

## Building for the Bayash

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“Despite constant exposure to a multitude of influences and pressures, [the Roma people have] managed to preserve a distinct identity and to show remarkable powers of adaptation and survival.”<sup>i</sup> In fact, their main achievement may be to have survived at all. [see image 1]

Though studies on their history, language, and social structure exist, little is written about the Roma’s interaction with their material environment and almost nothing is written about the Bayash, in English anyway. Therefore, this research is based upon written analysis of the Roma in general, as well as firsthand observations from those who work directly with the Bayash. Bob and Nancy Hitching, a British couple who provide humanitarian aid to the Bayash, are my primary source.

My study of the Bayash perception of their built environment is a springboard for a yearlong project. As my thesis for my masters’ degree in architecture, I will be partnering with the Hitchings to master-plan a village and design modest homes for the Bayash people. The design of these dwellings intends to meet the basic needs of shelter and safety, doing so in a way that will embrace their heritage. [see image 2]

The Roma, sometimes referred to as Europe’s largest vulnerable minority<sup>ii</sup>, are one of the most marginalized groups in modern day Europe. They are inaccurately called ‘gypsies’, a sometimes derogative label, stressing a cultural disparity from and perceived threat toward mainstream European culture. While this term is often attached to anyone leading a nomadic lifestyle, the Roma share a common cultural and linguistic heritage that sets the group apart as a genuine ethnic group.

The origin of the Roma is often contested, but through linguistic study, it has been determined that they hail from India, though the initial cause for coming to Europe during medieval times remains unknown. Today, as a result of local law<sup>iii</sup> and discrimination against nomads, they have settled in established cities or built villages of their own, especially in the Balkans, which have the densest population of Roma<sup>iv</sup>.

For centuries, Roma have been persecuted formally by nations and governments, including the Nazi holocaust and various communist regimes. More importantly, perhaps, they are still marginalized by neighbors. One incessant matter of contention has been the refusal of the Roma to give up their own traditions to assimilate into mainstream European culture. Subsequently, they have been branded as strange, exotic, lazy, thieving, or even dangerous. Whereas their neighbors may feel threatened by their differences, the Roma refuse to conform in order to protect a unique heritage. [see image 3]

The Bayash are one branch of Roma. They were slaves in Wallachia and Moldavia for roughly five hundred years, until 1864<sup>v</sup>, when slavery was abolished throughout Romania. This time of slavery has caused the Bayash to differ greatly from other Roma. While one unifying factor among most Roma is the common language of Romani, many castes now speak various dialects, influenced by the languages of other nations. This includes the Bayash who speak their own language, also called Bayash, an archaic form of Romanian<sup>vi</sup>. This language has changed considerably since then; words have been borrowed

from countries they traveled through and eventually settled in, including what are now parts of Romania, Hungary, Slovenia, Serbia, and Croatia.

I will be focusing on the Bayash who have settled in Northern Croatia, in villages around the city of Zagreb. The poorer Bayash have settled in shanty towns just outside of, but bearing the same name as, rural Croatian peasant towns. In order to design a place that is sensitive to this community and their beliefs and practices, I must first understand the society they currently live in and their attitude toward that built environment. *[see image 4]*

Most of the poor villages are concerned with daily issues of subsistence and consequently the people do not attach much value to material possessions or the quality of the built environment. This is common among the poor, worldwide<sup>vii</sup>. They may live in the moment and are focused on mere survival without planning or building for the future. Bayash identity is based on the present. Unlike other ethnic groups, a sense of history or an attachment to the place they have come from is not central to their culture. This is evidenced in the impermanence of their dwellings. In the rural countryside, the poor tend to build shelters out of whatever materials may be available. Scrap metal, cardboard, or sheets of plywood and occasionally rough masonry are used to build crude structures. Scavenged doors and windows may be added on haphazardly, and the roof may be made of tile like the vernacular architecture of Croatia, or may be just a tarp or blanket laid over rafters. Most of these homes have no electricity or plumbing, indoors or out, and often do not meet the basic needs of shelter. Winter temperatures can be life-threatening, as most of the dwellings do not have adequate insulation. Each home has a wood burning stove used for heating and cooking, but it stands unprotected against a wall and is hazardous as children suffer burns from bumping into it. These structures are clearly not built to last, but is that because a *sense of place* is not valued over ideals like an intangible life together<sup>viii</sup> as a community, or because they simply cannot afford to build in a permanent way? Therefore, do the Bayash have a transient sense of place formed by tradition or is it merely a product of poverty? *[see image 5]*

It can be argued that the Bayash live in a way that echoes their nomadic tradition<sup>x</sup>. Certainly, the parallels are apparent. Practices such as spending a great deal of time outside, living close to each other, especially near relatives, and limiting domestic life to one room can be linked to the years they lived in wagons or tents on the move. What they lack in privacy, they make up for with the benefits of living in a tight community.

Though this insular society may be close, it is decidedly separate from their non-Gypsy neighbors. The dichotomy of independence from and economic dependence upon the non-Roma has determined where they live. This desire for independence is not the same as self-sufficiency. While the Bayash show a significant disdain for their non-Bayash neighbors, they live near them as a means of survival. This separateness may be a result of the fear of contamination, based upon an elaborate purity code, but it may also be a reaction to centuries of marginalization from the cultural majority. *[see image 6]*

This tight community has many social problems, most of which are rooted in poverty. Poverty afflicts the Roma significantly more than other European ethnicities. Studies in Romania and Bulgaria<sup>x</sup> show that the Roma only account for 3 - 7% of the population, respectively, but they represent 70 – 80% of

those living beneath the poverty line<sup>xi</sup>. Though I do not have figures for Croatia, I'd imagine the results are similar. Poverty has become the foremost contributing factor in the cycle of problems afflicting the Bayash. Some prevalent issues are illiteracy, the lack of available work, sexual abuse, petty crime, and alcoholism. These cyclical social issues continue to plague generation after generation.

Illiteracy oppresses many poor settlements, but it is endemic to the Bayash for multiple reasons. Children usually leave school by age ten, if they even make it that long; children who go to Croatian schools are quickly marginalized. As a result of the lack of plumbing facilities, by the time children are school-aged, they cannot navigate public restrooms and have no concept of European hygiene standards. Classes are taught in the national language, in this case, Croatian, which the children may not know, being raised to speak Bayash. The concept of homework is alien and not often encouraged by parents who are in most cases illiterate as well and unable to assist them. This alarming dropout rate has continued for generations resulting in a largely illiterate society.

Without an education, finding a job is near impossible, leading to high unemployment rates. In fact, as a representative group, unemployment plagues the Roma in Hungary disproportionately compared to the non-Roma there<sup>xii</sup>. World Bank figures show male unemployment rates at 74% for Roma and 37% for non-Roma. Similarly, 85% of the female Roma are unemployed, compared to only 50% non-Roma women.

This is not to say that they have no work ethic. Instead, they become industrious in order to survive. While some work for nearby farmers, many become entrepreneurs. Men collect scrap metal and women rummage through trash in larger towns, collecting bags full of goods every day. They may wash this merchandise and sell it back to the townspeople, or collect plastic bottles for refund money. However, these occupations do not pay much money. Women may turn to begging in larger cities, usually bringing their children with them to solicit compassion and money. Though few people turn to petty crime, the stereotype that all gypsies are beggars and thieves continues to circulate, making fear a large part of discrimination and the reason Croatian neighbors are reluctant to hire them or interact with them at all. *[see image 7]*

For those whose homes have utilities, the concept of paying bills is foreign and the responsibility is an almost overwhelming burden. Within the insular social structure of the village, bill paying becomes the responsibility of the head man in the village who enforces payment by the threat of violence. This man or group of men may also offer loans to those who cannot pay. For an impoverished family looking to make a payment or start a business, the loan may be tempting, as they are unable to get one from a bank. Though the loan may come from a friend, the interest is so high that repayment is virtually impossible. When they miss a payment, they may be beaten or fined even more money<sup>xiii</sup>.

This circular relationship between the lack of available jobs and the lack of money can lead to despondency and its own downward spiral. Despair often leads to seeking relief through excessive alcohol use. Alcoholism has become rampant, especially among the men who cannot adequately provide for their families. Drinking is seen as a means to escape problems, but it ends up causing erratic behavior, bad judgment and an excess of additional problems. *[see image 8]*

One such problem is that incest, rape and sexual abuse have become endemic to the culture. The majority of dwellings are one-room structures and some of these small homes can house as many as eight people. Furnishings usually consist of a single bed with possibly one or two chairs or a table. The entire family sleeps on the bed and the earthen floor. Because there is no parental privacy, the taboo lines of other cultures are at best blurred<sup>xiv</sup>. This fact, combined with lax adult supervision, has resulted in an abundance of sexual abuse among the Bayash, especially among children.

For the Bayash, such vicious cycles of sexual abuse, alcoholism, unemployment, illiteracy, and poverty will continue with each generation if no alternative is made possible. One way of addressing these issues is through the design of their physical surroundings. The way they live and the kind of housing they have can positively influence these problems. The homes they live in now are only working to continue these dangerous cycles. Are these issues dismissed as part of their background, or do they strive to address them but are unable to, for whatever reason? What do they desire for the future and for their children? [see image 9]

One might argue that changing one's social outlook might change the built environment. Instead, I will argue that an improved built environment, in this case the home, can address certain social issues. I agree with Winston Churchill who said: "We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us"<sup>xv</sup>. Though good architecture alone cannot solve these problems, it can provide an environment conducive to such solutions. By designing housing that respects the existing societal structure of the Bayash, the resulted created place will meet the basic needs of shelter, safety, and hygiene, but will also sustain their heritage. This conference is on preserving history and heritage. *Whose heritage?* I ask. What if this tradition perpetuates certain social problems? How can it be valued but corrected, without demanding total assimilation? Can I, therefore, design in an affordable, low-tech manner that requires low maintenance and is environmentally sustainable while being culturally relevant? Can this architectural solution create the grounds for the social re-orientation of the poorest segment of Bayash society?

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<sup>i</sup> Fraser, Angus. *The Gypsies*. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers. p1.

<sup>ii</sup> Ivanov, Andrey. *At risk: the Roma and displaced in Southeast Europe*. Bratislava: United Nations Development Programme Regional Bureau for Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States.

<sup>iii</sup> Fraser, Angus. *The Gypsies*. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers. p4-6.

<sup>iv</sup> Fraser, Angus. *The Gypsies*. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers. p282.

<sup>v</sup> States freed their slaves in the 1840s and 50s, but it was not until 1864, when a new constitution united principalities to form Romania, that slaves obtained citizenship. Fraser, Angus. *The Gypsies*. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers. p57-9, 226.

<sup>vi</sup> The name Romani references the Romani word for man, rom, not Romania, as is often misunderstood.

<sup>vii</sup> Hitching, Bob. personal correspondence.

<sup>viii</sup> Stewart, Michael. *The Time of the Gypsies*. Boulder: Westview Press. p72.

<sup>ix</sup> Fraser, Angus. *The Gypsies*. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers. p309.

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<sup>x</sup> World Bank. *Roma and the Tradition in Central and Eastern Europe: Trends and Challenges*. Washington D.C.: World Bank, 2000. p11.

<sup>xi</sup> The poverty line was set at two-thirds mean per capita consumption. [all data taken from Romania Integrated Household Survey (RIHS) and Bulgaria Integrated Household Survey (BIHS).]

<sup>xii</sup> Central Statistical Office and Kemeny-Havas, 1993, as cited by: World Bank. *Roma and the Tradition in Central and Eastern Europe: Trends and Challenges*. Washington D.C.: World Bank, 2000. p15-16.

<sup>xiii</sup> Hitching, Nancy. personal correspondence.

<sup>xiv</sup> Hitching, Bob. personal correspondence.

<sup>xv</sup> Churchill, Winston.