

# Peculiarities of the New Architectural Interventions in Rural Area. Case Study: Trascău Depression, Alba County, Romania

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## ABSTRACT

The new construction trends have manifested in the rural area, as well. The perpetuation of certain traditional elements represents a challenge for the beneficiaries of these houses. The new architectural adjustments introduced in the local architecture of the Trascău Depression have built the central idea of this paper. First of all, one distinguished an inventory of the building types and the applied changes according to the partial or complete restoration works, respecting the local urban provisions or lending traditional elements noncompliant with the local tradition, followed by a spatial distribution and specification of the intervention measures for the preservation of the rural heritage. The paper highlights the cohabitation of the modern with the traditional, peculiarities of the present architectural style in the rural space, but also the extent to which the legislative act may intervene in providing the protection of some historical monuments. The use of georeferenced orthophotoplans of the Livezile, Rimetea, Colțești and Vălișoara built-up areas, rendered in a scale used in town-planning documentations (1:5000) and the territorial survey of 168 houses subjected to subsequent interventions (which 108 traditional houses with adjustments and 60 houses built during the modern period) represented the main tools of rendering the peculiarities of the architectural changes.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The communion with the heritage of our ancestors, delivered through traditional values, seems to overpass with great difficulty in the perspective analyses of present generations, regardless of the approached development trend. The modern “scraped” solutions prevail, and these replace the preservation and optimum spatial planning of rural areas. The rural area is the materialized expression of the territorial identity, and by its vernacular elements, dictates the evolution of the rural heritage and its landscape destiny.

Seen as a integrating part of the cultural and natural heritage and subjected to debates by the ministers responsible with spatial planning, in 2003, in

Ljubljana, by the approval of *European Rural Heritage Observation Guide - CEMAT*, the rural heritage becomes a development factor for the rural area, provided that its appropriate preservation and protection are ensured<sup>1</sup> [10], [1]. In a restrictive sense, the rural heritage includes only the edifices associated to agricultural exploitations, in a large scale, consequently improving the semantics of the heritage by the inclusion of all the material (landscape, households, specific products) and immaterial (building techniques, local personalities, local

<sup>1</sup> Déjeant-Pons, Maguelonne (2008), *The European landscape convention*, in: *Infrastruktura i ekologia terenów wiejskich/ Infrastructure and ecology of rural areas*, Polska Akademia Nauk, Oddział w Krakowie, Komisja Technicznej Infrastruktury Wsi, Kraków: p. 12.

legends, traditional customs) elements which testify the communion of people and territory.

The vernacular rural heritage represents a sum of all the vernacular architectural and landscape elements bearing the footprint of place and inhabitants, establishing a common denominator for both the traditional buildings and the specific rural landscape. The interest for the approach of such subject finds an answer in identifying some viable spatial planning models that fulfil the needs of the community by interventions to the heritage (restoration, renewal, the propagation of heritage).

The traditional architecture will gradually “yield up to” modern architecture based on material reasons, due to the used technology, becoming a distinct field of the built heritage, with visible benefits in developing research, conservation and restoration initiatives<sup>2</sup> [3].



Fig. 1. Location of Trascău Depression within the administrative limits of Alba County.

In a society that strives to impose its own values and *technique*, the vernacular tries to survive. The specialists' interest for the conservation and promotion of a vernacular heritage soon occurred, as the elaboration by the ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) of the *Charter on the built vernacular heritage* (1999) representing the first proof

of respecting the cultural values of some communities. One should mention the followings among the trends aimed for the conservation of vernacular heritage: performance of a well-documented analysis on the existing vernacular buildings (style, shape, structure), accessible; respect of the cultural landscape and the adequate integration in the territory, in case of any subsequent interventions; maintenance of the traditional building systems, by encouraging the formation of specialists/experts; choosing of construction materials to provide the cohesion of buildings with the surrounding environment; adaptation of buildings by keeping the traditional structures and by the elaboration of a guide intended for specialists' interventions, existence of training programs both for the specialists and for the community [12]. Considering the extension trends of the settlements, of changing their image by the new buildings or ensembles of buildings with the purpose of improving the life standard of the society, new town planning measures are needed to provide new trends of cultural landscape development, concordantly with the preservation of traditional elements [7].

## 2. MATERIAL AND METHOD

The study area is located in the Trascău Depression (territorial unit found in the researches of Emm. de Martonne, 1922, Manciușea, Șt., 1929, Ilie, M., 1933, 1957, Ficheux, R., 1939, Lupu, M., 1960-1964). It is a mountainous depression, located inside the Trascău massif, and surrounded by calcareous massifs with a gradual descend towards the depression represented by a series of steep slopes. The extent of the depression (length - 11 km, maximum width - 4 km) enabled the occurrence and development of settlements cores grouped in two basic administrative-territorial units, Rimetea, Livezile, of which only the localities Rimetea, Colțești, Vălișoara, and Izvoarele are located within the depression area.

The favourable climate conditions (shelter climate), an annual average of rainfall of 800-900 mm and the high frequency of temperature inversions, together with a rich river network (presence of surface waters belonging to the Trascău basin (tributary of the Arieș river), in the Northern half of the depression and to the Ampoi basin (tributary of the Mureș river), in its Southern half and the frequent occurrence of springs) and an extraordinary landscape diversity, expressed by a specific land-use, these have all represented positive arguments for the settlement of the region [6].

In administrative terms, the localities included in the depression area belong to the Alba County (NUTS3), included in the Central Development Region (NUTS2), located in the central-northern part of the county. The settlements spread on the bottom of the depression are old settlements, documentary certified

<sup>2</sup> Kázmér, K. (2003), *Timpul monumentului istoric*, Colecția Spații imaginare, Editura Paideia, București: p. 68.

in the Middle Ages, Rimetea (1257-1272), Colțești (1332), Vălișoara (1342-1343), Izvoarele (1470), whose birth was at a certain moment conditioned by the land-use.

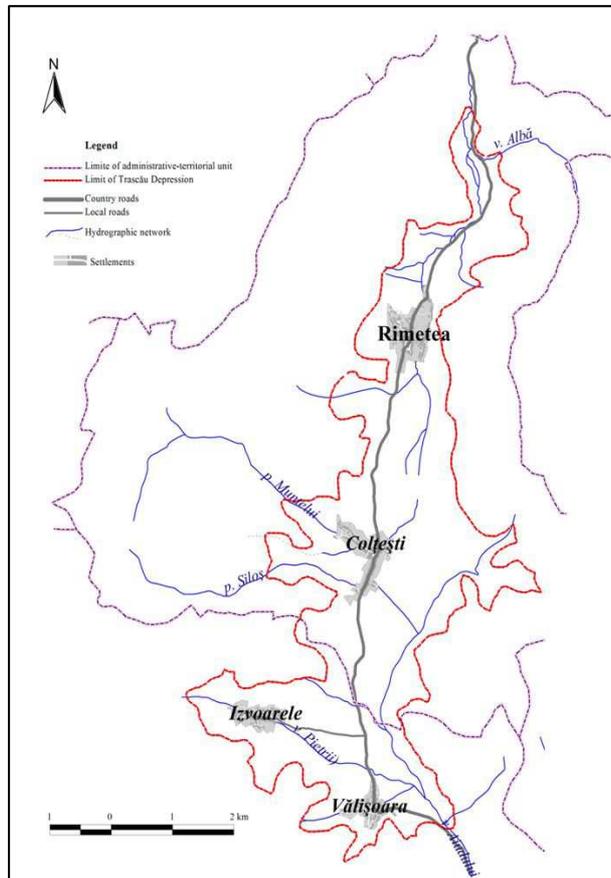


Fig. 2. The settlements from Trascău Depression.

The use of various sources, the study of some cartographical materials and the relevant literature regarding the approach of this topic, but also the field research or the spatial representation of the elements specific to the architecture in Trascău Depression have represented some necessary markers of the methodological norms of the research. The inventory, typology, and spatial distribution of the existing architectural elements from the Trascău Depression have been accomplished, by their identification in the field, by the analysis of the comparative study between the types of buildings found in the four settlements subjected to study. For the elaboration of the graphical and cartographical material, geo-referenced orthophotoplans of the administrative territories of the communes Livezile and Rimetea, Alba county, with a 50 cm/pixel resolution (240,000 sq km), with spatial coordinates expressed in Stereo 70 system, performed in the year 2004 (the Matra fly section), the representation scale was 1:5000, which is recommended by the urban planning legislation.

In order to determine the categories representative to the new architectural changes in the

Trascău Depression, digital images with a 3216x2136 pixels resolution were used, by means of a DSLR (digital single-lens reflex camera).

The inventory of the existing architectural elements from the Trascău Depression includes 168 houses with different architectural adjustments (which 45 restored traditional, with a certified architectural value, 28 traditional houses with adjustments in accordance with the spatial local planning, 35 traditional houses with unjustified adjustments, which do not respect the local identity, 3 new houses with vernacular architecture specificities, 30 new houses with allochthonous architecture specificities, 4 houses under construction, 16 houses with kitsch elements, 7 weekend houses). According to the type of architectural interventions, the observance of existing town planning regulations, the new construction trends implemented within the rural area, a typology of the architectural changes was established. This included households in the Trascău Depression as follows:

a). *Traditional houses with various interventions during the modern period, partially restored (façades, gates, foundations restorations) or completely restored, respecting the local tradition or lending other native models, some with a certification of their extraordinary architectural value (for example the Rimetea rural site).*

b). *Houses built during the modern period – starting with the category of the newly built houses, according to the traditional specificity of the study area or denying any relation to the past, and ending with the dazzling of some kitsch elements (phenomenon less frequently met locally, as compared to other regions of the country, especially if we refer to another scale), with the choice of traditional elements or by hiring architects, by using models specific to other European rural areas or even by importing some patterns from the urban area in order to improve the life standard (unfortunately, sporadically found in the study area, especially outside the residential areas). The same category also includes houses under construction, whose style may be inferred, in some cases, but also houses whose construction style is still uncertain.*

c). *Traditional houses, public edifices, architectural monuments, all rendered as “other buildings”, already existent previously to the above mentioned categories.*

Certainly, new buildings or changes of existing non-residential buildings have occurred during the last years. One could identify the same trends related to the physiognomy and construction style of the households in the style of some cult edifices, pensions, processing units or traditional facilities.

In order to highlight the built-up area planning in this area, and the life style of the inhabitants, the mapping of agricultural or other lands was also performed.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. Coexistence of the traditional and the modern

Village represents a live entity, which continues to survive and to change, adapts to anything “new” accepting or rejecting some infusions. Internationally and nationally, on a more conceptual rather than applicative level, the conservation of traditional elements has become a very high interest topic, with great efforts towards achieving minimal but rational and long-term changes in the habitat structure. Preoccupied by the viability of the historical monument, Kázmér K. [3] stated that *“although the popular architecture represents for us the only still alive and relatively recent historical model, it cannot be either intentionally built as it becomes instantaneously cult, or consistently preserved as it freezes due the lack of its traditional function, immediately changing into a cultural curiosity”*<sup>3</sup>. The depression space surrounded by the Trascău Mountains represents one of the areas that harmoniously combine with the inhabitants, with their way of being/*être*, with their developed activities/*savoir faire*, and with their habitat. The proves of this happy communion are the traditional households, inherited for generations, with gates, porches, benches, crosses – all these marking the life of people, the continuous quest but also the indispensable connection with the divinity.

While many existing houses originate from the period before the war, the following historical periods have also marked the rural space with a certain manner of spatial distribution of houses and with a particular way of constructions elevation. The real-estate fever, the increased desire to exhibit the social status by the so-called improvement of the living standard and originality was present everywhere around the country. From the implementation of some models from the neighbouring or visited regions, of some undesired copies taken from magazines in creating some vacation locations, the use of some construction materials such as bricks and concrete, all these concur to the particularity of a place defined by traditional elements but also open to newly occurred architectural trends. The settlements in the Trascău Depression are in their turn characterized, by the infusion of modern elements, designed by architects or by the owners of the households.

After a punctual analysis at the locality level of the combination of vernacular elements with modern or even post-modern elements, the following situations were identified:

- within the Rimetea’s built-up area, the architectural interventions brought to the existing

traditional houses partially respect the local tradition, despite the restrictions imposed by the local urban planning regulations and by the “filter” of adjustments to buildings by the Transylvania Trust association, which has the pre-appraisal right. For the restored houses, the quality of restoration works and of the implemented changes has caused an official recognition according to each of these houses. The European Council has assigned the distinction Europe Nostra in 1999. Fortunately, the use of kitsch-type imitative details has an unusual character, only few of these cases are found in villages, especially on the outskirts, but more and more inhabitants tend to abandon the traditional elements specific to the area in favour of some elements from the urban area (see fig. 4). Regarding the traditional facilities, these are limited to new mills, with only aesthetic purpose, the fountains from the central square of the villages or along the main and secondary roads, with an originality character due to their good condition;

- with the same benefits [restrictions imposed by the pre-appraisal right by the Transylvania Trust association] as the neighbouring locality, Colțești has only one house with the status of Europe Nostra monument. The architectural changes respected now and then by the inhabitants interfere with newly built houses [in most of the cases, directly by the imitation of a genuine construction plan]. A single building conforms entirely to the local planning norms: the Pension Conacul Secuiesc, built in 2005-2007 (see fig. 5).

- Vălișoara represents the only locality in the Trascău Depression where, based on the old population, the changes of old households are not noticeable. While most of the new houses are built according to the local tradition, the details less compliant to the reality in the area are very frequent (see fig. 6). In the South and East of the village there also occur weekend houses, most of them with a “rustic” style;

- although it has very valuable architectural elements similar to the Szecklers’ villages in the area, a house was identified in Izvoarele that has been restored with no changes to the initial structure. The relatively old population, migration of young inhabitants, lack of a local budget allocated to building investments might represent some explanations for the low number of new houses (see fig. 7). Another peculiarity found in Izvoarele is given by the fact that, although the traditional facilities are present, these have been completely left in decay.

#### 3.2. In what manner and how much do they build ... traditionally?

In a society dominated by the increasing welfare and improving life standard, habitation represents one of the main points of political debates

<sup>3</sup> Kázmér, K. (2003), *Timpu monumentului istoric*, Colecția Spații imaginare, Editura Paideia, București: p. 69.

related to the development of an optimum socio-economic environment.

The occurrence rhythm of the new buildings, with a higher or lower number of traditional elements, the most frequent edifices occur outside of the Rimetea's built-up area; many of these being used as secondary residences or accommodation units. Inside the built-up area, the new buildings are less and less frequent. This fact might be explained by the old demographical structure and the migration of the young inhabitants. A particular situation for this area is represented by the Northern sector, overlapping the Rimetea and Colțești localities, where, due to the local urban planning regulations, the trend of new buildings is controlled. The Rimetea territorial-administrative unit was declared rural site and it benefits of the architectural Conservation Area statute, proposed by the Transylvania Trust Association. This association has initiated a rehabilitation program of the vernacular heritage in Rimetea, having the pre-appraisal right for the buildings in the respective area. Unlike the Northern depression area, the Southern depression side, extended along the localities Izvoarele and Vălișoara, is subjected to a stagnating rhythm regarding the newly built structures with a construction regime not regulated by any institution. This issue is transposed in the elimination of the traditional elements. Other traditional elements occurred during the recent years may be identified within new ecclesiastical buildings (the Orthodox Church in Rimetea, Rimetea Monastery), some traditional facilities (the water mill in Rimetea) and some tourist pensions (Colțești and Vălișoara).

In most of the cases, however, new adjustments were preferred to the already existing foundations, either by the elevation of the house, change of some parts of the house (especially facades), the external aspect remained the traditional one, or by the reconstruction of others on the existing foundation). The most alert partial or complete restoration rhythm was recorded in Rimetea, where various interventions were performed, conditioned by the available financial resources. In case of Colțești, one may notice a renovation tentative of houses but still in an incipient stage, with unplastered facades and only elevated roofs. At another scale and to a lesser extent, we find the same desertion phenomenon of the renewal works of buildings in the Izvoarele and Vălișoara localities. The existence of an old population and of a high number of people who went abroad for work, who started the restoration works at their parents' houses, but whose works have been ceased, represent possible arguments for explaining the uncompleted/ceased building works. On the other hand, the present economic context eliminates the chances of materializing some investments in restoring the households.

Another difficult issue of the present constructions trend is represented by the confronting with the implementation of details which do not respect the technical regime of a house.

Moreover, the inappropriate usage of these details gives a meretricious impression, representing a feature of a population segment which has lost its guide land references. Put into other words, "Their function is that of social acknowledgement, of social legitimating"<sup>4</sup> [4].

Without any significant proportions, the phenomenon of these kitsch details presence in the localities of the bottom of Trascău Mountains (ornamental marble pillars, inappropriate colours etc.).

### 3.3. Between legislation and practice

By observing the law, the protected areas represent "natural or built areas, geographically and/or topographically delimited areas that include natural and/or cultural patrimony values and are declared as such for the achievement of specific objectives of preserving the heritage values" [9], the research, restoration, conservation and capitalization works of the existing cultural heritage, becoming the concern of the administrative authorities and of the specialists in the field. In addition, the same legislative act, appendix no. III, under the conditions of art. 5 align. (2) provides the existence of some "protection areas of the historical monuments, of 100 meters in cities and towns, 200 meters in communes and 500 meters outside the localities"<sup>5</sup> [9], [8], [5].



Fig. 3. Rimetea rural site – Architectural Conservation Area (2009).

As one of the most frequently proposed solution in the policies related to landscape, heritage

<sup>4</sup> Mihăilescu, V. (2009), *Satul ca peisaj cultural*, in: Urbanismul, serie nouă, mai, nr. 2, an II: p. 48.

<sup>5</sup> *Legea nr. 5 din 6 martie 2000 privind aprobarea Planului de amenajare a teritoriului național – secțiunea a III-a – Zone protejate*, in Monitorul Oficial al României, nr. 152 din 12 aprilie 2000; Oberländer-Târnoveanu, Irina (2002), *Un Viitor pentru Trecut. Ghid de bună practică pentru păstrarea patrimoniului cultural*, Editura CIMEC, București: pp. 40-41.

and implicitly traditional architecture conservation is represented by the *in situ* conservation of the monuments and ensembles of existing monuments. In this direction, at the initiative of an association which deals with the sustainable protection of the built heritage, Transylvania Trust, the “The Rimetea Heritage Conservation Project”, financed by the Local Council of the 5th District of Budapest, materialized by donations of building owners for their maintenance. According to the public information presented by the association, starting with the year 1996, the houses in Rimetea have benefited of a maintenance support, equal to a monthly medium salary – Grant A.

The conservation grant – which implied the involvement of the owner in the restoration works, but only with assistance provided by the association and another subsidy provided in the case of restoration works – Grant B. The restoration grant – provided based on competition contest [13], [2].

Seen as a summer school, open towards the learning of adequate techniques applied in the field of historical monuments restoration by the participants, the Transylvania Trust association has managed to perform restoration, expertise, design and disclosure works of 70 buildings in Rimetea.

As a result of the initial achievement of the protected monument statute, they managed, in 2000, the granting of the architectural Conservation Area statute for the Rimetea rural site [11], any type of architectural intervention was performed only with the notification of the Commission for historical monuments protection, and since 2004 the pre-appraisal right [2].

The implementation of this statute of legal protection at national level should not be limited to the Rimetea’s built-up area, but extended to the entire depression area, including to the areas outside the residential limits, in the context of identifying an original cultural landscape.

The identification of a material asset as an element of heritage enables its recognition, its positioning in the society, regeneration of the rural space by valorising the respective monument of monuments ensemble and by the recognition of its identity.

The restoration works performed in Rimetea have led the granting of the Europa Nostra prize to the Transylvania Trust Association. Because of this award, 20 buildings have benefitted of façade restoration.

The award of this European Union prize for the cultural heritage is destined for the stimulation and support of the projects regarding the preservation of the ancestral cultural heritage by means of the Europa Nostra organization, succeeding to create a network of more than 400 members and professional organizations with the same mutual purpose on the European continent.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The main conclusions drawn from the analysis of the local architecture of the Trascău Depression may be rendered in the following ideas:

- the low number of newly built structures, an interrelation action for the Rimetea’s built-up area, with the local planning regarding the construction terms, according to the configuration of the area;

- there is a visible difference between the residential and non-residential areas of the localities, the construction of new edifices in the non-residential area of the localities (be they vacation houses, houses, pensions, camping places) is not controlled, and not concordant to spatial planning rules;

- the lack of sound solutions of integrating the new rural space for the avoidance of previously mentioned situation;

- the traffic infrastructure represents a serious problem of the investigated area, slowing down the territorial economic development;

- a low participation interest on behalf of the public sphere, a general phenomena at national level, but with unfavourable effects locally;

- one part of the rural patrimony of the Trascău Depression –Rimetea rural site–benefits of the conservation area statute, which ensures the *in situ* survival of the historical monuments;

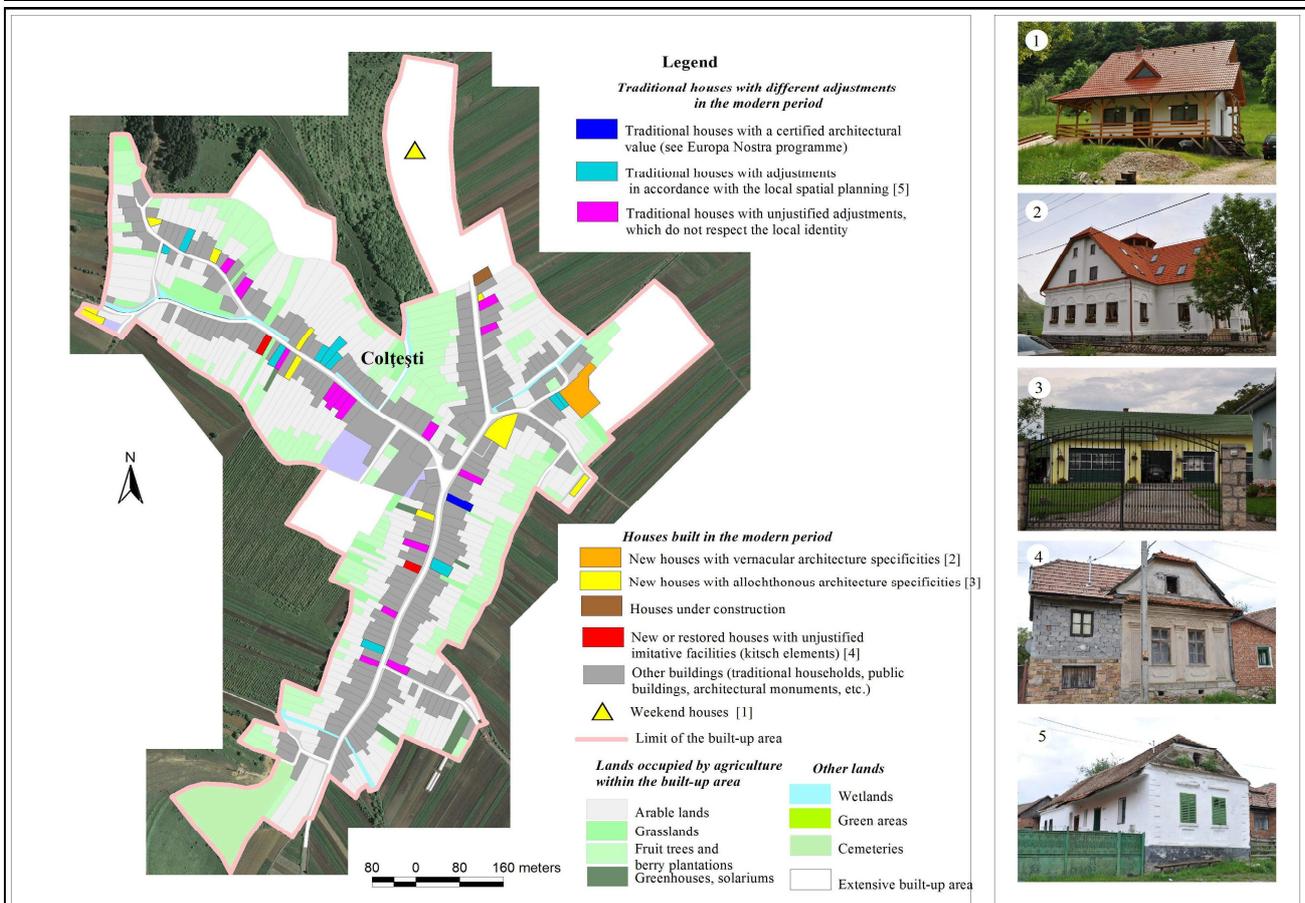
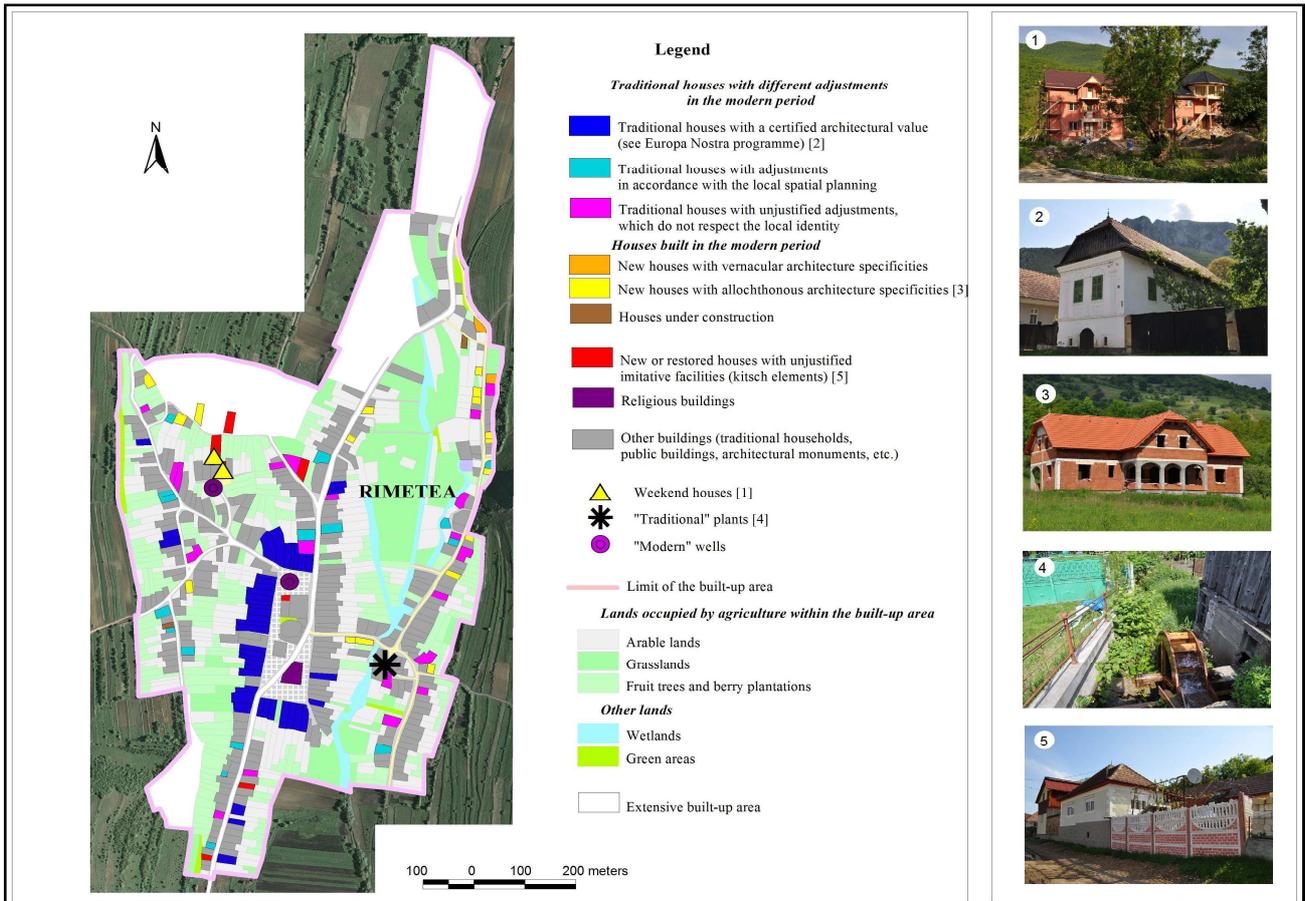
- the mental evolution of the inhabitants, local or not, the transition from the simple mentality of the peasant/villager, which places the accent on a safe, sustainable and efficient architecture (not declared as such) harmoniously balanced with the rural environment, to the mentality of the “urban” villager or of the townsman who came here “for vacation”, dominated by consumerism, technology and standards.

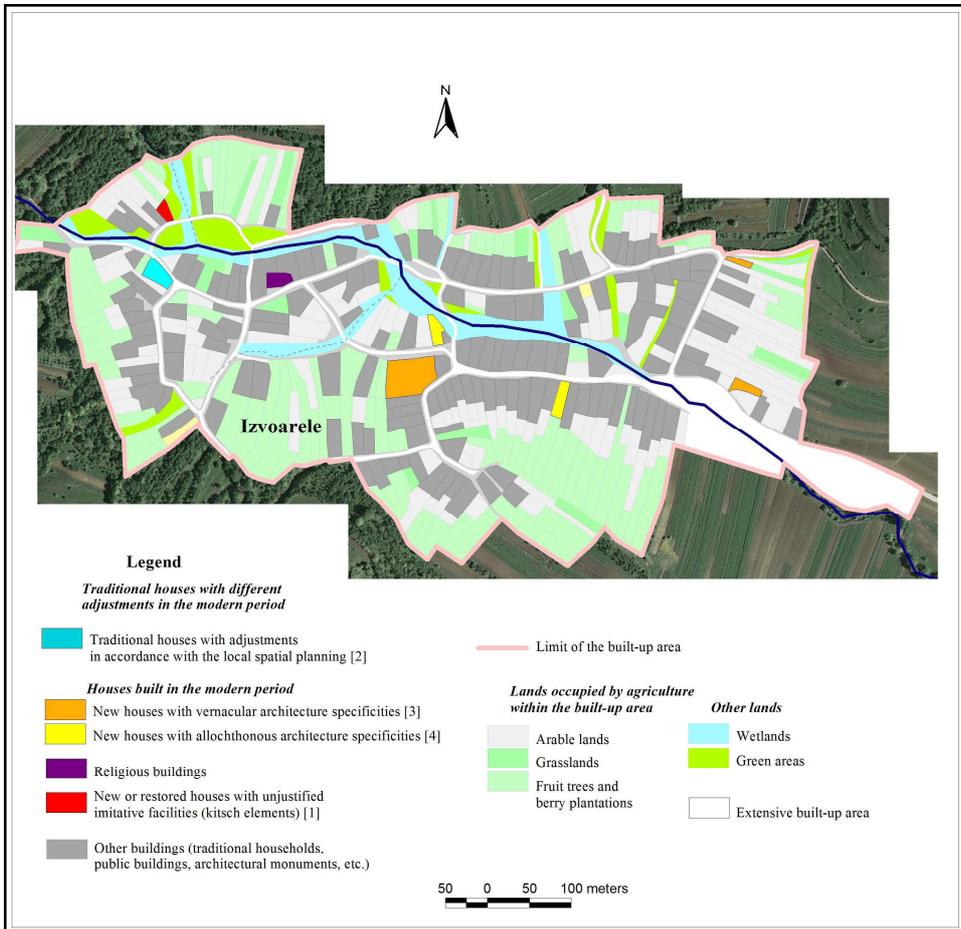
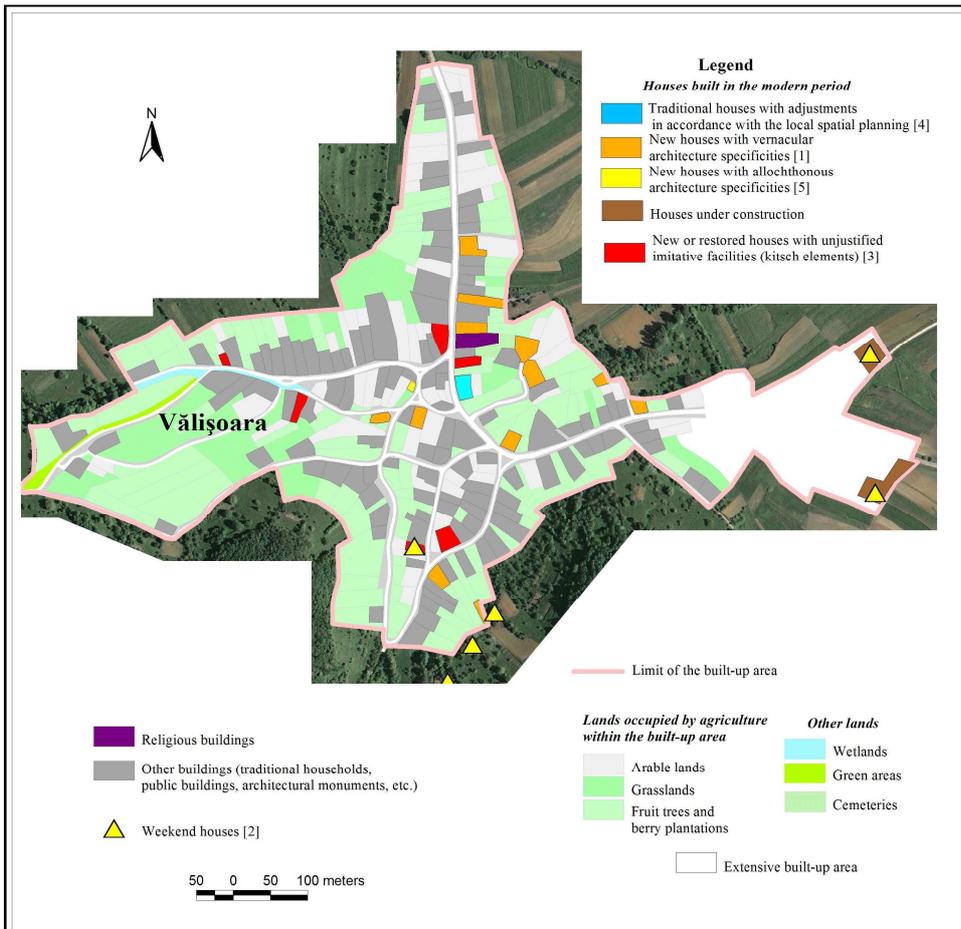
The declaration of an environmental protection area and/or extent of the architectural conservation area for the entire depression, in the context of the existence of some common traditional elements in all four localities could represent one of the viable alternatives for the maintenance of the rural heritage of the Trascău Depression. By simply crossing the village streets in the Trascău Depression, which are surrounded on one side and the other by authentic “live” simple households, gives us live models, whose survival is conditioned by present or designed changes of the so-called specialists, regardless of their field of intervention. The vernacular spreading from the invisible but lasting identity threads, as opposed to the post-modernist elements, should become a *generalized* debate point, approached not insularly, *multidisciplinary*, by an opening towards the cooperation with specialists in various fields (architects, urban planners, geographers, sociologists, economists etc.), *applicative* and *institutionalized*, otherwise it risks remaining just an idea, a plan ... on the shelves of a beneficiary institution.

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