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Gypsy architecture: Houses of the Roma in Eastern Europe. Texts: Renata Calzi, Patrizio Corno; photographs: Carlo Gianferro; [translation into English by Neil Stratton]. Stuttgart: Edition Axel Menges. 2007. 159 pp., numerous color photographs, 1 map; 31cm. \$75.00 (USA). ISBN 978–3–936681–12–3 (Hb.)

Reviewed by David J. Nemeth

This is a Roma-related picture book for architects. It illustrates the creative influence of some rich Eastern European Roma in house surface design and execution using various treatments, for example, ornate and colorful exterior metallic towers and scintillating claddings. This catalog of elaborate “facades” not only introduces Roma to architects, but invokes a convenient metaphor for Roma/Gypsy culture that begs for more penetrating ethnographic enquiry. Previous English-language books by Romani studies scholars making mention of these “Gypsy palaces” (for example, Achim 2004: 203–11) have done so merely in passing and without photographic examples. Romani studies scholars around the world should therefore find *Gypsy Architecture* (hereafter *GA*) fascinating and provocative.

GA is a coffee-table book that should successfully transcend at a glance any lingering doubts in the public mind that Gypsies—in this instance Roma—have houses. And what splendid houses they have on display here: villas; mansions; palaces! As seen through the impressionable and impassioned eyes of its Italian authors, *GA* leaps alive in its oversized wraps, larger than life, to announce its irresistible message in photography and text: *Voilà!* Look here! There is an authentic Gypsy domestic architecture!

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GA is the collaborative research of two enthusiastic architects (Renata Calzi and Patrizio Corno), a talented photographer (Carlo Gianferro), and a visionary publisher (Axel Menges). Their focus on rich Eastern European Roma families and their unusual living conditions comprises stunning photographs of house exteriors and interiors (excepting kitchens and bathrooms) accompanied by several short essays, all ripe for scholarly elaborations. CC&G offer a festive presentation of Roma mansions and their proud owners in *GA* providing a dramatic, drastic departure from the usual media fare of hate walls, hovels and barefoot children in rags. *GA* will shatter some stereotypes and reinforce others. It should stir the intellects and emotions of Romani scholars and bring new evidence to bear on numerous significant ethnographic issues still unresolved.

CC&G compiled their photo catalog while deliberately searching throughout Romania and Moldova for brazen examples of Gypsy architectural excess. Corno (pp. 7–9) describes the entire graphic adventure presented in *GA* as “an immediate, rapid and intriguing view of a new world that is almost unknown in the West—the new static world of the Gypsies.” Of his epiphanic first encounter with a colony of rich settled Gypsies in Sorooca, Republic of Moldova, he writes: “I could not believe what I was seeing from the car window... this was a ghetto with a difference.” He describes the “striking, violent and vulgar” panorama of multi-storey villas with “Indian-style” roofs, having extravagant wrought-iron railings and great variety of wall ornaments and decorative materials—“a world of dreams and fairy tale.” Gianferro’s photographs capture in great detail and at various scales the astonishing panorama that stirs the fancies of Corno and Calzi as demonstrated in their essays.

Successful coffee-table books aim to inspire conversations without being conversations in themselves. Calzi (p. 12) describes *GA* as a cultural trail that does not explain but illustrates how architecture, by its nature one of the most static of arts, has been taken as a frame of reference through which to provide the world with images of the dreams of a people who have wandered throughout the world.

The romanticized vignettes contributed by Corno and Calzi amidst Gianferro’s vast feast of photographic images and include: “Preface;” “Settled Gypsies?;” “Gypsy architecture;” “The man with the gold tie;” “The magician and the feminist;” “The community of Artur;” “Requiem for a pig;” and “The family of songsters.” I have selected a few of these for comment here.

Sorooca’s Gypsy quarter is an emerging international sight-seeing destination overlooking Moldova’s isolated northeastern Dniester River borderland with Ukraine. Corno’s typically incredulous-at-first-glance experience reveals the depth of his and other tourists’ entrenched outsider expectations for Gypsy residential conditions in Eastern Europe, where Roma are widely perceived in the popular mind as “the beggars of Europe” (Dragomir, 2000).

Corno describes the Soroca Gypsy quarter consisting of around fifty villas of various styles and shapes (all built after 1992) as inhabited by “Calderari” families of traditional metalworkers. The authors (pp. 9, 12) interpret the spectacular building-boom in Soroca and elsewhere as the outcome of competitions between rich and powerful Roma families who vie against one another “to construct the largest, the most striking, the most eye-catching house, because the house ... represents the family, its standing, its power and its wealth.” The extravagant house designs, treatments and details are of “no practical use” and function only “to represent through their lack of proportion and absolute needlessness, the financial and social power of the family.”

Many of Gianferro’s photographs show local Roma leaders (identified as “Bulibashas”) and their family members posing proudly amidst their houses and automobiles and other prestigious properties. This matter of Roma prestige properties brings immediately to mind Peter Berta’s recent discussion in *Romani Studies* involving Transylvanian Gabor Roma and their *taxtaj* (silver beaker) “prestige items” (2007: 36): “Prestige items are primarily important means of political self-representation and status rivalry among Gabor individuals and patrilineages, and their ownership is usually interpreted as an index of economic and social status.”

The important primary role of these Roma domestic architectures interpreted as prestige items “on display” to impress and intimidate others (mainly other Roma) might also help explain why many of the mansions, though furnished, are not even inhabited by their owners, who nevertheless may live on or near the premises. Calzi (p. 12) proposes while waxing poetically that “They still live anchored to a past in the open air that finds it difficult to transform itself and confine itself to the closed rhythms of a room ...” She adds that “most of the time they live outside, in the street ... [and that] at certain periods of the year, the villa owners and members of their families travel widely “to work and make money.”

Both authors agree that remittances from family members abroad help finance the constructions of the villas, and that unfinished houses are indicators of delayed and ceased remittances. Design ideas are apparently also inspired from abroad. Corno (p. 9) reports that each family head “uninfluenced by any knowledge of architectural culture [chooses] the style, size and furnishings on the basis of his ... personal tastes or memories of travels, houses and things seen in other countries.” I would tentatively classify the design ideas as “Bulibasha baroque” though CC&G seem intent on stretching their interpretation of design origins all the way to India. Corno implies Calderari workshops are at the heart of the Roma colony at Soroca, but both authors seem unclear about the extent to which the local Roma metalworkers have active roles in the constructions of the villas.

There is an intimate relationship between Roma prestige houses, their designs, and Bulishiba power that Calzi elaborates in two of her essays, “The man with the gold tie” and “The community of Artur”: She reports the essentiality of obtaining a variety of permissions from the local ‘Bulibashas,’ the heads of the communities, in order to interview local Roma and photograph their homes. She describes these leaders as “indisputably charismatic figures,” having strong personalities as exhibited in their extravagant articles of clothing, accessories and accouterments. Gianferro captures these items in some marvelous triumphal Bulibasha portraits. One photo-essay introduces Bulibasha Artur, “Baron of the Gypsies of the Republic of Moldova and all the Russias.” He is photographed standing in the spacious courtyard of his palatial villa, gripping the restraining collars of two muscular pit bulls.

Ostentatious display of Gypsy triumphalism is not a new story in Romani studies. The intimate relationship between leadership, power, prestige and territorial behavior among Romanies (and among ethnic Travellers for that matter) has been well documented over many centuries in both Europe and the Americas. *GA* merely reminds Romani studies scholars that these displays in the context of these relationships continue. In conclusion: the exemplary houses and owners depicted in *GA*, while indeed remarkable and perhaps unique phenomena, are from a broader perspective of Romani studies scholarship not near as exceptional as portrayed. *GA* demonstrates that competitive Romanies and Travellers continue to choose their own times and places to demonstrate to outsiders and to each other the rich and symbolic rewards of their remarkable entrepreneurial spirit and economic flexibility.

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