

Communist-era Developments in Romanian Town Centres – Issues of Identity and Cultural Relevance

Horia Mihai COMAN

*Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning, Technical University of Cluj-Napoca, Observatorului Street 72-76,
400500, Cluj-Napoca, Romania*

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Abstract

As most of the built heritage from the socialist-communist era is usually deemed “impersonal”, “lacking” in cultural references and in cultural identity (or just “totalitarian” in that sense), otherwise “cheap”, “simplistic”, “cold”, too economical and functionalistic, this paper searches for a “cultural identity” that may be harder to spot beneath the obvious totalitarian feel. Surprisingly or not, some of the communist-era town centres (the one in Satu Mare, for instance) actually relate to some elements of cultural identity and tradition in built form – and this would be an important result of the research. Also, the research tries to spot some cultural and identity-related references in the political and professional discourse on architecture and urban planning in the communist era, as to understand the views on cultural identity that the communist rulers – and the “professionals” they used to carry out their politics with, such as architects, urban planners or technicians – used to have. Yet again, surprisingly or not, some politicians and professionals actually had some sort of a “cultural agenda” that would go beyond the obvious communist and totalitarian rhetoric, therefore searching for a style (a national style, a regional style) in the design of the new central areas of towns and cities.

Keywords: *decoration, demolition, socialist content, national form*

1. Introduction

Romania has been under communist rule from the end of the Second World War (roughly 1947) to the end of the Romanian Revolution of 1989. During this time of about 4 decades, the communist authorities have been promoting some extended construction works in the central areas of many Romanian towns. These operations involved many demolitions of old buildings, and subsequent “fractures” in the existing urban landscapes. Inevitably, this resulted in a loss of tangible and intangible heritage: churches, Belle Époque mansions, merchant houses, old commercial areas, etc. – plus the underlying “culture” that was associated with them (value systems, symbols, etc.).

And what did the communist rulers (and their professional collaborators) propose instead? What did they replace the old “identity” with? Was there a new “cultural identity” that emerged in communist-era urban developments of central areas of towns? Is it powerful, relevant, or valuable? How does it relate to the old identity it mostly fought against (and usually replaced)? Do the citizens appreciate the new cultural and identity paradigm? Do they recognise it, in the first place? How are the new spaces being “read” and understood by the public, versus how are they being presented by the rulers and the professionals (architects, urban planners)? These are some of the questions that this study is aiming at.

2. Socialist content in national form

This phrase (“socialist content in national form”) is at the forefront of the debate concerning the “identity” aspect of architecture and urbanism in the communist era. Conceived within the political milieu in order to address the aesthetic aspect of the socialist/communist project inside the field of architecture, construction and urbanism, this phrase has become one of the slogans of the era, and an overarching goal. Issued in literature as early as the interwar period, via the contribution of Maxim Gorki, the term is aiming at forging a dialectical union/link between “socialism” (or the “socialist content”) and “form” [1]

Soviet leaders were searching for the “forms” that would embed “socialism”, expressing ideas into matter. As Soviet policies (and, arguably, “philosophies”) are often concerned with the “national” aspect, the word “national” is often attached to the word “form”, so the search is sometimes for “socialist content in national form”. The attachment of “national” makes the search more specialised, and also more problematic/delicate/complex. Though this “aesthetic effort”, it can be argued that the communists were nurturing the emergence of a specific “identity” (of their philosophy) in “built form” (buildings, architecture). Consequently, the phrase “socialist content in national form” becomes very relevant for the topic of this article.

In Romania, as in other socialist-communist states, the search for this “socialist content in (national) form” has its “periods”/ “ages”/ “moments”/ “fashions”. One of its first “incarnations” is the “socialist realism” of the Stalin era. In Romania, this “style” is adopted at the beginning of the communist era, after the end of WWII, being “in fashion” for a few years, throughout the 1950s. Following Stalin’s death in 1953, the style is beginning to fade away, and a new “interpretation” of the same slogan (“socialist content in national form”) is starting to emerge. During this period, “the light comes from the east” (another slogan) – meaning that the leading guidelines are coming via Moscow, and Romania is just “welcoming” them, adopting them, and maybe adapting them to local circumstances. The second phase, post-Stalin, is closely related to a seminal discourse given by the new Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, in which the Stalinist approach is condemned (!). But the changes in Soviet policies usually arrive in Romania with a delay of a few years, and are usually adapted to “local” conditions – by the local leaders and professionals.

The concrete/ practical/ material/ objective difference between the Stalinist and the post-Stalinist (Khrushchev era) approach on the topic of “socialist content in national form” lies within the actual “aspect”/ image/ “looks” of the buildings (among other things). The differences are quite easy to spot, visually, at street level, while analysing the façades of the buildings and the configurations of the urban ensembles. Whereas the Stalin-era buildings are promoting the aesthetics of the “cvartals” (clusters of medium-height apartment blocks, organised around an inner courtyard, with the buildings being “embellished”/ ornate by mostly classical-inspired elements), the post-Stalin buildings are shifting towards a functionalistic/ modernist aesthetic, with the “abolition” of “added ornament”, and following the principles of “free urbanism”.

Each “stylistic moment” had its own principles, reasons, and supporting propaganda. For instance, the Stalinist “cvartal” approach (with its ornate façades) explained the resort to ornamentation as a means of giving (or “restoring”) “dignity” to the working class - as the communist propaganda claimed that the “proletariat” had formerly been denied access to quality housing, as “workers” could rarely afford decent living conditions during the so-called “era of the liberal city” (in capitalist societies of the 19th century, for example). In order to fulfill, to mark and to assume the rise of the proletariat in hierarchy and in terms of standard of living, the Stalin-era rhetoric advocated for “giving columns to the working class” – a form of expressing the end of an arguably acute “inferiority complex”...

But it was exactly this ornamentation that was to be later dismissed by Khrushchev, deeming it as “resource wasteful”...Subsequently, ornamentation was largely abandoned in the Khrushchev years, and thus began the functionalist/ modernist phase. Probably, the working class had already recovered the social gap, and the need for spending resources on ornamentation ceased to be a priority...And this could be considered as an issue of identity and cultural relevance... Otherwise,

although the post-Stalin approach was mostly entrenched in the reasons of cost reduction, this “cost reduction” was arguably circumscribed to the same goal of “socialist content in national form”, being explained as such – which is a quite problematic (or even contradictory) aspect [2]

In Romania, these two “stylistic moments” happened in a quite similar way to what was happening in the Soviet Union and in other communist countries. It can be roughly approximated that the 1950s was the decade of the Stalinist “socialist realism”, while the 1960s were “modernist” and “functionalist” (an approach/ “style” sometimes labeled as “socialist modernism”). The two sub-eras promoted different sub-identities of “socialism” (if one can put this way).

3. Nicolae Ceaușescu and the new “socialist content in national form”

Nicolae Ceaușescu came to power in 1965, but his dictatorial behaviour (and implicit excesses) mostly happened in the 1980s, when his ideas also regarded the theme of “socialist content in national form”. The second part of the 1960s, and a part of the 1970s, mostly continued within the paradigm of functionalism, modernism and cost reduction (that was set in motion by the aforementioned Khrushchev speech). As supreme leader, Ceaușescu began to advance his personal ideas regarding this aspect, mostly following his visits to North Korea and China from the beginning of the 1970s. Being impressed by the size and amplitude of the urban spaces he saw in Pyongyang or Beijing, Ceaușescu developed a desire to do something similar in Romania (Bucharest). These visits are largely considered to have been instrumental in the emergence of yet another approach regarding the theme of “socialist content in national form”, during the Ceaușescu period.



Figure 1. Built fragment from the new Bucharest civic centre, constructed in the 1980s, during the time of dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu. Source: author’s personal archive.



Figure 2. Two pre-communist apartment blocks from Bucharest, designed and constructed in an eclectic style at the beginning of the 20th century, in the time of the monarchy. The two Belle Époque buildings have been credited as “inspiration” for the Ceaușescu-era buildings of the civic centre nearby. Source: author’s personal archive.

But, whereas the two previous “styles” were somewhat “common” (with inherent variations) to, roughly, all the communist states of the European communist bloc, the Ceaușescu-era approach is “special”, somehow unique, “local”, or “personal”. It can be argued that it happened only in Romania, and largely in Bucharest, due to Ceaușescu’s consistent interference in the professional field of architecture and urbanism. The most eloquent materialisation of this new “instance” of “socialist content in national form” is the project for Bucharest’s civic centre. Designed and

executed in the 1980s, although not finished in its entirety – partly because of Ceaușescu's execution in 1989 (during the revolution) – Bucharest's civic centre boasts a somewhat peculiar architectural image, with a resurgence of decoration...The buildings of the new civic centre are massive, being adorned with decorative elements of mostly classical origin.

This new "aesthetic" is controversial, having been labeled either as neo-Stalinism, as post-modernism, or even as kitsch. Maybe, a more adequate label would be as frank as "Ceaușescu style", as the dictator's role (and "infringement") in the architectural and urban design has often been massive, being denounced by various architects who were active in that period, namely the 1980s [3]. There are recollections of Ceaușescu actively taking part in the design process, demanding numerous studies and proposals from various architects, making "corrections" to what was delivered to him, expressing his "tastes", and "deciding" for the "best" design [4]. For example, Andrei Pandele cites a pre-communist apartment block from Bucharest, designed in an eclectic style, as one of the buildings that Ceaușescu "promoted" as a desirable aesthetic inspiration for the design of the housing blocks of the new civic centre (!). The dictator liked the design of the building, and asked for its design features to be assumed by the architects in regard to the new civic centre [5]. A side-by-side comparison (see figures 1 and 2) between the (alleged) "inspiration" building and the new buildings is somewhat striking...More striking even is the fact that the inspiration building is a pre-communist one, from the time of the monarchy – a period usually deemed "decadent" by the usual communist rhetoric...

4. Alternative, personal and special types of "searches" towards "identity" in built form.

So far, this article has been discussing the mainstream approaches regarding the "identity" issue of architecture and urbanism in the socialist-communist era. The discussion has been gravitating around the key-phrase "socialist content in national form" – a constant goal throughout the study period. Apart from the major responses cited above (the Stalin-based "socialist realism" of the 1950s, the Khrushchev-backed modernism and functionalism of the 1960s, and eventually the 1980s "Ceaușescu style"), other approaches can also be traced. They are usually more "insular", isolated, alternative, and "personal" – as they relate to visions and approaches of just one architect (or a group of architects). When discussing about town centres (the focus of this article) in the communist era, the confrontation between the proposed buildings and the ones that were in the target area at that time (before the communist-era interventions) is inevitable, and has been fueling the debate concerning "identity". As communist-era developments in the central areas of towns and cities were usually synonymous with the demolition of existing buildings – a situation that translated itself into some delicate resulting conditions of vicinity between "the new" and "the old" (contrasts of style) – the (cultural, architectural and urbanistic) "identities" of the targeted areas were sometimes severely affected (being usually changed/ transformed).



Figure 3. In search for "identity" in built form: political-administrative headquarters, Satu Mare, arch. Nicolae Porumbescu. Source: <https://www.google.ro/maps>

Faced with the prospect of demolition (of urban fragments in central areas, containing cultural values and monuments – more or less recognised as such), some architects questioned the effects of the new developments on the cultural identity of the target spaces. Some of them advocated for the (more or less) conservation of historical centres, or carried out studies in order to deliberate upon the different levels of cultural values that are to be found in various city centres – so as to calibrate

future interventions in regard to them. A few architects even addressed the issue of “identity” in articles, or in books. Other architects tried to forge distinct architectural styles/ vocabularies, as to relate to the traditions in built form, so their new buildings would integrate themselves (in the existing urban fabric) in a more harmonious way.



Figure 4. In search for “identity” in built form: a possible attempt to “translate” the architectural “identity” of the context (Maramureş area) into the new architecture, in concrete: political-administrative headquarters, Baia Mare, arch. Mircea Alifanti. Can this be labelled as “contextualism”? Or critical regionalism? Source: <http://arhitectura-1906.ro/2015/03/mircea-alifanti-1914-1999/>. [Accessed: December 30, 2019].



Figure 5. In search for “identity” in built form: a creative approach for a landmark building: National Theatre building, Craiova, arch. Alexandru Iotzu. Source: author’s personal archive.

A few examples can be given. One of them would be architect Nicolae Porumbescu, who is acknowledged to have created a somewhat distinct personal style – in which some elements of tradition (in built form) are being employed and adapted to modern materials and techniques. For example, the building of the political-administrative headquarters in Satu Mare (see figure 3) exhibits some distinctive architectural elements and forms, arguably transposing the image of traditional wooden joints into concrete forms. Alongside his wife Maria, Porumbescu is credited for writing an article – in the most important architectural journal of the communist era – that elaborates on the subject. The article’s title is eloquent: “Specificity in Architecture” [6]. The two architects advocate upon the need of concrete (as material) to fulfill its own “lyrical” potential in this way (by reinterpreting wooden forms), thus moving away from its reputation as a “hard”, “cold” and “industrial” material...

Alongside Porumbescu, architects Mircea Alifanti and Adrian Gheorghiu could also be considered to have been, more or less, on the “identity path” in the socialist-communist times. Alifanti is the designer of the political-administrative headquarters in Baia Mare (see figure 4), where he is employing some architectural forms somewhat similar to Porumbescu’s – forms that relate to the traditional ones that can be found in the cultural area of Maramureş. On the other hand, Gheorghiu writes a few articles in *Arhitectura* journal, with some revealing titles: “Processing Romanian Folk Architecture” [7], “Romanian Specificity in Contemporary Architecture” [8]. Another important “entry” in this “identity” group would be arch. Virgil Bilciurescu and his arguably influential article that approaches the delicate theme of “The Systematisation and the Reconstruction of cities” [9]. On the other hand, there are some architectural results of the era that, without necessarily relating to socialist or traditionalist approaches on “identity”, have managed to acquire a certain degree of distinct “identity” of their own, through something that can probably be labelled as simply as “original design”. For example, the building of the National Theatre of Craiova is a widely

acclaimed and revered construction of the socialist-communist times...and its design can truly be called “distinctive” (see figure 5).

5. Conclusion

At the end of the research journey, communist-era town centres shall not be seen as merely “lacking” in cultural identity...It’s only that this “identity” is different, and mostly unappreciated (mainly for good reasons)...And this has to do with many causes, one of them being a weak link (too weak, probably) between communist-era developments (on one hand) and the national and local (powerful) elements and aspects of “identity” (on the other hand)...But, otherwise, this problematic “identity” of the socialist-communist “heritage” has to do with an arguably strong link (too strong, maybe) between architecture and urbanism (on one hand) and the aspects concerning the sought-after expression of authority, power, order, or functionality (on the other hand)...as it happens in many other totalitarian political regimes.

References

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