

VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURAL AND FURNISHING PATTERNS OF BRAȘOV, SIBIU, COVASNA AND ARGEȘ COUNTIES, 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 wood 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 conducted in four selected Counties of Romania (Brașov, Sibiu, Covasna, Argeș), 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 furniture. Based on this experience it was possible to outline a strong link between how human behavior influenced the perception and creation of the rural built environment. This shift in time of the human behavior can be translated into spatial and building mechanisms such as 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, roof; furniture.

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

INTRODUCTION

The specific local historical context, social behavior, building methods, materials and techniques used in each particular rural area turn vernacular architecture into an identity symbol (Rapoport 1990, Gronegger 2013) and rich ethnographic evidence concerning rural technologies and ways of life in the countryside (Vellinga 2007, Pop 2009, Bartha 2017).

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 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: an artisan, not an architect designs the dwelling that is built with local techniques, local materials, and with the local environment in mind with its climate, its traditions, and its economy – predominantly agricultural (Brinckerhoff 1984). This type of dwelling is loyal to local forms and rarely accepts innovations from outside the region.

The selected areas from Romania, Brașov, Sibiu, Covasna and Argeș Counties, 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 four selected Counties from Romania: Brașov (Fundata village), Sibiu (Rășinari village), Covasna (Cernat village), Argeș (Stroești village). From each county a

village was selected with 3 representative households, summing up in total 4 counties with 4 villages and a total of 12 households (Fig. 1).

The aim was to obtain results that will set the basis of the understanding traditional cultural and architectural values in the contemporary context and being able to identify specific forms of vernacular in the case of four different counties of Romania. This study will highlight similarities and common characteristics of the vernacular and the contemporary rural context between the four selected areas through four relevant households presented in detailed summarizing figures (Fig. 2-5).

This subject has been in the center of the specialists' interest in the last 5-10 years: a growing concern towards the historical-socio-cultural context, environmental impact, sustainability, experiments with new prototypes and ways of living adjusted to the more complex and diverse needs of modern society (Touman 2005). The term vernacular architecture entered the Romanian specialized literature quite recently. It can be said that to a great extent, this subject was included into what is now called folk architecture. The first writings concerning this subject can be dated in the middle of the 20th century (Pănoiu 1977, Curinschi 1981) in 1964, when the Moravian-born American architect Bernard Rudofsky publishes his statement book entitled *Architecture without Architects*. This meant not only the introduction of a new term, but also a new vision and understanding of particular, local indigenous architectural forms and their socio-cultural behavior (Rudofsky 1964).

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).

Based on documentation on site, the research aims to highlight elements, which constitute social-cultural and identity indicators. The most important outcome is the determination of a strong link between how human behavior influenced the perception and creation of the rural built environment. This shift in time of the human behavior will be translated into spatial and building mechanisms such as 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, roof; furniture.

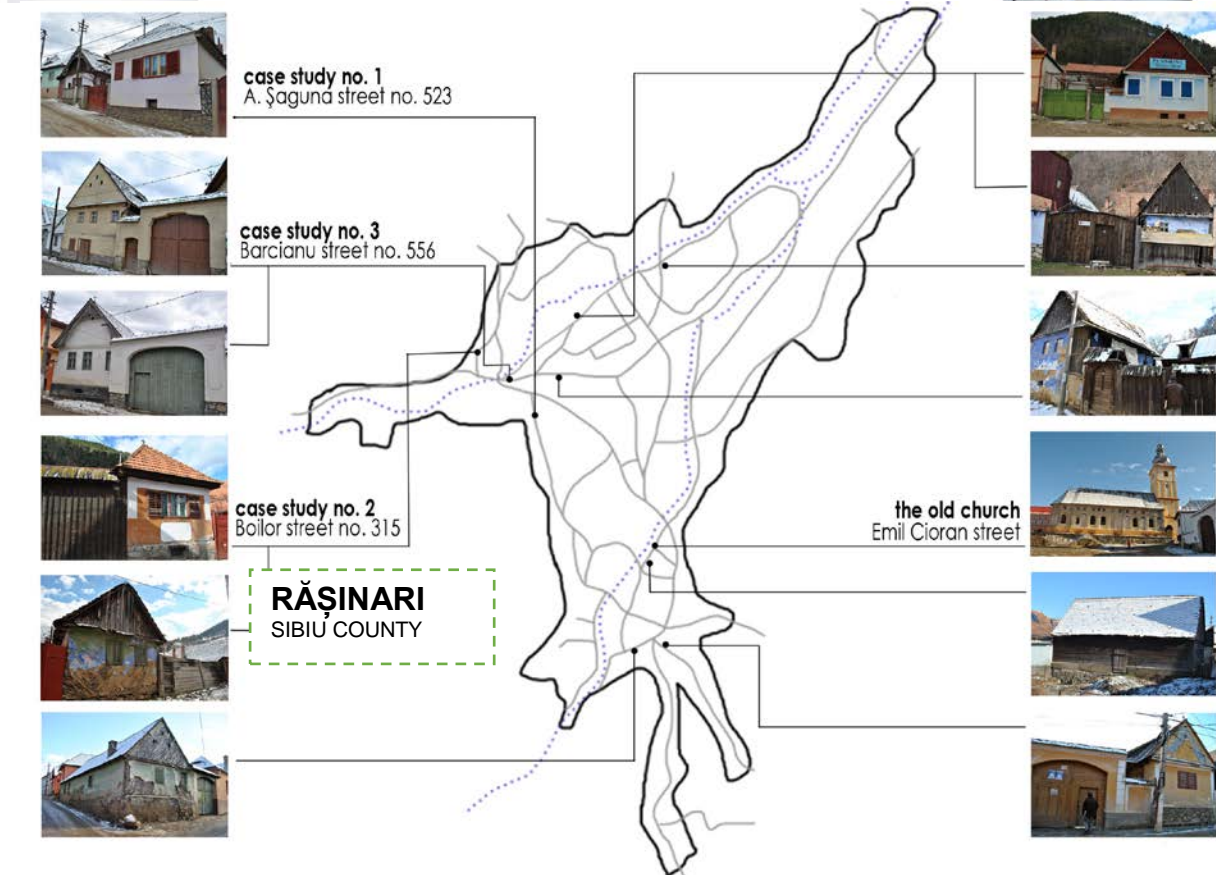
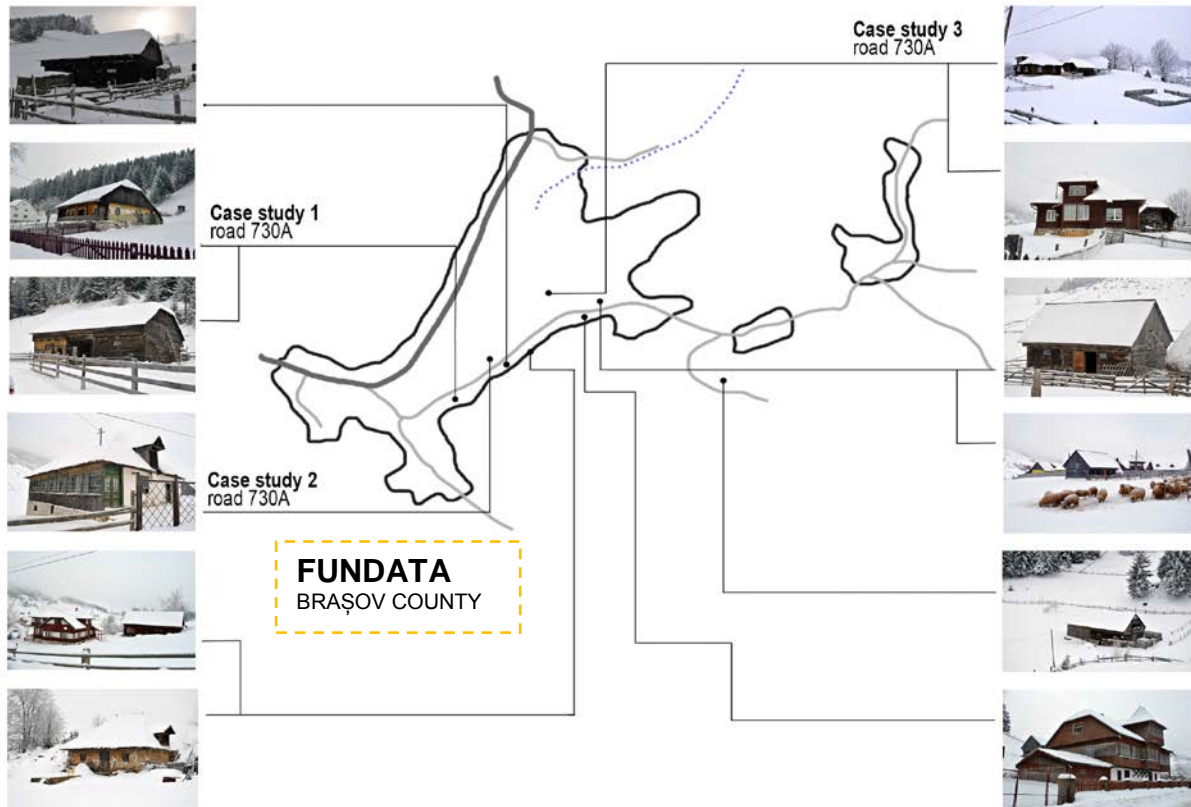
LOCAL CONTEXT SHAPING THE VERNACULAR

The four 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 (Fig. 2-5) and are briefly described.

The first county that this study has approached is Braşov, focusing on Fundata village (Fig. 1) situated on DN74 national road, at a distance of 40km from Braşov city, a mountain area. Situated at an altitude of 1304m, Fundata village is one of few such cases in the country. It was erected at the base of two important mountains that form the landscape: Bucegi and Piatra Craiului.

The first aspect that can be remarked compared to other research areas (Sibiu, Argeş or Covasna Counties) is the scale of the plot and the position of the house which is oriented towards the street and also very close to it. The house is positioned at the base of the slope, the plot being most of the time steep, ending in the northern limit with dense pine forest.

Regarding the structure of the traditional local house oak is the most frequent choice (*Quercus robur*) in the manufacture of the sill beams and posts (Bartha, Cionca 2014). Over time, fir (*Abies Alba*) replaced oak, due to the decreased geographical spread of the species.



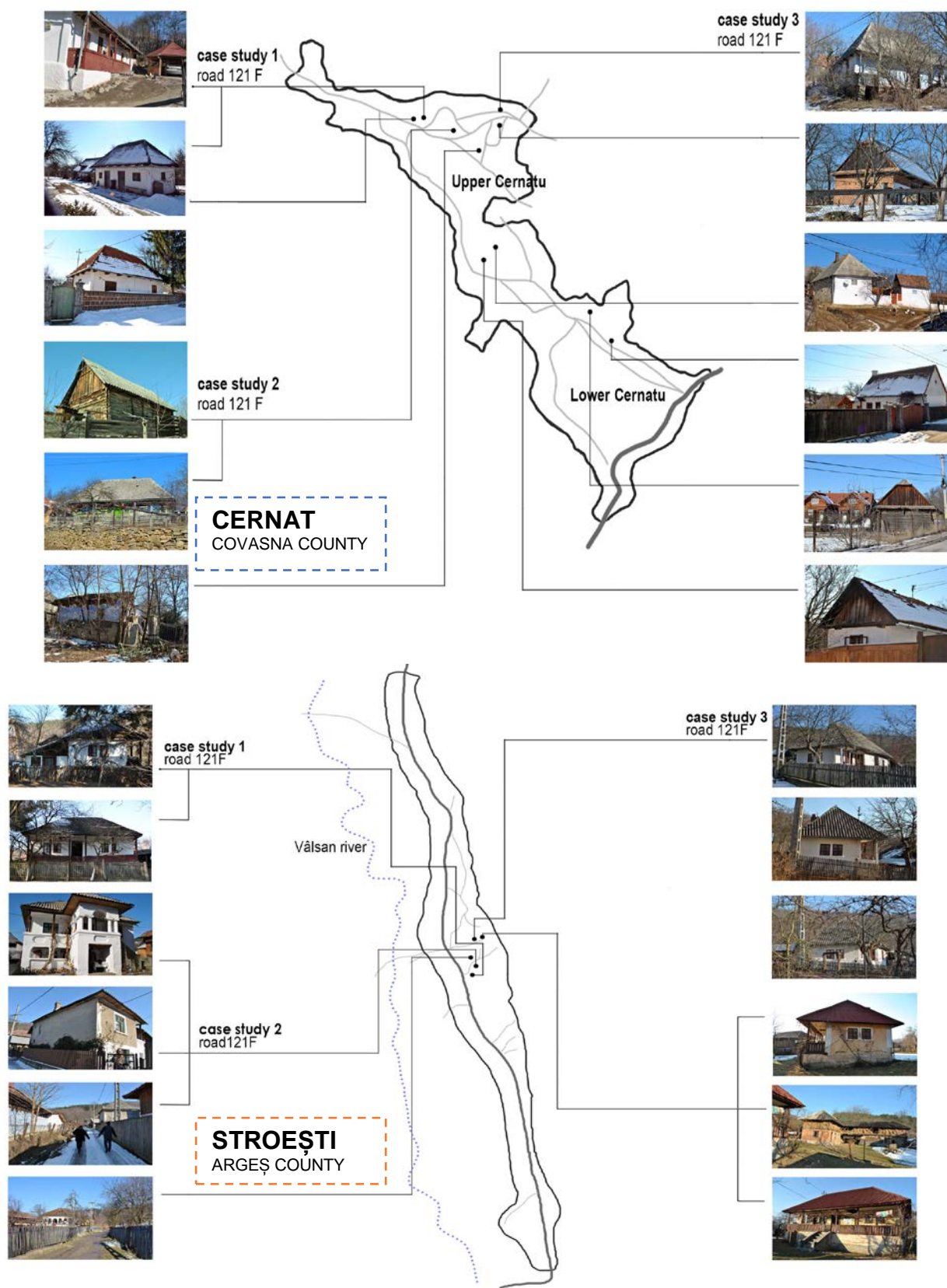


Fig. 1.
General plan of the four studied counties/villages, indicating the location of all case studies.

This type of round fir log structure is very common in the studied area and has a number of typologies: round horizontal beams – log construction, post-and-truss construction, and mixed structures.

The wall structure of vernacular housing is typically made of logs (fir, oak) with dimensions ranging between 120-150mm for the width and 200-300mm for the height. These horizontal elements have special joints at the corner intersections, dovetail or lap joints being used (Bartha 2014).

The house from Braşov County, presented in this case study (Fig.2) was built at the beginning of the 20th century, overlooking the street, facing south. It is raised from the ground with approx. 2-3m and the access to the porch is via stone or wooden steps. Such a transit area offered by the space of the porch has emerged first of all due to the harsh winter climate and also as a necessity in order to extend the activities of the inhabitants and obtain in the same time supplementary storage space. In time, the porch has acquired a meaning not only on a functional and aesthetic level, but also on a social one (becoming a place for family gathering). The plot, which is mainly cultivated and functions as a meadow for sheep and cattle, is facing south and has plenty of sunlight. The main volume of the housing unit is continued with a series of annexes, these being directly added to the back of the ground floor. Each of these annexes has the following roles: to store hay, animals or tools.

The extension of the house contains the following annexes: a storage room (approx. 2x4m), it is placed on the opposite side of the house, parallel to the longitudinal porch axis. The interior space is simple, the oven being placed in the center of the house, in the entrance hall, thus providing warmth to both rooms. Access is only possible through the courtyard. The kitchen can also function as an independent unit having its own access on the side facade of the house.

The interior space of the vernacular house (which is also characteristic for this region) is organized according to four compositional principles or centers: heating and cooking area, sleeping area, sitting area (long benches), storage areas (in chests, cabinets, cupboards) (Bartha 2020).

In the case of the analyzed area, the specific furniture items are the following: beds, low tables (round with three legs) tall tables, cupboard table, carved chairs, low round chairs (with simple joints), dish shelves, wooden cases and chests. These objects were realized in the first phase, by simple, fixed assembly methods, the most common joints being the notch, lapped and butt joints (Cismaru 2003).

The second county is Sibiu represented by Răşinari village which is situated south to the town of Sibiu (8km distance), at 573m altitude surrounded by the Cibin Mountains, with a population of 5500 people in the present. The local economy is based on agriculture (very poor soil - corn, wheat, oats, barley, potatoes, beans are cultivated on long and narrow plots 96% of these being private properties); horticulture (vegetable and fruit gardens); livestock (mainly cattle and sheep); forestry (in the 19th century 11 sawmills were still functioning). Regarding the structure of the traditional local house the most frequent choice remains oak (*Quercus robur* or *Quercus pedunculiflora*) for beams and posts.

The presented household from Răşinari village (Fig. 3) is built overlooking the courtyard, facing east or south. It is raised from the ground with approx. 2-3m and the access to the porch is via wooden steps (Bartha 2019). Such a transit area offered by the space of the porch has emerged as a necessity in order to extend the activities of the inhabitants and obtain in the same time supplementary storage space. In time, the porch has acquired a meaning not only on a functional and aesthetic level, but also on a social one (becoming a place for family gathering). It is composed of the following elements: - rail boards; - columns (simple or carved); - etched boards (attached to the top of the pillars; - solid masonry (as a support for the wooden structure of the porch) - upper porch (a higher area of the porch, which provides access upstairs into the attic) – cellar (access to basement) - henhouse. The courtyard itself is facing south, the main volume of the housing unit being continued with a series of annexes on the longitudinal spatial axis. Each of these annexes has the following roles: to store hay, animals or tools (Păcală 1915).

The extension of the house contains the following annexes: the summer kitchen area (approx. 2x2m), it is placed on the opposite side of the house, perpendicular to the porch axis. The interior space is simple, the bread oven being placed in the center of the room. The shed, which is isolated from the rest of the building unit and has a solid structure, composed of horizontal wooden logs. Access is only possible through the courtyard. Hay is stacked in the attic of the roof structure and can be approached through a dormer, above the gate, on the ground floor animal, tool and food storage spaces being found.

The interior of the house (depending on the manner and frequency of its use by the tenant) can be divided in three major areas. The guest room is oriented usually to the street; followed by the living room (everyday room) oriented towards east and directly related to the porch. The entrance hall has a double role; here the stove or oven is placed along with the cooking utensils.

The living area was furnished as follows: two wooden beds (set against the walls), a wardrobe, a stove, a low table; in the guest room high table, chairs, benches, beds, chests, pegs and textile ornaments were placed. In the case of furniture joints, more complex solutions can be identified: tenon joints, finger joints, dovetail joints, or joints which employed wooden pegs. After assembly, the furniture was carved or

painted with patterns that include geometric (shaded squares, diamonds, rosettes), vegetal (leaves, flowers, pine, oak), or zoomorphic motifs.

The third county is Covasna with Cernat village (Fig. 4), which is located in its center, in the sub-Carpathian area of the Bodoc Mountains, west of the Târgu-Secuiesc basin and has around 4000 inhabitants. The village is crossed by the Cernat stream and is situated 28km from Sfântu-Gheorghe Municipality on DN11 national road (Braşov - Târgu-Secuiesc - Oneşti) linking two important areas of Romania: Transylvania and Moldavia.

Regarding this case study, the household is composed of the housing unit and several annexes, these being oriented towards the yard and facing each other. The house is positioned close to the street, the plot being most of the time planted and full of vegetation, ending in the western limit with a generous garden area. The general volume of the house is opaque, with small openings because low temperatures are present 6 months of the year. The porch is the only element of the main façade, which can change its status becoming open in the summer (for outdoor activities) and closed in the winter (mainly for storage and protection from cold weather and snow).

The main volume of the housing unit is continued with a series of annexes, these being directly added to the back but also another series of barns and staples were added to the household in a parallel display towards the housing unit. Each of these annexes has the following roles: to store hay, animals or tools.

The extension of the house contains the following annexes: a storage room (approx. 2x4m), it is placed on the opposite side of the house, parallel to the longitudinal porch axis. The interior space is simple, the oven being placed in the center of the house, in the entrance hall, thus providing warmth to both rooms. Access is only possible through the courtyard. The kitchen can also function as an independent unit having its own access on the side facade of the house.

In the case of the analyzed area, the specific furniture items are the following: beds, low tables (round with three legs) tall tables, cupboard table, carved chairs, low round chairs (with simple joints), dish shelves, wooden cases and chests (Olărescu 2012).

The interior space is composed of three main areas: the porch, the living area and the storage area. All these spaces are organized according to the longitudinal compositional axis of the house as follows: the porch, the entrance hall and two rooms (guest and living room) placed in the core, and finally, facing the courtyard, in the back of the house, the kitchen and storage space (Bartha 2017). The living area was furnished as follows: two wooden beds (set against the walls), a wardrobe, a low table (if any); in the guest room high table, chairs, benches, beds, chests and textile ornaments were placed.

The furniture dates from the beginning of the 19th 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.

Regarding the last county, Argeş, the studied village is Stroeşti (Fig. 5). This village is situated in the commune of Muşăteşti in Argeş County, Muntenia, Romania. It is located in the center of the Vâlsan Valley, located 37km away from Piteşti and 20km from Curtea de Argeş.

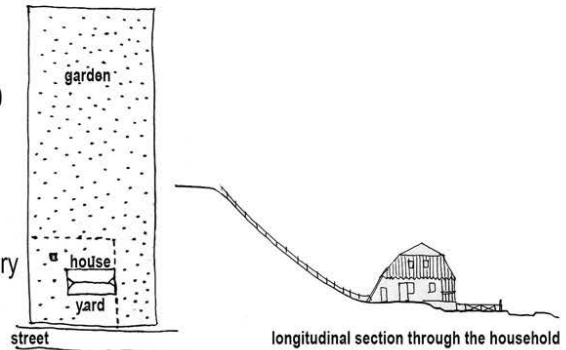
The household from the fourth county, Argeş, was built at the beginning of the 20th century and contains all relevant architectural items, remaining in their initial display and interdependence related to the main construction of the house. Only local materials were used in the building process: wood, river stone (from Vâlsan Valley), earth, sand and locally made brick. 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.

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 where 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).

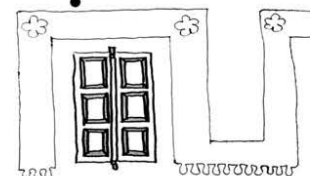
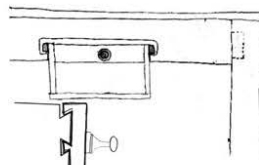
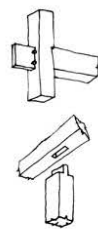
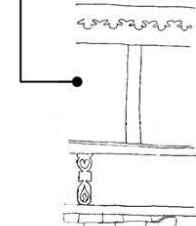
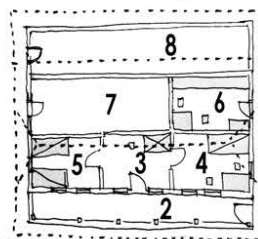
BRAȘOV COUNTY – FUNDATA VILLAGE

- **owner:** business man from Brașov
- the construction has not been renovated in the last 50 years
- the owner's intentions consist of transforming the household into a vacation home.

- **year of construction:** beginning of the XXth century
- **utilities:** electricity



- 1 courtyard
- 2 open cellar
- 3 entrance hall
- 4 guest room
- 5 bedroom
- 6 kitchen
- 7 storage room
- 8 animal shelter



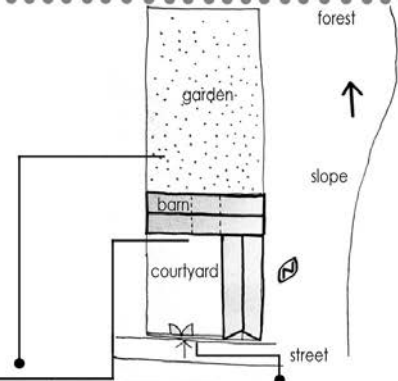
Exterior
Household, house, barn, construction typologies & details

Household
Details, space utilisation patterns

Fig. 2.
Summarizing table [case study 1] household from Fundata, Brașov County.

SIBIU COUNTY – RĂȘINARI VILLAGE

- **owner:** Blezv Iosif (born 1963)
- **address:** Boilor Street no. 315
- in the present the house is inhabited only by mr. Blezv, being a widow, two of his three children being settled in Germany.
- he has worked as a driver for the last 15 years and before that he was an employee of the post office in Sibiu
- **year of construction:** beginning of the 20th century
- **utilities:** electricity

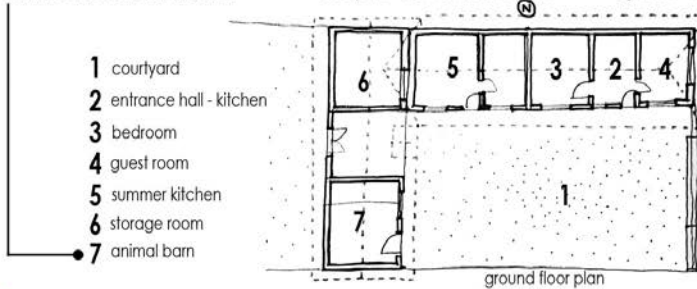


main facade - towards the street

courtyard - view towards the barn

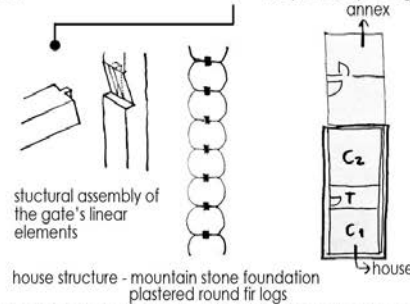
garden - in the back

100 year old spruce gate



- 1 courtyard
- 2 entrance hall - kitchen
- 3 bedroom
- 4 guest room
- 5 summer kitchen
- 6 storage room
- 7 animal barn

ground floor plan



house structure - mountain stone foundation
plastered round fir logs

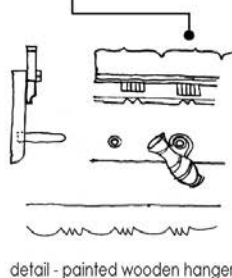


entrance hall (kitchen) - painted wooden hanger

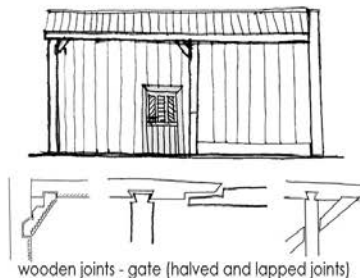
guest room

bedroom

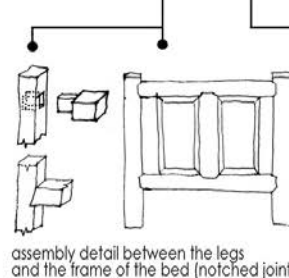
entrance - 100 year old wooden door



detail - painted wooden hanger



wooden joints - gate (halved and lapped joints)



assembly detail between the legs
and the frame of the bed (notched joints)



detail - wooden door

Exterior

Household, house, barn, construction typologies & details

Interior

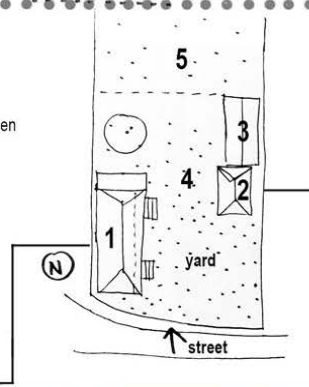
Furniture, space utilisation patterns

Fig. 3.
Summarizing table [case study 2] household from Rășinari, Sibiu County.

COVASNA COUNTY – CERNAT VILLAGE

- **owner:** business man from Braşov
- the construction is in a visible state of degradation, it has not been renovated in the last 30 years
- the intention of the owner is to transform the construction into a vacation home.
- **year of construction:** beginning of the 20th century
- **utilities:** electricity

- 1 house
- 2 summer kitchen
- 3 barn
- 4 yard
- 5 garden



main facade, view from the street



facade facing the street

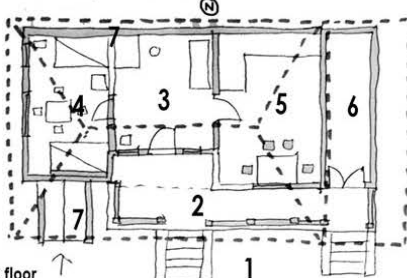


south facade

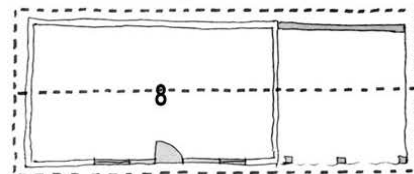


view of the household

- 1 yard
- 2 open porch
- 3 entrance hall
- 4 guest room
- 5 bedroom
- 6 storage room
- 7 cellar access
- 8 barn



ground floor



barn and animal shelter



access into the household



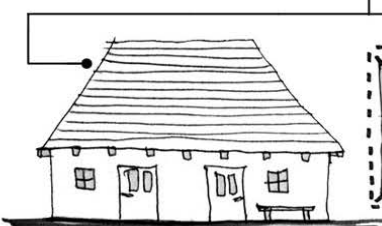
view of the barn



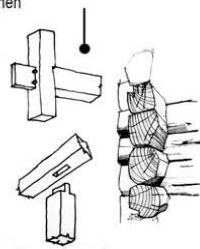
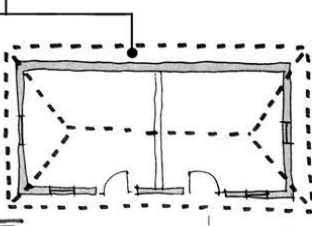
summer kitchen



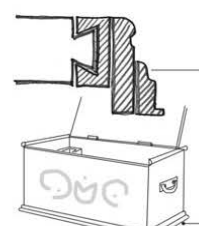
view of the garden



south facing facade of the summer kitchen
logg structure with earth plaster



detail of post-beam connection
barn structure



detail of a wooden chest
tongue and groove joints

Exterior

Household, house, barn, construction typologies & details

Household

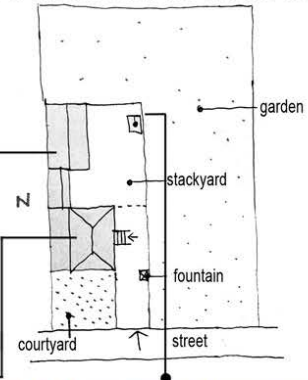
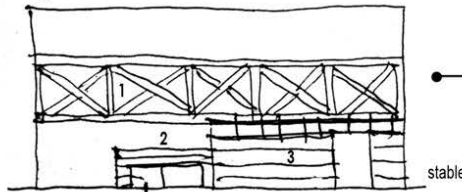
Details, space utilisation patterns

Fig. 4.
Summarizing table [case study 3] household from Cernat, Covasna County.

ARGEȘ COUNTY – STROEȘTI VILLAGE

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

1 hay attic
2 swinery
3 toolshed



south facade entrance porch - sala



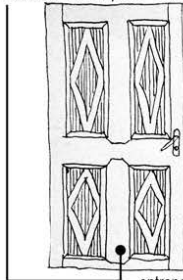
side facade - polată



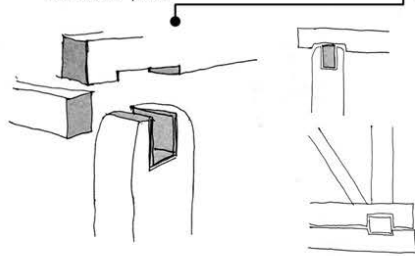
stable and hay stacked in the attic



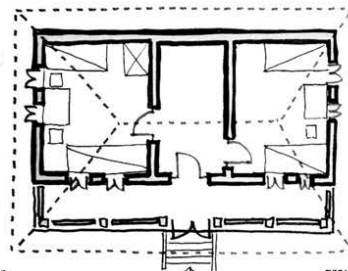
henhouse



entrance door - wood



detail of corner joint between wooden pillar-beam-crossbar



ground floor



storage-table in the guest room



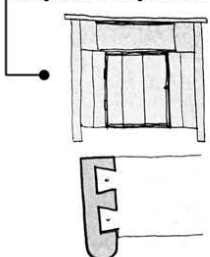
high chair



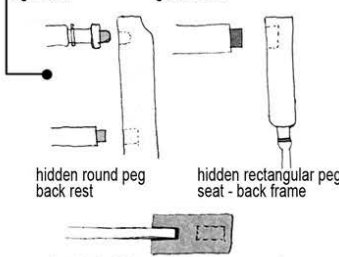
guest room



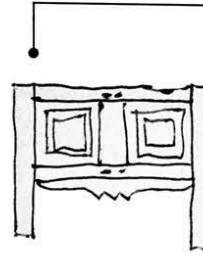
wooden panel frame - bedroom



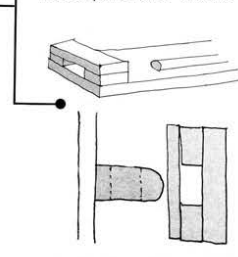
storage-table, detail of finger joint dovetail connection



hidden round peg back rest
hidden rectangular peg seat - back frame
detail of a high chair wooden connection tenon-mortise joint



assembly detail between laterals and extremities of the bed



detail of lateral element - bed

Exterior

Household, House, barn, construction typologies & details

Interior

Furniture, space utilisation patterns

Fig. 5.
Summarizing table [case study 4] household from Stroești, Argeș County.

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 gabled 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 19th 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).

RESULTS

As a result of the documentation on site and the close investigation of the four counties and their four selected villages, a series of elements, which constitute important social-cultural and identity indicators were identified. These can be determined as axioms that generate specific characteristics for each county regarding the following: 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.

The summarizing table for the four counties (Fig. 6) puts into a visual language all characteristics regarding urban fabric, household and house typology, annexes, and furniture.

Regarding the urban fabric, Fundata stands out with its low density and low number of households, compared with the other three villages (Răşinari, Covasna and Argeş) that have double or triple number of households and a dense urban fabric.

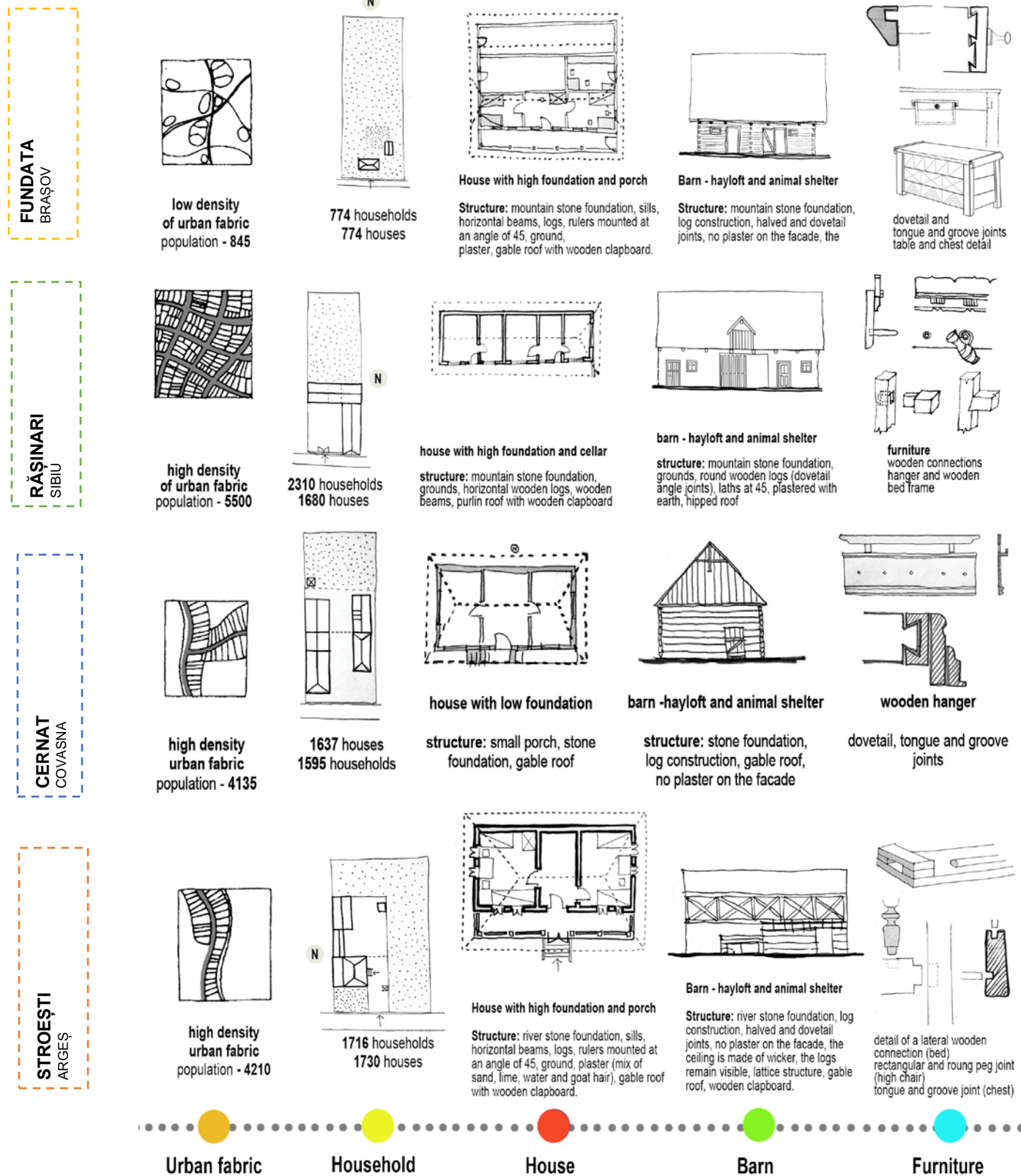
Regarding house position, placing the house in relation with the street denotes the human need of exposure or protection. All houses are close to the street, but currently, the settlement of the house is as far away from the road as possible, showing the tendency and need of isolation of modern man from the public space, which is gaining ground compared to the private space, a protection against pollution.

In addition, several common characteristics can be observed regarding the shape of the house when analyzing the four selected counties (Fig.6). Mainly we can discuss about common features when it comes to the compact shape of the house, the utilization of local materials (mainly wood for walls/roof or locally produced brick, stone for the foundation), the wall structure being defined by horizontal logs, the porch facing south and the efficient use of interior space (Bartha, Olărescu 2017). 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.

The stable, which is placed very close to the house as an extension of it, is organized on two layers: the ground floor and upper floor. The ground floor is compact, its walls being formed of horizontal logs where the toolshed and the swinery are placed, and the upper floor is more open with a linear structure, pillar-beam structure (in the case of Stroeşti) and a generous gabled roof in the other three cases.

Even though many social and technological changes have occurred, the proportions and general shape of the house and annexes remained unaltered.

Regarding furniture, in the case of the four analyzed households, we can conclude that the main part of vernacular wooden furniture dates from the 18th-19th 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.



Urban fabric

Household

House

Barn

Furniture

Fig. 6.

Summarizing table [the four case studies] Fundata, Rășinari, Cernat, Stroești.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

The traditional household has seen many changes over time (Olărescu 2012, Bartha 2014). Several factors that have a significant impact on the general shape of the house were identified through this research. Most important are the utilization of local materials, climate, local resources, and construction techniques of the region.

Based on this experience it was possible to outline a strong link between how human behavior influenced the perception and creation of the rural built environment. This shift in time of the human behavior was translated into spatial and building mechanisms such as 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, roof; and furniture.

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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