

# DEVELOPMENT, IDENTITY & HERITAGE

## THE SIBIU COUNTY ECOMUSEUM

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### INTRODUCTION

**T**HE POLITICAL CHANGES (transition to democracy and capitalism) that began in 1989 in the former communist Central and East European countries represented only the starting point of more complex transformations of society. The European Union (EU) is one of the transnational actors that caused changes in this region. For Romania, the process of European integration meant a reevaluation of the relation between its history, heritage and identity. In the context of Sibiu European Capital of Culture 2007 programme, initiated by the European Commission, heritage is an essential part of different strategies used by local people in Sibiu city and region to promote economic, social, and cultural development and to increase the global competitiveness of regions (in this specific case, Transylvania). The issue of rural heritage is strongly related to that of cultural and natural landscape that constitutes a foundation of peoples' identity.

The first ecomuseum in Romania – Sibiu County Ecomuseum (*Ecomuzeul Regional Sibiu*) – is an example of how heritage, landscape and identity were linked and gained more importance in the

context of the Sibiu ECC 2007 programme. Ecomuseum is an example of 'heritagescape'. Neither wholly museum nor entirely landscape, a heritagescape incorporates elements from both, making them a unique and complex social space. Heritagescape is distinct from but at the same time an

integral part of the larger landscape in which it is located. Following Appadurai (1996)'s scheme of five dimensions of global cultural flow – 'ethnoscapes', 'mediascapes', 'technoscapes', 'financescapes' and 'ideoscapes' – that are constantly at play in today's deterritorialized world, Garden (2006: 3, 5, 14) introduces the concept of 'heritagescape' and explains:

Like the larger landscape, the heritagescape is more than the sum of its physical components and, while centered on the site itself, it may not necessarily be restricted to the physical limits of the place. In thinking of heritage sites as heritagescapes – i.e., as landscapes – it draws attention to their qualities as dynamic, changing space.

The Sibiu County Ecomuseum demonstrates how tradition is

being changed in the context of the European integration process in Romania. The Sibiu County Ecomuseum aims to preserve the natural and cultural heritage in rural areas by combining in situ museum, involvement of local community and the development of tourist products representative for an ecomuseum. The project is significant for showing that cultural tourism gained a new relevance for Romania after the EU accession. Rural areas in many areas of Europe have turned to tourism as an alternative development strategy in the face of changes to the agricultural food production system. Particularly in more remote and less agriculturally viable areas, national and European policies have concentrated on encouraging 'bottom-up' development based on the commodification of local cultural resources or knowledge. In the Territorial Agenda of the EU, cities are seen as regional centers, but the need for urban-rural partnership is also acknowledged. Sibiu was seen as the proof of the interreligious and intercultural dialogue, but also as the proof of the dialogue between rural and urban heritage. Rural heritage is an important part of



Romania, a symbol of the connection between cultural heritage and landscape. The Sibiu County Ecomuseum shows the complex ways in which such initiatives intersect with existent historical configurations and at the same time shape newer social relations. These initiatives change the ways local knowledge is valued and contribute to creating different senses of place identity.

#### THE SIBU COUNTY ECOMUSEUM

The Sibiu County Ecomuseum is a project developed by the French NGO 'GAIA Heritage,' the Sibiu County Council and the ASTRA National Museum Complex.

The ecomuseum is an instrument for the local community to control its changing process:

The tourists go to an ecomuseum to learn about a specific geographical space, a heritage, the people where they live. This creates a direct relation with them, unlike in a museum where there is no direct connection to the people who made the displayed objects. Our hope is that local people living in these localities become aware of their heritage and how they could protect it. (The Sibiu County Ecomuseum brochure: no page number).

The logo of the Sibiu County Ecomuseum Association is 'The Wheel of the World', a drawing made by Picu Patrut, an artist from Saliste.



*The Sibiu County Ecomuseum brochure and the logo of the Association.*

Its aim is to valorize the heritage of Sibiu region. The Sibiu County Ecomuseum includes Romanian villages in Marginimea Sibiului area (Saliste and Gura Raului), villages with Saxon architecture (Biertan, Mosna and Valea Viilor), and villages with valuable built heritage, but very damaged (Sasaus).

While ASTRA NMC includes a village made up of relocated buildings, the ecomuseum maintains buildings in their original locations, fulfilling continuing uses while open to the public and thus generating additional income from tourism.

The presentation brochure for the Sibiu County Ecomuseum states that the Ecomuseum Association (in charge with organizing and managing the ecomuseum) aims to “carry out local and regional development projects; to preserve the folk traditions and customs; and to involve local communities in the protection of the heritage (The Sibiu County Ecomuseum brochure: no page numbers). The same brochure explains that the Sibiu County Ecomuseum project is based on modern principles for preserving the heritage, seen as being constituted not only of objects, but also of the entire area in which they are situated: the community, landscape, history, crafts, specific agricultural and industrial activities preserved ‘in situ.’ The ecomuseum uses this cultural and natural heritage as a development factor for local community.

As Mihai Halmaghi, the president of the Ecomuseum Association said, it symbolizes the changing nature of life and the heritage that is left by everyone. The logo reads: “The inconsistent wheel of life and its dangerous waves. I will inherit. I inherit. I have inherited. Ashes to ashes.” And also it invites the tourist to “Explore a village and discover centuries old architecture and traditional ways of life.”

The initiative of setting up the ecomuseum was a national premiere. The ecomuseum is an alternative to the classical museums. The next section addresses a brief history of the ecomuseum concept.

#### BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ECOMUSEUM CONCEPT

Over the past two decades there has been a change in the understanding of the museums’ role in society. One aspect of this is that museums have been trying to attract and build “deeper relationships with more diverse audiences” (Spitz and Thom 2003: 3). Museums have also built a closer relationship with their communities. Examples of museums which have organized such programs are diverse, and range from universal survey museums and city museums to indigenous-run cultural centers (Nakamura 2007: 148). Some of the results of these projects are discussed in different studies

(e.g., Fuller 1992; Davis 1999; Peers and Brown 2003; Spitz and Thom 2003; Clifford 2004; Hendry 2005; for a more detailed history of ecomuseums, see Maggi and Falletti 2000).

The development of community projects has been accompanied by a change of perspective that places emphasis on culture and cultural heritage. The ecomuseum has proved successful in providing a new way of transmitting cultural knowledge. An ecomuseum is an agent for managing change that links education, culture, and power. “[A]n ecomuseum recognizes the importance of culture in the development of self-identity and its role in helping a community adjust to rapid change. The ecomuseum thus becomes a tool for the economic, social, and political growth and development of the society from which it springs” (Fuller 1992: 328).

The ecomuseum movement started in France in the early 1970s and spread internationally (see Corsane and Holleman 1993; Davis 1999). The idea of the ‘integrated museum’, a more socially inclusive form of cultural institution, was a key outcome from the Round Table on the Development and the Role of Museums in the Contemporary World, a joint meeting between the UNESCO and the International Council of Museums (ICOM) held in Santiago de Chile, Chile, from 20 to 31 May 1972. It prompted movement toward creating real community museums (Hoobler 2006: 447). The ecomuseum has the potential to be a socially inclusive mechanism and is now a worldwide phenomenon (Davis 2004: 5). The movement has become strong in numerous countries, but most noticeably in Brazil, Mexico, Venezuela, Canada, China, France, Italy, Japan, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, India and Taiwan, Province of China.

Two key proponents were the French museologists Georges Henri Rivière and Hugues de Varine. Rivière’s belief was that an ecomuseum is an instrument conceived, and operated jointly by a public authority and a local population:

It is a mirror that the local population holds up to its visitors so that it may be better understood and so that its industry, customs and identity may command respect. It is a laboratory, in so far as it contributes to the study of the past and present of the population concerned and of its environment and promotes the training of specialists. It is a conservation centre, in so far as it helps to preserve and develop the natural and cultural heritage of the population. It is a school, in so far as it involves the population in its work of study and protection and encourages it to have a clearer grasp of its own future (Rivière 1985: 182).

Hugues de Varine and Rene Rivard (1984, 1988; see also Boylan 1992; Davis 1999) have provided the most useful definition by comparing the traditional museum (=building+collections+experts+public) to the ecomuseum (=territory+heritage+memory+population). However, although there are common ecomuseum characteristics, ecomuseums also have distinct traits because they respond to shifting local environmental, economic, social, cultural and political needs

(Corsane 2006: 404). In museums, heritage is exhibited as objects of past. In the ecomuseum – this museum without walls – it is a sign of a past that is still alive. The ecomuseum casts its inhabitants as actors of their own story and also spectators of their own exhibition. The ecomuseums allow the villages not only to preserve and reinforce their past, but to influence their present and shape their future. There are also risks associated with the status of ecomuseum: “The loss of a sense of place [...] promoted by the ‘heritagization’ of history” (Walsh 1992: 68; see also Graham et al. 2000).

#### CRAFTING A LIVING ON THE HEDGE: THE SIBU COUNTY ECOMUSEUM IN MARGINIMEA SIBULUI (SALISTE AND GALES)

The Marginimea Sibiului (“The Edge of Sibiu”) area lies at the foot of the Cibin Mountains in the South-western part of Sibiu County and consists of several small villages. Marginimea Sibiului has been recognized as epitomizing Romanian rural civilization but also Saxon traditions. Shepherds built pine houses, with tall roofs. People here have been breeding animals since old times. Shepherds took their sheep to the pastures, crossing the Danube and even to Constantinople and the Adriatic, beyond the Tisza River, in Poland, and to the East, up to the Caucasus. Over time, the region flourished as a trade center, becoming one of the most renowned centers for leather and wool, which are a proof of the craftsmanship of the peoples in Marginimea Sibiului. Products made in Marginimea Sibiului were traded throughout Europe and even as far away as America. Among the well-known villages in the Marginimea Sibiului are Saliste, Sibiul, Tilisca, Rasinari, Poiana Sibiului, Miercurea Sibiului, Poplaca, Orlat, Fantanele, Jina. In present times, this craftsmanship of breeding faces difficulties:

2007 was the year for celebrating 125 years since the founding of the only craftsmen’s association in Romania that is still active, and currently has 41 members [...]. There are big challenges and gloomy perspectives ahead of these craftsmen. They can access EU funds but their needs are many in terms of supplies and markets for selling their products [...]. This is a crucial moment for the continuation of rural traditions. After the migrations of the local Romanian population known as ‘roiri’ (‘pastoral’, ‘commercial’ and ‘crafting’) [to cities], followed by the big migration of the Saxon population in the last decades of the twentieth century [to Germany], we are now witnessing the most serious crisis in the villages in Romania. It is a complex crisis caused by the population growing old, migration of the young people [to cities or abroad], and the lack of any means and sources for survival and decent living. (Mihai Halmaghi, president of the Sibiu Ecomuseum Association, in Tribuna, 17 January 2008, author’s translation).

The craftsmen’s association mentioned in this quote is the Craftsmen’s Assembly (Reuniunea Meseriasilor), a regional association set up in Sibiu in 1882. In 1892, a similar Assembly was founded in Saliste as a professional association. The Assembly represented a

significant step in the development of local crafts, which initially included ten crafts: furriers, hammer smiths, carpenters, brick layers, shoemakers, boot makers, leather dressers, drapers, strap makers and wheelwrights.

Saliste was founded in 1354 as a large Romanian village. The settlement flourished in the nineteenth century as a burg, a small town with agricultural and commercial activities. In 2003, due to cultural and economic development, Saliste gained urban status. Different traditional crafts are representative for *Marginimea Sibiului*: hand-loom weaving, woodcarving, leather processing, stone working and woolen handicrafts.

tradition for generations in Ilies' family: Virgil learned this craft from his father, and now his two boys, Radu and Daniel, are working with him" (Formula As, 1999). He has a strong motivation for wanting to preserve this skill: "I am selling to maintain my identity."

The Sibiu County Ecomuseum in Saliste includes: a carpenter and wood carver's shop-dwelling, a leather goods workshop, store and dwelling, a flour mill, a blacksmith's workshop and an old wooden beam house.

At the inauguration of the ecomuseum in Saliste, Vasile Crisan (the director of the Sibiu County Department for Culture, Religion and National



*Virgil Ilies' hat-making workshop and the carpenter's workshop in Saliste.*

There are only six households where barrel-making is still practiced in Saliste, but it is not known for how long. One problem for the craftsmen is that the materials they work with are very expensive. At the inauguration of the Ecomuseum in Saliste, two of the craftsmen said they will change their job the following year, the others were saying: "What can we do if this is the only thing we know how to do?" One solution was offered by the mayor of Saliste, Teodor Banciu, who opined the wood makers could sell small barrels as souvenirs to tourists coming in Saliste (Monitorul de Sibiu, 24 January 2008). Virgil Ilies, a craftsman from Saliste, said craftsmen are able to adapt to the current market needs but that "We lose ourselves as a nation if we do not preserve our language, folk costumes and customs" (The Sibiu County Ecomuseum inauguration in Sibiu, 13 July 2007, personal notes). Virgil Ilies' hat making workshop, the only one left in Saliste, is in a long courtyard, with a big, wooden gate.

The 'fortress-house' is of Saxon influence, but his skill is Romanian. The hat-maker is the only maker of Romanian traditional shepherds' hats (called 'clop' in Romanian): a round and black hat, specific to the shepherds in Sibiu area. But the workshop has evolved over time to produce cowboy hats and ladies' hats. "Hat making has been a

Cultural Heritage) said that the ecomuseum is a first step to develop tourism in Saliste. He also warned about some risks involved in this project and brought as an example the case of Sibiul, a village in Marginimea Sibiului, where the development of tourism triggered a degradation of the village. Teofil Gherca, the representative of the GAIA Heritage NGO (which is one of the organizers of the Sibiu County Ecomuseum), explained that the majority of the ecomuseums in Europe opened during situations of crisis (for example, in France, when villages started to disappear, when a mine closed down, and with it a whole history around it):

We are in Romania at a crossroads, regarding rural life, crafts, agriculture, animal husbandry. The ecomuseum comes as a tool for the local communities to help them come together, evaluate what is left, what they can do, how they present themselves to others. The ecomuseum appears in Romania also in a situation of crisis of the villages. Very few people here are really interested not only in preserving the houses, but also their significance (for example, a house was built as a workshop). (Teofil Gherca, the Sibiu County Ecomuseum inauguration, personal notes).

The Sibiu County Ecomuseum in Gales (a village part of Saliste town) includes a hat-maker's workshop and a traditional water mill. The ecomuseum in Sasaus included houses where the specific architecture

was preserved and also a small Greek-Catholic church exhibiting church objects, photographs, textiles and folk art.

#### THE SIBIU COUNTY ECOMUSEUM IN BIERTAN

The ecomuseum in Biertan aimed for economic development and for maintaining the authenticity of the houses' architecture and workshops. The Biertan commune is made up of three localities: Biertan, Copsa Mare and Richis. Saxon colonists, one of the first Saxon settlements in Transylvania, established the ecomuseum in 1230. At the end of the twentieth century, the Saxon ethnics left the

show their heritage to the visitors. The visitor walks up on the trail near the Saxon fortified church, and goes down on the path near the Romanian church. These two churches reflect, in fact, the two significant components of today's Biertan: the Saxon heritage and the Romanian one.

#### THE SIBIU COUNTY ECOMUSEUM IN VALEA VIILOR

Valea Viilor village is a very distinctive place, with its 700-year old fortified church. The village's name translates to 'The Valley of the Vines' and is also known under the Saxon name of 'Wurmloch'. The ecomuseum includes a Romanian house, two old



*The carpenter's workshop and view of Biertan with the fortified church in the background.*

settling and in 1990 only a few families were present. Later, the Saxon population returned as Biertan emerged as a Saxon spiritual center. The fortified church in Biertan (a historic monument and an architectural masterpiece included on the UNESCO World Heritage Sites list) is illustrative for the entire area that was colonized by the Saxons in Transylvania.

The ecomuseum in Biertan includes: a pharmaceutical garden, the enviroing hills, the Romanian neighborhood, a cooper's workshop and a flour mill, a carpenter's workshop specialized in carving shutters, and a therapeutic and homeopathic drug-store established in 1809 in the oldest building in Biertan founded in 1572.

The inauguration of the ecomuseum in Biertan tour is so designed that the visitor passes through the pharmaceutical garden and continues on a small trail up on a hill from where the visitor could enjoy a panoramic view of Biertan.

The grand fortified church dominates this view. The path winds down through a cemetery and near the Romanian church, in a beautiful garden. The feeling the visitor gets is that even if the ancestors are no longer present, their knowledge and skills are still alive. Those that keep these skills alive are like those who chose to be part of the ecomuseum project to

Saxon houses, the old priest house, the old mill, the house where the famous musician Martian Negrea was born, and the Romanian neighborhood. In 1939 the Evangelical community of Valea Viilor had 928 members, though by 2004 there were only twenty members remaining. Nowadays, there are only four Saxon families left in the village. The visit included a glass-maker workshop where they make beautiful big glass vases.

When visiting the old Orthodox church, the local priest spoke about the importance of heritage in maintaining one's identity: "We do not have to forget that our ancestors prayed in these churches, tried to embellish them and preserve them" (The local priest, personal notes). That is why the ecomuseum has a significant role: "The ecomuseum aims to reinvigorate our traditions, our crafts and the occupation of animal breeding and to raise people's awareness of the fact that we can not survive without them" (Halmaghi, personal notes).

#### THE SIBIU COUNTY ECOMUSEUM IN MOSNA

The reinvigoration of traditions was also made evident during the inauguration of the Sibiu County Ecomuseum in Mosna, which includes a traditional Saxon house, the former communal kindergarten, the communal flour mill – a traditional, electrically-

powered mill provided with millstones (purchased from France), two households with sheds to the front, and the Evangelical parish house.

The main occupations of the local people are agriculture, cattle breeding, beekeeping, hunting, fishing, and harvesting of medicinal plants and of plants to obtain natural dyes. The local people in Mosna were very interested in the ecomuseum project; they saw it as an opportunity for the development of their village based on its heritage, including buildings and crafts. But as Mihai Halmaghi advised one owner of a house part of ecomuseum, they now have to know how to be guides of their own houses, how to 'tell a story.'



House with shed in front in Mosna and the glass maker workshop in Valea Viilor.

a strategy to promote tourism, economic development, and rural and urban regeneration. Places are increasingly being restructured as centers for consumption (Urry 1995:1) and cultural industries, including heritage, have become crucial to the economic and cultural transformation of different places, in Romania and in wider Europe. ■

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#### CONCLUSION

Understood as a force for the transformation of European society and culture, the European integration has an impact on and interacts with local debates over culture, politics and identity. This article argued that for Romania the process of EU integration meant a reevaluation of the relation between its heritage and identity. This article looked at how, in the context of Sibiu ECC 2007 programme, heritage is an essential part of different strategies used by local people in Sibiu city and region to promote economic, social, and cultural development and to strengthen regional identities and increase the global competitiveness of regions (in this case, Transylvania). The rural heritage is seen as a significant part in promoting national identity.

Contrary to the expectations that European integration would act as a force, somehow erasing tradition, the investigation in this article aimed to reveal that integration might more accurately be said to have brought a new revival of the idea of tradition. The Sibiu County Ecomuseum was chosen as an example also of the way in which the integration has intensified the process of linking identity, heritage and place.

Heritage is an economic resource ("the commodification of memory", as Urry [1995: 27] says), used as

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