

## **VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURAL AND FURNISHING PATTERNS OF STROEȘTI VILLAGE, ARGEȘ COUNTY, ROMANIA**

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### **Abstract:**

*This analysis is based on the investigation of Romanian-vernacular built environment and the specific structures used in traditional vernacular architecture and furniture that inspire it on a conceptual level. This was possible by researching settlements specially chosen for determining what the main characteristics of vernacular are, based on the following criteria: presence of specific structures in the construction and furniture, diversified utilisation patterns of wooden species, architectural and furniture joints, scale, proportion and general characteristics of the interior space.*

*The case studies illustrate and provide some conclusions in this regard but they provide also an additional practical experience to the theoretical analysis through on-site investigation.*

*The purpose of the research in the village of Stroești, situated in Argeș County, was to investigate and evaluate a series of rural landmarks that can provide the necessary data to draw conclusions regarding the forms of manifestation of specific vernacular architecture and based on this experience to be able to outline a guide containing concepts for value-adding in contemporary design.*

**Key words:** *Romanian-vernacular architecture and furniture; interior space; on-site investigation; wood; local identity; traditional values.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The increasing interest among architects in what we call vernacular architecture and the growing public awareness of a rich vernacular heritage suggest that it is time we examine the nature of the vernacular and its historical development (Brinckerhoff 1984). In terms of general use, the meaning of vernacular can be connected to concepts such as homemade, traditional or countrified, but in the context of architecture and built environment, it indicates the small scale rural dwelling, that of a farmer or a craftsman. The current definitions point out a series of characteristics: the dwelling is designed by a craftsman, not an architect; that it is built with local techniques, local materials, and with the local environment in mind: its climate, its traditions, its economy – predominantly agricultural (Brinckerhoff 1984). This type of dwelling is loyal to local forms and rarely accepts innovations from outside the region.

The tradition of wooden buildings, in spite its fragmented and discontinuous development has always managed to adapt itself to the modern context due to its important role in the (mostly rural) collective conception concerning life and living (Gronegger 2013, Jose 2010, Oikonomou 2011). Regarding the repertoire of construction systems and materials, it can be stated that these reflect general principles on the effective use of local resources (Pănoiu 1977), and offer diverse expressions not only on a structural level, but also on a functional and aesthetic one (Mitrache 2008).

The selected area from Romania, Argeș County, can provide a series of relevant data regarding the stylistic, architectural and structural evolution of vernacular architecture and furniture overlapping with local tradition, geographical context, climate, thus shaping the contemporary rural house, as we know it today.

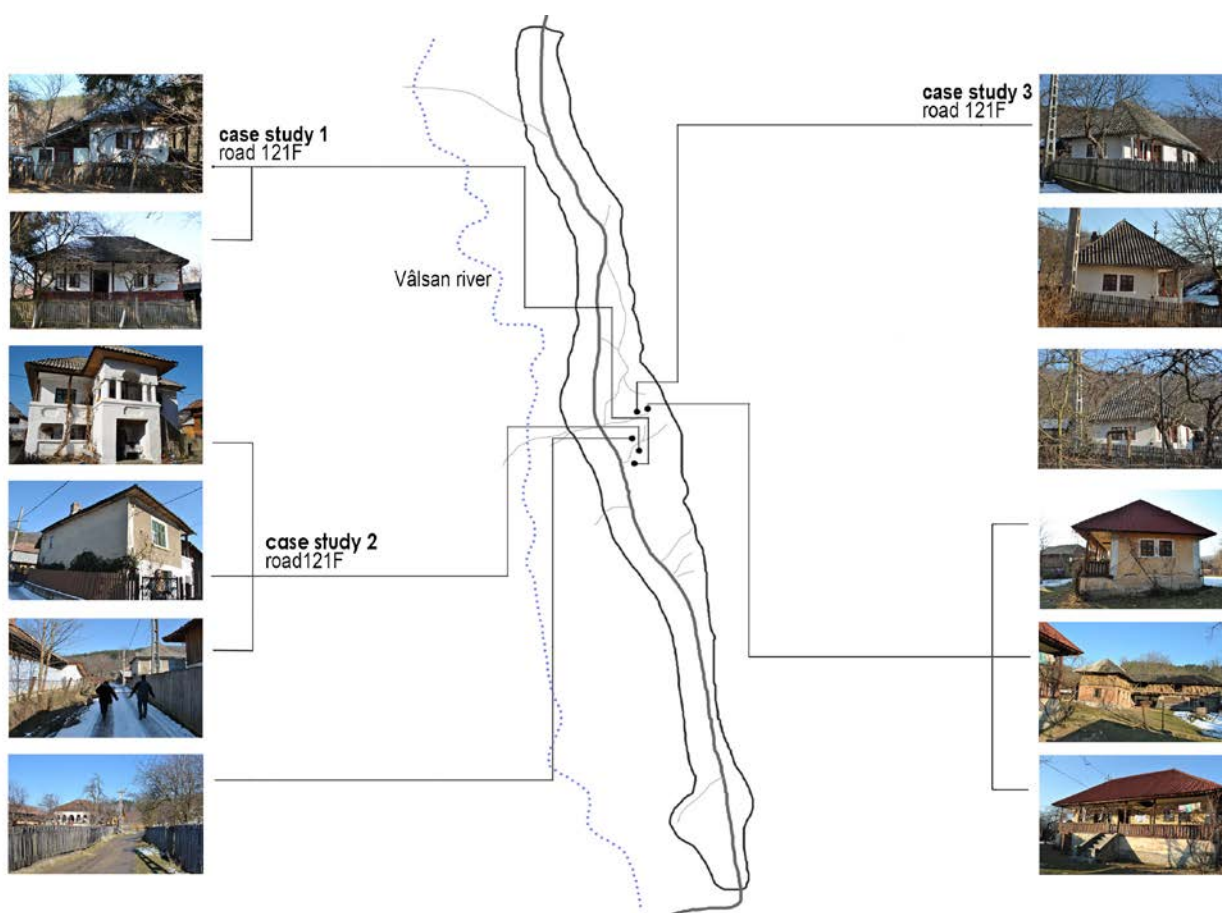
### **OBJECTIVES AND METHOD**

The objective of this research is to address in a critical and synthetic manner forms and structural typologies of vernacular construction and furniture of Argeș County – Stroiești village, Romania (Fig. 1). The aim was to obtain results that will set the basis of the understanding process of an improvement or concept transfer methodology regarding traditional cultural and architectural values in the contemporary context.

The role of tradition in the modernization and globalization era has led to a series of debates in the presence of specialists, architects, designers in recent decades (Ruggiero 2009). Tradition is the mass of cultural, religious, ethnographic values and modernity may be associated with cultural transformation,

mobility, social class stratification, a consumer-oriented society (Mitrache 2008). At present, tradition and modernity are no longer seen as two opposite concepts, but ones that coexist, overlapping and influencing each other.

This definition is largely the product of architects and architectural historians, but also other disciplines have been involved in studying the vernacular. A great input has been done by geographers, social historians, and archeologists that contributed to a holistic definition that we cannot afford to ignore. Their collective research has revealed that the vernacular building, especially in Europe, has had a history of its own, distinct from that of formal architecture or determined by ancient archetypes, it has undergone a long and complicated evolution (Brinckerhoff 1984).



**Fig. 1.**

**General plan of Stroiești village showing the location of the three case studies.**

Regarding vernacular architecture in Europe, the first designs were realised without the use of any „artificial” tools, a large sector that might be regarded, as an example of this is wattlework where pieces of wood are simply gathered and not at all processed (Zwerger 2000). This type of construction could not offer enough stability, so the next measure consisted in weaving the pieces into regular geometric forms, the wattle being used as an infill material for the walls, rural buildings combining wattle walls with skeleton-framed, more solid walls (Pănoiu 1977).

The transition to bronze tools, has influenced the appearance of log construction in Europe and with a slight delay, in Romanian territory. The principle of log construction is that the elements are stacked horizontally one on top of the other and held in the desired position using different types of notches.

If we consider the Romanian territory, vernacular constructions were simple regarding the structural forms, with some of the wooden pillars buried under the earth, the visible part being covered with planks, wattle and clayey soil. These structural systems diversified in time, leading to the construction typology with horizontal logs resting on stone foundations (Olărescu 2012). From a structural viewpoint, these constructions were made of round pillars embedded in the soil, ensuring the stability of the construction (Păcală 1915).

The purpose of the research was to investigate and evaluate a series of rural landmarks that can provide the necessary data to draw conclusions regarding the forms of manifestation of specific traditional

wooden architecture. The research was conducted on several levels (having a holistic approach): a) investigations concerning the context and community structure (general data - geography, economy, utilities, population, surface and utilisation pattern of the built area, wooden species, household - architecture, structure and building materials, interior space composition and furnishing patterns).

After a general research regarding vernacular housing typologies, three households were selected the results of the on-site investigation being presented in summarizing tables below.

### **ANALYSIS OF LOCAL VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE AND FURNITURE OF STROEȘTI VILLAGE**

Stroești is a village in the commune of Mușătești in Argeș County, Muntenia, Romania. It is located in the center of the Vâlsan Valley. The village of Stroești is located 37km away from Pitești and 20km from Curtea de Argeș.

The three selected case studies illustrate a series of vernacular characteristics that survived the changes brought by technological evolution. All these features are represented as summary tables and are briefly described.

The first household was built at the beginning of the XXth century and contains all relevant architectural items, remaining in their initial display and interdependence related to the main construction of the house. Only local materials were used in the building process: wood, river stone (from Vâlsan Valley), earth, sand and locally made brick. The household is composed of several yard typologies (all of them having a clear function): *flower garden* – placed in front of the house, oriented towards the street; *stack yard* – where the annexes are placed, haystack, animal shelter; *garden* – the most monumental in size, here all vegetables and grain were harvested. The stable, which is placed very close to the house as an extension of it, is organized on two layers: the ground floor (compact, its walls being formed of horizontal logs) where the toolshed and the swinery are placed, and the upper floor (more open with a linear structure, pillar-beam).

The volume of the house is always facing south, thus according more importance to the cardinal points and not so much to the position of the road. It has a generous continuous porch on the south façade, here the entrance is placed, and the volume is compact, containing an entrance hall, which serves also as a kitchen and two rooms placed on each side of the entrance hall. The ground floor is intended for living and the gable roof serves as a good storing area through winter for grains and other products.

The furniture is hand hewn of local oak, beech or ash, made at the beginning of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, all joints are realized without adhesives: finger joint dovetail connection (drawer of a storage table placed in the guest room), tenon-mortise joint (detail of a high chair backrest), hidden round or rectangular peg joints (detail of a high chair backrest).

The second household is raised on a high foundation at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1904-1905) and has remained intact regarding its general shape during the last 100 years. In addition, in this case we can clearly observe the relation of interdependence between all the constructions composing the household. The house, facing south, oriented with its main façade towards the first yard, has a compact volume with small openings on the ground floor, continuing with an open porch or turret on the first floor and closing the general shape with a generous gable roof. The barn is situated as an individual construction in the second yard, close to the house, but with the possibility of functioning independently having also its own yard area. The barn in this case has a massive structure on ground level, the wall structure formed of horizontal logs being changed with a contemporary solution of brick cladding. The first floor has a linear wooden structure based on the principle of pillar-beam-crossbar. The aim of this typology is to let airflow, which can be an advantage in the case of storing hay. The third yard area is assigned for the garden, it is the most generous in surface and oriented with its long axis towards south.

The house, monumental as appearance from the street, has accommodated on the ground level the workshop of the carpenter Beldie, modifications being made only in 1950, meaning a functional reconfiguration, the new spaces being as follows: bedroom, pantry and cellar. The first floor has the characteristic display of the vernacular house containing an entrance hall and two bedrooms placed on each side of the entrance axis. Even though many social and technological changes have occurred, the proportions and general shape of the house and annexes remained unaltered.

Ion Truțășilă built the third household in 1923. The house has a low foundation and cellar, the main façade being oriented towards south. The main spatial components of the household have remained intact, in the front yard the main volume of the house is placed, the second yard accommodates the shed for storing wood which is directly attached to the house on the longitudinal axis. In the second yard, facing the shed, parallel to it, the barn is placed. In the case of the shed the structure is open, linear and formed on the pillar-beam principle with mortise and tenon connections. The barn has an opaque, continuous structure formed of horizontal logs and small openings. The most generous open space remains the garden, which is visibly and carefully limited from the first and the second yard. Wooden fences mark these limits without interrupting visual continuity and visibility of the entire household.

A small porch placed on the south façade marks the entrance in the house. The layout of the house is simple: separate entrance in the guest room (which is only occasionally used) and a second entrance for the bedroom and kitchen for daily use and activities of the inhabitants.

The furniture dates from the beginning of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, high chairs and chests with sidewalls made of planks are placed in the guest room, all joints are simple, geometric and realized without any adhesive. Mortise and tenon joints are specific for backrest joints of high chairs. The barn was also furnished with a wooden chest for storing grains.

Concerning materials, initially local materials were used as locally made bricks, stone from Vâlsan River, wood. After the revolution, during the 90's, a diversification of materials led to replacement of many local materials with new ones such as: bricks, concrete, metal-sheets for roof cladding.

Based on documentation on site, in this research are considered important elements, which constitute important social-cultural and identity indicators: housing position in relation to the road; house typologies; main façade position in relation to the road and the cardinal points; the structure of the foundation, walls, ceiling and roof.

Several common characteristics can be observed when analyzing the three selected case studies, (Fig. 2, 3, 4) mainly we can discuss about a compact shape of the house, utilizing local materials (mainly wood for walls/roof or locally produced brick, stone for the foundation), the structure being defined by horizontal logs, a porch facing south and efficient use of interior space (Bartha, Olărescu 2017).

Placing the house in relation with the street denotes the human need of exposure or protection. Currently, the settlement of the house as far away from the road as possible, shows the tendency and need of isolation of modern man from the public space, which is gaining ground compared to the private space, a protection against pollution.

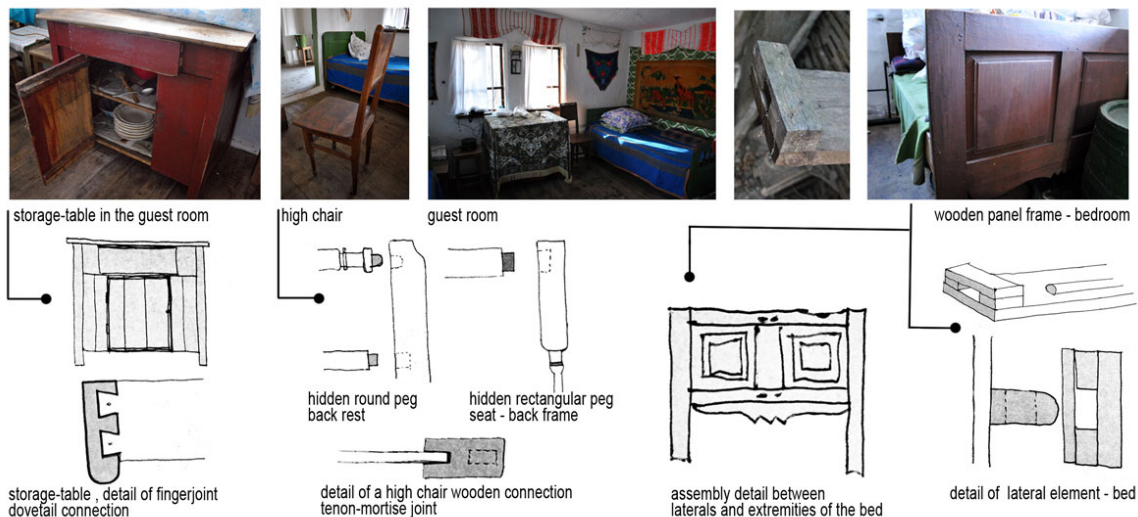
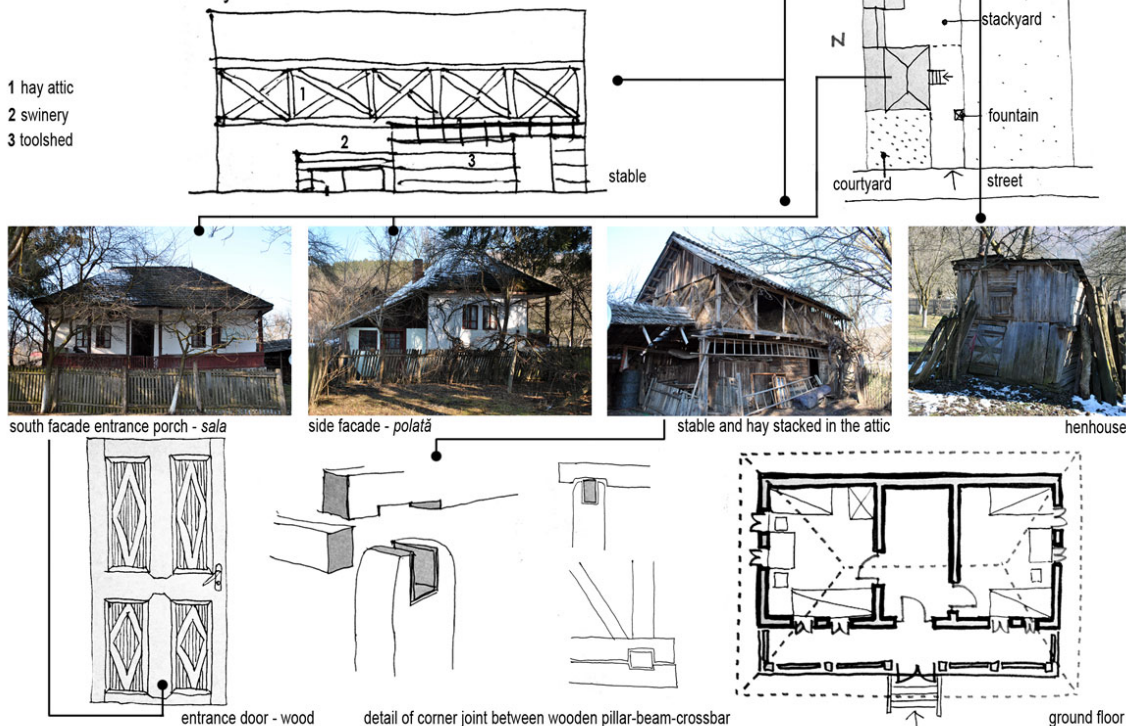
The dynamics of the typological structuring of housing can be observed in the studied period, also an accelerated pace in terms of freedom of choice and the transition to a stable democracy compared to the "rigid" ideological statement of 50-70s period.

The boom in house construction after 1989, based on a new structural scheme (ground and first floor / attic, with central hall, bathroom downstairs, bedrooms upstairs / attic) denotes the ideological resistance of the population who waited for an appropriate moment to put their plans into effect, on the one hand and on the other hand, for the shift of the centralized planning phase in accordance with the needs / requirements / cultural development of the rural population.

In the period of 2000, due to contacts with Western Europe as well as temporary or permanent migration of Romanians to these countries (especially after joining the EU) cultural paradigm has changed and larger housing began to appear, with an updated structural scheme according to existent ones in Western Europe. In their construction new materials and techniques are used common on a European level (promoted by the major suppliers of building materials and systems), to the detriment of traditional materials and techniques. Thus, a gradual leveling of specific regional / national characteristics is taking place in the context of the current European Union.

**Household 1 - House with low foundation, without cellar**

- **owner:** Alexandru I. Hristea (1932 - 1997)  
Ion Stoica Cristea (Ion Ciocă) from Stroești-Argeș
- **year of construction:** beginning of the XXth century
- **utilities:** electricity



**Exterior**

Household, House, barn, construction typologies & details

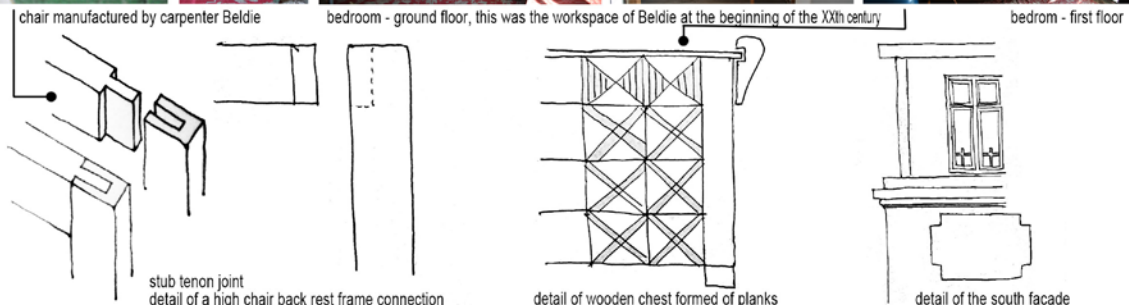
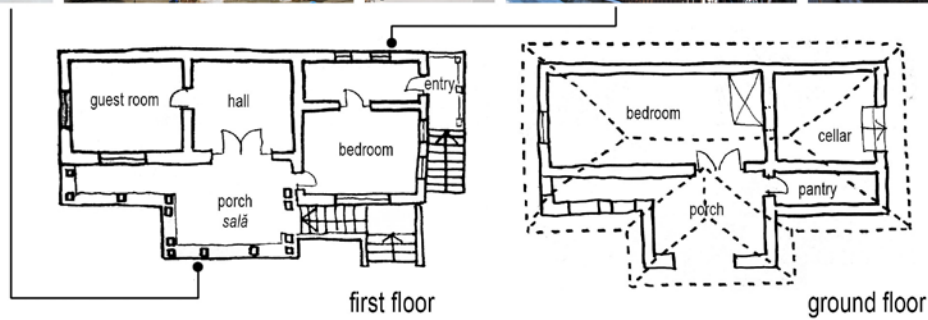
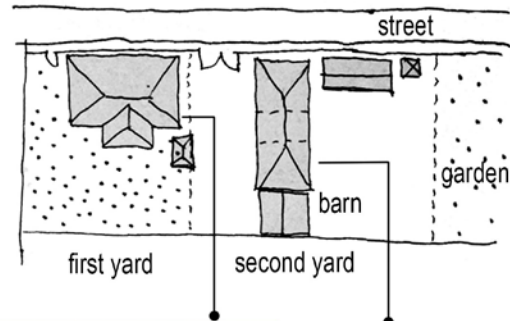
**Interior**

Furniture, space utilisation patterns

**Fig. 2.**  
**Summarizing table with case study 1 from Stroești, Argeș County.**

**Household 2 - House with high foundation and cellar**

- **owner:** Dumitru Z. Beldie
- **year of construction:** 1904 - 1905, by craftsmen Ion (Niță) Tambu for carpenter Dumitru Z. Beldie from Stroești.
- until now, the house has been inhabited by 6 generations
- the ground floor hosted the workspace of the carpenter Beldie (at the beginning of the XXth century)
- **utilities:** electricity



<p><b>Exterior</b> Household, house, barn, construction typologies &amp; details</p>	<p><b>Interior</b> Furniture, space utilisation patterns</p>
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**Fig. 3.**  
**Summarizing table with case study 2 from Stroești, Argeș County.**

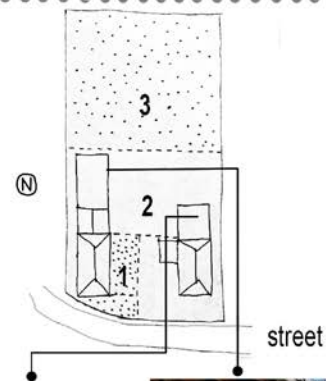
**Household 3 - House with low foundation and cellar**

- **owner:** Trufășilă Gheorghe (born 1938) and Trufășilă Paraschiva (born 1944)  
- T. Gheorghe worked at the Godeni mine, and T. Paraschiva is a housewife, but she is fond of tailoring  
- 2 daughters (one is living in Mălureni - Bădiceni village, the other one is in Italy)

- **year of construction:** 1923

- **utilities:** electricity

- 1 front yard
- 2 back yard
- 3 garden



household



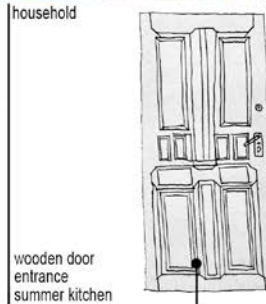
detail of wooden railing - facade



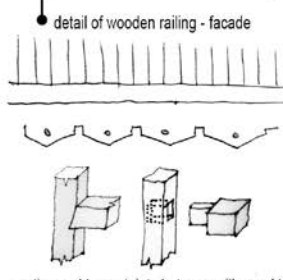
barn



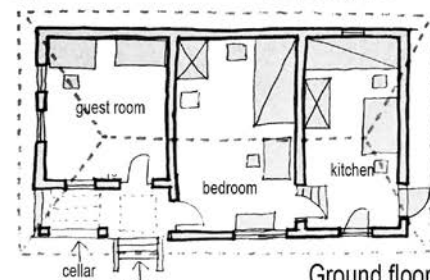
shed for storing wood



wooden door  
entrance  
summer kitchen



mortise and tenon joints between pillar and beam



Ground floor



high chairs in the bedroom



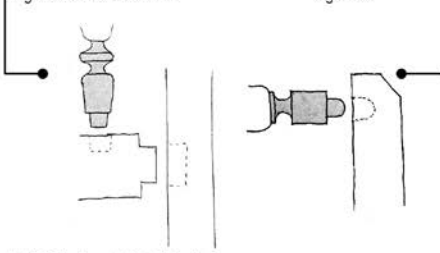
high chair



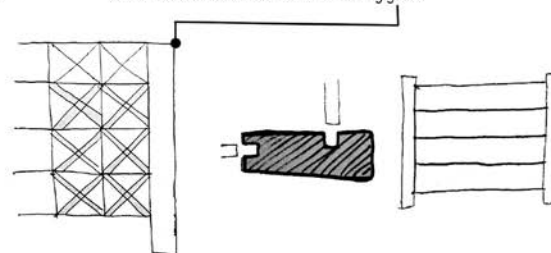
kitchen



wooden chests in the barn - used for storing grains



detail of back rest joint - high chair  
mortise and tenon joint



wooden chest with sides formed of planks

detail of side wall-leg joint

**Exterior**

Household, house, barn, construction typologies & details

**Interior**

Furniture, space utilisation patterns

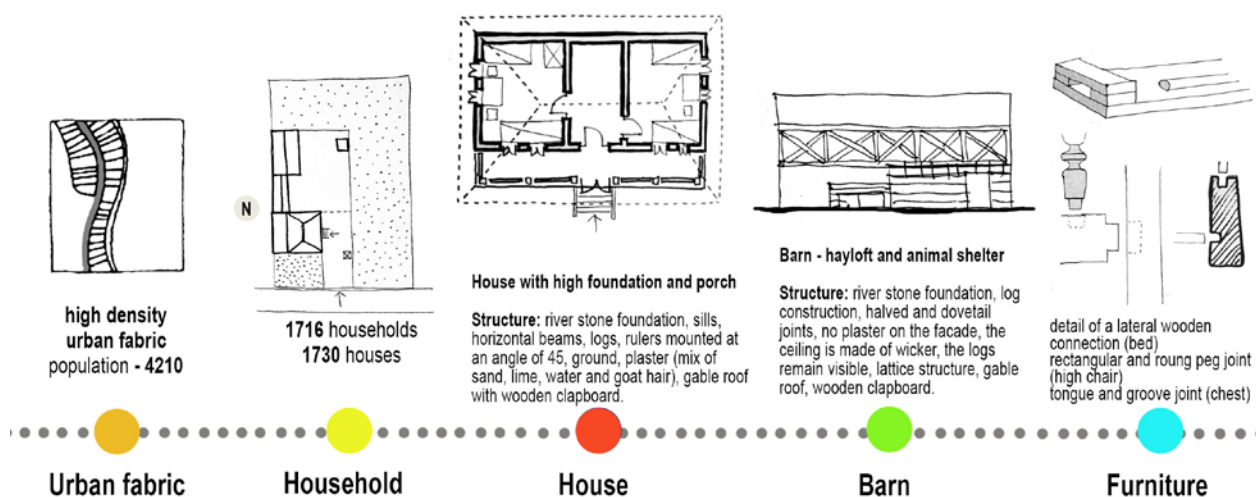
**Fig. 4.**  
**Summarizing table with case study 3 from Stroești, Argeș County.**

## CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

The traditional household has seen many changes over time (Olărescu 2012, Bartha 2014). There are several factors that have a significant impact on the general shape of the house: climate, local resources, and construction techniques of the region. We cannot ignore the utilization of local materials such as river stone from Vâlsan valley, earth and local wood: beech (*Fagus sylvatica*), oak (*Quercus robur*), elm (*Ulmus glabra*).

Several common characteristics can be observed when comparing the three selected case studies, (Fig. 5). The house was raised usually on a high foundation made from local river stone. The structure of the wall is composed of horizontal logs, over these horizontal beams a series of rulers are mounted at an angle of 45 degrees, the final layer of the wall section being closed with plaster (a mix of sand, lime, water and goat hair). The gable roof is closing the visual composition of the general shape, the continuity of materials and textures being highlighted by the wooden clapboard, as a frequent choice for roof cladding material.

Regarding furniture, in the case of the three analyzed households, we can conclude that the main part of vernacular wooden furniture dates from the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century. We can highlight a series of items, including a table with a drawer employing a dovetail connection, also a high table with tongue and groove connections and a series of chests (utilizing tenon joints), a wooden hanger employing pegs. In its earliest manifestations, wooden joints were simple, made without adhesives, later on, when tools diversified, more complex connections appeared.



**Fig. 5.**

**Summarizing table containing general data and conclusions regarding the specific local household and furniture of Stroești village.**

Even though, vernacular architecture and furniture have shown a dynamic evolution and shift in time, they still reflect and reveal a long-term utilization of natural, traditional and local materials and archetypes. Not in all cases, but enough to set the basis for future projects that maintain a healthy amount of respect towards local identity and traditional values.

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