conservation of earth-dwelled inhabited heritage.

The diversity of local building cultures of the historical lowlands of Banat, manifested over the time through a variety of techniques – rammed earth, adobe, earth filled timber frame, wattle and daub, and earthen plaster reflect the geodiversity of the studied territory and is in the same time reflected in the multitude of technical, formal and chromatic details of the facade of the house and other household annexes. The variety of multicultural expressions define the identity of the rural communities and of the built landscape of Banat: in the same area or even in the same village, a *rammed earth* house neighbors upon one made of *adobe* (unburnt brick) and upon a wattle and daub or a earthen filled timber frame annexe, all plastered with earth, painted in lime and decorated with stucco. Everyday practices of convivial and creative transformation of available mineral or vegetable resources - whether extracted or harvested in raw form from nature or resulting as waste from other human activities, such as chaff or dung - ensure both a circular economy of living and building with earth and a recyclability of the rural habitat, which can reintegrate into nature without creating waste once it ends its life cycle.

The methodological framework for documenting the widespread practices of building and daily maintenance of earthen heritage combines research methods specific to architecture and ethnology: written and drawn architectural documentation, ethnographic documentation through field observation and semi-structured interviews with holders of local knowledge. In order to document audio-visually and to practically validate the information collected in the field I applied the participatory observation method and when the know-how was not available anymore in the field I applied and adapted the *operational chain* method, reconstructing on the basis of literature traditional techniques that are no longer practiced today. Such a transdisciplinary perspective on earth heritage also involves the simultaneous interpretation of its material and immaterial components, highlighting their interdependence and the need for an integrated methodological approach to them.

In this way I documented fifteen houses inhabited by my interlocutors and conducted eighteen semi-structured thematic interviews with three categories of interlocutors: ten local people or owners of a house built with earth, four craftsmen or producers and four heritage specialists.

The correlation of the information collected in the field with the study of the specialized bibliography, the ethnographic surveys of the Romanian Ethnographic Atlas (AER) and the censuses of the National Institute of Statistics (INS) gives an overview of the rural heritage in the land. On the one hand, we have two images of the constructive traditions of the inhabitants of Banat, resulting from two ethnographic perspectives: the external one, of foreign travelers - generally sent by the Habsburg Empire to assess the state and potential of the colonized territory in the 18th and 19th centuries - and the internal one, of Romanian ethnography, among which Romulus Vuia, Valer Butură, Nicolae Săcară, Ion Taloş and Radu O. Maier are the reference names for this subject.

On the other hand, according to statistics, earth is present in a quarter of the national housing, a quarter of that of Banat and 40% of the housing in Timiș county. In addition to the bibliographic and field research of this diffuse heritage and of the local knowledge incorporated, linking this reality to the European context offers possible directions for the recovery and patrimonialization of the earthen constructive cultures with earth in Banat and Romania: from the Italian approach of heritage protection of historic centers which ensured the continuity of traditional practices in Italy, to the approach of national standardization of local natural materials in the case of Germany or the regional approach and large-scale professionalization of technical knowledge in France.

The common denominator of these approaches is the sustainability of constructive cultures with earth: the raw material is a natural resource that offers circular living and building solutions, healthy habitats with a low carbon footprint, involving a minimum consumption of fossil energy in the process of transforming the raw material into building or decorative material. In addition to its technical performance, building with earth brings people together, ensuring the cohesion and autonomy of rural communities. The accessibility and versatility of the material favors spontaneous transmission of know-how through practical activities and technical gestures that anyone can easily acquire.

Based on the collective intelligence, diffuse local knowledge about the constructive valorization of earth and of other natural resources is passed on from a generation to another in the form of *recipes* practiced in everyday life, which are shared and empirically validated by rural communities in many parts of the world. The ways in which this common collection of recipes contributed to the protection of rural housing and their scientific substantiation became topics of reflection for international research teams in order to find sustainable and circular solutions - based on nature and local knowledge - for bioclimatic and current socio-cultural challenges.

An important conclusion of this study is that the collective know-how about building land in the lowland Banat of the twentieth century is more related to the domestic world of householders than to that of the professional environment of paid craftsmanship. Performing and sharing the diffuse traditions related to earth building maintenance is part of the rhythm of daily life: new members of a household incorporate it by daily maintenance activities of the interior and exterior of the house, always under the careful guidance of the elderly. The natural embedding of the knowledge inherited by young people ensures the organic accumulation of the experience of previous generations, without the need to fix it through written archiving methods. Such sustainable, open-source use of local resources and technical knowledge – shared by rural communities to ensure the construction and maintenance of their earthen habitat – has led to the persistence of an important domestic heritage in Banat's rural areas.

This diffuse character of the house coating maintenance practices reveals another interesting look: the protection of the earthen habitat is one of the "nodal problems" of pre-industrial village communities. Building habits alternate with agricultural ones, in a ritualized rhythm: the operational chain of building with the local earth is interrupted by that of cultivating and harvesting it and all these cyclic activities are distinguished by moments of celebration for the entire community. In the spring, the villagers refresh the finishes of their own houses, before starting the agricultural work, then they produce the adobe, the rammed earth or the wattle and build together new constructions for the newlyweds, before the summer harvests. Plastering the house, which takes place in the spring, summer or fall, later becomes an annual habit of maintaining the house coating.

Beyond its decorative role and its social implications, the maintenance of domestic finishes is related to the intrinsic quality of housing, that of ensuring a healthy and pleasant living environment. More precisely, the exterior of the house represents a

third coating – after our skin and clothing – that provides the thermal comfort necessary for human habitat. Once the house is built, finishing and decorating it are part of the domestic duties of the women of the house, along with baking bread, maintaining the rammed earth floor or the Saturday house refreshing. Just like the home-baked cake or the everyday bread, wall decorations are part of the local knowledge package, practiced in a diffuse manner in the daily life of the last century. Passed on through domestic housekeeping practices like the pre-paschal custom of spring refreshment, the technical knowledge embodied by the collective female character of the Banat village has ensured the preservation to the present day of the diffuse vernacular heritage that defines the earth-built landscape of lowland Banat.

Both the inherited earthen habitat and the diversity of building traditions in Banat symbolize what is specific to this region: the intergenerational and multiethnic dialogue of all members of the village communities. Of any age, occupation or ethnicity - from nomads to sedentary people, from craftsmen to housewives, from children to the elderly, whether they were Romanians, Serbs, Hungarians, Germans, Bulgarians, Roma or Slovaks, they were all involved in different phases of the building and maintenance of the earthen habitat of the Banat. This constant dialogue ensured the variety of the expressive form of the earthen built environment, but above all the collective capacity to maintain it, through the diffuse patrimonial know-how, in a daily rhythm of customs and gestures that shaped the life of the village communities and the inhabited territory.

In addition to this domestic know-how, the present study brings to light the importance of the *memory places* in which it was transmitted and embodied: the *târnaț*, *conc* or *prispă* (porch, portico) and the *divan* or *divan* (sitting place in front of the house). These are places for meeting and exchanging useful knowledge that we could call today incubators of sustainable practices: besides ensuring the social cohesion, they favor the widespread application of sustainable circular economy principles for the improvement of earthen rural housing.

The functions of these community places are aimed at the collective management of daily life before public institutions partially take over this role: the first one is that of socializing and negotiating/solving nodal community problems through activities done together, with direct and diffuse impact over the quality of life - mutual help activities, the council of the elders and planning the community calendar of agricultural, constructive, commercial activities, etc.; the function of educating and training young people by incorporating local knowledge and customs, from common to

festive ones; and finally, storage and management of raw materials and waste that are necessary for the functioning of the household. The third role reveals a very important aspect for the circular economy of rural communities, that of the waste from one human activity becoming the raw material for another: the chaff and dung were used for plastering, the ashes for whitewashing, the adobes from a demolished wall were used to remodel the ground around the house, agricultural and forestry waste was used to build fires or reinforce the corners of the house, while the piles of earth and sand stored around the house had many uses in maintaining the rural dwellings.

The conservation of the earthen habitat is therefore based on a few sustainable principles that are still relevant today and could serve as a model of good practice for the long-term development of tangible and intangible heritage: careful and collective knowledge of the inhabited territory leads to the responsible use of local resources, while the diffuse and daily transmission of community know-how ensures the quality of housing and social cohesion of human communities everywhere.

Documenting and interpreting local constructive cultures with earth as a chain of sustainable gestures and habits involves rethinking the relationship with our cultural heritage: tangible and intangible heritage are the subject of study of different disciplines and are rarely analyzed as interdependent components of a whole. In the case of earthen habitat, the two components are difficult to dissociate: In the case of earthen habitats, these are difficult to dissociate: on the one hand the material heritage requires diffuse practices of regular maintenance, on the other hand the technical knowledge and gesture of shaping matter becomes an integral part of the built form. The earthen heritage is by excellence a living one, which undergoes continuous transformations under the action of man and nature. Easily shapeable, the local earth is within the reach of any human group in the hilly or lowlands areas and its use generates a variety of fascinating constructive cultures.

When removed from the autonomous context of rural communities that rely on the responsible land use, the earth gradually loses its once multiple attributes: cultivated and built, fertile and inorganic or mineral, raw material for growing food and building shelter. With the dimming of the diversity of know-how and practices related to the crafted transformation of the local earth for daily living, the earthen heritage is associated by reduction with its material component that becomes increasingly difficult to maintain, while its immaterial component moves from a diffuse practice shared by all to an isolated and voluntary one. Tangible heritage thus becomes almost a burden,

through its dissociation from intangible heritage, that is from the diffuse traditions of community and periodic maintenance of earthen habitat.

As rural life changes - villagers no longer gather at village annual feast, families no longer gather at Easter or on the feast day of the house, today's automated harvesting methods no longer allow for the conservation of chaff, the decrease of number of animals in the villages lead to the disappearance of activities and raw materials such as manure or chaff - the regular maintenance of the earthen domestic heritage with local resources becomes unjustified and costly in today's economic conditions. Therefore, understanding the socio-cultural and economic mechanisms that have generated these changes in the mentality and habits of rural communities can provide solutions for creative adaptation of the sustainable practices of earthen building cultures to the present dynamics. Moving beyond the formal mimetism of building traditions, by reproducing gestures that have lost their meaning or relevance today and approaching them as circular or sustainable traditions, by understanding, contextualizing and updating the meaning of each action of the operational chain of building with earth as well as of the building custom as a whole, could be one of the solutions.

Another solution would regard the sustainable use of the know-how handed down from one generation to the next by rural communities, which is fundamental to the maintenance of the earth-built habitat. The latter is inherited by young people and even today's specialists without instructions for use. In a socio-cultural context in which the daily sharing and incorporation of technical knowledge no longer finds time and space, applied research and transmission of the *domestic recipe book of local knowledge* can form the basis of an interdisciplinary documentation and of an experiential learning of the earthen heritage. Adapting and updating the community practices that have contributed to the preservation of the rural habitat until today would only bring benefits to the conservation of the yet dominant earthen domestic heritage of Banat and to the remodeling of the sustainable chains of local know-how related to it.