

## "Summer Schools in the Danube Region: Student Projects as Means for Development in Depopulated Regions"

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### *Abstract*

The paper describes process and progress during an international summer school in Dealu Frumos/Schönberg during May and October 2018. First there is a magnificent, underused landscape full of outstanding cultural heritage that abruptly lost important parts of its population at the end of last century and could not yet recover from that loss. Second there were 25 international students developing project ideas on how to promote development by tourism, agriculture or to improve infrastructure. Third there were supportive people, locals in Dealu Frumos, members of institutions in Sibiu County, academic and administrative staff of several universities, artists and freelancers that helped to create a good productive atmosphere. Several project ideas were born, all of them suited to improve life for resident people and to generate more income for locals. The costs to organize the summer school were reasonable as many of the resources needed were made available at limited costs. We propose to organize similar summer schools in other scarcely populated, rural areas of the Danube Region as a cost efficient means of rural and regional development.

*Key words: cultural heritage, landscape management, regional development, rural planning, thematic tourism, vernacular architecture;*

Figure 1: Participants from the international summer school Dealu Frumos/Schönberg 2018



Source: M. Breiling, July 13th, 2018

## Introduction

For more than 700 years the Germans were the dominant ethnic group in Transylvania or Siebenbürgen, primarily protestants, and responsible for building most of the approximately 250 fortified churches as defense line against aggressors from outside. Most churches are still owned by the Romanian Protestant Church. The "Stiftung Kirchenburgen" a foundation dependent on donations primarily from people who left the country some time ago manages some 110 of the fortified churches.

Figure 2: One out of the many fortified churches built by Transylvanian Saxons in Bradeni/Henndorf



Source: M. Breiling, July 13th, 2018

While the objects in their totality are a unique cultural heritage of sacral buildings, worthwhile to be protected as an ensemble the reality of the region and country does not allow such an approach. The poor region did not recover from the loss of people and income. Means provided by international and national sources are scarce and only allow a priority setting to protect the best-preserved objects. One out of 35 or the seven most famous fortified churches became a UNESCO World Heritage Site. These churches get the most attention and visits. Some 100 objects in need for renovation are in hands of institutions or cultural associations who try to reestablish a meaningful use. The remaining majority of objects are ruins or under current conditions not useable buildings.

During July 2018, the International Summer School took place in Dealu Frumos/Schönberg in the very center of Romania. It gathered 25 students from the University of Architecture and Urbanism Ion Mincu in Bucharest, the host, Technische Universität Wien, and the Korean Gyeongsang National University in Jinju. In total 12 professors and/or supervisors from Romania, Austria, Germany, Japan and Korea were present and supported the students in their search for contemporary uses for selected lands, villages and houses of the region that became marginalized and widely neglected after the retreat of German settlers taking place during the final quarter of the last century. The purpose of the summer school was to introduce the students to: a) Sibiu Region, b) its population and ethnic groups that changed over time, c) its rich history that generated so much cultural heritage, d) the difficulties in acquiring funds for renovating buildings according to their needs, e) providing a general overview on landscape management practices and economic activities, f) introducing particular skills like renovating mediaeval fortresses and repairing buildings or "painting with the colors of the earth".

Thereby, the participants did not only stay in Dealu Frumos. They visited Sibiu/Hermannstadt town, many sites in Sibiu County like the Museum Astra, the second largest free air museum in Europe (Breiling 2018). Here are hundreds of traditional farm houses and other vernacular architecture objects exhibited, providing models to find stimulation for one's own project. The main work for students was to find a suitable idea that can help the local population and to elaborate this idea into a mature state. The realization of the idea is another problem. Many hindrances may oppose a direct implementation such as lacking resources and skills, not sufficient support by public institutions or changing priorities for initiative takers to name some of them.

Figure 3: Students and professors at Stiftung Kirchenburgen in Sibiu



Source: M. Breiling, July 9th, 2018

Since 2004 the University of Architecture and Urbanism Ion Mincu Bucharest revitalizes one of the objects, the fortified church in Dealu Frumos/Schönberg as the seat of the Center of Vernacular Architecture and the place for numerous national and international summer schools. The use of the fortified church in Dealu Frumos is restricted to the warm season as it would be too expensive to heat the object during winters. But at least during the summer season citizens and visitors can feel new life in the old village. And even more important is that continuously new ideas are coming up on how to improve the state of single objects, ensembles of built environment, or the magnificent cultural landscapes in the surroundings of Dealu Frumos. In this spirit 15 architect and planning students from TU Wien, four architect students from Ion Mincu University, and six students from agricultural engineering came to contribute in summer 2018. The course preparation for TU Wien students started in May 2018 with lectures and experience reports from the region. Until June 2018 the students had to pre-formulate a design or development project which they wanted to follow during and after the summer school in Dealu Frumos/Schönberg. The period in the region, not only Dealu Frumos, but entire Sibiu county was up to one month, one facultative workshop and excursion week, one additional practitioner workshop "Hands on" organized by the Stiftung Kirchenburgen in Sibiu/Hermannstadt or self organized study trips in relation to the design or development project. During August and September 2018 students finalized reports. In addition to an internal report in September 2018, there was a public presentation in October 2018 in Sofia. The topics of design and development projects were manifold: students came up with their ideas on how to intensify the underused structures and to regain economic incentives for the further development of the region. Ideas of new uses comprised the fields of tourism, agriculture, manufacturing and improving the local and regional infrastructure.



Figure 4: Dealu Frumos/Schönberg Summer Campus of Ion Mincu University Bucharest



Source: M. Breiling, February 4th, 2016

### *Land use and income*

Tourism in various forms - as architectural or cultural heritage tourism, religious tourism, history tourism, ethnic minority tourism, event tourism, cycling tourism and farm tourism - was selected by students as the most appropriate economic activity to revitalize the region and several ideas were born to strengthen tourism. From Austrian viewpoint, it was astonishing how little tourism developed in Transylvania despite the chain of superb attractions with some of them classified as world heritage. On a country average, the tourism intensity of an Austrian is ten times higher than the one of a Romanian (Eurostat 2018). An explanation for this is the comparatively poor quality of infrastructure and services, which is not yet very well developed. Few tourists generate insufficient funds for maintenance and operations and this is not only a hinder for the development of tourism but for any other industry in the region. Promoting tourism needs co-operation between initiative takers and the public and the participating students are possible mediators in this context.

Agriculture appealed in two ways, in form of a traditional agriculture and (ultra-) modern methods of smart farming. In 2013, we found 3.9 million farms in Romania and 2.8 million farms had less than one hectare production area. The tiny farms are primarily for subsistence food production and for the survival of the rural families. Family farms are 99% of all farms, and have 53% of the land, and they keep: 99% of sheep; 99% of goats; 99% of bees; 90% of cattles; 70% of pigs and 61% of poultry. A perceived problem for the continuation of agriculture is that 64% of farmholders were over 55 years (Baker-Smith 2016). The tiny farms are not entitled for agricultural subsidies within the EU. Another 1.04 million farms were classified small scale with more than 1ha and less than 10ha. Some 60,000 farms have a size of over 10ha and less than 100ha, 12,000 Romanian farms contain more than 100ha area and are the reminder of collective farm co-operatives established during the communist period (Page and Popa 2013). A few large-scale farms existed even before the communistic period when one particular large-scale farm unit - the property of the Czell family - comprised 2000ha and was one of the largest farms in Romania at the beginning of the 20th century (Czell, 2018).

Figure 5: View at Hosman/Holzmengen village from fortified church



Source: M. Breiling, July 11th, 2018

Traditional agriculture formed the unique cultural landscape of Transylvania with large-scale pastureland and small agricultural fields. Many shepherds move around with their flocks of several hundreds of animals thereby remaining traditional practices to manage marginal lands. Small scale fields, sometime in difficult terrain are maintained by small scale peasants practicing circular resource economy and subsistence agriculture with few animals on limited land sometimes with less than a hectare agricultural fields. Ancient farming practices survived in the region due to lack of other alternatives. This in turn gave an important push to organic farming. During the period 2005 to 2012, the land of organic production tripled from 0.7 to 2.1% of area in Sibiu County and included more than 15,000 farmers or (TĂNASE, CĂRĂTUȘ-STANCIU 2016).

As a vivid contrast to traditional agricultural farming methods, the group of participating Korean students targeted new smart farming concepts aiming to digitize and rationalize farming.

Students from Korea study at the Smart Farm Centre in Jinju (Okyerere 2018) and tried to develop ideas of smart farming in a very different context (Qasim 2018) . This includes very modern methods of animal husbandry and plant breeding. The mix with and innovation of traditional farming methods is a final aim.

The shapes of the buildings and the spirits of the past were in particular collected by the concepts from the students from Ion Mincu University. Hogeia focused on the spiritual identity of the fortified ensembles emphasizing the “mythical feeling of the place”. The timeless shapes of the fortified churches kept alive for many centuries (Hogeia 2018). Different architectural solutions to solve practical problems by groups of Saxons and Romanians are in focus at another analysis (Oprescu, 2018). Yet another analysis reconstructed a fairytale image or elements of a dream landscape and opposed it to the reality found at the place today (Sabotnicu 2018).

### *Summary of student projects*

The participants of the summer school hope to support local residents and influence regional decision makers. Many students were passionate in developing concepts and believed they can contribute to improve the wellbeing of the region. In the following, we present the main ideas of student concepts originating from TU Wien. The concepts are grouped around tourism and agriculture; manufacturing, renovation and tourism; concepts promoting themes and unifying regional assets; and general development projects.

### Concepts combining tourism and agriculture

Touristic farming was one concept that combined both main ideas, tourism and farming. Why would you visit Dealu Frumos/Schönberg? Most people not familiar with Transylvania cannot answer this question and probably here first time from this location. Two students started therefore to develop activity plans for tourists in the field of agriculture, how to care for animals and to gain animal products, or simply to wander and stroll around in the virgin landscapes and explore traditional lifestyles. In addition, the students assessed the economic potential of the likely tourists: how much they would be willing to pay for a week tourism on the Romanian countryside. Prices should be fair and at the same time allow many locals to work and to earn some money. Additionally they provided also ideas how to host tourists in modular building structures as they did not assume that Austrian or Western tourists will stay in Romanian farmhouses (Barbu and Selistean, 2018).

Another idea of combining agriculture and farming was the idea of a liquor cooperative (Schnaps Genossenschaft). This idea rooted in the discussion with citizens of Dealu Frumos that many fruits are no longer harvested and that this resource should be better used. The fortified church of Dealu Frumos/Schönberg in which most lectures of the summer school took place had a few empty rooms. The concept was born to use some of them for a distillery producing plum brandy and a bar to consume the product. In addition the local need of plums can create a small market and give an incentive to harvest and process more products (Chang 2018).

### Concepts promoting manufacturing, renovation of cultural heritage and tourism

Not only agriculture but also old manufacturing tradition can contribute to successful tourism products. A revitalization project in Dealu Frumos for handmade brick and tile production is a good idea to provide an income opportunity for several people. Becoming engaged in hand made brick and tile production means a possibility to renovate buildings and roofs in a closer way to the original settings of the built environment. Currently in many cases, new materials – not perfectly fitting – have to be imported for renovations. During a field trip, we visited another brick and tile production center in Apos. Prince Charles of England – as a relative of the Saxons in Transylvania - supports this manufacture and the demand in particular of tiles is by far higher than the supply. So the concept of one student to establish a new factory in Dealu Frumos has good chances to result in early returns (Ianu 2018).

Another idea to revitalize a forgotten manufacturing tradition in Dealu Frumos and to employ the resident Roma population is lime production. Lime is a building material that will be used for the renovation of older buildings like the fortified church in the village. A similar project of lime production exists in other parts of Romania. In addition an annual festival - targeted to tourists and village people alike - was proposed to exhibit the manufacturing skills of locals and also as a contribution to the social activities of the village (Harlesteanu 2018).

Figure 6: Students discussing with locals in Dealu Frumos



Source: M. Breiling, July 12th, 2018

### Concepts promoting themes and unification of cultural heritage

The key concept to cluster common assets according to topics from nearby villages is a great idea. This creates a considerable higher regional value than just adding the single attractions. The goal has to be to create a network of possibilities, generated from the uniqueness of each single village while avoiding separation. Three items are in focus: the church, the village and the people. While tourism is the motive to earn money, the goal is to strengthen the economy and quality of life in the villages. Tourism will develop additionally because requirements such as landscape and cultural heritage are given (Flandorfer 2018).

Branding, marketing, cooperation with other organizations is essential if locals of Transylvania aim to increase their tourist numbers. Most of current tourists will start with UNESCO cultural heritage churches and the "branding" was done by getting acceptance and fulfilling requirements from UNESCO/ICOMOS. However, saving seven objects as world heritage is not enough to save the ensemble of churches. Here, one needs to go one-step further and to focus on the second or even third level objects to create new tourist products. An architectural circuit is a special highlight for architects and tourists interested in staying longer and going to depth in Transylvania and interested in additional features like fortified churches built during a certain historic period (Severin 2018).

Another project aims to promote sustainable tourism and at the same time boost the region's infrastructure. The bicycle infrastructure has to build further out. Focal point is the village of Dealu Frumos, where the church has been renovated with efforts of Ion Mincu. Here is the starting point for various exploration trips, by bike or hiking. To this end a camping site near the village is planned for cycling tourists. In addition a network between major cities nearby is considered: Sibiu, Brasov, Targu Mures, Cluj. These serve as starting points for foreign tourists. Another possibility is to connect and expand the EuroVelo Network towards Transylvania (Chervena, Rotariu 2018).

### General development concepts

The concept of rural development by land use planning according to sectors was promoted by analyzing strength, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in a so called SWOT analysis. After that, the main idea is to focus on aims and actions regarding the expansion on each of the analyzed sectors. Mobility, building development, green and free space but also the social space are topics of

the concept. The development area is Dealu Frumos in Transylvania, near the geographical center of Romania. The village population accounts for 500 people, Romanians and Romas with a few "Summer Saxons", a group of retired German people that bought houses in the village. The fundamental objective is to bring more people in the area, both local and foreign. The main method that will be used, is to organize participation events, where experts and locals exchange information (Sassu 2018).

After the fortified church of Dealu Frumos became a summer campus of Ion Mincu University in 2004, another university campus could be established for TU Wien in another fortified church and thereby protect another fortified church. If many universities in Europe or even outside Europe would do so, a whole chain of scientific summer events would boost life and ideas into the region not only in summer. Similar to medieval times, Transylvania could regain the status as a scientific centre of Europe. A first idea for the TU Wien Summer Campus was projected for Pelisor/Magerau village. The first documentary mention dates from the middle of the 14th century. A major fire destroyed part of the village at the end of the 18th century. Currently Magarei has about 500 inhabitants. (Plankensteiner 2018)

#### Agricultural modernization concepts by Korean students

As a vivid contrast to traditional agricultural farming methods, the group of participating Korean students targeted new smart farming concepts aiming to digitize and rationalize farming. Students from Korea study at the Smart Farm Centre in Jinju (Okyerere 2018) and tried to develop ideas of smart farming in a very different context (Qasim 2018) . This includes very modern methods of animal husbandry and plant breeding. The mix with and innovation of traditional farming methods is a final aim.

#### Reviving the past concepts by Ion Mincu students

The shapes of the buildings and the spirits of the past were in particular collected by the concepts from the students from Ion Mincu University. Hogeia focused on the spiritual identity of the fortified ensembles emphasizing the "mythical feeling of the place". The timeless shapes of the fortified churches kept alive for many centuries (Hogeia 2018). Different architectural solutions to solve practical problems by groups of Saxons and Romanians are in focus at another analysis (Oprescu, 2018). Yet another analysis reconstructed a fairytale image or elements of a dream landscape and opposed it to the reality found at the place today (Sabotnicu 2018).

#### *Summary*

The ensemble of several projects provides more value than the sum of single project by each student. Financially weak regions can gain a lot from student workshops and student project work as a follow up of those workshops. The summer school in Dealu Frumos fulfilled its purpose: students experienced a region and its particularity. Local inhabitants and stakeholders got an outside feedback and several ideas to improve their situation with the possibility to earn more money. While some of the projects will not be realized due to budget constraints, other ideas - particularly the lower budget ones - may find locals interested in promoting these ideas. We propose that similar international classes, workshops and summer schools are repeated in other countries or parts of the Danube



Region, in particular in the poorest regions where the work of students can find the most appreciation.

An important task is to integrate students and their initiatives within the available frameworks to promote general development in the region. University co-operation such as the European ERASMUS network can provide an initial basis to prepare international joint student courses. Students in turn generate new thinking where local stakeholders get stuck in prevailing challenges. They do not care too much for the likely problems of problem realization and lack disappointing experiences from previous projects. Thereby, the range of perceivable possibilities opens up. According to our opinion this approach can be institutionalized and support institutional networks like the working groups and priority areas of the Danube Region Strategy often lacking labor force for ground work. This may contribute to alter local and regional capacities and to think about hidden potentials. With this article and experience report, we further hope to stimulate more colleagues to contribute with similar actions and course developments in other less privileged areas of the Danube Region and hope for additional chances to undertake more courses in this direction.

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