

Traditional Architecture

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ROMANIAN VILLAGE ARCHITECTURE

"What makes a Romanian village special? It reveals an eternal youth...and a perpetual rejuvenation.... Its deep poetry comes from its spiritual treasures. Tradition here is a continuous renewal and victory...just like nature."

—George Matei Cantacuzino, architect

Romanian village architecture is characterized first and foremost by its rich understanding of nature. Houses are generally located away from the main street and are subtly inserted in the landscape. When built along the valleys, the angle of the roof follows the slope of the mountains; when built on the plains, the roof line is horizontal. The stone, wood, thatch, and clay used as construction materials come from the land nearby. Orientation is determined by the sun, with windows mostly facing east, south, or southeast.

The plan of the traditional house runs longitudinally from front to back, with the heating system as the focal point. Heat is essential to all major household activities: cooking, baking bread, sleeping, smoking food in the attic, and warming the adjacent rooms. To maximize the distribution of heat throughout the house, the stove is placed in the central space. Then furniture such as a bed or table is arranged in the corners of the room. Tapestries, pottery, stained glass, painted wood, costumes, kitchenware, as well as the low ceiling and the use of



A wooden house from
Gorj (18th century).

Photo courtesy Village
Museum, Bucharest

beams give the traditional house a warm and intimate ambience.

Rooms communicate directly with the porch. Lower or higher, situated on one or more sides, the porch dominates the façade of traditional houses and assures a fluid connection between the interior and exterior space. The handrail of the porch is the equilibrium line or horizon, balancing the fields of shadow and light falling on the façade. The porch also helps give the traditional house a horizontal rather than vertical aspect.

G.M. Cantacuzino, professor at the Institute of Architecture in Bucharest and a great scholar of traditional Romanian architecture, remarked:

I said once that the Romanian peasant is our best architect. He thoroughly described how to harmonize a manmade construction with the cli-

mate, geography, and social environment. His sensibility inspired the forms. Traditional peasant architecture is a great lesson: [it] created the background for Romanian decorative art and was a unifying characteristic for this people very much like [their] language.

Indeed, the basic elements in traditional Romanian architecture — its functionality, adaptation of purpose and means, balance in proportions and decoration, artistic value, and fit with the landscape — confer on it a sense of unity and a unique personality.

—Iuliana Ciotoiu

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ARCHITECTURE IN MARAMUREȘ

Maramureș is distinguished by its wooden buildings: houses, mills, churches, and gates.

Churches have played an important role in Romanian history. They are the places where ancient documents were preserved; where decisions were taken by the wise men of the village in difficult times; where the national consciousness was kept alive in periods of upheaval; where people were christened, married, and buried. The steeple allowed people to survey the entire area of their village, and it was a special tolling of the bells that announced not only invasions but also devastating fires or raging floods. In short, the church provided warning and protection for the village. Obviously, therefore, the villagers would be concerned with the appearance and location of the structure.

Almost all the churches which date from the 18th century were built in the place of older ones which had been burnt by the Tartars during their last European invasion (1717) and were identical to the originals. The plan generally consisted of three rooms — the altar, the nave, and the narthex on an east-west axis — and sometimes had an open, west-oriented porch. The main features are the very high, sloping, two-level roof and the arrow-shaped steeple. Because of their general architectural profile, many researchers consider them to be in the Gothic style: “Maramureș Gothic.” Such important architectural examples exist in all the villages of Maramureș; religious ceremonies are still held in some of them, while others are protected by national heritage preservation laws.

The famous “Maramureș gates” can be found in every village. They continue to be built and are the pride of Maramureș villagers.

—Mihai Dăncuș



A Maramureș gate and church. Photo courtesy Village Museum, Bucharest

Suggested Reading

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