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# Precariously symbolic or Learning From Vama Veche<sup>1</sup>

*„There is a perversity in the learning process: we look backward at history and tradition to go forward; we can also look downward to go upward. And with-holding judgment may be used as a tool to make later judgment more sensitive. This is a way of learning from everything.<sup>2</sup>*

Between October and April, the small beach town of Vama Veche reverts to a 1:1 working model of itself. It quiets down, there are hardly any humans around, solitude predominates. By the end of October most buildings are normally wrapped for winter in OSB, metal cladding of all sorts, PVC and other foils. Without the tourists and the trinkets one can see more clearly the spatial typologies invented over the years, the strategies of land occupation or the construction techniques employed by local business owners. During this post-touristic silence, the occasional visitor can reflect better on the nature and anatomy of this place. During March and April, the place comes to life once more, but not with tourists! It's the building and retrofitting season. Builders, owners, architects, engineers, suppliers race towards the finish line: the beginning of the summer season. Again, the occasional visitor is exposed to the underlying processes and conventional wisdom that shape this place. Vama Veche is at the same time perfectly unique in the Romanian context but also perfectly homogenous with a large part of post socialist

<sup>1</sup> Vama Veche is a small seaside village, close to the Romanian border with Bulgaria. It has a particular significance due to its reputation as a freedom outpost during the communist era. This reputation extended after the 1990 and many people were attracted by this small and scarcely populated village. Touristic facilities started to develop slowly and with respect towards the spirit of the place. By the year 2000 camping on the beach for free was still probably the main way to spend the night. Gradually its bohemian reputation became its downfall and when the place was threatened with overwhelming tourism and development, a number of intellectuals, locals and professionals joined forces to try and preserve it. All attempts to impose a moderate tempo and a homogeneous architectural image failed. Instead, Vama Veche developed erratically, without much concern for urban regulation. As such it fell completely outside any current architectural discussion or analysis. This text is based on my experience as a practicing architect, overseeing a construction site in Vama Veche for almost 2 years. It is in no way an apology for low quality construction. But it is based on a profound skepticism that Vama Veche is unanalyzable or that it has no lessons to offer to the established profession. Quite the contrary, it seems irresponsible turn your head from a place that, overall, was so untouched by our current definition of the profession and good architecture! If nothing else, Vama is probably the most representative example of commercial makeshift urban development, that otherwise floods the inside and outside of our cities. So, it probably deserves a second look. The text stops short of being actual research. It is a sketch, so I can only hint at the main authors and works I had at the back of my mind, while writing. To Venturi and Scott Brown, I add, first of all, Albert Pope with his discussion of the invisibility of the city and identification of the *ladder* as the spatial unit of the contemporary urban space, Rosalind Krauss for her considerations on *grids* and Ed. Soja for his research on *third space* and *real-and-imagined spaces*.

<sup>2</sup> D. Scott Brown, R. Venturi, S. Izenour. *Learning From Las Vegas*. (MIT Press, Cambridge, 2005), 3.

urban development. It is isolated, yet representative – an adequate pretext to dive into uncharted territories of makeshift architecture and what appears to be erratic urban development.

## 1. Difficulties of categorization

Vama Veche eludes conventional categorization. It is too urbanized and cosmopolitan to be a simple village. It is too disorderly and formally ambiguous for a tourist resort (a machine for relaxation), it is too little civic and feels too non-permanent to be a small city. Subjective labeling could be more precise: Vama is the commercial float some<sup>3</sup> extracted from a typical Bucharest junction, Ianclui<sup>4</sup> by the sea, a light in the night, appealing like a highway gas station, *laissez-faire* like an outpost at the end of the world, a playground for grown-ups, an intermittent city. An inhabited spectacle that takes place in a precarious but permanent decorum.

## 2. The locals

Anyone is a local in Vama Veche. Therefore, we encounter *locals-as-business-owners* and *locals-as-tourists*. Only the *actual-locals* feel estranged, confused by the stroboscopic effect of the new local urbanism. While they have never changed place, they struggle with the vivacity of a newly arrived immigrant. Saying yes to any opportunity, they run from place to place, and dream of making money. As for the village elders... they are those first capitalists of the 1990s - tourism futurologists or eccentric intellectuals (from Germany): "I bought this piece of land right after the 1989 Revolution because I wanted to conduct a socio-economic experiment on Romania's transition from Communism to Capitalism" was once explained to me in a reputed and touristically historic establishment.

## 3. Research question

Most business owners in Vama Veche seem to try to solve one question: which is the most effective way to fence a plot of land, cover and protect it in order to present it as accommodation and sell it to the *locals-as-tourists*. To this (research) question each *local-as-business-owner* answers by restaging some of his own vacation experiences and by testing the limits of what is acceptable.

## 4. The Fence

So how does one go about creating this beautiful nightmare? Although easily overlooked, the fence seems to be the basic building typology– the zero degree of local architecture. In Vama Veche the plot is the building. From a simple perimeter

<sup>3</sup> Scott Brown, Venturi, Izenour. *Learning From Las Vegas*.

<sup>4</sup> Ianclui Square is a large urban space in Bucharest, at the junction of Șoseaua Mihai Bravu and Ianclui street. Like other urban spaces it features numerous billboards, large posters, pharmacies, fast food restaurants, gambling saloons kiosks and other on street amenities, disordered electricity and internet cables and other such utilities, that proliferated in the past 20 years.

fence to the fully developed plot (a recognizable building and landscaping) there are numerous intermediary levels of development where significant achievements in design and business have been recorded. Most of the time the plot starts to be inhabited well before any recognizable building is erected. The plot has a water and sewage connection and is equipped with an improvised bathroom, a table, chairs, and a hammock. One lives outside, or in a tent until one day when...

.... A container appears.

## 5. Symbols on vacation

Collage is also part of the mechanism through which Vama Veche urbanizes. Once the land is fenced, each *local-as-business-owner* materializes some of his own vacation memories and adds them to the great patch work of Vama Veche. One is from Greece, another from Turkey...but sometimes one feels the familiar reverberations of Prahova Valley<sup>5</sup>, and Bran. Hippy beach but also Predeal<sup>6</sup>. Mediterranean but also mountainous. Most surprisingly, one can even discover older patches of Vama Veche itself, reenacted There or Overthere<sup>7</sup>.

It can be said, therefore, that Vama is the result of an emotional dialogue between those who demand and those who offer. The dialogue is carried out through the outlook of plots and buildings, and results in the great urban form so typical of this place. The finishings and colors contain messages. They are an intuitive language (ducks) that guides *tourists-as-locals* towards the thing or place that best “corresponds to their needs”: are you a hippy, a punk or against the system? Come over! We have a courtyard with tents, a grill and pallet furniture. Are you a party boy or girl and you don’t care where you sleep? Come over! We have a generic building, ceramic plates almost everywhere and we disinfect daily. Are you a hipster with a passion for design? Come over! We have a gourmet breakfast, minimalist Norwegian furniture and fluted wood panels.

“Building designed by a respected architect, employed by a respected owner who thinks Vama Veche is not what it used to be anymore” is wordlessly written on the facades of some guesthouses.

<sup>5</sup> A mountain area, placed on the road between Bucharest and Braşov, known for its resorts and sky slopes.

<sup>6</sup> Predeal is the highest city in Romania with an elevation of over 1000 m and a known mountain resort on Prahova Valley.

<sup>7</sup> “There” and “Over there” were the names of two well known establishments placed at either end of the town.

## 6. Precarious

Precarity leads the approach. Precarity means stopping at the limit. Or a little beyond. The foundation of the house is precarious, the structure is precarious, installations are hastily done. Precarity is at the core of probably the most important aspect of Vama Veche – it is inevitably a laboratory of experiments in the realm of habitation. It moves forward through trial and error. Vama is a record of its own evolutionary process, urbanism with track changes – it does not hide its traces. Mistakes are almost defiant – challenges for other developers or builders to dare take on, making even bigger mistakes.

~~Good architecture seems foreign, inauthentic, respectable but misfitted – the dream of a well-read city dweller about what she should find at the seaside.~~ To comprehend why Vama Veche is relevant in uncovering the *idea* of the contemporary city<sup>8</sup> one needs to let go of prejudice and principle for a moment. Invention and mix are significant. On every plot of land, someone has invented at least one thing, a space, or a solution to one of the site's problems. There are thousands of such inventions: surprises, transitions, nooks, arches, and semi-enclosures of vegetation, corners, porticoes, screens, small courtyards, cozy spots, and other spatial diminutives. The elements of Vama Veche lean on each other, crowd together, adapt. They are overly contextual. Then there are countless types of fasteners, glues, screws, adhesive tapes, but nothing surpasses the power of silicone to heal any architectural ailment, to patch any hole, to decorate any bathroom. The great sea, the Black Sea, throws itself onto the beach, clashing with a sea of commercial vernacular, made of stone, mortar, aerated concrete, OSB, electrical conduit, fir wood, nails, screws, sawdust, LEDs – Dedeman<sup>9</sup> in a cocktail shaker.

“Nothing interesting to see here” some would say. “It's just pragmatic decisions and the desire to do things as quickly and cheaply as possible.” True, but not quite. Vama Veche's pragmatism defies reason! And since when has the idea of building cheaply lost its moral validity?

## 7. An inevitable esthetic project

Vama operates only seasonally, and this makes installations simple. Heating and piping can be left on the exterior of the building, exposed, evacuated from the inside, onto the street. In doing so installations become a part of the façade, and implicitly the interior of the city. Thus, a new aesthetic project is unavoidable – how

<sup>8</sup> A. Pope. *Ladders*. (Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 2016), 2.

“The contemporary city, the city that is at this moment under construction, is invisible. Despite the fact that it is endlessly reproduced, debated in learned societies, and suffered on a daily basis, the conceptual framework that would allow us to see the contemporary city, is conspicuously lacking. While it remains everywhere and always in view it is fully transparent to the urban conceptions under which we operate.”

<sup>9</sup> Dedeman is a Romanian constructions store, similar to Hornbach or Leroy Merlin.

exactly should these elements be treated? Camouflaged or color coded? Are they part of an open-source culture or *décorations parlantes*?

## 8. *The inside*

Many of the interiors of Vama Veche are practically absent. So generic, so nonspecific, so self-sufficient... The theoretical reason for the existence of this place remains *poché*: a kind of technical space, because technically you need to sleep.

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### *A visit to the construction store*

While contemplating all these phenomena one is normally inclined to think that lax regulation and excessive freedom lies behind the makeshift city of Vama Veche. But I am tempted to look somewhere else for the answer, in the general organization of the construction ecosystem.

A place like Vama as *real-and-imagined*<sup>10</sup>, would not be possible without its complementary opposite – the construction materials store. The eclecticism and subjectivity of Vama Veche originates in the rigorous grid of the materials depot – an orthogonal space with clear categories or a library of elements that allows you to make combinations. Vama is anti-categorization (e.g. a broken bicycle is welded inside a metal frame and used as a gate) and encourages juxtaposition and collage, but how could it achieve this without access to a database that can be shuffled?<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, the construction store as a *real-and-imagined* space, indexes compulsively, divides, distinguishes and enrolls.

The randomness of a contemporary urban space like Vama Veche seems directly proportional to the indexing capacity of the construction materials store. And if the big box of the store could be likened to the box of a children's construction game, Vama would be the space delineated by those 4-5 objects that usually appear in

<sup>10</sup> E. W. Soja. *Postmetropolis*. (Blackwell Publishing, 2000).

Ed Soja uses the term real-and-imagined as part of his theory on Third space to emphasize that when speaking of a place we inevitably address the collective imaginarium in relation to which that specific place is defined, and its position in it. The term is appropriate since I am discussing both Vama and the construction store as categories of contemporary space entangled in both a physical and conceptual relation, that goes beyond their spatial proximity.

<sup>11</sup> R. Krauss. *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. (MIT Press, 1986) 14-16.

There are many ways in which Krauss' text on Grids could serve to further explore the relation between the material and conceptual organization of the construction store and the almost hysterical inventiveness of Vama Veche. But for the moment I will only refer to her identification of analytical color grids, found in treatises of physiological optics, as underlying 19<sup>th</sup> century impressionistic and expressionistic painting and her description of the Grid as being anti-development and anti-narrative in relation to historical analysis.

front of the box, in an inevitable promotional image<sup>12</sup> —” here are some of the countless combinations you can create with this set”.

However, the firm organization of the construction store conveys a fragility to any arrangement of elements in practice. Perhaps, the *idea* of the store is so strong that materials and objects can no longer truly detach from it; they can no longer melt into new, definitive compositions and structures.<sup>13</sup> A minor detail betrays the relationship between the two spaces— in almost all new buildings, builders no longer bother to remove the barcode stickers from various objects. Beams, angles, sinks, lamps and many other elements seem to patiently await their return to the depot, once the masquerade is over.

#### Bibliography:

1. Krauss R. *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. (MIT Press, 1986).
2. Pope A. *Ladders*. (Princeton Architectural Press, 2016).
3. Scott Brown D., Venturi R., Izenour S. *Learning From Las Vegas*. (MIT Press, 2005).
4. Soja E. W. *Postmetropolis*. (Blackwell Publishing, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Although I do not wish to particularly illustrate this passage, the reader may look for one of the Austrian games Matador, invented in 1899 by engineer Johann Korbuly. Besides their quality, the reader will enjoy the passage from Aristotle that occasionally appears on the boxes: 'For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them' (from Nicomachean Ethics).

<sup>13</sup> Krauss. *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. 12-13.



Figure 1 – Credits (Author Matei Niculescu, Vama Veche seen from the northern headland).

*(1) Difficulties of categorisation*



Figure 2 – Credits (Author: Alexandru Belenyi, makeshift storage for winter).

*(2) Research question (6) Precarious, A visit to the (imaginary) construction store*





Figure 3 – Credits (Author: Alexandru Belenyi, one of the oldest houses in Vama Veche).

*(6) Precarious, A visit to the (imaginary) construction store*



Figure 4 – Credits (Author: Alexandru Belenyi).

*(6) Precarious, (7) An inevitable esthetic project, A visit to the (imaginary) construction store*





Figure 5 – Credits (Author: Matei Niculescu, A living unit in “La Rulote” one of the oldest touristic establishments in Vama Veche, developed by recycling old German trailers. The owner recommended himself as a Mathematics and Economics university professor from Freiburg).

*(2) Research question (4) The Locals (5) Symbols on vacation (6) Precarious, (7) An inevitable esthetic project*



Figure 6 – Credits (Author: Alexandru Belenyi, “La Rulote, seen from the main road.”).

*(2) Research question (4) The Locals (5) Symbols on vacation (6) Precarious, (7) An inevitable esthetic project*





Figure 7 – Credits (Author: Alexandru Belenyi, just a normal bench that will outlast most of the buildings).

*(5) Symbols on vacation*



Figure 8 – Credits (Author: Alexandru Belenyi, a courtyard that seems to be waiting for a house).

*Research question (3) The Fence (4) The Locals (5) Symbols on vacation, A visit to the (imaginary) construction store*





Figure 9 – Credits (Author: Matei Niculescu, abandoned camping site).

*(2) Research question (5) Symbols on vacation*



Figure 10 – Credits (Author: Matei Niculescu).

*(3) The Fence (4) The Locals (5) Symbols on vacation, A visit to the (imaginary) construction store*





Figure 21 – Credits (Author: Matei Niculescu, a beach club wrapped for the winter).



Figure 32 – Credits (Author: Matei Niculescu).

*(2) Research question (3) The Fence 5) Symbols on vacation (6) Precarious*



Figure 43 – Credits (Author: Matei Niculescu).

*(2) Research question (3) The Fence (6) Precarious*





Figure 54 – Credits (Author: Alexandru Belenyi).

*(5) Symbols on vacation, (7) An inevitable esthetic project, A visit to the (imaginary) construction store*



Figure 65 – Credits (Author: Alexandru Belenyi).

*(5) Symbols on vacation*



Figure 76 – Credits (Author: Matei Niculescu).

*(3) The Fence (4) The Locals (5) Symbols on vacation*





Figure 87 – Credits (Author: Matei Niculescu).

*(7) An inevitable esthetic project, A visit to the (imaginary) construction store*



Figure 98 – Credits (Author: Matei Niculescu).

(6) *Precaious*





Figure 19 – Credits (Author: Matei Niculescu, a goat herder's house, annexed with solar panels, a trailer and oversized swans, amongst other unexpected accessories).

*(4) The Locals (5) Symbols on vacation (6) Precarious, (7) An inevitable esthetic project, A visit to the (imaginary) construction store*