

How Do Cultural Houses and Cultural Hearths Matter? Towards a New Imagination of These Institutions

IRINA BOTEA BUCAN¹

Abstract: Whether resembling vacated shells or remaining fully functional, either commercially repurposed or relatively busy with paid or unpaid 'leisure activities', cultural houses and cultural hearths are still present throughout Romania, usually in the centre of towns and communes. Designed to centralise cultural and informal educational activities within a socio-geographic area, they enabled regional authorities to both survey the leisure time of the population along with providing a foundation for the production of the 'new' multidimensional socialist subject within a collective context. But immediately after 1990 they were seen as either a nuisance or a historic reminder that needed to be turned into an absence, a void: the epic but invisible institution.

The article makes a case for why they deserve another chance in a punctual and specific re-evaluation that ultimately desires to insert a number of critical points for a possible re-imagination of these models of organization in which both stable and transitory communities collectively produce what we may call culture. It provides an extended timeline/lineage that opposes one-dimensional readings of the institutions as objects of communist propaganda. It argues that the ways in which they were planned during 1955-1989 counteracts contemporary monetarist visions towards the role of such cultural institutions. Ultimately, cultural houses were part of a national plan that considered culture as central to the 'common good' rather than a laissez-faire approach that places

¹ Irina Botea Bucan, professor at Bucharest University of Arts, Department of Photo-Video, Adjunct professor, The School of The Art Institute of Chicago. PhD researcher at Goldsmiths University of Arts, London. ibotea@artic.edu

economic efficiency above all else. Paradoxically, more contemporary versions of cultural houses and hearths are often far more restrictive than their early predecessors and this situation can and should change.

Keywords: cultural houses, architecture, social imagination, monetization of culture, entanglement

An Extended Timeline and Examples of Differentiated Practices

Two main historical and entangled lineages can be traced: workers' circles and clubs, outcomes of early socialist ideas dating from the second half of the 1800s and a later, pro-active, liberal-sociological programme of modernising the rural areas that was funded and supported by the Romanian Royal Foundation (1934-45), and led by the sociologist Dimitrie Gusti. By the end of the 1800s, the General Association of All the Workers in Romania had initiated a number of *workers' clubs* [*clubul muncitorilor*] and houses of the people [*casa poporului*] in the main industrial cities of Bucharest, Iași, Ploiești, Galați, and Craiova. Places for social gatherings and for the exchange of ideas, they had the clear purpose of empowering the workers and peasants to represent themselves through the distribution of socialist ideas.²

Social and political forms of organisation and action were clearly entangled with cultural events in the workers' circles and clubs. While early documents reveal³ their focus on social and political urgencies, there was

² The 1890 manifesto of the Bucharest Workers Club stipulated that the club was a "society" whose aim is to "solidify brotherhood and solidarity in general amongst all the workers in the country" and to "improve the material, moral and political state of being of the workers, and to organise them around their own party." The manifesto also stated that a newspaper would be produced and distributed to all of the contributors, plus a library would be constituted together with a bakery. When the "society" (cultural institution) acquired more stability, a doctor would then be employed for its members. Additionally, other production workshops would be developed, such as a butchery and a clothes shop. See Ion Popescu-Puturi and Deac, Augustin. *Documents of the Workers Movement in Romania* (Bucharest: Editura Politica, 1977-78), 631.

³ Ion Popescu-Puturi and Deac, Augustin. *Documents of the Workers Movement in Romania*, (Bucharest: Editura Politica, 1977-78).

also an interest in introducing various cultural activities, such as: literary circles, various forms of theatre, conferences, and film projections.⁴

Even before the formation and consolidation of the Socialist Democrat Workers Party in Romania (1893), the workers' clubs were organising cultural-propagandistic manifestations. A clear example of such activities was mentioned by Ioan Massof in his article *Theatre in the Workers' Clubs*: "In Bucharest, in 1880, poetry was recited alongside discussions on 'What is the Workers Party and what does it want to achieve?'"'. Actors from the National Theatre were invited to recite poetry as an introduction to staging plays that were written by a club member. For example, the famous actors Constantin Nottara and Ion Brezeanu came to recite poems on the 1st January 1891⁵. In 1894, at the same workers' club in Bucharest, piano concerts were taking place as background music for a *tableau vivant* initiated by the workers representing "Liberty's Marriage with the Worker". A popular ball was also organised that incorporated poetry readings and two further examples of *tableaux vivants*: "Universal Vote" and "The Triumph of Social Democracy".

The multiple roles and facilitation of social encounters is also to be found in the history of their rural counterpart, the cultural hearths, whose history can similarly be traced back to the late 1800s. This article does not insist on revealing this early history as it can be found in the writings of Raluca Muşat.⁶ She sketches the lineage of cultural hearths (*cămin cultural*) by including early educational reforms and the first cultural hearth initiatives that appeared at the turn of the 20th Century (1897-1910) under the supervision of Bogdan Petriceicu Haşdeu and Spiru Haret, liberal social reformers and nationalist leaders, whose central philosophical goals were to enlighten the peasantry. These initial programmes were later continued by various

⁴ In his article "Theatre in the Workers Club," Ioan Massof mentions that "[I]n Craiova, at the Workers Club on the 20th December 1894, after a musical literary soiree, a production with the miraculous camera followed, a kind of primitive cinema", *Theatre magazine*, no. 4 (April 1971): 19.

⁵ *Theatre magazine*, no. 4 (April 1971): 19.

⁶ Raluca Muşat. "Cultural Politics in the Heart of the Village: The Institutionalisation of the Camin Cultural in Interwar Romania," *New Europe College Ștefan Odobleja Program Yearbook 2012-2013* (2013): 149-180. http://212.146.115.237/data/pdfs/publications/odobleja/2012-2013/RALUCA_MUSAT.pdf.

philanthropic associations, such as ASTRA (Transylvanian Association for Romanian Literature and Culture), and ultimately culminated in the extensive sociological programme of Dimitrie Gusti.

In order to better understand the reality of the villages in Romania, Dimitrie Gusti organised applied sociological, interdisciplinary (holistic) and transformative surveys through 'descending upon' villages with a large team of students and academic specialists. The new cultural hearths were then tailored according to the needs and desires of the local peasants, filtered and assembled by members of his team, and documented in comprehensive sociological studies entitled Sociological Monographs [Monografii Sociologice].

Special editions of literary books and a magazine called *Căminul Cultural* [Cultural Hearth] were published and distributed within the new hearths. A library, a stage, a museum and a radio were some of their core elements. The magazine *Căminul Cultural* contained specialised texts surveying the newly created institutions and various 'guide-articles' that would hopefully educate the peasants on various material culture issues, for instance: personal hygiene, crop cultivation, harvesting, and the preservation of traditional culture. Within a special edition of the magazine, a guide on how to make a village museum and preserve the so-called 'authentic folklore culture' was signed by Grigore Antipa, famous Romanian zoologist and museologist who was the first to introduce the use of dioramas into a museum setting and who administered the Romanian Natural History Museum for 51 years.

Significantly, the four distinctive categories of culture employed within the cultural hearths, and that appear in the initial documentation of these institutions were: *labour culture*, *health culture*, *culture of the mind* and *culture of the soul*.

In order to cover as much ground as possible Dimitrie Gusti invited various specialists (doctors, lawyers, writers, sociologists) who would contribute and complete a village inventory according to the four identified categories of culture. However, his subjective and personal idea of culture had a major impact on the structuring of these incipient socio-cultural institutions. In the initial edition of *Căminul Cultural* (November 1934), published after Carol II's speech, Gusti's first article "Guiding Ideas for the Cultural Work in the Villages" outlined the cultural 'mission' of the sociological programme and also detailed what he meant by culture:

“Culture” is a word with many meanings. Poetry, music, religion, science, codes, compile the culture of an epoch, and its lifestyle. But only the vivid and lived connection between these cultural goods, created by the talents and geniuses of its time, and people and social groups, give birth to the acquired culture, called personal culture. The personal culture of each of us it is not inherited or stiff, but a continuous endeavour in perpetual movement and becoming... Culture is the faculty earned to give to the human the possibility of finding himself inside the reality in which he is living and is fixated by nature and faith and to build a spiritual life of his own, through the vivid connection with the cultural goods (artifacts), peoples’ culture.⁷

Gusti laid out a methodology based upon five main guiding ideas: the right to culture for the 14 million rural inhabitants of Romania (out of a total population of 18 million); the need to educate social leaders in the villages; the need to understand regional culture; personally acquired culture as a continuous endeavour; the four different categories of culture form ‘the total village culture.’

The total village culture should equally embrace: Health (village and peasant hygiene, physical culture), Work (economical regional work, women in the household, life in a cooperative), Soul (moral-religious and artistic life), Mind (spreading books through the libraries, gatherings, museum, theatre, radio, and so on).⁸

His liberal ideology was arguably only one part of these initiatives, as his closest collaborator Henri Stahl, a self-declared Marxist who was highly influenced by Dobrogeanu Gherea, practiced a legal-participative⁹ sociology; constantly embedding his research findings within a historical context and often actively participating in peasants’ revolts¹⁰ against local landowners.

⁷ Dimitrie Gusti, “Guiding Ideas for the Cultural Work in the Villages”, *Căminul Cultural*, November 1934: 3.

⁸ Dimitrie Gusti, “Guiding Ideas for the Cultural Work in the Villages,” 3.

⁹ I call it ‘participative’ because of the methodology he applied during his field research.

¹⁰ Henri H. Stahl, *Amintiri și gânduri (Memories and Thoughts)*, (Bucharest: Editura Minerva, 1981), 10.

Stahl described Gusti's sociological programme as a 'real turning point' and considered the cultural programme as having a reformist character (reflective of Spiru Haret's cultural programme) that viewed culture as an agent capable of resolving social class conflict; the radical newness of it being built upon the thesis that "any social reform is based on previous scientific knowledge of the realities that must be reformed,"¹¹ and therefore it was a (new) type of reformism that combined both knowledge and action.

Crucially, the historically observable and documented lineage shows that these cultural institutions not only preceded, but also continued on after the Romanian Communist Party governing period (1945-1989); counteracting 'post-socialist' narratives¹² that identify the so-called communist period as a socio-political 'historical interruption' and representing a cultural colonization imported from the USSR. Therefore, cultural houses and hearths cannot be simply branded as purely being a dictatorial and colonial imposition. Thus, such propaganda-focused narratives are evidently brought into question, and a strict connection with this period alone obscures their extended history and influence.

A counter-narrative to this perspective could well argue that not only did Romania have its own tradition of Marxist discourse and actions prior to 1945, but also that the history and functioning of cultural houses and cultural hearths contains a substantial wealth of individual and collective experience rooted in community-based agency and self-defining cultural volition. The intersection of such multiple agencies becomes even clearer when individual accounts are taken into consideration.

Numbers Count: Planning a Cultural House or Cultural Hearth after 1945

Following the post-WW2 political changes, there commenced a period of rapid expansion and growth in both the numbers and categories of cultural houses and hearths throughout Romania.

¹¹ Henri H. Stahl, *Amintiri și gânduri (Memories and Thoughts)*, 8.

¹² Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Comisia prezidențială pentru analiza dictaturii comuniste din România. Raport final [Final Report of the Presidential Committee for Analysing the Romanian Communist Dictatorship]*, Bucharest, 2006.

This numerical enlargement also registered a diversification in their sizes, formats and institutional allegiances. Such variants included: union cultural houses (*casa de cultură a sindicatelor*), youth houses (*casa tineretului*), student cultural houses (*casa de cultură a studenților*), cultural hearths (*căminul cultural*) and palaces of culture (*palatul culturii*).

An obsession with numbers and their multiplication can be observed throughout the Romanian Communist Party leadership period and literally seen as a major factor in the scientific methods of planning and their results. The article *Beyond Numbers* by Dan Deșliu, published in the *România Liberă* newspaper in 1963, gives an insight into the numerical growth of the cultural hearths (*cămine culturale*) after 1945 (fig. 1)¹³. For instance, in 1948 there were 4,931 cultural hearths, whereas in 1962 10,137 such places existed.

Number counting also played a distinctive role both in the classification, and more importantly, in the actual planning and architectural designs of the new cultural institutions. For instance, each cultural house, hearth or club¹⁴ encompassed two main areas that were delimited by two distinctive functions: the performance or the 'spectacle' hall (*sala de spectacole*) and the club rooms (*clubul propriu-zis*). The performance hall, which occupied the main and most important space in almost all of the cultural houses, is fundamentally a theatre space/stage with large seating areas and flexible spaces designed to accommodate a range of displays, exhibitions or presentations. In comparison, the club rooms, or alternatively a club area, were generally much smaller spaces and their varying dimensions were essentially designed to accommodate participatory sessions, formal lessons, rehearsals and workshops. Specific activities included: visual arts, photography groups, cinema clubs, amateur radio, music sessions, popular dance, ballet, technical activities, theatre and literary circles.

¹³ *România Liberă* [Free Romania] 3rd January, 1963.

¹⁴ Cultural houses were also named "clubs" in 1956, marking a connection with the Soviet model of workers' clubs, see Georgeta Ghițulescu and Gherghel, Radu, *Manualul Arhitectului Proiectant* [Manual of Designing Architect], (Bucharest: Editura Tehnică, 1956): 106-121.



Fig. 1. Translation of the text under the published image in *România Liberă*: “The favourite meeting place of the collectivised peasants, after work is the village cultural house, the afternoons of questions and answers, spoken diaries, the competitions ‘Who Knows Wins’, the mass agrarian zoo-technical education, the books, the artistic shows are all appreciated by the citizens. This is why many communes in our countries have built new buildings for the cultural houses, their number being increased considerably.”

According to the number of seats located in the main performance hall, these cultural institutions were divided into three categories: union clubs (200-800 seats), city clubs (300-600 seats), and village clubs (100-400 seats). Hence, the actual size of a cultural house was expressed through the number of seats placed *in-situ*. A fixed ratio specific for each category, was used to calculate the relationship between the capacity of the performance hall vis-a-vis the capacity of the club or house. In planning a specific cultural institution, the size of the active (working) population was carefully identified and calculated, including the actual nature of the work they were engaged in. The outcome

of the 'capacity planning formula' often resulted in many such clubs being placed in close proximity to the local factories, or the main workplaces, but away from any potential sources of pollution and inside the residential housing zones.

According to the official instruction manual for architectural designers, the planning of a cultural hearth or house would not be based upon a system of financial efficiency, but rather centred around the number of people that could be accommodated. The architectural manual gave detailed suggestions relating to the core components of a cultural house: what rooms you need to incorporate in response to the overall size of the cultural house, appropriate spaces for specific activities, electrical installations and the required voltage/circuits for each structural partition, how to calculate the visible area around the stage or projection screen, how to plan for good acoustics in each room through considering the sizes, proportions, materials and furniture used within the identified space.

Tabela 1						Tabela 2				
Cluburi sindicale						Cluburi oraşeneşti, raionale sau regionale				
Sala de spectacol	Numărul locurilor					Sala de spectacol	Numărul locurilor			
	200	300	400	600	800		300	400	500	600
Club propriu-zis	120	200	300	600	800	Club propriu-zis	200	270	300	350
Raport	1:0,6	1:0,6	1:0,75	1:1	1:1	Raport	1:0,66	1:0,65	1:0,6	1:0,59

Tabela 3				
Cluburi săteşti (cămine culturale)				
Sala de spectacol	Numărul locurilor			
	100	200	300	400
Club propriu-zis	28	90	110	140
Raport	1:0,28	1:0,45	1:0,37	1:0,35

Fig. 2. Page from the quoted *Manual of an Architectural Designer*, with the number of seats according to the type of clubs.

This planning by numbers did not exclude various other factors influencing, temporally as well as topographically, the realization of new cultural houses. It must also be noted that the period of 1945-89 was neither politically or economically homogeneous. Moreover, national political leadership changes within the international context, such as the death of the communist leader Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej in 1965 and Nicolae Ceaușescu's restructuring of Romania in 1968 and the July thesis in 1971, directly impacted upon projection of the institutions into their immediate future.

Several distinctive phases can thus be distinguished: the decade of standardization (1945-55), multifunctional spaces that accommodated multiple activities (1955-59), incorporation of local and national motifs (1955 onwards), cultural houses regarded as 'unique objects of architecture' (1960s-70s), youth cultural houses gain prominence (1981-89). Following the July thesis, even larger scale cultural houses were built and the union cultural houses became the 'stars' of the period (1974-81).¹⁵ Each of these distinctive phases contained ongoing discussions on the rapport between monumentality, functionality and intimacy.

Tabela 4

Determinarea capacității cluburilor

Numărul de muncitori		Numărul de locuri din sala de spectacol
două schimburi	trei schimburi	
1 300–2 000	1 000–1 500	200
2 001–2 700	1 501–2 000	300
2 701–4 000	2 001–3 000	400
4 001–5 400	3 001–4 000	600
5 401–6 000	4 001–5 000	800

Fig. 3. Table Determining the Capacity of the Clubs, according to the number of workers working in two or three shifts, in the quoted *Manual of Architectural Designer*, vol. 2.

¹⁵ Irina Tulbure, *The Factory of Facts and Other (Unspoken) Stories* (Bucharest: Asociația Pepluspatru, 2017), 46-73.

How do They Actually Matter?

“Culture is a good that belongs to everybody.” (Tia Șerbanescu, journalist)

“Culture is a supreme form of freedom.” (Maria Porumbescu, architect)

The extended history and schema of ‘planning by numbers’ attempts to delay the expedient and simplistic dismissal of cultural houses and hearths as instrumentalized centres of ‘brain washing’ and the dissemination of ‘empty’ communist propaganda, (to use all the tropes in one sentence). Nevertheless, they did not sit outside of state control. Wherein, alongside individual and community driven activities, dry, empty political discourse and political education forums did find an institutional place. A level of surveillance and control was present. But the way they embodied a very specific holistic understanding of culture is of great importance today, when we are witnessing the turn to a complete monetarization of cultural activities, and the dismissal of the need to subsidize culture.

Cultural houses and hearths ultimately refracted the vision that culture belongs to everybody and that cultural democracy is about the immediate, ubiquitous, access to culture and therein represents the transformation of the population from consumers into producers. The view corresponds to the 1976 Council of Europe statement on culture. A report commissioned by the Oslo Ad Hoc Council of Europe Conference of Ministers with Responsibility for Cultural Affairs stated “Cultural democracy implies placing importance on amateurs and on creating conditions which will allow people to choose to be active participants rather than just passive receivers of culture.”¹⁶

Tia Șerbănescu’s journalist investigation, written in 1977¹⁷, following the changing views of culture stipulated by the Council of Europe Conference, punctuates the specific place of cultural houses within the national cultural-educational plan:

¹⁶ James Bau Graves, *Cultural Democracy, The Arts, Community and the Public Purpose*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 11.

¹⁷ Tia Șerbănescu, “Cultural Houses File,” *Tribuna României*, (15 January 1977): 8.

The activity of the cultural houses must be understood as a constitutive part of an element of the network of cultural-educational institutions, organised at the level of concrete human collectives. [...] The institutions were connected with the idea of educating the masses, reflecting the cultural policy of constituting a national system of mass cultural-educational activity.¹⁸

She even mentions the idea of the democratisation of culture in connection to the cultural houses: “Democratisation of culture presupposes direct and wide access of the masses to culture without formalities or inhibitions.”¹⁹ Şerbănescu considered them to be the cultural institution with the most diverse profile of activities, whose purpose was to transform the consumption of culture into creative acts.

Not only supplementing the absence of theatre, opera-houses, cinemas and museums in remote locations, they induced a transformation towards a collective authoring of culture. Literally these were the places where participatory and negotiated learning could take place. Professional actors would collaborate or coordinate amateur theatre performances. Visual artists would initiate reoccurring workshops and laboratories (*cercuri*). Professional writers would be invited to literary circles. The goal was not the professionalisation of amateur artists but the multidimensional construction of the individual within group interactions. Şerbănescu mentions four clear functions of these institutions: *instructive-educational*, to transmit an informational flux to educate the receivers; *developing creativity*, to develop the participant’s creativity, to support it in order for the individual to feel fulfilled; *human-intercommunication* to establish new types of human relations, which start with cultural collaboration in order to consolidate social relations; *recreational-entertainment*, encompassing all forms of social consciousness and the full development of the individual.

Cultural houses, depending on their specificity and size, included cultural and scientific universities, dance bands, artistic brigades and applied laboratories, as well as sports facilities. Culture was performed through accessing forms of ‘high culture’ (visual arts, films, books, theatre) alongside

¹⁸ Tia Şerbănescu, “Cultural Houses File,” 8.

¹⁹ Tia Şerbănescu, “Cultural Houses File,” 8.

the material culture of everyday life (cultivation of crops, hygiene, domestic repairs, amateur-radio). Sports were also included in the idea of culture. A wide range of individual and collective sports were practised: football, swimming, ping-pong, bowling, tennis, volleyball, handball.



Fig. 4. Cultural Houses from Buzău, Alba Iulia and Tulcea. Children's show (Craiova), ballet (Sibiu), visual art class (Roman). *Tribuna Romaniei*, 1977



Fig. 5. Union Cultural House in Vaslui: amateur cineclub.
Tribuna României magazine, 1977

The amateur movement was highly encouraged. Previous to the grand focus on *Cântarea României* [Singing of Romania], the national amateur festival initiated in 1976, a variety of other significant festivals existed: the National Competition of Amateur Groups, Popular Art Biennial, Dialogues on the Same Stage, Biennial of Amateur Theatre²⁰ and the Biennial of Cultural Centres (a competition for musical and dance groups)²¹. Regional union

²⁰ In 1966, *Scânteia* [The Spark] newspaper mentions the amateur theatre festival organized in Bucharest every 2 years. See Radu Constantinescu, Ion Cuchi, Ion Chiujea, "The Style of Cultural Activities in Cultural Houses," *Scânteia* (April 7th 1966): 7.

²¹ Both mentioned in the Romanian Free Europe files, item No 2130/1965, under the file of Cultural Centres.

cultural houses scheduled in their repertoire a special programme performed by amateur groups that were initiated in the cultural hearths. For example, in 1974, Radio Bucharest mentioned that in the Suceava district there was an “initiation of a permanent programme at the cultural house in Suceava, for the best performance groups from the rural localities in the district”.²² While widening participation was declared as their main goal, and while a focused analysis of what communities were allowed in is not the subject of this text, it must be mentioned that small cities and village cultural houses would accommodate Roma performances, while the big cities would not include such performances²³ in their programmes.

Cultural houses are performative and contradictory places and spaces; small intimate rooms and corridors exist alongside monumental performance halls. Intimacy and familiarity overlap with the ‘big scale’ of the presentation mode... the spectacle. The open spaces are not only connected to monumentality and voluminous architectural grandeur but they also embody a desire to signify culture as a ‘supreme form of freedom’. Interviewed by Ecaterina Oproiu, Maria Porumbescu and Nicolae Porumbescu, the architects of Baia-Mare Cultural House, explain the reasons behind their decisions:

I have struggled to respect all the functions but at the same time to raise everything to significations, so that we can create indeed the feeling that culture is a supreme form of freedom. We didn’t want anything closed or isolated. All the functions needed to be entangled. Spaces must flow one into the other. Look at the doors. I didn’t want them to be objects that produce a closing, but possibilities of openings. Look at the windows that we embedded in the walls of the library. We wanted the library not to be isolated, closed like in a shell. We wanted people to feel the presence of books even before entering the library. Look at the staircase surrounded by balconies. Young, old, people, we wanted them all to walk, to look at their city, the green hills and to think... Everything was thought as a perpetual fluidity of space and form, meaning the fluidity of thought, the liberty of thought.²⁴

²² 23rd May 1974. Radio Bucharest, from OSA Archive. 812 Article in Amateur Artist file.

²³ Elaborated upon in more depth in a film in progress, featuring Julius Rostas by Irina Botea Bucan and Jon Dean.

²⁴ Oproiu, Ecaterina, *3x8 Plus infinit*, (Bucharest: Editura Eminescu, 1975), 95-117.

Highly programmed spaces, they also included non-activities, allowing for informal encounters and a non-observed 'hidden' leisure time. Architect Mihail Cafee argues for disorder:

People should come here to meet, to relax (recreate) and in this presence, spontaneous cultural activities could be ignited: exhibitions, concerts, projections, discussions rather than conferences. The cultural house has to be opened all of the time, to have an intimate atmosphere, that can only be achieved by giving up monumentality and luxury. Participation for pleasure not induced or mandatory, argues for some spontaneity and disorder. [...] The main appeal would be constituted by the possibility of non-activity, attraction for the loss of time, favoring empty chit-chat and unpretentious contact [...] Less glamour, more clutter, a clever programme disguised in a lack of programme."²⁵

Re-entangling Pre-entangled Institutions

Cultural houses and hearths are still institutions of entanglement.²⁶ Historical, political and economic contexts condition their functioning. Most of them are big, and they need to be subsidized. Cultural policies, material culture, architectural design, personal and collective accounts intra-act;²⁷ generating entangled re-imaginings of them. They capture and accommodate contradictory experiences. Because of their previous status and collective role, these 'voided' institutions are now, within the present, filled with a multiplicity of personal stories and shared anecdotes. Mental images, sometimes only

²⁵ "Ancheta revistei. Zece întrebări cu privire la casele de cultură," [Magazine Survey: 10 Questions Related to Cultural Houses], *Architecture magazine*, no. 2 (1974): 13.

²⁶ Referencing the way Barad uses entanglement, as Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press), 2007.

²⁷ Intra-act is taken from Karen Barad: "Intra-action signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies: Distinct entities do not precede but rather emerge through their intra-action (distinct in a relational, not an absolute sense), agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don't exist as individual elements." See Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press), 2007, 33.

existing in the minds of previous participants, have the potential to produce a heterogenous re-articulation of the usage and capacity of such cultural houses when allowed time, space and an appropriate medium through which they can be shared.

Recorded²⁸ personal accounts reveal a vibrant past-image of these cultural centres: narratives populated with opportunities and fond inspiration, stories of where people were encouraged to draw and paint, learnt how to play the guitar in the village, of cinema caravans brought on “Molotov” trucks and projected onto the outside wall of the cultural hearth that was too small for everybody to enter, unique occasions for Roma theatre performances, radio-amateur groups, cine-clubs, photo-studios, ping-pong championships, workers’ forum theatre-like performances, realms of celebratory moments and actions.

Today, they may be gradually coming back into the visible. There seems to be a new and emerging focus upon them. An interest in the aesthetic-specificities as architectural objects is noted;²⁹ cultural projects funded by the Administration of National Cultural Funds (AFCN)³⁰ for the reconstruction, rehabilitation or even the construction of new cultural centres.

However, they may need more than just renovation. They may instead need to be ‘unfinished’, and by that, I mean re-deciphered, re-engaged by active-habitation. Reclaimed through belonging to everybody. What would people want and expect from them today?

²⁸ For the past five years, my artistic and academic research on the cultural houses includes listening, provoking conversations and recording evocations of various active participants in cultural houses from Cămpina, Satu Mare, Rădești, Boldești-Scaieni, Slon, Ploiești, Roman, Bucharest, Iași, Sibiu, Budapest, Dunaújváros, Paks and Singapore. I have also interviewed my mother who was assigned to work in the Tămășeni Cultural Hearth (1959) when she got hired to be the teacher of the village school. Her testimony as well as my own experience in the Cultural House of the Students Preoteasa in Bucharest inspired the whole research.

²⁹ Irina Tulbure, *The Factory of Facts and other (Unspoken) Stories*. (Bucharest: Asociatia Pepluspatru, 2017), 46-73.

³⁰ The National Investment Company (CNI) a joint stock company, under the authority of the Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration, highlighted in its activity report the rehabilitation, reconstruction or construction of 235 cultural hearths and cultural centres for the period of 2019-2021.

In Hungary, artists produced experimental educational programmes and have consistently chosen to exhibit 'progressive' work in the small galleries of cultural houses. In 2015, Jon Dean and I conducted several interviews in Hungary for experimental films that were looking into a comparative history of similar institutions. All of our interviewees called the art exhibited in cultural houses 'progressive', versus the conservative art that was permitted to be exhibited in the official museums and galleries, mostly portraits and landscape paintings. Artists like Imre Bak and Károly Hopp-Halász were trained cultural workers that activated and structured these spaces. Their history is inspiring.

Previously, Romanian architects were already predicting the need for unknown activities. Can we re-imagine these places full of free-activities? Can we imagine replacing the need to go to the very badly designed shopping malls by producing an alternative space of gathering where even the collective re-definition of culture can be considered? Can they be the new hubs and repositories of collective and subjective imagination so necessary for producing any kind of alternative change? Can there be such shifts within the present context?

Fifteen kilometres away from here, where I am writing this text, in front of the cultural house (Casa de Cultură) in Mioveni, people meet and roam. They are already there in front, waiting to be invited in. Book-clubs, micro-cinemas, theatre, experimental education, not compulsive play but a break, a stop, in the 'work-time'. The pandemic has given us both acceleration and deceleration, but ultimately filled us with a sense of 'slowing down', an imprecise and hard to remember delay. We have become a lot more 'local' and we have travelled less. Maybe we need, again, a collective home. Mostly empty even after renovation, they still promise... they still exist.

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IRINA BOTEA BUCAN (b. Ploiesti, Romania) has developed a symbiotic artist-educator-researcher methodological framework that consistently questions dominant socio-political ideas and centralizes human and non-human agency as a vehicle for meaning. Choosing to act in diverse contexts, such as: academic institutions, alternative galleries, museums, art biennials, film festivals and generic community centers; she is currently focusing on the de-centralization of cultural discourses and the possibility of sustaining creative differentiation that arguably exists outside of a dominant hegemonic system of values and critique. Presently she teaches

IRINA BOTEA BUCAN

at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Bucharest University of Arts and is pursuing a Ph.D. at Goldsmiths University of Arts. Solo and group shows include: 55th Venice Biennale, International Film Festival Rotterdam, New Museum, New York, MUSAC (Museum of Contemporary Art of Castilia and Leon), Pompidou Centre, Paris, National Gallery Jeu de Paume, Paris etc.