

# Travelling Architecture: Vanishing heritage of Gypsy caravans in Poland

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## Abstract

The wandering Gypsy/Roma groups began arriving in the territory of Poland in the fifteenth century. Leading a nomadic life, they did not develop any form of a built house until the nineteenth century, until the first wooden caravans appeared. In the twentieth century, the architecture of Gypsy caravans began to thrive. They developed into several different forms of meticulously decorated wooden mobile houses. At the same time however, the introduction of a new law imposed a ban on wandering, which forced Gypsies to abandon their nomadic lifestyle. Deserted caravans gradually vanished from the landscape. This paper presents an inventory of original wagons based on the archives and literature studies, as well as on-site analysis of their structures and details. It proposes a hypothetical reconstruction drawing for one exemplary non-existent wagon illustrated in the archive photograph from the first decades of the twentieth century.

**Keywords:** Gypsy caravans, vernacular architecture, travelling architecture, mobile houses.

## Introduction

Vernacular architecture usually relates to a specific geographical context. It reveals how groups of people developed their own way of building culture and contributed to the transformation of landscapes. In such cases, a specific way of building deeply influences the characteristics of a particular territory. However, the evidence of ‘mobile knowledges’ (Della Dora, 2010) and ‘travelling landscapes’ (Nyka, 2018; Nyka and Szczepański, 2017) question the thesis that building culture is place-specific. The presence of Gypsy or Roma<sup>1</sup> wooden mobile houses, called caravans or wagons, only temporarily modified the image of towns and villages. Provisional settlements of these nomadic communities appeared and vanished unexpectedly. The introduction of a strict ban on wandering resulted in their confinement to one place. As a result, the scenes of colourful roving fleets of wagons observed in many towns and villages in Poland disappeared in the 70s. At this point, researchers realized how little they

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<sup>1</sup> The terms Gypsy and Roma are sometimes used interchangeably, particularly in countries where all Gypsy groups are of Romani ethnic origins. Although, according to some researchers (e.g. Kapralski, 2017) the term “Gypsy” was forcedly imposed on wandering groups by the non-Gypsy majority and should be replaced by the term “Roma”, which connotes the distinctive heritage of this diaspora (Gay y Blasco, 2002). The term Roma, however does not refer to numerous Gypsy groups, for example the Sinti. In literature, the two terms are used, e.g. David M. Crowe (1994). *A history of the Gypsies of Eastern Europe and Russia*; Guy W., (ed.) (2001). *Between Past and Future: the Roma of Central and Eastern Europe*, or G. Thorburn, J. Baxter (2010). *Travelling Art: Gypsy and Canal Barges*. In this paper, the authors use both terms without differentiation in reference to the Roma ethnic groups in Poland.

know about this mysterious ethnic group. Their customs, music, legends and moral code (*romanipen*) almost immediately wound up under investigation and critical reconstruction within anthropology, ethnography, cultural studies or linguistics (Ficowski, 1953, 1965; Mróz, 1966, 1979; Bartosz, 1967). Gypsy caravans, very specific mobile houses, became an object of interest for writers, poets, photographers and ethnologists, but not architects. Abandoned and deteriorating, they have remained for many years almost non-existent in the field of architectural research. In effect, nowadays, when only a few of them still remain, one may notice many gaps in studies on their dimensions, composition, ornamentation and scale of detail. Thus, the first objective of this paper is to present architectural drawings of Gypsy wagons to the wider community of researchers. It is aimed at proposing hypothetical reconstruction drawings of no-longer-existing wagons presented in archival photographs. Equally important is the discussion on the meaning of this architecture, focusing on how the Roma imagined their lives and perceived themselves in relation to the non-Roma majority.

### Gypsies in Poland – the historical background

Travelling Gypsy groups appeared in Europe in the medieval times (Ficowski, 1965, Crowe, 1994). As Lech Mróz (1995) points out, they were not an exception – the roads were full of different genres of wanderers: pilgrims, crusaders, refugees, and heretics escaping prosecution or people threatened by the outbreaks of plague. Their first reception was positive, but it changed very soon, when it became clear that this community was not going to settle down: “The wanderer is no longer a distinguished figure, a God-fearing pilgrim, but he has become transformed into a bum who avoids work and lives at the expense of others” (Mróz, 1995;242). As a result, Gypsies became the object of persecution, which was so severe that the whole history of their presence in Europe is closely interrelated with the history of the oppression they experienced in different countries (Fraser, 1992). Already in the sixteenth century, they were tortured, burned at the stake, expelled or victimised in many other ways, which was a consequence of acts and decrees issued in many countries, e.g. in Germany (1496, 1497, 1500, 1530, 1544, 1548, 1551, 1557), Spain (1499), France (1504, 1539, 1561, 1582), Holland (1524), Portugal (1525) and England (1530).

Wandering through Europe, they reached also the territories of Poland. The first wave of Gypsy migration, called *Bergitka* Roma appeared on the Polish roads at the beginning of the fifteenth century. They came mainly from Hungary escaping from disfavour imposed by the Habsburgs. Their nomadic tracks were limited to the proximity of the Carpathian Mountains. Another wave of migration involved Gypsies called *Polska* Roma, who came to Poland at the beginning of the sixteenth century as refugees from Germany, escaping from prosecution fostered by the new anti-Roma legal act issued in 1500 (Mróz, 1966). The youngest in the territories of Poland were Levari Roma and Kalderari Roma. In the second half of the nineteenth century, they fled from Romania, where they had regained freedom in 1855 after more than 300 years of slavery.

Already in the sixteenth century, Gypsies used simple wagons, but only as a means of transport, not as a dwelling (Mróz, 1979). Usually, wagons were bought from the local villagers, and they differed slightly in different regions, depending on the local building culture and tradition. In the nineteenth century, those simple wagons started to be covered by a kind of canopy. According to Jerzy Ficowski, the *Polska* Roma group almost until the middle of the twentieth century used wagons with canvas spread over a rounded wooden frame, or sometimes just bended tree branches. These types of wagons were called *vurden satrasa* by *Polska* Roma, or *harnevo* by *Kalderari* (Ficowski, 1965). Iconographic material confirms that at this point, Gypsies still preferred to stay overnight in their tents. At the same time, in the second half of the nineteenth century, small dwelling wagons called *amvago* became increasingly common. They were built on a wider platform than the common villagers' carts. Since they were used for both travelling and dwelling, they can be classified as the first of Gypsy mobile houses.

After the trauma of the Second World War (1939-1945) Gypsies undertook their wandering again. In the 60s and 70s of the twentieth century, the architecture of Gypsy caravans began to thrive. It developed into several different forms of meticulously built and

characteristically decorated wooden mobile houses. Unfortunately, Poland at those times suffered from the imposition of a communist regime. Local authorities could not afford to have groups of people with no legal names and addresses – wandering eluded the concept of a fully controlled state. An action toward the forced settlement of the Gypsies began in 1952, when the government issued a resolution on “help for the Gypsy population in transition to a settled lifestyle” (Bartosz, 1967). Very soon, however, the program turned out to be very radical. Members of the Roma families were forbidden to wander, and were given documents with random names and approximate dates of birth. Subsequent decrees strengthened the pressure on the Gypsies to settle even further (Drużyńska, 2015). Adam Bartosz (1967) marks the year 1964 as the end of the Gypsy nomadic lifestyle in Poland. In fact, Gypsy caravans appeared on Polish roads until the 70s and even 80s of the twentieth century. Forcibly stopped, the Gypsy families were offered low quality flats or temporary barracks for seasonal workers (Bartosz, 1967). With no education and no earning prospects, they found themselves very soon at the margin of society (Guy, 2001). Immobilised wagons put aside deteriorated with the passing seasons. In some of them, families had lived for years without any access to electricity or water supply. Many owners, who discovered they would never return to wandering, just burnt their mobile houses.



**Fig. 1:** Gypsy wagon dated about 1930

Source: National Digital Archive (Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe, signature NAC 1-P-2316-

The ban on wandering brought about a deep trauma for the Roma people and until today it is still considered by this community as a tragedy. Roman Kwiatkowski, one of the ancestors of the Roma culture, points out that wandering was the essence of the Roma tradition and their identity; all the customs, legends and beliefs were related to journeys (Polakowski, 1967). Travelling architecture of Gypsy wagons was an inherent part of this tradition. Despite this fact, abandoned wagons have remained for many years almost unnoticed by architects and were not present as an object of architectural investigation. The enquiry into archives and libraries did not reveal any architectural drawings depicting the structure, cross-sections or façades of Gypsy wagons used in Poland. In 1966 Lech Mróz wrote: "The settled Gypsies are scattered all over the country, but groups of wandering Gypsies are spread even more irregularly. Their routes include a dense network covering all regions" (Mróz, 1966, p. 178). Today, there are no wandering Gypsies in Poland. The architectural heritage of their houses is in fact a vanishing heritage.

## Literature review

Literature studies have provided necessary insight into the tradition of the Gypsy communities in Poland. Jerzy Ficowski's books (Ficowski, 1953, 1965, 1989) offer a precious source of information on customs, beliefs, legends, clothes, dwellings and many other aspects of Gypsy life. Lech Mróz, researcher and ethnographer, spent years discovering the culture of the Roma groups, such as Bergitka Roma, Polska Roma, Loverari and Kalderari, who had found their home in Poland, (Mróz, 1966, 1979, 1995, 2005, 2007). His research paper 'Gypsy wagons' (Mróz, 1979) is an exceptional source of information on the history of the appearance of caravans on the Polish roads and also their evolution. The author provides descriptions of wagons encountered in Poland, and locates them in the broader context of wagons seen in other countries, like those in Germany, Britain, and Romania. The photographs by Andrzej Polakowski included in the album "Farewell to Caravans" provide further insight into the everyday life of Gypsy families just after the moment they were forced to settle down (Polakowski, 1967). Glimpses of the Polska Roma life during the time they were still wandering were found in the photographs of Janusz Helfer (Helfer, 2005).

Jerzy Ficowski, based on his experiences of travelling with the nomadic Roma community in 1948-1950, points out that they used to have three different types of houses, known in the Polska Roma language as *Kher*. Their first and oldest house was a tent, named by Polska Roma *satra*, and by Kerderi Roma as *cerha*. It consisted of several sheets of linen with wooden supporting poles and pegs. Another house was a shelter where they stayed during the winter – this could have been a big and heavy wagon or a rented flat. Such heavy wagons, usually bought from the rambling circus troops, were too heavy for travelling so they were located in one place. When necessary, they were transported to another location by means of rail transport or with the support of tractors. The third type of Gypsy house was a mobile wagon, called by Kerderi *amvago*, used both for living and for wandering (Ficowski, 1965). This mobile house is one of the most emblematic symbols identifying the Gypsy community. Leszek Mróz (Mróz, 1979) analysing the history of the Gypsy wagons in Europe, points out that only the caravans in Britain could compete with the beauty of mobile houses that used to appear on the Polish roads. At the same time, with the exception of a few photographs, there is scarcely any material available for any comparative architectural studies. Photographs usually illustrate the everyday life scenes of Gypsy families with wagons appearing only randomly in the background. In effect, the mobile houses could be seen only from one perspective, whereas many details and decorative motifs are only partially visible. Due to the scarcity of visual materials and the lack of interest, the architectural drawings of historical wagons have never been presented.

## Materials and Methods

The research is based on the comparative studies of two groups of materials: archive photographs and inventory of the original Gypsy wagons currently in the possession of the Ethnological Section of the Tarnów Regional Museum. The authors of this paper used different archive resources for an introductory comparative analysis. Particularly interesting were those photographs found in the National Digital Archive (NAC) illustrating the Gypsy wagons dated to the years 1918-1939. These are the oldest photographs of the dwelling type of wagons used in Poland. The project continued with a survey of the original Gypsy caravans dated from 60s and 70s of the twentieth century that are currently in the possession of the Ethnological Section of the Tarnów Regional Museum. The survey identified five wagons that were judged to have potential for further comparative studies. On the basis of observations and measurements, the authors were able to produce architectural in-scale inventory drawings of these wagons, choosing two examples for publication in this research paper. The in-situ analysis, as well as the inventory, allowed the authors to recognize the characteristics of the wagons' function, structure, material, detail and ornamentation, as well as determine the size of the wagons' platforms, the span of wheels and other details of construction.

Subsequently, the same types of wagons were identified in historic photographs from the 50s, 60s and 70s of the twentieth century. The next step was the restitution of dimensions of the photographed wagons with the use of the AutoCAD computer programme. Namely, these

photographs were imported to the AutoCAD programme, which allowed the authors to build 3D models and establish the approximate dimensions and proportions of the photographed wagons and their details. Results confirmed that this method of digital restitution is reliable since the received dimensions were the same as the dimensions of the existing measured wagons; the differences were less than 5%. This allowed for preparing a hypothetical reconstruction drawing for one exemplary non-existent wagon illustrated in the archive photograph from the first decades of the twentieth century (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1:** Gypsy wagon dated about 1930

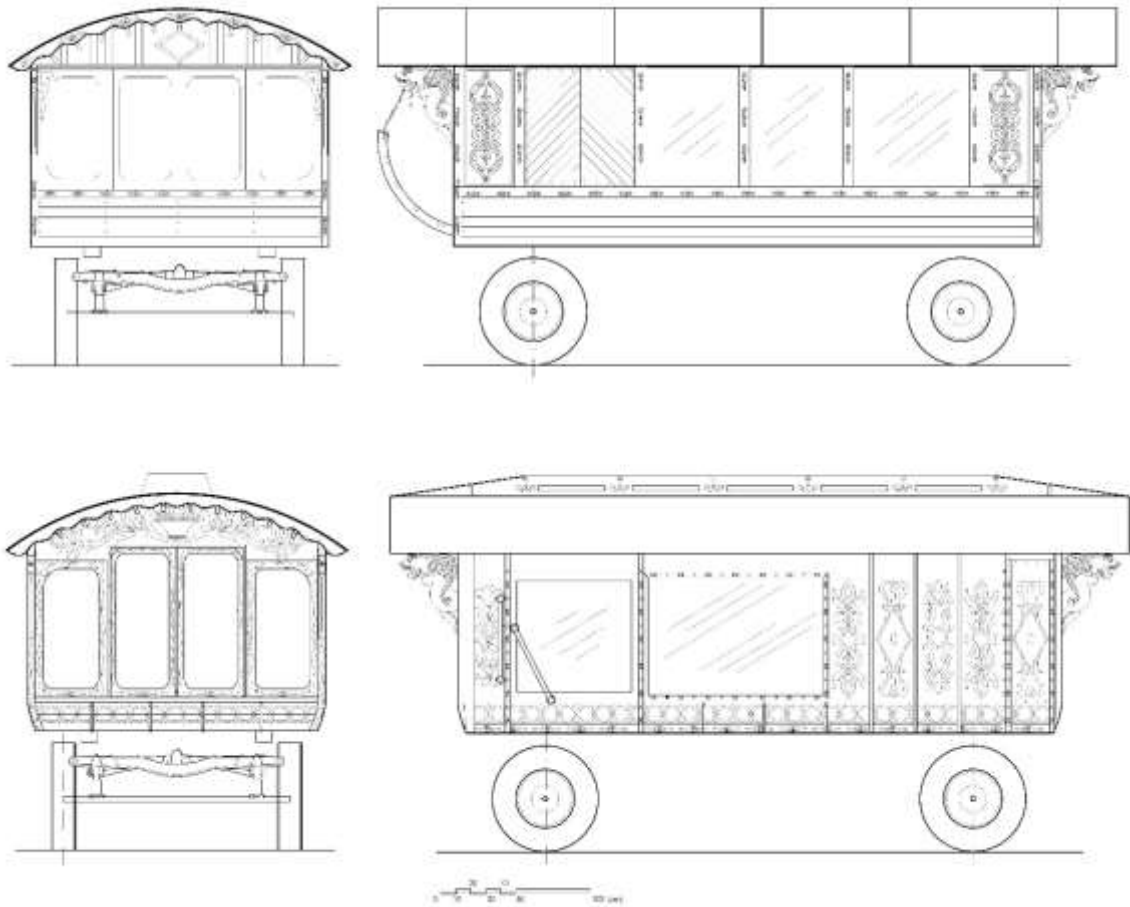
Source: National Digital Archive (Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe, signature NAC 1-P-2316-2)

### **Architectural characteristics of the Gypsy caravans in Poland**

Despite the meticulous detail and rich ornamentation of the Roma caravans, the history of their appearance is no more than 150 years old (Mróz, 1979). In the middle of the twentieth century, several types of Gypsy mobile houses of different shapes and construction could be encountered on Polish roads. The first type was a simple vehicle with a canvas stretched over a rounded frame; it was already used in the nineteenth century (*urden satrasa*, *harnevo*). The second group were old carriages very often bought from former owners and painted with different colours. The subtype within this group were new vehicles built to resemble historical carriages, but with the use of different materials. A good example of this is a fully glass vehicle built on the pattern of an historical carriage and photographed in 1955. The third type was a wagon in the shape of elongated cuboid (*amvago*), built specifically for the purpose of transportation and also dwelling for Gypsy families. It was a timber-frame construction on wheels, a kind of mobile house with a roof, windows, and door. In the first half of the twentieth century, wooden wheels were used, but in the middle of the twentieth century, they were often changed to more convenient rubber ones.

Inventory studies reveal that Gypsy wagons were built on a rectangular platform with a width of 185-216 centimetres and length of 390-425 centimetres. Both photographic material, written descriptions and on-site inventory studies confirm the basic architectural components, which are mostly the same in Gypsy wagons (Fig. 2). In the front part of this mobile house, there was a wide window composed of three parts, with the wider middle part being easy to open by sliding wings. When the window was open, it was possible to ride the horses from the interior. The corners of the front window wings were usually rounded; however, in some of the simple wagons they are rectangular. The wagon was accessible through the doors located on

the longer wall, usually on the left side close to the carters' stool. The upper part of the doors was glassed, which allowed for an unobstructed view. The construction was covered with a slightly bowed roof.



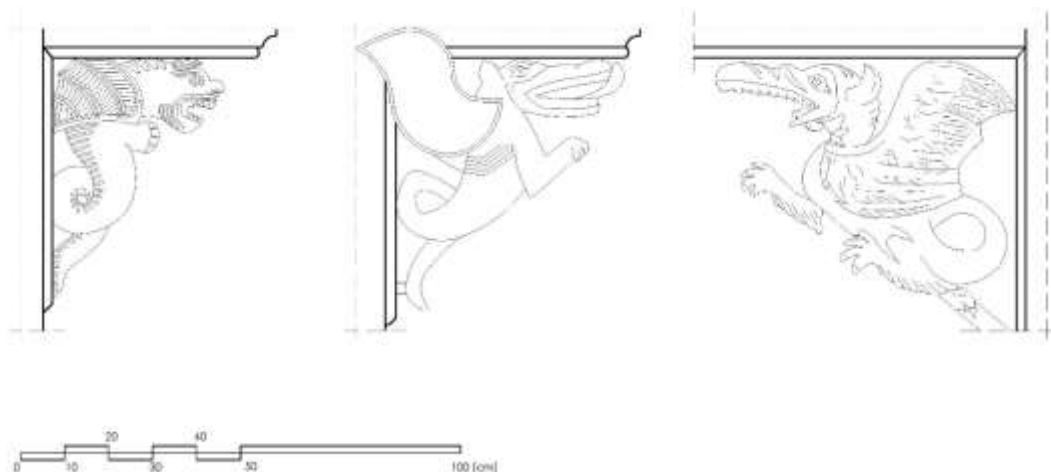
**Fig. 2:** Inventory drawing presenting two façades of Gypsy wagons. Tarnów Regional Museum

Source: Agnieszka Szuta, Jakub Szczepański, Lucyna Nyka, in-situ inventory drawing, 2018

The composition of side and rear façades could vary. Two or three windows line both sides of the wagon. The windows were located closer to the front part of the wagon, but in some cases disposed evenly through the whole length of the side façade. In that case, relatively narrow, about 50 centimetre wide rectangular wooden panels were left on both ends of the side façade. In the rear end of the wagon, there was storage accessible through the narrow doors located at the rear façade or from both sides of the wagon. In case of the absence of such a storage space, the wagons were equipped with a wooden ladder-like structure used for transportation of additional things, mostly hay for horses. The majority of wagons built after 1945 were delicately widening in the cross-section, extending the width of the bottom platform. Some of them however remained straight with vertical walls. These kinds of wagons repeat the construction of the historical ones, as seen in photographs from the years 1918-39.

Almost all the surfaces of the wagon that were not glassed, were decorated. Outer walls covered with wooden panels were painted, curved and ornamented. Many floral and animal motifs seem to be deeply embedded in the world of Roma myths and legends. In some wagons, the narrow wooden slats attached to the construction frame formed geometrical patterns accentuated with rhythmical arrangements of trims and screws. According to the archival photographic material, the arrangement of wooden slats could differ, which was probably

related to different building cultures presented in particular workshops. In all wagons, the corner, horizontal and vertical trims, as well as the wooden panels, were decorated with paintings and carvings, usually floral. Sometimes rhomboidal mirrors were attached to the façades. Sculptured figures of imaginary gryphons or dragons were supporting the protruding roof of the wagon. Although all of the wagons exposed in the Regional Museum of Tarnów were decorated with the same shape of these creatures, the study of historical photographs reveal that they took many other forms (Fig.3).



**Fig. 3:** Inventory drawing (left) and reconstructions (centre and right) of sculptured figures supporting the protruding roof of Gypsy wagons.

Source: Agnieszka Szuta, Jakub Szczepański, Lucyna Nyka, in-situ inventory drawing, 2018.

The interior of the wagon resembled a small one-room house. In the front part of the room, there was a living space with a stool for the driver, a manual brake protruding from the floor nearby, a stove with chimney exhaustion pipe, and sometimes a table. As photographs reveal, it was a very flexible space used for preparing food and other household activities, such as sewing, playing with children and entertaining. The rear part of the room was a bedroom. There is no photographic material revealing the presence of a bed, so presumably, in most cases the floor covered with rugs and quilts served the family for sleeping. The bent ceiling was usually covered with paintings, very often resembling a sky with stars. Walls were decorated with different kinds of floral ornamentation, sometimes photographs or devotional items. In some wagons, elongated roof fanlights gave way for additional light.

The inventory drawings allowed the recognition of architectural components and provided the necessary information in respect of the scale of the wagon, the size of the bottom platform, the track of wheels and the scale of detail. Comparative analysis of the inventory, texts and photographic material offered a key for developing the hypothetical reconstruction drawings of the exemplary historical wagons presented in archive photographs. For this exemplary reconstruction, a wagon dated from the 30s of the twentieth century was chosen (Fig. 4). This reconstructive study indicates that already in the first decades of the twentieth century, Gypsy wagons were fully developed architectural forms with meticulously disposed detail and ornamentation.





**Fig. 4:** Exemplary reconstruction of the historical Gipsy wagon

Source: Agnieszka Szuta, Jakub Szczepański, Lucyna Nyka, in-situ inventory drawing, 2018.

## Conclusions

With the end of the nomadic lifestyles of Roma communities in Poland, colourful caravans disappeared from the roads. Abandoned by their owners, they silently deteriorated and finally vanished from the landscape, both in the physical and metaphorical sense. In effect, the most emblematic symbols of Roma material culture were almost lost. Due to the Tarnów Regional Museum initiative, which was the first of its kind in Europe, several wagons have been restored and exposed to the public. This gave an opportunity for developing basic architectural documentation and provided additional data, which were indispensable for the critical reconstruction of the historic caravans used in Poland. Further architectural investigations shall lead toward creating a comprehensive catalogue of Gypsy wagons used in Poland in the nineteenth and the twentieth century.

Architectural studies of wagons offer interesting insights into the material dimensions of the daily life and culture of nomadic Gypsy communities. Studies reveal that wagons were decorated in a very specific way, conveying a message of being both 'in' and 'outside' the surrounding non-Gypsy culture. The composition of narrow slots, trims, woodcarving, the shape of windows and the use of shutters, seem to directly follow the patterns present in vernacular wooden houses built in some regions of Poland. In one of the archival photographs, the glass painting on the front window presents a pot with a flower, with a line of white curtains that seem to hang above it (photo NAC, signature 1-P-2316-2). Such motifs demonstrate how much the inhabitants of caravans were trying to find references between their mobile home and traditional houses they passed while travelling. On the other hand, wagons were painted with bright colours and abundantly decorated to be distinguished from the surrounding. This visual differentiation and isolation, like the cultural one, imposed by *romanipen*, could be interpreted as a strategy for building strong ethnic identification within the prevailing environment of the non-Gypsy majority. As it appears, the urge towards both assimilation and differentiation triggered a very specific building culture, which reached its apogee in the form of a Gypsy caravan. This meticulously decorated masterpiece of woodcraft could be considered travelling architecture that only temporarily changed the images of local landscapes, but left long lasting memories, and still provokes reflections on diversified cultures and lifestyles.

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