

## RIMETEA, AN EXAMPLE OF A TRADITIONAL VILLAGE FROM ROMANIA

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### Abstract

*Following the Rural Group's fields study for Romanian Rural Architectural Guides, it was found that the main issues of the villages are the lack of jobs and an appropriate educational system. The village of Rimetea (Alba County) has an ascendant trajectory: its development, started in 1996, brought a lot of benefits in terms of tourism, economy, social and cultural life; for 23 years, the coordinators of the traditional Rimetea's settlement rehabilitation project have carried out a hard work having a big goal: raising awareness among the locals regarding their architectural heritage. In 2000, Rimetea was already in an architectural protected area. This is not the only evolutionary moment of the village, because between the 15th and the 18th centuries, Rimetea becomes a settlement by the number of blacksmiths and demographics. As a conclusion, today Rimetea should be a role model village with jobs and a good level of education, but the field study shows that there is an essential thing missing: the lack of youth (the workforce)- the future! They have the duty to carry on the spirit of the place. With decreasing natural growth, the current population is represented by the aging population (>70 years) in a 60%-70% range. In this direction, warning signs must be issued.*

**Keywords:** Rimetea; Rehabilitation; Rural; Village; Future; Natural growth; Demographics

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### Introduction

Rimetea Village is part of, from a geographical point of view, Alba County. Given its location, throughout time it managed to develop itself in a more special way than the other villages from the area, thus regaining its special identity: a blend of Székely and Hungarian influences. The result succeeded to fascinate in such a way that the inhabitants organized all their activities, the architecture of the houses and the traditional garb in relation with the moment in time, maintaining and perfecting everything according to the requirements of their own comfort.

From the point of view of its evolution, the village next to Piatra Secuiului (the Székely-man's Rock) has had both ups and downs (Figs. 1 - 6). Thus, beginning with the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when, based on the documentation so far, it is possible that families of German miners came to the area meeting the majority of Hungarian population. These facts lead Rimetea Village reaches its first period of revival: the exploitation of iron ore from around the village. The entire mechanism used by the blacksmiths to process ore was set in motion by the force of water; currently there is one watermill build in 1752, which can be still operated, that used to set going

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the bellows and hammers. This was the first blooming stage for the village: the local blacksmiths were creating objects out of metal like handrails, gates, window bars, locks and door handles from wrought iron which they would sell or give in exchange to people from outside the village who came with other products. The decline of the village came in various ways, first of all due to the constant conflicts between the serf population and the Thorockay feudal family. After the Revolution from 1848 the diminishing of ore mines profitability was felt even more acutely as many of them had been closed, thus the inhabitants started leaving the village and from a number of 1500 souls in 1765 it dropped to 1406 villagers in 1890 and poverty and the negative political and economic changes led that by the year 2005 only 600 inhabitants be left in Rimetea [1].



Fig. 1. View from Rimetea Village, the Central Square, drawing by F. Oláh Xénia [1]

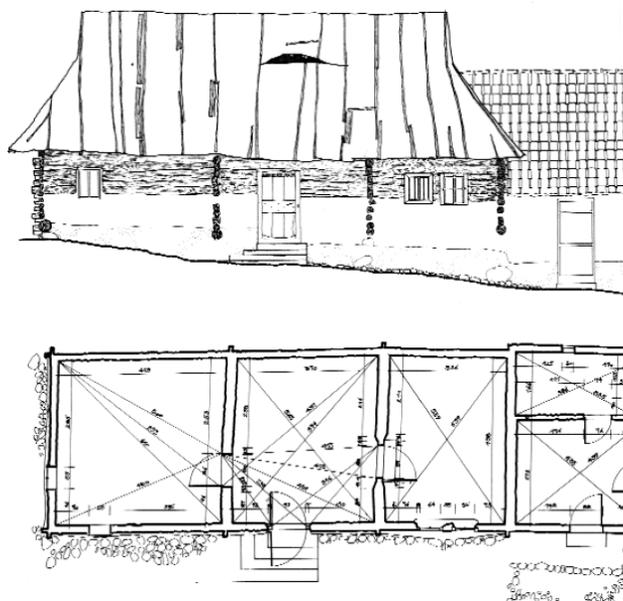


Fig. 2. Old house of servants, no. 305 from Rimetea (construction year 1717) - plan and view from the courtyard, drawing from Transylvania Trust archive [1]



**Fig. 3.** The oldest dated rural house discovered so far in the Carpathian Basin, no. 260 from Rimetea (construction year 1668), photos taken by arh. Árpád Furu before and after the rehabilitation [1]



**Fig. 4.** Former savings bank, house no. 15, Central Square, Rimetea (year of construction: 1872-1873), photo by arh. Árpád Furu [1]



**Fig. 5.** Bourgeois house no. 4, Sfântul Gheorghe str., Rimetea (year of construction: 1871), photo by arh. Árpád Furu [1]



**Fig. 6.** View of Rimetea Village – in the background, Piatra Secuiului (the Székely-man’s Rock) (photo source: [http://dejulmeu.ro/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/dsc\\_3281-300x201.jpg](http://dejulmeu.ro/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/dsc_3281-300x201.jpg)) [2]

1996-2006 is the first 10 years period when, after a long time living under near-extinction conditions, Rimetea Village begins a new ascent towards the long-awaited stability. The Transilvania Trust Foundation along with specialists from various domains elaborate a village rejuvenation program which focuses on many aspects such as: placing into the spotlight and maintaining the traditional weaving of the village and the houses’ façades (especially the urban types from the central area), rehabilitating as many of the emblematical elements pertaining to certain time periods which are part of the homesteads and, one of the deepest goals, raising awareness among the villagers who have taken part in all of the key moments for the houses’ rehabilitation regarding the importance of respecting the values. Following a diligent work plan, day by day, a handful of specialized people, concerned with the

organizational process, have held up the villagers' morale during the whole rehabilitation process started since 1996. Till the year 2000, when the status of the area was changed to protected heritage, the work which has been carried out was even harsher due to the people's mentality who was not convinced by the historical, aesthetical, technical and/or material arguments brought by the specialists. Thus, after entering the field of national heritage protection that required certain rules and regulations, the communication between them was facilitated. Nevertheless, the approval of certain buildings which were to be certainly detrimental for the specificity of the area has been avoided and the interventions which were carried out, although they do not follow 100% the approved projects are closer to the authorized plans. Apart from the awareness raised among a great deal of villagers regarding the heritage site where they lead their lives, there are other positive results as well: Rimetea is the first locality from Romania to receive in the year 2000 the Europa Nostra Award for Cultural Heritage, followed by the granting of the status of architectural and urbanistic protected area for the entire intravillan land, which is a legal protection at national level for buildings deemed as traditional throughout the intravillan area of Rimetea. Moreover, the fact that the villagers from Rimetea can still live out of agrotourism is not to be disregarded either, as the number of tourists who come visiting the village increases from year to year [1, 2].

### **Rediscovering and reconnection to its Identity**

Apart from the physical pollution of a certain territory (air, soil or water pollution), the area where we live in can be affected in other various ways, which are also due to human inappropriate behaviour towards the living area. The imbalance between the build space and the natural space, the lack of space organization due to assigning an inappropriate function to a certain space, overcrowding, the tacit acceptance of some non-values in architecture or the environment are some of the ways in which the area we live in can be polluted going to affect us psychologically. And although man is a species adaptable to harsh conditions this does not mean those are also beneficial for him. On the contrary, we must realise that the environment where we live in, both the natural and the cultural one, is the most priceless possession of our society. As a strong conclusion, we must understand that protecting this environment where we engage in conversation, maintain and continually create bonds must become a priority [3 - 8].

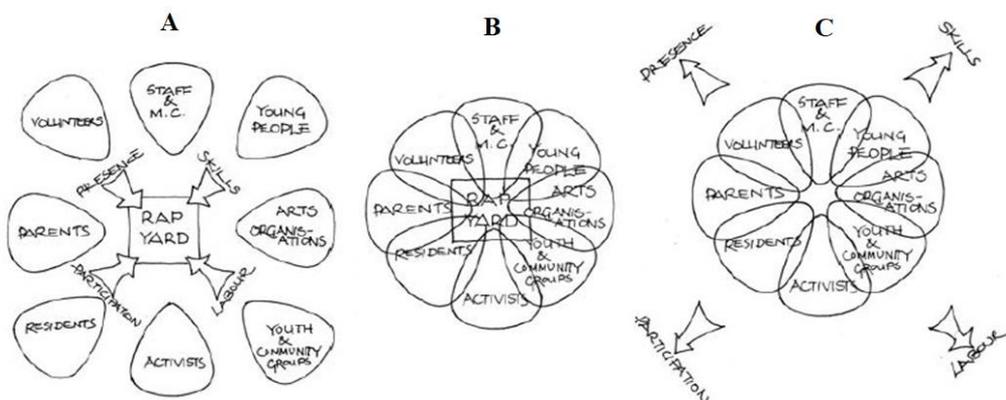
In the case of the localities where a large part of the build upon grounds are included into the declared or not yet declared heritage of the region/country where it can be found, various social pressures can step in which may influence in a positive or negative way its evolution in time. Due to this reason, the topic of the cultural heritage is a very sensitive one: because of political reasons there is an openness towards development in terms of culture (at least in theory), but the rapid development of society, which also implies accepting with greater leisure certain new values, puts a huge pressure on the remaining cultural values. This is one of the reasons why they end up at the bottom line on the society's priority lists. Nevertheless, we can strongly emphasise the fact that the bond between a community and its cultural heritage is one of emotional nature because most of the time, and especially at the beginning of a revival, it is a matter of heart rather than mind. Maybe this is the reason why there is somewhat troublesome to find the right motivation for everyone regarding the need to take care of the cultural heritage [4 - 8].

When a renaissance of what meant the labour of man in a certain timeframe and space is desired, it is essential to define the principles of this process so that the final goal be that of convincing the community that a special place in the society they are a part of must be given to the protection of the inherited patrimony. However, this cannot be accomplished without clearly stating the reasons behind the heritage preservation, it requires time for debate, cooperation and experience. As we can notice, it is therefore a defining factor the creation of an intellectual basis in order to have a certain level of dialogue [4 -8].

In the case of the Rimetea Village, the Transilvania Trust Foundation has undertaken the planned steps for raising awareness regarding the place's specificity; the clearest examples are the 160 houses from the 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries which are already included in the program for architectural heritage protection. These manage to benefit daily from the opportunities given by the local tourism, including the financial ones which are long-termed. Apart from all of this, the quality of life for the majority of the villagers has greatly improved as they receive the visit of over 20,000 tourists annually [8]. Another extremely important goal which is also part of the concept of durable development was achieved in Rimetea and this is the possibility for the local people to learn traditional crafts with materials and traditional techniques from specialists while in the process of rehabilitation. Undoubtedly the program that begun in 1996 and which still sustains the community even as we speak has had a positive impact both at the physical level, within the village per se, but also at a mental level, among the villagers, who no longer see their houses as a disgrace, but they try to preserve them. The connection that the local people now have with the environment they live in is at the basis of what is called "genius loci", because the living spaces are imprinted with the way of life of the people who are in harmony and in balance with them [9].

There are many methods through which the rejuvenation of a place can be accomplished, but in my opinion one of the most outside the box but also relevant nowadays is the method in which a pole is created inside a certain community, a "place for healing", which can attract and modify the reality of the locality so that, in time, it can change for the best by itself. Of course, this type of approach initially involves elaborate studies which have to address certain problems such as: thoroughly getting to know the community in time, evaluating the efficiency of the intervention, determining the context suitable for the moment of the intervention, understanding the position taken by this practice, the potential architectural implications, the social impact – changing the interactions inside a certain society and how new opportunities can be created for that society. The most difficult problem to solve is to get away from the *dolce far niente* state which can be generated as a result of people being deeply rooted in their own memories and opinions or being stucked on a historical trajectory that they had to follow before, without appeal. Thus, the solution must set into action, must call for the involvement of local people making use of both visual languages, public debates, practical activities and, if possible, financial incentives [10].

Examples such as The RAP Yard Project from the Eastern side of Oxford, Great Britain, a short-termed project, start from the desire to change a former shop fallen into disrepair into an important hub for establishing connections, a cultural and multiethnic space, created especially for young people (Fig. 7). The idea of such a space came from a non-profit organization called RAP (Right Angle Production) launched by Nick Lunch in 2006 who wanted to set a challenge: Cowley Street, a desolated area left to chance by the authorities which was in a state of physical and social transition. Through the RAP Yard Project, which developed over a period of only three years, the entire street got to be transformed by the direct involvement of the volunteers, of the community, especially the lower classes. Everyone formed a new community, with newer, more long-lasting values, with common sense and management worth following. Thus, for a period of time, things developed informally and spontaneously applying for funding, new people were constantly getting involved, even curious passers-by whose attention was caught by the new brightly-coloured façade – the Cowley Street had now a point with a new identity, an attractive spot, a place for young people which was fixed and revived also by young people. It was a space meant to create bonds between locals and tourists, between various organizations, young people, teachers and so, in a short amount of time, this spot became a place full of information which had a very "open door" policy [10].



**Fig. 7.** Three stages of social transactions: first, different groups bring skills etc. to RAP Yard. Then they form links. After RAP Yard is gone, links continue, and skills etc. go back into community, diagram made by Katherine L. E. Beinart [10]

From the “healing” point of view of the process, the key points of the above-mentioned project were reached: the newly created space has a new appearance, new partnerships and connections are established which pass on the relevant information through other newly created bonds inside the community. Furthermore, the openness towards the new generations, the inter-generational dialogue, the new generations’ feeling of belonging to a place which represents and makes them more visible is at the basis of the “healing” process promoted by this project [10].

Although the project unfolding since year 1996 from Rimetea Village and the one which took place during a span of three years in Oxford do not share apparently any common ground being projects which were viewed from different perspectives, both of them try to rediscover or revigorate the local identity, to maintain the local spirit and seek the involvement of the community.

Nowadays Rimetea is still under the protection of the Transilvania Trust Foundation and is shielded by the rules imposed by the status of protected heritage area. Locals are the ones who carry on their cultural heritage and many of them have learned how to preserve their houses by themselves, using traditional methods (Figs. 3, 4 and 5) But things stop here somehow; during the first 10 years, having annual external economic support from the beginning until now, the community developed on an economical, social, educational and cultural level, today no more big investments are being made towards a long-termed development (without the financial support received annually for the reparation of the houses), although there are multiple resources. The only direct result which is also a direct consequence of the work done since 1996 are the tourists (especially from Hungary), who are fascinated both by the houses from the 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries and by the wonderful scenery lying in their background.



Fig. 8. Cowley Street – buildings with graffiti (source: Google Maps, 2019)

From another standpoint, the project from Oxford started in the same year as the one from Rimetea, in the year 1996, apparently spontaneous. In an area already well-known as obsolete and alienated that time in Oxford, Cowley Boulevard appears under the idea of regaining its cultural and personal identity, a space which brought people together even from its restoring stage and which thus gives a paramount importance to the goal in itself.

Somehow this project seems to have started with the end, but exactly this new approach which spontaneously managed to make the locals act is very noteworthy. Once the action was started, things have been running by themselves, and after those three years the administration was still financially supporting the area, so that Cowley Boulevard had completed its new identity. Nowadays the street is full of public art started through the RAP Yard Project and many of the locals consider it as a “legal heritage of the RAP Project” [10].

### The Social Component

Ultimately the comparison between the two above-mentioned projects actually gets down to the impact each of them has had upon the communities they were meant to serve. What is certain is that this type of actions are carried out for people: for the people who inherited them, for the people who lived there, for the people who wanted, planned and built them, and in the end for us, the people who admire and value them. Spaces are brought to life by people, man designs the interior and exterior spaces and uses them. Therefore, the importance of the relation between the social (people) and the physical component (buildings) is undeniable. From this point of view, it is beneficial to draw a comparison between the perspective of a museum-type of village and a living village; the latter one lives and is a part of an interchangeable system on an economical, social and cultural level with other localities/communities. The comparison between these two options highlights the importance of the human factor, its presence constantly promoting the buildings and their value. The villagers of Rimetea are hardworking people who have had the strength and patience to learn how to preserve their houses and reappraise them for their true value. However, it is only as part of an architectural ensemble that a building increases its value; it is the same with people – individualism never impressed; the groups and the relationships which form between people are the one to be appreciated and approved, while connecting and outlining a community.

*Responsibility* is the key term which all the members of a community must understand. It is not only the responsibility towards buildings that must be appropriated but also the conscientious responsibility of passing on the regained values to the future generations. A well-rounded plan for long-term development also includes methods through which the future generations are stimulated to develop new opportunities, and this consequently leads to the

creation of *new jobs* and, in time, increases the *education* level through a better understanding of the entire process. And these two aspects are the most important points to achieve for a complete long-termed development [11, 12].

Regarding one of the most commonly-used terms on which all of the latest projects for development are based, meaning sustainability, the widely spread definition is given in the 1987 Brundtland Report where it is being defined as “the methods through which human progress meets the needs and aspirations of today’s generations without compromising the ability of future generations to satisfy their personal needs”, where the idea of *need* is established according to the area’s level of development [13]. However if today’s generations do not take care of the physical existence of the future generations, then all the efforts against jeopardising the other possible future generations would be pointless. This aspect is a very sensitive one and it involves a long-term debate because it is part of a larger process comprising other steps as well. Thus, we must come up with strategies through which young people can be helped to remain in their own village/locality and, furthermore, they must be encouraged to invest in the village’s future through small businesses and by helping to increase the natural growth rate. A recent option for the villages’ rejuvenation, coming as a result of consumerism-triggered saturation, is the phenomenon called “Downshifting”. Characterised by the conscientious refusal of the individual to depend on the material side of life, by the running way from a certain position and regaining a balance in a less sophisticated environment, in the countryside, the young people who by their own accord choose this path begin living a new life, which is being lived while respecting the nature and the housing that already exists [13, 14].

From the statistical data gathered after the 50-60’s, in opposition with the previous period characterized by communism, the rural area had a pyramid-like, balanced demography, but after that period, due to the high migration rate from the rural to the urban area, an imbalance was created. From now on, the urban area, apparently, promised to fulfil the needs and eradicate the poverty which the population experienced throughout the communist period. We can observe the implications of the demographic changes in the rural area analyzing the population age pyramid (Fig. 9).

While interpreting it, we can provide an answer to the current demographic problems of the rural area, such as: the reality of aging of the rural population, which in time can lead to the disappearance of certain villages and the additional weight carried on their shoulders by the active population section, the people around 35-59 years old. The latter, those who remain at home, must sustain the inactive age groups represented by young and old people. The fact that the number of youngsters, between 0 to 14 years old, and old people, over 60 years old, both put together equate the number of the active people means that it is dependent relationship and a heavy weight to carry for those who are in the middle of the pyramid. So the strangulation shown in the figure nine image should ring an alarm bell; we do not want to witness the disappearance of the Romanian village (Fig. 9), which is equally represented by the buildings and the community living here [15].

The imbalances within the rural area are in strong correlation with the village’s reproductive potential. As we can observe from the chart of population age pyramid, the emigration of adult women is much more accentuated than their male counterparts. As a result, there is a tendency towards the masculinization of the village. The way in which families regarded the birth of a child in the past is different from how we see it nowadays: women/ the traditional family saw the child as a natural event, which was unhindered by any specific conditions, and they received it with joy. From another standpoint, today childbirth is conditioned by material dependencies which, if not met, postpone the families’ decision to bring children into the world [15].

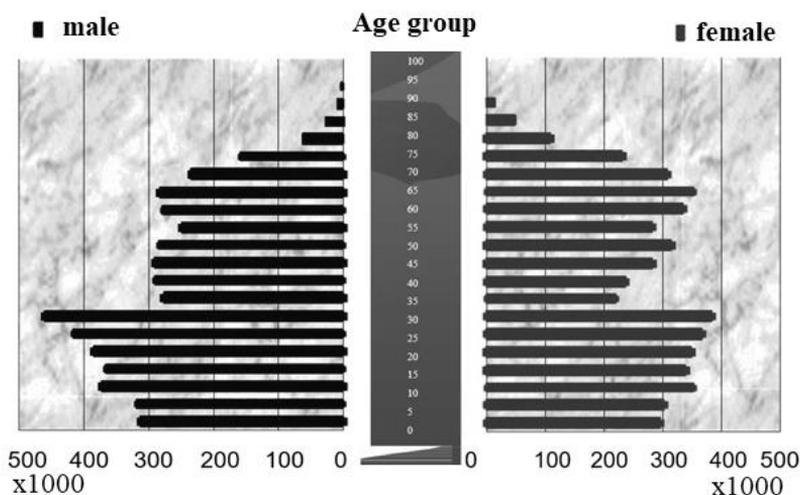


Fig. 9. The population age pyramid in the rural area [15]

From another diagram, one which I personally created based on clear statistical data, we can observe that only 22% of the population living in the rural area in our country has a positive natural growth rate, in comparison with the majority of nearly 80%, which show a negative natural growth. Thus, the counties from the North-Eastern part of Romania present a positive birthrate, while the North-Western, Western, the Central-South part show a negative natural growth rate. Obviously, in these regions the aging of the population is much more noticeable in comparison with the other counties, being over 36% (one third of the population) [15].

Therefore we can conclude that, due to the migration and decreasing number of births, the rural environment is slowly disappearing. However, in order to slow down this process and then make it reversible, we must adopt certain rejuvenation strategies for the village, one of the most powerful sources of inspiration which can most certainly ensure the continuity and the long-term development of the community [16 - 19].

Table 1. Statistics of Live Births in Rimetea according to the results from the National Institute of Statistics (INS) 1990-2017 [17]

	Years												
	1990	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
	<b>UM: Number of people</b>												
TOTAL	5762	3639	3462	3492	3629	3283	3252	3241	3343	3224	3199	3210	3218
6592	16	8	9	3	3	6	4	3	1	4	3	5	6

Table 2. Statistics of the deceased people in Rimetea according to the results from the National Institute of Statistics (INS) 1990-2017[17]

	Years												
	1990	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
	<b>UM: Number of people</b>												
No. of people	4692	4642	4349	4459	4687	4517	4433	4414	4357	4342	4641	4431	4401
No. of deceased	38	25	21	24	20	14	17	11	16	26	26	19	16

**Table 3.** Number of tourist arrivals in tourist accommodation establishments in Rimetea during 2006-2017[18]

	Years											
	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
	<b>UM: Number of people</b>											
<b>No. of people</b>	50619	54054	51264	44271	47838	78496	95918	101869	107271	154210	167970	172340
<b>No. of tourist</b>	811	:	:	588	1788	1290	3104	3735	5237	5756	6118	7406

### Conclusions

Analysing both examples of identity restoration/ regaining/ rediscovery presented above from the point of view of the initial plan implementation both display an overwhelming mobilisation of a large part of the community alongside with the promoters who coordinated everything. The only major difference between the two is the fact that, in the case of the Rimetea Village it was very important to preserve unaltered the historical monuments which were already forming the local specificity of the place, while in the case of the RAP Yard Project regaining a new local identity was the main goal. This obviously implied bringing in new elements which meant new functions, new materials and refaçading, everything being done with the help of the community, just as with the first case. Noteworthy in the second case is the emphasis laid on the social part, on the way its inhabitants, especially the young people, would leave their personal mark on the Cowley Street. After the project ended, the area developed and attracted other people as well, resulting a particular place. The young people, the volunteers, the locals and other people taking part in the project attracted other people, thus breathing new life into it and consequently the entire area was brought to life.

Undoubtedly Rimetea is a reborn village which has its contribution in tourism, every year receiving important awards. However, from the point of view of the long-term development, which has as main goal maintaining the confort of the younger generations, which represent the workforce as well, I do not think this was emphasized enough. This is the reason why, looking at the statistics, you cannot stop wondering what will be the future of the village if no major changes are to be done. Will there be any future for the village of Rimetea (represented by both its buildings and its community) or it will end up as a museum-village which is open only during the touristic season? The answer to this question is not very favourable as long as after the first struggling 10 years of renovation program the houses', things have gone very slowly regarding the implementation of new development paths. The administration does not develop at the moment any program through which to try and solve the current problems of the villagers (such as the poor infrastructure or the organization of the intravillan area) or by implementing developmental strategies in order to encourage the young people who have moved to the nearby cities in pursuit of their studies to come back to the village.

All in all the rejuvenation of a village/ locality represents a major activity, which involves specialists from many domains, which is spanning over a large period of time and which must be planned in order to satisfy the majority of the necessary goals that must be reached in the case of a long-term development. I believe the breath of a community defines and compliments in the same time the buildings, and the rhythm and way of living leave their mark over the psysical environment in a defining way. This is why I consider of the essence among the priorities for any village/locality rejuvenation process to address and study

thoroughly the social component (the locals). Underlining this aspect will mark the care of the locals at a certain moment in time while transmitting their legacy to the potential successors.

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