

**FUNCTIONAL ASPECTS OF URBAN COMMUNITIES:  
"THE NEW NEIGHBOURHOODS".  
CASE STUDY: VIILOR NEIGHBOURHOOD,  
SIGHIȘOARA MUNICIPALITY, MUREȘ COUNTY**

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**ABSTRACT.** – **Functional Aspects of Urban Communities: "The New Neighbourhoods". Case Study: Viilor Neighbourhood, Sighișoara Municipality, Mureș County.** The relationship between residents and the area that they were born and/or live in, on the one hand, as well as the determination of any form of social relationship established between individuals, on the other hand, represents the fundamental nature of a human community. "The New Neighbourhoods" have been formed both in urban and in rural areas – where dialogue covers other dimensions and connotations –; they were borrowed, in type and in form, from the Saxons, but are defined by a distinctive function. By clarifying the theoretical approach and terminology, and by describing the applied methodology, the analysis of urban community under the form of a case study, which was applied in the case of Viilor Neighbourhood – Sighișoara Municipality - evidences the possibility of considering it a territorial unit quite suitable for the implementation of various social policies.

**Keywords:** *neighbourhood, Viilor Neighbourhood, urban community, functionality, social policies*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

*Purpose and objectives.* The pace, in which society is being subjected to everyday transformations, does not always influence the urban system in a successful way. In a society in which everything seems to be ruled mostly by competition and individualism, social relationships between individuals and groups of individuals lose more and more their meaning, therefore being directly dependent on the pursued interest. Hence, social relationships become the essence of a human community, even if the association based on purely spatial criteria does not guarantee its existence and further development.

In case of Transylvanian settlements, where people of Saxon origin have created their own organizational system, characterized by reciprocal help between neighbours, we can sketch a model of practical human community. Once with their departure, after the

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'80s, the rest of the remaining segregation elements diminished. Rather resilient, some of the urban communities still seek to meet the needs of the present-day society, by taking over the old models, therefore generating a neighbourhood community, on the same criterion of spatial proximity, yet only partially observed. Much more common in the suburban area of cities in Transylvania, this model of social organization was also adopted by the Romanian urban communities, in this case, the ethnic criterion being neither defining, nor exclusive!, a viable example being given by "the new neighbourhood"<sup>3</sup> in Sighișoara Municipality, Mureș County. The bond of the residents to their living territory, the spirit of cooperation in case of burial, and not only, can be considered reasons for substituting this form of social organization and bringing out several associative housing policies that would respond best to the current and future needs of the community.

By starting from the identifying such communities within a city profoundly marked by deep German public consciousness, we focused on expressing its functionality within the existing urban system and the possibility of [its] inclusion in urban housing policies.

*Conceptualisation in specialized literature.* The issue of human communities was first raised by F. Tönnies (*Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, 1887), who makes the distinction between community (*Gemeinschaft*) and society (*Gesellschaft*) through the type of social association involved; social relationships are more visible within a community, because we deal with a stationary population, governed by certain values. Other similar or contradictory opinions are sustained by sociologists such as: F. Le Play, L.W. Warner, P.S. Lunt, W.M. Whyte (*Larousse. Dicționar de sociologie [Dictionary of sociology]*, 1996, p. 62).

T. Parsons saw the community as a "broader relationship of solidarity stretched over a rather undefined area of life and interests". At the same time, Hillary G. (*Definition of Community: Areas of Agreement*, Rural Sociology, 1995) has attempted to make a distinction between the different connotations of this concept, succeeding in identifying 94 definitions, in which people represent the common element, "Beyond this common basis, there are no points of agreement." (*Oxford. Dicționar de sociologie [Dictionary of sociology]*, 2003, p. 119).

We can also note that, semantically, there is no major distinction between the concepts of "community" and "neighbourhood", in some cases them being identified as synonymous terms (*Oxford. Dicționar de sociologie [Dictionary of sociology]*, 2003).

If we refer to the Romanian literature, the neighbourhood phenomenon has distinctly drawn the attention of P.H. Stahl (1998), Muslea or Herseni (1931), whose ideas were continued, in the last two decades, by sociologists like V. Mihăilescu (2002, 2003), S. G. Totelecan (2002) and others, their approaches being mainly focused on the sociological and anthropological perspective.

Considering it was implemented in the territory by the German ethnics as a form of social organization V. Mihăilescu (2002, p. 7) considers that the neighbourhood becomes «an association of people, strictly according to the criterion of spatial contiguity: all adult inhabitants of a street were grouped and organized in a neighbourhood. And if the street was too large, it was divided into several neighbourhoods. Preceded by youth associations, dissociated by gender (*Bruderschaft* and *Schwesterschaft*), the neighbourhood compulsorily gathered all young individuals, from the moment of their marriage or from the moment of

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<sup>3</sup> Such types of communities, established after 1980, are mentioned in the literature under the name of „New Neighbourhoods”.

their turning 24, under the rule of a “neighbourhood father”, democratically elected, since “life outside the neighbourhood was inconceivable for a Saxon living in the village“ (Schenk, 1995). Women belonged to the neighbourhood only by association to their husbands, the neighbourhoods of women being quite rare and met relatively as a tardy form»).

After completing the semantic analysis of the connotations of “neighbourhood” term, S. G. Totelecan (2003, p. 120) shares V. Mihăilescu’s opinion, emphasizing the fact that “[it] represents a socio-spatial entity, either individual or as a group (social group, whose members maintain primary relationships determined by their location in the same place, also embodied by the regular exchange of products, either barter or by the provision of compensation services). Thus, it becomes the argument for a well organized community space, although standing for the same place where the disintegration can start, as a result of no longer sharing the same way of being.”

Once with the emigration of the Saxons, the Romanian population creates its own neighbourhoods, in accordance with the existing model, based on the “*voluntary*” association of inhabitants of one street, (see *The Statute of Organization and Operation of Viilor Neighbourhood*, 1995, art. 1); these were designed to provide relationships between their members if help was needed, while entirely complying with the superior legal and institutional forms: “Our aim is *to get to know us better* by organizing meetings, parties, trips, *to help each other* in case of death in the family and *together contribute* to the implementation of decisions by the local government and state” (ibid, Art. 1).

In addition, the Neighbourhood follows a definite purpose, therefore becoming a “special economic, intermittent, exceptional association, based on mutual assistance [...]”. The neighbourhood report means bilateral relationship based on tacit agreement: *do ut des*. It is neither philanthropy, nor altruism, not even sentimentality – it is an association of interests: the neighbour located in the surrounding area proves he is the first one that would help us; it is, then, the most natural choice, based on the simple principle of the economy of force” (S. G. Totelecan, 2003, p. 13).

Both L. Vlăsceanu and Cătălin Zamfir have come to the conclusion that neighbourhood represents “a social group, especially formed in areas with strong community orientation, such as traditional villages or ethnic communities, structured either as a result of tight relationships of assistance and acquaintance, or determined by joint action projects and certain specialized roles (such as “the neighbourhood father”, the cashier, in some Saxon communities in Transylvania)”. (*Dicționar de sociologie [Dictionary of Sociology]*, <http://www.dictsociologie.netfirms.com/V/Termeni/vecinatate.html>, Accessed in February 2010).

Beyond the meaning DEX offers to the phrase: “The state of being, the situation of someone or something that exists, inhabits, lives in close proximity to someone or something else; the relationship between two or more neighbours”, by considering the identity attribute of the locals, neighbourhood acquires new meaning.

Another definition of the neighbourhood, if we consider its use in spatial planning, would be that it represents “the basic territorial unit of the urban living area. By achieving the status of such unit, means to be able to provide the best possible combination among housing, daily use facilities and street network. This way, it aims at increasing the living standard and fostering community relationships within the type v unit”<sup>4</sup>. In case of urban

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<sup>4</sup> *Dicționar de sociologie [Dictionary of Sociology]*, <http://www.dictsociologie.netfirms.com/V/Termeni/vecinatate.htm>, last accessed, February 2010.

inhabitants, neighbourhood involves certain networking among community individuals, thus its viability depending on the intensity of current connections.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

So as to reflect the current functionality of the forms of urban communities such as neighbourhoods, we considered to use the case study as a sociological method (A. Mucchielli, 2002; R. K. Yin, 2005). The accent fell on deciphering several questions (how, when, why), whose answers can not be validated by quantitative statistical criteria. After analysing the framework in which this urban community has emerged and developed, after a thorough analysis of the terminology and previous views on this topic, we established the contact with the territory. Data collection and processing was completed with the analysis of this case study, after which discussions and conclusions were initiated. Viilor Neighbourhood, Sighișoara Municipality, Mureș County, was chosen as the reference unit for this type of urban community. It represents a territorial unit that greatly benefited from the richness of multicultural elements, the German influence standing for the main source of setting up this form of social organization. Furthermore, such communities may be considered areas suitable for the implementation of development plans, therefore playing a double role: to ensure support so as to establish social relationships and housing that can be used as the main resources for the implementation of social policies.

## 3. RESULTS

The built-in area of Sighișoara Municipality, as well as its suburban localities, is crowded by neighbourhoods, whose names are established by the name of the main road that keeps together the inhabitants of Romanian nationality. By taking over the former Saxon model of neighbourhoods, these new social institutions have maintained the ethnicity and spatial proximity as the main criteria for their setting up. Even if most of the neighbourhoods are Romanian, the coexistence of specific Hungarian or Roma neighbourhoods, within the same area, is not surprising at all. Being defined by a rich multiculturalism, it generates the environment for the social organization of each ethnic group. Moreover, *rural neighbourhoods* appear as a distinct phenomenon of the urban space of Sighișoara Municipality. The natives of the Romanian Jac (originally settled for work) living in Sighișoara, have created their own neighbourhood, which is named after the former locality, still following the same rules, transmitted from generation to generation, from their parents and grandparents.

*Viilor Neighbourhood*, Sighișoara Municipality, Mureș County, was established during the '80s, by merging three smaller neighbourhoods, and its territorial extension broadly overlaps the former neighbourhoods. The need for cooperation and mutual assistance, the respect for "the neighbours" or the desire to socialize have encouraged the upholding of this social institution, despite all changes, verified in the evolution of society. Yet very similar to the former Saxon **organizational** model of communities, subtle differences appear in this new form of neighbourhood.

First of all, although *the criterion of spatial proximity* is being considered, it has lost its accuracy. One of the four sectors of Viilor Neighbourhood (sector 4) includes, on the one hand, members living outside the area, most of them belonging to this neighbourhood by place of birth, and, then again, new members, who wish to join Viilor Neighbourhood out of practical reasons (i.e. mutual assistance in case of death). The requirement that all neighbourhood members should declare their nationality represents

another clause stipulated in the statute of the neighbourhood “When setting up, all residents can become members of the neighbourhood [...] regardless of gender, age, yet compulsorily only those of Romanian nationality” (ibid, chap. 2, art. 1 ).

As in the case of the ideal association model – the Saxon model of neighbourhoods – everything is regulated by legislation (statute, records). If the neighbourhood statute makes clear distinctions in which regards the organization pattern of community, it representing the “legislative act” officially stipulating the existence of this social institution, then, the neighbourhood registers all entries and losses, revenues and costs, economically describing its functioning. Records register incomes and expenditures, the financial records including both revenues and penalties of the community members, like the old Saxon neighbourhoods used to operate (Gabriela Coman, 2002, p. 105).

### Similarities between Viilor Neighbourhood, Sighișoara Municipality, and the Saxon model of Neighbourhood.

Table 1.

Characteristics	Viilor Neighbourhood, Sighișoara (2010)	The Saxon model of Neighbourhoods (12 <sup>th</sup> -17 <sup>th</sup> century)
Criteria for setting up	√	√
- spatial proximity	√	√
- ethnicity	√	√
The organizational pattern (the general assembly as the Steering Committee, the great father of the Neighbourhood, the vice of the Neighbourhood and the cashier)	√	√
Normative aspects (statute, financial records )	√	√
Means of transmitting information (the Neighbourhood’s blackboard)	√	√
Revenues	√	√
Functionality	√	√
The existence of women neighbourhoods	√	√
Typical objects (the Neighbourhood’s trunk, the flag)	√	√

### Members of Viilor Neighbourhood (2010).

Table 2.

Sectors of the Viilor Neighbourhood (2010)	No. of members		
	Total	Out of which:	
		Exempt	Contributors
Sector 1	114	6	108
Sector 2	109	5	104
Sector 3	120	7	113
Sector 4	72	1	71

Source: Information provided by Lucaci C., 2010.

Having the same importance as an official company regulation, the statute lays down the rules referring to the establishment of the neighbourhood, the enrolment procedures, the rights and the obligations of the members, the subscription fees. Each new adherent to this form of social unit has to be at least 18 years old, must be aware of the Neighbourhood’s statute, and know his rights and

obligations. We have to note that enrolment in the neighbourhood is made only once a year, at the beginning of the year, and it is optional, dependent on the will of the people. As for

the old neighbourhood, “The registration consists in a written application that is submitted to the representative of the sector or to any member of the committee. Once with the application form, the person that wants to become a neighbourhood member will pay a fixed registration fee” (see *the Statute ...*, chap. II, art. 1), subsequently its adherence being discussed and approved by the general assembly, at its annual meeting. In the last 10 years, out of 430 members of the Neighbourhood, 78 deaths were registered, the gender ratio being rather balanced (39 men deaths /39 female deaths), while 74 new members were added and 19 people were excluded from the neighbourhood institution, the main causes being the non-payment of taxes in case of three deaths, as well as indiscipline. *We can observe that, despite the transition that characterized the last decade, a reasonable input and output stability has been maintained in the system (urban community), people showing the same openness to support this form of social association.*

Yet, who leads the Neighbourhood? Following the previous models of association, **the general assembly** is the one that ensures the execution of the duties stipulated in the statute and manages the functionality of neighbourhood. The general assembly, as the steering committee, elected every five years, consists of:

- *the steering committee* – meets statutorily once a year. The future of the neighbourhood in general and of Viilor Neighbourhood in particular, is decided by the chair, the vice-chair and the cashier of the Neighbourhood. The neighbourhood chair, also called „*fotâr*” (name taken after the German word *Vater*, which describes the same occupation), represents neighbourhood in all its problems. He is responsible for the order and discipline or the proper course of this form of social organization, while keeping track of members and being responsible for all the expenses registered; both the vice-chair and the cashier help the chair achieve these assignments.

The chair election is organized in accordance with the decision made by the elderly committee, and only the persons over 60 years old and having a high standing civic and moral behaviour are eligible.

- *the audit committee*, consisting of three persons and designated by the general assembly for a 4-5 year period, is in charge with the financial management of the Neighbourhood;

- *the elderly committee* consists of three elderly members, and is responsible for the compliance with tradition, as well as it has the power to propose the members of the general assembly, every five years;

- among the representatives of the steering committee we also mention *the master of ceremonies*, who supervises the carrying of flags, cross and crowns, the funeral cortege, who also organizes the parties; *the 4 sector representatives* (one for each sector of the neighbourhood), who collect the fees and fines from members, who are responsible for notification of the members regarding future meetings, reunions, and funerals; and *the janitor*, who is responsible for cleaning and supervising furniture in the Neighbourhood.

**Taxes** that are levied in the neighbourhood are as it follows:

- a) *the registration fee*<sup>5</sup> (the fee for a dead person in the amount of 4 RON), which varies with age: 18-30 years – 8 RON (two fatalities), 30-40 years old – 20 RON (5 fatalities), 40-50 years – 60 RON (15 fatalities), 50-55 years – 400 RON (100 fatalities), 55-60 years – 600 RON (150 fatalities); over 60 years – 800 RON (200 fatalities).

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<sup>5</sup> Verbal information shared by Lucaci C., the vice-chair of Viilor Neighbourhood between 2000-2010.

Exemptions from this fee apply to persons under 18 and over 85 years. The money is distributed as funeral aid, for purchasing the crown at current price, as well as for covering other costs (pay and charge of all people responsible for the ceremony).

Another exception is allowed in the case of families whose children are over 18 years old, but who are away for studying: “The mutual assistance for funeral is also specified for family members, yet contributors over 20 years old, who attend college under 25 years old, even if they are not members of neighbourhood” (ibid, chap. II, art. 2).

A further exemption is applied to all members of the Neighbourhood’s steering committee: chair, vice-chair, sector representatives, people in charge of ceremonies and the hearse keeper” (ibid, chap. II, art. 2).

b) *the annual fee* “*the smoke money*”: 3 RON for each neighbourhood member. This money is usually spent on a festive event – *Richttag* – which is held at the beginning of every year (usually in February) at CFR Club, Sighișoara Municipality. In 2009, out of a budget of 2356 RON, they covered the amount of 1206 RON for organizing the *Richttag*, including insurance and lease of the hall (1150 RON) (according to the verbal statement shared by C. Lucaci, 2010).

c) *penalties*, applied for: 1. the non-payment of the annual fee (0.25 RON/day); 2. missing the convened general assembly (100 RON for those not attending the meetings and 10 RON for those who are late for the meetings); 3. the lack of discipline during neighbourhood assembly (10 RON) and during other meetings (50 RON); 4. the unjustified absence to a funeral of at least one family member (5 RON).

As they are inventoried in the neighbourhood’s records, we also mention the income represented by interests (“In order to guarantee the payments representing the death assistance, the money necessary for three deaths will be kept at hand, while the remaining cash will be stored at CEC Bank” – see *The Statute ...*, chap. IV, art. 3) or the financial input from the rental of seats and tables used for other events (weddings, baptisms). The neighbourhood’s secretary administers these funds, to make sure that he always has enough money to cover the costs for funeral arrangements in case of three fatalities.

Currently, *the Neighbourhood functions* tend to become obsolete, the only function still standing being *the obligation for death assistance*<sup>6</sup>. The Neighbourhood assists the mournful families, providing for both the cost and the funeral procession of carrying the deceased on his last journey.

Perpetuated until two or three years ago, the Neighbourhood board made the recorded death known publicly among its members, news which was passed from house to house by the representative of the sector. At the same time, the contributions for funeral were gathered and the burial date and place announced.

Another function, less and less verified, is *the mutual assistance for wedding arrangements*, but, due to the multitude of firms offering a range of services to plan a wedding, and the desire of the bride and groom to be modern, led to a continuous loss of traditional customs related to marriage, and gradually the performance of this function diminished.

Socially, there is an annual party (*Richtog* → *Richttag* – on which occasion the Saxon influences are visible again), expected to take place at the beginning of each year (in

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<sup>6</sup> V. Mihăilescu (2003, p. 9) distinguishes three forms of mutual assistance: situations of mutual assistance (specific to any community, particularly rural), duties of mutual assistance (defined by reciprocal obligations) and obligations of mutual assistance (neighbourhood).

February), which involves all the members of the neighbourhood, regardless of gender. Another distinct feature of this neighbourhood is the parallel existence of a *neighbourhood of women*, the only one being located in town, on the Târnavă Mare River. In accordance with the rules of the old Saxon neighbourhoods of women, this one does not have its own status or a binding character, thus having an exclusively female nature. The main function used to be the lease of pots on various events. As the demand to the service currently diminishes, the functionality of this Neighbourhood is limited. The Neighbourhood's female members meet at Richtog, a folk celebration, held as a ceremonial wedding, once every two years, when the new leadership of the neighbourhood is elected, thus, Fotărița Mare, the female equivalent of "the Father" of the Neighbourhood is replaced with the new elected.

By respecting the same criterion of spatial proximity, the analysed human community is characterized by smaller groups, and for a better insurance of the neighbourhood functionality, some of them respect this criterion (sector 1: Viilor Street, no. 1-64, Dealul Gării, Tudor Vladimirescu, sector 2: Viilor Street, no. 65-99, Stejarului, Oltului, Crângului streets, sector 3: Parângului Street, Viilor Street, no. 100 – end of the street, Cart. Viilor), while others include members from outside the geographic area, as well (sector 4: Cornești, Ipătescu streets, etc.).

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The updated analysis of the way Viilor Neighbourhood was formed, of the determination of the key actors involved in the leadership of this community, of the presentation of the rules under which it operates and of the rights and obligations its members have to comply with, can highlight a number of issues, such as:

- the seething multicultural space and the role played by the German population in this framework, represent the main cause of taking up such model of social organization, functional at the time. Once with the implementation of such type of social interaction by the members of a social group, the working pattern, of the Neighbourhood meeting the needs of individuals and of the created group, has also been adopted;
- the use of the criterion of spatiality in establishing the Neighbourhood becomes obsolete to that community, due to the continuously changing motivation;
- in light of friendly relationships and good neighbourliness that may be established between the community members, we can observe a persistence of identity and the social character of the Neighbourhood, even if membership to this territorial unit is not so defining as in the case of the old Saxon neighbourhood;
- the neighbourhood functions are affected by the „dilution” process, thus, the economic relationships established between individuals are no longer so strong as they used to be in the initial forms of social organization;
- despite the existence of an elderly committee, responsible for compliance with tradition, its preservation is slightly beginning to deteriorate, up to, in some cases, its utter denial;
- the Neighbourhood represents a model of voluntary association between the residents of urban communities, therefore the verb „to choose” becomes the benchmark for the expression of its existence, this being able to become a project unit, in which the customary criteria are no longer legitimate.

By taking over the Saxon model of Neighbourhood and adapting it to its own needs, the New Neighbourhoods become separate territorial entities, with different characteristics, this way, *new group-entities, carrying an associative character*.



## 5. DISCUSSIONS

*Is Neighbourhood compatible with the urban area? Does Neighbourhood represent an optimal form of communication? Can this form of social organization be stored?* The answers to these questions are confirmatory, thus making Viilor Neighbourhood become such an example.

By analyzing the functioning way of Viilor Neighbourhood<sup>7</sup>, the type of interaction among individuals and that of the social group, as well as the community way to refer to that place, we may dare to suggest this type of neighbourhood communities should be considered suitable territorial units for the implementation of some social projects. The following ideas stand for arguments:

- this type of urban community is the result of a voluntary association of inhabitants, governed by certain rules followed by them;
- the criterion of spatial proximity provides a certain closeness among neighbours, therefore, allowing them to establish socialization relationships more easily;
- the Neighbourhood has autonomous management, being able to satisfy its own needs, in line with the new requirements of society;
- the Neighbourhood follows superior organization and administrative structures and, at the same time, it meets one of the essential criteria of existence of inter-community associations, namely *the joint management*.

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