

A MATERIAL CULTURE PERSPECTIVE ON THE CAPITALIZATION OF ROȘIA MONTANĂ ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE (ROMANIA) BY THE ROȘIA MONTANĂ GOLD CORPORATION

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Abstract: By taking as an example an abandoned house from Roșia Montană (Alba County, Romania), this photographic essay is a critique of the capitalization of the village architectural heritage by the Roșia Montană Gold Corporation (RMGC) – a private mining company interested in the resources of the region. I sustain that RMGC promotes and implements a disembodied perspective on the houses, people and landscape, thus erasing the memory of those who once lived at Roșia Montană.

Rezumat: Luând ca exemplu o casă abandonată din Roșia Montană (județul Alba, România), acest eseu fotografic este o critică a valorificării patrimoniului arhitectural de către Roșia Montană Gold Corporation (R.M.G.C.) – o companie minieră privată interesată de resursele în regiune. Susțin că R.M.G.C. promovează și implementează o perspectivă dezîntrupată asupra caselor, oamenilor și peisajului, ștergând în acest fel memoria acelor care cândva au locuit la Roșia Montană.



Fig. 1. Roșia Montană, September 2011: overview (photo: Radu-Alexandru Dragoman).

Roșia Montană is a village located in the Apuseni Mountains in Transylvania (Alba County), at 700-900 m altitude, where, since the Antiquity, the main activity of the inhabitants was mining. After the fall of the communist regime in 1989, the mining activity continued for a while, but the human life was severely affected due to the general economic deterioration of Romania. Following the adoption of a pro-capitalist discourse and the transition to the market economy, the state mining at Roșia Montană was classified as hopelessly unprofitable. Gradually, the mining exploitations were closed, leading to the lower incomes of the

residents and the increase of the migration to urban areas, in search of a better standard of living.¹ In this context, in 1997, the Gabriel Resources Company, whose shares on the date on which I wrote these lines were owned by 80% by investors in the United States, has focused on the mineral deposits of Roșia Montană and founded the company Euro Gold Resources SA, renamed in 2000 Roșia Montană Gold Corporation (RMGC); in the latter company, the Gabriel Resources has become the main shareholder, with over 80% of shares.² Two years later, Euro Gold Resources SA/RMGC, obtained the license for the exploitation of the gold and silver deposits in the area of the locality and initiated the necessary steps to start a large mining project.³ On the RMGC's website, in commercials or TV shows, the mining project was presented by its promoters as extremely beneficial for the locals, affected by the unemployment following the closure of the state mines from the communist period and, also for the entire country, affected by the "global crisis" started in 2008: RMGC promoted/promotes the message that it will create thousands of jobs, will provide generous salaries, will create favorable conditions for the business development in the area, will create a modern infrastructure,

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¹ Vulpe *et al.* 2011, pp. 29-30, 103.

² RMGC's official website: <http://www.rmgc.ro/>; accessed: 23 November 2011.

³ *Ibidem.*

will contribute substantially to the local and the state's budget, will highlight the historical and cultural heritage and so on; moreover, it is stated that RMGC provided funds for the rehabilitation and the long-term monitoring of the environment. In short, the discourse of RMGC is building around the project an image of success for the future of the people and of the area.



Fig. 2. Roșia Montană, May 2008: house purchased by RMGC (photo: Tiberiu Vasilescu).



Fig. 3. Roșia Montană, May 2008: house purchased by RMGC (photo: Tiberiu Vasilescu).



Fig. 4. Roșia Montană, May 2008: little plate applied by RMGC on a house (photo: Tiberiu Vasilescu).



Fig. 5. Roșia Montană, May 2008: house purchased by RMGC (photo: Radu-Alexandru Dragoman).

One of the measures taken by RMGC in order to achieve the project was the initiation of a campaign to persuade the residents to sell their houses and the lands in the area proposed for exploitation. Thus, many properties have come into the possession of the company, and people began to leave the village (in company's terms – they were “resettled”). This campaign was accompanied by the emergence of a new item of material culture, namely the little metal plates, blue or green, which indicate the new owner: SC Roșia Montană Gold Corporation SA. Often, the little plates are mounted at sight, on the frontage facing the street; other times were mounted on one of the sides of the house. To the purpose, the little plates have not been applied only on the good houses but also on the buildings that had reached a state of ruin. The little plates are not mere passive indicators of the ownership status. The little plates are “alive”: they multiply in time, expand, loom before the eyes in different parts of the village. The little plates “continuously talk”: inform the viewer on the degree of

abandonment of the village; they always send the same message, that RMGC is the owner of one or other of the houses, but the message is actually enriched with each new little plate – RMGC *again* purchased a house, *again* a number of people left the village. In other words, the little plates gradually create a certain atmosphere, discretely induce a feeling of irreversibility and of helplessness in front of the changes of life.



Fig. 6. Roșia Montană, June 2002: the Old Square; in the middle of the image is the House 325 (photo: the Archive of Vasile Pârvan Institute of Archaeology of the Romanian Academy, Bucharest).



Fig. 7. Roșia Montană, May 2008: outlook to the house 325 from the Old Square during restoration (photo: Radu-Alexandru Dragoman).



Fig. 8. Roșia Montană, September 2011: the House 325 restored and turned into a museum (photo: Radu-Alexandru Dragoman).

geography and history-ethnography), into pension-restaurants, cafés, souvenir shops, etc.; other buildings would be converted into hotels.⁶ The first building restored by RMGC is the House number 325, from the Old Square, which previously functioned as a pharmacy of the village; the house is part of a series of old buildings that will form, if the project will be initiated, the Mining Museum.⁷ Restored, the frontage of the building has gained a refreshed, brighter “image”, which stands out even more as the surrounding old buildings are still not restored, and some are even in ruins. Not only the exterior appearance has changed, but also the interior, the

In the RMGC’s plans, a part of the village of Roșia Montană is defined as “Protected Area”, the buildings comprised in this area being included in a restoration program: “In parallel with the mining project, RMGC will ensure the restoration and the preservation of 317 buildings, of which 41 historic buildings (35 from the Protected Area, 6 outside of it), 49 valuable constructions and 143 common buildings”.⁴ From the perspective of the project, the conservation and the restoration, and generally, the enhancement of the cultural heritage are considered to be “a first step to develop a successful tourism in the area”.⁵ Once restored, the houses of the Protected Area, or some of these, would be converted into a Mining Museum (with exhibits of geology,

⁴ Călătorie 2011, p. 28.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 68.

⁶ Ibidem, pp. 20-27, 67-77.

⁷ Ibidem, pp. 20-25.

building became the headquarters of an exhibition on the history of mining at Roșia Montană. Although it has a long biography, following the restorations and the improvements, the House number 325 “rejuvenates”, becomes more “modern”. The manner of the applied restoration keeps the shape/the body of the building and continues its biography, but basically its past is erased: from a palimpsest, the house is transformed into a building of the present and the future. Between the “younger” look of the house, on the one hand, and the image of a prosperous future, on the other, there is a direct link: both are expressions of the transformative and progressive discourse promoted by the RMGC project.



Fig. 9. Roșia Montană, September 2004: “landscape with house”; outlook towards the House 519 (photo: The Archive of Vasile Pârvan Institute of Archaeology of the Romanian Academy, Bucharest).



Fig. 10. Roșia Montană, May 2008: House 519 (photo: Radu-Alexandru Dragoman).

Among the buildings inside the Protected Area and which, consequently, will ever be restored if mining exploitation of RMGC begins, it is also included the House number 519. It is a vernacular house, canted on the cellar, with two rooms and the porch along the frontage. According to the ethnographic analysis, this type of houses is often met in the Corna village (administratively related to the Roșia Montană commune) and characteristic to the Moșilor Country (*Țara Moșilor*), but unrepresentative for Roșia Montană.⁸ The rooms communicate, but one cannot penetrate the porch than from one of them. I first saw this house in the spring of 2004 when, together with other colleagues we arrived (again) at Roșia Montană to conduct excavations. We were staying in the house next door which had been already bought by the RMGC and arranged for this purpose. In September 2004, another colleague even photographed the house and called the picture “landscape with house”. When I returned to Roșia



Fig. 11. Roșia Montană, May 2008: House 519 (photo: Radu-Alexandru Dragoman).

⁸ Popoiu 2010, p. 27.

Montană in May 2008, this time with the intention of shooting a series of ruins and industrial landscapes, I found the House 519 abandoned and damaged – it did not have doors (even on the entry), had no glasses at the windows, the frames were dismantled and pieces of the external and internal plastering were broken away, etc.



Fig. 12. Roşia Montană, May 2008: House 519; the first room (photo: Radu-Alexandru Dragoman).



Fig. 13. Roşia Montană, May 2008: House 519; outlook to the first room (photo: Radu-Alexandru Dragoman).



Fig. 14. Roşia Montană, May 2008: House 519; the first room (photo: Tiberiu Vasilescu).



Fig. 15. Roşia Montană, May 2008: House 519; the first room (photo: Radu-Alexandru Dragoman).



Fig. 16. Roşia Montană, May 2008: House 519; outlook through one of the windows of the first room (photo: Tiberiu Vasilescu).

In the first of the rooms, as you enter from the porch, there were a heavily damaged bed, some baby clothes, a glass, a jar, a radiator, etc. At one of the windows a curtain was waving in the wind. On the same wall were still standing two hanging mirrors and a ladle. Among the scraps were also included two stacked packs of *Kentucky* and *Ronson* cigarettes.



Fig. 17. Roșia Montană, May 2008: House 519; the second room (photo: Tiberiu Vasilescu).



Fig. 18. Roșia Montană, May 2008: House 519; the second room (photo: Tiberiu Vasilescu).

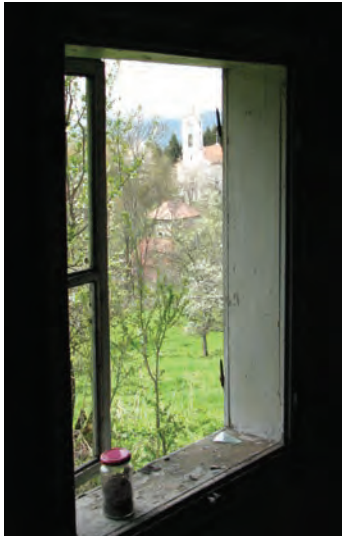


Fig. 19. Roșia Montană, May 2008: House 519; window of the second room (photo: Tiberiu Vasilescu).



Fig. 20. Roșia Montană, May 2008: House 519; a portion of the chimney of the second room (photo: Tiberiu Vasilescu).



Fig. 21. Roșia Montană, May 2008: House 519; glass bottle from the second room (photo: Radu-Alexandru Dragoman).

From the first room, one could enter the second. Here were spread down a hob, an empty box of *Bonux* detergent, a plastic jar of the *Regal* tomato paste, a faience cup with the handle broken, a plastic bread basket, a metal saucepan, a broken glass, a glass jar of *Regal* cappuccino, a metal cup, a metal bowl with two grabs, a plastic lid, a plastic bottle, a wooden box, a broken knitting, a bundle (probably) of dried lavender, a glass jar with a lid containing coffee, etc. Located also on the floor, a broken glass bottle of five star brandy with metal label stands out in comparison with the humility of other objects; very likely, the container was kept for its special appearance. I have also found traces of a stove: the metal sheet underneath and a part of the chimney. On the metal sheet were coals, a fragment of a pack of cigarettes, a cigarette butt and other scraps. The ceiling beams were beaten with some nails, possible with a hanging utility.



Fig. 22. Roşia Montană, May 2008: little plastic fish found near the house 519 (photo: Radu-Alexandru Dragoman).

The material leftovers evoke actions associated with the moment of deserting the house: the selection of the objects for storage and moving, giving up to the others. At the same time, however, the objects evoke a range of daily activities and their gestures, such as drinking, cooking and eating, washing laundry or sweeping and charging the stove. Other gestures, such as styling the hair or a head covering for example, are evoked by the mirrors placed on the wall. The ladle hanging on the wall seems as it “expects” the appearance of a person to grasp it and use it to put the food in plates; similarly, the mirrors hanging on the same wall seem like they “expect” the closeness of a human face. Some of the scraps convey a certain atmosphere from a sensory point of view: the heat from the stove or the radiator, the smell of lavender. A toy, specifically a little plastic fish found immediately next to the house (not necessarily in association with it), “reverberates” the voices of the children. The material leftovers from the inside and around the House 519 evoke an absent human presence. The empty house and especially the deserted things, send to an entropic process that ends a life cycle (very modest, as suggested by the objects and the size of the

building). Due to the deterioration of the house, of the damaged, cracked or broken things, and of those objects abandoned in places which were not theirs – on the windowsill or on the floor –, the image is that of ruination. Together, the house and the scattered objects inside, induce a feeling of nostalgia and sadness. The material leftovers are the reminiscent of the finitude of human life, of its transitional status. Therefore, the house and the objects in various degrees of “decomposition” can arise in the soul a metaphysic shiver.



Fig. 23. Roşia Montană, September 2011: House 519 (photo: Radu-Alexandru Dragoman).



Fig. 24. Roşia Montană, September 2011: House 519 (photo: Radu-Alexandru Dragoman).



Fig. 25. Roșia Montană, September 2011: House 519; the first room (photo: Radu-Alexandru Dragoman).



Fig. 26. Roșia Montană, September 2011: House 519; the first room (photo: Radu-Alexandru Dragoman).



Fig. 27. Roșia Montană, September 2011: House 519; outlook to the second room (photo: Radu-Alexandru Dragoman).



Fig. 28. Roșia Montană, September 2011: House 519; the second room (photo: Alexander Dragoman).



Fig. 29. Roșia Montană, September 2011: House 519; the second room (photo: Radu-Alexandru Dragoman).

In September 2011, we returned to Roșia Montană to see what happened to the House 519 and the objects in it. This time, the entering of the house was blocked by a door lock. The windows in the first room were empty. The windows of the second room were covered with plywoods; in the inner side of one of them I noticed that it was written “E Egger Eurosti[1]”. Inside, on the floor, was no longer any object. In both rooms we could find on the wall a few window frames, and on the wall in the first room there were still those two mirrors. Also, were retained remnants of the stove (the chimney fragment and the sheet metal) and of the beam-hanging nails. Otherwise, the house was cleared of the material scraps photographed three years earlier. With the house emptied, the fragmented memory of the life in the house is cleared. Just as the house converted into a museum, from the past of House 519 it remains nothing but an empty form.



Fig. 30. Roșia Montană, May 2008: House 519; view through one of the windows of the second room (photo: Radu-Alexandru Dragoman).

In the spring of 2003, when I was at Roșia Montană for excavations, a woman from the village, in the house of whom my colleagues had been accommodated the year before, told me that in the winter that just passed, was the first time she had a very strange feeling, associated with fear: a while after it snowed, on the littered snow was not seen any trace of human foot; many neighbors had sold their houses and had gone, leaving the street almost deserted; she herself was going to leave Roșia Montană, to her children. The fingerprints on the snow are fragile and ephemeral; but also, they are the indicator of a concrete, living presence. The same can be said about the material traces of the House 519. Through its capitalization policy of the cultural heritage, namely, by the way of restoration and reuse of the buildings, the RMGC project destroys exactly this fragility, annihilates the presence, erases the fingerprint. For example, in the building transformed into a museum, the memory of the past of a particular space, reflected in ruins and scrapes, is replaced by a metanarrative of the main occupational activity of the inhabitants of Roșia Montană, the mining. This metanarrative is comprised into a commodity totally embellished: an exhibition dedicated to the tourists. According to the same strategy on heritage, the traditional House 519 was devoid of “junks” in it, except that the space was empty now, and the house has not yet been restored. RMGC proposes an abstract image of the past and not an embodied one. Moreover, from the history of Roșia Montană submitted by RMGC, the time of the desertion is missing; so is, that unlike the archaeological objects found in the excavations and ethnographic ones, the ordinary scraps

Following the commencement of the mining exploitation by RMGC, the character of the naked form of House 519 will be perfect. The landscape which the residents looked through the windows of the house will be radically transformed. The changes will not only be very visual but, also acoustic and olfactory. Due to the changing of the eco-system, the sounds of the animals, birds and insects which inhabit the surrounding landscape will disappear and be replaced by other sounds. The smell of the vegetation and of the earth specific to every season will be replaced by the smells of the mining wastes or by artificial scents. The sound and the “touching” of the wind will change by altering the landscape. The House 519 will be completely decontextualized from the sensory point of view. The future visitors will experience nothing of the life of those who once lived in the House 519. So the question arises: what past RMGC is talking about?



Fig. 31. Roșia Montană, November 2005: bird tracks on the snow (photo: Cristina Georgescu).

of the abandoned houses are not considered to be part of the “material heritage”, which is why in the plans of the cultural heritage enhancement proposed by RMGC it doesn’t say anything about them.⁹ The absence, the decay, the nostalgia or the finitude evoked by the remains of the House 519 contrasts sharply with the picture of the project’s success and, therefore, they are not part of the vocabulary of the capitalist cultural managers of RMGC. Ultimately, the way that RMGC relates to the material traces of the contemporary history is an indicator of how they relate to the lives of people in Roşia Montană in general: despite their discourse, for the agents of the RMGC project, the past/memory of the inhabitants, their footprint, actually does not matter.

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Bibliographical abbreviations:

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⁹ See for example *Călătorie* 2011.

