Building Informality as a Pattern Language. The case of Romanian Suburbs

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Abstract

The paper looks the informal evolutions in the building sector in Romania and to a lesser extent in former Yugoslavia and while trying a set into their respective context, a broder sense of context comes into light, one which occasions a furher discussion of the position of the informal inside the building culture and inside society as a whole, as a quasi-permanent attribute of processes which shape up living and urban environments altogether. The role of the informal is brought into discussion, with a review of some of the major contributors to the advocacy of informality and organicism in the building culture, whose preaching are then compared to the present situation in the Romanian suburbs, which they apparently mirror, only to discover a certain restraint which is backsetting and revealing a certain sense on inconsistency.

Rezumat

Lucrarea urmăreşte evoluţiile informale în sectorul construcţiilor în România şi, într-o măsură mai mică, în fosta Iugoslavie. O punere în context a acestor evoluţii produce un discurs mai amplu al contextului cultural şi societal în care informalul este prezent în cvasi-permanenţă, ca unul din factorii modelatori ai mediului de viaţă şi ai cadrului construit. Rolul informalului este adus în discuţie, cu o trecere în revistă a unora dintre cele mai importante opinii critice în sprijinul informalităţii şi organicităţii în cultura construitului, pledoarii apoi confruntate cu situaţia actuală în suburbiile din România, pe care aparent o reflectă, pentru a releva o anumită reţinere şi slăbiciune a discursului critic, puţin oportună.

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1. Introduction

Within the framework of the social-economic transition in many of the Central and East-European countries the public concerns have been put behind the new private interests, as far as many of the facets of society are concerned. As long as in the fields of urban and territorial planning, for a while, planning has still functioned even by using almost obsolete tools, the principle of which was collective interest and concern, the multitude of the interests and needs newly asserted on the social stage were still looking for answers. Very soon, the whole mechanism had been recalibrated so as to expressly address and meet private interests, more accurately the private interests and groups which had managed to adapt themselves first to the new opportunities. It is nevertheless understood that, for all the others, this was a horizon, which rested, whether not becoming at that very moment, a closed one. This dual situation, of a legislation which was at the same time complex and (too) fastidious at a formal level and at the level of a free market, still only formal, but in fact controlled by a number of monopolies, creates a type of informality which is equally dual. On one hand, the powerful ones can missaply and break the requirements of the planning system to their own interests, the others, in exchange, cannot break the system barriers and cannot provide and ensure the required high standards, therefore they are pushed towards the lower part of the informal system [1]. This situation particularly applies to the East-European region, nevertheless it reflects what is going on in the whole world nowadays, as more than half of the population lives in informal residential settlements around and inside of the large cities. And this tendency has been registering such an increase that in the next 20 years it could become the predominant form of human dwelling [2]. Except a number of developed countries, informal urbanization is even today the main development type [1].

2. Informality in the Building Culture of Eastern Europe

Informality, inclusively in the construction field, generally refers to activities developed beyond the official procedures and regulations implemented and sometimes revised by governments. As for the dwelling itself and land coverage some authors [1] define informality as being a complex phenomenon usually in connection to the property regime, but also with the lack of compliance with the urban regulations, the under-dimensioning or the lack of equipments and facilities and with the development of inadequate regions. Within the former Yugoslav area, nevertheless in other countries of the region where these remarks stay valid, Boris Zerjav [1] defines two large groups of interests and needs expressed under distinct types of informal constructions: basic, for dwelling, residential and for various services, and opportunistic, in which public land is occupied and privatized for profit. In reality, the categories are flexible, as there are frequent situations of flashover of the construction processes by opportunistic or over evaluated needs. Zerjav refers to two different levels of illegality as far as informal constructions are concerned – those without permits/authorization, which still observe the regulations and those which were issued certain permits or authorizations, but which fail to observe the regulations. There is, of course, the third situation, in which there is neither authorization, nor construction procedure developed within the construction regulations. Furthermore, so as to define the groups involved in informal processed thee categories of people are referred to: the "common" people, the people who generally satisfy elementary dwelling needs, by tacitly usurping the system, the powerful actors, usually the class of the new rich, who use weaknesses of the system in opportunistic purposes and finally the state institutions, which tolerate the informal sector and which, in addition, are corruptible.

In Yugoslavia the success of the informal system is explained by institutional collapse and the progress of the grey economy from a survival strategy during the international embargo of the 90's

towards the main production means. Under such circumstances and by getting this powerful, informality has created a special form of urbanization, whose specific disperse structures, nevertheless still not separated from the existing built environment, proved to "resemble the profoundly symbiotic forms which were often more sophisticated than the conventionally created ones", offering the chance of different urban visions which contained and eluded at the same time modernization and the forms of globalization [2]. This type of development, achieved by private means and with no supervision of the community or state courts of law, determines the image of many of the towns of the East-European region. In many of the regions of the Eastern Europe these dwellings/residential areas at the edge of the large towns are most often urban structures lacking adequate cadastral allotments, where the existing constructions - most often residences, are placed in the midst of agricultural parcels and where the property regime is most of the times uncertain, the road infrastructure is underdeveloped, whereas roads are inadequately developed, and networks of all kinds are at least partially inexistent, than many of the dwellings are in a state of disconnection, in some way or another [3]. Nevertheless, it is only in exceptional circumstances that we can talk about actual poor neighborhoods, as such a description might suggest, as does the label of informality itself, because what generated the highly heterogeneous urban structure present here is just a certain combination of official and unofficial development networks [3]. Kai Vöckler identifies a new form of urbanization within former Yugoslavia (which can be nevertheless found in other countries of the region) and also typologies completely independent from the ancient regional particularities and significantly different from any other type of informal dwellings known at the time from examples outside Europe [4]. Among the cases of the former Yugoslavian space, Belgrade is rightfully one of the most studied cities, being one of the cities with a spectacular informal construction sector. According to estimations, a third of the city built environment was informally created, beginning with the 60's, when the city began to significantly increase and develop and culminating in the 90's, when the country, having passed through the civil war was facing a period of poverty, of embargo and of state bankruptcy. In this period, the estimations refer to one hundred fifty to two hundred thousand newly erected informal constructions [1].

Whether initially the Belgrade informality targeted areas at the urban limits or those in the proximal rural municipalities, and was performed by the low income labor force which tried to get close to the economy of the big city, during the post-socialist period informality had come to be practised by the population with average and high incomes as well, the same as in other countries of the region, and in fact the same as in many other developing countries [1]. It was both the poor immigrants, the internal refugees and the society's rich/peaks, - politicians, magnates, individuals close to the regime, private and state companies, who would resort withoutmuch restraint, to the informal construction. In Moscow, even the multinational investors of high reputation, such as IKEA has preferred to get the construction authorizations and permits during the site development, having therefore priority in deciding the manner in which and what was to be built, contrary to the official regulations [5].

According to the authors of the Balkanology exhibition [6], 210 informal buildings a day or approximately a million houses and extensions were informally built in Serbia during the Milošević regime, between the years 1988 and 2001. In the countries of the former Yugoslavia there is a powerful precedent in homebuilding by the owners/inhabitants, even before the post-socialist transition, the same as in other countries of the region [7]. As for Romania, the political and the vernacular have shook hands for a long time, according to Ioana Tudora. The late occurrence of building regulations and their weak implementation has lead to a development of a balance of forces between the two and has created a certain spatial production manner, where the vernacular construction is not confined to everyday discreet manouvers, but plays a more consistent part. In Bucharest today the whole spatial symbolism is recomposed by vernacular practices, according to Tudora, and the official discourse itself seems to adapt to them, either out of habit, or as a result of

the half measure typical to the public project, which confers the vernacular the statute of main real policy inside the city. In this she sees a possible continuity in the landscape production of Bucharest (and, by extension, of Romania) [8] maybe excepting the communist period, she says, the only one in which this type of communion would not have functioned. The remark is nevertheless questionable, as long as a good part of these practices of dribbling the state were developed during exactly that time, some even under the indulgent eye of the authorities. Today, the geeralized loss of trust in the norms of the contemporary society, and in the urban and community values, recalled by Tudora in connection to the public opinion on those militating to preserve the city and its character, understood and seen as misfit and unrealistic [9], has obvious filiations in the pre-1989 society and is one of the main symptoms of the failure of the socialist regime.

3. The Role of Informality

The city has almost always been constructed by private efforts and initiatives, although its compliance as an environment "fit" for a longer period of time is a collective initiative, situation which represents, in fact, or at least seems to represent a contradiction [10]. One of the eternal balance points is the public - private report within the city, often in a virtualization which sometimes denies, sometimes exceeds the effective opposite character of the two domains. Quoting Augustin Ioan, the public space, in order to exist, requires to be preceded by the completely private space, a space of inhabitance and protection, from the inside of which the human being can face other types of spaces as well [11]. From this perspective the city reflects its incipient shape - that of "archipelago of private spaces" and inhabited spaces, situation which mostly corresponds to the regions of organic or informal development: in informal settlements we can only speak of private space, because the public one does not exist (yet). In Romania, in the new residential settlements the space itself is not lacking, as everywhere in such places unbuilt land abounds, either apparently abandoned, half-constructed or not, or as agricultural land, or waiting for a better moment of the market to be capitalized and become profitable [12], but in the organically developed territory its use as a public space is only as informal. The residual or "virgin" space can, as a principle, function as a surrogate of the public one or as an extension of the private one, and to the extent in which its use is stable, it can be even successful. The social functions of the common land [13] are the same, legislated or not, namely it offers an effective meeting point for the people, and allows someone to connect to the social system as an assembly, without interacting with a certain neighbor, making thus possible the comfort outside their private property. Without a stable character and legal status of such a space the possibility of its comfortable use becomes nevertheless questionable, on the other hand the increase of its physical quality becomes improbable, the only improvements which can be somehow brought to the public domain within this informal development being rather connected to the improvement of the infrastructure and of certain facilities, according to Topalović [12]. Augustin Ioan is even more radical (and more right wing oriented), as in his opinion the space (acting as) public can be never created by violating the private space, the same as the theft or the disfigurement of the public space shall not confer it its private features.

On the other hand, N. John Habraken believes that the short or long term venting of the domestic or the private into the public space are not just natural, but even necessary sometimes, because in this way recognizable forms are created [14], thus producing habituality and a kind of steadiness. For Habraken formal space production and architecture in general create a too narrow boundary between the domestic space and the more generic space in which it is situated, a functionalist reflex, he says, which hasn't always existed and which, due to the even greater fluidity and variety of contemporary life, doesn't look like living much longer. In his opinion living is fundamentally territorial and requires permissive spaces [14] A high degree of autonomy and control of users over

the domestic space, whether not referring also to its generation, is largely acknowledged today in the architecture profession as being desirable. The right to self-determination in an extensive way relatively to the personal life environment appears more and more persistent in the actual discourse [15]; nevertheless, the use, maybe the shortest of the stable aspects of a construction and maybe the most changing, generates conflict reports with even the planned nature of the designed and constructed object (and no less with the ambitions of the architects). The Pessac case is probably the most known when talking about what is going on with architecture once the architect has left, which exceeds the regrets of losing some important pieces, to make room for the consciousness of a "natural order of things". Such alterations, the same as those of modern residences, show who are the real authors of architecture, insists Charles Holland [16]. Whether architecture is still hardly open to alteration or to the arbitrary as status quo, and architects prefer to create themselves "creative" disorder, urbanism currently works with them, and not only in the informal area. Whether perpetual adapting, incremental increase, post-factum regulation or the lack of it altogether, the weak presence or the absence of infrastructure and facilities and the defining of a spatial morphology along the way [17] approaches the local suburb to the favela more than to the formal city, not even the latter is immune to artifice and organic improvising. The apparently rigid systems, as for example the American ones, with their functional strict zoning and ubiquitous grid, incorporates and live by the change which permanently occurs inside, in the case of the hyper-dense downtowns and sometimes even in the uniform suburb.

Whether "*the grid as a whole is rigid, (...) change appears instead in each of its forming blocks; the system shall not have to be changed anymore; the more different each block is, the stronger the unit as system becomes.*" (my translation) [18]

The authority of the grid does not leave room for some other totalitarian project in Manhattan [18]; whereas in the Romanian suburb the land "grid" limits, in its turn, the chance to intervene in the organic development which overlaps it. Same as above, the steadyness of the assembly it contains is free to increase, as it will get built, in other words at the same time with the increase in density and in spite of the formal diversity possible in each of its morphological units. On the other hand the American super standardized suburb experiences, in some cases, an extremely significant organic metamorphosis: in the case of the diminishing cities, such as Detroit, where those left to inhabit the more and more rare grids of the former residential areas, spontaneously occupy and use the neighboring lots emptied of constructions. It is nevertheless interesting the fact that the authorities have come to agree to such approaches, so as at least this part of the population to stay in the region [19].

The subdivision of the agricultural lands meant to create residential lots was a kind of a practice common at the end of the XIXth century in the Northern-American space. The change, through acquisitions of the land developers from the farmers, would produce a spatial pattern which at least could be called eclectic, although ultimately recognizable; in each assembly, considering the form and the dimension of the initial parcel, they would change into parcels of different dimensions, often alternated by streets which would serve a limited number of parcels [20]. In the structure of a suburb of the contemporary city of Quebec, for example, the space form/shape follows previous stages whose traces are almost integrally kept in the current street network, in which the former rural roads have become road arteries. In the shape of the former agricultural parcels, long and narrow, development has occurred independently and in stages, turning its back to its neighbors and occupying the land in the few manners allowed by its form and dimensions [21]. In Europe, even more, in the evolution of some villages at the boundaries of the towns towards urban peripheries, as those in the area of Lyons [22], the old configurations of the agricultural lands and of the ancient roads had the most important role in determining the form of the new built environment. Here too, the same as in local peripheral developments private implants and opportunistic changes adopt a

strategy which is ultimately conservative in regard to allotment, accessibility and building, constrained only by the limited means of intervention, by the physical configuration of the parcel in "the grid" of the former agricultural territory and by the compliance with the relatively repetitive functional requirements. On the other hand, public investments, and especially large investments address the less common tactics, consequently those which on one hand had the impact the most powerful in modifying the structure of the built up tissue, whose evolution over time is the most unstable, first of all from the point of view of the functions lifetime. By comparison and in opposition, private residences, once built, tend to remain for a long period of time, in spite of the changes required by the modifications of the domestic component or even by the demographic changes at a larger scale. Moreover, as compared to the "correctly" designed space of the formal city, the "improved" space of the private or informal initiators is less interchangeable and less attractive for others. Once designed, it therefore tends to have more stable uses/destinations and users, although less numerous. To this effect, their being credited as stability factors can be taken into consideration.

Not only from the point of view of uses the public programs introduce a rupture, but also by their typological options. Contrary to most typologies emerged yet a century before, which although did not have precedent as scale, were perpetuating the same historical relationship between professional innovation and the common understanding forms, the XXth century brings a whole series of new typologies which have to adventure on their own [14]. Unlike them, houses are enjoying even today the same popular support, from this point of view, evolving freely in accordance with the requirements and possibilities of the time, but never moving away too much from the typological essence. And that despite the variety of choices of the life environments and of lifestyle as post modern ideas and on offer in the consumption society [14], which enables today fundamentally different embodyments of this sort.

 "The house is not an utterance, and in its persistence as a form and complexity as a process, it stands boldly on the landscape. It frames experience and custom by providing a basic human need for shelter and symbolizing social existence. Sheltering people as well as symbolizing them, elevated above them and enclosing them, the house can be a constant, longstanding reminder of tradition, and often its standing in a culture." [23]

For Habraken though, against any and every interference, the built environment in its wholeness evolves inside the same frames: urban, suburban, rural, to which it remains faithful during transformation, preserving the same relationship between its forming components [14], a determinist perspective which is nevertheless far from reality. It is this general context which hosts this evolution and the effective ability of changing the lifestyle environments of societies producing them which seem to be underestimated. As far as Richard Ingersoll is concerned, on the other hand, a simplified living in the consumerist era does not seem but a utopia, any step backward being hard to imagine as put into practice [24].

4. Advocacy and Setback

Militating for an open responsibility dispersed over the built environment, instead of a responsibility vertically implemented and in agreement with its permanent self-regulated evolution [14], Habraken warns on the danger of ignoring "the common understanding forms", which, collectively assumed, lay the foundation of the success and prosperity of our environments and of their historical evolution. These forms (*patterns*), types or systems, which he refers to, do not offer either recipes or rigid frameworks, but flexible rules which generate variation within recognizable

themes. When somebody builds, they improvise inside of a theme, in a certain personal variation which defines that somebody within the context of society and in contact to society. In any variation somebody complies to create [14] and therefore certain patterns become more powerful when they are repeated in the same place [14]. It is still uncertain how far Habraken would go in applying these forms of understanding as instruments of obtaining the variation considering that the examples which he suggests to illustrate his concept are rather from the field of the classical vernacular heritage and of the historical urban fabrics - the houses on the canals of Amsterdam, the boulevards of Paris etc., all so widely acknowledged as valuable assemblies that they do not need further explanations. Observing the patterns becomes interesting and useful when performed in the case of uncertain fabrics, when it manages to identify coherence or a certain functionality where a generic approach cannot detect them. Such fabrics are the residential suburbs of Romania, where the variety of patterns and the vocabulary - or maybe an architectural jargon are as a whole more peculiar to these very areas than to any other space.

The supreme advocate of the oraganicism of the built environment, Christopher Alexander, builds his discourse on the same concept of patterns, elements of knowledge shared by a large public, which make the vertical or professional discourse useless in organizing a life environment. The complexity of an organic (living) system cannot be dictated from the outside, he states, but only indirectly generated. In the same way, complexity can be achieved in an urban development only indirectly, within the processes of "biological" development and multiplication where each part is at least partly autonomous [25].

"*In the town, each building and each garden must also be shaped by an autonomous process, which allows it to adapt to its unique particulars. This vast variety can only be created by the people. Every house along a road must be shaped by a different person familiar with the different forces peculiar to that place(...)*".

This autonomy can nevertheless create chaos, but it shall not be unleashed should there be a genetic code in each particle, which shall guide their growth. This code, in Alexander's opinion, is a form of language [25], formed of a multitude of such patterns or motifs implemented in the common consciousness. In this way, whenever someone builds a house, that someone has the image of a house by and through all these reasons which form it. The result of their blend is not a project, but a form of language of the house, repeated in infinite variations, never typologically perfect or identical and yet always recognizable [25]. Quite obviously, in a contemporary building culture the motifs and the language elements are more abundant than in a traditional one, therefore the more diverse combinations, the more vague the resemblances and therefore increased probabilities of chaos. This raises again to the question whether these forms of language have boundaries and whether these freedoms have limits, beyond which one can talk of a different "genotype". Contrary to Habraken, Alexander does not offer any clue.

In his opinion, this form of language is a fundamental feature of human nature, the same as the verbal language, it adapts to time and to the times use and is not specific only to traditional societies [25]. Its vocabulary elements or motifs (patterns) are though always simple, because only those sufficiently simple can survive to communication without frontiers and the time transfer. They are based on the use, on the precedent and on boundaries, and not ultimately on elementary forms of science. In contrast, the professional language, kept secret and far from non-specialists, has gradually diminished and lost the trust of the public and on the other hand it has separated the specialists from the common language. The result are just endeavors, efforts of will and breaks with reality on the other hand [25].

"*Recognize, first of all, that each person in the town has the capacity to shape his own surroundings*

... He does not need to be an expert. The expertise is in the language" [25]

Models are not completely and at once generated, they appear as results of some smaller acts, repeated sufficiently often. The small individual acts, almost random, are collected and valued so as to create order, even though the order thus created is a product of confusion, resulted by their implementation together, nevertheless it is much more powerful than any other order enforced or planned, but facile. This is a living order, present in the whole human being, created and generated by the natural order of everyday life. It is, therefore, not just possible but essential that human beings model themselves the environments they live in. Their homes cannot, in any case, be created by architects alone but by themselves, he says, as this is the only way in which the whole variety of human reality can be reflected and depicted. Thus, the city must be built by people and must be unpredictable. It shall be enough to know what kind of city it is, and not how it will grow and develop, so as the individual construction acts can freely adjust to the forces they encounter [25]. The city can therefore be aggregated by the cumulated gestures which repeat and reiterate the same motif, with caution, the most, to their different scales.

"The proper order for a building or a town, which comes about when buildings are correctly fitted to the forces in them, is a much richer order, with a far more complex geometry. But it is not merely rich and complex; it is also very specific." [25]; *"There is no other possible way to create a living city or living house."* [25]

This way of building has always existed [25], says Alexander. The quality of the environment thus constructed is given by a "subtle freedom from every inner contradiction", which occurs the moment in which it is shared by the whole, and not when it is divided in its inside, whereas harmony and consistency is given by the repetition and by the reiteration of motifs [25]. Quality is nevertheless inconstant: it is something in one thing, while it is different in another [25], the same as each object thus built answers to the dreams and the needs of individuals different in themselves [25]. Order shall be extracted from nothing but from the inner self of the one engaged in the process; it cannot be cultivated, but allowed to happen [25]. The method applied is inherent, it exists already inside us, it just needs to be released: the method supposes the release of any method [25]. The shading which the author brings here generates a significant contraction of the theory, or, more exactly, of its sphere of applicability. The lack of "any inner contradiction", moreover, "fully shared" is an improbable condition for any environment, entity, individual, always inside fields of influence and in continuous evolution. That "subtle" tries a dissimulation or a dilution of conditioning, which is relatively inefficient and nevertheless rests non-explicit.

"But as things are, we have so far beset ourselves with rules, and concepts, and ideas of what must be done to make a building or a town alive, that we have become afraid of what will happen naturally, and convinced that we must work within a "system" and with good "methods" since without them our surroundings will come trembling down în chaos." [25]

It is yet this fear and these illusions which create dead, artificial spaces [25], while patterns fall into oblivion and the chaos conquers the cities and the buildings which form it [25]. This is nevertheless the inflexion point in Alexander's discourse. The more applicable the previously mentioned principles may seem otherwise within the nowadays context and the more descriptive they may be for the evolution of certain contemporary lifestyle environments, the more he blocks their articulation possibilities in the (post)industrial world, revealing an auctorial neo traditionalist position, insistently denied in title and repeatedly in the text.

"People know that buildings are less human that they used to be. They are willing to pay great prices for old buildings which were made at a time when people still knew how to make them

human."

The humanizing of the built environment is nevertheless naturally achieved through its use. The industrial forms are, in their turn, alive and affective, to the extent in which they are connected to experience, life frame, daily use. Equally, ageing of the building stock and its becoming heritage significantly contribute to the acknowledgement of certain formulas which Alexander consider trivial. Whether in the industrially generated life environments there obviously occur forms of planning and of standardization which sometimes are extremely rigid and stiff, standardization in itself does not block in essence the personal experience of living. Nor does the change in construction methods, "alien" contaminations or their industrialization, impede the organic nature and the intensively and extensively personalized compliance/conformity of the built-up environments or the horizontal distribution of the *pattern*s. Yet, unanimous acceptance and sharing of the building culture is even less realistic today than in the past.

5. Conclusions

There are certain traits of the informal construction which make it inevitably longstanding in any building tradition and in any society, including contemporary societies, in which the right to self-determination in an extensive way relatively to the personal life environment appears more and more persistent in the actual discourse [15]. A high degree of autonomy and control of users over the domestic space, whether not referring also to its generation, is largely acknowledged today in the architecture profession as being desirable. In Eastern Europe and particularly in Romania and Ex-Yugolsavia the roles in framing the built environment within the liberalization of these roles in the post-socialist era have equivalents in the urban practices historicaly peculiar to the region. Even if not refering to these areas and these particular examples, the readings of Christopher Alexander and John N. Habraken apparently apply to them as well, only to reveal a certain limitation of their discourse which is eventualy more traditionalistic than advertised and advocated.

Acknowledgements

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