ARHIPERA IN DOR MĂRUNT
4 stories
Next to the new, unfinished wooden house we first discover the trees full of fruits and buckets to collect them. Then, the chicken, a water well, an improvised table on a tree trunk, a chair with flower pots, a cat under a bench. This garden breathes life. We see the old house, small but colourful, and in the shadow of the trees we see the round, friendly face of Sevastița, the housewife, we meet her daughter Georgiana, who speaks a few words of English, an elder looking man and a young boy. The family has inhabited this site for 17 years and they have become one with it, the house, the yard, the trees and the animals together form one organism, one life story, they are connected, they are rooted.

Enthusiastic about the lively atmosphere and the strong sense of place, the group sets out to provide the family with an organic structure. The veranda should become a place where the children reside and meet their later boyfriends, where new grapevines grow and new wine is harvested, meanwhile providing shade and protection from the wind. The open space can become the heart of the organism, this is a place to cook and eat, close by the trees and garden. The group works fast but the difference in voices makes the design decisions more complicated. A general proposal is agreed on, the elaboration causes questions. Details are proposed and rejected, questions are posed but remain unanswered. Who knows best what is best remains unsolved. But on the site, it is the spirit of the place itself that seems to make decisions and set the group to work effectively. In one day, the whole house is insulated and works on the veranda start. The work evolves fast, organically, as the grapes in the garden. Not everything turns out as planned, things change during the process, and things will be changed in the coming period, by the family. Because this place is alive. And when we leave, it will continue.
MARCU HOUSE. HOUSE OF APPROPRIATION

Nicoleta Marcu looks worried when a large group of people enters the domain where she and her family have just moved, after their old house became inhabitable. They would like this process to be over as soon as possible, they look forward to the moment when the house is theirs to use. They have collected precious things and brought them to their new place. Around the young walnut tree, a stack of tiles for a new oven, behind the house a frame of branches to become the shelter for their horse, the hole in the ground a water well. Bricks, roof panels, they are saving everything that can be of use.

The daughters stare at us with big eyes of curiosity. The group is in doubt. We know nothing about their lives, and what do all our architectural skills offer us if the task is so different from all we learnt, and our time and resources are so limited? The group members are uncomfortable. How can they relate to the family, to the site, to each other? Every proposal seems blocked, every idea is received with question marks. What can we offer them if all they want is shelter? How can we provide them with something which provides more possibilities, a sheltered place in winter, a social space in summer, how can we provide an appropriate structure for them to place the few precious things that make their home, and what is more, to give space for new things, that will be collected in the future? The first sketches are all about reversibility: flexible panels to temporarily close the porch in winter. But time and materials are not available to execute the idea in this phase. Finally, the proposal is simple but effective. The facade offers a social space where objects can be displayed on the front side and a space where tools and materials can be stored on the rear facade. The framework is concrete and practical but stands also for a larger one: the whole house becomes a framework for the family to appropriate. They can collect things, and make them part of the house - not of just a house, but of their home.

CAPRA-UTICA HOUSE. HOUSE OF PRIDE

Marian Utica is a proud man and he knows exactly what he wants: a house to be proud of. It should be coloured in the most beautiful green he has ever seen: kiwi green. He knows precisely where he wants new walls, and the new well in the garden. He is proud of his five children, who go to school, or soon will. The house will be for them. The old house is at the front part of the site. This is Alina’s place, here she sits at her outdoor bench, at her self-built table with colourful tablecloth. Here she talks with neighbours, here she gets fresh water from the well, here the children play around her. The front yard is the living room in
Summer. The old house is a collage of bricks and clay and wood, inside is a colourful collection of textiles. The curtain at the small rear window depicts three black cats looking to the empty backyard, the new house and the fields.

During the week, the group becomes friends with the family. They know the names of all the kids and chat with Alina and neighbours, they are taken around the neighborhood to meet other acquaintances. Meanwhile, the collector skills of Marian are taken as point of departure for the key feature of the facade design: a mosaic of bits and pieces of tiles and glass around the window frames, enlivening the bright kiwi-green plastered walls. The idea is expressed in a simple and communicable way on a paper model and brought the next morning to the family with confidence. However, when the group presents the mosaic idea with the paper model and with real pieces on the floor of the new house, the first reaction is quite different: "how on earth do you think I will put garbage on my beautiful new house?" Only after showing pictures of Gaudi, the beauty of the proposal comes across, and is supported, under the condition that the pieces should not be recognizable as garbage. A lot of hammering is to be done in the next days to make the colourful bits as small and abstract as possible. When the real work starts, though, the group cannot quite cope with the fast change from ideas to practice. The heat and the hurry break the enthusiasm of some group members, and encouragement is needed to make them work, literally. The kids help, by commenting, making pictures with our cameras and by arranging the mosaic. Marian is excited and proved himself as a skilled and fast construction worker. When we leave, we leave a house and a family of pride.

Gheorghe House. House of Shelter

We arrive at an empty plot at the very edge of the village, next to the railway, where the wind has a free spell along the new house that seems still alien to this place. Here, we meet Olguta, a woman with a beautiful face marked by a hard life, and Mitica, her husband. A few children around them, but they say there are more. A train passes by, countless wagons, the wind blows the dust around our feet. Here, one is exposed to wind, rain, fast passing trains. How, we wonder, can this empty, windy place become a home for a family? It is a site and a family in need, in need of protection.

Some of the group members are in despair. There is nothing at this site which can inspire them, since there is nothing. What can they contribute here, when there is hardly anything positive to start with. Then, they turn to the family and start to discover potential. The girls of the group take place on the bare concrete of the unfinished porch and talk for hours with Olguta and the young
children. The guys walk around with Mitica and start envisioning yet invisible fences, a toilet shed, a water well and even trees. The proposal offers protective skins: the inner skin of the house, insulated and protected, the outside skin with a fence around the property to keep the children safe, and an in-between skin around the house. The veranda is made with ropes to hang blankets for protection when needed, the rear facade is extended by a pergola under which wood and tools can be stored, while shadow is provided for those who can sit here and look at the passing trains, protected. Suddenly, the tide has turned: where there is nothing, great things can be made. Mitica and his eldest son help some members of the group to make the pergola at the rear side, the others start building up the protective skin of insulation with high speed and making a sheltered outdoor room, with panels that can be opened and closed depending on the weather conditions. Within the very few days we had, the house has been given a whole different character: this will be a safe and pleasant place, a house of shelter.

REFLECTIONS ON PARTICIPATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

For many of us, this project has been a confrontation, with poverty, with different living circumstances, with limited means, limited time and limited building material, a confrontation with different patterns of thought, and with our own dogmas’ our ideas of what architecture is about. Sometimes, it has seemed like a tower of Babel: we speak different languages. The locals and the helpers, the architects and the anthropologists, the romanian and the dutch-speaking, the educated and the non-educated, the first years and the masters... Convinced as we all are of our own terminology and understanding of things, we may find it uncomfortable to hear other opinions, other knowledge, as they may not coincide with our own ideas. It takes a few hours, a few days, a few more conversations, until we realize: there is no black and white, there are only different shades of grey. And then, the words, ideas and sketches of the other start to resonate in our own thinking, adding new value.

Like many things, the aspect of sustainability has remained an unsolved issue. As we discovered, sustainability is a complex idea containing many different, sometimes contradicting aspects. Can such a project, with limited means and difficult circumstances be simultaneously energy efficient, socially and technically sustainable, and respond to users needs and convictions? Most likely not. Do we use the cleanest, healthiest, best produced materials: no we don’t. Does the used method of building offers long term solutions? Maybe even the long term is a discussable notion in the context of Dor Maruntians. How can we sustain, how
can the community sustain, how can change processes develop in the right direction? Does the here and now connect to the there and later? For the families, now there is a later. To judge the resilience of the houses, the families and the community, we should revisit the houses in the next few years and study carefully how the processes of appropriation take place, how the community reacts to changes, how the material structure of the houses copes with the temperature differences, with the forces of wind and snow and rain. Let’s hope these houses have provided not only new chances for the families, but also test cases for new projects of providing better housing conditions for poor communities. Let’s hope we can use lessons from these houses to construct on the achievements, and to improve the parts that don’t sustain. Because in this way, the process and the project might be sustainable, and might in the long run provide better conditions for life.

So, we have worked together, we have not only been involved in participatory architecture, we have been participants ourselves. And when we leave, we share an experience. An experience of words, questions, observations. An experience of dust and sweat and plaster, a social and architectural experience. We participated, we have taken part in a process of change, change of life conditions in Dor Marunt, and change in our own thinking. We wish the very best to the Dor Marunt community, to all participants of this week, to the Arhipera project, and we hope to stay part of it.

Klaske Havik, July 2012