

**Florin & Monica Muresanu**

**Pride and Concrete: What to manage when culture plus economy doesn't amount to cultural economy**

**Abstract**

The county of Maramureş, on the northern side of Transylvania, stands as unique in the region through its archaic cultural landscape and vernacular expression of its architecture. Proof to this are the eight UNESCO sites that sample the timber construction traditions from almost 100 wooden churches. The high level of artistic maturity and craft skills were achieved between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, as a response to the prohibition against the erection of stone Orthodox churches, and dwellings alike. The people of the rich in forests upper Tisa basin had an uninterrupted log building tradition for several centuries. Even with parts still characterized as extremely rural and traditional, Maramureş is now the place of architectural extremes. Communism, the temporary ideological transformation which lasted for more than four decades left its mark, paradoxically, not by changing the region, but by removing its longstanding cultural factors. On the one hand the skilled wood workers were displaced to take part in the abrupt urbanization of the country where, working almost exclusively with standardized concrete elements, they lost their traditional abilities. On the other hand, the religion was sidetracked in order to remove it from potentially challenging the state ideology. No tall and slender wooden church was erected in Maramureş for more than a century now.

With communism's fall and the bankruptcy of the centralized construction industry during the 1990s, many of the construction workers joined the international occupational migration. Unfortunately, their relation with the vernacular architecture remained severed by the loss of tradition and the change in habits. Modern materials replaced the timber as new constructions were erected, to address the need for comfort, rather than the perpetuation of local identity. A non-authentic landscape attends now the local pride, translating the prosperity into flamboyancy. The former desire to go bigger as a proof of proficiency still prevails in the local architecture by

replicating whatever is considered to best the neighbors. The hard working people of Maramureș, even if working abroad, do not untie from their roots and spend most of their earnings on what they know and represents them best – buildings. Whether is the pride of the inhabitants or their humor (the region hosts the famous Merry Cemetery of Săpânța) that turns the homes into mausoleums for an eventual retirement, it surely seems that the heritage values are endangered by the inherited values. Getting the balance right between the preservation of the authentic architecture and the somehow natural evolution of the villages is an issue that concerns the management of the local cultural economy. The poor accessibility of the region is, at the moment, responsible for both the conservation of the most remote villages that still keep their vernacular appearance and the general lack of strategies to promote and value them as economic assets.