

**ARCHITECTURE AS A POLITICAL
COMMUNICATION TOOL**

AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF BUCHAREST

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*To my parents,
for the enthusiasm with which they supported my every endeavor.*

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

Intro.....	7
CHAPTER 1.....	9
The city and city branding.....	11
Architecture as communication.....	18
Architecture as a political tool.....	23
Regime avatars.....	34
CHAPTER 2.....	44
Bucharest's Eastern heritage.....	49
Traits of a nation.....	53
Turning to the West.....	61
The becoming of Little Paris.....	77
The shift from Europeanist	

beliefs to autohton social thought.....	83
Authoritarian doses.....	97
Communism (1): Stalinist imports.....	113
(2): Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej.....	121
(3): Nicolae Ceausescu.....	133
(4): The cult of personality.....	143
1977 and its aftermath.....	149
CHAPTER 3.....	177
Sprawl and its friends.....	182
Icon makeovers.....	203
Post-communism and modern identity making:	
The Gypsy Palaces.....	240
Epilogue.....	259
Bibliography.....	265

INTRO

This project started as an incursion into the world of City Branding in Eastern European Capitals. However, the bibliography revealed a field closely interconnected with marketing, public diplomacy and politics, and not an evident rich enough from an architectural point of view. It thus became metamorphosised and explored the precise role of building in the entire process. Due to an expanding pool of research, it found itself tracking modern day city branding through history (the first chapter) and in order to offer a more concise view on the phenomenon an empirical study was introduced (the second chapter). The last part, hindered by the lack of the same historical distance as the previous chapters, presents itself more in the form of a collection of present day observations in the search for patterns which might generate the modern branding phenomenon.

Besides its more academic goals, this project has also offered me an insight into the architectural and urban nuances of my past and led to better understanding on just how deep political forces influence the built environment around. It has been a highly rewarding quest, one which I hope to further pursue in the years to come.

With this occasion, I would like to thank my promoter Geoffrey Grulois for the support he has offered not only for this project but also throughout the years that i have spent in Brussels and Nadia Casabella for her precious advice in times of need. I would also like to thank the entire establishment of ISACF La Cambre for providing the framework in which I grew through my studies.

ICON MAKEOVERS

GUIDEBOOKS PAINT THE PICTURE OF A CRAZED DICTATOR ALWAYS IN search of monumental size and Guinness book records when trying to build the most representative urban ensemble of his totalitarian career. Long enumerations of figures concerning more than impressive quantities of marble, decorations or even the workforce are apparently the most important heritage the Victoria Socialismului Boulevard managed to leave. But beyond the touristic info, on the ground, it does not represent a victorious portrayal of a long ago regime, but still an all too familiar reminder of the starvation, terror and repression of the communist years. Passionate voices right after the revolution aftermath claimed the people's house, not even completed at the time, should be demolished. But beyond its rich political meaning, what do the boulevard and the house itself still inspire today? What kind of impact does its 6 centimeters longer than the Champs-Elyse's' length and supposed monometallic finish have?

I was indeed born under communist, but as my 4th birthday was

celebrated in the midst of the revolution, my memories are few and the reluctance of my family to recall those past years made it hard to have a very complete image of what was going on at the time. Of course, 20 years later, both the media and my family started opening up. A bit too late one might say, as memories faded and distance to the events already took their toll. But my interest grew not only because of my architecture studies but also since my parents moved into an apartment on the famous strip in 2003 making me have direct everyday contact with the one street in the country whose name everyone knows. To me it's not the dream set in stone by a crazy dictator. For me it's simply home; a home with really low ceilings, noisy pipes and almost no neighbors. These apartments on the nowadays Unirii boulevard were initially destined to belong to the families of the militias at the time and were envisaged as the best of the best. But the best amongst the terrible reality of collective apartment buildings of the communist years means no more than decent sized rooms and a doorman at the entry.

So in this context of neighborhood familiarity and flaming texts of architects glad to finally be living in capitalist Romania, I consider important to take a second look at this boulevard. Starting from the Alba Iulia square, directly facing the people's house at the end of the long still so communist looking strip, I was intent on isolating those architectural elements that were supposed to speak of the socialist ideology, while in the same time trying to ignore the lure of the many coffee places and hip stores that have sprouted up on the Decebal Boulevard, one of the two arms that break off from the boulevard at this national symbolic round about. I focused instead on the falling plaster decorations stuck on the buildings. The so-called national symbols, which in reality come from an aberrant mix of elements starting with the Stalinist architecture and

going all the way to the post-modern architect Stefano Boeri - in vogue at the time in Europe proved to be restrained to mere geometrical shapes engraved in the plaster, a minimalist modern translation of monumental orders.

The perfectly round plaza, with its many banks, hairdresser salons and dance schools tucked at the ground floor of the apartment buildings, lacks the majestic feel that the People's House axial counterpart was supposed to have had. One of the reasons, not taking into account simply bad urban planning, is that the mantelpiece that was initially designed for it, the statue of the Victory of Socialism that would proudly look at the magnificent communist giant across the boulevard, is missing. The whole space is now a simple greenish roundabout and a private parking. The apartment buildings themselves are rising adamantly to frame the space in a perfect circle but achieve nothing more. It is the modest start for a boulevard with such pretensions.

In the wider context of the city, excluding of course the communist housing districts which present the same particularity but in a special disturbing way, this uniformity contrast strongly with the 'normal' hybrid character of Bucharest. When he was set about building it, Ceausescu intended to forge an imperial alley, mark of monumental historical moments that the country never had. It is the only area in the city center which is a continuous one-source-only architectural strip. The Arsenalului hill on which his 'palace' was placed had long been courted to house monumental edifices, churches or military headquarters alike. Due to the interest in this area since the 20's, the majority of terrains had remained in state property, making the expropriations need for the plans of Ceausescu all the easier. Many architects still lived under the impression that with the right words and attitude they will get the

vicinity of the republics house, as it was called in past time, itself.

Today, the urban center which was supposed to give life to the entire ensemble, made up of a department store, the national library and the new headquarters for the state opera, are either absent as construction was halted at the revolution, or completely refurbished in a plastic like fashion which is a reminder of the bad office spaces of the 90's. The department store turned tribunal but the library, after serving 20 years as sets for movies which required neo-classical ruins to act as a meaningful backdrop, is finally being finished. The two constructions appear as aliens onto the boulevard and the unity that they were supposed to have has been shattered by the new shells of corporate inspiration. The opera had remained just a foundation and it is the reason why the center of Bucharest is still the owner of vast area able to support huge developments right in the center. Many have tried to develop this land, including the almost successful Esplanada project, but all failed due to the uncertainty regarding the ownership of the land on one hand and a law passed in the late 90's which trying to enforce an international urban design competition, protected the communist civic center from developments not in sync with the winning project.

Walking past this vast loose urban space we quickly end up in the Unirii Square, the cross point between the new boulevard and the old north-south axis of the city. Here, after intense demolitions of city icons, a patch of rectangular green space has been inserted and flanked by the same rigorous housing blocks that already accompanied out walk on the boulevard. The presence not so far of the old city has been almost erased, just like the Dambovita River which is hidden under the concrete slab of the square. This place, another example of vast nothingness, is at least at times put to good use. It was here that on the 1st of December 2007,

dictator to build their way. But when on a site visit to the Arsenalului hill, he noticed that the 17 floor tower in nearby Nations Square was too visible, he declared that the palace will be built on top of the hill, instead of the base as it was initially planned, while also demanding the creation of the long boulevard on which I am walking today. The initial 18 teams demanded to individually design the new center were excited that 'the mad man' was giving them such a unique opportunity, but never envisioned the development going beyond the Unirii Square. The solutions articulated by more experienced architects were ignored and a collective of young professionals, lead by the unknown 28 year old architect Anca Petrescu, chosen as the winning team, mainly for her docile acceptance of the dictators comments. Her solution was on the urban scale, probably the cheapest and most effective one. The creation of a long boulevard, flanked by repetitive housing blocks was shielding with Potemkin tactics the tissue of the old city behind.

The size of the boulevard is thus truly impressive. The width of the boulevard, 20 meters wider than the Champs Elysees - its direct competitor, is carefully divided between 6 lanes of circulation, patches of green, rows of densely leaved trees and enough space for people and parked cars to arbitrarily negotiate space. But for the pretensions of a space so monumental that it crushes the individual into a mass, it is surprisingly serene. This maybe also because the buildings framing it, placed like theater decoration, are around 10 levels high and offer quite a soft urban feel to the street section. It does not weigh heavily upon the passersby, plus the ground floors all have a generous two storey high commercial spaces, remnant more of chic Paris feel than stalinistic heritage. A much more oppressing place could be considered plaza d'Espagna in Madrid, with its towering building hovering over the small



green plaza in the middle. And that space too, with its 140 and 117 meter tall towers, was a product of an authoritarian ruler being built at the end of Franco's isolation regime after 1953.

Back to Bucharest though, according to the building rules created in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake of 1977, the homogenous three kilometer long boulevard had to split its apartment buildings into 40 meter slices. As one might imagine, this 40 meter urban module should have been replicated. Since the boulevard itself does not impress through the height of its buildings as the Karl Marx allee does in Berlin, or even the void that they frame, their only other alternative is to form a homogenous looking wall guiding the attention onwards, towards the People's house. And yet, thinking that there is kilometer repetition of the same architectural element is false. Although keeping with the slightly towering elements that provide a rudimentary animation of facades, the details and decoration are different every time. This could also be a result of the fact that the boulevard mostly had unfinished structures at the time of the revolution than actual buildings and that they have been slowly completed in time by a varied array of actors. But even amongst those finished before 1989 the stylistic differences are already present. For those buildings still intact to the original design, it can be noticed that there is a gradient of decoration on the boulevard, ranging from geometric abstraction of the classical vocabulary in piazza Alba Iulia, which is diluted more and more. As we distance ourselves from it, only to regain detail profusion in the immediate vicinity of the people's house. Here the decoration leaves the realm of the abstract is defined by the Corinthian capitals and other such classical elements. It is interesting to note that despite the attempts to interpret classicist decoration, elements of modernity have inserted the boulevard decoration but not in the

seemed like half of the city's population conglomerated in the evening. In reality there were around only 70,000 people, but it is already an exceptional event since the Romanians are rarely interested or capable of organizing mass gatherings, exception being the still questionable revolution. This time however it wasn't discontent bringing them there, but a need for public entertainment. On this particular national day, the authorities decided to install the tallest Christmas tree in Europe. Flamboyant decorations for the holiday season was nothing new for the capital and never caused mass gatherings of this type. It is therefore somewhat understandable that everyone, including or especially the authorities, were taken by surprise. The metro stops in the immediate vicinity were overwhelmed as it took some people 45 minutes just to exit the stations, the circulation had to be completely halted in the entire center and more than 40 children got lost from their parents due to the agglomeration. Luckily for the lack of preparation for this event, all the families were quickly reunited and no major incident reported. And judging from the interminable waves of camera flashes and subsequent blog posts the following day, most enjoyed the lighting of the tree, even amidst the overwhelming crowds.

Normally, the events in this otherwise useless patch of grass, are not such an outstanding success. Winter greets the inhabitants of Bucharest with make-shift Christmas markets and bumpy skating rings, while in the summer, unless some type of beer festival takes place, passersby mostly avoid it. In the former communist times, this was not a popular gathering place. Here, at the shadow of the Unirii Shopping center, responsible to this day for most of the animation on the square's edges, lay a serene, neon advertisement septic urban space. The demolitions that were needed to make way for this entire part of the city to take place uprooted in a

way the soul of the square. Today, the events taking place here and their surprise appeal to the public stand however testimony of the interest of the inhabitants still sometimes have for the urban gathering space.

Walking further down the Unirii Boulevard, in the last segment just before the People's House, I am surprised to find an almost abandoned state of the commercial areas. If before the Unirii Square, an informal banking district and many upscale furniture shops have inserted themselves, here, in seemingly identical commercial conditions, or even better due to the vicinity of the House, everything is void. The contrast gets even higher since here and further on in the Constitution Square, the homologue of Alba Iulia, is the preferred place for free concerts, festivals and New Year's Eve celebrations. Using the People's house as a backdrop, the sheer size of the plaza in front is a perfect setting for such events. With the occasion of the 1999 total solar eclipse, when Bucharest was lucky enough to enjoy a perfect visibility, Luciano Pavarotti gave here a breathtaking concert. The pricey 2 million lei tickets were still quickly snatched up, but many were allowed to take part for free and the audience grew to 50,000 people. Foreign tourists declared feeling overwhelmed by the eclipse, the concert and the breathtaking venue itself. Taking all these events into count, even if I am probably one of the few people on this part of the boulevard at this time, I understand that this space has only two conditions: either over packed or completely empty. The strange thing is that in some respects it is a sort of a second city center of the capital and its location would normally spur intense commercial development.

Further on, as the Constitutiei square and its' parking in front sits quietly and half, it looks as if it is opening for us with the apparent single purpose of giving room to breathe to the overinflated dimensions of the

People's House. In summer, for pedestrians, it is here that the first real visual contact is made, as the many trees lining the boulevard hide not only the other side of the street but also its megalomaniac end, the house suddenly opening up without warning. At first glance, it is neither too tall, nor too impressive. The heritage from the Stalinist model which gave birth to Scanteii house, kept this administrative building from extending vertically too much, as to not resemble the vial capitalist symbol of the skyscraper. Its Guinness world record was obtained by its impressive horizontal span which is perceived frontally and overwhelmingly from the square. Its overall dimensions are 240 by 270 linear meters, a total surface of 330,000 square meters organized in 20 storeys, 8 of which are underground. It sits layered like a cake on the top of a crisp artificial hill which acts like a plateau at the end of a ceremonial avenue built by the last totalitarian rule in²⁸. It does not draw from other similar European experiences, like the Berlin of Speer or the piascentin EUR. Unlike Hitler, who had a passion for the arts and a dedication to architecture or Musolinni and his conflicting attraction towards both modernism and Caesar Augustus²⁹, Ceausescu had no architectural preference for a style. His references were more along the line of the North Korean communist reality of Kim Il Sung, whom he had visited in the 1970's or Saddam Hussein. The Ryugyong hotel, a 105-floor skyscraper still under construction for the last 30 years in Pyongyang, is yet another super-sized example of the similitude between the Romanian and north Korean dictatorships. The 'Mother of all battles mosque' that Saddam Hussein built 20 kilometers outside Bagdad, has the same '*gaudy shapes and the reduction of an intricate decorative tradition to a cartoon*'³⁰ that

28 Celac M., Carabela O., Marcu-Lapadat M., *Bucharest, architecture and modernity*, Bucharest: Simetria, 2005, p.76

29 Sudjic, Deyan, op.cit, p.1

30 ibidem

the People's house also has, as it is the result of trying – and failing - to be '*simultaneously modern and respectfully rooted in the past*'³¹. The modern references on this autochthon production are said to revolve around the Spanish post-modern architect – at the time – Stefano Boeri, who was popular amongst the young Romanian architects, but the official speech claimed that entire ensemble was inspired by nationalistic symbols of pure Romanian origin.

Its' simple geometric outline holds nothing remarkable by itself, being a less vertically ambitious version of the Stalinist model that gave birth to the Scanteii house, the Romanian version of Boris Iofan or the Seven Sisters of Moscow. Its intricately ornate inside and outside was to be surrounded by a vast empty forest-like pasture, a private palace garden equivalent in scale to the house itself. Today, this stretch of bare land meant to exhibit the ambitious build to the city is nowadays mainly left derelict. Only in front of the house are the trees trimmed and the grass watered. The rest of the 'domain' is left the crows to inhabit, joined by piles of garbage, construction materials or parking spaces. Its decorations and window perforations try to break the colossus and bring it down to human scale by offering some sort of general texture to the building and this manage to enhance even more the 'harmless' feeling the giant gives, only its size making some be inspired with awe.

For about half an hour already, I am strolling along the interminable cemetery like fence of the house that through a height of only 2 meters magically manages to hide the entire construction behind. This unpleasant perimeter march I am making, squished between a road and a blind wall, with the sole urban companion of the ruins of the



Romanian Academy, or the former palace of Ceausescu's wife, Elena, is in the hope that I will eventually reach a recent development in the programmatic and aesthetic composition of the House. Back in 2004, with the support of the government - and its funding - the new national museum for contemporary art, or MNAC, was to be opened in the A4 wing of the palace, literally the backyard of the Romanian Parliament. If it hadn't been for the revolution in 1989, Ceausescu and his wife would have drunk their morning coffee here, as it would be a part of their private apartments.

The feelings of the people towards the House have varied in the 90's from the utter disgust of the intellectuals derived from memories of urban, human and economic sacrifice for a building that only meant something from a communist ideology point of view, to the awe and pride which many of the visitors expressed in those early post-revolution days. Passions ran high as no one knew what to do with the building. Demolition, everyone's favorite option was impossible, due to the scale and resources invested in the building. After some years of debate and with an almost natural decision, the new democratic parliament moved in. The decision was based more on practical reasons regarding space availability, than any ideological effort to reinvest a communist symbol with new democratic values. As time passed, idea competitions kept taking place regarding the future of the new communist civic center, but no other large scale interventions had been made on the house, except the careful assignment of a constant flow of resources to finish the construction. So when the Nastase administration decided to offer a part of the edifice for the headquarters of the new national contemporary art museum or MNAC, it opened the long overdue discussion regarding the symbolic meaning the edifice has or could attain in the future.



Frankly, the MNAC did not choose to be placed at such a controversial location. Other sites had been previously proposed, like a 1930's Horia Creanga edifice at the Obor Square, or the construction of an entirely new edifice that would correspond to the need of exhibiting contemporary art in the 21st century. But the government had not magically decided one day that they need a new museum and started to figure out what the best solution for its coming to life would be. Instead the cultural society was pressuring the state to give a platform that would support the already struggling artists. Since space was sufficient, the house being 30% empty all of the time, the government thought it had found an inexpensive compromise that would please everyone. In reality, the sums necessary for the reconversion of the A4 wing into a museum would have been suffice for the construction of an entirely independent building. But rather than letting the opportunity to pass by, knowing well that it might be years before another might appear, the director of the future museum, Mihai Oroveanu, made the tough choice of accepting the offer made by the Romanian prime minister and placed the underrepresented contemporary artistic scene in the former communist palace³².

The new museum would take up only 4% of House, or 10,000 square meters, more or less half of the MAXXI in Rome, and in the lack of funds to acquire a permanent collection it would function as a laboratory showcasing temporary international exhibitions. This would be the first museum in modern Romanian history ever financed by the state itself. The other similar institutions Bucharest has, have always been started at the private initiative of art patrons such as Zambaccian and others³³.

32 Celac, Mariana, *Before and after MNAC – at the People's House*, in The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest, 2004, p.65

33 Oroveanu, Mihai, in The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest, 2004, p.20

This time, when it came for the second major state financed architectural statement, the architect chosen was once again Adrian Spirescu which was gracious enough to offer me an interview³⁴ and an insider view on the entire affair.

The discussion started from afar as I was also interested in his broader view of the architectural phenomenon in the capital as for the last 20 years he had been involved in most of the big opportunities.

E.C.: What do you consider as a professional involved in many important projects, the key moments in architecture and urban planning over the past 20 years since the fall of communism?

A.S.: Well, this is such a vast subject and has so many ramifications, not only in the architectural sphere, but also in the social one that it is difficult to give a short concise answer. Over the last 20 years I have seen so many nuances that I really have no thought of making a retrospect of my architectural activity, or let's say their counterpoint in the changes society was going through. But if I know reflect a bit, immediately after the 90's came a time when there were intense construction in the banking sector, Romanian banks that is, not yet foreign capital ones.

Then there was an important moment when many individual houses started being built. And yes, all these projects were connected to changes in the society. Banks became more important and needed headquarters and private people started gathering capital and therefore wanted to build houses or small offices. These are things in which I was directly involved and my architectural portfolio is connected to these important

³⁴ Interview and English translation by Eliza Culea. The interview took place on the 13th of August 2010.

moments.

An interesting professional moment for me was the project for the new contemporary art museum. In popular terms we refer to it as the MNAC, which are in fact the initials of the museum. It was much debated and there was a large controversy regarding its original location, as it was placed in the Palace of the Parliament. It's where the People's House is, or that building that had various names at times. It is a place that has liked or not in time in a nuanced manner, although architects have less appreciated this building. In the end, it has become, willingly or not, a symbol of Bucharest. I don't know if you have noticed but many albums depicting the capital feature either on the cover or in an extensive article within The People's House, or the Palace of the Parliament. And the insertion of this museum here, where there is already an important official function of representation, gave rise to many comments both from a part of the society and also the daily users of the building.

For me it was a familiar program since I come from a family where my parents and some of my relatives have worked in the art domain, and the plastic arts became something familiar to me. Over time I had participated in a series of discussions between artists, writers, art critics, some of which were very well known at the time like Comarnescu, Frunzescu, Amza or Mihai Oroveanu, the current director of the museum, himself a critic. It was because of this discussion revolving around the art world that I say it gave me this familiar feel.

E.C.: *Were you awarded the project directly or as a result of a competition?*

A.S.: *It was based on an offer selection from various*

companies, and what I can say is that the president of the commission, or the person whose opinion weighed in heavily, was the current director Mihai Oroveanu, who especially appreciated the internal mechanism of the museum. I had proposed then that several aspects regarding the reception, storage and distribution of the art works, to be done through the basement of the building on a series of large mobile platforms, and only then distributed to the exhibition halls. This was a logic that I was familiar with from my professional culture and also due to my very own past in the arts, and he was impressed by it, how the things moved in the interior of the museum. Another thing he liked was that the museum was made out of two segments, the current one and a subsequent phase two, an outdoor part. And the two panoramic elevators that are now left a bit stupidly hovering over the derelict back yard of the House, were designed in relation to the terrain all the way to the Marriot hotel that I wished to design as a museum with small exhibiting pavilions and events which would have led to the entry to the museum. In this end, this phase never happened, maybe someone else will do it, and it's time to leave some room for the young architects as well.

E.C.: *Do you know why the second phase got canceled ?*

A.S.: *Yes, I do, it got canceled because the works for the museum took a long time and the political configuration that our professions is intricately connected with, made that the ones which started and supported this project did not get reelected and the next wave of politicians did not consider this to be an important investment. Others were preferred. Maybe just as good....or better, I don't know...*

E.C.: *In the book published with the occasion of the opening of the MNAC, Mihai Oroveanu gives special thanks to Adrian Nastase.*

How did you find the involvement of the prime minister in the whole affair?

A.S.: *Honestly, I found his participation as very consistent. I mean, I participated to many conversations between him and Oroveanu connected to art and he seemed like an educated guy. Of course, what I am saying now is in no way connected to his political views and choices, but as far as the museum is concerned, he effectively backed the work needed to make it happen, and frequently visited the construction site to see how things were going. As far as I understand, he also has an important modern art collection and it was his idea to make this museum. Well, actually I remember talk about it since I was in high school or as a student, cause I heard my father talking about it. So it was an idea even before the 90's and Nastase probably knew about it, brought back into attention and put it in practice. It was in the end erected while he was prime minister so he is strongly connected to the construction of the MNAC.*

E.C.: *There were many discussions regarding the symbolic value that the insertion of this museum will have on the People's House. Do you think that this programmatic addition will change the perception we have on the entire edifice and its communist associations?*

A.S.: *No, I don't think so, the intervention is too small. Physically I mean, from a quantitative point of view, given the sheer scale of the house, and also because of the connection it has with the city. Oroveanu and I wished through this project to connect the still isolated house, still surrounded by a strong fence, to the rest of the urban tissue. It still represents power and its message has stayed the same. It is a house meant for a strong power to reside in, like a fortress in which the*

important people of the time to reside, surrounded by this wall almost like a geographic element, making it hard to conquer. This logic remained to this day and through our project we wished to bring society in and create a breach in its perimeter.

E.C.: *Did the winning project from the urban competition of Bucharest 2000 influence in any way the conception of the museum?*

A.S.: *Well, no, because in the project of Von Gerkan, or the team he lead, the house was still surrounded and isolated but this time by big, tall buildings. In the museums' case we wished to open it to the public. All those plans with the outdoor museum meant for the house and the society to mix. That was the whole point.*

E.C.: *Do you think that if built the museum would have a bigger impact on the interaction with the city?*

A.S.: *This is hard to say. If the success would have been let's say fantastic, I think it would have been an interesting stage of development between the relationship of the House with the rest of the urban fabric as the fence would of opened. Today, if you want to go to the House, you go to the gate where you are being asked for identification and entering very hard with the car. If you have a foreign guests it is normal to want to take him to the museum of contemporary art, but here it becomes so difficult to go in. whereas, if the second phase would have been implemented, there would have been a special entry only for the museum open at all times. The protection for the edifice would have been connected to the protection of the actual pieces exhibited inside and it would have eluded all those controls. There are some who say that there is a security problem for those who come to the museum with a*

political agenda in mind since it is a House of power. But these are things incorrectly resolved so far making the entire ensemble inconvenient. And the connection of this program with the house is very small. But it's a start and maybe the younger generation of architects will think my idea was a good one and put it in practice. They should seek to open the house to the city for it must remain some sort of Bran Castle. Of course, that castle is also interesting to see as many tourist Dutch, Chinese or so on, come and see both, which I feel is nothing bad to try to keep this touristic interest. But I think there must be made some form of inversion of the relation of the House to the city. And this should be done through minimal destruction. My colleagues reproached to me that I had the opportunity to destroy more and make a much more powerful stand out of the destruction of the People's house as the den of the Power. Honestly, I did not wish that to happen. I think it is barbaric for those who come to power to destroy that which has been created by the previous ones. Like this you only get complete chaos.

E.C.: *Recently, there was the idea at the Nation's Cathedral be placed in the same back yard of the Parliament. What are your views on the matter?*

A.S.: *Well in this case my opinion is a bit more nuanced. Independent of an eventual relationship with the museum, I think the Cathedral repeats the gesture of the House as being another big, unsuitable thing.*

E.C.: *And how do you see the development of Bucharest over the next 10 years?*

A.S.: *Very hard to say, but first of all, what I think bothers*

most about the capital is not the existent built patrimoine but the urban comfort like circulation, basing things like cleanliness or stray dogs. Of course many are debating about these new constructions, being ugly, badly inserted in the fabric and so on...I think the Bucharest 2000 competition should have been used as a blueprint. It was a project I followed at the time and I found very interesting. If they have bothered to make the competition, then why didn't they enforce it? They paid for it, haven't they? All projects in the center should therefore obey it. It wasn't an idea competition, it was meant to be built, and it was an official demand for a project. But as far as future development is concerned, I think they should finish what they started around the Lipscani area. I was recently invited there by some friends to this coffee place, and it was nice. I noticed that each house was taken by someone and turned into a bar or terrace or something. I think it's a good thing. It will lead in time to the general restoration of the entire area. And this is a paramount condition. Also, there should be more attention given to the course of the Dambovita River. Right now it looks like this giant irrigation canal where there could be a series of programs inserted, cafes, exhibitions, all kinds of things. Over the years I had the chance to see that many students approach the river for their final diploma project. I think such endeavors should be put in practice.

After such an interview I had to see for myself. As I finally reach the official entrance which just as described by mr. Spirescu is the only way in which I can reach the museum itself, I quickly glance at the armed guard at the entrance. His presence is only justified by making sure that visitors are directed to precise access gates according to where they want to go. If I would have been a lost tourist in search of a free tour of the house, I would have been sent back to circle the same cemetery wall on

three sides, as the entrance for the tour is on the other side and shortcuts on the parliament grounds are not permitted. Luckily I am in the right place and looking at the south west wing of the house. The museum is on the North West side and since this is a 400,000 square meter building, this means it will take me another 5 minutes walking just to get to the door. From this point I can feel the Guinness record effect. The building is big and so is the field of savage vegetation surrounding it. Crows and parked cars are the only ones taking advantage of all this space. The pavement guiding my way to the museum is full of pot-holes and while I pass mountains of construction material and the semi-derelict areas of the house which were not yet lucky to be completed, I wonder what foreigners think when they come to visit this museum. Maybe it looks to them as a giant installation showcasing the ruins of a fallen regime. It surely does to me. This is however a result of the fact that the project for the museum has not been finished. This almost back-door entrance was initially just the temporary solution offered until a more appropriate entry, through the art-garden starting at the Marriott palace would be made.

There is a sudden contrast between the decaying facades of the unfinished People's house and the shiny bluish transparency of the two new glass elevators which frame the museum's entrance. The panorama these elevators give today is a sad one and a constant reminder of the lack of interest of those responsible for the maintenance and administration of the House for the potential of the vast empty terrain behind it. In six years, the approval for the outside exhibition space has not been granted due to alleged security concerns. The project seemed to disturb to much unpleasant 'police-filtering' system that is currently in place at every entry. The intended opening would have been the a first connection of this

Forbidden City with the urban tissue around. It seems to me that if there was enough political will the security necessary for the safe functioning of the parliament could be very easily solved at a local level and not the moat-like armed separation in place today.

The interior is a traditional whitish septic exhibiting space and frequently some of the four floors are closed off to the public due to the lack of artistic works on display. Today, only two upper levels are accessible and the security staff warns me that I must not look at the photographs on the ground floor as the exhibition only opens in two days. This conversation takes place in the actual room of the forbidden art-works as it is through there the only access to the elevators taking me to the upper floors and so I am able to distinguish multiple outlines of mass housing blocks, apparently the exhibitions' theme. In any case, I exit illegality and continue towards the glass elevators.

As I make my way to the first floor exhibition I wonder whether the works before me would be indeed tinted by the unavoidably oppressing palace history or the present day political presence on the other side of the building. These were in fact the main arguments of those in the artistic world that opposed the opening of the museum here. Mariana Celac, architect, critic, curator and writer, adamantly declared³⁵ that the parking of the 21st century artists at the end of a long alley behind a blind wall in the Forbidden City initially seemed to her an extremely unlikely option and perhaps a measure of how little contemporary art was indeed valued in the country. But as the project moved forward, her opinion shifted as she started to see this intervention, digging deep in the very flesh of the communist icon, as a chance for re-architecture

to reclaim perhaps an interesting but declining structure, investing it with uses which belong to different times than those when it was first erected.

Can a change of function and an architectural project halfway between conservation and erasure change the way a buildings' meaning is perceived? Could the infusion of an art institution begin to cleanse the heavy air of communist stench as Lucezar Boyadjiev, a Bulgarian artist and participant to the inauguration exhibition, so graphically expressed? Augustin Ioan, in the final chapter of this book regarding totalitarian architecture³⁶, written in 1995 with all too fresh memories of the fallen regime, claimed that simply replacing the 'bad symbol' with a new positive one through the infusion of new functions is cultural infantilism and that it would leave the core problems related to the major dysfunctions that this alien body has caused the city unsolved. But even him, later on adds that despite all the accusations brought to such a solution, it remains the only feasible approach possible in this particular 'colossal' case. He saw that in the lack of demolition as option, pushing the house to the brink of pure kitsch, a path on which it is naturally inscribed, would be the only way of reducing its native aggressiveness and thus its association with a regime of terror, oppression and fear. He proposed to turn the entire building into Europe's biggest casino. Years later, with the creation of MNAC, kitsch or Monaco-type tactics were however not employed, but it was still considered a small victory that at least a part of the palace was given to the public.

Inside the exhibiting space the room was pitch-black, hiding the neo-classical moulds, which would normally remind me that I was standing

in a building filled with surprising amounts of history for its young age. The sacrifices of an entire nation for the whims of a messianic dictator or the strange mixture of both shame and pride the Romanians have for a construction they never needed or wanted, were all silent. The only presence was the flat-screen TV showing a choir chanting Irina Botea's latest art piece. The work, involved the creation of a contemporary hymn for the country made out completing of works from 15 other writers, one of which involved of the alphabetical enumeration of Romanian cities³⁷. This empty chanting of places is in the artists' vision the sole unquestionable common trait that the inhabitation of this country still has. Today this state can no longer be defined by a common culture but only by language and territorial borders. This satiric look at the Romanian identity today didn't seem to be bothered that the symbols of the state were just next-door and also managed to address the subject without invoking Ceausescu's ghost still present in the buildings walls. Removing from the art-works' equation the sensitive subject of the location of the museum, when addressing questions of national identity, was solved by simply turning off the light. Such a simple solution seemed to prove the statements of the artists, who risked being marked as institutional opportunists for exhibiting in a museum not only funded but also located right next to the symbols of state. Since 2004, they refused to keep treating the house like a memorial of pain, acknowledged both the undoubted impact the location would have on the art production, but saw it more like an advantage, a rich source of inspiration or reaction than an impediment.

The fierce reaction of the artistic world to new museum dimmed in time, just like the flaming conviction that the Unirii Boulevard and the

People's house can never represent anything but an evil regime. But the rate at which such edifices are changing the way they are being perceived is very slow. As I have a coffee on the 4th floor terrace of the museum, from where normally I should admire the museums art-installations garden, I can instead see from above the unwelcoming no-man's land which greeted me at the entrance. In 6 years of existence, the museum has not managed to obtain the outside exhibition space promised in the inauguration. Lacks of clear policies and strategies, plus on-again-off-again initiatives, are responsible for the still lingering ghost of past regimes.

It cannot be said right now how many more such foreign inserts in the palace's body are still necessary for it to be symbolically reborn, but despite the isolation and invisibility to the public within the city of the museum, mainly due to poor accessibility and the deplorable state of the 'gardens', MNAC still managed to become an institution, supporting and encouraging dialogue through its exhibitions and conferences. One such occasion was 'Urbanology – crash courses on a 'science'³⁸ in crisis' debate which took place at the MNAC mediateque in March 2009. It was one of those international conferences where Dutch architects, including Ole Bouman, the director of NAI Rotterdam, and their Romanian counterparts decided to debate the number one problem of the post-communist cities: the lack of real public space. From the book published following the debate, it becomes clear that instead of a real dialogue it was more the individual reflection on the given theme by each participant, as everyone kept dancing around their comfort zone. But despite all that, the museum institution helped the creation of a debating

38 Balici, R., Ioan, A., Velisar, R., Smelik, F., Hanssen, J.(organisers), *Urbanology – crash courses on a 'science' in crisis*, Bucharest: Masterprint Super Offset, 2009

throughout the edifice. The changing of a light bulb thus becomes a complicated operation needing a staff of at least 6 people and is being done only at night, as to avoid the mocking taping of the procedure by the press⁴². The 3500 square meters of the marble hallways alone constitute the mopping nightmare of the 15 cleaning ladies, who also see themselves forced to wash the intricate drapes of the House in bathrooms sinks.

The maintenance procedures in the House who don't even live up to the standards of a supermarket due to a very restrained budget, also have to face the deterioration of the edifice as a whole due to its natural aging process. Even if some parts of the House are not even complete yet, many areas already need restoration. And as everything was custom made for Ceausescu's palace, even the replacement of a doorknob becomes a serious concern as the companies who used to manufacture these parts are long gone. This perpetual construction site seems to be a weighing difficulty on the shoulders of the administration and although in the context of the current economical crisis extreme changes of destination are unlikely, these attempts of entertainment related infusions seem to gather at least pure economical sense and weight. Architects and intellectuals alike are divided on the subject as some have supported in the early days of democracy the introduction of kitsch capitalist meanings into the building in an effort to erase the gruesome communist reminders and for a long time the creation of the largest casino in Europe seemed viable.⁴³

Leaving the museum, the same unpleasant way I went in, and continuing

42 Benezic, D., *Casa Poporului, spălată cu mopul de 200 de "hocheiste"*, in *Evenimentul Zile* on January 20th, 2010

43 Ioan, A., 1993, p.101

platform, giving its existence more meaning than a simple exhibition space and making it an active actor in the present and future efforts of urban change within the city.

The programmatic exorcism seems however a continuing process, as in January 2010 the former prime minister Adrian Nastase has announced on his blog³⁹ that plans to move the parliament to the National Library building next door are underway since many businessmen in the entertainment sector have expressed the interest in turning the People's House into the largest Shopping mall in Europe. Though so far, only a handful of politicians⁴⁰ admitted to the existence of such discussions, the appearance of the Parliament Park or Parliament Mall is a constantly talk-show recurring topic invoking more frequently the economic burden of the maintenance of the House, than other meaning related transformations. The 3 billion euro building, assessed in 2008, large enough to impress the entire journalistic staff of the NATO summit⁴¹, is an intricate sequence of gigantic hallways, marble staircases and intensely decorated conference rooms. Despite their anachronist classical design, the interiors are considered at times as being more architecturally valid than the gruesome exterior and a guided visit through just a handful of reunion halls impresses most tourists, foreign and Romanian alike. Everything is once again big, highly ornate and flooded with the artificial light coming from the many crystal chandeliers that hang everywhere. Some of these light fixtures, already more than 20 years old have dozens of light bulbs posing a major problem, since daily several need replacing

39 Nastase.wordpress.com

40 Amongst which depute Silviu Prigoana

41 The People's House in Bucharest was the host of the 2008 NATO summit, offering the 3000 delegates plus the 3500 journalists covering the event 950 offices and 16 conference rooms.

to circle the perimeter of the People's house, led me to be face to face with the building of the armed forces behind it. It faces directly the back of the people's house and there is an obvious intended dialogue between the power and its military counterpart. It is also perched on top of an even more ridiculous artificial hill in order to counteract the abrupt curve levels of the area, as it struggles even more to keep a straight face in the battle with the Bucharest terrain. One might see the entire contraption as a way in which the geography of the city itself was trying to battle the megalomaniac communist plans. But ignoring the difficult pedestal that the house sits on top of, it is clear to me that this building could only be built for the military. Tall and vertical pilasters rhythm a sober and dangerously looking façade, that stands testimony of the fact that there were in fact architects with the know-how to build in an impressive military style. Therefore knowingly Ceausescu chose a more benign version for his personal palace. Did he not understand the fully the power his architectural dream could really have?

Was his eye that lacked sensitivity for edifices of power the reason that Bucharest is the owner of this innocent looking pile of pure Romanian stone and marble? If we could not avoid the presence of such an element in the city which is to be preferred? This calmer version of authoritarian rule or an arresting boulevard and its monuments to induce the fear and the respect the Speer's Germany undoubtedly would of given if ever built? The official speech surrounding the entire built was painted in the colors of a supreme gift given to a nation 'in-love' with their dictator. Far from the romantic image Ceausescu and his wife had in mind, the immense funds diverted for the colossal construction plunged the country in deep starvation, but it still came as a surprise to them when the revolution began. Deyan Sudjic notes that in totalitarian

regimes such imposing buildings do not achieve their goal to give the rules a tighter grasp on power, but that frequently they contribute even to their quicker demise. This gift meant to show the world an independent Romania both from its former ideological leader, the USSR, but also the technologically challenged and eternal far-behind Balkans in an effort to align the history of this country with others which rank higher up in the importance chain of the world. Still this dual separation both from ideology and from historical geography seem to only be attained if the country becomes a castle regime⁴⁴, in order to avoid ‘contaminations’ or ‘associations’.

As I am nearing the end of my tour, having completed a perimeter march around the people’s house, I also passed living proof of the demolitions that took place 25 years ago. At a certain point, the blind wall of the house stops and is being replaced by the remainder shell of Horia Creanga’s stadium, half buried in the backyard of the parliament. Its inter-bellum look, so precious to the inhabitants of the city these days, is being guarded night and day by security staff. Not far from here would have been the entrance to the garden of the MNAC, with an opening of the perimeter fencing which would have allowed unrestricted access to the House’s grounds at all times. There would have been vegetation footpaths recalling the former traces of the demolished urban tissue at the intersection of which exhibition areas would rhythm the space. In this context, the glass elevators of the museum would have been not an exterior, addition to the building, but an interior part of the exterior exhibition area. But also a characteristic element of democracy is the frequent possible changing of the governing parties and that projects

44 Barris, R., The rape of Bucharest, as viewed on August 3rd, 2010 on www.artmargins.com/index.php/archive/361-the-rape-of-bucharest

started under a past political configuration might not find their way on the political agenda of the new party in charge.

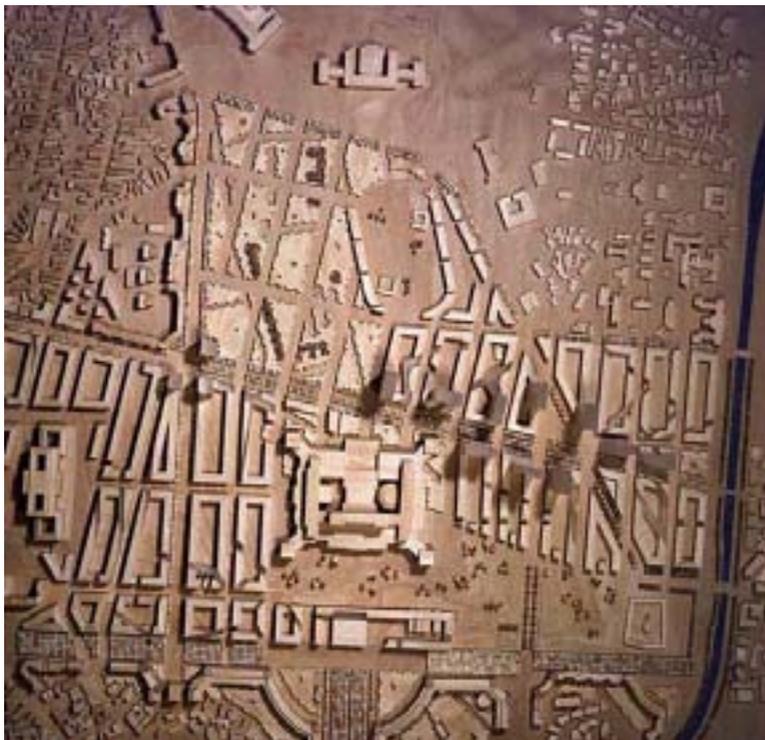
My final stop is in the Izvor Park, also a product of the new civic center Bucharest. In reality, park is an overstretched term, pasture being a bit more appropriate. Its flat appearance, right next to the Dambovitza River is the only place in the city where you can truly feel the infamous size of Ceausescu's palace. From here it truly looks big, imposing and sealed off, but oppressing, not really. Maybe my memory is tainted with one too many outdoor concerts including Brian Adams or Madonna using the house as a theatrical backdrop.

If all had gone well, all around me now would not have been this green plate of grass, punctuated from time to time by young trees, nor would the makeshift terraces next to the Dambovitza River, but probably the huge construction site of a new high rise business district. It would have been part of a major remodeling of the center of Bucharest and the built result of an international urban development competition organized in 1996. It was called 'Bucharest 2000' and put together shortly after the instauration of democracy. It was the second try of redefining the area, the first being in 1991 when suggestions of total demolition were paired by the awe of the many visitors of the house who could not endorse the destruction of 'such a beautiful monument'.

Crisan Popescu did a chronology⁴⁵ of the competition showing that as early as October 1990, not even a year after the revolution, the issue of the future of the People's house and the entire new communist civic center started being debated. After the costs for the finishing of the construction were estimated to be well over 20 billion lei or over 250

million dollars on the 12th of November 1991 there was a first official discussion an expert referred by the World Bank, regarding the procedure and the goals of a future urban design competition meant amongst many things to showcase Bucharest onto as a city of the new millennium and it would do so by bringing in internationally acclaimed architects⁴⁶. In time it gained the support of the Romanian Presidency, and after funds to organize the competition were secured, a general meeting was held on the 24th of may 1994 with the union of architects, the finance minister, the department for public and local administration, the ministry of culture, the general secretary of the government, the Bucharest Mayor's office and presidential advisors, officially launching it. It was not intended as a mere idea competition; the winning project was to be the base which would enable the organizers to define the new directory plan of the center. The appeal was unparalleled in the international world as 235 teams, from 35 countries and 5 continents responded to the challenge. The jury designated to decide the winning entry after two phases with a selection of the best 15 ideas, was composed by an elite selection counting besides its Romanian members Kenneth Frampton and Barry Bergdall (USA), Vittorio Gregotti (Italy), Fumihiko Maki (Japan), Josep Martorell (Spain), Claude Vasconi (France), Krzysztof Chwalibog (Poland) and Dan Hanganu (Canada).

The theme of the competition surrounded the urban future of the civic center built during the communist regime. The tone and also the intentions of the jury project selection revealed that the entire site was being treated like a wound on the face of the city which has to be 'healed' by the proposed solutions. And while it is true that the new boulevard had caused immense damage on multiple levels including the basic



Bucharest 2000: 1st prize

everyday N-S circulation within the city, there was explicit desire that all proposals focus on an attempt to erase as much as possible the boulevard and especially the people's house as a continuity with this area in this new era of democracy was viewed as impossible. Boris Groys notes that this is a typical behavior in post-communist societies and that we are in fact talking about an attempt to erase history. This erasure is however a second one in the history of all these countries, as the communists themselves have practiced this technique for over half a century, trying to eliminate everything within the cities which had preceded them, as they were reminders of a previous era not in sync with their ideology.

The park in which I am looking at the House from is defined by a strict French style geometric pattern of alleys which, in order to fit the scale of the adjoining building, end up being so spaced apart that they have rendered themselves useless. Arrays of footpaths which cross the grass have sprouted up everywhere, despite all too familiar signs forbidding it. But underneath this large, somewhat useless part of the city, only truly appealing when organizing massive events, lay an entire neighborhood which was wiped out in record time by communist decree. Many still mourn the disappearance of this part of the town and albums, blogs or exhibitions showing black and white pictures of picturesque green streets and old houses try to remind the population of what they have lost. This nostalgia for the lost urban tissue was however directly used by the winning team led by German architect Meinhard von Gerkan in the Bucharest 2000 competition. Their proposition promptly responded to all the sensitivities of the Romanian jury members and also inhabitants. First of all, although presenting restraint and not touching the People's House itself in a bid for preservation of urban history regardless of its connotations, they chose to submerge the edifice in a high density

urban fabric with a punctuated high rise district. This responded to the automatic needs at the time to hide the House or its perception within the city with the possible means. Secondly, they have used the nostalgic feelings mentioned before for the former neighborhood and retraced with their new urban blocks urban fabric lost in the demolitions. In a way, their project, highly acclaimed by a vast majority of intellectuals and unanimously chosen by the jury members, had managed to balance all the evident traumatic effects of the boulevard.

The competition continued to briefly serve as photo-ops for the political parties which were facing new election only two months after the results were announced⁴⁷. A series of professional naiveties have followed including the nomination of the CBC British consortium as responsible for building the new Bucharest 2000 urban center. As von Gerkan disagreed with the company chosen as a result of the auction and preferred to work with the much better known company Dress&Sommer, an agreement was reached and the agency for development of the new 'Bucharest 2000' urban center was established having CBC as the major stakeholder owning 42% of the company, the general counsel of the municipality of Bucharest WITH 36%, D&S SRL 18%, BCR 2% and BERD 2%. Following a change of government for a second time in 2001, the newly formed agency was shut down as political support for the scheme was withdrawn and by 2006 it was radiated from the Register of Commerce⁴⁸. The promises that the company made which included a profit of 300 million US dollar per year for a period of 20 years proved to me nothing more than a smoke screen which however to an even quicker demise of the entire affair. Those involved from the

47 Patrascu G., *A lost chance*, in *Urbanismul* 3/2009, p.95

48 Patrascu, G., op. cit, p.96

beginning in the competition were looking helplessly at other similar but successful rebuilding schemes like in the case of Berlin which benefited from huge amounts of funds pumped by the German state, or Beirut which despite a bad economical situation was able to provide an efficient legal framework in which the involvement of the private sector actively was supported by the Lebanese state.

The competition seems to have vanished in thin air and all the enthusiasm surrounding it has in the last 14 years long evaporated. As I make my way to the bus stop next to the Dambovită River I do not think of the whole event as a lost chance. Instead my attention is drawn by another potential development area for the city. The river before me, looking right now more or less like an irrigation canal, according to what architect Adrian Spirescu also says, is one more example of how many opportunities the city had and how for the last 20 years systematically ignored all of them. It is still the direct consequence of democracy. The boulevard on which I just spent the last 6 hours walking, analyzing, circling, visiting and pondering had been built more or less in 6 years. Ever since, on a similar scale nothing has been done. There is in me a tinge of understanding why many architects are drawn to authoritarian regimes. Even nowadays, Rem Koolhaas, Herzog and De Meuron and many others are taking advantage of global repositioning of China, which allows them to build at a massive scale with unlimited budgets which would have never been possible in their native democratic states. This unfortunate democratic grid lock Bucharest is experiencing for the last 20 years can however be a blessing in disguise. The complete lack of policies and land ownership issues has prevented developers from taking advantage of a retreating state from the urban policies sector. Perhaps it is an opportunity in which urban mistakes like the Potsdamer Platz in Berlin could be avoided.

POST-COMMUNISM AND MODERN IDENTITY MAKING:

THE GYPSY PALACES

THE CRASH-OPENING OF THE EASTERN EUROPEAN STATES TO THE MASS culture elements of the west has brought many abrupt social changes, economic unbalances and a questioning of values and identity issues. And while the economic, political or legislative sectors were just as in previous eras of Europeanization, some sort of copy-pasting from the more affluent neighbors and the pray capitalism was set on transforming the previous periphery of Europe into a new profit opportunity for the already well off westerners, some groups either ethnic or religious found an opportunity for revived visibility on the urban cultural scene.

Since the ‘autumn of change’⁴⁹, the Romanian population has been bombarded with western mass culture and for an unprepared, closed off for 50 years country it initially came as a shock. Some things were

49 CNN's name for the sequence of events that lead to the fall of communist regimes throughout Eastern Europe in the fall of 1989

themselves. After half a century of communism there weren't many foreigners left in the once multicultural diverse Bucharest. In 1930 the city was filled with many minorities 10.93% of them being Jewish, 8% German, 3,6% Hungarian, 3% Albanian, 1.5% polish, some Armenian, Greek, Bulgarian and Roma(or Gypsy)⁵⁰. Today these figures have dropped sharply Jews and German each adding up to less than 0.15% of the population, the Hungarians 0.3%, while the Albanian, Greek, Bulgarian or Polish communities barely count a few hundred people. The Roma however, despite the emigration of many in the 90's to the west or their return to the villages around the same time add up in the 2002 census to 1.6% of the population. While other nationalities went voluntarily or not back to their motherland, the story of this ethnicity is has been interlocked with that of Romania for quite some time. At a census of the Roma in Europe, Romania had the highest numbers, somewhere between 800,000 and 2,5 million members, as the lack of birth certificates or identity cards make accurate censuses impossible.

Their history is tainted with the tragic, being slaves on these lands until freed in 1856. Later on, between 1942 and 1944 almost 25,000 Roma were deported to Transnistria from the order of general Antonescu during the war. Out of these, over half of them were children. The ones that remained were in the 60's subjected to forced sedentarisation which came contrary to their centuries long culture of nomad behavior. Before, they would be of traveling 10 to 15 carriages at the time on well defined routes from village to village offering their products, which in Romania mainly revolved around handmade metal utensils for everyday life or be a source of entertainment as they are worldwide famous as being a particularly well gifted musical ethnicity.



taken too literally, as young voluptuous women all over eastern Europe rejoiced in the emergence of glittery make up, the mini-skirt and high heels; others had taken high-class markers as granted, making the 'public' consumption Evian or San Pellegrino, averagely priced products on the western markets, the height of luxury. 'Supersize me' fans would be shocked to know that McDonalds became the most respected restaurant in the 90's due to the assurances of cleanliness and validity of their products, something that no other restaurant could make. To further astound them, there was even a pride and a sense of distinction of the restaurant's employees, since only the best, most well groomed college students would be lucky enough in those early days to be amongst the selected staff.

Generation after generation of high school students had their meeting and hang out spot in one of the McDonalds in the center of Bucharest and its terrace was full all year long, despite the freezing temperatures of the continental Romanian climate. To be seen on that particular terrace meant to be hip, trendy and cool. It was in the end a style statement. Over the years, other fast-food places opened up in the vicinity of the Romana plaza where this McDonalds was positioned. But despite even the not-so-glam-no-more image of the fast-food chain, some traces of this trend remain that no other competitor has ever managed to equal. All this while in Barcelona, Tokyo or many other world capitals McDonalds is the restaurant of the poor, badly maintained, frequently dirty but always at least edible. So in the East, here described from the prism of Romanian's capital, the basic symbols of capitalism were warmly received.

But while the general population was busy turning their ways to fit with the new market economy and all its consequences, minority groups realized that for the first time in 40 years they were free to express



After '89, the poverty that continued to deepen in the country made everyday life even worse and pushed some to crime, from petty theft to complex money laundry operations and human trafficking. All these activities besides proving to be highly lucrative also came to deepen the discrimination the Romanian people had towards the Roma, especially since many of these crimes were committed abroad and a constant flow of international news reports that associated the Roma with the Romanians harmed the reputation of the entire country. Though most were honest workers and continued to gain their living by acting on traditional crafts such as music or flowerery, they were marginalized and pushed into living a parallel existence to that of Bucharest or the entire country. In 2009, a report of the European Union's Fundamental Rights Agency⁵¹ did a study regarding discrimination of the Roma in the EU states. The results regarding perceived discrimination - Czech Republic 64%: Hungary 62%: Poland 59%: Greece 55%: Slovakia 41%: Bulgaria 26%: Romania 25% - put Romania in a better light than expected although another 2000 EU report stated that *'in Romania... the continued high levels of discrimination are a serious concern... and progress has been limited to programs aimed at improving access to education'*. But regardless of all this, a part of the Roma population has managed to gather wealth and despite constant discrimination and plagued by general low levels of education they have managed to produce an architectural group identity through the building of their personal residences: the Gypsy palaces.

For about 15 years, several Romanian cities and quite a few villages have witness the apparition of new Disneyland colorful neighborhoods.

51

As viewed on july 2nd, 2010 on www.fra.europa.eu/fraWebsite/roma/roma_en.htm

en.htm



Huge houses, topped with hundreds colorful wall decorations which frame imposing staircases have appeared as if overnight, usually in tight groups, as if they were standing proof of some sort of pack mentality.

Born out of a sense of group representation of ethnic pride and identity⁵², entire villages of these Chinese/Disney/Bollywood residences have sprouted up all over the country. They are generally following a set of simple rules, though naming them as such is more a tool for understanding the phenomenon, than an actual gypsy guide book to building. The first generation, the basic model academics might say, looked like yet another example of bad turbo-architectural production but with a curious particularity. The roof of the buildings, far from being benignly normal, looked like a shiny tin Chinese pagoda, an unseen typology in these parts of the world. The general grayish look of the entire residence was also more visible due to the generally bigger proportions that it had when comparing to those of the neighboring property. Somewhere in within this construction also lies a one or two roomed twenty year old shell of the initial house built two generations before. There are rarely toilets within these houses as the strict cultural separation between then clean and dirty elements does not allow them inside. The family members all inhabit only a small room or much more modest annexes. Therefore the palace is not a home but a representational façade tool which upgrades itself continuously in an accumulation typology that in jumps in construction phases, the building never achieving the status of 'finished'. They are remodeled and reshaped to constantly be 'in gypsy fashion'. In the beginning though, the signature funny looking roofs started being replicated more and more, and their increasingly decorative appearance

52 Andresoiu, B., Ciocazanu A., Castello. *Palate ale rromilor din Romania*, Bucharest: Igloo, 2008, p.17



started being associated with wealthy gypsy residences.

But this initial model quickly evolved and the grayish appearance of these soon to be called palaces, started to change. As if gathering more and more confidence of ethnic expression despite the ridiculing tone of a handful of newspaper articles mocking these constructions, the very rapid ease with which the Roma inserted bold colorful statements and an always on the increase number of decorations and volumetric configurations, stands testament to the juicy contemporary vernacular they created which presents such a stylistic unity that not even the toughest urbanism regulations couldn't enforce⁵³.

Their construction experiences in various countries translated almost immediately in the building activity in the country. The time some gypsies spent in Iran and later on Germany as construction workers expert in metal roofs starts explaining the origin of this romantic German/Asian imagery and as they came in contact with more and more new building materials so did the palaces at home become enriched with reflective colored curved facades, marbled exteriors double glazed windows, imitating new banking headquarters. Even the signature roofs were after a while left behind and replaced with striking red or deep blue shingles. This fundamental change resembles to a stage of style maturity although it is interesting to note that within the gypsy culture there is no conscious desire to adhere or contribute to an ethnic style. In reality one of the reasons for this artistic unity is a mimetic behavior of the 'architects'. Each gypsy wants a building identical to the one of his neighbors' but slightly bigger and if possible with more ornamentation. This instinct that 'bigger is better' pushed every new construction and the continuous



remodeling of the already existent ones to outrank the others.

These palaces are being built mainly in gypsy villages but they are no strangers to cities. Present in Bucharest, Sibiu, Brasov and all other major cities of the country they quickly became a phenomenon no longer possible to ignore. Though many are built in rural surroundings, their overall appearance, their tight, orderly presence in relation to the street show that they are flirting with the urban condition. Although they might still be called villages by some sort of infrastructure related criteria, they frame the urban space with such force that even the capital should be jealous of. Countless YouTube videos⁵⁴ have emerged with amused Romanians filming, from the safety of their cars, as they pass through these ethnic Disneyland areas. They don't just manage to film the palaces as individual objects but also the urban feel that has derived from this clustering mentality.

Journalists started venturing here, fearing for their parked cars and their expensive cameras, but with a need to begin to document the phenomenon. When they returned unharmed from the gypsy territory, presumably where the worst interlope leaders and their extensive families live, they wrote with a sense of death defying irony about the Kafka-like urban environment they experienced. Architect Mariana Celac and photographer Iosif Kirali opened an exhibition in 2001 showing for the first time in an official context these 'palaces'. The reactions were not mixed as almost all left simply amused by this example of so called low-culture. As time passed, the Igloo trust, also responsible for a Romanian monthly architectural publication, decided to issue a book in 2007 in the hope of opening academic dialogue on this subject entitled



Kastello. They carefully documented as best possible all the regions in the country where this phenomenon appears and managed to separate it in two distinct typologies. The first encompassed the west of the country where deeper Austrian and German influences have made more difficult the dissociation between the Roma constructions and other Turbo-architecture production. It is in the south and east of the country where the most intriguing buildings lay and where the evolution from a single room to a three storey colossus can be seen under layers of brightly colored paint.

Out of the entire album, depicting hundreds of gypsy palaces, I even have a favorite. It might be my forever tainted architectural background that makes me look at this 'palace' in Costesti with some sort of detachment that initially pushed me to describe this building in a more frivolous manner, as if telling a funny story to fellow architects. But a closer look and a more honest analysis of it makes me humbly conclude that before me stands an actual architectural valid product, by all internationally acclaimed standards. I don't exactly know how much of Iosif Kirali's picture itself, acclaimed photographer in the international artistic world, has such a mesmerizing effect on me, but it might also be the exposed brick and unfinished outer look of the building, as I have always had a weakness for structures just before they are covered up under layers of plaster or plastic, in the good Romanian post-communist tradition. But besides all these personal excuses, the palace/picture/or simply that particular moment in time is awe inspiring.

First of all, it has the all-so recognizable tin pagoda like roof with some extra touches of bright red thorns coming out discretely here and there. The thing that comes to mind is that these pointy additions might be part of some superstitious belief that it would protect the building from



the bad spirits people can cast on both humans and buildings alike by simply expressing wonder or envy when passing by. And when it comes to an ethnicity which has made fortunes from predicting the future, making love potions for the heart broken or using black and white magic alike to assure the financial success of their clients, or even reaching as far as touching with its purple flame the presidential contenders of the country⁵⁵, this theory does not seem so farfetched. But regardless of what decoration adorns it, its color, shape or number of the superposed pagoda layers, this roof has managed in an incredibly short amount of time to achieve the same iconic power that only religious places seem to have. Seeing it for even a split second automatically lets everyone know that there is the residence of a family member of a specific ethnicity with an almost literal representation of their bank accounts as well. And while the relation of size between the residence and the financial status of the owners can be seen regardless of one's ethnicity, such an outspoken declaration of membership to a persecuted and discriminated community is unique.

Psychologist Alfred Dumitrescu⁵⁶ tries to explain this phenomenon, noting that being seen is the first step towards being respected, which means being taken into account and that for an ethnicity which suffered decades of repression tactics under the communist rule this is a mark of increased group confidence. He continues pointing out that this building behavior contradicts their ancestral need for freedom and mobility and

55 In December 2009, Mircea Geoana accused his opponent, president Traian Basescu of using dark magic against him during the final televised confrontation. As a result of the scandal, a new fashion was briefly circulating in the country, in the form of purple clothes, especially ties in the case of men, said to of protected the president during the debate.

56 Andresoiu, B., Ciocazanu A., Castello. *Palate ale rromilor din Romania*, Bucharest: Igloo, 2008, p.188

that for a people which have always literally worn their riches as to be independent from the owner of the land they would temporarily settle upon, such an investment seems downright risky. Therefore in just 50 years, since their forced sedentarisation in the communist times, this incredibly resilient community has not only managed to completely adapt to their new stable condition which contradicted a century long tradition, but also develop a completely individual means of self expression.

Secondly, I must admit that the beauty of this gypsy palace might reside also in what is missing. Since the plaster has not yet been applied, so have not the countless decoration which my architectural background cannot in anyway endorse. So far, the delicate metallic floral patterns of the windows contrast nicely with the reddish earthy tones of the exposed brick. But this is not about my professionally educated personal preferences of proportion, color or detail profusion. In an almost Asian way, these gypsy palaces seem to fear emptiness and treat the walls like a canvas where, together with the all-mighty neo-classical baluster, symbols relevant today are placed almost like protective omens. Such a case can be found on a house in Recas where the owner proudly centered a plaster decoration to the entrance of this neo-classical inspired mansion which proudly stated the 'In God We Trust' phrase of the American dollar bills. More commonly we can find the surnames of the owners decorating the top of the palace. This might become an inconvenience however when due to the crisis, which hit even this minority, such palaces of gypsy dreams are put on sale. Moise Guran, an economical analyst for Antena 3, was discussing at the start of the crisis an unsurprising reality. These houses, worth hundreds of thousands of Euros in the least, have a real estate value equal to zero. The only possible buyers are gypsies

belonging to the same family which usually manage acquire the palaces at a fraction of their building costs due to the total absence of demand. But despite such economical realities, these building continue to sprout up and metamorphose every few months.

This phenomenon is even more impressive since it originated in a country that is at a loss regarding its personal identity for the last two centuries. We are assisting to the birth of a new branch of folklore in the 21st century ingeniously managing to mix the characteristic of this consumers fever society with the ethnic identity in one. And the disdain that the public opinion has for these construction is damn right undeserved. There is no difference of aesthetical value between these richly ornamented residences and the neo-classical inspired turbo products splattered all over the periphery of Romania's major cities. And as Ana Maria Zahariade notes, they are not different even from the arrogant houses belonging to the newly sprouted up gated communities. But for some reason, these examples of mistaken personal identity production, since their owner's wives dream at night of being stars in Mexican soap operas seem to be much better tolerated than their Roma counterpart, living in them being the ultimate goal of a vast number of Romanians. Truth be told, these gypsy palaces are in fact a far more valuable asset to urban culture, since they contain the identity essence of the ethnic group that produced them displayed a highly personal remix of contemporary influences that through a technique of blatant honesty shows that unlike the rest of us they are not shamed to portray themselves to be part of a world in which the consumer fever of capitalism is defining everyday life.

Dollar signs, gold leaf decorations or Mercedes three armed stars adorn many such palaces, while the building themselves serve the unique purpose of dowry gathering space, these buildings are the making of an

ethnic group that wished to be acknowledged as a participant to daily Romanian life. In retrospect to the spontaneous birth and evolution of this 'style', the architects who have long ignored these creations now have started worrying that the palaces are starting to shed their shiny luster losing their low-culture originality and start looking simply 'normal' and big as it is already taking form in the west of the country. They mourn the decline of the new-found gypsy identity predicting its immediate downfall forgetting that it has appeared and evolved with a spontaneity and independence unlike a typical 'trend' and that in the layers of cultural specificity that we know nothing of enough vitality may still linger to keep it going. Others wonder like Ana Maria Zahariade if this marginal cultural product will follow a similar rise to acceptance (or fame) as jazz had in the United States. But regardless of the path this urban phenomenon may have it must be noted that just as Rudolf Graf warns at the end of his article for Igloo's Castello, only a small part of gypsies can indeed afford to build these palaces while the vast majority of them, trapped by extreme poverty are still prisoners of a marginalized and fragmented identity.

* * *

Walking on the Victoriei Avenue, the traces of the urban tissue remnant of a past rooted both in the Balkan but also in the eastern orientation of Romania are still there. Here, the 19th century the straightening of the avenue which serves as central spine to the city, has only been partially realized and it is the best place where the preservation of the old urban tissue can be seen. It is also the avenue with probably the biggest concentration of representative buildings in the city. But these multiple monuments of Bucharest are not neatly arranged around central squares of quietly disciplined and nicely aligned to impressive boulevards in the good 19th century fashion. In a similar way all over the city center, the one rule that seems detach is that there are none. This main spine of the north-south axis of the city is just as contorted as the side alleys in the old quarters, while some series of buildings are aligned and then abruptly others are not. A mix of collective housing blocks or office buildings are placed alongside impressive individual residences. Some have courtyards remnant of a village typological heritage, while most do not. There are tall, short, elongated or narrow buildings, gardens of all sorts and informal but representative plazas.

There is no order and no hierarchy. There is no unifying building style though on some segments we can see the French inspired art-nouveau or Modernism taking over. The streets themselves twist and turn and sometimes it comes as a surprise that they bear the same name from start to finish. The sidewalk too varies unabashed from large and welcoming to narrow or inexistent. This eclectic mix of building typologies resting on an urban fabric of byzantine heritage is perhaps the most representative trait present in the Romanian capital. At a certain point, there can be counted five consecutive buildings each belonging to a different period: the first, an art-nouveau turn of the century construction is followed by a modernist one, a communist filling, one with visible art-deco inspiration and a contemporary example as well. The high mixture of elements which somehow have come together over the last 150 years has formed an urban landscape of such a variety that despite its westernized architecture cannot be described other than eastern in morphology as the street pattern of the former villages each gathered around their own church has therefore survived to this day. And it is this wild mix which made Bucharest the perfect case study for the use of architecture as communication.

Leaving from the assumption that it doesn't take much for architecture to become archeology⁵⁷, over the last chapters we have tested the idea that the political can be deciphered from a simple urban reading of a place. After this highly empiric study of the Romanian capital, we have seen how democracies spur mostly architecture, while authoritarian regimes prefer the total art work under the umbrella of urbanism, how icons are born, demolished or transformed and how recently the political

57 Robert Hughes, *Visions of Space* documentary 2003, first aired on BBC4, source www.youtube.com

has become too small to account for the complexity of our world. The profusion of urban testimonies that the city of Bucharest has offered, paints the image of an untraditional but highly valuable European capital, which over the years has been the center stage for an impressive mix of influences. Branding proved itself as old as time and even if the lack of historical distance from the events described in this last chapter forced a more anecdotic reading of architectural phenomenons and is open to perpetual additions of rising contemporary situations, it stands testimony of the incredible complexity of the built production of our societies and unavoidable messages it end up enclosing.

Tell succeeding generations that we made the supreme sacrifice on the fields of battle (for the union of the people)⁵⁸.

58 Inscription on the Monument to the Heroes of the Military Engineers' Army in Bucharest. The part of the inscription in brackets was chipped away during the communist period.

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