

# Elements of Romanian Folk Architecture: Traditional Houses

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**ABSTRACT:** The present material has been intended as a brief chronicle of Romanian folk architecture, based on the concept that individual has in perpetuum inclined toward habitation in accordance with their corresponding socio-economic status and household requirements. It explores aspects such as construction methods, along with the choice of position in terms of a sustainable structure to withstand over time for generations to come, the significance of inhabitation in collective consciousness, the evolution of architectural materials over time, and the harmonious blend of architectural styles including the transformation of the living area from the front room to drawing room (*the main home*). The facets in relation to the constitutive elements or parts of a provincial establishment, from the foundation to the rooftop (sheathing), have been taken into consideration and analyzed. The purpose of this article is to uncover the rich heritage embodied in these traditional houses and gain valuable insight into their construction, symbolism, and role within the community.

**KEYWORDS:** architecture, homestead, villager, sacred, profane, emplacement

Folk architecture represents one of the most complex and extensive domains of ethnic culture in general and popular art in particular, a characteristic that has to be articulated. In this context, Romanian folk architecture highlights the mode of life on the subject of Romanian villagers along with the mentality and socio-economic conditions over the course of time.

The history of Romanian civilization, deeply rooted in the ancient origins of the Romanian people architectural prowess and benefiting from a bountiful nature in terms of raw materials, have conditioned the emergence of structures that exhibit a clear spatial concept, thus resulting in the construction of geometrically rigorous edifices (Petrescu-Stoica 1981, 16).

From time immemorial, for the Romanian villager and beyond, the habitation house has symbolized the spiritual center of human life, a place where the profane encounters the sacred, around which the majority of the wondrous universe of creatures described in specialized literature revolves. The motivation and the necessity that the individual has felt in point of the idea of building a shelter, the mythical mindset of the Romanian villager has articulated the following explanation:

The instant that has followed after the creation of the world revealed that God (The Granfer) did not initially conceive the need to provide human beings with a shelter, as the sky was very close to the earth, and celestial bodies (the sun, the moon, the stars) moved among people, warming them. Nonetheless, when divinity became displeased with humanity and raised the sky and celestial bodies high above, far from earth, humans began to experience the need for protection against the elements. At first, they sought refuge in forests and caves, but gradually, as the numbers increased, they felt the need to shelter themselves artificially. It was in that moment that God, who has constantly looked after for his creation, in his notorious benevolence, brought up the idea of constructing subterranean covers (huts) and subsequently above-ground structures (houses) (Petrescu-Stoica 1981, 19).

The traditional Romanian village (Marin 2006, 1109-1112), which is scarcely preserved in current time, had revealed in point of the habitation peculiarities of construction that endowed it with a distinct architectural profile, being influenced by the region, occupations, the degree of ethno-historical spirituality, and especially a remarkable artistic sense. The setting up of a house was

initiated only after particular construction rituals were performed in the respective household, aiming to solidify the new dwelling as a whole. These rituals included practices such as the edification of a living person (the Legend of Craftsman Manole), the burial of the stolen shadow of a human being in the foundation of the construction, introducing apotropaic inscriptions (magical verses) with talismanic value among the bricks in the walls, a practice prevalent in the Middle Ages, and the sacrifice of a poultry bird, a ritual that continues in present.

In the broad sense of the term, the house represents a "building used as a dwelling" (DEX, s.v.), a structure that is intended to be inhabited, constructed from diverse materials using various techniques, featuring different dimensions and various rooms to cater to the material and spiritual needs of the occupants, thus being embellished in Romanian folk architecture with a significant and artistic decorative theme (Stoica and Petrescu 1997, 102).

When the peasant decided to build a house, his worries began with choosing the place for the new construction (because it had a very important role) and ended with the lighting of the first fire in the hearth. The mindset of the Romanian peasant has perceived the abode as a space with material, economic, and utilitarian value and an area that is endowed with spiritual meanings, thus creating a profound connection, and a nucleus of stability, tranquility, harmony, fertility, and blessings. It was no coincidence that on *the headpiece of the facade* were carved open palms raised toward the sky, the snake of the habitation, astral symbols (sun, moon), and stylized horse heads on either side of the entrance, representations of the protective solar spirits of the dwelling with no practical purpose, nevertheless with aesthetic and spiritual significance.

The habitation of the villager was seamlessly integrated with other spaces, namely the vicinity, the heart of the village, and even the boundary, the confine between the space that offered a sense of security and freedom and the unknown. In particular, the above-mentioned boundaries (along with crossroads) were being marked with triptychs or wooden or stone crosses, intended to shield the one that dared to cross beyond this space, the one who ventured out of the realm where the sense of protection was to be conferred within.

The intended area as regards the construction of a habitation, preferably situated as higher as possible and set away from the road, the orientation of the dwelling place always toward east or south, the positioning of the chamber, also on the east side along with the arrangement of objects inside were not coincidental and served not only practical purposes but also held deep spiritual significance. The Romanian peasant considered the sunrise as the source of light, and the south as bountiful and generators of welfare, therefore positive, while the sunset and the northern direction were considered less fruitful and harboring negativity (Bernea 2007, 73).

The peculiarities of the sunrise are related to the present existence in the world and linked, in line with the beliefs of the Romanian people, to the theme of death and resurrection: "Everything is oriented toward the sunrise regardless one takes into account an abode or a flower, even a deceased person is laid to rest with the face onto the sunrise" affirm Elena Bășa, 40 years old, Moeciu de Jos, Bran, 1971 (Bernea 2007, 74).

Hence, in terms of the placement of the dwelling, for the Romanian peasant, there were only two types of locations: the former that was benefic and pure, being chosen with great attention, while the latter was perceived as reverse, defiled, typically where iniquities (all sorts of crimes) had been committed or where malevolent forces exerted influence (haunted places). The outset of new construction implied a prior act, namely the Romanian peasant always resorted to the benediction of the site anent the household in order to revitalize the beneficial attributes of nature and the corresponding purity, attributes that were tied to the divine order in which God had created the world. The necessity to protect against evil and ensure the longevity in respect of the new dwelling has determined the peasant to appeal to certain ritualistic gestures, specifically the burial of protective items at the foundation of the habitation, which were believed to bring well-being and prosperity, including holy water,

incense, wine, salt, bread, or symbolic representations of continuity: the shadow of a person, the string used to measure a human figure, small sacrificed animals, reminiscent of the creation sacrifice myth.

The spiritual and social significance attributed to the dwelling by the Romanian villager was exceptionally strong as it was closely linked to family and tradition (Bernea 2007, 143); the formation of a family was inconceivable without establishing a household, a home of their own (before getting married, the lad needed to have a abode, whereas the young woman, a dowry). The peasant could neither experience the feeling of wholeness nor consider to be fully integrated within society unless the possession of a house existed, regardless of its size. Thus, the endeavor and necessity to put down roots were nurtured by a profound social sentiment of community engagement and the stability of the family within the village.

The habitation of the newly formed family was not constructed at a distance far from the one of the parents so as to ensure that the familial bond remained intact, while the youngest child of the family was to live together with the parents and had the moral duty to care for them until demise, thus ensuring that the burial process had been carried out accordingly and by means of proper rituals. The mentality corresponding to the village of the past, leaving behind the parental inheritance was considered a mistake, a severance from a "familial treasure" which, upon abandonment, was destined to disappear and as a consequence the adjustment to a life devoid of roots involved considerable anguish. Hence, marriages usually occurred between young people from the same rural community and on rare occasions from different villages.

Therefore, the decision in point of the location for the dwelling place was followed by the construction of the new habitation that, in the mindset of the traditional village corresponding to that time, meant that not only relatives and friends would be involved in this activity, but the entire community would participate through the organization of "corvées" (The corvée entailed an activity of a "benevolent collective work that was performed by peasants to help each other, often accompanied or followed by a small celebration, drollery, and stories" (DEX, s.v.). The manner in which the peasants assisted each other in all activities anent building habitations, plowing fields, harvesting crops has determined the perspective according to which in relation to the traditional village of the past, to set up a home was considered as regards the amount of money inexpensive as the necessary materials were provided by the geographical area of the village (wood, earth, or stone) and durable, thus imparting a sense of stability and independence.

In terms of typology and ethnography, the constructions to be inhabited by Romanian villagers were classified according to:

- I. The building material and the construction technique,
- II. The elevation (height above the ground),
- III. The plan of the house and the number of rooms.

I. The material and the building technique with view to the construction of the dwelling place create the following division:

a. Habitations with walls made of rammed earth specific to flat areas where wood is scarce or expensive;

b. Habitations with walls made of wood, utilizing techniques such as horizontal girders or log wreath, a wooden supporting frame that was completed or filled with various materials (wattle, logs, bricks), or a woven wattle frame coated with a mixture of yellow soil and cow dung. This type of house, known as "timber-framed," were particular to hillside and along larger rivers where limber wattle thickets grew;

c. Habitations with walls made of "wattle" (rom. *văioagă*) a larger type of burned cinder block the composition of which was a mixture of clay; these can still be found in plain regions;

d. Habitations with walls made of "mud" (rom. *chirpici*) a brick-like construction material made from a mixture of clay, straw, and dried cow dung, prevalent in Dobrudja, where the climate somewhat necessitated it due to the hot summers, thus providing a sense of comfort in point of a moderate temperature for during the season;

e. Habitations with walls that were made of stone, and more recently, cement; the stone was typically used as a foundational material for houses, whether built on a wooden structure or cinder block.

II. In respect of elevation, namely the height of the habitation in point of the ground level, constructions can be classified as follows:

a. Habitations that were built below ground level, partially buried in the ground, an example would be "the shanty" (rom. *bordei*). This type of shelter is known since the Neolithic period, not only on Romanian territory but worldwide.

The "shanty" represents a rudimentary dwelling place common across the world; the construction technique involves digging a deep hole of approximately one to one and a half meters, with wattle walls meant to support the border of land and coated with a thick layer of clay whereas the roof was made of soil, straw, or reed-covered (Stoica 1985, 78). All things considered, "shanty" does not represent, as one might think, a primitive mode of habitation, but rather an adaptive one for humans, as in the summer the atmosphere within it kept breezy and warm in the winter; being not necessarily indicative of the poor economic status of the family that would inhabit them. In fact, the habitation often required a significant amount of materials, to the point that they could be more expensive than the surface of the dwelling with plaited wattle walls. Typically, "the shanty" had two rooms: the former placed near the source of heath, where the fireplace was located, and the latter intended to habitation, heated by a stove that was fueled from the former room. In the Dobrudja region, the "shanties" were dug into earth embankments and referred to as "earth houses" by the natives specific to the Danube Plain, southern Oltenia, and Dobrudja.

In the pictures below, there is Castranova Shanty/Cottage, in the region of Dolj County, south-western area of Romania, located and rebuilt within "Dimitrie Gusti" Village Museum in Bucharest.



Figure 1: Castranova Shanty/Cottage, south-western area of Romania

This type of "shanty" is embedded into the ground up to the roof (roof covering), and as seen from the layout of the habitation, it comprises four rooms arranged in a T-shaped plan. The dividing walls are constructed as "timber-framed" (plaited wattle walls, coated with a mixture of yellow clay and cow dung) and plaster. The peripheral walls are built from soil and supported by thick vertical wooden boards placed side by side, resembling a lining. Additional planks, supported at the center on a strong ridge, form the two sides of the roof, which is externally protected by a thick layer of compacted soil. The rooms are spacious and welcoming, with the central room being particularly notable. The distinctive feature of the entire architecture is the entrance, which appears as a fronton with the corners marked by the protrusions of wooden beams, cut in the shape of stylized horse heads - ornaments with ancient magical significance, as previously mentioned, serving as protection for the family members of the dwelling place.

b. Habitations that were built **at ground level**, such as: *the shepherd's hut* (rom. *colibă*), *one row* houses with one "level", and dwellings with *two rows* or two levels.

1. The most rudimentary form of dwelling is the shepherd's hut; this type of construction is found in mountainous regions and is built within the pastoral household called a "sheepfold" (a temporary sheepfold). Structurally, the shepherd's hut is as simple as it can be: four walls made from logs or woven branches on a framework of stakes, and above, a roof, usually with two slopes covered with shingles. Often, the hut had only one room without a ceiling, fireplace, or oven; at times, huts were comprised of two or three rooms. Designed solely as a temporary shelter to meet the needs of life and pastoral economy during periods when the flock was halted in a specific region, the shepherd's hut is a rudimentary type of dwelling without significant architectural interest. It holds only documentary value due to its construction method, material, and as an ancient form of housing characteristic of transhumant shepherds. These shepherds would move their herds cyclically between vast and unbounded territories, a practice known as transhumance, ascending to the mountains during summer and descending to the plains where the weather was milder during winter. Similar forms of huts are encountered not only in Romanian territory but also in other areas of the Balkan Peninsula where transhumant shepherds have existed and still exist today, as transhumance involves the cyclical movement of sheep flocks across extensive and borderless territories.



Figure 2: The Shepherd's hut

2. The one "row" habitation (what is currently referred to as a one-story house), built at ground level, represents the evolved form of the dwelling used almost exclusively by the Romanian peasant, as it provided the necessary living space for families, often of considerable size. This type of house has a very long history and a widespread presence, being found throughout Romanian territory. The one "row" house was adapted not only to the terrain where it was to be built, the environmental conditions (climate), and construction materials, but also to the lifestyle of the peasant and the family that would inhabit it. Situated within the village boundaries, surrounded by hills, valleys, and streams, it displays various appearances and types, often well-marked. However, beyond these differentiations, in terms of general layout and volume, houses in all Romanian regions conform to a unified, regular form, which is that of a straight prism or at most two such prisms juxtaposed with a rectangular section.

3. The tall house, or the house with two "levels," is a later appearance in the realm of Romanian vernacular architecture (19th century). The house is built either on a high foundation of river stone masonry (beneath which generally lies the cellar or tool room), or on a semi-developed or well-constructed ground floor. This type of house was more often found in households with means, as they could afford the construction of such a more costly house.

III. The floor plan and the number of rooms (the horizontal description of the dwelling) have determined the following division:

a) *The single-room or monocellular habitation* is considered to be the also the oldest one along the course of time, built at ground level and specific to scattered pastoral villages, represents the most ancient type of folk dwelling. This type could be constructed from the same above-mentioned materials (large wooden logs, timber-framed, mudbrick, etc.) and had a porch or a direct access from the courtyard, and usually featured two small windows on either side of the entrance door. The roof of such a monocellular house usually had a four-sided shape and was covered with reed, shingles, or later on, sheet metal. Inside, the walls and ceiling were often plastered with clay mixed with chaff and/or coated with loam. The floor could be made of compacted earth/soil and pasted by means of clay, then being blended with horse manure or timber planks. The interior, was characterized by modesty, invariably dominated by the hearth with an elongated oven that was soldered with clay.

b) The **two-room dwelling place**, initially independent with separate entrances, later had a single entry with rooms arranged side by side and separated by a hallway.

The two-room house follows the monocellular model in chronological evolution. The two rooms of this type of house are independent with separate entrances directly from the porch, serving one as a living space and the other exclusively for storing provisions or receiving guests. The living room also functions as a kitchen and bedroom; for cooking, the fire was set on an open hearth (rom. *căloniu* or *horn*), a sort of low podium situated in the corner formed by the back wall and the partition wall between the two rooms, above which a large pyramidal chimney, made of woven wicker and clay, was hung from the ceiling. Through this chimney, smoke was conducted into the attic and then slowly released through gaps in the roofing material. Generally, the attic also served as a smoking chamber for meat and pork products, while during winter, after *Ignat-St. Ignatius Day* (the day of pig slaughter in the Christmas fasting period), the peasant would hang meat there for preservation through smoking. The image below presents my grandparents house, which is a tall habitation with a dormer and two independent rooms (left room - living room, right room- "big house" or guest room), with a shingle roof, built in four bays and stick walls (rom. *vârghii* or *paiantă*). The house is in Valea Village, Dambovita County, Muntenia area.



Figure 3: House in Valea Village, Dambovita County, Muntenia area

Later on, the open hearth was replaced by a stove with a cooking surface. This type of habitation, in its archaic form, is still preserved today in certain areas of Muntenia and Transylvania.

c) The habitation with a **hallway** (rom. *tindă*), the most advanced and widespread type of rural dwelling in Romania, has two variants: one with two rooms and another with three rooms, depending on the construction plan. In this structure, the hallway is the smaller room in the two-room variant or the central one in the three-room variant, but invariably, the

hallway is the space through which one enters the house. The second, larger room is called the "big house" and was used as a guest room, while the room used for living was called the "small habitation."

Since the hearth from the living room of the *monocellular dwelling* was moved to the hallway, the latter received, in addition to its function as an entrance room, the role of a kitchen, so that the room in which the family spent their life remained exclusively a living space. This marked a real improvement in terms of hygiene conditions.

The methods of constructing a dwelling along the horizontal axis along with the evolution of the peasant habitations in terms of the number of rooms have been analyzed within the lines of the article, hereinafter the manner of vertical appearance is considered, anent three constructive registers: the foundation, the walls, and the roof or sheathing.

1. **The foundation** of the habitation was generally made of a combined stone wall, hewn into the ground and built above the surface. Larger stones were placed at the corners to anchor both sides of the wall. The height of the foundation depended on the location of the dwelling place; in flood-prone lowland areas, higher foundations were built, while in sloping hilly areas, the foundations were lower. Another criterion for determining the height of the foundation was the amount of stone the villager had, as stone was expensive and often transported by oxcart from a distance. After constructing the foundation, the space between the walls was filled up to the level of the foundation with compacted soil by means of a wooden mallet (a "hammer-shaped tool (made of wood) used for pounding, compacting, and leveling" (DEX, s.v.) and brought in baskets made of wicker.

2. The partitions of the habitations were erected after completing the foundation. In accordance with the area where the dwelling was to be built, the **walls** could be made of stick/wattle (rom. *vârghii* or *paiantă*) (plaited with soil mixed with dung), wooden beams, or bricks. Until the beginning of the 20th century, houses with walls made of wooden beams (usually spruce), either round or carved with edges, were typical for Romanian villages. They were "joined at angles using systems called fish tails or notches," or made of adobe, while houses made of bricks or stone were very rare. With few exceptions, all types of peasant houses featured an open gallery (a sort of balcony) on the front and often on the sides. In Moldova and Muntenia, it was referred to as "veranda," in Oltenia "hall," in southern Transylvania "the head piece of the bridle" and "porch," while in Maramureş it was "booth."

**The "stoop/porch"** (rom. *prispă*) was made of compacted clay or wood, often bordered on the outside by a low timber wall with ornamental perches and allowed the passage toward the habitation was via the entrance hall. The "stoop" or verandah was to be noticed either be in the front of the dwelling or to surround the construction entirely, an architectural element providing external protection to the walls against the elements, being endowed with mythical value, while functioning as a transition area between the exterior and interior, the courtyard and the house, and vice versa. In many Romanian villages, from spring until late autumn when the weather turned colder, the peasants would sleep outdoors on the "stoop". Additionally, particular mythic-magical activities were performed on the "stoop" that were related to rites of passage, anent birth and christening, bridal ceremony and funerals. Sometimes, women would cast spells and charms from the "stoop" at night towards their intended addressee.

3. **The roof** of the traditional Romanian habitation had been submitted to evolution over time and architectural diversity in accordance with the ethnographic regions and the material possibilities. Initially, the accommodations were covered with thatch and reeds, then with shingles (especially made from spruce wood), and more recently, peasants have used tiles and metal sheets. A specific pattern of roof among Romanians, as well as other Balkan Peninsula peoples, was the four-ridged one, regardless of the material used for its construction. The roofs of Romanian dwelling places particular to villagers could be characterized by means of two fundamental characteristics: a significant height in relation to the walls, which allowed

for easy and rapid drainage of rain or snow as well as a considerable width of eaves, which always included the porch of the habitation within them.

The mentality of the villager attributed importance to another noteworthy area of the house, namely the **threshold** (rom. *prag*) with a specific role within the course of the rites of passage. An example was related to weddings, during which the grooms were embraced on the threshold by their in-laws and godparents. In return from the church, the baptized child was handed to the mother by the godmother over the threshold, with the words, "You gave me a pagan, and I brought you a Christian." Currently, the bride is carried over the threshold in the groom's arms. Moreover, in the process of the construction, money was buried under the threshold to magically attract wealth into that dwelling.

Similarly, **the window** held special significance in the rituals that were aimed at altering or impeding a predetermined fate, which would involve the sell of a newborn child, after several previous births, resulted in the death of the children (Vuia 1980, 142; Marian 1995, 86). On a window of the house, the most recent child born was traded by the mother and bought by a close relative or a stranger. After a few hours, the mother would redeemed the child from the buyer using the initial amount of money paid. This redemption took place on the porch of the house, and the child's name would change at that moment. Abduction of young girls was also practiced by means of windows, usually the side ones, when parents disagreed with a marriage proposal, believing that the trail of the abductor could not be identified. Christmas Eve carols were sung at the front windows, with carolers lightly tapping the windows with sticks (the caroling sticks). **The hearth** (rom. *vatră*) and the **chimney** (chimney stack) (rom. *coș de fum / horn*) also possessed considerable importance in daily activities and mythical-ritual practices.

**The hearth** has symbolized the divine connection between Earth and Sky, the place food was prepared, where a woman would give birth to her first child for good luck, where incantations were performed, love spells were cast, and the future was divined. The hearth provided magical protection for people, especially women, being considered the most significant sacred space in the traditional habitation. Simultaneously, it represented a space of safety since the material value was stored in a clay pot beneath the hearth to prevent it from being stolen by malicious individuals. The actual layout of the house was organized around this central element, where light, warmth, and sustenance were produced.

**The chimney stack** represented one of the entrances of the dwelling, permanently open, and it was believed that through this magical "opening," witches, demons, and nocturnal creatures circulated during their activities. Peasants believed that the soul of the deceased would exit through the chimney stack.

The corollary of the analysis in point of the material at issue denotes the perspective according to which the habitation of the Romanian peasant has always represented the core center of life as regards the social, economic, historical, and anthropological aspects (Rotaru 2005, 462c). The diversity of typological forms known in traditional houses contributes to the variety of folk architecture. The dwelling place of the villager is the place where the material and spiritual culture of the Romanian people have originated, developed, and been preserved over the course of time. This article has shown how Romanian folk architecture is not just an architectural style but also a testament to the resilience of a culture deeply connected with its rural heritage.

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