



Milena Grbić, University of Novi Sad, mdelevic@gmail.com

## **PRESENT CONTEXT OF INFORMAL ROMANI SETTLEMENTS IN BELGRADE AS EXORDIUM FOR THEIR REGENERATION: ONE CONTEXT BUT SIX THEMES OF A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE**

### ***Abstract***

The intent of this paper is to present how several characteristics of the functional organization of Roma community present the essence of forming spatial structures in settlements that by correct understanding and reinterpreting have the potential to successfully trace the steps of future planning and designing decisions in the revitalization process of existing informal settlements. In further development of the paper concrete physical patterns of settlements and houses will be demonstrated, systematized and classified into a useful base of program principles, for which research has proven to be inevitable and important to be considered in every responsible process of settlement regeneration.

*Keywords:* romani settlements, Romanipen, regeneration, La Biennale di Venezia 2023

## **РОМСКА НАСЕЉА У БЕОГРАДУ КАО УВОД У ЊИХОВУ РЕГЕНЕРАЦИЈУ: ЈЕДАН КОНТЕКСТ И ШЕСТ ТЕМА ЗА ОДРЖИВУ БУДУЋНОСТ**

### ***Сажетак***

Намјера рада је да покаже како одређене функционалне карактеристике ромске заједнице представљају есенцију фомирања просторних структура које правилним разумијевањем и интерпретацијом имају потенцијал да формирају будуће кораке у планерским и пројектантским одлукама чији је циљ ревитализација тих насеља. У развоју рада указаће се на конкретне мустре насеља и кућа, које као се као систематизована база програмских начела неизбјежно морају узети у обзир у сваком одговорном процесу обнове насеља.

*Кључне ријечи:* ромска насеља, Romanipen, регенерација, , La Biennale di Venezia 2023

## 1. INTRODUCTION

To regenerate means to restore something to a better state. Regeneration is how we can restore the soil, the water, the flora, the fauna, the livelihoods, the health of the Earth and most of all, the way human beings relate to nature, to power, to civilization and to progress by designing an equal and balanced nature-inspired system.

By valuing and bringing forth indigenous knowledge and selectively applying advances of our technological age, regenerative approaches seek to reverse the degradation of the planet's natural systems and design human-driven systems that co-evolve with natural systems to generate mutual benefits, improve life for all on this planet and create resilience for the future.

Regenerative development, which draws inspiration from the self-healing and self-organizing capacities of natural living systems, aims for an integrated, whole-systems approach to the design and construction of human settlements and practices and development, is increasingly seen as a successful model for achieving this end.

Even though the establishment of such principles is theoretically vast, in practice it primarily deals with the local level, as every community has different social, economic and environmental needs whose parameters remain unique in constant change. In the case of the Roma population, the subject of housing is additionally made even more complex due to the subtext of appreciating the different; such subtext becomes a certain imperative because the current documentation dealing with the integration of the Romani is based on the theoretical model of integration. This means that all projects regarding the Roma population including housing projects need to emphasize the preservation of the ethnic and cultural identity of that community.

Through the overlapping of the two functions of housing – the physical and the social – the meaning of the term territorialization is also broadened. Therefore, the places claimed by the Roma cultural group aren't only spatial facts, but also cultural, social, economic and ecological, and as such, as explained by Ferguson, make possible the understanding and analysis of what different cultural groups create in space [1]. The understanding of regenerative settlements is thus changed from green units, which might be the primary association to a social enhancement in a much broader sense.

Romani studies and sociological research find that the Roma microenvironments represent the most reliable form of protection of the cultural identity of the Romani; and even though it changed dynamically, it preserved the social and cultural behavioral patterns – the Romanipen – which still hold a key role in the everyday life of the Roma people [2, 3]. What actually qualifies the informal Roma settlements as spaces of significance is the fact that the Romani themselves shaped them and formed them based on the needs of everyday life, and without the involvement of professionals. According to Eagleton, the lifestyle of every cultural group holds a complex set of cultural values, traditions, habits and beliefs [4], the Romanipen (Romani identity system) being exactly that for the Roma people.

In that sense, several concepts of physical structure were noticed in various slum-type informal Roma settlements analyzed by the author of this paper from 2011 in Belgrade (Serbia) and as a result of those earlier studies, they are singled out and explained and can be considered as culturally adjusted environments.

In further, more detailed and focused research, which will be presented in this paper, the intention is to demonstrate that within these patterns, which can already be considered as culturally adapted environments, there are significant potentials that need to be given special attention in the domain of settlements development towards the general process of regeneration. This simultaneously reconciles strategic duality - achieving improvements that are affirmative for the broader society and acceptable within the framework of the Roma cultural context.

Directly observed culturally adapted formations within the broader context of the settlement include yard group and its immediate neighborhood.

Therefore, the first step of the research involved field studies through observation. The reality of the observer consists in the stimuli produced within as he observes the space and its use. In order for these stimuli to remain recorded, and to be able to be communicated later, they need to be memorized in an organized structure that is an extensive representation of the perceived world and in which the stimuli are related to each other, stored together as information.

Further methodological development of the study involves the classification and systematization of knowledge established through direct observation in the field and the identification of the characteristics of physical structures as regenerative potential in referent types of Roma settlements and houses. This set of information will form the relational database.

The third step involved comparing the results with the concepts of sustainable development presented at The Laboratory of the Future at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2023 to demonstrate that the obtained and extracted results have both the strength and direction for further action on the path of regeneration.

## 2. FIELD RESEARCH: OBSERVATION AND DATA RECORDING

The methodology was created in such a way as to provoke one to dive deeper into the micro in a realistic (existing) scenography of the existing context, using the intuitive deeper basis of being when observing the potential of the space for regeneration.

The concept of this methodology is based on Kant's guidelines that if we treat the space that surrounds us as a handy empirical world, it is possible to decipher the deeper meaning, the one that is felt, that is received by experiencing, not by reason, but by the power of the archetypal mind. By including personal perception, we want to achieve the deconstruction of iconic rules that primarily relate to the meaning that regeneration themes imply in a general sense.

A specific space, with a special focus on isolated segments, was intensively observed every day, at different times of the day for 7 days, during which all the changes occurring within the yard groups and their immediate environment were recorded.

Diagrams were chosen to record all observations. They have the potential to illuminate, round off, mark the important, without it being explicit and conceptual. Each occurrence is assigned a universal identifier in the form of small circles. (Figure 1)

### 2.1. METHODOLOGICAL TOOLS FOR OBSERVATION AND RECORDING

**The screen** is the selected space that will be observed during this research, where concrete objects reside and which is infinitely rich in information. He is never really known, because we only have a mediated approach to him, through the perception of the observer. Thus, we emphasize that what is important for the observer is not the world in itself, but the perception that the observer has of it. It exists only for the observer and only during his perception. The screen can be imagined as a frame placed on a given part of the space. The screen is as big as it needs to be, but its boundaries must be clearly and logically defined. The screen includes all actors (both animate and inanimate nature) and their events and changes. It is drawn as a circle with the largest diameter.

The configurations of the screen are all the values perceived by the observer; all the values provided to us by the senses. The screen contains different groups of such patterns that can be classified into categories:

**Territory** is the field of action of various phenomena, not all of which need to be physically present, but they must be spatially defined. Territories can also have their own field of action, which depends on the mobility of its users (agents). Territorial membranes can be completely impermeable, semipermeable or permeable. They can freely transmit influences or allow only some of them to pass and transmit influences in one or more directions.

For example, we can single out several types of territory: house, street, garden, but also solar panel...

We also mark the territories with small circles, but with three. One small circle marks the physical presence of the territory, the second circle indicates the type of membrane and is drawn as a concentric circle slightly outside the circumference of its territory, and the third circle is the territory's field of action.

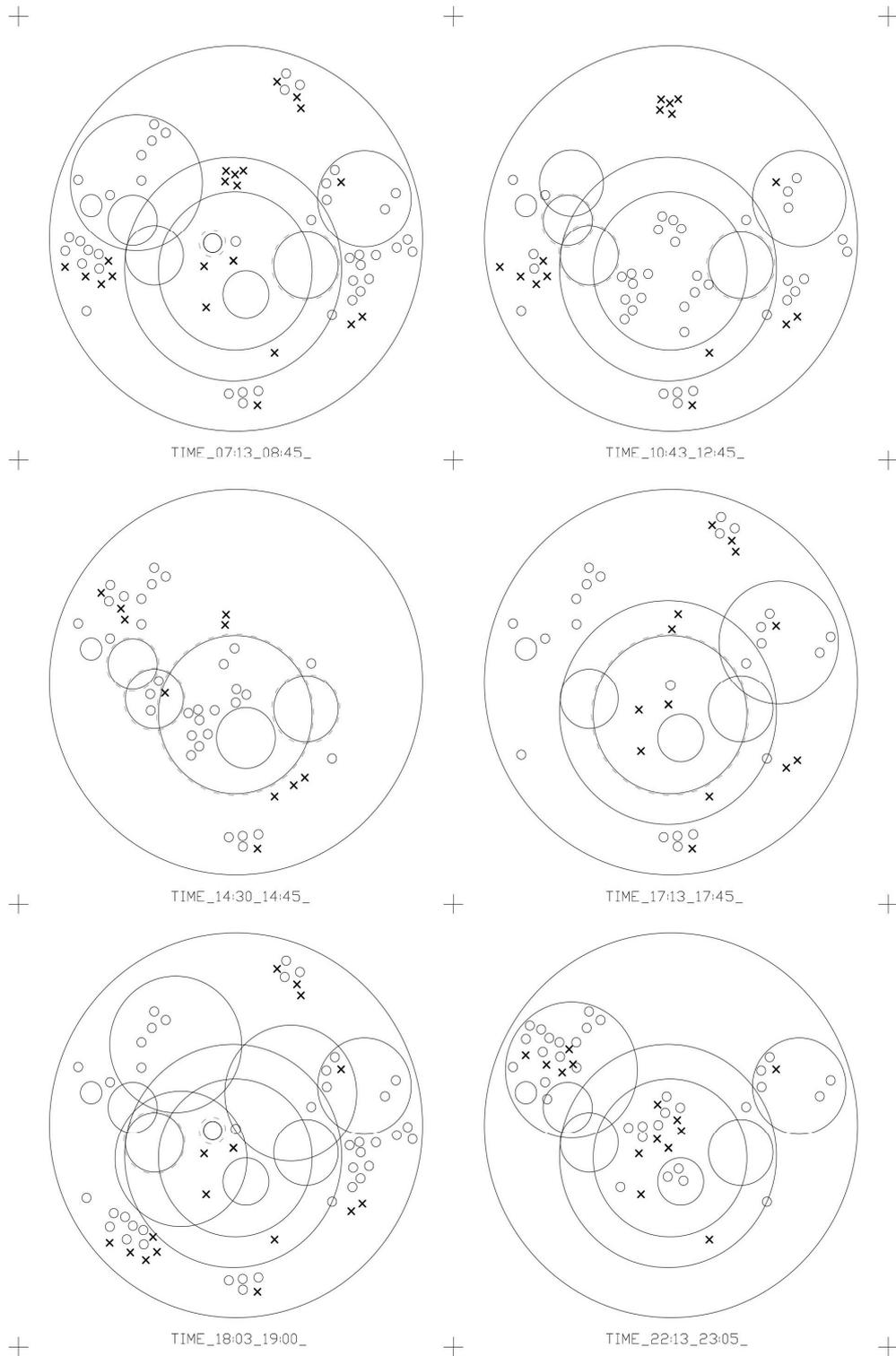
**Institutions.** Institutions are rules of behavior imposed by certain institutional impositions. A classic system that works from the top down and acts as a community concern. It can be treated as an element of organization that affects a certain control of the behavior of agents in an attempt to control the space (fences, parking, sign, prohibition...).

They are marked by a circle of colored surfaces, the shade of which varies according to the strength of their power of action (lighter is weaker, darker is more powerful). The diameter of the circle varies depending on the breadth of influence that the institutions have on the observed space.

**Agents.** Agents are people within the space, perhaps the most important factor, they are the ones who create all of the changes in the screen. Their behaviors can be predictable and unpredictable and it requires further research. Special attention needs to be paid to the relation between the agents and the institutions and the relation between agents and territories, as well as their mobility ways. How do the agents move? What do they use to move? What are the distances in question?

They are marked by circles with the smallest circumference.

**Desires and wishes.** Desires and wishes are also dynamic elements of the screen. They are tendencies on a specific topic (regenerative potential here). They are produced exclusively by agents and they can be individual, in the form of intention or under the influence of an institution. Holistic themes in the form of experiential and interpretive qualities of human thought aspirations, feelings, actions are very important and applicable in regenerative processes. Special attention should be paid to them. They can be perceived as gestures by pure observation, and they can also be obtained through dialogue with agents.



*Figure 1. Diagrammatic representation of research*

### 3. RESULTS: CLASSIFICATION AND SYSTEMATIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE

As already mentioned, Romani lifestyle is based on the extended family household, ostensibly established on the family residence, but it cannot be recognized as a single-family house. The residence consists of several units which are spatially interdependent and socially organized as a whole – the yard group. Representing the core unit of the settlement, it is based on a collective Romani lifestyle of expanded family. It is usually a semi-atrium formation where the built and non-built spaces are clearly defined and separated. The built space is made up of a few housing units, usually four to five and a few additional utility units.

By researching the behavior and analyzing the functioning of yard groups of buildings and their integral elements of the built structure, the following potentials for regeneration were determined using the aforementioned methodology.

**Reuse of elements that materialize the house.** The basic structure of dilapidated houses - barracks is made of wooden planks or beams. The materialization of the basic structure is achieved by cladding boards, doors, windows, wooden boards, nylon, sheet metal or cardboard. All elements of materialization were found on some kind of waste and reused. (Figure 2)

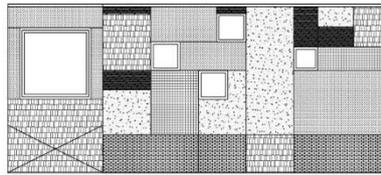


Figure 2. Materialization of a house

**Floor of the house.** In all analyzed barracks, the floor of the house is made of ground, and cardboard or Styrofoam is often laid over the ground. (Figure 3)

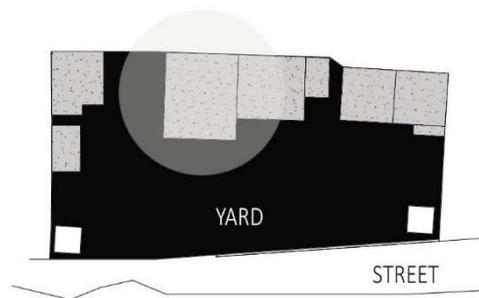
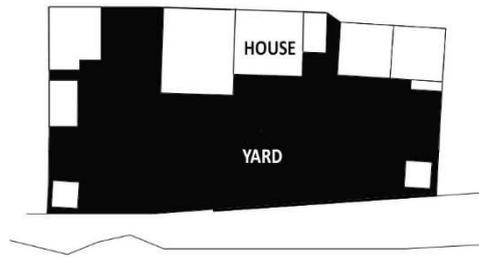


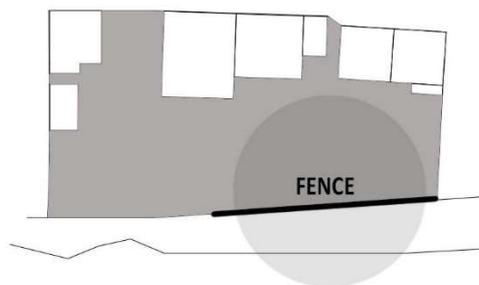
Figure 3. Prevalence of earthen floors

**The size of the house.** A Romani barrack for an average of 5 family members, which is the case in over 60% of the houses in the observed scope, is about 30m<sup>2</sup>, or about 54m<sup>3</sup>. The height of the shack is up to 2m due to better heating of the space in winter. (Figure 4)



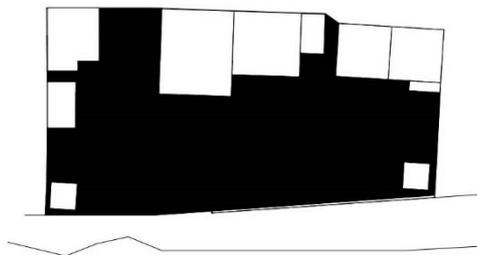
*Figure 4. Ratio of house to yard area*

**Fences.** A fence in the usual sense, which marks and encloses a group of buildings across the entire surface, is rarely present in slums. Almost as a rule, only one part of it, a few meters long, is placed, which marks the surface that defines the boundary of the courtyard group in relation to the street. Fences between houses within the courtyard group are almost always absent. Therefore, the common yard belongs equally to all houses within the yard group. (Figure 5)



*Figure 5. Position of the fence*

**The ratio of built and unbuilt space.** In the slums, great attention is paid to the "occupation" of open space. Romani daily life is quite oriented towards the open space. The yard is a place to help each other in daily tasks. The spirit of community that is achieved there is a resource on several grounds. The yard represents the most visible place of connection within which knowledge and skills are shared and enables mutual assistance in the fight with everyday challenges - from babysitting, food preparation to house building services and help with their rehabilitation. The ratio of built and unbuilt space is 3:10. (Figure 6)



*Figure 6. Ratio of built and unbuilt space*

**Field toilets.** Due to the way slums are created, the shacks have no access to water supply or sewage. Within the yard group, the most common sanitary area is the field toilet. (Figure 7)

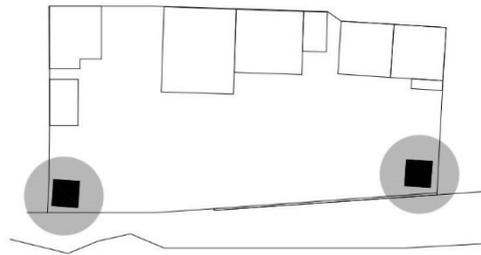


Figure 7. Position of field toilets

#### 4. AND THEN, WHERE ARE THE AGENTS OF CHANGE?

The sets of data obtained by this methodology are very diverse because they shed light on micro-level functioning in a special way. The micro level is a pure world of signals, it contains numerous indications for future actions, which are often unexpected. This interpretation of information, which is full of value, creates a wealth of possible choices. It narrows when the label becomes the meaning, that is, the definitive choice for inclusion in further steps. In this one urban contest, six topics were opened for further discussions about the possible steps that the Roma microenvironment carries in itself, and they concern regeneration. In order to directly indicate their meaning and potential that is worth thinking about, they were demonstrated through six recognized exhibition concepts of the recently concluded Biennale of Architecture and which, each in their own way, excellently indicated the thematization of possible choices. At this moment, exhibitions like this are especially important for this topic, because their impact is felt far beyond the physical walls and spaces in which they are located.

So, what can be considered as important when you are ‘an agent of change’?

**Reuse of secondary raw materials.** This topic of contemporary architectural practice and the social context in general, by which the Roma are forced to handle reflexively due to their social position, is considered one of the important topics in the regeneration process because it makes an important contribution to the maintenance of the urban fabric and towards developing a more cautious approach to urban renewal and the conservation of communities. The setting of the German pavilion is precisely the installation that was dedicated to the issues of care, rehabilitation and maintenance of the built stock. The entire setting of the German Pavilion was made from the rest of the settings of the previous Art Biennale also held in Venice in 2022. The architects wanted to point out the large amounts of waste material in order to promote the theme of material reuse as a socially responsible architectural principle. The concept also aims to shed light on contemporary debates over the existing building stock and the social practice of maintaining urban fabric. [5]

**Floors made from soil and the relation of built and unbuilt spaces.** What does soil and contact with the ground mean for us? The exhibition in Brazilian pavilion had focus on earth as the center of discussion, both as a poetic and a concrete element in the exhibition space. The curatorial team has proposed covering the entire pavilion with soil. This allowed the public to have direct contact with Terra. Earth as soil, fertilizer, floor and territory. But also, the earth in its global and cosmic sense, as a planet and common home of all life, human and non-human. Earth as memory, and also as the future, looking at the past and heritage to expand the field of architecture in the face of the most pressing contemporary urban, territorial and environmental issues. The architects actually wanted to use examples of socio-spatial practices of Indigenous and Afro-Brazilian knowledge about land and territory and their true relation towards the ground in order to enhance the importance of presence other narratives through architecture, landscapes, and neglected heritage within the architecture canon. [6]

**The size of the house.** How many "m<sup>2</sup>" are actually enough for us? Two excellent themes dealing with housing situations in cities were set by the creators of the Estonian and Singapore pavilions. The Estonian pavilion, with its setting, explores the contradiction between the use and the exchange value of living space. A regular occurrence in modern cities is reflected in the two opposites of the relationship between people and real estate. Housing is no longer only aimed at acquiring a place for a sense of stability as one's own intimate space or a place of family history, but has become an

investment; the primary purpose is to have more and more apartments, which affects their increasing demand, which conditions the increase in the price of real estate or rent. City centers abound with such investments where life itself has become redundant. The accumulation of houses that have owners but no tenants' points to the problem of the absence of restrictions on the square footage that an individual may own as an owner. [7]

The Singapore pavilion examines the other extreme in its specific segments: what do people think - when they really have enough? Visitors were asked to answer six questions that highlight the intangible characteristics of the city to encourage reflection on the traits that can elevate the urban environment. Visitors were choosing the ideal combination of characteristics to evoke their ideal habitat by navigating through various creative renderings, weighing their choices, and registering these values at the pavilion. This is a test methodology for future practice creators to know what measures must be taken to calibrate different entities, environments and dreams with the question of the sufficiency of architectural space. [8]

**Absence of fences, joint neighborhood, sense of community.** The installation of the Swiss Pavilion, titled "Neighbors," was a project focused on the spatial and structural proximity between the Swiss Pavilion and its Venezuelan neighbor. Artist Karin Sander and art historian Philip Ursprung point out the proximity of the Switzerland and Venezuela pavilions. Of all the pavilions in Giardini, they are the closest, separated by a wall. By temporarily removing the fence between these two pavilions, the authors pointed out several important things through the story of two sycamore trees that influenced the shape and proximity of both pavilions. First, the fence, that is, the wall, is above all a political act. In a broader sense, overcoming the conventional limits that we impose even in such a small space, what nature can tell us. Two sycamore trees grew side by side, one belonging to the Venezuela pavilion and the other to the Switzerland pavilion. When the Swiss sycamore had to be cut down, the Venezuelan one branched out even more, shading both yards. To whom then does the shade belong, if the tree belongs to one? And can the elements be more intelligently organized when fencing is not forced and when the connection between neighbors is more immediate and on multiple levels? The point is that with the joint action of the neighborhood, significant and more favorable solutions can be obtained that can have an impact on a wider social sense. [9]

**Field toilets.** The exhibition of the Finnish representation at the biennale critically evaluates the sanitary infrastructure in the context of the global freshwater shortage that has become a reality in Europe. Sanitary infrastructure is also linked to the possibility of renewing the cycle of nutrients in food production.

As a solution for places with low population density, the exhibition presents the modern dry toilet, Huussi, which is still a typical sanitary solution in remote locations and cottages in Finland. Questioning the undisputed position of the current water-based sanitation system, the exhibition aims to inspire architects to start looking for alternative solutions, also on an urban scale, to better serve the world we live in today. [10]

## 5. CONCLUSION

When it comes to climate change, most people do not know what they should do or believes that things that can be done are not enough, in regards to such a meaningful and omnipresent subject. However, believing that regeneration is something that life has always done, and we are also life, the thesis is that on the micro level exist conscious or unconscious gestures that still move the fight against climate change and this paper tries to shed a light on that, as a potential for future steps in regenerative strategies.

Lesli Luoco noticed that it is often said that culture is the sum total of the stories we tell ourselves, about ourselves. Whilst it is true, what is missing in the statement is any acknowledgement of who the 'we' in question is. In architecture particularly, the dominant voice has historically been a singular, exclusive voice, whose reach and power ignores huge swathes of humanity — financially, creatively, conceptually — as though we have been listening and speaking in one tongue only. The 'story' of architecture is therefore incomplete Not wrong, but incomplete [11]. Pointing out the importance of micro level is important because it encourages the common man that he is already on his way to make his contribution and that big deeds are not needed, but that even small gestures are big and have their significant share.

In particular case the fact that informal Romani settlements were created spontaneously in unbuilt parts of Belgrade, with no expert influence, and that they were formed by the Roma themselves, using their own knowledges and skills based on needs of everyday functioning of the community

and the individual has inestimable value. It is important to show that they are not exclusively places of social damnation but rather a valuable source of information about the lifestyle within which we can recognize and understand potential for each intervention to be adequate as well. Acknowledging the character of the physical structure of a culturally adjusted environment with integrated principles of regeneration has a dual effect: it pushes architecture towards a smarter, more sustainable future; and, it achieves the fulfillment of certain spatial needs which enable the development of a cultural identity, meaning the enabling of adequate conditions for a lifestyle acceptable to the Roma population.

## LITERATURE

- [1] H. Ferguson, *Self-Identity and Everyday Life*. Routledge, 8 Apr. 2009.
- [2] M. Grbić, et al. "Anthropological Understanding of Culture – the Key for Designing Romani Housing." *Open House International*, vol. 46, no. 1, 5 Nov. 2020, pp. 130–142, <https://doi.org/10.1108/ohi-07-2020-0078>. Accessed 13 Feb. 2024.
- [3] M. Grbić, and A. Nikezić. "Lifestyle as a Resource for Re-Structuring Romani Urban Housing." *Open House International*, vol. 42, no. 1, 1 Mar. 2017, pp. 95–101, <https://doi.org/10.1108/ohi-01-2017-b0014>. Accessed 17 Apr. 2022.
- [4] Eagleton, Terry. *The Idea of Culture*. Malden, Massachusetts, Blackwell Publishing, 2000.
- [5] "Open for Maintenance:" the German Pavilion at the 2023 Venice Biennale Is Curated by ARCH+ and Summacumfemmer Büro Juliane Greb." *ArchDaily*, 5 Apr. 2023, [www.archdaily.com/985234/arch-plus-and-summacumfemmer-buro-juliane-greb-selected-as-curators-of-the-german-pavilion-at-the-2023-venice-biennale](http://www.archdaily.com/985234/arch-plus-and-summacumfemmer-buro-juliane-greb-selected-as-curators-of-the-german-pavilion-at-the-2023-venice-biennale).
- [6] "Terra. Brazilian Pavilion at the 2023 Venice Biennale, Golden Lion for Best National Participation | the Strength of Architecture | from 1998." *Www.metalocus.es*, [www.metalocus.es/en/news/terra-brazilian-pavilion-2023-venice-biennale-golden-lion-best-national-participation](http://www.metalocus.es/en/news/terra-brazilian-pavilion-2023-venice-biennale-golden-lion-best-national-participation).
- [7] "Venice Biennale 2023 Estonian Pavilion: Home Stage." *B210*, [www.b210.ee/home-stage/](http://www.b210.ee/home-stage/). Accessed 13 Feb. 2024.
- [8] "WHEN IS ENOUGH, ENOUGH? The Performance of Measurement | Singapore Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2023." *Singaporepavilion.sg*, [singaporepavilion.sg/](http://singaporepavilion.sg/). Accessed 13 Feb. 2024.
- [9] "We're Turning Two Neighbours into an Exhibition." *Ethz.ch*, 19 May 2023, [ethz.ch/en/news-and-events/eth-news/news/2023/05/swiss-pavilion-in-venice-opens-wall-to-neighbour.html](http://ethz.ch/en/news-and-events/eth-news/news/2023/05/swiss-pavilion-in-venice-opens-wall-to-neighbour.html). Accessed 13 Feb. 2024.
- [10] "Finnish Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale "Declares the Death of the Flushing Toilet."" *Dezeen*, 17 May 2023, [www.dezeen.com/2023/05/17/finnish-pavilion-venice-architecture-biennale-toilet/](http://www.dezeen.com/2023/05/17/finnish-pavilion-venice-architecture-biennale-toilet/).
- [11] "Biennale Architettura 2023 | 18. Mostra." *La Biennale Di Venezia*, 27 Mar. 2023, [www.labiennale.org/it/architettura/2023/18-mostra](http://www.labiennale.org/it/architettura/2023/18-mostra). Accessed 13 Feb. 2024.

\* All drawings were made by the author during the research