



# ROMANIA

**An eastern European country struggles to revive its crumbling built heritage as it recovers from a disastrous communist regime.**

*at the Crossroads* **MICHAEL MEHAFFY**

IN THE YEARS AFTER THE FALL of the Iron Curtain, eastern Europe has seen a surge of visitors eager to explore destinations that were not previously on Europe's beaten path. In some cases, these new visitors are even interested in setting up new homes and businesses. The European Union's recent admission of a number of former East Bloc countries has made it even easier for visitors there to convert currency, manage transportation, and book accommodations—or even to become permanent residents. Frequently topping the list of destinations are cities like Prague, Czechoslovakia; Krakow, Poland; and Budapest, Hungary.

Steeped in old-world charm, these cities are emerging from their longtime economic depression under communism, which at least has spared them much of the homogenized overdevelopment of many Western destinations. They are still relatively inexpensive, and often retain vestiges of an exotic and vanishing way of life. In almost all cases, they have rich and colorful histories, scenic countryside, and noteworthy architectural sights.

By all accounts, Romania is the newest hot ticket on the list of former East Bloc countries. Armed with an ample share of distinctive scenery and architecture, the country of



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Former East Bloc countries like Romania that have joined the European Union still have villages that retain vestiges of old-world charm with colorful histories and noteworthy architecture. In the Transylvanian town of Sibiu, designated the "European Capital of Culture" by the European Union, there are signs of a major restoration of the historic core. The town's historic Piata Mica, once in disrepair, is now surrounded by thriving shops and cafés.

22 million residents anchors a cultural crossroads between east and west Europe, with influences from Roman, Byzantine, Germanic, Slavic, and, more recently, Islamic states. Within the picturesque countryside, there are medieval towers that owe more to Luxembourg than to eastern Europe; opulent Renaissance palaces; and eye-catching houses with a distinctive Pakistani influence.

The best-known castle is surely the one in the Transylvanian town of Bran, the setting for the 1931 movie *Dracula*. In an early example of modern globalized media, Bram Stoker, an Irishman, based his book's character on Count Vlad the Dragon, or "Dracul" as he is known in Romania. In fact, the Bran castle was not Vlad's, though he is said to have visited it, but it was atmospheric enough for the later (Hollywood) producers to choose it as the movie's exotic and moody setting.

Bran today, like much of Romania's fabled Transylvania region, is being overrun by the surge of tourists. Roads are choking with traffic, and the landscape is slowly being smothered by a mishmash of new, incompatible tourist facilities and vendor outlets. New seasonal residents also are moving in and building homes around the countryside—creating Romania's own version of sprawl.

The residents of Romania welcome the new economic activity, but they are interested in finding a way to manage a more sustain-

able form of it. Like the rest of Europe, Romanians are working hard to meet EU targets for more sustainable development, but, in the process, they want to ensure that their own genuine heritage is conserved and promoted—not merely replaced with a cheap imported image. Plans for a major new Dracula Theme Park, for example, recently were withdrawn after vocal opposition from residents.

Romanian-American architect Joanna Ali-manestianu has been involved in the work in Bran and other Romanian communities, bringing a U.S.-style "smart code" to fight American-style sprawl. "I think it's vital to work with neighborhood committees and local citizens, but you also have to work with the whole economic reality. You have to bring in experts on retail, traffic—all the things that will help you get to an economic and environmental combination that's going to be sustainable. There's so much here to work with in terms of the local quality of place, the local heritage, everywhere you look," she adds.

But the conservation of Romanian heritage is a daunting task: many of its buildings are in alarming disrepair, made worse under the disastrous communist regime of the postwar era. Nicolai Ceaucescu, Romania's dictator for many years, became notorious in the West for his campaign to raze countless picturesque villages and replace them with rows of monolithic concrete towers, in a rapacious

campaign of "modernization." In fact, his energy-leaking, poorly constructed "slaburbs" (suburbs comprising rows of "slab" towers) were not much of a modern advancement over the highly livable, well-adapted, thermally efficient villages. Although the slaburbs did have modern sanitation and amenities, the old buildings can be retrofitted with these features—and there are some sound arguments in favor of this strategy. New research is showing that the older structures have surprisingly sophisticated qualities that might still prove useful in the quest for a low-carbon, high-livability future.

But, what Ceaucescu could not accomplish sadly is being accomplished by a mix of poverty and neglect, as many worthy old structures simply crumble away. In multiple cases, their owners lack the skills or the financial resources to repair them. In some cases, owners have perhaps accepted too much of Ceaucescu's thinking about what is "modern construction" and have intentionally—or mistakenly—caused much more damage.

Adding Portland cement to lime plaster and stucco—a common example—seems to offer a quick and strong "modern" repair. But it sets the stage for later devastating erosion, as water gets behind the new moisture barrier of Portland cement and destroys large sections of walls and foundations.

Tourism may play a big part in a sustainable solution. The money for repairs, and for the needed education and training to go along with it, might come through the growth in economic activity generated by tourists, who are attracted by the increasing number of restored buildings, thereby generating an ongoing circle of more tourism and more restoration.

There are even more benefits. New construction jobs, for example, create sustainable employment in often remote villages, as well as introduce tourism. In addition, the buildings frequently are remarkably "green," incorporating significant energy-saving and local materials in sturdy construction that is built to last, and that tends to include surprisingly good thermal properties. Such buildings fit into well-adapted local patterns, responding to climate, terrain, materials, and culture. They are adaptable to new uses, including tourism, which can result in more local employment. Accompanying these economic ac-



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**In the Transylvanian town of Bran, the setting for the 1931 movie *Dracula*, is Bran Castle, informally—and mistakenly—called “Dracula’s Castle.” Though the castle dates from the 1200s, the current renovation was completed in 1921 for Romania’s Queen Maria. The so-called “Saxon villages” of Transylvania include unique Germanic decorative patterns in doors and windows.**

tivities is a local economic “multiplier” effect: research has shown that for every Romanian leu spent (until the country converts to the euro), some 1.8 lei of additional local commerce is generated, often in stable local building employment.

But the challenge facing Romanian leaders is a daunting one. The costs of proper restoration are steep, and capital markets frequently do not understand these projects and are unwilling to commit financing. Moreover, the skills needed to conserve the old structures are in drastic decline. As in other parts of Europe and around the world, education in heritage conservation and preservation are out of fashion, as shiny new global brands of architecture get disproportionate attention.

The new European Union has made a commitment to step into the breach. With new eastern European countries joining the EU, all states share an interest in developing new economic vitality, political stability, and environmental sustainability. Toward that goal, wealthy European Economic Area (EEA) member states like Norway and Germany are obliged under EEA rules to put up funds for the regeneration of poorer member states like Romania. There is also political momentum in Germany to offer assistance for the restoration

of the Germanic heritage represented by Romania’s Saxon villages.

Everywhere in the Transylvanian town of Sibiu are signs of fresh construction and revival. A walk from the crumbling old train station, which is being redeveloped, shows fresh new cobbled and bollarded streets, and scattered pockets of workers carving stone and painting trim. In the city center in late September, a conference titled “History, Heritage, and Regeneration” was underway, attended by a number of Romanian preservation leaders who were taking stock of what has been accomplished in Romania and other eastern European countries—and what still needs to be done to revitalize the region’s traditional building, architecture, and urbanism.

Dan Dimancescu is a Romanian-American architect and developer who now lives part-time in Romania and who says he has fallen in love with his ancestral country’s heritage. There are lessons to be shared in the way this successful transformation occurred, he notes. Certainly, Sibiu’s designation as the “European Capital of Culture” by the EU has helped attract private capital and entrepreneurs and inspire public confidence in the city’s future, explains Dimancescu. Probably more important, he says, Norwegian and German governments,

obliged to contribute to Romania's rebuilding, insisted that they do it in direct partnership with Romanian agencies and NGOs (non-governmental organizations). This partnership cut through a lot of red tape and leveraged the funding, catalyzing a lot more redevelopment, he adds.

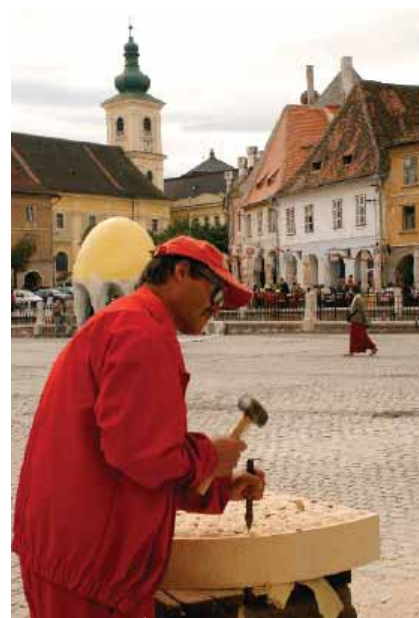
The effects on the city's economy have been dramatic, according to Dimancescu. Due to redevelopment, and to additional business recruitment—that is, persuading businesses to relocate there—unemployment has dropped from more than 20 percent a decade ago to less than 5 percent today. Although some gentrification has occurred, many of the original residents have remained in the area and developed businesses or taken on tourism-related employment.

That many residents remained in the area was the result of close local involvement in the process, says U.K. architect Dennis Rodwell, a consultant to the city of Sibiu. He explains that the city worked carefully with local residents to develop a charter for the historic rehabilitation of the city center, completed in 2000. The city conducted extensive discussions and surveys, which showed that more than 60 percent of residents in the central area were owner-occupants; of those, some 85 percent wanted to remain in the city center. Based on those results, the city developed a holistic management system to integrate economic, social, architectural, and planning goals.

The city also took a bottom-up, incremental approach to the regeneration, says Rodwell. Of course, there were some outright grants of money, but no less important, the city set up assistance centers that offered training, counseling, and an extensive range of free publications. Residents were carefully guided through the process of repair and redevelopment, and given assistance to set up businesses. It clearly paid off.

Rodwell believes such incrementalism is crucial. "If the focus is only on 'glossy restorations,' a huge proportion of Romania's heritage will be lost through neglect. On the other hand, if the focus is on step-by-step restoration—first, careful maintenance, then progressive upgrades—an equally huge proportion will be saved. I would like to see this approach employed far more widely across Romania's urban and rural heritage," notes Rodwell.

Dimancescu says Romanians are not just taking new pride in the beautiful cultural artifacts of their past—carpets, folk traditions, buildings; they also are reconnecting to their living environment with its traditions that are thousands of years old, and they are finding new relevance in an era of sustainability. "My wife is an anthropologist, and we've noted that this area is a very special region—a kind of cultural eddy that's not swept up in the big flow, and that has its own distinct currents," he says. "The Carpathian Mountains are just to the south, so lots of invaders passed through this crossroads on their way between East and West. A lot of different people have taken refuge in this eddy around the



MICHAEL MEHAFFY



MICHAEL MEHAFFY

Carpathians, and that's made for a fascinating cultural tapestry."

The danger for Romania right now, says Alimanestianu, is that because things are moving too quickly, too many mistakes are being made. Prices are rising too fast, displacing many former residents and gentrifying some areas. Local identity is getting stronger in places, but globalization and its less sustainable effects are surging here too, she adds. In the suburbs, for example, Ceaucescu's slabs are being replaced with American-style sprawl. The rapid growth is increasing pressure on Romanians to make tough choices about their region's future.

"But we have the right tools now, and Romanians have always been known for being resourceful," says Alimanestianu. "In this

**The restoration of Sibiu's historic buildings is an ongoing process, providing steady local jobs and reviving near-extinct skills (top). Students are shown the correct restoration formula for stucco and plaster at Banffy Castle (above), in Transylvania, a baroque palace that was damaged during World War II and later neglected by the communist government.**

vulnerable crossroads position, we've been downtrodden by a lot of invaders throughout history. But we've always had the strength to make the most of what we've had." **UL**

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